Sociological Theory

Putting Values and Institutions Back into the Theory of Strategic Action Fields
Jack A. Goldstone and Bert Useem

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What is This?

Putting Values and Institutions Back into the Theory of Strategic Action Fields

Jack A. Goldstone[1] and Bert Useem[2]

Abstract

Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam have presented a new theory of how collective action creates the structure and dynamics of societies. At issue is the behavior of social movements, organizations, states, political parties, and interest groups. They argue that all of these phenomena are produced by social actors (which may be individuals or groups) involved in strategic action. This allows Fligstein and McAdam to advance a unified theory of "strategic action fields." This article takes issue with aspects of Fligstein and McAdam's important contribution. We argue that that all organizations are *not* essentially the same; in addition to the location and interactions of their strategic actors, their dynamics are shaped and distinguished by differing values and norms, by the autonomy of institutions embedded in strategic action fields, and by the fractal relationships that nested fields have to broader principles of justice and social organization that span societies. We also criticize the view that social change can be conceptualized solely in terms of shifting configurations of actors in strategic action fields. Rather, any theory of social action must distinguish between periods of routine contention under the current institutions and norms and exceptional challenges to the social order that aim to transform those institutions and norms.

In the pages of this journal, Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam (2011) have advanced a new approach to the study of social movements and social organization, treating both phenomena as dynamics in what they term "strategic action fields." Their analysis may turn out to be a significant advance for sociological theory. They are to be commended for trying to take the various "theories of"—of organizations, of social movements—and move theorizing to the level of a general understanding of social actors, institutions, and social change. In doing so, however, they have fitted their model of social interactions into a familiar mold. Their model of society and social change looks much like the challenger-incumbent model of social movements writ large: Lots of skilled actors jockeying for advantage, within an institutional framework of "challengers" versus "incumbents," with much of the history, fundamental values, and larger range of social relationships left out. This essay highlights both the value and the limits of this contribution and then goes on to suggest a somewhat different direction to achieve a new synthesis—the project Fligstein and McAdam have so ably begun.

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THE CONCEPT OF STRATEGIC ACTION FIELDS

Fligstein and McAdam argue that the fundamental unit of society is the strategic action field (SAF). These are social arenas, both macro (involving millions of people) and micro (involving a mere handful of people), in which individuals, groups, and organizations strategically contend for privileges and gains. Examples of SAFs include a division within a business firm and the firm itself, a nation-state and a region of nation-states, and a social movement and an "industry" of social movements and countermovements. As these examples imply, a SAF is often nested within another SAF, and it in another, and so on, much like (using Fligstein and McAdam's metaphor) Russian matryoshka dolls. For example, an academic biology department may be nested in a college of science, itself nested in a university, with the university nested in regional and nationwide university systems. The salience of any particular SAF for its actors may depend upon circumstances and the issues of the day.

SAFs are uneven playing fields. Fligstein and McAdam, drawing on the challenger-incumbent model of social relations that underlies so much of social movement theory (Gamson 1975), distinguish among three sorts of actors. *Incumbents* are the actors who exercise dominant influence within that field. By setting the rules, incumbents shape the field to work to their advantage. *Challengers* are the members of the SAF who have fewer privileges, exercise little influence over the rules and laws, and receive a smaller share of the SAF's benefits. While challengers often see the inequities of the system and can visualize different arrangements (for Fligstein and McAdam, there is no hegemony), challengers may or may not engage in open revolt. This requires opportunities. Still, the term "challenger" implies that revolt is never too far off the agenda. A third type of actor, *governing units*, exists in some but not all SAFs. These are regulatory units that help ensure that the field's rules (generally as set by incumbents) are followed. Governing units make the SAFs run more smoothly but almost always with an underlying purpose to help sustain the advantages of the incumbents. They are like oil to reduce friction among the moving parts, not levers for change.

