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TOWARD A GENERAL THEORY OF STRATEGIC ACTION FIELDS*

Neil Fligstein

Department of Sociology

University of California

Doug McAdam

Department of Sociology

Stanford University

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Abstract

In recent years there has been an outpouring of work at the intersection of social movement studies and organizational theory. While we are generally in sympathy with this work, we think it implies a far more radical rethinking of structure and agency in modern society than has been realized to date. In this article, we offer an over brief sketch of a general theory of strategic action fields (SAF). We begin with a discussion of the main elements of the theory, describe the broader environment of fields in which any given SAF is embedded, consider the dynamics of stability and change in SAFs, and end with an extended example intended to illustrate how adoption of our perspective would fundamentally change the interpretation of one of the more consequential "episodes of contention"—the civil rights revolution—to take place in the U.S. over the past 50 years.

For some thirty years, scholars of social movements and organizations have been in dialogue with each other. Initially, the conversation was tentative and decidedly one-sided, with social movement scholars rejecting the traditional collective behavior perspective in favor of a "rationalist" view of social movements that saw movements as but a particular form of organizational behavior (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977). By comparison, organizational scholars were slower to borrow concepts and theoretical frameworks developed in the study of social movements. But as scholars who studied organizations tried to understand better the process of organizational emergence and change and the role of actors in making those changes, they turned to social movement studies where scholars were studying how relatively powerless actors came to mobilize and organize fields.

Over the past decade, the pace of scholarly exchange between social movement and organizational scholars has increased rapidly, resulting in an impressive and growing body of integrative work (for some examples, see Armstrong 2002; Binder 2002; Binder and Minkoff 2004; Brown and Fox 1998; Campbell 2005; Clemens 1997; Creed 2003; Cress 1997; Davis, et al. 2005; Davis and Thompson 1994; Dobbin and Sutton 1998; Fligstein 1990; 1996; Haveman 1997; Jenkins and Ekert 1986; Kurzman 1998; Lounsbury, Ventresca and Hirsch 2003; McAdam and Scott 2005; McCammon 2002; Minkoff, 1995; Moore and Hala 2002; Morrill, Zald and Rao 2003; Rao, Morrill and Zald 2000; Rao, 2009; Schneiberg and Soule 2005; Smith 2002; Strang and Soule 1998; Stryker 1994; Swaminathan and Wade 2001; Weber, et. al. 2009).

But even as we applaud and embrace the intellectual fruits of this union, we see great promise in pushing this synthetic project much further. For even as social movement and organizational scholars borrow concepts and insights from each other, they still tend to see themselves as studying either one or the other. In doing so, they reify typological categories (i.e. social movements and organizations) that obscure a more fundamental and unifying structural reality. We want to push a more radical view. We assert that scholars of organizations and social movements—and for that matter, students of *any* institutional actor in modern society--are interested in the same underlying phenomenon: collective strategic action. Each is fundamentally concerned with the efforts of collective actors to vie for strategic advantage in and through interaction with other groups in what can be seen as meso-level social orders. We call these orders "strategic action fields" and use the terms interchangeably (see Martin, 2003 for an extensive discussion of the concept of "field").

In this article 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 sociology. While there remains considerable consensus about what figures and theories should be featured in classical theory courses, the opposite is true for classes in contemporary theory. Of the dozen or so contemporary theory syllabi we reviewed in connection with this article, we found no two that were at all alike. One still featured Talcott Parsons as a contemporary theorist, even though he has been dead for some 30 years. Another was organized around works by Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel that were written in the 1970s. But the strongest evidence of the perceived absence of

viable general theory in contemporary sociology came from a third syllabus which featured the work of the canonical figures of classical theory. After a brief review of the work of Weber, Marx, Durkheim and Mead respectively, students were then asked to read several recent selections that allegedly reflected the ongoing resonance of these classic thinkers in contemporary sociology.

While applauding the creativity inherent in this approach, it would also seem to mirror the impoverished state of general theory in contemporary sociology. "Theory" has gone the way of subfield specialization. As subfields have proliferated, so to have specialized perspectives designed to explain the empirical phenomenon seen as central to the enterprise. We now have distinct theories of 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 endemic to that structure. That is what we hope to come closer to describing in the perspective on offer here.

To be sure there *are* a handful of theories that we see as legitimate alternatives to our perspective. These would include new institutional theory in organizational theory, Anthony Giddens' theory of "structuration," and closest to our perspective, Bourdieu's account of the habitus, field, and capital in social and political life. We have borrowed elements from several of these perspectives and admire the ambition inherent in all of them. But, we see all of these alternatives as 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 will have more to say on the comparative merits of these various perspectives in a later section of this article.

We begin by sketching the basic elements of the theory. We then use these elements to generate some propositions about the dynamics of field emergence, stability and change. After critiquing some of the alternative theories on offer in contemporary sociology, we close with an extended example showing how the perspective alters our understanding of the origins of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

The Central Elements of the Theory

Space constraints preclude a detailed rendering of the full perspective here.[i] In this section, however, we identify and briefly describe what we see as the key components of the theory. These are:

1. strategic action fields
2. incumbents, challengers and governance units
3. social skill
4. the broader field environment
5. exogenous shocks, field ruptures, 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 (hereafter, SAFs) are the fundamental units of collective action in society. A strategic action field is a meso-level social order where actors (who can be individual or collective) interact with

knowledge of one another under a set of common understandings about the purposes of the field, the relationships in the field (including who has power and why), the rules of the field, and a situation where actors have frames that produce an understanding of what other actors' moves in the field mean.

All collective actors (for example, organizations, extended families, clans, supply chains, social movements, and governmental systems) are themselves made up of SAFs. When they interact in a larger political, social, or economic field, that field also becomes an SAF. In this way, SAFs can look a lot like Russian dolls: open up an SAF and it contains a number of other SAF. So, for example, an office in a firm can be an SAF. 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 SAFs constitutes a meso-level 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.

We think the insight that action takes place in meso-level social order is implied in the various versions of institutional theory. These orders have been variously called *sectors* (Meyer and Scott 1983), *organizational fields* (Dimaggio and Powell 1983), *games* (Scharpf 1997), *fields* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), *networks* (Powell *et al.* 2005), or, in the case of the government, *policy domains* (Laumann and Knoke 1987). In the economic realm, *markets* can be thought of as a specific kind of constructed order (Fligstein, 1996; 2001). For their part social movement scholars conceive of movements as emergent orders comprised, in the most successful cases, of collections of formal social movement organizations (SMOs) and more informal groups of activists. McCarthy

and Zald (1973, 1977) refer to these emergent orders as *social movement industries* (SMIs). Movements also have the potential to spawn *conflict arenas* composed of movement groups, state actors, the media, and countermovement groups, among others (McAdam 1999[1982]: chapter 5).

If, however, many analysts have come to focus on meso level orders as central to institutional life, their conceptions of these fields can be quite different. Bourdieu sees "social power" as the underlying key to both the structure and logic of any given field. Institutional theorists like Jepperson (1991) tend toward a more 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 focused concern on how at their core, field processes are about who gets what. We too see strategic action fields (SAFs) as socially constructed arenas within which actors with varying resource endowments vie for advantage (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Martin 2003; Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). SAFs are socially constructed in three important respects. First, membership in these fields is based far more on subjective "standing" than 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 SAF. 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 with each other.

