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Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, "A Theory of Fields". New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 238 pp.

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## Book Review

**Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, *A Theory of Fields*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 238 pp.**

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Fligstein and McAdam's *A Theory of Fields* will probably affect the agenda of social theory on an international scale. This is certainly due also to the prestigious editorial placement of the book and to the prestige of its authors: Fligstein, economic sociologist at Berkeley, authored several major books combining the approach of the new economic sociology with a Chandlerian economic historiography and some contributions from European social theory; McAdam, political sociologist at Stanford, is one of American most celebrated scholars on social movements. But what is most relevant is the ambitious theoretical programme pursued in the book: in a rather brief space, Fligstein and McAdam introduce a theoretical foundation for social action developed around the concept of field, and they provide microfoundations and macroimplications, examples of application and methodological considerations. The basic assumption is that the concept of field can be considered the most significant and accessible theoretical ground for the study of so-called "meso" social orders, on which empirical research focuses most of the times.

The adoption of the concept of *field* in a *grand* Anglo-Saxon theory could be seen as a considerable step towards the reception of Bourdieu's social theory into American sociology (a phenomenon discussed in this journal by Zavisca and Sallaz [2008]; see also Emirbayer and Johnson [2008]; Dobbin [2008]). At a closer look, rather than consolidating the importance of Bourdieu in American sociology, the book proves how partial such a reception is.

The idea of social field suggested by Fligstein and McAdam is strongly linked to the analyses of social movements and market competition, which are precisely the themes of interest of the authors. Significantly referring to what they call the fields of strategic action, Fligstein and McAdam conceive fields as socially constructed arenas in which the competition takes place between actors endowed with different types and amounts of resources. The membership of the fields is not intended as an objective condition, but as an individual choice; the boundaries of the fields are not fixed, but they depend on the definition of the situation and on the issues at stake; most importantly, fields are based on sets of ideas subject to a relentless negotiation: ideas concerning the nature of the game and stakes, the relative position of each actor in the field, together with a series of shared assumptions about the rules of the field, and cognitive frames for the interpretation of actors' behaviour.

Fligstein and McAdam's main concern is to assert the inherent tendency of fields to change, the endless bargaining of meanings, goals and rules. The neo-institutional approach is explicitly confronted. Whereas neoinstitutional scholars conceive the field as a network of actors interacting on the basis of widely shared rules and predefined scripts (and they overlook the interactions between different fields), Fligstein and McAdam's theory focuses on social change (clearly recognizing that the relationships between fields are a constitutive part of the change). Rather than interacting on the basis of a fixed script, Fligstein and McAdam's social actors – similarly to Bourdieu's social agents –

interact on the basis of an unequal endowment of resources and with a strong propensity for transformation, or even for the subversion of the rules of the game.

The similarities with Bourdieu's conception of social fields, however, should not be overestimated. *A Theory of Fields* confirms that American social theorists are far from neglecting the voluntary basis of agency and from accepting the idea of a social actor played by the game. Fligstein and McAdam's theory of field is significantly defined as a theory of strategic action: it deals with intentional change, its possibility and conditions, thus appearing to be a custom-made theory for economic sociology and, even more, for a sociology of movements.

The core of the criticism explicitly addressed to Bourdieu's theory relies, in fact, on the importance of cooperation and collective challenge. According to Fligstein and McAdams, Bourdieu underestimated the ability of social actors to form coalitions aiming to the transformation of the fields (with the relevant exception of *Le Règles de l'Art*, where the French sociologist insisted on the importance of coalitions). Fligstein and McAdam's incumbents and challengers are not akin to Bourdieu's dominants and dominated (as Fligstein and McAdam perceive them): rather than being involved in social games, they are permanently, consciously competing in games whose regulation they aim to control.

Fligstein and McAdam's voluntaristic approach – far more related to an Anglo-Saxon than to a European-continental conception of society – clearly emerges in the microfoundations of the theory. Belonging and competing – they argue – are two basic expressions of human sociability, resting on the existential need for a collective dimension of human life. What Fligstein and McAdam call the existential function of the social is the consequence of the appalling condition of a human animal capable of an “outer perspective” on his own existence and its unknowable meaning.

