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The Gist of It

Accounting for social change and social order is one of the enduring problems of social science. The central goal of this book is to explicate an integrated theory that explains how stability and change are achieved by social actors in circumscribed social arenas. In constructing this perspective we draw upon the rich body of integrative scholarship produced in recent years by economic sociologists, institutional theorists in both sociology and political science, and social movement scholars. To this foundational corpus we add several distinctive elements of our own. Later in the chapter we sketch the basic features of the perspective in some detail, differentiating the new elements from the old. Here, however, we begin by highlighting three main components of the theory. First, the theory rests on a view that sees *strategic action fields,* which can be defined as mesolevel social orders, as the basic structural building block of modern political/organizational life in the economy, civil society, and the state. A concern with stability and change in field-level dynamics is central to the work of a number of theorists including Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), DiMaggio and Powell (1983), Fligstein (1996, 2001b), Martin (2003), and Scott and Meyer (1983).

Second, we see any given field as embedded in a broader environment consisting of countless *proximate* or *distal fields* as well as states, which are themselves organized as intricate systems of strategic action fields. The source of many of the opportunities and challenges a given field faces stems from its relations with this broader environment. Crises and opportunities for the construction of new fields or the transformation of existing strategic action fields normally arise as a result of destabilizing change processes that develop within proximate state or nonstate fields. Finally, at the core of the theory is an account of how embedded social actors seek to fashion and maintain order in a given field. While most such theories stress the central importance of interests and power, we insist that strategic action in fields turns on a complicated blend of material and "existential" considerations. We posit an underlying microfoundation—rooted in an understanding of what we term the "existential functions of the social"—that helps account for the essence of human sociability and a related capacity for strategic action. In turn, this microfoundation

informs our conception of "social skill," which we define as the capacity for inter-subjective thought and action that shapes the provision of meaning, interests, and identity in the service of collective ends.

In fashioning this perspective we draw heavily on research and theory generated by scholars in the fields of social movement studies, organizational theory, economic sociology, and historical institutionalism in political science. The volume of work at the intersection of organizational theory and social movement studies has grown especially rapidly in the past decade and a half (for some examples, see Armstrong 2002; Binder 2002; Brown and Fox 1998; Campbell 2005; Clemens 1997; Clemens and Minkoff 2004; Creed 2003; Cress 1997; Davis et al. 2005; Davis and McAdam 2000; Davis and Thompson 1994; Dobbin and Sutton 1998; Fligstein 1990, 1996; Haveman and Rao 1997; Jenkins and Ekert 1986; Kurzman 1998; Lounsbury, Ventresca, and Hirsch 2003; McAdam and Scott 2005; McCammon 2001; Minkoff 1995; Moore and Hala 2002; Morrill, Zald, and Rao 2003; Rao 2009; Rao, Morrill, and Zald 2000; Schneiberg and Soule 2005; Smith 2002; Strang and Soule 1998; Stryker 1994; Swaminathan and Wade 2001; Weber, Rao, and Thomas 2009). Social movement scholars, organizational theorists, economic sociologists, and institutionalists in political science are all concerned with how organizations can control and effect change in their environments. All are interested in how "the rules of the game" are set up and how this creates winners and losers. At the core of these concerns is the foundational problem of collective strategic action. All of these scholars are interested in how it is that actors cooperate with one another, even when there is conflict and competition and how this cooperation can work to create larger arenas of action. All have discovered that in times of dramatic change, new ways of organizing "cultural frames" or "logics of action" come into existence. These are wielded by skilled social actors, sometimes called "institutional entrepreneurs," who come to innovate, propagate, and organize strategic action fields.

In spite of the attention to, and cross-referencing of, different literatures, the increasing tendency toward disciplinary and even subfield specialization acts to balkanize thought and discourage synthesis and broader integrative theorizing. Speaking only of sociology, the subfield division of labor within the discipline has tended to make empirical specialists of most of us and for the most part the vocabularies, ideas, and even methods of the various subfields constrain broader, integrative discourse. This empirical specialization has proven fruitful to a certain degree. But it has its limits. We think it is useful to explore the commonalities across these subfields. We are convinced that most of the concepts employed in this book can be traced back to scholarship on social movements, organizations, economic sociology, and institutional analysis within political science. We are also convinced that this is so because scholars in all of these areas have discovered a foundational social reality at work, a generic theory of social action, one that provides the building blocks for the theory on offer here.

It is useful to consider what these fields have in common. All are focused on the emergence, stabilization/institutionalization, and transformation of socially constructed arenas in which embedded actors compete for material and status rewards. Political sociology focuses centrally on change and stability in the institutions and agencies of the state and their relation to civil society. Much energy has been spent trying to show how the state is a set of organizations and how powerful nonstate actors take their grievances to the state (for example, Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985; Laumann and Knoke 1987). For their part, social movement scholars have been centrally interested in how perceived "threats and opportunities" catalyze the mobilization of new actors who, in turn, have the capacity to destabilize established institutions and fields in society (Goldstone 2004; McAdam 1999; Tarrow 2011; Tilly 1978). Organizational theory has been traditionally concerned with the emergence and spread of formal organizations and the role of the environment, key actors, and the state in this process (Scott 2001). Economic sociology has focused on the formation of markets and the role of firms and states in their construction (Fligstein 2001b). Historical institutionalists in political science have sought to understand how institutions emerge as answers to recurring problems of conflict and coordination and how they are reproduced—or not—over time (Mahoney and Thelen 2009; Pierson 2004; Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth 1992).

Scholars in all of these fields are concerned with the ability of actors to engage in successful collective strategic action within constructed social orders. We call the terrain of action within which all of these collective actors operate a strategic action field when it is well defined and unorganized social space when it is not.

Scholars in all of these subfields are also centrally concerned with the state. For political sociologists and scientists and social movement scholars, this interest makes intuitive sense. For their part, organizational theorists and economic sociologists have conceived of the state mostly as an exogenous force that provides rules for what constitutes an organization, an enforcer of those rules, and the creator of organizational environments (Dobbin 1994; Fligstein 1990). After favoring structural accounts of action for an extended period of time, a renewed interest in culture is another emphasis these subfields share in common. Culture, as a concept, has crept back into political sociology and political science (particularly historical institutionalism) in recent years. It is also central to institutional theory in organizational study (Powell and DiMaggio 1991). The "cultural turn" has been very much in evidence in the study of social movements since the mid-1980s, with much of this interest focused on the role of "framing processes" in collective action (Snow et al. 1986). But just as we will argue that sociologists have not gone very far in conceptualizing social space, we likewise see the notions of culture that inform current work in these subfields as

generally impoverished. We will have much more to say about this issue later in the chapter.

The problem is that these elements—collective action, social space, culture, organization, the state, and mobilization—which are present in all of these literatures, have not been integrated into a systematic theory in any of the subfields. Indeed, authors tend to focus not only on a specific empirical phenomenon but often also on a theoretical view that only emphasizes a few of these elements. This is understandable in light of the fact that the subfield concerns often require focus on fairly narrow empirical phenomena. But this means that authors rarely engage in theory building with an eye to fashioning a more general perspective that incorporates all of these elements in a systematic fashion. This is very much our goal here.

We are also interested in rethinking the problems of the relationship between agency and structure (Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992) and the links between macrosocial processes and microinteractions (Alexander et al. 1987; Coleman 1986). Much of sociology posits that people are enmeshed in social structures that are out of their control and operating at a level that is above or outside of them. This gives people little leeway to act autonomously and makes them entirely subject to the control of social forces. Examples of such structures include the class system and patriarchy. Those concerned with the issues of micro/macro linkages and especially the structure/agent problem have struggled to understand how it is that individuals act in spite of these macro processes and/or structural constraints. Scholars in this area are also interested in the conditions under which actors are either the direct beneficiaries or the victims of structures and the conditions under which it may be possible for actors to resist structures and create alternative worlds.