The boundaries of SAFs 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 SAFs described above would cease to be all that relevant. Instead the conflict would define a new field, comprised 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.

One common way to describe such orders is to use the idea of "institutional logics" (Scott, 2008; Friedland and Alford, 1991). We think this idea is too broad for understanding how fields actually operate. We want to separate four aspects of the kind of meanings that underlie SAFs as suggested by our definition of SAFs. First, there is a diffuse understanding of what is going on in the field, i.e. what is at stake (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1990). Here, we would expect that actors in a settled SAF 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 are a set of actors in the field who can be generally viewed as possessing more or less power (in a moment we will define these positions as incumbents and challengers). Here, we have in mind that actors occupy a position and they understand who is in what position in the field. One way of thinking about this, is that they know who their friends, their enemies, and their competitors are because they know who occupies those roles in the field. Third, there are a set of shared understandings about the cultural 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 moves make sense as interaction in the field plays out.

Finally, there is the interpretive frame that individual and collective strategic actors bring to make sense of what others are doing. Here, we consider the fact that the degree to which all actors actually share the same perception of what any other actors' actions means, is an open question. We expect that actors will tend to see the moves of others from their own perspective in the field. In most fields, we expect that dominant or incumbent actors will have a frame of reference that encapsulates their view of the field, while dominated or challenger actors will have an "oppositional" perspective. The reactions of more and less powerful actors to the actions of others thus reflect their social position in the field and their interpretation will reflect how someone in their position who perceives the actions of others as directed at "people like them" will react. Their reactions to those actions will be drawn from the repertoire of behaviors that they can mobilize under the rules in reaction to others given their position in the field.

All of these aspects of SAF structuring are lumped together in the conventional view of organizational or institutional logics. We think this is wrong and creates a number of problems. The use of the term organizational 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. The relative and potentially oppositional positions of actors are not well captured by the concept of organizational logic. It fails to convey how different actors in different positions 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 new 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 in those terms when others make moves. To the extent that change occurs at all, it is relatively rare and never really 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. Actors who are both more and less powerful are constantly making adjustments to the conditions in the field given their position and the actions of others. This leaves great latitude for the possibility of piecemeal change in the positions that actors occupy. Even in "settled times," less powerful actors can learn how to take what the system will give them and improve their positions in the field.

One implication of seeing conflict and change as far more common than the prevailing view of settled fields is that the exact nature of any settlement is itself a continuous variable that runs from all of the elements discussed above being open to contention to all of the elements being settled. Indeed, if one studies a particular SAF over time, one could observe it moving back and forth on such a continuum as crisis undermines existing relationships and meanings and order becomes re-established with a new set of relationships and groups. If the field is more oriented toward the pole of settlement, conflict may be lessened and the positions of actors may be reproduced.

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

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 SAFs. We see fields as comprised of *incumbents, challengers,* and sometimes *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 SAF.[ii] Thus, the purposes of the field are shaped to their interests, the positions in the field are defined by their claims on the lion's share of the resources in the field, the rules tend to favor them and shared meanings tend to legitimate and support their privileged position within the 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. They may 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 SAFs have formal *governance units* that are charged with overseeing compliance with field rules and, in general, facilitating the overall smooth functioning 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 SAF. Virtually every industry and organization has its trade association. The system of higher education in the U.S has various accrediting bodies and Police Departments have Internal Affairs Divisions. 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 logics that are used to justify that dominance. Regardless of the legitimating rhetoric that motivates the creation of such units, they are generally there *not* to serve as neutral arbiters of conflicts between incumbents and challengers, but to reinforce the dominant logic and safeguard the interests of the incumbents. Ordinarily, then, 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 SAF.

It is possible for fields to be organized less hierarchically. If actors in a SAF are roughly of equal size and power, then it is possible for them to form political coalitions to organize a field. On way to think about this, is that such stand-offs can help to create an order (Wagner-Pacifici, 2000). Coalitions can form between incumbent groups or between different incumbents and challenger groups. Within political coalitions, the relative power of individuals or social groups can change thereby increasing the power of certain actors and undermining the coalition. SAFs can form out of dominant political coalitions that then operate to structure interaction between incumbents and challengers. So, instead of thinking of a SAF as divided into incumbent and challenger players, it may be the case that they are best thought of as a dominant coalition confronting less organized opposition.

3. Social Skill – How to think about the role that social actors play in the construction of social life has been one of the core controversies in social theory in the past 20 years (Honneth, 1995; Fraser, 2003; Jaspers, 2004, 2006). On the one hand, sociologists tend to see overriding cultural or structural factors as overcoming 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 our theories), 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 SAFs at different moments in their evolution.

Following Fligstein (2001a), we define strategic action as the attempt by social actors to create and maintain stable social worlds by securing the cooperation of others. Strategic action is about control in a given context (White, 1994; Padgett and Ansell, 1993). The creation of identities, political coalitions, and interests is to promote the control of actors vis a vis 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 find some collective definition of interest (Jaspers, 2004, 2006).

Put another way, the definition of social skill highlights how 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 these action "frames" (Fligstein, 2001a; Snow and Benford, 1988; Snow, et. al., 1992; Jasper, 2004, 2006). These frames involve understandings that offer other actors identities. They must resonate with varying groups and are open to interpretation and modification. To discover, articulate, and propagate these frames is inherently a social skill, one that underscores the "cultural" or "constructed" dimension of social action. We assume that this set of skills is distributed (perhaps normally) across the population.

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 in which those actors' identities and interests are defined. 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 uninstitutionalized SAFs, the task for skilled strategic actors is somewhat different. Skilled actors can become "institutional entrepreneurs" (DiMaggio, 1988). Here, their ability to help create and

maintain collective identities comes to the fore and in unorganized or unstable strategic action fields, these skills are at the greatest premium. They may be able to build political coalitions or have enough 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 willing cooperation of others (Fligstein, 2001a). This kind of skill requires that actors have the ability to transcend their own individual and group's narrow self-interest, formulate the problem of the multiple group interest, and thereby be able to mobilize sufficient support for a certain shared world view (Mead, 1934).

4. Broader Field Environment - Other theorists have proffered descriptions of the kind of meso-level orders that we are calling strategic action fields. One of the places where we part company from these analysts is in regard to their treatment of the broader environment within which SAFs are embedded. Indeed, virtually all of the work on fields focuses only on the internal workings of these orders, depicting them as largely self-contained, autonomous worlds.

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 SAF. The first distinction is between *distant* and *proximate* fields. Proximate fields are those SAFs with recurring ties to, and whose actions routinely impact, the field in question. Distant fields are those who lack ties and have virtually no capacity to influence a given SAF. The second distinction is between *vertical* and *horizontal fields.* The distinction captures the formal hierarchical relations that exist between a specific pair of proximate fields. A field that is vertically linked to

another is one that exercises formal authority over it. When neither field exercises formal authority over the other, but they mutually depend upon each other, we say their relationship is horizontal.

The final distinction is between *state* and *non-state 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 non-state fields. This grants to states considerable and generally unrivaled potential to impact the stability of most SAFs. But, states for us are dense collections of fields, whose relations can be described as either distant or proximate and if proximate, can be characterized by horizontal or vertical links. We avoid a reified notion of singular, hegemonic states; on closer inspection states contain myriad social orders whose relations can be as conflictual and constraining as any other fields.

