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Understanding stability and change in fields☆

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ABSTRACT

In the literature on organizations, there are two very different views of social change. One emphasizes piecemeal change and actor learning. The other views change as more revolutionary resulting in entirely novel forms of organizations. On the surface, these two conceptions of social change seem incompatible. But, I argue that by situating organizations in field analysis, we can make sense about the conditions under which both can occur. This paper offers a framework for understanding strategic action in organizational fields. Embedded in this framework is the idea that these different theories of change operate under quite different structural conditions of fields. The emergence or transformation of a field implies radical change precisely because all elements of the structuring of the field are in flux. If one is observing an already existing field, then the dynamics of interaction are likely to be quite different. Actors in existing fields will work to maintain their position in the field. They will engage in strategic action to make changes in response to what others are doing in the field. Thus, in a stable field where the game for position is ongoing, we expect change to be more incremental, more imitative, and often, in reaction to the moves of others. I end by presenting an example of stability and suggesting a research agenda.

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1. Introduction

The problem of understanding the sources of stability and change within organizations is one of the deepest theoretical issues in organizational theory. In the past forty years, organizational theorists have tended to think that

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the sources of change lie not within organizations but in their linkages to other organizations. Much of the scholarly debate subsequently has been focused on the different views as to how to think about the environment around organizations. Related to the conception of these linkages is a focus on stability and change. Scholars have tended to view the links between organizations and their environments as either producing revolutionary change, i.e. total change in the way that organizations operate including the death and replacement of existing organizations, or piecemeal change whereby organizations make ongoing adjustments to changing conditions in their relationships to other organizations.

This paper has two purposes. I want to argue that most of the conceptions of the environment that have proliferated can be usefully subsumed under the idea of fields (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, 2012). A field is a social arena where something is at stake and actors come to engage in social action with other actors under a set of common understandings and with a set of resources that help define the social positions in the field. I develop the theory of fields in such a way as to propose why some of the time change is revolutionary and at other times, change is more piecemeal by focusing on the problems of the emergence, stabilization, and transformation of the field. My basic insight is that both kinds of change occur, but under different social conditions that characterize the field of organizations.

The field idea can be easily abstracted from a variety of theoretical projects in organizational theory. At the core of institutional theory is the idea that action takes place in arenas defined very much as I have defined fields that have been called sectors (Scott & Meyer, 1983), organizational fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), games (and here I mean game theory in general), fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), strategic action fields (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, 2012), networks (DiMaggio, 1991; Powell, White, Koput, & Owen-Smith, 2005) and in the case of the state, policy domains (Laumann & Knoke, 1987), and in the economy, markets (Fligstein, 1996). Population ecology with its focus on niche and niche partitioning and more recently with its concern with the identities of organizations (Carroll & Swarminathan, 2000) also focuses on these same kinds of field level processes. Social movement scholars have recognized that social movements contain a group of organizations that begin to work together by both competing and cooperating to create a new political field and if they are successful, that field becomes part of the state (see Tarrow, 1994 and Campbell, 2005 a theoretical discussion, and Ansell, 2001 for an interesting application).

One of the critical problems in comparing these very different literatures is that what they mean by field and how they capture the underlying dynamics of such orders demonstrates quite clearly their differing theoretical perspectives. Feyerabend (1970), a philosopher of science, has argued the all observations are theory laden. In the case of the study of meso-level social orders, this is particularly true as scholars within various research programs have followed the logic of their theoretical perspective to define the operation of fields in terms compatible with their perspectives. So, in organizational theory, population ecology, institutional theory, and network analysis all claim to study and model such orders, yet would seem to have strikingly different mechanisms to capture such effects.

For population ecology, the niche is an environmentally given set of resources that can be exploited by a species of organizations (Hannan & Freeman, 1977). For institutional theory, a field is a set of taken for granted understandings about how the world works. In network analysis, a field is the set of network ties between actors in the field. While these differences do represent somewhat different ways to think about the problem of the links between organizations, it is tantalizing to believe that we might be able to find a deeper way to think about these processes.

My goal is to consider a small set of mechanisms by which fields are thought to come into existence, become structured, operate dynamically on a period to period basis, and finally end up being transformed. I draw on the mechanisms that are already part of the differing perspectives. Additionally, scholars across many subfields have produced historical and case based studies in a wide variety of settings. Over the past two decades, an impressive and growing body of empirical work has been produced that can be used for such a synthesis (for some examples, see Armstrong, 2002; Binder, 2002; Campbell, 2005; Clemens, 1997; Cress, 1997; Davis, McAdam, Scott, & Zald, 2005; Davis & Thompson, 1994; Fligstein, 1990, 1996; Haveman, 1997; Lounsbury, Ventresca, & Hirsch 2003; McAdam & Scott, 2005; Morrill, Zald, & Rao 2003; Rao, Morrill, & Zald 2000; Rao, 2009; Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006; Schneiberg & Soule, 2005; Strang & Soule, 1998; Stryker, 1994; Swaminathan & Wade, 2001; Weber, Rao, & Thomas, 2009).

At the core of a theory of fields as it is usually discussed, are two very different views of social change. One emphasizes the continuity of actors in fields and posits piecemeal social change and actor learning (for example, the view in DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The other views change as more revolutionary resulting in entirely new and novel fields (sometimes in what can be described as a punctuated equilibrium model of change where external events occur and completely transform the field, see Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006). The view here is that real change only occurs at the founding moments of a field (something also suggested in population ecology). Here the view is that once an order is institutionalized, the players in the order have a commitment to maintaining that order and work to stabilize it (this view is in Bourdieu's theory of fields for example).

These two conceptions of social change seem incompatible. With a deeper understanding of field dynamics we can make sense about the structural conditions under which both kinds of change can occur. The basic insight is that radical change occurs only when a field emerges or is transformed. This is because everything is up for grabs and change occurs in all elements of the field. If one is observing an already existing field, then the dynamics of interaction are likely to be quite different precisely because the goals of the field are established, the resources distributed, the positions defined, and the tactics are known.