Whether strategic action is successful—whether by incumbents or challengers—depends, according to Fligstein and McAdam, upon the skill of the actors in engaging others. Social skills have three dimensions: cognitive (IQ), empathetic (emotional intelligence), and communicative (language skills). Skillful actors bring others into their cause and build coalitions with other corporate actors. A social movement, for example, may engage in bloc mobilization, bringing into the fray an entire group of previously organized individuals. These social skills are distributed more or less evenly—"perhaps normally" (p. 7)—across the population. Challengers thus have a chance to contend, but contention is often put into motion by "exogenous shocks" to SAFs.

Three types of shocks actuate contention. One is that an external group invades the SAF in an attempt to take it over. An example is a hostile takeover of a business firm. A second form of shock occurs when a nearby SAF, upon which a SAF depends for its normal operation, changes its relationship to the SAF. For example, a division in a firm may lose favor with the firm's overall management team. A crisis occurs when fewer resources are allocated to the division. A third type of exogenous shock includes "war, economic depression, and the like" (Fligstein and McAdam 2011:16), when an entire society becomes unstable and uncertain. The SAF becomes unstable because its context is unstable.

This all-too-brief summary fails to do justice to the sophisticated and insightful paper by Fligstein and McAdam. Still, we believe it distills the central points, allowing us to embark on a useful discussion. In the following, we first identify some of the weaknesses of the piece. If it appears that we are dwelling on the negative, it is because we take as self-evident the many virtues of the analysis. We then suggest how a broader synthesis might be achieved.

MAJOR WEAKNESSES IN SAF THEORY

Undertheorizing Institutions

Fligstein and McAdam simply absorb institutions into SAFs. This mirrors the challenger-incumbent model in social movement theory but is inadequate for a wider theory of societal dynamics.

First, Theda Skocpol (1979) was among many political sociologists who, some decades ago, argued for the autonomy of the state—the governing units within all SAFs that have their own agendas and issues, revolving around revenues and responsibilities, which often come into conflict with the desires of elites (incumbents). While states are never fully autonomous, they can be substantially so, and their needs and decisions are never simply reducible to the "interests" of elites. To that extent, states (to reverse the earlier metaphor) are themselves often levers for change rather than mere oil for working parts.

Second, a rather significant portion of social action involves contests over institutions that involve elites versus elites or different challenging groups versus each other. Different elite groups often contest among themselves for control of, or changes in, the structure and policy of governing units. This is true whether we are speaking of states and political elites, corporate boards and executives, university administrations and tenured faculty, hospital administrators and doctors, or national governments and state or local leaders. In addition, even granting the complexities of mobilization of challengers to act against incumbents, as Fligstein and McAdam do, their position oversimplifies what goes on at the grassroots level in social movements. Goldstone (2004), in an earlier analysis of social movements that presented them as action in complex social fields, noted that such fields are characterized not only by incumbents and challengers but also by autonomous political and economic institutions, contain neutral bystanders who could be recruited to support incumbents or challengers, and often have countermovements that are neither pro-incumbent nor pro-challenger but are simply opposed to certain kinds of subgroups or social changes.

Third, another element of social dynamics consists of efforts to evade governance or defy rules that ill fit the challenger-versus-incumbent logic. If we consider organized crime and inner-city gangs, the distinctive feature of these sorts of predatory organizations is that they undermine institutional processes, not that they are effective fighters in challenger-versus-incumbent struggles. Even at the microlevel, much of the interaction among participants is to certify that they are dyed-in-the-wool enemies, not agents, of the state. For example, time spent in prison is an important certifying credential because it is difficult to fake and costly to endure (Gambetta 2009).

Fourth, the presumption that governing units generally work to preserve the advantages of incumbents may be accurate for traditional and authoritarian SAFs, but this should not be the case for those designed to be democratic. In the latter, the action of governing units is intended to protect the average or weaker members against depredations and excessive influence by the stronger. It is true, as Michels long ago pointed out in his iron law of oligarchy, that even democratic SAFs develop privileged incumbents who seek to protect their privileges. But what this means is that in democratic SAFs, the main ongoing social dynamic is a struggle between the majority who seek to keep control of the governing units and keep them purposed to protecting the weak against the privileged who seek to assert control over the governing units and use them to maintain and expand their positions and privileges.