Armed with these distinctions, it is now easier to appreciate just how complicated and potentially consequential are the ties that link any given SAF to its broader field environment. Consider a single product division within a large firm. The division constitutes a field in its own right, but it is also tied vertically to the larger field defined by the entire firm and to all other divisions within the firm, with whom it routinely competes for resources. But this only exhausts the intra-firm fields to which the division is tied. The division is simultaneously embedded in a complex web of proximate fields external to the firm; financiers, suppliers, customers, competitors, and state regulators.

We use this example and offer these distinctions to make a simple point. For all the attention paid to meso-level 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 a crisis to develop as a result of an exogenous shock emanating from a proximate field.

5. Exogenous Shocks, Field Ruptures, and the Onset of Contention – The main theoretical implication of the interdependence of fields is that it is a source of a certain level of rolling turbulence in modern society. A significant change in any given SAF 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 as to pose a real threat to the stability of proximate fields.

Most incumbents are generally well positioned and fortified to withstand these change 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 fields. Possessed of these material, cultural, and political resources, incumbents are positioned to survive.

Sometimes, however, these advantages may not be enough to forestall crisis. In rare instances, the sheer magnitude of the perturbation—e.g. like the recent "sub-prime" mortgage crisis--may virtually impose chaos on many proximate fields, especially those who stand in a vertically dependent relationship to the SAF in question. More typically, however, the magnitude of the destabilizing change is not so great as to compel crisis. Instead it develops through a process that speaks to the capacity for social construction and strategic agency that is at the heart of our perspective. We depict this process in figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

The figure depicts the onset of contention as a highly contingent outcome of an ongoing process of interaction involving at least one incumbent and one challenger. The collective *attribution of threat or /opportunity* is not 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. organizational 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 proscribed forms of collective action *(e.g. innovative action).*

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, the two significant hallmarks of contentious episodes are: (a) a shared sense of uncertainty/crisis regarding the rules and power relations governing the field,

and (b) sustained mobilization by incumbents and challengers. An episode can be expected to last as long as the shared sense of uncertainty regarding the structure and dominant logic 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 wasn't 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 SAF 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 (Goffman 1974; Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 1992). 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 allied state actors. Indeed, the imposition of a *settlement* by state actors is a common, if not always stable, resolution to a field crisis. In other 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).

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 (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).

Change and Stability in Strategic Action Fields

Armed with these basic conceptual elements, we are now in a position to begin analyzing the conditions that make for stability and change in strategic action fields and the potential role of strategic actors in these processes. In our view, SAFs tend toward one of three states: unorganized or emerging, organized and stable but changing, and organized and unstable and open to transformation. We take up each of these three types of fields, paying special attention to the processes that tend to produce each. We also produce some summary propositions.

Emergent Fields

An emerging field is an arena occupied by two or more actors whose actions are oriented to each other, but where agreement over the basic conditions of the SAF have yet to emerge. One can conceive of emerging fields as a social space where rules do not yet exist, but where actors, by virtue of emerging, dependent interests, are being forced increasingly to take one another into account in their actions. Concrete examples of such emerging fields might include the U.S. auto industry between 1890 and 1920 and the civil rights SAF that developed from the close of World War II until the birth of the mass civil rights movement in 1955-56.

Proposition 1: Unorganized social spaces become organized through a crescive social process akin to a political social movement.

The opportunity to create a new SAF implies that actors see an opportunity, but have no obvious way to cooperate or compete towards a stable solution to gaining hold over that opportunity. Indeed, such groups will find themselves disagreeing on the nature of the opportunity, who should have the power to set the conditions under which groups will exploit the opportunity, and how to think about what the identity and interests are of actors interested in the opportunity. In short, such a situation is akin to the founding of a political social movement. At such moments, we will find multiple conceptions of the SAF, multiple possible solutions to the structuring of the SAF, and multiple possible configurations of who will get to be a challenger and who will be an incumbent. This situation will be very fluid and many actors, both individual and collective may appear to claim the new SAF. This creates a rising wavelike process (hence the term "crescive") whereby the actors in the field appear to emerge from nowhere.

Proposition 2: Skilled social actors are pivotal for new fields to emerge. They must find a way to translate existing rules and resources into producing local orders by convincing their supporters to cooperate and finding means of accommodation with other groups.

Proposition 3: Skilled social actors can help produce entirely new cultural frames for fields. They do so by building compromise identities that bring many groups along. In is process, every group's identities and interests can be transformed.

Skilled social actors recognize that is a newly emergent situation, the possibilities for what will ultimately win are open (Ganz, 2000, 2009). They have a few kinds of resources that they can mobilize to push either their own or their group's interests. Most important are already existing systems of rules or resources (like money, social connections, or knowledge) that can be mobilized to convince other groups that they should cooperate rather than compete. If these are decisive enough, skilled actors can manage to set up a hierarchical field where they dominate.

But if such domination is not possible, skilled strategic actors can try and produce a new collective identity for the field that can be bring lots of groups along, including perhaps challengers. Skilled strategic actors will use available identities to build coalitions of either other dominant groups or actors or else build broad coalitions of challenger groups to push forward a compromise version of the nature of the field (Wagner-Pacifici, 2000).

Proposition 4: Initial resource allocations effect whether or not SAFs become organized hierarchically or cooperatively. The greater the inequality of initial resource distribution, the more like the field will be hierarchical. Conversely, the existence of a set of groups of roughly equal size or resource endowment will encourage coalition building.

At the basis of all SAFs, is the problem of order. There are two ways to get a settlement around order. The first is to be able to impose some form of hierarchical order that in the end creates incumbents and challengers, or perhaps even more hierarchical, employers and employees. This will depend on the initial resource distribution of actors and the nature of the field at hand. If many groups emerge that are more clearly of the same size, then a hierarchical strategy is more difficult. This often pushes actors towards political coalitions as the basis for social order. Such coalitions will depend on the creation of frames and identities for coalition members. Of course, such coalitions can have more and less dominant players.

Proposition 5: SAFs are stable when they have role structures that are based on either hierarchical incumbent/challenger structures or political coalitions. Unorganized social space, on the contrary, is characterized by the frequent entry and exit of organizations, no stable social relationships, and no agreement on means and ends. This kind of drift or conflict can go on for long periods of time.

If one thinks of field settlement as a variable from more to less settled, it is possible for highly conflictual fields without settlement to exist for long periods of time. Actors can agree there is a field, but they may disagree vehemently about who occupies what position, what the rules are, and what actions taken by their opponents mean. Near permanent

instability is a common feature of social life. So, for example, one might think of the fight over the existence of the state of Israel as such a crisis. The conflict over the territory is at stake for all actors. But, the conditions under which different groups will accept any division of that territory are at odds in many ways. This has been going on for over 60 years.

Proposition 6: New strategic action fields are likely to emerge nearby existing strategic action fields. They are likely to be populated by existing groups who "migrate" or offshoots of existing groups.