Actors in existing fields will work to maintain their position in the field. They will engage in strategic action to make changes in response to what others are doing in the field. The game for position is ongoing. Moves and countermoves imply more incremental, more imitative actions, and often, in reaction to the moves of others. Sometimes these actions will result in the rise of some players in the field and the fall of others. Sometimes, the nature of what is going on in the field can be altered as well. Ironically, stability can be accompanied by change if the position of players in the field remains the same after some innovation and that innovation is adopted or reacted to by most incumbent organizations. For example, if one automobile company innovates by producing cars with hybrid engines, they may be able to improve their position and sell more cars. But, other firms will likely follow suit, and in this way, the status quo could be restored. This produces an interesting way to think about ongoing change in existing fields. Fields that may appear to be stable may in fact undergo substantial change in the activities and identities of the players, but only appear to be stable because the spread of those changes means that the underlying order in the field can be preserved.

This brings me to my final goal in the paper. It is my belief that we have gathered quite a bit of quantitative data on the dynamics of fields. What we have not done is utilize those data to test whether or not fields come into existence as our theories say they do, what happens to fields on a period to period basis, and finally, what forces bring about a transformation of a field. I argue that we can return to these data sets and use them to test the theory of strategic action fields, pushing forward the project of specifying how meso-level social order works. I provide one brief example, the stability in the main fields of American manufacturing industries from 1947 to 1992.

2. A Theory of strategic action fields

The core insight of field theory is that fields are socially constructed arenas within which individuals or groups with differing resource endowments vie for advantage (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Martin, 2003). For groups to succeed, they must engage in strategic social action by which I mean undertake actions that take into account what others are doing. The model of action that I wish to propose here is one that focuses on social skill, the ability to engage cooperatively and competitively with others (Fligstein, 2001a). I use the term strategic action fields (hereafter SAFs) in order to highlight both the structuring of the field and the role of actors in production of the field (see Fligstein & McAdam, 2012 for an elaboration of this theory).

The idea of an SAF alerts us to a radical possibility for the idea of fields. We may think of fields as a hierarchical ordering, and this ordering might reasonably be used to describe very different kinds of social actors who interact such as: individuals, groups, divisions of an organization, firms, universities, nonprofits, social movement organizations, departments or ministries in governments, states, and intergovernmental organizations. Conceiving of fields this way implies that they are embedded like a Russian doll in other fields. A firm may contain product divisions each locked in competition with divisions from other firms, the divisions themselves may fight it out for resources with each other in the larger firm, and the larger firm is embedded in a world of financiers, suppliers, customers, and regulators. Each of these might constitute a field for analysts to study. This view of strategic action fields implies that the possibility for collective strategic action in modern societies is endless and the number of such fields may be impossible to estimate.

It is necessary to specify what kinds of problems need to be solved in order for a stable social space, an SAF, to come into existence. In unorganized social space, everything is up for grabs: what the purpose of the field is, what positions exist, who occupies which position, what the rules of the game are, and how actors come to understand what other actors are doing. A stable SAF contains groups who have stable social relations with each other. These relations govern interaction and the division of opportunities and rewards in the SAF. They are based on resources and collectively shared meanings, what can be called "conceptions of control" (Fligstein, 2001b).

The idea of conceptions of control sensitizes us to two issues: first, that the rules are a collectively shared cognitive construct and second, that they are used to control interactions between organizations or groups in a strategic action field. The nature of these rules is to give actors an intersubjective view of what other actors mean by their actions. Once in place they comprise the template out of which subsequent actions are both constructed and interpreted. Hence, to the degree that a field is characterized by such a template, the meanings of other actors will be clear. Strategic action fields with developed templates are shifting aggregations of collective actors who are attuned and share a view of the field and the rules governing its operation. Members of strategic action fields function as the collective equivalent of a reference group for one another.[1]

The purpose of fashioning a shared template is, first and foremost, simply to ensure sufficient stability to allow action to take place. Secondly, however, the rules and definitions that emerge can be expected to define and promote the interests and advantages of already existing organizations or groups. This is achieved by articulating rules by which actions between more and less powerful members can be made more predictable, less threatening, and more rewarding to all. One can usefully distinguish between incumbents and challengers in any given strategic action field. Incumbents are powerful organizations or groups which have the necessary political or material resources to enforce an advantageous view of

[1] In a stable strategic action field, one may find situations akin to the conventional dynamics of game theory. Strategic action fields are arenas in which repeated games are acted out. Conceptions of control form the rules of the game and the consensus that holds the game together is a form of Nash equilibrium. A stable field has a reproducible structure because the actor's interests and resources are fixed and the outcomes are therefore stable. Of course our view is attuned to the problem of achieving a stable game in the first place and the conditions under which a stable game might be undermined.

appropriate field behavior and definition of field membership on other groups. This view contrasts sharply with the perceptions of challengers. Challengers are organizations or groups which define themselves as members of a given strategic action field, but find themselves at a disadvantage in the field.

There are two main tactics of solving the general conflict in SAFs: the imposition of some kind of hierarchical power relationship between actors or the creation of some kind of political coalition based on cooperation. At the core of the problem is whether or not the SAF will be built on coercion, competition, or cooperation.[2] In practice, it should be noted that fields contain elements of all three but it is useful to consider these as ideal types. Coercion implies the threat or actual use of physical force or the withholding of valued resources (which may come down to the same thing as a physical threat). Competition occurs when different groups vie for dominance over opportunities or advantages without resorting to violence. Their competition to control opportunities or advantages will be based on resources that they have. The eventual winners have resources and use them to command subsequent resource flows and the opportunities to exploit them. The losers may get less, but may manage to remain in the field.

Cooperation involves building a political coalition to keep a group together. The purpose of a given cooperative project is to provide resources to members. The basis of these resources can be material, but it can also be meaning or identity based. People join groups and cooperate for the rewards that occur, but also for the feeling of being a member of a group. In practice, a stable SAF can be built on any coercion, competition, or cooperation bases or some combination of them.

Hierarchy implies a pecking order of groups that can be distinguished as incumbents and challengers. The incumbents are generally the largest groups that predominantly define the situation and get most of the valued objects in the SAF. The challengers are the smaller groups who may not totally accept their place in the SAF, but are unable to contest it. The hierarchy of incumbents and challengers is held in place by coercion or competitive threat. If incumbents have overwhelming resources, including the threat of force, they can coerce challengers and keep them in line by using material and psychic threats. If there is more than one incumbent, competition between incumbents can force them to create an uneasy truce whereby they agree to a division of the field. In an SAF, incumbents will constantly be testing the limits of each other's power.