Fifth, we would argue that incumbents more often launch social change than do challengers. Fligstein and McAdam speak of the "inherent conservatism of incumbents" (p. 14), and their Proposition 15 states, "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" (p. 18). This statement is plainly false and speaks of an impoverished view of institutions simply as means to preserve the status quo and of elites as simply seeking to halt change. In fact, elites may see new opportunities and try to reshape field rules to meet them. The engines for change are more numerous than SAF theory conceptualizes. Think of how Toyota's leadership reshaped labor rules and factory operations to compete with GM. Or institutions may be weakening because of problems replenishing finances or personnel, and elites who see this first may try to design a more effective set of rules, much as Gorbachev unleashed perestroika on the USSR well before challengers had any impact. Or elites may see threats from outside the SAF and try to restructure the SAF and its governance structures to meet those threats. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed, revolutions usually begin with rulers recognizing that they cannot meet internal or external challenges within the existing rules and institutions governing their society, and so they launch a set of reforms. Only if such reforms attack vested interests and reveal weakness do challengers rise up against the state. Indeed, Fligstein and McAdam are

correct when they say that "the overwhelming tendency is for challengers to prefer to maintain their position in the system, while awaiting clear signs from incumbent vulnerability" (p. 14). But if that is true, social change requires a theory that locates dynamics in the actions of elites dealing with autonomous institutions that, for good reasons, elites will often decide need to be changed.

Finally, it should always be explicit that institutions and "governance units" do not continue to exist simply at the wish of incumbents. Any such governance units require resources—financial and personnel—that must constantly be replenished. Fligstein and McAdam say nothing about the ability of SAFs to solve their fiscal and other problems that can generate movement action. The challenger-incumbent model has long conceptualized collective action as flowing out of the struggle between challenger and incumbent, which, in turn, leads to crisis. The reverse process may be the more fundamental one. Unsolvable institutional problems unleash collective action. In the case of prison riots, for example, it is the disorganization of the state, rather than the organization of inmates, that predicts their occurrence. Likewise, in contemporary Greece, state elites have been unable to solve a fiscal crisis: the state spending far more than collected in revenue. This has unleashed collective action, pulling in multiple directions.

SAFs as an Unsupportable Conflation

Seeking the most generalizable model possible, Fligstein and McAdam treat all SAFs as essentially similar, but they are not. A prison may be similar to a state, a business firm may be similar to a university, and a golf club and a stamp-collecting club may be similar, but they are not all alike; the rules of entry, exit, and control in prisons are radically different than those in a business, which is again different (in hiring, firing, hierarchy) than those in a club. This is not just a matter of hierarchy (verticality); it is a matter of the purposes, memberships, and underlying value and control structures being radically different in these different SAFs.

In short, SAFs differ in highly significant ways, which affect their structure, dynamics, and longevity. Fligstein and McAdam allow only one dimension of difference—SAFs may be hierarchical (vertical) if power is distributed unequally, or cooperative (horizontal) if power is equally distributed. But, to take just one example, both business firms and democratic governments are hierarchical with clear incumbents and the ability of people to move up and down the hierarchy. But the leaders of business firms are in no way accountable to their workers; the latter can quit if they wish, but they cannot hold leaders accountable. Indeed, the business owner can fire workers whose actions do not support his or her plan for the firm. But democratic government leaders cannot exclude citizens from citizenship; the latter can remove the leader. Thus the mechanism of "exit" controls hierarchical relations in the business firm, while "voice" controls those relations in democratic government (Hirschman 1970). These very different operating principles are lost if all SAFs are conflated as simply incumbents and challengers interacting under some recognized rules.

Some SAFs are wholly structured by their members (clubs); some are structured by rules of competition (in markets or athletics or politics); some are structured by long-standing and difficult-to-change rules that are formally recorded and enforced by legal or judicial bodies established for that purpose. The latter are SAFs structured by institutions. The most obvious such institution is the state, but churches, some tribal and village societies, unions, and long-standing corporate bodies have the same features. These differences have systematic impacts on the longevity and turnover of incumbents and other members and on the rules of operation of these SAFs.

