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Reviewing social order and change: Field concepts in political analysis

Over the past decade, the concept of field has become an important theoretical tool in social and political analysis. Studying field dynamics situates the analysis at a meso level and promises to bring together macro-structural and micro-sociological perspectives. It means explaining social order and social change as relational. Social actors (individual or collective) are always in complex relationships to other actors and form action systems with specific logics and dynamics. The analysis of individual actions becomes meaningful with regard to these action fields. Scholars have suggested different concepts account for this relational dimension: *field* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), *organizational fields* (DiMaggio and Powell 1991), *sector* (Scott and Meyer 1983), *arena* (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988, Jasper 2011), or *strategic action field* (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Despite their conceptual differences, all these approaches are concerned with locating actors relative to other actors and raise the question of institutionalizing these locations. Furthermore, according to all concepts, units or collections of social locations are considered as structures, while processes of conflict and competition are seen as crucial to understanding the evolution of these collections of social actors.

This section provides an opportunity to discuss the progress of field approaches in political sociology and their usefulness in explaining social order and change. While theoretical contributions to the theory of fields are welcomed, the section encourages panels and contributions that use field-level analysis in empirical case studies. Panels and contributions could address some questions from the following (not exhaustive) list: 1) on a theoretical level, the different conceptual notions (such as field or arena) refer to different ways of empirical object constructions and, ultimately, different theories of action. What do empirical case studies tell us about action logics? 2) On an analytical level, how does one identify fields, its boundaries and its action logics, capitals, actors? Do all participating actors share the same representations of these boundaries and of the logics that govern a field? 3) All the different approaches suggest a specialisation, autonomisation or institutionalization of fields. How can such evolutionary processes be analysed? How do fields change, divide into sub-fields, or collapse? How do new fields emerge? How do certain actors come to play dominant roles in fields? How do they evolve historically and in the course of interaction? And how are different fields tied to one another?

Field analysis raises a series of original questions that are highly relevant for all aspects of political life. The section encourages panels that cover a broad variety of political processes, such as the rise of public problems, the analysis of public policies, the sociology of the state, supranational and transnational political institutions and actions, or social movements.

References

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