Competition between incumbents and challengers is an ongoing process as well. A stable SAF is a role structure. But it is also a game being played by groups who occupy particular roles under a certain set of rules. Incumbent groups work to use their advantages to reproduce their position. Challengers will nibble around the edges. Over time, we expect that both challenger and incumbent groups will learn more about defending their positions. There can also be some alteration in their relationships if one incumbent group manages to get the upper hand on another or alternatively, if a challenger group manages to gain more resources and become an incumbent. The jockeying for position in stable SAFS is a core feature of organized social life.

The structure of incumbents and challengers depends on the number and size of the groups. Incumbent groups of roughly the same size may compromise with each other and therefore share the field. This can cause them to form niches within the social space such that these groups can cooperate without stepping on one another's toes. They may ritualize their competition and constantly work to nibble at each other's resources. Challenger groups can use their resource dependence within a SAF to advantage. If groups are dependent upon other groups, this can create a stable situation, where "contracts" are made. There will always be tension in these kinds of relations because they define the roles of unequal partners.

A political coalition reflects an alliance between two or more groups in response to other groups. Our ideal typical view of political coalitions is that they are based on cooperation. This cooperation can be based on common interests or common identity. Forging political coalitions is a tricky task that requires social skill. Actors have to convince other groups that if they join together, their collective interests will in fact be served. If groups are of different size and purpose, then the larger groups obviously have advantages. Strategic actors use coalitions and hierarchies as alternative means to organize fields. They can form coalitions with some groups in an SAF to build a larger group and then use that larger group to coerce or compete with other groups. Of course, political coalitions can be SAFs in and of themselves. A political coalition that organizes an SAF contains explicit agreements between groups on the nature of the SAF and how the gains and losses will be distributed between groups. Often, groups in a political coalition will come to share a common identity. The identity is usually oppositional; i.e. it defines who is a member of the coalition and who is not.

In our ideal types, we have associated hierarchies with coercion and competition and political coalitions with cooperation. In reality, hierarchies are not just held in place by coercive or competitive advantage, and political coalitions do not rely entirely on cooperation. Hierarchies often depend on the tacit consent of challengers and can even provide some rewards for compliance with a hierarchical order. So, incumbents will keep the lion's share of resources to themselves, but will allow challengers to survive. In return, challengers will keep their opposition to incumbents in check.

Strategic actors have two sorts of problems to solve in the various SAFs in which they are members. First, they have to keep their group together. This requires solving the internal political problems of who is a member and who gets what in the group. They can solve their problems by creating a political coalition around a certain identity based on communal ties or associative ties. They can also solve these problems using threat and coercion by favoring certain members of the group and threatening others. Strategic action is about figuring out which tactics to pursue with which groups.

[2] This idea comes from Max Weber's discussion of orders (1968: 14–18).

The second problem strategic actors have to solve, concerns how they will relate to groups who are outside of their boundaries. If those groups are hostile, then coercive social relations might set in. If the struggle over scarce resources in the field is carried out peacefully, then the struggle turns to who is an incumbent and who will be a challenger (i.e. who will be able to put together the most resources to win in the field). Finally, it is possible that the larger field, itself, will become some form of political coalition. Skilled strategic actors thus have a number of tools with which they can try and solve their problems of getting action. Their actions will depend on what resources they have to work with and the various possibilities of political alliances.

3. Strategic action and social skill

Strategic action is the attempt by social actors to create and maintain stable social worlds by securing the cooperation of others. One important aspect of this involves the creation of rules to which disparate groups can adhere. In settled times, it involves the reproduction of a given order. In this process, groups' interests and identities are created. To find these rules, actors must have a larger conception of the world (Swidler, 1986). These conceptions are world views that are cultural frames or templates that define what actions are legitimate and which outcomes are most desired.

Strategic action is about control in a given context (Padgett & Ansell, 1993; White, 1994). The creation of identities, political coalitions, and interests is to promote control of actors vis a vis other actors. But, the ability to find such agreements and enforce them requires that strategic actors be able to "get outside of their own heads" and work to find some collective definition of interest. Put another way, our definition of social skill highlights how certain individuals possess a highly developed cognitive capacity for reading people and environments, framing lines of action, and mobilizing people in the service of these action "frames" (Fligstein, 2001a). They must resonate with varying groups and are open to interpretation. To discover and propagate these frames is inherently a social skill, one that underscores the "cultural" or "constructed" dimension of social action. We assume that this set of skills is distributed (perhaps normally) across the population. Thus, it may be that the distribution of skill across a given set of collective actors is more or less random.

Strategic actors are present in situations where there is already a stable field and in situations where things are more up for grabs. Their actions will be different because of the opportunities presented by these different contexts. In stable social worlds, skilled strategic actors in incumbent groups will help to produce and reproduce a status quo while such actors in challenger groups will try and take what the system gives in order to keep themselves in the game. They are aided by a collective set of meanings shared by other actors in which those actors' identities and interests are defined.[3] In uninstitutionalized social space, the task for skilled strategic actors is somewhat different. Skilled actors can become "institutional entrepreneurs" in order to try and produce a new order (Battilana, 2007; DiMaggio, 1988). Here, their ability to help create and maintain collective identities comes to the fore and in unorganized or unstable strategic action fields, these skills are at the greatest premium.[4]

By emphasizing the cognitive, empathetic, communicative dimensions of social skill, we hope to underscore that actors who undertake strategic action must be able to use whatever perspective they have developed in an intersubjective enough fashion to arrive at an account that allows positive action to occur. This kind of skill requires that actors have the ability to transcend their own individual and group's narrow self-interest, formulate the problem of the multiple group interest, and thereby be able to mobilize sufficient support for a certain shared world view (Mead, 1934).

4. The problems of emergence, stability, and transformation

This brief discussion of the nature of fields pushes me to consider how fields are formed, how once formed, actors work to challenge and defend a given order, and how under some conditions that entire order becomes unstuck. At the core of my argument is that change is always going on in fields. But, the current structuring of that field tells us a lot about how likely and extensive that change is going to be and the direction of that change. It is useful to motivate this by considering the imagery of fields that I have just presented and oppose it to that available in many forms of institutional theory.

One of the key differences between our perspective and most versions of institutional theory is that fields are only rarely organized around a truly consensual "taken for granted" reality. The general image for most institutionalists is one of routine social order and reproduction. This is true for the Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983) version of fields which relies on consensus as well as the Bourdieu's version which relies on social power. The routine reproduction of that field is assured because all actors share the same perceptions of their opportunities and constraints and act in those terms when others make moves. Many actions are viewed as habitual and do not require much self reflection. To the extent that change occurs at all, it is relatively rare and never really intentional.