One of the most interesting questions is where does the possibility for the existence of new SAFs come from? Indeed, to the degree that societies are increasingly organized, the opportunities for forming new fields increase because the unorganized fields are spawned by the empty spaces between new fields, and those fields and the state. For instance, once the dominant biological model of disease won out over its rivals, the medical profession using that idea, dominated the health field (Starr, 1982). But, the biological model quickly led to the proliferation of different forms of expertise on different parts of the human body and the diseases that afflicted patients. Doctors created new subfields, specialties which were formed around organizations that governed training and practices. In this way, existing strategic action fields provide the opportunities for new SAFs because they provide the "market" for new ends to emerge.

Proposition 7: States aid in the creation of new social space as intended and unintended consequences of state actions. States will also be the focus of attention from emerging SAFs.

The state is also a significant source of new strategic fields. For example, in the wake of a significant new piece of legislation, we are likely to see organizations or groups move in to take advantage of the new opportunities it creates for strategic action. Similarly, organized groups can take their grievances to state fields and attempt to help

produce rules to stabilize their SAFs. State fields can also intentionally or unintentionally undermine stable SAFs through direct or even indirect actions.

Indeed, to the degree that states interact with other states, and large-scale organizations in the economy and nonprofit sectors come to operate across national borders, the possibility for the emergence of international fields increases as well. For example, the political and economic integration of the European Community pushes forward the possibilities for new strategic action fields to emerge. For instance, we have witnessed the construction of new multinational policy fields made up initially of existing national organizations, but soon supplemented by new multinational public interest groups (see Marx and McAdam, 1996).[iii]

While material resources remain a powerful weapon in the struggle to shape the broad cultural contours of the emerging field, it is quite possible at this stage for a coalition of relatively impoverished groups to ban together under the tutelage of skilled strategic actors to overcome better endowed groups. This kind of fluid situation is the least easy to make predictions about, and likely to yield new and innovative forms of organization and action.[iv] This is because in the pragmatics of the situation, strategic actors will have their preferences and ends shaped as they try to create an SAF. They may not even realize that they are forging new cultural agreements until after they appear successful. Once those new strategies become recognized, then a language and culture can develop that applies these new cultural ideas more systematically.

Proposition 8: Emergent fields produce new forms of organizing. These frames can be borrowed from actors in nearby social space.

New ways of organizing are more likely to spread across strategic action fields that have some relation to one another. We would expect that "successful" modes of

organizing are borrowed by actors in adjacent social space to help order their SAF. So, for example, civil rights activists pioneered a set of tactics and a general collective identity that subsequent struggles, such as the women's movement, the disability rights, movement and gay liberation adopted through adaptation..

Stable Fields and Piecemeal Social Change

Field stability is best analyzed as an ongoing game where incumbents and challengers and members of political coalitions make moves and countermoves. This constant jockeying for position is controlled by the existing structure of the field. The goal for incumbents is to preserve or expand their power in the field by using the structures and meanings in the field to full advantage. But, incumbents are products as well as architects of the world view and set of rules they have helped devise. They are now dependent upon it and this dependency restricts their ability to conceive of alternative courses of action. Cognitively, it would be very difficult for a culturally "embedded" actor to shift world views dramatically especially when the world view and the system of field relations based on it has served them well.

Proposition 9: Stable strategic action fields are characterized by a well known role structure of incumbents and challengers or a set of political coalitions. The rules of the game will be known. Response to instability will be met by attempts to reinforce the status quo. Challengers will be particularly vulnerable to downturn. Challengers risk their survival under stable or crisis circumstances by undertaking actions vis a vis incumbents.

Field stability, however, does not depend on the inherent conservatism of incumbents alone. The emergence of a new field is typically accompanied by two institutional processes—one internal to the field, the other external--that further solidify

the advantage of those who fashioned the SAF in the first place. With respect to the former, the emergence of a field almost always leads to the creation of a set of internal governance structures designed to monitor and ensure compliance with field rules, membership criteria and the like. While these internal structures are nominally there for the benefit of the field as a whole, it should be clear that the enforcement of rules and logics designed by incumbents will generally serve to preserve the incumbent-friendly status quo.

The external process involves various forms of *certification* by state actors (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). As defined by McAdam et al. (2001: 121), "certification entails the validation of actors, their performances, and their claims by external authorities." So as fields coalesce, they tend to establish ties—often formal legal ties—to state actors and certifying state agencies. So new businesses require various state licenses, emerging industries are brought under the jurisdiction of established state regulatory regimes, charter schools are subject to myriad state requirements, etc. With few exceptions, these processes result in the overall *certification* of the dominant logic as well as the establishment of ties between state actors and incumbents that grant to the latter a set of allies who, in times of crisis, are very likely to defend the status quo.

Challengers contribute to the overall stability of the field because they are dependent on the current structuring of the field for survival and thus, on the very status quo that they seek to change. In short, there is a "prisoner's dilemma" quality to the circumstances challengers find themselves in. Seemingly, their interests would best be served by a successful challenge to the status quo. However, an unsuccessful challenge could prove disastrous, inviting, as it would, the wrath of incumbents. So the

overwhelming tendency is for challengers to prefer to maintain their position in the system, while awaiting clear signs of incumbent vulnerability.

Proposition 10: Skilled actors of dominant and challenger groups will engage in moves that they hope will preserve or improve their position in the existing SAF. These constant adjustments constitute a form of organizational learning. Tactics for challengers include building niches and taking advantage of crises of other challengers. Tactics for incumbents include, imitation, cooptation, or merger.

This does not mean, however, that SAFs are static orders. Instead even the most stable of SAFs are undergoing more or less constant change. Challengers can be expected to engage in a constant testing of the stability of the field, probing through their actions to assess the overall vulnerability of incumbents or more proximate rivals. These kinds of adjustments can be thought of as a form of "organizational learning" (Nelson and Winter 1982). Incumbents will also adjust to the actions of others, both challengers and other incumbents. They will try to coopt them, absorb them, or undermine them if they seem too threatening to the underlying structure of power in the SAF. We can expect that some actors will get stronger, others weaker. We can also expect that innovations on the part of different actors can subtly transform the existing order and/or their position in it. The status quo should be viewed as an ongoing, negotiated accomplishment, threatened at all times by challenger resistance and exogenous change processes. As such, this constantly produces shifts in the nature of the relationships, the tactics organized groups use to attain their goals, and the world views they use to make sense of their situations.

Field Crisis

It is our contention that SAFs are more vulnerable to crisis than most institutional theories—with their stress on "taken for grantedness" and reproduction—suggest. The most frequent source of these crises are the links SAFs have to other SAFs. These crises are met on a period to period basis by attempts to preserve the status quo. We have just described the tactics of challengers and incumbents under such routine playing of the game. Destabilization of a field that really threatens the underlying order can be seen as just a more extreme version of "normal" contention within the field.

Proposition 11 Strategic action fields are generally destabilized by external shock originating from other strategic action fields, invasion by other groups of organizations, actions of the state, or large scale crises such as wars or depressions.

Typically these "shocks" take one of three forms.[v] The first might be termed "invasion by outside groups." By "outsiders," we mean groups which had previously not been active "players" in the field. Outside challengers often make the most effective competitors because they are not bound by the conventions of the field and instead are free to bring new definitions of the situation and new forms of action to the fray. Their ability to be successful in this effort will depend on a number of factors: the strength of the incumbent groups, the defection of inside challengers to their side, and the attitude of state actors towards the invading group. If the state will not protect the incumbent's social order, then the possibility for transformation increases.