Fligstein and McAdam also err in conflating all social action in SAFs with the entire range of the significant dynamics of collective action. They see collective action as the enterprise of creating or extending various sorts of social organization, such as firms and nonprofits. The most important attributes for this enterprise are social skills in getting people to join in. The social movement entrepreneur is not that much different from the business entrepreneur.

This picture, as accurate as it may be for some social movements, such as the civil rights movement, truncates the range of collective action that we need to understand. On April 29, 1992, following the acquittals

of four officers accused of the beating of Rodney King, residents of South Central Los Angeles poured into the street to protest. Reginal Denny, a white truck driver, was pulled from his truck and beaten. Protestors' targets for arson included Korean-owned businesses. The key agent of the state, the Los Angeles Police Department, was immobilized by its own organizational problems and lack of confidence (Useem 1997). Few of the processes highlighted by Fligstein and McAdam are evident here.

At the opposite end of the scale, Tunisia and Egypt saw their governments collapse in 2011 not because of any of the Fligstein-McAdam "field crisis" processes—shock from other SAFs, invasion, actions of the state, or large-scale crises (this list is from their Proposition 11 on p. 15). Rather, excessive rent seeking by small circles of political and business executives led military elites to defect against the leaders when popular protests against intrusive state authority and corruption spread. Indeed, the initial galvanizing action was a self-immolation by a desperate rural fruit vendor in Tunisia that had wholly unexpected consequences, spurring outrage and then protests that rapidly spread to the capital; but that can hardly be what Fligstein and McAdam had in mind when they say that "skilled social actors . . . must find a way to translate existing rules and resources into the production of local orders by convincing their supporters to cooperate and find means of accommodation with other groups" (p. 11). Thus local and societal dynamics have a much wider range than the simple "skilled social actors" building new "local orders" dynamic that is the foundation for the Fligstein and McAdam model of how changes occur in SAFs.

In addition, Fligstein and McAdam seem to think in short and fairly uniform time spans, characteristic of episodes of contention. There is not much room in the theory for longer term evolutionary changes of social organization or, for that matter, for the revolutionary social change that is the product of many decades or generations of mounting contention.

The Fractal Nature of Society

Perhaps most important, Fligstein and McAdam undertheorize a critical part of their own model—the fractal nature of SAFs and the implications of fractal structures for larger social dynamics and institutions. In particular, when they discuss SAFs as "nested," they do not distinguish between the simple coexistence of units that operate at different scales and the binding of units at different scales to institutional structures that are reproduced across those scales. As one of us, Goldstone (1991), has pointed out, the fractal nature of social order—meaning self-similar structures on varied scales—often implies that social order coheres because institutions create similar rule frameworks (aristocratic privilege or democracy, market choice, individual rights) that operate across different levels of society. Thus one of the reasons that great revolutions are such major events is because they challenge the basic rule frameworks of authority and status that shape order, from local interpersonal interaction up to regional and local economic and governance practices. A democratic society differs from an aristocratic one because certain rules of rights and responsibilities are agreed upon, institutionalized, and practiced across many different scales and levels of social organization, not just because many SAFs are independently run according to such rules. By omitting consideration of how institutional frameworks do or do not span fractal spaces in societies, Fligstein and McAdam also cannot distinguish between routine competition among SAFs for power and position and true crises involving efforts to change the institutions and rule frameworks that provide the structure for vast numbers and levels of SAFs across an entire society

Neglect of Norms and Values That Underlay Institutions and SAF Affiliations

It has always been a challenge for social theory to deal with both the objective elements of social order and dynamics (groups, hierarchies, institutions) and the subjective elements associated with them (norms, values, identity). Still, it is striking that Fligstein and McAdam neglect the subjective elements entirely. Revolutionary theory has expanded considerably from Skocpol's pure structuralist view (in which ideology is merely a "blueprint" that may or may not be discarded) to include the role of ideology in building cross-class

coalitions, defining goals for social change, forging revolutionary identities, and providing a field of contention among varied challengers with differing values (Foran 2005; Goldstone 1991; Parsa 2000; Selbin 1999). Social movement theory itself has actively studied the role of identities, emotions, leadership, and other such issues outside the scope of simple challenger-incumbent contention (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001). Even organization theory—in Michael Hannan and John Freeman's (1989) organizational ecology—considers the spread of norms as optimal forms across different organizations. Yet all this is missing in Fligstein and McAdam's field theory; they compare their theory only to other social theories that also use a mainly "geometric" approach to social organization (locating groups or individuals in social spaces or hierarchies), such as Pierre Bourdieu's social capital–network theory or Paul DiMaggio's organizational institutionalism.