In contrast, my vision is that there is constant jockeying going on in fields as a result of their contentious nature. Actors make moves and other actors have to interpret them, consider their options, and act. Actors who are both more and less powerful are constantly making adjustments to the conditions in the field, given their position and the actions of others. This leaves great latitude for the

[3] This concept is very close to the classical idea of what managers do in organizations as expressed in Barnard.

[4] It is an open question as to whether or not institutional entrepreneurs seek out situations where their skills might matter or else if they are selected because they happen to be in the center of an unstable social world.

possibility of piecemeal change in the positions that actors occupy. Even in "settled times," less powerful actors can learn how to take what the system will give them and improve their positions in the field.

One implication of seeing conflict and change as far more common than the prevailing view of settled fields that is offered in institutional theory is that even in settled fields, the exact nature of what is at stake, what the resources are, who occupies which positions, and what constitutes reasonable moves, can at any moment be up for grabs. Indeed, if one studies a particular SAF over time, one could observe it moving back and forth on such a continuum as ongoing "crisis" undermines existing relationships and meanings, and order becomes re-established with a new set of relationships and groups. If the field is more oriented toward the pole of settlement, conflict may be lessened and the positions of actors may be more easily reproduced.

But, if there are more unsettled conditions or the relative power of actors is equalized, then there is a possibility for a great deal of jockeying for position. All of the meanings in a field can break down including what the purpose of the field is, what positions the actors occupy, what the rules of the game are, and how actors come to understand what others are doing. Indeed, at this extreme, it means the whole order of an SAF is up for grabs. It is possible for a whole new order to appear with a re-definition of the positions of the players, the rules of the game, and the overriding ends of the SAF. The purpose of my theorization is to understand better where such orders come from and how they are continuously contested, and move back and forth on the continuum just described. I expect SAFs to always be in some flux as the process of contention is ongoing and the threats to an order always in existence.

It is important to discuss how a particular field is affected by and embedded in other fields. I conceive of all fields as embedded in complex webs of other fields. Proximate fields are those SAFs with recurring ties to, and whose actions routinely impact, the field in question. Distant fields are those who lack ties and have virtually no capacity to influence a given SAF. SAFs can have hierarchical relations that exist between a specific pair of proximate fields. SAFs can be dependent on some fields and rule over others. These provide both resources but also constraints. When neither field exercises formal authority over the other, but they mutually depend upon each other, their relationship is horizontal or cooperative. Finally, in the modern world state actors alone have the formal authority to intervene in, set rules for, and generally pronounce on the legitimacy and viability of most non-state fields. This grants to states considerable and generally unrivaled potential to impact the stability of most SAFs. But, states can also be conceived as dense collections of fields, whose relations can be described as either distant or proximate, and if proximate, can be characterized by horizontal or vertical links.

The emergence of a new field requires that actors not only solve their problems vis a vis one another but also manage their relationships to nearby fields. It is easy to appreciate just how complicated and potentially consequential are the ties that link any given SAF to its broader field environment. Consider a single product division within a large firm. The division constitutes a field in its own right, but it is also tied vertically to the larger field defined by the entire firm and to all other divisions within the firm, with whom it routinely competes for resources. But this only exhausts the intra-firm fields to which the division is tied. The division is simultaneously embedded in a complex web of proximate fields external to the firm; financiers, suppliers, customers, competitors, and state regulators. A failure to take seriously the constraints (and opportunities) imposed on those orders by the myriad ties they share with other fields significantly truncates the understanding of field dynamics and, in particular the potential for conflict and change in any given field. The stability of any given field is largely a function of its relations to other fields.

It is useful to consider some ideal typical states of fields in order to get more leverage on how such structures emerge and change. The emergence of a new field implies that new social space is being formed and as such all of the elements of field are in flux. Once some order emerges in such a space one can call it a SAF. But that order as I have just suggested is always more or less established and the possibility for both small and large changes are lurking as the game is being played out. Finally, when an existing order has its basic structures under assault, it once again resembles an emerging order and entirely new things are possible.

5. The emergence of SAFs

It is in the emergence of new fields that we tend to see the most innovation and change. Because everything is up for grabs, what the goals of the field are, who are actors, what actions work, and what positions do actors hold are all being invented. It is useful to consider more systematically how skilled social actors, strategic action, and the relative resources of groups produce either hierarchically organized SAFs or cooperative SAFs. An emerging field is an arena occupied by two or more groups whose actions are oriented to each other, but who have yet to develop a conception of control to stabilize field relations. Action in an emergent SAF is often best thought of as akin to a social movement. Groups will rush into a new social space, offer alternative cultural framings for how to organize that space, and try and use the external resources they can draw on to build unique coalitions with other groups to organize the space. New social spaces are political opportunities. Because the social space is fluid, there exists the possibility for new political coalitions of groups and new social forms of interaction. In spite of the wide open character of such situations, one can make some remarks about how these fluid situations might be resolved.

Social movement theory, thus, plays a very important role in our theory of fields. The emergence of SAFs is best characterized as a social movement process. It requires a political opportunity (i.e. a "hole" in existing social space) where actors come to believe they can organize some new social space. It takes on the form of a rush of organizations

to try and take control of that space by building a frame and possible political coalition to control the space.

Two other ideas are borrowed from social movement theory; the idea of incumbents and challengers and the problem of framing. Gamson (1975) noticed long ago that social movement organizations tended to be challengers in a political system dominated by incumbents. The challenger-incumbent structure is a general way to understand SAFs. Since SAFs are systems of power, they have rules that help the incumbents maintain power and keep the challengers down. Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1992) introduced the idea of framing into social movements. They take this idea from Goffman (1974:21) who defines a frame as "a set of concepts and theoretical perspectives that organize experiences and guide the actions of individuals, groups and societies". Social movement theorists have argued that framing is important because it provides activists with a way to mobilize people to participate in a social movement by providing them with a perspective that causes them to see the world in a different way. This helps political coalitions to come into existence that might challenge an existing order. Such frames often operate to form identities whereby actors come to define who they are and who they are not. Such identities can build coalitions and define the opposition.