Examples of invasion have been commonplace in recent years. So-called "hostile takeovers" are a form of invasion. So too is the entrance of a major foreign investor into a previously national industry. But it isn't only economic fields that are subject to invasion. In the early- to mid-1970s, the efforts of the Teamsters to unionize agricultural

workers upset the relative stability that Caesar Chavez had been able to achieve among seasonal farm laborers in California (Ganz, 2009).

The second type of shock is the most common. As we noted above, all SAFs are embedded in a complex lattice work of other fields, including state fields. Crises in a given field typically arise as a result of destabilizing change processes that emanate from proximate fields. Shocks take the form of changes in resource dependencies or changes in the pattern of interaction between providers and audiences for the inputs and outputs of SAFs. These changes can emanate from other fields in intended and unintended ways and, if severe enough, have the effect of destabilizing relations within the SAF in question.

We use a hypothetical example to illustrate this second source of exogenous shock. Imagine a branch campus of a large state university in which the Dean of an undistinguished medical school seeks to enhance the stature of his college within the campus SAF by developing a hi-tech cancer center. He does so by petitioning the legislature for the lion's share of the resources needed to launch the project. After a bitter fight, a significant allocation is made, thus significantly enhancing the Dean's position within the university community. But the effects hardly stop there. To cement the legislative agreement, a new set of guidelines prohibiting the "duplication of university programs" is enacted. The immediate effect of this prohibition is the closure of a small cancer research lab at another branch campus. But the ripple effects continue. Legislative approval of the allocation is based, in part, on a staff report projecting increased tax revenues for the first three years of the project. The tax revenues never materialize. As a result the legislature is required to trim the budgets of the other branch

campuses by an average of three percent. At one of the campuses, the political fallout from the cuts is severe enough to cost the president his job, while at another a coalition of deans and department heads uses the crisis to justify closing the College of Education, whose resources they have long coveted.

The third type of exogenous shock are those rare events such as war, economic depression, and the like which tend not simply to destabilize specific fields, but the entire national/state structure in which the fields are embedded (Dobbin, 1994). This type of crisis can set in motion a period of prolonged and widespread crisis in which groups struggle to reconstitute all aspects of social life. Chief among these struggles is the struggle to fashion a new state and to create a stable consensus agreeable to a new set of incumbents. By destroying any semblance of a political status quo, regime crises encourage innovative strategic action by all groups sufficiently organized to contest the structuring of a new political order.

Regime crises to arise in the same way as more localized field crises develop; that is, as a result of some shock or set of shocks to those fields that comprise the state. These shocks have similar sources to those that other strategic action fields experience. Other states can threaten a given state symbolically, or more often by war. In the extreme, a state can be taken over by another state with profound implications for all other strategic action fields in society. Macro-economic crises can also threaten the legitimacy of the state by threatening its stable relations with existing fields. The more fields involved in these crises, the more likely the state is to become destabilized. To the degree that these crises reach epic proportions, the opportunities for collective action to transform the entire system may be present.

Our perspective points out why such crises are so rare. States are in the business of dealing with crisis by promoting the survival of the most organized groups in their societies. It is only in the extreme conditions under which those organized groups can no longer guarantee survival for their members and the state can no longer claim to produce order that the possibility for transformation exists. Just as the conditions for the transformation of existing strategic action fields increases when multiple shocks are present, one would expect the possibility for a general regime crisis to increase when multiple shocks occur.

Whatever form the external "shock" takes, its effects are likely to be the same. Such shocks threaten field stability either by interrupting the flow of resources essential to incumbent advantage, undermining the legitimating ideas on which the field rests, or by destabilizing the ties linking incumbents to key external allies, especially state allies. The degree to which such shocks actually undermine an SAF depends on a number of factors. First, SAFs with more connections to other SAFs, particularly state actors will have more resources to draw on in a crisis. Alternatively, an SAF that is heavily dependent on one other SAF for its survival will find its crisis more difficult to resolve.

Proposition 12. The more connected an SAF is to other SAFs, the more stable that SAF is likely to be. Similarly, new SAFs or those with few connections will be unstable.

Proposition 13. The more dependent an SAF is on others for resources, or the lower it is in the hierarchy of SAFs, the less stable it is.

Proposition 14: States will be the focus of action in crises. This explains why modern societies appear to be crisis ridden. General societal crises are rare, but when they occur, they have the potential to rewrite the rules across much of society.

Most crises would seem to be resolved in one of three ways, only the last of which is consistent with the idea of field transformation. In the first instance, incumbents

are able to restore order themselves by allying with other incumbents to use their muscle against challengers, and mobilizing internal governance units. They can also grant concessions to one or more challengers—perhaps even make them part of a dominant incumbent coalition—in an effort to undercut the prospect of a generalized revolt of the challengers. These kinds of adjustments change the field but do not transform it.

Another outcome involves the restoration of the status quo through the decisive intervention of powerful external actors, of whom the most important are probably state actors. In such instances, the external actors may well impose conditions on the field as a condition of restoring order. They may, for instance, depose incumbents irreparably damaged by the crisis, restructure internal governance units, or elevate particular challengers to incumbent status. The point is this second type of crisis resolution is likely to be accompanied by at least some changes to the underlying structure and/or logic of the SAF.

The third and probably least common outcome of a field crisis is a genuine transformation of the field. By "genuine" transformation" we mean a fundamental restructuring of power relationships within the field as well as the elevation of an oppositional logic to a position of dominance within the field. Although never easy to achieve, this kind of transformation is more likely to occur under some combination of the following conditions: (a) an exogenous shock of unusual intensity; (b) the defection of at least some incumbents and/or some or all external allies; and/or (c) united opposition by virtually all challengers within the field.

Highlighting the role of external actors in both the restoration and transformation of field stability underscores an idea central to our perspective. The "connectedness" of

SAFs is a source of both strength and weakness. For an SAF to become institutionalized means that it must establish stable social relations not only internally but also externally. Incumbents draw great strength from the legitimacy conferred by forms of state (and non-state) certification. In crisis, actors in a given SAF can draw on these resources to try and maintain stability. But, dependency on other SAFs can be both a source of instability that creates crisis in the first place as well as a liability should those external allies turn against the incumbent in the midst of a crisis.

Proposition 15: Incumbent socially skilled actors will defend the status quo. It follows that if a new frame emerges, it will come from an invader or challenger groups. They will attempt to create new rules and a new order and therefore either will build a new political coalition based on interest or create a new cultural frame that reorganizes interests and identities.

What behaviors can we expect during periods of field instability? In a crisis incumbents will initially stick to what got them there. Even when it is evident that they may lose power over the SAF, they have little choice but to try and enforce whatever conception of control they have by using the resources they have. A second option that incumbents will use is to call upon the state in a crisis. If they cannot enforce their view, then getting the state to recognize their difficulties in order to preserve the stability of their SAF is a good tactic. The crisis of an already existing SAF creates political opportunities for challengers to engage in strategic action. Indeed, this situation is akin to being able to organize unorganized social space.

Challengers have sold themselves on some collective identity to justify their position as challengers. In order to take advantage of political opportunities, challengers must create a larger collective identity that encompasses themselves and others. At the moment of flux, the very nature of the SAF is breaking down as the incumbents start to go under. If

challengers do not recognize that and forge a broader encompassing collective identity with other members of the SAF, then the political opportunity may well be lost. If they stick to the collective identify that has made them successful challengers, then they too are probably going to get swept away.