Yet, in fact, norms, values, and identity are crucial to the dynamics of groups in SAFs. As Goldstone (2004) has argued, one of the key factors shaping the relational fields of social movements is the available symbolic and value orientations, which shape the actions and responses of challengers, incumbents, various types of authorities, and publics. Identities, however socially constructed, are crucial to placing people's locations in SAFs and overcoming collective action problems, thus making incumbent and challenger actions possible. Institutions gain traction by their resonance with norms and values. Shifts in relationships or new knowledge that undermines old norms and values may produce crises of a type very different from the simple challenger-incumbent struggles that characterize much (but not *all*) of social dynamics. Relations among different challenger groups (unity or conflict or competition), and among different groups and the state (both challengers and incumbents), are shaped mainly by norms, values, and identities and whether the actions of states or groups are resonant or in conflict with them.

The significance of value orientations underlying institutions is illuminated by two linked examples offered by Arthur Stinchcombe (1997:16) in his effort to see virtue in an "older" view of institutions. The first example is Edward Banfield's explanation of the failure of capitalist organizations to take root in Southern Italy. An overriding loyalty to family, the value orientation Banfield observed in Southern Italy, precluded the attainment of pubic goods—law and order, municipal government, roads, and "economic development offices facilitating factory and firm foundation." The latter are, in Fligstein and McAdam's terms, governance units. These public goods did not come into being in Southern Italy because the commitment to and solidarity within the nuclear family overrode any possibility of a broader contribution to social and economic welfare. The "greatest generation" was nowhere to be found.

The second example is the consideration of accreditation associations in the field of education—the governance units of modern educational SAFs. Stinchcombe notes that, since these governance units have little power to formally regulate or to tax, they must rely on the generosity of members to contribute money and time. Volunteers from one organization are normally relied upon to inspect the performance of other educational organizations. Stinchcombe (1997) links the two examples: "Now imagine a South Italian or Sicilian organization as described by Banfield sending out volunteers and making them hold to educational standards . . . , but without making them an offer they can't refuse" (p. 15). In other words, governance units require supportive values, which may or not be present.

PROBLEMS WITH PROPOSITIONS DERIVED FROM SAF THEORY

One way to focus our critique of SAF theory is to examine directly some of the propositions that Fligstein and McAdam derive from SAF theory. Fligstein and McAdam present 16 propositions. Some we believe to be empirically correct. Others, we argue, reveal problems that inhere in SAF theory. We restate verbatim 5 of the 16 propositions and discuss why we believe them to be invalid. Across the 5, the core difficulty is this: In Fligstein and McAdam's article all SAFs are essentially "organizations" created by individuals or groups with a purpose to achieve. This fails to capture the tensions that arise when actors in SAFs not only confront each other but shift in directions that confront the institutionalized rules within and across SAFs.

Proposition 1: Unorganized Space

The first proposition states, "Unorganized social spaces become organized through a crescive social process akin to a social movement" (p. 11). This is simply not true in all, or even most, cases. Generally, unorganized social spaces become organized by extending the institutional frameworks and norms that actors bring with them from their prior social settings. In *some cases*, a social movement may innovate in organizing a social space. Thus the Pilgrims and Quakers who settled Massachusetts and Pennsylvania created social movements deliberately seeking to organize a new social space to realize their movements' goals. But the Jamestown settlement and most other American colonial settlements (especially almost all of those in Latin America) were state-implemented efforts (royal colonies) designed to reproduce the authority structures and SAFs of the home country. Similarly, when a large business firm moves into a new area (e.g., General Motors moves into finance or opens operations in China) it does *not* do so like a social movement (trying to recruit voluntary supporters to contend with other actors or groups in the hope of achieving its goals); instead, it usually seeks to use its dominant market power and connections to political authority to establish a privileged position that will give it a high chance of market return. Different types of SAFs try to structure unorganized social spaces in different, but characteristic, ways.