While this debate has been useful in clarifying some issues, it has generally been highly abstract in orientation. For example, the debate has successfully highlighted the fact that structural accounts underestimate the role of actors in reproducing everyday life (Giddens 1984). Every time we go to work, for instance, we reproduce the part we play in the system of labor relations. If even a fraction of us stopped going to work, much of social life would quickly bog down. The debate, however, has proven less useful in other ways. It has been carried out at such an abstract level and generally outside of empirical subfields that it has not informed actual research in sociology. As a result the central concepts of both structure and action remain empirically underspecified. In spite of much concern with the idea of actors' resistance to structure, there is very little elaboration of a genuinely sociological view of how actors enact structure in the first place and the role they play in sustaining or changing these structures over time. We have only begun to theorize the complex dynamics of emergence and institutionalization, stability and change, and rupture and settlement in constructed social

worlds. While scholars have invoked the idea of institutional entrepreneurs as agents of change, there has been little concern with thinking about what kind of specific social processes and skills helps these actors get what they want or successfully resist other actors' power. There has also been a decided lack of attention to how the opportunities and constraints that shape the prospects for strategic action within fields depend critically on the complex latticework of relations that tie the strategic action field to a host of other state and nonstate fields.

The literatures on organizations, historical institutionalism, economic sociology, and social movements have been directly concerned with dealing with these questions. They are concerned with how some actors work to set up stable mesolevel social worlds. Scholars in these fields have had to think long and hard about how such orders are built, held together, and destroyed. Scholars have discovered that the most useful way to push forward the discussion about agents and structures is by creating a mesolevel theory of action that involves asking what a sociological theory of actors should look like. A mesolevel theory of action implies that action takes place between and within organized groups. By understanding more clearly the role of social actors in producing, reproducing, and transforming their local fields of action, we think we can gain a great deal of leverage on many foundational issues in social life.

Finally, much of the concern in these subfields has been with trying to understand the problem of social change. On the one hand, many aspects of social life appear extremely stable across the life course and even across generations. On the other hand, it often feels as if change is ubiquitous in social life. We do not necessarily see a contradiction between these perspectives. We argue that stability is relative and even when achieved is the result of actors working very hard to reproduce their local social order. That is, even under generally stable conditions, actors are engaged in a constant set of adjustments that introduce incremental change into constructed social worlds. Skilled social actors work to improve their position in an existing strategic action field or defend their privilege. To a degree, change is always going on.

Even more difficult is the question of the emergence of genuinely new social arenas or fields. There are two related problems here. The first is to specify the conditions under which this happens. The second is to theorize the agency involved in these processes. *How* are new fields created and by whom and for what purposes? The fields of political science, political sociology, organizations, social movements, and economic sociology have been searching for the answers to these kinds of questions since at least 1960. In recent years, scholars in a number of these fields have begun to emphasize the role of framing and entrepreneurship in such efforts. It is interesting that the researchers in these subfields have ended up focusing on these few elements as central to their particular micro/macro, agent/structure problems somewhat *independently* of one another.

It is this convergence that leads us to believe that a unified theoretical view of field-based strategic collective action is possible.

In this book, we mean to offer a general theory of social change and stability rooted in a view of social life as dominated by a complex web of strategic action fields. In proposing this theory we hope to fill a significant conceptual void in contemporary social theory. Theory in sociology has become a subfield almost entirely divorced from empirical research. Within this subfield, as Abend (2008) points out, there are at least seven distinct views of what theory means. As research subfields have proliferated, so too have specialized perspectives designed to explain the specific empirical phenomenon central to the area of study. Reflecting this trend, we now have distinct "theories" (or, perhaps more accurately, orienting perspectives) for social movements, organizations, religion, culture, and so on. But increasingly these seem "thin" to us, insufficiently general to tell us much about the overall structure of contemporary society and the forms of action that shape that structure. That is what we hope to come closer to describing in the perspective on offer here.

To be sure, there *is* a handful of theories that we see as legitimate alternatives to our perspective. These include new institutional theory in organizational studies, Anthony Giddens's theory of "structuration," and, closest to our perspective, Bourdieu's account of the role of habitus, field, and capital in social and political life. We have borrowed elements from each of these perspectives and admire the ambition inherent in all of them. At the same time, however, we see all of these alternatives as, in one way or another, inadequate to the task at hand, which we take to be explaining the underlying structure of, and sources of change and stability in, institutional life in modern society.

We begin by sketching the basic elements of the theory. We then use these elements to think about the dynamics of field emergence, stability, and change. We end by critiquing some of the alternative theories on offer in contemporary sociology.

The Central Elements of the Theory

In this section we identify and briefly describe what we see as the key components of the theory. We will elaborate these ideas in subsequent chapters. We stress the following seven key elements of the perspective:

1. strategic action fields
2. incumbents, challengers, and governance units
3. social skill and the existential functions of the social

4. the broader field environment
5. exogenous shocks, mobilization, and the onset of contention
6. episodes of contention
7. settlement

We take up each of these elements in turn.

1. Strategic Action Fields—We hold the view that strategic action fields are the fundamental units of collective action in society. A strategic action field is a constructed mesolevel social order in which actors (who can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field. A stable field is one in which the main actors are able to reproduce themselves and the field over a fairly long period of time.

All collective actors (e.g., organizations, clans, supply chains, social movements, and governmental systems) are themselves made up of strategic action fields. When these fields are organized in a formal bureaucratic hierarchy, with fields essentially embedded within other fields, the resulting vertical system looks a lot like a traditional Russian doll: with any number of smaller fields nested inside larger ones. So, for example, an office in a firm can be a strategic action field. It is itself located in a larger structure within a firm, say a division. That division vies for resources in a firm structure. The firm interacts in a larger field with its competitors and challengers. They are embedded in an international division of labor. Each of these strategic action fields constitutes a mesolevel social order in the sense that it can be fruitfully analyzed as containing all of the elements of an order from the perspective we outline here. In general, the ties between fields highlight the interdependence of strategic action fields and their very real potential to effect change in one another. Indeed, we will argue that these links constitute one of the main sources of change and stability in all fields.

This first element of the theory is the insight that action takes place in constructed mesolevel social orders, which is implied in various versions of institutional theory. These orders have been variously called *sectors* (Scott and Meyer 1983), *organizational fields* (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), *games* (Scharpf 1997), *fields* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), *networks* (Powell et al. 2005), and, in the case of government, *policy domains* (Laumann and Knoke 1987) and *policy systems/subsystems* (Sabatier 2007). In the economic realm, *markets* can be thought of as a specific kind of constructed order (Fligstein 1996, 2001b). For their part, social movement scholars conceive of movements as emergent orders composed, in the most successful cases, of collections of formal social movement organizations and more informal groups of activists. McCarthy and Zald

(1973, 1977) refer to these emergent orders as *social movement industries*. Movements also have the potential to spawn *conflict arenas* composed of movement groups, state actors, the media, and countermovement groups, among others (McAdam 1999: chapter 5).

If, however, many analysts have come to focus on mesolevel orders as central to institutional life, their conceptions of these fields are quite varied. Bourdieu sees "social power" as the underlying key to both the structure and logic of any given field. Institutional theorists such as Jepperson (1991) tend toward a more culturally constructionist view of fields, stressing the unifying force of shared understandings among a set of mutually attuned actors resulting in a "taken for granted" everyday reality.

Our view attempts to combine the social constructionist aspects of institutional theory with a central interest in understanding the sources of stability and change in strategic action fields. We see strategic action fields as socially constructed arenas within which actors with varying resource endowments vie for advantage (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Emirbayer and Johnson 2008; Martin 2003). Strategic action fields are socially constructed in three important respects. First, membership in these fields is based far more on subjective "standing" than on objective criteria. So, for example, while there are some 2,500 four-year colleges and universities in the United States, they do not, ordinarily, constitute a single strategic action field. Instead subsets of these schools have come to regard themselves as comparator institutions. It is within these more narrowly constructed educational fields that schools compete and cooperate with each other.