In short, some group or set of individuals must propose to others a new collective frame for the field. If they fail to do so, the SAF may simply collapse and become unorganized social space. The disruption of an SAF does not always result in the construction of a new one. Challengers can opt for several alternative solutions besides coalition building around new collective identities. They may, for instance, exit the field. They may migrate to other fields or unorganized social space where they will try and set up new social arrangements. The advantage in this, is that they may not have to dilute their collective identity. The disadvantage is, they might fail and risk the group disbanding. They can also work to partition the already existing SAF into several SAFs. This can be done by enlisting those who are most sympathetic and resist diluting the collective identity of the actors in the field.

Political opportunities do not tell us how the crisis will be resolved. Successful challengers will orient themselves towards the reorganization of the social space by creating a new collective identity and bringing others along. Generally, if challenger groups are able to communicate and draw on complementary resources, they may successfully find a collective identity. If one of the challenger groups is a lot larger than the others and is able to bring off a coalition of the others, then the chances of reorganization are enhanced. The real problem is finding a collective identity from which to construct a new conception of control. We expect that the new view will need 1) to deliver valued resources to the participant

groups, 2) be premised on what exists and how goods are already delivered, and 3) remove the onerous burdens imposed by the old conception of control.

Challengers have the best chance to succeed when there exist fewer challengers with complementary resources, and where one group is significantly bigger than the others. Here, the largest group's leaders can propose a collective identify to the others that satisfies the conditions listed above. Obviously, the less these conditions are satisfied, the more likely the field is to either break up or revert to incumbent control.

Proposition 16: An SAF crisis can result in:

1. A re-imposition of the old order with some adjustments. This will occur most frequently with the state enforcing whatever new agreements have been reached, most often at the expense of challenger groups.

2. The SAF breaks down into unorganized social space. If the groups that make up the social space are unable to find a new conception of control and the state is unwilling or unable to impose a new order, then the filed can become disorganized. This kind of condition is likely, by definition to be unstable for the groups that remain and one can expect that they will migrate to other social spaces or else disappear.

3. The SAF is partitioned into several social spaces. One solution is to break the field down by redefining the activities of the groups in the field so that they are no longer trying to occupy the same social space. Thus, new agreements are possible amongst potentially smaller set of groups.

4. The challengers can build a coalition to produce a new SAF. Challengers and incumbents can migrate to already existing social space or they can try and colonize new social space. Depending on the circumstances, it might make sense for groups to join already existing social space. They might do so as invaders, challengers, or incumbents. This may prove problematic (i.e. no one wants them there). Under these conditions occupying unorganized social space may prove the most appropriate way for groups to survive.

Critiques of Other Perspectives

It is useful to develop and critique some of the main perspectives which are most relevant to a SAF view of social life. While all of the perspectives imply elements of the

field approach, none of these perspectives has developed a general theory of social order that can account for such disparate phenomena as the generic field approach we propose here. We briefly consider some of the problems inherent in the approaches proposed by Bourdieu, Giddens, institutional theory, network analysis, and social movements theory and suggest how our more general approach resolves them.

Obviously, there is substantial affinity between Bourdieu's scheme and the one proposed here. Indeed, explaining the differences and similarities is a topic worthy of an entire paper. One of the most important differences in the two approaches stems from the construction of individual and 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 where they then act. He has few accounts of how collective actors work or how cooperation and competition between collective actors actually structures fields. There are complex reasons why this is so. One is that his main focus was explaining how such fields actually work and what individuals in those fields actually do.

But, his focus on individuals acting in fields meant that his theory is distinctly silent on the problem of collective action. This makes it difficult to use his theory to account for the emergence or transformation of social spaces by collective actors. Our critique here is somewhat different from the usual critique which focuses on how Bourdieu's theory can be thought of as a theory of social stability and not change. Our critique is instead, that without a conception of fields as embedded in one another and collective actors working together to support or tear down an order, it is difficult to have a complete theory of fields. Bourdieu recognized the fundamental importance of how

people thought about their worlds and how their either tacit or explicit acceptance of those worlds was fundamental for their stability. He also suggested that it was when the conventional wisdom (what he called "doxa") was called into question that the possibility for field change emerged. 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.

Anthony Giddens work shares many of the same assumptions about how social life works to the perspective outlined here. Again, one could write an entire paper comparing the approaches. Giddens is very much concerned to have actors always being reflexive, 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. But what Giddens lacks is a conception of the arena of social action, i.e. the concept of strategic action field. Instead, he has a much more general (and we would argue vaguer) idea about social structure, what he terms "structuration". A lack of a theory of SAFs means that Giddens is not good at understanding the common dynamics of individual and collective action which is conducted in fields. The theory of SAFs provides a way to understand if a meso level 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, both as individuals and collectivities.

Institutional theory in organizational studies (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott and Meyer, 1983) is pitched exactly at a meso level. Scott and Meyer (1983) use the term sector to describe fields as containing all of the organizations that one can imagine that might impact on 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 towards similar outcomes, what they call mimetic, coercive, and normative isomorphism. Their basic argument is that actors in organizations face uncertain worlds. In order to reduce this uncertainty, actors will be swayed by different kinds of forces. They may follow what they consider to be successful organizations. They may also follow the advice of professionals or experts to tell them what 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 see two problems with this 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 explicitly wants to remove an active conception of agency. Actors follow rules, either consciously by imitation or coercion or unconsciously by tacit agreement (DiMaggio, 1988; Jepperson, 1991). DiMaggio's paper (1988) is frequently cited as inspiration for the idea of institutional entrepreneurs. But its main argument is that institutional theory 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 acknowledges that this can only happen when someone comes along and figures out how to do something new and is able to convince others to go along with them. It is at this moment that power and agency work. What this means is that for institutional theory in its Meyer/Rowan and DiMaggio/Powell forms to have a theory of change, it depends on a theory very much like the one proposed here.

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 version of a field, actors do not have interests, resources, or positions that determine what they can get. They are not jockeying around in a game where 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), 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.

The idea of using network analysis--an analytic technique--as a way to model fields dates back to DiMaggio and Powell (1983). There has been a lot of interesting research into how networks are used in different ways by different actors. So, networks, we are told, can serve as a source of information (Davis, Diekman, 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.

Network analysis is not a theory of fields. Instead, the analyst always has to provide the theoretical underpinning for what is important about the relationships (i.e. networks) being studied for a given outcome. So, networks can index power, trust, information, etc…. There is thus, no network theory of fields; instead, network analysis is a technique to model whatever the analyst thinks is important about a set of relationships. This creates a deeper problem in using network analysis to capture field dynamics. If a field is really an arena

where individuals, groups, or organizations face off to capture some gain as our view suggests, then the underlying logic of fields is not networks of ties, but power and culture. Network analysis may be one way to model a field if used appropriately, but it is not the same as an SAF. One obvious way to see this problem is that formal network analysis is sensitive to small changes in a network of relationships. So, if one actor exits the network or one set of ties were broken, a network analyst would conclude that the whole situation had changed. SAF theory suggests that such changes would have to be interpreted by considering how who has power and what the underlying conception of the field was before one would conclude that the field was transformed.