Proposition 5: SAF Stability

This proposition states, "SAFs are stable when they have role structures that are based on either hierarchical incumbent/challenger structures or political coalitions" (p. 12). This is the formula for stability in an established monarchy or in the legislature of a multiparty government. It is hardly a basis for a broader social theory of SAF stability. It gives no role to the resource-demand balances faced by SAFs nor to the inherent rigidity or flexibility of the institutions or norms that support a given configuration. The concept of "role structures" here is treated as unproblematic, for role is simply whether an actor belongs to a challenging or incumbent group, and the position of that group in the SAF. The questions of whether a role depends on a chosen or ascriptive identity, whether a role could have other dimensions than spatial location in the SAF, and whether role structures are sustained mainly by patronage and force or by a set of shared values that underlay institutions that fix those roles are not addressed.

Every revolution in history arose in societies with role structures based on either hierarchical challenger-incumbent structures or political coalitions. What happened is that those role structures were maintained by institutions and rule frameworks for distributing income and reproducing power that ceased to work effectively so that gradually economic, technical, demographic, or educational or other processes resulted in a distribution of income and power that divided incumbents at the top of the hierarchy and weakened the state institutions that were relied on to contain the challengers; an outburst of protest then set in train processes that shattered old political institutions and gave birth to new ones.

In short, stability is not a product of a given set of role structures. Rather, stability is the result when role structures combine with institutions that are working well to maintain and reinforce those role structures over time.

Proposition 9: SAF Stability Continued

This proposition correctly states, "Response to instability will be met by attempts to reinforce the status quo." But then it continues to argue that "challengers will be particularly vulnerable to downturn" (p. 14). This is the case only if the structure in the SAF always directs scarce resources to the incumbents and if such resources are all that matter to keeping the incumbents' position.

Yet in true crises—such as those caused by wars, depressions, or other state failures (as in succession crises in dictatorships)—the very values that underlie the institutional rules lose purchase on the great mass of people who are neither challengers nor incumbents but are normally bystanders involved in various

SAFs that normally support or peacefully coexist with the current challenger-incumbent hierarchy. Moreover, even incumbents may then defect from the current structure and support a challenge. These trends greatly weaken the challenger-incumbent hierarchy from both the top and the bottom and make *the incumbents* particularly vulnerable.

Proposition 11: External Shocks

Fligstein and McAdam's proposition on the features of external shocks is also full of difficulties. It states, "SAFs are generally destabilized by external shock originating from other SAFs, invasion by other groups of organizations, actions of the state, or large-scale crises such as wars or depressions" (p. 15). One first has to decide what the phrase "are generally destabilized by" means. If it means SAFs tend to be destabilized when any of these events happen, it is wrong. What is striking about social order is how resilient it is—during the entry of new firms, the migration of many people, and even wars and depressions, by far the great majority of SAFs continue to function as before and survive intact. But this is because they are often reinforced by formal institutions and internalized values rather than just by the geometric configuration of organizations as such.

But let us assume the proposition means that *when* SAFs are destabilized, it is from one of the forces they list. Yet this list is then too vague—what kinds of state actions are destabilizing? Any state actions at all? Fligstein and McAdam give a revealing example—they say a "field crisis" could be spurred by the creation of a new high-tech cancer center at one branch of a state university that turns out to require a 3 percent cut in the budgets of other branches at the university. That is change, to be sure, but most of us would consider that the kind of routine reallocation in pursuit of competitive advantage that happens every day in almost every kind of organization—not a field crisis. Again, this shows that in the absence of explicit treatment of the core values or institutions that underlie and define large-scale social orders, the SAF theory is unable to distinguish between routine change within a social order and a crisis that challenges that order.

Proposition 13: SAF Stability and Hierarchy

Fligstein and McAdam propose that "[t]he more dependent an SAF is on others for resources, or the lower it is in the hierarchy of SAFs, the less stable it is" (p. 17). This either-or condition makes it very hard to test this proposition. The federal government is presumably the highest in the hierarchy of SAFs in the United States. Yet it is almost entirely dependent on taxation paid by corporations and households for its resources. How then do we weigh its dependence for resources against its place in the hierarchy of SAFs?