The boundaries of strategic action fields are not fixed but shift depending on the definition of the situation and the issues at stake. So, for instance, imagine if Congress was to take up a sweeping reform bill that threatened to change the tax status of all institutions of higher education. For the duration of the conflict, the narrow comparator strategic action fields described above would cease to be all that relevant. Instead the conflict would define a new field, composed of all 2,500 colleges and universities, which would probably unite and oppose such legislation. So fields are constructed on a situational basis, as shifting collections of actors come to define new issues and concerns as salient.

Finally, and most important, fields are constructed in the sense that they turn on a set of understandings fashioned over time by members of the field. The term "institutional logics" has often been used to characterize these shared understandings (Friedland and Alford 1991; Scott 2001). We think this concept is too broad and too amorphous to really capture the set of shared meanings that structure field dynamics. We want to distinguish between four categories of shared understandings that are critical to field-level interaction. First, there is a general, shared understanding of what is going on in the field, that is, what is at stake (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Here, we would expect that actors in a

settled strategic action field would share a consensus as to what is going on. Such a consensus does not imply that the division of spoils in the field is viewed as legitimate, only that the overall account of the terrain of the field is shared by most field actors.

Second, there is a set of actors in the field who can be generally viewed as possessing more or less power. Here, we have in mind that actors occupy a general position within the field and further that they share a generalized sense of how their position relates to that of others in the strategic action field. One way of thinking about this is that actors know who their friends, their enemies, and their competitors are because they know who occupies those roles in the field.

Third, there is a set of shared understandings about the nature of the "rules" in the field. By this, we mean that actors understand what tactics are possible, legitimate, and interpretable for each of the roles in the field. This is different from knowing what is generally at stake. This is the cultural understanding of what forms of action and organization are viewed as legitimate and meaningful within the context of the field.

Finally, there is the broad interpretive frame that individual and collective strategic actors bring to make sense of what others within the strategic action field are doing. And here, rather than positing a consensual frame that holds for all actors, which is implied by the idea of "logics," we expect instead to see different interpretative frames reflecting the relative positions of actors within the strategic action field. We expect that actors will tend to see the moves of others from their own perspective in the field. In most fields, for example, we expect that dominant or incumbent actors will embrace a frame of reference that encapsulates their self-serving view of the field, while dominated or challenger actors will adopt/fashion an "oppositional" perspective. The reactions of more and less powerful actors to the actions of others thus reflect their social position in the field.

All of these aspects of strategic action field structure are lumped together in the conventional view of institutional logics. This leads to a number of problems. The use of the term "institutional logic" tends to imply way too much consensus in the field about what is going on and why and way too little concern over actors' positions, the creation of rules in the field that favor the more powerful over the less powerful, and the general use of power in strategic action fields. In short, the relative and potentially oppositional positions of actors within the field are not well captured by the concept of institutional logic. The term fails to capture the ways in which different actors in different positions in the strategic action field will vary in their interpretation of events and respond to them from their own point of view.

One of the key differences between our perspective and most versions of institutional theory is that we see fields as 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. In most versions of institutional theory, the routine reproduction of that field is assured because all actors share the same perceptions of their opportunities and constraints and act accordingly. To the extent that change occurs at all, it is relatively rare and almost never intentional. In contrast, for us, 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 in response. 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 substantial latitude for routine jockeying and 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 are always looking to marginally improve their positions in the field. Constant low-level contention and incremental change are the norm in fields rather than the image of routine reproduction that tends to define most versions of institutional theory.

We can extend this view even more. In place of the simplistic distinction between settled and unsettled fields, we argue that even settled fields exhibit enormous variation in the extent to which there is consensus. Settled fields should, we argue, be arrayed along a continuum, anchored on one end by those exceedingly rare strategic action fields that exhibit very high consensus on all of the subjective dimensions touched on above and on the other by those fields that, despite widespread dissent and open conflict, nonetheless exhibit a stable structure over time. Indeed, if one studies a particular strategic action field over time, one could observe it moving back and forth on such a continuum as crisis undermines existing relationships and meanings and order becomes reestablished with a new set of relationships and groups. If the field is more oriented toward the pole of settlement, conflict will be lessened and the positions of actors 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 good deal of jockeying for advantage. 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, we have left the continuum and entered the realm of open conflict in which the very existence and structure of a strategic action field is up for grabs. It is possible for a whole new order to appear with a redefinition of the positions of the players, the rules of the game, and the overriding ends of the strategic action field. The purpose of our theorization is to understand better where such orders come from and how they are continuously contested and constantly oscillating between greater or lesser stability and order. In short, we expect strategic action fields to always be in some sort of flux, as the process of contention is ongoing

and the threats to an order always present to some degree. This stress on the essential contentious character of fields and the constancy of change pressures within strategic action fields is one of the distinctive new elements that we bring to this theoretical project.

Our view has a great deal of implication for how to think about change and stability in fields. We think it is useful to separate out the dramatic changes that occur in the formation and transformation of a field from the more piecemeal changes that result from contention in fields on an ongoing basis. The more radical moments of change can be characterized through a more social movement–like process that we will describe shortly. The more continuous sources of change will be the result of the period to period jockeying for position within the field. We expect that as the arrangements in the field are challenged successfully by various groups, the possibility for change is ongoing. We will discuss this issue more thoroughly in chapter 4.

2. Incumbents, Challengers, and Governance Units—Our interest in the dynamics of both conflict/change and stability/order is reflected in our general characterization of the composition of strategic action fields. We see fields as composed of *incumbents, challengers,* and very often *governance units.* First introduced by Gamson (1975), the incumbent/challenger distinction has long been a conceptual staple of social movement theory. Incumbents are those actors who wield disproportionate influence within a field and whose interests and views tend to be heavily reflected in the dominant organization of the strategic action field.[1] Thus, the purposes and structure of the field are adapted to their interests, and the positions in the field are defined by their claim on the lion's share of material and status rewards. In addition, the rules of the field tend to favor them, and shared meanings tend to legitimate and support their privileged position within the strategic action field.

Challengers, on the other hand, occupy less privileged niches within the field and ordinarily wield little influence over its operation. While they recognize the nature of the field and the dominant logic of incumbent actors, they can usually articulate an alternative vision of the field and their position in it. This does not, however, mean that challengers are normally in open revolt against the inequities of the field or aggressive purveyors of oppositional logics. On the contrary, most of the time challengers can be expected to conform to the prevailing order, although they often do so grudgingly, taking what the system gives them and awaiting new opportunities to challenge the structure and logic of the system.

In addition to incumbents and challengers, many strategic action fields have *internal governance units* that are charged with overseeing compliance with field

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[1] Gamson's actual distinction was between challengers and *members*, but "incumbents" has come to be the preferred alternative term.

rules and, in general, facilitating the overall smooth functioning and reproduction of the system. It is important to note that these units are *internal* to the field and distinct from *external* state structures that hold jurisdiction over all, or some aspect of, the strategic action field. Virtually every industry has its trade association. The system of higher education in the United States has various accrediting bodies, police departments have internal affairs divisions, and bond markets have their rating agencies. It is important to note that virtually all such governance units bear the imprint of the influence of the most powerful incumbents in the field and the ideas that are used to justify their dominance. Regardless of the legitimating rhetoric that motivates the creation of such units, the units are generally there *not* to serve as neutral arbiters of conflicts between incumbents and challengers but to reinforce the dominant perspective and guard the interests of the incumbents.