The final perspective we take up is social movement theory.[vi] 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 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 is narrowly "movement-centric" in its focus (Walder 2009), 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 SAFs. By contrast, the perspective sketched here aims to account for field emergence, stability *and* transformation.

Each of the perspectives reviewed above capture an important aspect of the way in which strategic action fields work. The fact that authors across these fields have found common grounds and borrowed from one another's theories imply that they resonate to other point of views. But, all of the theories 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 meso-level 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 much of organized social life works.

The Perspective Applied: The Civil Rights Revolution, 1932-68

The conventional account of the civil rights revolution is told as a movement story; one that revolves around the courage and agency of grass roots civil rights activists. It is a powerful, inspiring story that almost always begins in Montgomery with Rosa Parks' refusal to surrender her seat on a bus in December, 1955. The end of the story is less consensually fixed, but tends to center on the assassination of Martin Luther King in April, 1968, the repression of the Black Panthers and other black power groups, or some other process or event that is thought to mark the "death" of the movement. In

book ending the story in this way, however, the literature conveys the impression that the civil rights revolution is synonymous with the mass movement.

Without discounting the importance of that movement, it should be clear by now that we favor a much broader view of social change and conflict, one that grants attention to a much larger cast of characters and centers on the interplay of a good many state and non-state SAFs. In an effort to render our perspective less abstract, we revisit the civil rights story in this section. We recast it, however, in much broader terms using the language of the perspective sketched in this paper. Consistent with the perspective, our focus is not on movements per se, but on the field of U.S. racial politics and the destabilizing changes in a host of proximate fields that triggered the 20th century "civil rights revolution." This revolution was just the second significant episode of contention in racial politics in the whole of the American experience. The first episode lasted from the "rupture" of abolition around 1850 through the "settlement" which marked the end of Reconstruction in 1877. This settlement returned effective control over matters of race to the Southern political/economic elite and once again made challengers of blacks and their allies.

It is the second episode, however, in which we are interested. For us the modern civil rights struggle begins with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's election in 1932 and lasts until around 1968. The decisive *public* break with the enduing post-Reconstruction settlement on race comes with President Truman's advocacy of civil rights reform in 1946. But this key event is preceded by a decade and a half of destabilizing changes in no fewer than five other SAFs. Together these changes seriously weaken the position of the

incumbent Southerners and the Jim Crow conception of control that held sway in the field of American racial politics since the end of Reconstruction. The five fields are:

1. Competitive party politics in the U.S.
2. The Democratic Party
3. The cotton economy
4. The field of U.S. constitutional law
5. The international system of nation states

In the remainder of this section we describe the significant changes that took place in these SAFs and the ways in which these changes ultimately destabilized the field of American racial politics, setting the stage for both Truman's "violation" of the post-Reconstruction "settlement" and the emergence of the mass civil rights movement in the 1950s. We organize the narrative around three discrete "chapters" in the emerging civil rights revolution.

1932-1936: The Depression and the Consolidation of the New Deal Coalition

As the political and cultural norm, white supremacy remained strong and seemingly inviolate throughout the 1920s. Cotton, as the economic linchpin of Jim Crow remained King. Lynching, as a social control "supplement" to crushing legal caste restrictions remained all too common averaging nearly 30 a year during the decade (Ploski and Marr 1976: 275-76). Southern white supremacists, called Dixiecrats, dominated the national Democratic Party. And Republicans had long since abandoned their progressive stance on racial matters. The party was now rabidly pro-capital, anti-labor, anti-immigrant, and fully supportive of the racial status quo. The crash of 1929

and the onset of the Great Depression changed all of that. The exogenous shock of the Depression destabilized three specific SAFs in ways that together powerfully undermined the racial status quo and granted new hope and leverage to civil rights forces.

- *U.S. electoral politics* – The crash effectively broke the stranglehold the Republicans had had on the White House since the turn of the Century. The election of Roosevelt in 1932, had little or nothing to do with race and everything to do with the economy. That said, Roosevelt's ascension to the White House, the policies that he pursued, and the symbolism that attached to his administration were to have tremendous implications for the nascent civil rights struggle and the politics of race more generally.
- *The Democratic Party* – Roosevelt's victory powerfully transformed the Democratic Party. By embracing pro-labor policies and granting liberals and even leftists considerable voice in party as well as policy circles, FDR made incumbents of the Party's northern liberal/labor wing, undercutting the power of the Dixiecrats in the process. The dramatic shift of the "black vote" to the Democratic Party in 1936 reinforced this internal transformation of the Party SAF and completed the consolidation of the New Deal Coalition that would dominate presidential politics until 1968.
- *The cotton economy* – Already weakened by the rise of foreign cotton producers and a string of boll weevil infestations, the Depression devastated the U.S. cotton economy. In turn, this weakened Jim Crow in two important ways. First it undermined the material logic of the tenant system that dominated the cotton economy and held African-Americans on the land. Second, by greatly reducing

demand for cotton, the Depression also reduced the need for agricultural labor to work the system. This undermining of the system helped to catalyze the Great Migration which brought large numbers of African-Americans to the cities of both the South and North between 1930 and 1960. This allowed African-Americans more social and political space where they dramatically increased their influence as their numbers grew and they pressed to vote (McAdam 1999[1982]: 78-81).

1932-1954: Judicial Change and the Rise of Legal Opportunity

One of the most important effects of the Roosevelt Administration was in re-organizing the SAF of Constitutional law. Reflecting 30-plus years of Republican control of the White House, the Supreme Court that Roosevelt inherited was dominated by conservatives who, on several occasions, declared his New Deal policies to be unconstitutional. While his efforts to reform the Court failed during his first two terms, Roosevelt's long tenure in office allowed him to outlast his judicial adversaries and to transform the Court, and the broader field of constitutional law, by posting liberal jurists to the vacancies. Recognizing the legal opportunity this transformation afforded, the NAACP fashioned and began to implement its long-term challenge to "separate but equal" (McAdam 1999[1982]: 85). Coincident with the new appointments and the resulting transformation of the field of constitutional law, the pace and proportion of pro-civil rights decisions returned by the Court increased dramatically. *Brown v. Board* was still years off, but the legal dismantling of Jim Crow had begun in earnest.

1946-1952: The Cold War and the Renationalization of Race

For all the significance of Roosevelt's years in office, it is important to note that Roosevelt remained fundamentally silent on racial matters throughout his four term presidency, refusing even to endorse anti-lynching legislation on the many occasions such bills were brought before Congress (Leuchetenburg 2005; Sitkoff 1978). In stark contrast, FDR's successor, Harry Truman, became the first president since Reconstruction to publicly embrace the need for civil rights reform. He did so in 1946 by creating a national Committee on Civil Rights and charged it with investigating the state of civil rights in the country and recommending "remedies for deficiencies uncovered". He later issued landmark executive orders establishing a fair employment board within the Civil Service Commission and ordered the gradual desegregation of the armed forces.

What prompted Truman to act when Roosevelt had not? The forces discussed above (i.e. the transformation of southern agriculture and the move of African Americans to towns and cities, the rise of the New Deal political coalition, and the creation of a more liberal Supreme Court) were already putting pressure on the field of American racial politics, particularly on the role of the Federal government in tacitly supporting the white Southerners' domination of that field.