Individual families and households are surely among the lowest SAFs in the hierarchy of SAFs, composing neighborhoods, municipalities, states, nations, ethnicities, and so on. Yet does that mean families are the least stable units? A neighborhood changes dramatically as the families that compose it move in and move out, but the families themselves usually remain intact.

In sum, Fligstein and McAdam offer a parsimonious theory of stability and instability that depends only on the population and configuration among SAFs. But, in our view, the gains in simplicity come at too high a price. There is too much emphasis on contention per se between incumbents and challengers and too little on popular values and identities, social structures, and long-term resource shifts.

Individually, McAdam and Fligstein have written historically nuanced, context-rich studies of how particular SAFs developed—McAdam for the civil rights movement, Fligstein for the modern corporation. It is a natural and worthwhile endeavor for them to team up to distill the wisdom of their past research to a series of more general propositions about the development and dynamics of SAFs. Yet we believe that Fligstein and McAdam have gone so far in this direction that they have left behind too many of the virtues and insights of their own work, in which historical context, institutions, and values were crucial elements.

THE WAY FORWARD

This essay has been mainly critical, rather than constructive, in its approach to social theory. Yet we have some thoughts on the way forward. Fligstein and McAdam are correct in their example of "Russian dolls" for SAFs within SAFs, that societies are organized at multiple levels and in different dimensions. We would want to put these relations among parts as central. But we would add several critical factors. First, the major force making for social stability is the fractal congruence of institutions and values throughout the multiple levels of social organization. The consent of the governed (an acceptance of the institutional and value structures by the ordinary members) is one such crucial rule that governs a wide range of organizations in democratic societies. Similarly, the specification of roles and direction of actions by a single higher authority (a party or the military) is characteristic at multiple levels of organization in authoritarian societies. Conversely, a major source of social change and tension is the rejection of existing norms and institutions at one level of society (e.g., a local challenge to voting restrictions on blacks in a particular town); where such changes do not immediately diffuse to other levels or realms of social organization but are resisted, that creates tensions and contentions at multiple levels, reaching across the fractal hierarchies of SAFs.

Thus the civil rights movement, women's movements, and labor movements all involved rejection of norms and efforts to institutionalize new ones, first at a local level (specific Southern communities or within families or firms) but then spreading to become societal in scope. Similarly, a prison riot (local rejection and struggles) may lead to broader changes in the legal or penal system. But such impacts occur only when the challenges from below resonate with broader tension in the legal and penal systems. Otherwise they are rapidly suppressed and ultimately ignored other than to improve riot-response teams and capabilities (see Goldstone and Useem 1999).

In short, while we fully endorse Fligstein and McAdam's formulation of social dynamics as involving SAFs that are driven by agency, we strongly believe that the focus on bipolar challenger-incumbent relations ignores too much the context of institutions, values, and the broader reach of fractal structures in understanding agency and its consequences.

Second, and related to the first, we need to recognize how identifying core social values and institutions that span a society's multiple levels allows us to grasp the crucial difference between routine competition among parties, movements, or firms, in which these organizations follow rules while jostling and competing to move up in the hierarchy or gain advantages as a result of such competition, and major institutional challenges (revolutionary movements or crises), in which the rules themselves—the core institutions and values that regulate SAF relationships and competition—and not merely the configuration of various groups under those rules, become the object of change.

Third, we should track as closely as we can the subjective elements of the social order. Identities, roles, framings, grievances, and ideologies are engines of change in some circumstances and stability in others. It is not the case, as resource mobilization theorists argued decades ago (against mainly relative deprivation theorists), that a useful assumption is that subjective states are either constant or derivative of social structures. This debate should be put to rest.

Fourth, we need to bring back the autonomous role of institutions and note the dynamics of conflicts among elites and among different challengers, and the role of neutral bystanders and counterrevolutionary conservative challengers. The challenger-incumbent dynamic is one major element of social dynamics, but this dualism is too narrow a notion to support a full-range theory of social action and social change.