The presence of these governance units aids the incumbents in at least three ways. First, in overseeing the smooth functioning of the system, they free incumbents from the kind of overall field management and leadership that they necessarily exercised during the emergence of the strategic action field. Second, the very presence of these units serves to legitimate and "naturalize" the logic and rules of the field. They do this in a variety of ways. They often collect and provide information about the field to both incumbents and challengers. They also produce standardized versions of this information that can serve to inform the actions of all parties. Finally, besides their "internal" functions, such units typically serve as the liaison between the strategic action field and important external fields. So trade associations typically cultivate powerful allies in various state fields that exercise nominal control over the strategic action field in question. They are in a position to call on these allies for help should a crisis begin to develop within the field. In short, governance units can be expected to serve as defenders of the status quo and are a generally conservative force during periods of conflict within the strategic action field. While the incumbent/challenger distinction draws on a long line of theorizing by social movement scholars, the concept of the *internal governance unit* is one of the unique elements we bring to the proposed theory.

Field stability is generally achieved in one of two ways: through the imposition of hierarchical power by a single dominant group or the creation of some kind of political coalition based on the cooperation of a number of groups. At the core of the problem is whether or not the strategic action field will be built on coercion, competition, or cooperation. 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. Competition occurs when different groups vie for advantage without resorting to violence. The outcome of the competition is

expected to turn on some combination of initial resource endowments, the strength of internal and external allies, and variable social skill. The eventual winners will 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 the strategic action field together. The purpose of a given cooperative project is to provide resources—both material and "existential"—to members. (We will have more to say about these "existential" rewards in the next section and even more in the next chapter.) A political coalition reflects an alliance between two or more groups in relation to other groups. Our ideal typical view of political coalitions is that they are based on cooperation. This cooperation is generally rooted in a combination of shared interests and a common collective identity. People join groups and cooperate for narrow material rewards but also for the existential benefits that a sense of meaning and membership affords. In practice, a stable strategic action field can be built on any of these three bases or some combination of them (Wagner-Pacifici 2000).

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 cooperative coalitions and enforced hierarchies as alternative means to organize fields. They can form coalitions with some groups in a strategic action field to build a larger group and then use that larger group to coerce or compete with other groups.

Depending on the evenness of the distribution of resources and position, political coalitions at one extreme are clearly based on cooperation between social groups, but at the other, where one group has more power, political coalitions may come to resemble a hierarchy. Equally sized incumbent groups can share power in one kind of political coalition, making it look "flat" rather than hierarchical. But we can also imagine a situation in which a dominant incumbent group controls a strategic action field in coalition with a number of much smaller partners. The latter closely resembles a hierarchical field even though the relationship between coalition members is nominally cooperative. Over time, the relative power of individuals or social groups can change, thereby moving the strategic action field toward either more hierarchy or more coalition.

The structure of incumbents and challengers depends on the nature of the strategic action field. So, for example, the number of incumbent groups will reflect the relative power of those groups and the underlying basis of that power. Incumbent groups may fashion an informal agreement to share the field. The result might be separate spheres of influence within the field, allowing these groups to cooperate without stepping on one another's toes. They might even ritualize this agreement even as they periodically test its limits. For their part,

challengers can use their resource dependence within a strategic action field to their advantage. If groups are dependent upon other groups, this can create a stable situation in which "contracts" are made. There will always be tension in these kinds of relations because they define the roles of unequal partners.

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 for themselves but allow challengers to survive and share in the spoils, even if in a somewhat inequitable manner. In return, challengers will keep their opposition to incumbents generally in check. By the same token, political coalitions often experience some level of ongoing conflict and competition. Groups in the coalition will believe that they are not getting their fair share of rewards. They may also believe that their vision of the coalition is not being honored. They can try to remake the coalition by mobilizing a different collection of groups based on an emergent oppositional account of the field. Obviously, the changing size of groups and their resources can affect the ongoing politics of hierarchy and coalition. The idea that fields can be organized either in a hierarchical or coalitional fashion offers a more integrated view of the possibility of field order. This is also a new element in our perspective.

3. Social Skill and the Existential Function of the Social—The next new element in our perspective is a unique theory of "social skill" peculiar to humans and rooted in a fundamental understanding of what we term the "existential function of the social." So central to our perspective is this distinctive microfoundation that we will devote a good part of chapter 2 to its explication. For now, we content ourselves with only the most general introduction to this aspect of the theory.

How to think about the role that actors play in the construction of social life has been one of the core controversies in social theory in the past twenty years (Fraser 2003; Honneth 1995; Jasper 2004, 2006). On the one hand, sociologists tend to see overriding cultural or structural factors as facilitating or impeding the ability of individuals or organized groups to actively affect their life chances. On the other, it is hard to be a participant in social life without being impressed at how individuals and groups are able to affect what happens to them (Ganz 2000, 2009). Much of sociology contends it is interested in society's challengers, the downtrodden and the dispossessed. This concern, when combined with the view that there is little challengers can do about their position (at least according to many sociological perspectives), puts sociologists in an awkward position, intellectually and politically. Our approach tries to define a sociological view of

strategic action and link it to the possibilities for change in strategic action fields at different moments in their evolution.

Following Fligstein (2001a), we define strategic action as the attempt by social actors to create and sustain social worlds by securing the cooperation of others. Strategic action is about control in a given context (Padgett and Ansell 1993; White 1992). The creation of identities, political coalitions, and interests may be motivated by a desire to control other actors. But the ability to fashion such agreements and enforce them requires that strategic actors be able to "get outside of their own heads," take the role of the other, and work to fashion shared worlds and identities (Jasper 2004, 2006).

Put another way, the concept of social skill highlights the way in which individuals or collective actors possess a highly developed cognitive capacity for reading people and environments, framing lines of action, and mobilizing people in the service of broader conceptions of the world and of themselves (Fligstein 2001a; Jasper 2004, 2006; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow, et al. 1986). To discover, articulate, or appropriate and propagate these "existential packages" is inherently a social skill, one that underscores the "cultural" or "constructed" dimension of social action. We view social skill as an individual capacity and assume that it is distributed (perhaps normally) across the population.

What socially skilled actors will do will depend on what role they occupy in a particular strategic action field. In stable social worlds, skilled strategic actors in incumbent groups help to produce and reproduce a status quo. They are aided by a collective set of meanings shared by other actors that defines those actors' identities and interests. It is also the case that in "institutionalized" social worlds, meanings can be "taken for granted" and actions are readily framed in relation to those meanings. In emergent or unsettled strategic action fields, the task for skilled strategic actors is somewhat different. In unsettled strategic action fields, it is possible for skilled social actors to assume the role of "institutional entrepreneur" (DiMaggio 1988). Here, their ability to help link groups based on appeals to common interests and identities comes to the fore. These skills are at the greatest premium in unorganized or unstable strategic action fields. Here, actors use their skill to mobilize others, either to help them build a political coalition able to organize the field or to use their superior resources to produce a hierarchical field (Ganz 2000, 2009).

By emphasizing the cognitive, empathetic, and communicative dimensions of social skill, we hope to underscore the central point that actors who undertake strategic action must be able to use whatever perspective they have developed in an intersubjective enough fashion to secure the cooperation—willing or otherwise—of others (Fligstein 2001a). This kind of skill enables actors to transcend their own individual and narrow group interests and to take the role of the other

as a prerequisite for shaping a broader conception of the collective rooted in an emergent worldview and shared identity (Mead 1934).

We make one final, crucial point regarding the exercise of the social skills alluded to here. Virtually all past perspectives on strategic action have focused primarily on disparities in power and preferences. Much of what we have said to this point in the book could be interpreted in this narrow instrumental light as well. However, we see strategic action as inextricably linked to the distinctive human capacity and *need* to fashion shared meanings and identities to ensure a viable existential ground for existence. This is not to say that power and preferences do not matter but that our attempts to exercise the former and achieve the latter are always bound up with larger issues of meaning and identity. What is more, our preferences themselves are generally rooted in the central sources of meaning and identify in our lives. We discuss this complicated topic in the next chapter. For now, we simply assert that for us collective strategic action is rooted at least as much in Weber's stress on meaning making and Mead's focus on empathy as on the naked instrumental orientation of Marx.