New strategic action fields are likely to emerge nearby existing strategic action fields. They are likely to be populated by existing groups or offshoots of existing groups. States aid in the creation of new social space as intended and unintended consequences of state actions. States will also be the focus of attention from emerging SAFs. For example, Baron, Dobbin, and Devereaux (1986) show that the human resource function in the firm became greatly elaborated as a result of World War II. The government needed to insure that enough skilled workers could be employed to continue the war effort. To do so, they created procedures and the legitimate basis for the human resource profession. In doing so, they empowered that profession and created a set of fields to organize, train, and certify such professionals and promoted the spread of a common set of human resource practices.

This example shows how the state itself can be a great source of new strategic action fields. As soon as a law is set in place, then organizations or groups can move in to take advantage of the new opportunities it creates for strategic action. But, this kind of action does not just flow from states to fields. Similarly, organized groups can take their grievances to state SAFs and attempt to help produce rules to stabilize their SAFs. States can also intentionally or unintentionally undermine stable SAFs through direct or even indirect actions.

The emergence of new social space is a situation where skilled strategic actors, who are able to consider interests outside of their own, can make an enormous difference by helping to fashion a conception of control that speaks to the interests of many prospective field members (see Ansell, 2001 for example). Indeed, while material resources remain a powerful weapon in the struggle to shape the broad cultural contours of the emerging field, it is quite possible at this stage for a coalition of relatively impoverished groups to ban together under the tutelage of skilled strategic actors to overcome better endowed groups. This kind of fluid situation is the least easy to make predictions about, and the most likely to yield new and innovative forms of strategic actions and produce unique conceptions of control.[5] Further, they may not even realize that they are forging new cultural agreements until after they appear successful.

What explains whether or not a field will be competitive, coercive, or cooperative? There are two ways to get a settlement around order. The first is to be able to impose some form of hierarchical order that in the end creates incumbents and challengers. This will depend on the initial resource distribution of actors and the nature of the field at hand. Obviously, privileged groups with lots of resources and access to the state will be able to promote their version of the field and enforce a more hierarchical order. If many groups emerge that are more clearly of the same size, then a hierarchical strategy is more difficult. This often pushes actors toward political coalitions as the basis for social order. A good example of this is Henrik Spruyt's account of the rise of the French state and the Hanseatic League during the middle ages. Spruyt (1996) argues that the city states of Germany were of roughly equal size. This caused them to decide to create a common defense system, one that rested not on the dominance of any of the states, but on a coalition whereby they would all contribute to a common defense. In France, on the other hand, the king was the largest landholder in the country at a relatively early date. He was able to build a more hierarchical state because of the size of his holdings that dwarfed the other lords. He was able to consolidate his position by creating a hierarchical absolutist state.

6. Stability in SAFs

In stable SAFs, constant adjustments are being made. A system of "rules" may be agreed upon by both incumbents and challengers, but adherence to those rules is always more or less. Contestation is endemic. Challengers are pushing the limits of the field in order to better their situation. New resources or opportunities may work to undermine some aspects of what allow incumbents to dominate. A working definition of stability is that the set of arrangements in the field more or less work to produce the reproduction of the largest and most powerful actors. In the case of a political coalition, it is the reproduction of the main groups in that coalition.

Stable fields may see piecemeal changes in what positions actors occupy in the field, what the rules of the game are, and how actors are themselves organized to maintain their positions in the field. One implication of seeing conflict and change as far more common than the prevailing view of settled fields is that the exact nature of any settlement is itself a continuous variable that runs from all of these things being open to contention to all of them being settled. Indeed, if one studies a particular SAF over time, one could observe it moving back and forth on

[5] This is the situation that most resembles a typical social movement. In such situations, the social world is in flux and many things are possible.

such a continuum as crisis undermines existing relationships and meanings and order becomes re-established with a new set of relationships and groups.

This means that the constant adjustments that are being made in stable fields, what can be called "organizational learning" (Nelson & Winter, 1982). While the overall purposes of actors will remain the same, it is possible for new types of innovations to empower some challengers to ascend in the field. These innovations will be met by incumbents attempting to regain their advantage by imitating the challengers or making new innovations themselves. This is business as usual in stable SAFs. The steady state of a field is always somewhat chaotic.

This opens up several possibilities for change. We might see innovation basically being imitated across the field and ironically, the reproduction of the relative positions of groups, even though their strategies and tactics have been altered. Thus, stability in the identities of incumbents and challengers may result from the playing of the game. We might also see new developments in the field changing who is an incumbent and challenger and the emergence of new political coalitions in a field.

An example of this is the duopoly formed by PepsiCo and Coca Cola in the canned soda industry that has been relatively stable for the almost 100 years (Yoffie, 2002). The two companies have followed each other's moves by using marketing tactics like advertising and discounting and introducing new products. When new products came along that threatened to dislodge their incumbency, they engaged in mergers and acquisitions of the companies that produced successful new products like juices, sports drinks, and bottled water. They also competed to sell their products countries around the world, mostly be negotiating on a country by country basis for exclusive rights of local production of soft drinks. They even entered into related businesses like the production of snack foods or fast food restaurants. Even as their product lines proliferated and their activities grew across countries, the two companies managed to stay in a tight duopoly in the soft drinks industry.

7. Transformation of stable fields

My vision for existing SAFs is a constant sort of change. It follows that the wholesale transformation of an existing strategic action field will require a given strategic action field to undergo more fundamental and total change. Such change requires a serious crisis whereby the existing order is undermined and cannot be maintained. Most theories of change begin with the idea that the most radical kinds of change in existing fields will not come from within a field, but instead will have as its source conditions outside of a given field (Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006). My theory has emphasized that the formation of fields depends on building stable ties to nearby fields including the state. It follows from this, that the destabilization of these relationships can have a profound impact on any strategic action field. So, for example, if a SAF on which another strategic action field is dependent goes into crisis, it can undermine the ability of actors to reproduce their order. Concretely, wars, depressions, and other forms of political upheaval are dramatic cases where fields' stability can be undermined.

Much of the ongoing turbulence in the playing of the game can be explained by the relationships to other SAFs. These relationships present both opportunities, but also challenges to the resources and structuring of the strategic action field. A crisis is a situation when the current conception of control no longer delivers valued goods to the members of incumbent groups. This creates social disorganization in an already organized social space and makes all of the agreements subject to revision. Such sources of change will always be reverberating somewhere in a set of SAFs and therefore, the exogenous shock perspective only means that the social world is constantly full of the possibilities for transformation.