Although they claim to be the first sociologists to offer a foundation for a theory of fields, Fligstein and McAdam's approach seems consonant with what Bourdieu argued since the early eighties, in *Leçon sur la Leçon* [Bourdieu 1982], where the collective production of meaning is assumed to be the core of human sociability. Nevertheless – in contrast to Bourdieu – Fligstein and McAdam conceive sociability as a competitive attribute, as social skill, which is to say “that complex mix of cognitive, affective, and linguistic facilities that render individuals more or less effective as skilled strategic actors supremely well adapted to the demands of collective action” [p. 46.] Albeit nobody absolutely lacks it, social actors are unequally provided with social skills. Some social actors are more capable than others in creating and sustaining mesolevel social worlds, “because they are able to create a positive sense of self that resonates with others.” As a consequence – it is argued – “these actors are more socially skilled” [p. 47,] that is, innately talented for the construction of collective action: “We all know people who are socially skilled than others, that is, have the ability to get others to cooperate. They appear in universities, politics, and the world of business” [p. 48.]

It is clear that social skill has little to do with Bourdieu's idea of habitus, that is, with the idea of a mental and practical set which is generated within the social space; nor it resembles the idea of symbolic capital, which is strictly dependent on the dynamics of the field, far from being an innate, natural talent; nor has it to do with the *illusio*, that is, the idea of the player played by the game.

Fligstein and McAdam's social skill is a theoretical construct affirming an agency that "interacts" with the constraints imposed by social fields (and challenges them). But, far from being embedded in social fields, it's set up outside the social space. Social skill is an attribute belonging to actors as such, enabling them to interact in social world, and to achieve greater or lesser success in their efforts to build coalitions aspiring to a leading position. The particular amount of social skill enjoyed by some actors is a personal attribute that puts its bearers in a leading role for collective action.

The construct of social skill has a paramount, strategic importance in Fligstein and McAdam's theory. It allows them – in their intentions, at least – to go beyond the idea that people are "positions in social structure" [p. 48,] avoiding at the same time the illusion of self-determination of social actors: "The theory of social skill and its relationship to the theory of field implies that both the actors have individual skills and the positions they occupy in social space affect their ability to engage in cooperation, competition, and collective action [...] On any given situation, actors' ability to improve their group's situation may be highly or minimally constrained by their position in the structure. Either way, the challenge will be to use their social skills to exploit whatever opportunities may be available to them" [pp. 48f..]

Fligstein and McAdam's homo sociologicus approximates to the well-tempered homo economicus of economic sociology and to the Homo Politicus in the fashion best suited to the sociology of movements. It is therefore an ideal type of social actor fitting into the disciplinary assumptions on which the authors draw. Fligstein and McAdam explicitly point out that their field theory is appropriate to the analysis of a large yet limited number of phenomena, those usually studied by researchers dealing with politics, religion, social movements, economic competition and no-profit sectors: "All of these arenas of action contain actors who seek to construct institutions to guide their interactions in order that they might forward their existential and material interests. They want to create new social spaces where their groups can dominate or prosper" [p. 53.] The authors do not pose any question about the reliability of their grand theory out of these areas.

Introducing the concept of social skill in the analysis of the dynamics of the fields – this seems the very original yet questionable contribution of this book – Fligstein and McAdam's theory meets a need American sociologists have often felt when confronting with European social theory: the need for the primacy of agency. The adoption of such a bourdieusian concept as field takes place within a horizon of possibilities defined by American sociological tradition: where agency is sheltered within an epistemology that by no means transcends the dualism between social structure and social actor.

Fligstein and McAdam's aim is to establish "a much more active, agentic view of social life than would appear common in sociology." One can agree or not with such a purpose. What's disappointing, either way, is that such a purpose is yet again being pursued by preserving those dualisms Bourdieu tried to overcome. The ostensible alternative Fligstein and McAdam offer to the pretended limits of Bourdieu's social theory is actually based on a well worn compromise, which aims to consider the social conditioning of action, but thoroughly defending a strong, voluntaristic conception of human agency.

*A Theory of Fields* is certainly an abundant repertoire of good reasons for using the concept of field as a versatile tool for social research. Much less undeniably

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it offers a solid contribution for a well-founded, internally coherent theory of social action.

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