4. Broader Field Environment—Many other theorists, as we have noted, have proffered descriptions of the kind of mesolevel orders that we are calling strategic action fields. Virtually all of the previous work on fields, however, focuses only on the internal workings of these orders, depicting them as largely self-contained, autonomous worlds. The next distinctive feature of our perspective derives from the central analytic importance we accord the broader environment within which any given strategic action field is embedded. More specifically, we conceive of all fields as embedded in complex webs of other fields. Three sets of binary distinctions will help us characterize the nature of these "other fields" and their relationships with any given strategic action field. The first distinction is between *distant* and *proximate* fields. Proximate fields are those strategic action fields with recurring ties to, and whose actions routinely affect, the field in question. Distant fields are those that lack ties and have virtually no capacity to influence a given strategic action field.

The second distinction is between *dependent* and *interdependent fields.* The distinction captures the extent and direction of influence that characterizes the relationship between any two fields. A field that is largely subject to the influence of another is said to be *dependent* on it. This dependence can stem from a variety of sources, including formal legal or bureaucratic authority, resource dependence, or physical/military force. Formal bureaucratic hierarchies of the Russian doll variety embody the first of these sources of dependence. Within these vertically organized systems, all lower level fields are nested in, and formally dependent upon, all higher level systems. When two linked fields exercise more or less equal influence over each other, we say that they stand in an *interdependent* relation to one another. It should go without saying that fields can also be

independent of one another, that is, unaffected by the actions of the other. Indeed, the great majority of strategic action fields are independent of each other.

The final distinction is between *state* and *nonstate fields.* The distinction is an obvious but important one. 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 nonstate fields. This grants to states considerable and generally unrivaled potential to affect the stability of most strategic action fields. But states for us are also dense collections of fields whose relations can be described as either distant or proximate and, if proximate, can be characterized as existing in either a *horizontal* or *vertical* relationship to one another. We therefore reject the all too common notion of a singular, hegemonic state. On closer inspection states are made up of myriad social orders whose dynamics are nearly indistinguishable from other fields. Indeed, we see this particular conception of the state, as a dense system of interdependent fields, as another of the original contributions of the theory. We discuss states as collections of fields in chapter 3.

Armed with these distinctions, it is now easier to appreciate just how complicated and potentially consequential are the ties that link any given strategic action field 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 which it routinely competes for resources. But this only exhausts the intrafirm 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. We use this example and offer these distinctions to make a simple point. For all the attention paid to mesolevel orders by other analysts, the failure to take seriously the constraints (and opportunities) imposed on those orders by the myriad ties they share to other fields significantly truncates our 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. While fields can devolve into conflict as a result of internal processes, it is far more common for an "episode of contention" to develop as a result of change pressures emanating from proximate state and/or nonstate fields.

5. Exogenous Shocks, Mobilization, and the Onset of Contention—The main theoretical implication of the interdependence of fields is that the broader field environment is a source of routine, rolling turbulence in modern society. A significant change in any given strategic action field is like a stone thrown in a still pond sending ripples outward to all proximate fields. This does not mean that all or even most of the ripples will destabilize other fields. Like stones, changes come in all sizes. Only the most dramatic are apt to send ripples of sufficient intensity to pose a real threat to the stability of proximate fields.

While these continuous moments of turbulence will offer challengers opportunities to better their positions and even change the rules of the game, in already existing fields, most incumbents are generally well positioned and fortified to withstand these pressures. For starters, they typically enjoy significant resource advantages over field challengers. They also may not face a challenge even in the face of a significant destabilizing shock because of the perception by challengers that incumbents are secure in their power. Finally, incumbents can generally count on the support of loyal allies within governance units both internal to the field and embedded in proximate state and nonstate fields. Possessed of these material, cultural, and political resources, incumbents are positioned to survive.

Sometimes, however, these advantages may not be enough to forestall an "episode of contention." In rare instances, the sheer magnitude of the perturbation—for example, the recent subprime mortgage crisis to which we will devote considerable attention in chapter 5—may virtually impose crisis on many proximate fields, especially those that stand in a vertically dependent relationship to the strategic action field in question. More typically, however, the magnitude of the destabilizing change is not so great as to compel crisis. Exactly how much of a threat the change proves to be is determined by the highly contingent mobilization process depicted in figure 1.1. This process speaks to the capacity for social construction and strategic agency that is at the heart of our perspective.

The process—which will be familiar to many social movement scholars (McAdam 1999; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001)—consists of three linked mechanisms. The first is the collective *attribution of threat/opportunity*. The simple question is how are the destabilizing change processes interpreted by incumbents and challengers? Unless they are defined as posing a serious threat to, or opportunity for, the realization of collective interests, there is no possibility that any serious field crisis, or "episode of contention," will develop.
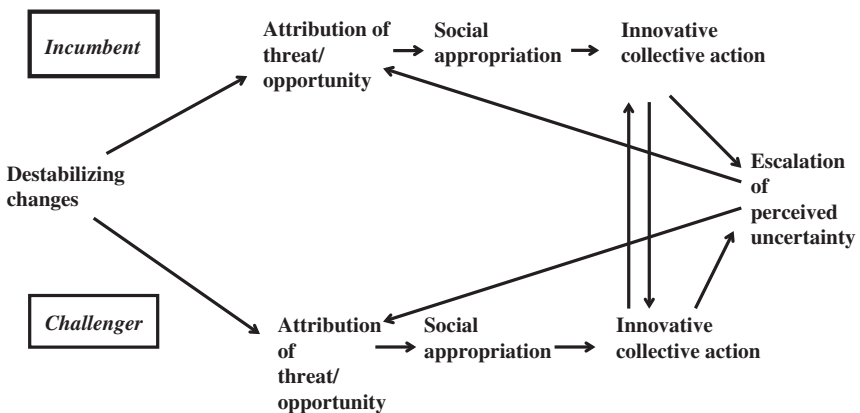

Figure 1.1

The collective *attribution of threat or/opportunity* is not, however, enough in and of itself to ensure the onset of contention. For that to take place, two other things must happen. First, those perceiving the threat/opportunity must command the organizational resources (e.g., *social appropriation*) needed to mobilize and sustain action. Second, the hallmark of a true episode of contention is heightened interaction involving the use of innovative and previously prohibited forms of collective action (e.g., *innovative action*). Should challengers, in the face of a shared sense of threat or opportunity, continue to hew to "proper channels" and established rules for pressing their claims, no crisis or sustained episode of contention is likely to develop.

An example may serve to make this more concrete. Rosa Parks's arrest in December 1955 for not giving up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery city bus hardly ordained the crisis that ensued. After all, countless blacks had been arrested for similar offenses in the past. But this time, perhaps because Parks was well connected to the city's civil rights establishment, the arrest was quickly defined as an opportunity to protest the injustices of the bus system (e.g., attribution of opportunity). But it was the next two steps in the process that transformed the arrest into the highly consequential episode of contention it became. By convincing the majority of black ministers in Montgomery to take to their pulpits on Sunday, December 4 to urge congregants to protest the arrest of Ms. Parks, civil rights leaders effectively "appropriated" the central institution of the black community—and for many the key source of meaning and identity in their lives—in the service of the incipient movement. Still, had the leaders sought to "protest" the arrest through traditional channels, there would have been no crisis. It was the decision to engage in innovative action by launching the one-day symbolic boycott of the buses that effectively triggered the episode of contention.

6. Episodes of Contention—An episode of contention "can be defined as a period of emergent, sustained contentious interaction between . . . [field] actors utilizing new and innovative forms of action vis-à-vis one another" (McAdam 2007: 253). Besides innovative action, contentious episodes contain a shared sense of uncertainty/crisis regarding the rules and power relations governing the field. In the case of fields already characterized by well-established incumbents and challengers, the mobilization of both groups can take on extraordinary intensity. An episode can be expected to last as long as the shared sense of uncertainty regarding the structure and dominant order of the field persists. Indeed, it is the pervading sense of uncertainty that reinforces the perceptions of threat and opportunity that more or less oblige all parties to the conflict to continue to struggle. In his book on the 1966–1968 Red Guard Movement in Beijing, Walder (2009a) offers an extraordinary description of just such an episode. He convincingly argues that it was not prior or even emergent interests that

motivated the conflict so much as the generalized sense of chaos and uncertainty that obliged all parties to engage in round after round of reactive struggle.