But the catalyst that finally prompted Truman to act lay not so much with *domestic* changes but the new *international* pressures and strategic considerations thrust on the U.S. by the onset of the Cold War. Locked into an intense political and ideological struggle with the Soviet Union for influence around the globe, federal officials quickly realized what a significant liability Jim Crow was to their critical foreign policy aims. This prompted calls for civil rights reforms to counter the Soviet effort to

exploit American racism for its obvious propaganda value (Dudziak 2000, Layton 2000, McAdam 1999[1982], Skrentny 1998). Truman's civil rights initiatives were one response to this plea.

Expressed in the terms of the theory outlined here, the decisive shift in federal civil rights policy owed primarily to a fundamental restructuring of a particularly important SAF: the international system of nation states. The restructuring was a direct outgrowth of World War II. Weakened dramatically by the War, neither Great Britain nor France was in a position to effectively influence the shape of the postwar world. Supplanting these perennial western powers as the undisputed "incumbents" of the new world order were the United States and the Soviet Union.

This profound transformation of the field of international relations served, in turn, to fatally undermine an SAF of American racial politics already weakened by domestic change pressures. The specifically racial consequences of this shift included: (a) the collapse of the longstanding federal "hands off" policy with respect to the "Negro question;" (b) a significant loss of Dixiecrat influence within both the Democratic Party and Congress, and (c) a dramatic increase in the vulnerability of the American state to challenge by civil rights forces. The rise of the mass civil rights movement in the mid-1950s was as much a response to these changing conditions as it was a powerful source of change in its own right.

We do not mean to suggest that the civil rights movement "did not matter" in this process. Its heroic efforts were taken in a context where the edifice of the old order governing political race relations in the U.S. had been severely undermined. The Federal government turned from being a supporter of the political dominance of whites in the

South to eventually working to undermine that dominance. The incumbents in the field of those relationships, particularly governments in the South, but also the Dixiecrats in the Democratic Party tried with all of their might to continue and enforce the status quo as our theory would predict. But, their economic and political power were undermined from outside the field and the efforts of millions of individuals to contest that field eventually led to a re-organization of U.S. political race relations and the collapse of the Jim Crow system.

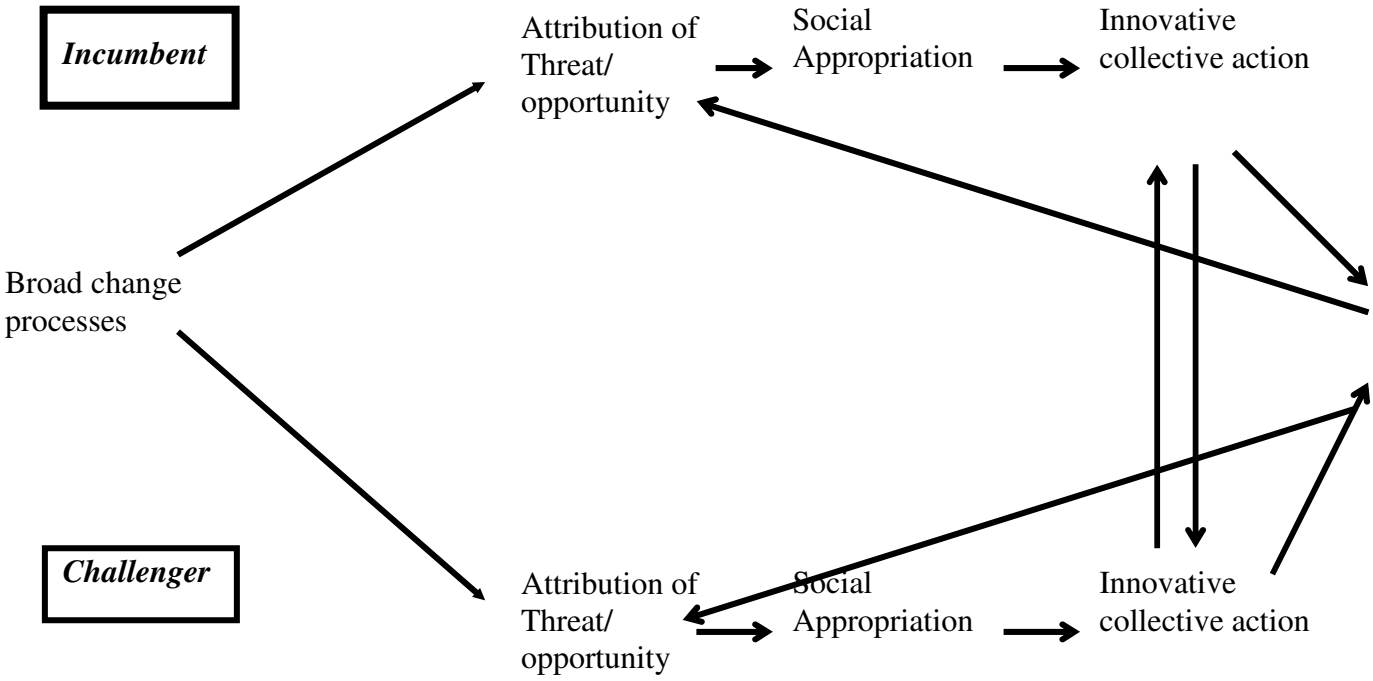
Conclusion

We are greatly encouraged by the direction of work being done by organizational and social movement scholars in exploring the connections between their subfields. But most of this work still strikes us as under-theorized and wedded to a typology of actors—e.g. social movements, organizations, political parties, states, interest groups—that obscures the essential structure and nature of all strategic collective action. Here we have tried to sketch, in broad relief, the central animating principles of a theory of SAFs that we think makes sense of strategic collective action across these nominally distinct social realms. This is exactly the kind of flexible middle range theory that can be usefully exploited by a large number of scholars to engage in a discussion across disciplines and empirical contexts. This will give us an appreciation of the generic social processes at work and how they combine in many unique ways across lots of cultural and historical contexts.

This, we realize, is only a beginning. The framework we have sketched here obviously needs more elaboration. It needs to be fleshed out in several directions. While

we have spent most of this paper arguing that it is useful to see collective strategic action as having similar theoretical underpinnings, it is clear that action in states, markets, and non state-non-market fields do have different dynamics. This takes us back to very fundamental questions: if the modes of collective action are similar in markets and politics, then what makes them different? Connecting the deeper theory to such an understanding is important. It is also the case that the invention of new forms of collective action and their spread has not been well theorized. The modern world has created the "social movement", the "organization", and the idea that one can deploy networks to expand one's power. Reflexive social actors have picked up on these inventions and used them reflexively. Finally, it is also important to bring data to bear on the propositions advanced in this article. The worth of any theory is, of course, measured by how well it accords with empirical evidence. We think these data efforts can include both historical case studies and an exploitation of the time-series data on organizations and social movements now exist. Together, this should allow for an empirical "test" of the SAF perspective.

Figure 1: A Dynamic, Interactive Framework for Analyzing Mobilization in Contentious Politics



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[i] We are presently working on a book manuscript that will allow us to explicate the theory in much greater detail.

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

[iii.] The literature on international relations generally stresses how increased interdependence of political and economic actors give impetus to forming more international arrangements (Keohane, 1984).

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

[v] These shocks can have multiple sources. For instance, fields might become destabilized and then invaded.

[vi] 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, etc.). 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.