One of the most important sources of change is when other groups or organizations may decide to try and occupy the same social space; i.e. invasion. This is a relatively common form of field transformation. This takes two forms: the new groups could just be trying to assume a position of dominance in the SAF but maintain the basic cultural rules regarding the division of power and resources, or the new groups could actually try and set up a new conception of control. The latter is probably more common than the former because what it will take to gain dominance in the SAF is not just more of what others already have to maintain power, but a new view as to how the SAF should be organized. The invading groups may try and make alliances with members of the old incumbent groups or else some of the challengers.

There are many examples of these kinds of processes in business. In the 1960s, Japanese automobile companies began to sell cars in the U.S. At the time, they appeared to be confined to a challenger position producing small, cheaper cars. American producers were prepared to give them that part of the market. But over time, the quality of their cars was perceived to be better than the American products and they slowly took over both the middle and upper ends of the market (Womack, 1990). They were able to build better products that were cheaper because of innovations in production techniques (Womack, 1990).

Incumbents will generally stick to what reinforces their position in a crisis. Incumbents are used to dealing with exigencies that threaten their position from the playing out of the game over time. This means that their repertoire of tactics is likely to not be able to differentiate between a "normal" crisis and an "extraordinary" crisis. Incumbents may try to enlist the state in a crisis. If they cannot enforce their view, then getting the state to recognize their difficulties in order to help them control challengers is always an option.

In market economies, some economists see states as distorting markets when they intervene to protect or help some set of incumbent firms. What they miss, is that the key dynamic of SAFs suggests that before such dominant firms will go down dying, they will appeal to the state, precisely because the state has already given their arrangement legitimacy. This is natural because the state is a participant in all fields and has a stake in their stability as well (for its own legitimacy). If too many fields go under, then the state loses its control over SAFs (after all they have

to be the final guarantor of delivering the goods) and this creates a regime crisis. So, it is axiomatic, that an SAF in crisis will eventually have its incumbents appeal to the state.

The crisis of an already existing SAF creates political opportunities for challengers to engage in strategic action. Indeed, this situation is akin to being able to organize unorganized social space. In order to take advantage of political opportunities presented by crisis, challengers must create a larger collective identity that encompasses themselves and others. At the moment of flux, the conception of control is breaking down and if challengers do not recognize that and forge a collective identity with other members of the SAF, then the political opportunity will be lost. If they stick to the collective identify that has made them successful challengers, then they are probably going to get swept away. Thus, some group or set of individuals must propose to others a new conception of control; one that offers a large number of other groups a share of the resources. If they fail to do so, the SAF may simply collapse and become unorganized social space. The disruption of an SAF does not always result in the construction of a new one.

8. Comparison to other versions of field theory in organizational research

Many of the insights suggested by the perspective outlined here have been partially "tested" by both qualitative and quantitative approaches. I have already mentioned Spruyt's study that considers the issue of whether or not a hierarchical or more coalitional structure will emerge in a field. One can observe similar patterns in the organization of markets in the U.S. and Europe after 1870. If left to their own devices, historically, firms of a similar size will attempt to form cartels to divide the market and prevent competition (Fligstein, 1990). This happened in Europe and the U.S. in the 19th century. In the U.S., the government decided that this form of cooperation was illegal (while many European governments formalized legal protection for cartels). This caused the largest firms in a market to merge their shares in order to create a monopoly or oligopoly, a form of hierarchical control. Here the impetus to move from cooperation to hierarchy was ironically the unintended consequences of government not allowing firms to cooperate to divide the market.

The recent literature on firms has focused on the role of entrepreneurs in the study of the creation of new markets. Scholars have noticed that such actors create new cultural frames or "logics" for strategic action fields. They also note that social movement like processes appear in such fields (see the papers in Davis et al., 2005; Davis and Thompson, 1994; Lounsbury et al., 2003; Haveman, 1997). So, for example, Davis and Thompson (1994) view the movement of American managers to oppose hostile takeovers of firms as a social movement. Others have viewed the start of the "shareholder value" conception of the firm as a social movement built on a new framing about what a firm should do (Fligstein, 2001b; Useem, 1993).

But much work in organizational theory and related subfields has lacked the general view of fields as an organizing principal to understand dynamics like that presented here. It is useful to develop and critique the three main perspectives which might seem to be most relevant to proposing a field perspective in organizational theory: population ecology, institutional theory, and network analysis in organizational studies. I argue that while all of the perspectives have elements of the field approach I have just outlined, none has developed a general theory of social order that can account for such disparate phenomena as the field approach I have developed in the first part of this paper.

One theory of meso-level social order that is explicit about the nature of field level effects is population ecology. Here, population ecology stresses the role of the nature of the niche into which organizations find themselves as being determinative for what kinds of organizations will be produced. One of the original claims was that niches favored either generalist or specialist organizations (Hannan & Freeman, 1977). This meant that upon entry into a niche (read: field), an organization which did not fit, would either exit or not survive. This strong conception of field is consistent with a view that fields change the course of the actors who enter them.

Population ecology began as an effort to reduce the role of agency in organization theory (Hannan & Freeman, 1977, 1984). Lots of work in population ecology has moved away from the idea of a niche as an objective environment with resources, opportunities, and constraints and moved toward the idea that niches themselves might be at least partially the construction of actors. Freeman and Hannan (1988) made this idea explicit although they did not follow up on it systemically. Carroll has pursued the idea that actors in firms can partition niches (1985). Carroll and Swarminathan (2000) have moved even further toward some form of social constructionism by positing that part of what firms do as they develop is to create identities. Much of what I have said is in sympathy with these moves in population ecology. I focus on competition as one important mechanism by which fields are constructed and also view that the nature of a particular field is very dependent on its relationship to nearby fields. But, a niche as not an SAF. To the degree that niches remain objective sources of resources and selection is the main form of adaptation to competitive conditions, population ecology misses the ways in which actors can construct orders more consciously and with agency. Indeed, many adherents of population ecology have now gone on to incorporate the kinds of elements suggested in my approach into their perspective (see for example, Swaminathan & Wade, 2001; Haveman, 1997).

Institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; and to a more explicit degree, DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) posit that field level effects exist. But, in the case of Meyer and Rowan, the field is never defined. Scott and Meyer (1983) provide a very vague definition of an organizational sector. They describe such a sector as containing almost all organizations that one can imagine that might impact on a particular organization. This means that one cannot specify causally much about the structuring of fields or the causal effect of a given set of arrangements on the field. In the Scott and Meyer volume devoted to the idea of

organization sector (1983), most of the case studies involve sectors where the state uses coercive pressure to force organizations to confirm sector level processes.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) begin with an explicit notion of field level processes. They begin with the Scott and Meyer (1983) definition of a field containing all relevant actors. They then posit the possibility of three kinds of forces driving organizations in fields toward similar outcomes, what they call mimetic, coercive, and normative isomorphism. Their basic argument is that actors in organizations face uncertain worlds. In order to reduce this uncertainty, actors will be swayed by different kinds of forces. They may follow what they consider to be successful organizations. They may also follow the advice of professionals or experts to tell them what is normative to do. Finally, they might be coerced by either other organizations or the government to conform to expectations. This has produced a powerful research agenda that has studied how new institutions spread in existing fields (for a review of the empirical work, see Mizruchi & Fein, 1999).

I have two sorts of criticisms of these lines of research. First, institutional theory is really a theory of how conformity occurs in already existing fields. It lacks both a theory of the emergence of a field or its transformation. Second, its model of action decenters the role of actors in producing fields and creating the conditions of change. Actors follow rules, either consciously by imitation or coercion or unconsciously by tacit agreement (DiMaggio, 1988; Jepperson, 1991). DiMaggio's paper (1988) is frequently cited as inspiration for the idea of institutional entrepreneurs. But its main argument is that institutional theory of Meyer and Rowan and DiMaggio and Powell lacks a theory of agency, power, and conflict. The reason DiMaggio posits the idea of an institutional entrepreneur, is that he is trying to make sense of what happens when a field comes into existence. He acknowledges that this can only happen when someone comes along and figures out how to do something new and is able to convince others to go along with them. In the murky world of DiMaggio and Powell, Jepperson, and Meyer and Rowan, most of the time, most people just follow rules. When they do not know what to do, they model other actors.

This makes them what Giddens (1977) calls "cultural dopes" that do not learn, have interests, or engage in the conscious reproduction of their world. For institutional theory, the only time that actors have agency is in those brief rare moments when everything is up for grabs. Then once a field is settled, everyone settles down to playing their part. One way of thinking of institutional theory from the perspective explicated here, is that it is incomplete (i.e. it only applies to stable worlds), and therefore we need another theory to account for new fields. Another argument might be that it is in fact wrong as a theory of fields and a theory of action.

In the contemporary literature on organizational, institutional, or market entrepreneurs, I would argue that scholars have become fascinated by moments of formation precisely because they can find agency. But, even here, scholars lack the ability to theorize why the actors who "win" actually do so. They replace the Meyer and Rowan and DiMaggio and Powell actors without interest and agency with actors who seem to have prescient views about the new possible world and the power to pull it off. They arrive at such a heroic view of actors because of their methods. They use a technique called "process tracing" whereby they tell the story of the formation of a field by tracing back how the entrepreneur came to be pivotal in its organization. This approach is an advance on both institutional theory and population ecology, but it obviously avoids the question of what alternative paths fields might have pursued and what field projects won and lost. Without a field concept and a theory of skilled strategic actors, it is difficult to tell what structural conditions of the field might produce what kinds of opportunities, and how differently placed skilled strategic actors might be able to create new coalitions to take advantage of those opportunities and dominate the field.

Finally, the idea of networks or relationships as the core of organizational fields dates back to DiMaggio and Powell (1983) who were explicit in using networks as the core of field structure. There has been a lot of interesting research into how networks are used in different ways by different actors. Networks can stand in for a source of information, a source of resource dependence, a way to co-opt resource dependence, trust, or collusion. In one of the most ambitious attempts to capture how networks and alliances help structure an entire field, Powell et al. (2005) argue that firms in the biotechnology industry appear to use networks to manage almost all of the above.

Network analysis as a set of techniques to discover structure is quite useful. But, network analysis has one very difficult problem as a theory of fields. First, networks by themselves do not constitute what a field is. Instead, the analyst has to provide the theoretical underpinning for what is important about the relationship being studied for some outcome. This typically means that networks quickly stand in for information, trust, or resource dependence. In that regard, there is no theory of fields as networks, but instead there is only the idea that one way to capture some of the dynamics of the problems organizations face in fields is through network analysis.

A deeper problem is that networks by themselves do not constitute all there is to a field. If a field is an arena where individuals, groups, or organizations face off to capture some gain, then the underlying logic of fields is not networks but power and culture. Network analysis is premised on the idea that the sum of information we need about a field in order to model it is contained in the network of relationships we have data on. Having a theory of fields in this case reduces to modeling the relationships between actors in a field.

This creates both theoretical and logical problems. Theoretically, if a field is about how actors understand what they are doing, what constitutes power, and who has the positions of power in the field, then a change in the network of relationships or the identity of one of the players may or may not matter much for the field. One would hardly want to say that because one player left the field that the game had changed. But network analysis takes any change in field membership as a sign of real change in a field. To arrive at this conclusion, one would

want more evidence than a change in a single or even a set of relationships in order to argue that a field had been transformed. The question of when a change is a change is important. But this is a question that requires theorization. Moreover, in order to convince other scholars that there has been a substantive change requires explicit measurement. Most analysts would not consider the breaking of a single relationship or the exit of a single player as evidence for real change in the field. Instead, scholars would need to be convinced that such changes really undermined the institutionalized order of a field

9. Empirical considerations and an example

The first part of this paper was a synthesis of what we know and think about the formation of fields in many different contexts. This synthesis was made possible by the fact that we have made progress on the theory of fields because we have tried to study them in many different ways in many different contexts. The more systematic testing of field theory remains to be done. While there is a large number of studies that can be interpreted to support some of the basic tenets of field theory, it remains to subsequent scholarship to discover whether or not these studies offer systematic support for the overall architecture of field theory.

Many methods can be used to test these ideas. Here, I want to suggest that we already have lots of data sets that can be usefully explored to test many of the basic field propositions. The key point I want to make is that we have not actually used the quantitative data we have to directly test many of the propositions that can be derived from field theory. This reflects mostly a theoretical lack of understanding about what are the underlying dynamics of fields. In principle, many of the aspect of theorizing that I have advanced are empirically testable.