In this sense, contention—at least for a period of time—can often feed on itself. Along with the generalized sense of uncertainty, perceived threats and opportunities generally change the consciousness of field actors by exposing rules that had been taken for granted, calling into question the perceived benefits of those rules, and undermining the calculations on which field relations had been based (McAdam and Scott 2005: 18–19). As the commitment to the ongoing structure of the strategic action field collapses, new actors can be expected to join the fray. In response to an emerging crisis, incumbents are apt—at least initially—to appeal to the status quo in an effort to try to stabilize the situation. For their part, challengers are likely to be the first to engage in innovative action, sensing an opportunity to advance their position in the field through novel means. Wholly new groups are also likely to emerge during the crisis.

One form of action that is ubiquitous during episodes of contention is framing (Benford and Snow 2000; Goffman 1974; Snow et al. 1986). All manner of combatants—sometimes including actors from outside the field—can be expected to propose and seek to mobilize consensus around a particular conception of the field (Fligstein 1996; Snow and Benford 1988). Incumbents may well persist in trying to reconstitute the old order, often with the help of internal governance units and allies in proximate state fields. Indeed, the imposition of a *settlement* by state actors is a common, if not always stable, method for resolving an episode of contention. Very often the advantages—material, cultural, political—enjoyed by incumbents may be enough to overcome crisis and restore order. In rare instances, however, oppositional logics may carry the day as challengers successfully sustain mobilization and slowly begin to institutionalize new practices and rules (DiMaggio 1991; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Consistent with the distinctive "microfoundation" alluded to above, it is worth noting that the desire to resolve a field crisis often reflects "existential" motives as much as narrow instrumental ones. That is, all manner of field actors—even those who stand to benefit from severe and prolonged crisis—have a stake in restoring the shared sense of order and existential integrity on which social life ultimately rests. The important empirical implication here is that in researching an episode of contention and especially its resulting settlement, researchers should attend as closely to "existential" motives as narrow instrumental ones (e.g., to issues of meaning, identity, burnout, and general stress).

7. *Settlement*—Through either sustained oppositional mobilization or the reassertion of the status quo by incumbents and/or their state allies, the field begins to gravitate toward a new—or refurbished—*institutional settlement* regarding field rules and cultural norms. We can say that a field is no longer in crisis when a generalized sense of order and certainty returns and there is once

again consensus about the relative positions of incumbents and challengers (McAdam and Scott 2005: 18–19; Schneiberg and Soule 2005: 152–53).

We have already noted the role of state actors in restoring field order, but other external parties may be involved as well. In general, if proximate fields are the source of the destabilizing shocks that set contentious episodes in motion, they often provide the models for the settlements that bring these crises to a close. When field rules are uncertain, actors tend to be more receptive to new perspectives and to engage in search processes to identify alternatives. Proximate fields are a readily available and generally trusted source for new ideas and practices. So social movements experience "spillover" (Meyer and Whittier 1994) or "spin-off" movements (McAdam 1995); organizations appropriate the "legitimate" forms used in other fields (Clemens 1993, 1996; DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 151–52; Meyer and Rowan 1977); and judges justify new legal interpretations by analogy (Epstein 1987).

Other Perspectives

In developing the perspective on offer here we have borrowed elements from many existing theoretical points of view. We think it is useful to acknowledge our debts and common themes but also to highlight areas where we think we have added new insights or have some disagreements or critique. Our goal here is not to denigrate other perspectives but to suggest what we have to add to the rich thinking already out there. We do not view what we have done as just a synthesis of what already exists but instead a reconceptualization that draws on some elements extant in other theories but adds significantly to them as well. Our perspective solves a number of puzzles in the way that scholars have studied sociological forms of collective action, and it is that novelty that we wish to highlight. One way to do that is to distinguish our view from others by pointing out not only our debts to other perspectives but also where our concepts push forward the field theory project.

At several points we have alluded to what we see as significant differences between our theory and other alternative perspectives. But we have not done so in any detailed or systematic way. In this section we review some of the alternative perspectives that are most relevant to a field conception of social life, taking pains to acknowledge how closely some of our ideas align with those of other major theories/theorists. We then go on to suggest what may be missing from each of these perspectives and how our approach might redress those holes. In general, while all of the perspectives reviewed below imply elements of the field approach, none of them, in our view, constitute a general theory of social order that can account for such disparate phenomena as the alternative we propose

here. We briefly consider the approaches proposed by Bourdieu, Giddens, institutional theory, network analysis, and social movement theory and suggest how our more general approach draws on each while extending them.

Bourdieu

Obviously, there is substantial affinity between Bourdieu's scheme and the one proposed here. Bourdieu is as responsible for the idea of situating action in fields as any scholar. His theoretical apparatus is one of the most developed (although it is not the only one[2]). We view our theorizing as developing both the theory of fields and the idea of action in order to explain more phenomena more explicitly. As such, we are not hypercritical of his approach but believe that he would take much of our argument as a useful way to expand the scope and power of field theory.

One of the places where our theory advances the theory of fields and action is our more systematic focus on collective actors. Bourdieu's three main concepts are habitus, capital, and fields. Almost all of Bourdieu's discussion of these phenomena is pitched at the level of individual actors who find themselves in fields (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). He has few accounts of how collective actors work or how cooperation and competition between collective actors actually structures fields (for an exception, see Bourdieu's *The Rules of Art* [1996]). In general, he has little to say about the architecture of fields beyond the general view that they contain positions that are structured by the relative power of actors. He also does not have much to say about the relationships between fields.

There are complex reasons this is so. In many ways, Bourdieu's theoretical starting points in classical social theory offered few clues about creating something like field theory, and this meant that he was breaking new and novel ground in the construction of his theory of capital, habitus, and field. He did so by creating a relatively simple but flexible set of ideas that offer a powerful organizing lens for research (see Sallaz and Zavisca 2007 for a review of how these ideas have been used in American sociology). His main theoretical contribution was proposing the concept of field and combining it with a theory of action. One of the problems he was trying to solve was a deep one for social theory and one that is close to the core of this project: the problem of agents and structures. His goal was to overcome the usual opposition between agents and structures and to demonstrate that both mattered if we are to understand what actors do. He was

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[2] Martin (2009) examines the history of the idea of fields and argues that there are varieties of field theory in sociology that draw on different takes on the problem. Fligstein (2009) shows how much of new institutionalism in sociology, political science, and economics can be read as being about the problem of constructing mesolevel social orders, that is, fields.

not only one of the first to articulate these theoretical ideas but also among the first to deploy them in the empirical analysis of particular cases. Those cases, not surprisingly, were focused on how individuals acted in fields.

For us, the challenge is to extend these arguments and clarify the theoretical lenses we can use to analyze these sorts of phenomena in a deeper way. Our perspective widens the object of study and draws into it insights from other literatures. Bourdieu's focus on *individuals* acting in fields means that his theory is generally less about the problem of *collective* action (again there are some exceptions in his work, such as *The State Nobility* [1998]). Instead, his actors have a position in a field, they come to that field holding some form of capital, and they have their habitus, which gives them a cognitive framework with which to interpret the action of others in the field. This focus on individuals is very useful. But it does tend to obscure the all-important collective dynamics of fields. Our focus is on how people cooperate, how groups get things done, and how we are to understand the interaction that goes on between groups. This, needless to say, is our key point of departure.

Actors in Bourdieu's theory are generally only responsible to themselves and motivated by a desire to advance their interests within the constraints of the situations in which they find themselves. But fields also turn more centrally on coordinated action, which requires actors not to simply focus on their position in a field but to seek cooperation with others by taking the role of the other and framing lines of action that appeal to others in the field. We view these collective dynamics as complementary to the generally individual action that is Bourdieu's central concern.