This is the briefest summary possible of an alternative approach. We have made preliminary efforts along these lines elsewhere to examine the social dynamics of order in organizations at different scales, from revolutions in whole societies to prison riots (Goldstone 1991; Goldstone 2004; Goldstone and Useem 1999; Useem and Goldstone 2002). In those studies, we demonstrated that changes usually came from efforts at reforms by rulers or prison administrators who challenged existing basic rules and institutions. We showed how those basic rules had become untenable or dysfunctional because of long-term shifts

in resources that had unanticipated consequences. We showed how ideologies of change and resistance were necessary to spur change and recast institutions and that these ideologies and changes often led in unanticipated directions. We believe these relationships put flesh and blood on the bare framework of social action fields but are neglected in Fligstein and McAdam's theory.

CONCLUSION

We agree that sociology needs a theory that includes purposive actors, organized groups, and their competition and multiple interactions under conditions of hierarchy and overarching states. But we strongly object to such a theory that treats all organizations as essentially the same, that sees social action solely in terms of challenger-incumbent contention, and that discusses social change solely in terms of shifting configurations among such organizations. Instead, we would insist on explicit recognition of the differing institutions and norms, rules and interests that undergird various social action fields and the interactions of groups, and on seeing a wide range of social actions, including waves of mobilization that draw in bystanders, and reforms from above that trigger larger changes. We would also insist on explicit recognition that congruence across SAFs operating on different scales in regard to following similar rules and norms provides a good deal of the social glue that gives societies resilience in the face of external shocks and that enables communications and adjustments by actors operating in various SAFs. At the same time, the diffusion of challenges or shifts in those rules across different levels or domains of SAFs is a major element of social dynamics, and challenges to such wide-reaching norms and institutions are what separate major social crises and transformations from positional challenges and changes that occur within the existing institutional and value frameworks.

Fligstein and McAdam close their essay by suggesting that they expect and welcome empirical tests of their theory.[1] However, their propositions are too vague to allow any such testing—terms such as "actions of the state" or "more connected" defy straightforward operationalization. Since Fligstein and McAdam welcome empirical tests of their theory, they need to offer more precise and falsifiable propositions to test.

We suggest that a promising way to undertake empirical tests is to specify observable *events* and *relationships among specific actors or groups* that are argued by the theory to characterize patterns of stability or instability and then to search among the empirical records of stability and instability for the presence or absence of those precise events and relationships. One might also predict that certain patterns or events will lead to expected outcomes and see if the empirical record shows such trajectories from the origin patterns or events to the predicted outcomes and with what frequency these trajectories appear. This is how we sought to make empirical tests of our arguments regarding social organization and social stability.

To give just two specific examples, we argued in our studies of social order and riots in prisons that maintaining social order required agreement on basic rules among different levels in the elite hierarchy of the prison system—states, wardens, and prison staff. We investigated empirically and demonstrated that prison riots occur not simply where prisoners organize themselves but where there is a disparity of views that leads to noncooperation of wardens with states, or of staff with wardens, that encourages prisoners to think a riot will find a response at some level of the hierarchy of authority (Goldstone and Useem 1999).

In addition, in his study of revolutions, Goldstone (1991) found that institutional breakdown that spurred efforts by elites to change institutions laid the foundation for popular uprisings. It was always efforts at reform from above that precipitated change and sparked the protests from below. This was documented by a study of the strains on those institutions: of the changes in social mobility and competition among different factions of the elites, and how fiscal weakness gave leverage to opposition elite factions and led rulers to seek changes in their own ruling institutions.

In sum, we would expect Fligstein and McAdam's expansion of their theory to provide empirical documentation of the *regularity and recurrence of specific patterns of relationships predicted by their theory*, rather than just illustrative examples, as support. We believe that such a research strategy is fully consistent with Fligstein and McAdam's important contribution and will lead to better testing and refinement of their rich and powerful arguments.

NOTE

1. Fligstein and McAdam (2011) state that various sorts of data should be brought to bear "for an empirical 'test' of the SAF perspective" (p. 23). We agree, although we would remove the quotes around "test."

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