Many aspects of field theory can be tested in existing data sets such as those collected by population ecologists to study births and deaths of organizations. By using data on the moment of field formation, we can test the degree to which fields were structured hierarchically or cooperatively. We know from those studies that both age and size at the time of field formation offered survival advantages. What we would like to know is how these advantages were translated into the social structures of fields. Can we demonstrate on a period to period basis that there is a reproduction of the incumbent organizations or do challenger organizations come to take their place in the hierarchy of organizations? We also know in some of these analyses that fields were disrupted, usually by an exogenous shock again in line with our theorizing. This frequently set off a new round of foundings and death. But what we do not know is if a field in crisis was reformed along new structural lines. Were incumbent organizations more likely to survive such shocks as our theorizing implies? Such data sets could also be supplemented with additional data that might measure the tactics and positioning of various organizations in the field.

It is also my belief that scholars have mostly been interested in change in the nature of fields and the identities of players. They have been less interested in understanding how stable fields might be reproduced, even over long periods of time. One of the main ideas I have put forth, is that once an incumbent/challenger structure forms in a field, it will reproduce itself over time. But this reproduction might be done even as challengers and incumbents adjusted their tactics, strategies, and structures. An easy way to translate this is to examine some social fields that have a small set of dominant individuals, groups or organizations, and observe how much change there is in the structure of those actors over time. Then, one can set out to observe how organizations were able to learn in order to preserve their positions in the field.

Let me produce a brief example. One place where many scholars assume a lot of dynamism is in the manufacturing core of a capitalist economy. In the US, there have been thought to be massive changes in the underlying structure of manufacturing since the Second World War. There has been a huge decrease in the number of people employed, a redeployment of assets to societies outside of the US, a huge invasion by foreign firms, and a shift in technology from metal making and basic industry to high technology production of new kinds of goods like jet airliners and computers.

But what do we actually know about the dynamics of these industries? Burt (1988) shows that in fact there has been enormous stability in U.S. manufacturing industries between 1969 and 1984. Here, his measure of stability was the patterns of exchange between manufacturing sectors. This is a way to measure the relationships between fields and it implies that such relations were quite stable. Given this stability in the relationships of suppliers and customers, I am intrigued about how this might have affected the stability of the firms who occupy these sectors. The question field theory might pose, is given the dynamism, increasing competition, and growth of new technologies, were firms who were leaders in their industries at an earlier point in time able to maintain those advantages over a longer period of time?

Gathering data on this proposition is very hard to do. But, I am able to show data on the overall structure of these fields over a long historical period. Fig. 1 shows the changes in the four firm concentration ratios across

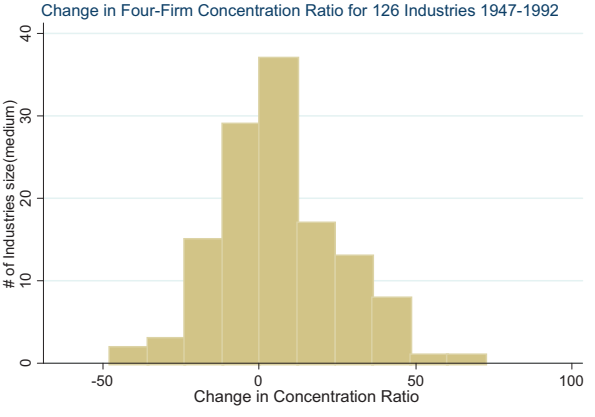

Fig. 1. Data on the concentration ratios for U.S. manufacturing industries. Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

126 U.S. manufacturing industries from 1947 to 1992 (Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census accessed at http://www.census.gov/econ/concentration.html). Concentration ratios are a good indicator of incumbent-challenger structures. High ratios imply that incumbents are large and have large market share, while lower concentration ratios suggest more openness in a field. A four firm concentration ratio refers to the percentage of the industry that the top four firms hold. Fig. 1 shows that about 70% of the 126 industries saw less than 20% change in their 4 firm concentration ratio over this long period. This implies a huge amount of stability in the ability of incumbent firms to maintain their positions. Even more startling is the obvious increase in concentration that occurred within these industries over time. Indeed, about 65% of the industries that did see changes saw increases in concentration, implying not that incumbents were displaced, but that a smaller number of firms controlled more and more of the market.

I want to make a couple of points about this descriptive data. First, this is not a causal story. It tells us nothing about the underlying processes by which firms kept their advantage or lost them. It only shows us that in most industries, incumbent firms not only kept their advantages, but indeed expanded them. It also, of course, does not examine the identities of the firms involved in each of these markets to see if they changed. One possibility is that the identities of the firms changed even as the overall structure of the market remained fixed. But, this table does show that change in manufacturing was not as extreme as one might have imagined. It would be of great interest to break down these industries more carefully in order to make sense of why there appears to be so little change in the positions occupied by the largest firms over such a long historical period given the obvious turbulence in American business.

The theoretical formulation of the theory of fields pushes us to ask different questions of our existing data sets. It also opens up really interesting questions about the nature of stability and change in organizations. These questions focus us on trying to figure out when the field emerged, what its principles were, whether it was based on cooperation and coalition or competition, and how long it was able to continue to remain in place. The perspective I have outlined here, also gives us leverage on looking for cases where such fields were transformed. How did that happen? Was it exogenous forces like the government or outside invaders, or endogenous ones like changes in technology or challenger strategies?

10. Conclusions

Field theory of the institutional theory variety has been criticized for lacking a theory of social change. Here, scholars have in mind the kind of social institutions posited by Meyer and Rowan and DiMaggio and Powell, institutions which once in place, rarely change because they have become taken for granted. I, too, have criticized this body of work. It does not ask good questions about how things become institutionalized in the first place. Nor does it understand that every social order witnesses a constant jockeying for position by actors trying to contest either the nature of the field or their position in it.

Scholars in institutional theory have either favored the approach that change is either rapid or piecemeal. I have argued that field theory should view social change in quite a different way. Rapid social change occurs either at the moment of the formation of a field or the moment of its transformation. These moments can look like punctuated equilibriums where the members of a field rapidly change their identities and positions. Piecemeal social change is occurring all of the time as actors jockey for position and seek to maintain or expand their advantages on a period to period basis. Here, they can learn from others, coopt others, and take advantage of others' temporary weaknesses. Thus, the maintenance of a field is itself a process worth studying. How incumbents handle challenges is a question we have rarely studied.

A more synthetic theoretical view of social actors in fields provides us with tools to analyze a wide variety of situations. This is exactly the kind of flexible middle range theory that can be usefully exploited by a large number of scholars to engage in a discussion across empirical contexts. This will give us an appreciation of the generic social processes at work and how they combine in many unique ways across a variety of cultural and historical contexts.

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