One advantage of our approach is that it views both competition and cooperation as fundamental to field analysis. Thus, collective action, which depends on cooperation, will rely on actors being able to convince others that their view of the problems of the field and the identity they provide for others in solving those problems work for everyone. This kind of action is common in the social movements literature and the organizations literature because scholars in both of these fields are centrally concerned with the demands and dynamics of coordinated action. This is one of the main differences between the Bourdieusian perspective and the view of most scholars of fields in American sociology.

Another difference between Bourdieu's theory and the one developed here is our focus on the emergence or transformation of social spaces by collective actors. Most of Bourdieu's work was oriented toward establishing that fields exist, that they shaped the behavior of actors in profound ways, and that actors took what such systems gave. But his work was less concerned with the emergence of new fields and the transformation of existing ones (again with a few exceptions such as *The Rules of Art* [1996]). His one insight on the matter was that when the conventional wisdom (what he called "doxa") was called into

question, there emerged at least the possibility of field transformation or disso-
lution (Bourdieu 1977). But he had little or nothing to say about how this
happened and how collective actors produced new identities and frames to form
new fields or transform existing ones. We think that Bourdieu would broadly
agree with this aspect of our theory. Our approach, which explicitly relies on
social movement theory to understand the emergence of a field and its transfor-
mation, fills an important gap in field theory.

Finally, while Bourdieu was very aware of the fact that fields were connected
to one another, he rarely theorized the linkages between fields and the dynamics
that could result from the interactions between fields (although *The State Nobility*
[1998] certainly provides one of the few extant empirical cases of the interde-
pendence of fields). For us, these linkages are fundamental to an understanding
of stability and change in existing fields. As such, these mechanisms need to be
explicitly explored and theorized. Indeed, this will be the sole focus of chapter 4
in this volume.

Giddens

Anthony Giddens's work shares many of the same assumptions about how
social life works as the perspective outlined here. Giddens's theory of structura-
tion (1979, 1984) is very much concerned with the reflexivity of actors, even in
the most mundane reproduction of a system. Giddens also appreciates the role
that preexisting structures and systems of power play in the reproduction of
social life. For Giddens, social structures are rules and resources. Rules are
patterns people may follow in social life. Giddens defines two types of resources.
Authoritative resources control persons, whereas allocative resources control
material objects.

The theory employs a recursive notion of actions constrained and enabled
by structures that are produced and reproduced by those actions. Agents'
knowledge of their society informs their action, which reproduce social struc-
tures, which in turn enforce and maintain the dynamics of action. Giddens
defines "ontological security" as the trust people have in social structure; every-
day actions have some degree of predictability, thus ensuring social stability.
Social change occurs when the trust that people have has broken down. The
agency of actors allows them to break away from normative actions, and
depending on the sum of social factors at work, they may instigate shifts in the
social structure. The dynamic between agency and structure makes such gener-
ative action possible. Thus, agency can lead to both the reproduction and the
transformation of society.

This phenomenological view of the duality of agency and structure shares
many common themes with Bourdieu's and the position we have elucidated.

Actors work to produce and reproduce their positions in social structures. They use rules (i.e., the rules of the field), resources (i.e., forms of capital), and their understanding of the field to make moves. Giddens also suggests that when structures appear to be broken down, actors can reimagine their worlds and bring about social change.

While we find this view to be attractive, we also think that it is a little vague. Giddens lacks several critical elements. First, he does not have a theory of collective action. Actors are instead located in nameless social structures where they are imposed upon to act. The motives of actors, their actual relationships to each other, and the desire to engage in collective action never appear in Giddens's view.

Second, Giddens lacks a conception of the arena of social action, that is, the concept of strategic action field. Instead, he has a much more general (and we would argue vaguer) idea about social structure. His use of rules and resources as structure makes it difficult to imagine how such structures are circumscribed. So, for example, in the theory of fields, there is always something at stake in the field. What distinguishes a particular field is that something is at stake and that the actors in the field are striving to control it. The theory of strategic action fields causes us to be able to ascertain who are members of a field, what their positions are, and what their moves might be. It also gives us insight into the fact that action is social and oriented toward others. Whether the goal of action is cooperation or competition, in a specific strategic action field, we can get closer to explaining the critical dynamics.

The lack of a theory of strategic action fields means that Giddens is also not good at understanding the common dynamics of individual and collective action that occur in fields. The theory of strategic action fields provides a way to understand if a mesolevel social structure is emerging, stable, or in the process of transformation. Without such a theory, it is hard to make sense of what actors are doing, as both individuals and collectivities. Our theory of strategic action fields specifies which state a field is in and therefore gives us leverage on the types of dynamics that are possible. In an emerging strategic action field, the problem of what the field is about, what exactly constitutes a resource, and the struggle over creating the rules all come front and center. The problem of gaining collective action, producing identities, and forging a field is what is up for grabs. Similarly, our perspective provides sources of social change in such fields. First, the connections between fields cause disruption in existing fields or new opportunities for field organization. Our view that reproduction in a field is not a rote process but instead the outcome of a round of interaction that does not necessarily only have to exactly reproduce a given order gives us a way to understand the piecemeal changes that can occur in particular fields. The theory of strategic action fields gives much more analytic leverage on how organized social life gets created and changes.

Institutional Theory

We owe a serious debt to institutional theorists in political science and especially sociology. Institutional theory in organizational studies (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Scott and Meyer 1983) is pitched at the same mesolevel as is our approach. Scott and Meyer (1983) use the term "sector" to describe fields as containing all of the organizations that one can imagine that might affect a particular organization. DiMaggio and Powell begin with the Meyer and Scott definition of a field containing all relevant actors. They identify 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 successful organizations. They may also follow the advice of professionals or experts on what they should 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. We borrow much from this perspective: a concern with fields and the mutual constitution of fields by actors who come to take one another into account in their actions and who operate to give one another a sense of what to do and why to do it.

While acknowledging a serious debt to the institutional framework, we nonetheless see two problems with the perspective. First, institutional theory is really a theory of how conformity occurs in already existing fields. It lacks an underlying theory of how fields emerge or are transformed. The theory, by its very nature, is antithetical to the notion of agency. Actors follow rules, either consciously by imitation or coercion or unconsciously by tacit agreement (DiMaggio 1988; Jepperson 1991). DiMaggio's article (1988) is frequently cited as inspiration for the idea of institutional entrepreneurs. But its main argument is that institutional theory 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 or is transformed. Here he suggests 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. But even as useful as the concept of institutional entrepreneur is, it hardly constitutes a systematic theory of field stability and change. Without embedding strategic action fields in broader field environments, DiMaggio has no deeper structural account of the kinds of ruptures that typically catalyze entrepreneurial action. In the end we are left with a thinly veiled "great man" theory of agency. In short, for institutional theory in its Meyer–Rowan and DiMaggio–Powell variants to work it needs a theory of change like the one proposed here to complement its emphasis on stability and reproduction.

The leads to the second problem, which is that the institutionalist view greatly underestimates the role of power in the structuring of fields, even those that are stable. Indeed, in both the Meyer and Scott and DiMaggio and Powell versions of a field, actors do not have interests, resources, or positions that determine what they can get. They are not jockeying with one another in a game in which they are playing to maintain or improve their position but instead following scripts that tell them what to do. This problem means that not only does institutional theory lack a theory of emergence or transformation (that is consistent with its basic terms), but also it cannot even account for the piecemeal changes that we expect in the constant playing of the game as conditions change within a field or between fields.

Network Analysis

The idea of using network analysis as a way to model fields dates back to DiMaggio and Powell (1983). There has been a lot of interesting research into how networks function to shape the relations between, and fate of, the actors embedded in them. So, networks, we are told, can serve as a source of information (Davis, Diekmann, and Tinsley 1994), resource dependence (Burt 1980), trust (Uzzi 1996), or collusion (Baker and Faulkner 1993). 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 do all of the above.

For all of its virtues, however, network analysis is *not* a theory of fields. It is principally a methodological technique for modeling various aspects of the relationships between actors within a field. And while it can be a powerful tool to help map fields and especially to monitor changes in the composition of strategic action fields, it is mute on the dynamics that shape fields. There are, to be sure, network researchers who have sought to theorize the role that social ties, or other properties of networks, play in shaping social dynamics (Burt 1992; Gould 1993; Granovetter 1973), but no one, to our knowledge, has fashioned anything close to a network-based theory of fields.

So, for example, we remain very much in the same situation that social movement theorists find themselves in with respect to network analysis. While network analysis has been a staple of social movement scholarship, theory has not kept pace with empirical research. So while the field has amassed an impressive body of studies showing significant network effects, especially regarding movement recruitment, there is still no theoretical agreement on what it is about networks that explains the effect. Or as Passy put it succinctly a few years back, "We are now aware that social ties are important for collective action, but we still need to theorize. . . . the actual role of networks" (2003: 22).

Network analysis has the potential to be a powerful aid to the study of strategic action fields but only when informed by some broader theory of field dynamics. A structural mapping of field relations, however sophisticated, will never substitute for a deeper analysis into the shared (or contested) understandings that inform and necessarily shape strategic action within a strategic action field. In short, the analyst always has to provide the theoretical underpinning for what is important about the relationships (i.e., networks) being studied for any given outcome. If a field is really an arena in which individuals, groups, or organizations face off to capture some gain as our view suggests, then the underlying logic of fields is not encoded in the structure of the network but in the cultural conceptions of power, privilege, resources, rules, and so on that shape action within the strategic action field.

We close this section with a simple example designed to illustrate the difference between formal network analysis and the perspective on offer here. Network analysts have gotten extraordinarily good at empirically mapping overtime changes in network structure. The tendency is to interpret these changes in the relationships between actors in a network as substantively important changes in the field. If any set of relationships either disappears or emerges, then it is interpreted as a direct measure of an important change in the field. However, without understanding the ways in which these shifts are viewed by challengers and incumbents in the field, the analyst is powerless to tell us anything about their significance. So, for example, a shift in the relationship between actors might signify the improving fortunes of one actor in the field but nothing of significance concerning the field as a whole. Alternatively, the ascendance of a single actor might, under other circumstances, portend a dramatic restructuring of the entire strategic action field. The problem is that the technique of network analysis that only describes the change in that one actor's position cannot tell us which of these two outcomes is taking place. Only by wedding the structural sophistication of network analysis with attention to the meaning of the shifts for all relevant actors in the field can we tell if a change in the network structure has implications for the field as a whole.

Social Movement Theory

The final perspective we take up is social movement theory.[3] Looking at the key elements of the perspective sketched here, it should be clear that we have drawn heavily on social movement scholarship in fashioning our theory. A host of our

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[3] In fact, a number of different theories of social movements have been proposed over the years (e.g., collective behavior theory, new social movement theory). Here the term "social movement theory" refers to the synthesis of *resource mobilization, political process,* and *framing theory* that has come to dominate the field over the past two decades.

key concepts—framing, political opportunity, rupture and settlement, episodes of contention, incumbents and challengers—have been borrowed directly from social movement theory. On the other hand, the framework proposed here is much broader in its application than social movement theory and different from the latter in a number of crucial respects. For starters, unlike the various organizational perspectives sketched above, social movement theory has never been oriented to the concept of "field." Second, as the name suggests, the study of social movements has become increasingly narrow and "movementcentric" in its focus (McAdam and Boudet 2012; Walder 2009b), while the theory proposed here emphasizes the critical interplay, not only of the actors within a field but also between the field and the broader field environment in which it is embedded. Finally, if institutionalists have been better at explaining stability and reproduction, social movement scholars have understandably sought to explain the dynamics of emergent conflict and change. Accordingly, social movement theory has very little to tell us about the processes that make for stability and order in strategic action fields. By contrast, the perspective sketched here aims to account for field emergence, stability, *and* transformation.

Each of the perspectives reviewed above captures an important aspect of the way in which strategic action fields work. The fact that scholars across these fields have found common grounds and borrowed from one another's theories implies that they resonate with other point of views. But all of these alternative perspectives fail to recognize their deeper theoretical affinity. The theory of strategic action fields is a far more general perspective that allows us to understand how new mesolevel social orders are produced, sustained, and come unraveled. Our brief consideration of these perspectives illustrates how, by ignoring this deeper level of convergence, each perspective offers an incomplete picture of how organized social life works.

Conclusion

A recurring theme in sociology is the existence of powerful social institutions or structures that are extremely resistant to change. "Greedy" institutions, class structures, states, corporations—all are viewed as enduring structures that defy change, even in the most turbulent situations. Capitalists always win, states always beat nonstates, and social movements are generally doomed to failure. Our view is that this perspective is at best partial, at worst, highly misleading. Strategic action fields represent recurring games. Even in stable fields, the game is being played continuously and the skill of challengers and/or destabilizing changes in proximate fields might render incumbents vulnerable and prevent reproduction of the field. At the very least, the rules, composition, and structure

of the field will be in play constantly. Reproduction of the field may be the norm, but it is always accompanied by routine jockeying for position and incremental changes. As new actors appear and old ones disappear, rules get modified and incumbent/challenger relations are renegotiated. These kinds of piecemeal adjustments are the rule in virtually all fields, even the most stable.

This kind of incremental change is distinguished from those rarer, but still frequent, field foundings or transformations. Here, the order itself is altered. New fields suddenly emerge or old ones are transformed or perhaps even collapse and disappear entirely. These dynamics are different. Incumbents are struggling while challengers are emerging or rising up. It is at these moments that new identities and shared meanings define emergent interests to produce new and innovative social forms. But either way, collective strategic actors have to organize their groups, motivate their participants, and organize action vis-à-vis other groups. In settled times, the structural positions of actors may well determine their fate. If rules, resources, and political alliances favor incumbents, skilled strategic actors in challenging groups will do all they can to survive or improve their position. Backed by internal governance units and allies in proximate state fields, skilled strategic actors in incumbent groups will use the existing rules and resources to reproduce their advantage. But when resources or rules are up for grabs and when the existing order does not hold, skilled strategic actors fight hard to produce alternative orders.

The rest of our book lays out this theory in some detail. In chapter 2 we articulate the microfoundation for our theory—nothing less than a foundational perspective on how the nature and fundamental communicative/interactive capacities of modern humans inform our theory. In chapter 3 we move from the micro to the macro. As we noted above, all of the other approaches to the study of fields are, in our view, fieldcentric. That is, they attend exclusively to the internal dynamics of strategic action fields. We are concerned with this as well, but we are convinced that to truly understand a field and its dynamics, we must begin by systematically situating it in the complex network of "external" fields—state and nonstate—to which it is tied. Indeed, for us, the distinction between internal and external is largely illusory. Or more precisely, it is the complex interplay between the internal and the external that shapes the possibilities for field emergence, stability, and transformation. Then, in chapter 4 we link these macrodynamics to the prospects for change and stability in fields.

Chapter 5 applies the framework in two detailed case studies. Our goal is to use the framework to understand phenomena that at first glance seem to have little to do with each other. We illustrate many of our principles by reconceptualizing the twentieth-century civil rights revolution in the United States as a story of rupture in the national field of racial politics, triggered by destabilizing changes in three proximate fields. We contrast that case study with an account of

the emergence of the market for mortgages in the United States since the 1960s and the eventual rise and fall of that market in the 1990s and 2000s. We hope the analytic utility of thinking of these cases in field terms will be clear from the extended narratives offered in chapter 5. In chapter 6, we address the methodological implications of our theory, offering something of a practical blueprint for anyone who would adopt the perspective as a basis for studying a given strategic action field. We bring the book to a close in chapter 7 by highlighting what we see as the central insights and implications of the theory on offer here.