A Theory of Fields. By Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. xiv+238. $29.95.

Debra Minkoff
Columbia University

A Theory of Fields is an ambitious book, as evidenced by its title and opening gambit: "Accounting for social change and social order is one of the enduring problems of social science. The central goal of this book is to explicate an integrated theory that explains how stability and change are achieved by social actors in circumscribed social arenas" (p. 3). These "circumscribed social arenas" are mesolevel strategic action fields, considered to be the "basic structural building block of modern political/organizational life in the economy, civil society, and the state" (p. 3). Blending insights drawn primarily from social movement and organizational scholarship, and extending previous articulations of their approach, Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam try their hand at theory building, offering a comprehensive perspective on the emergence, reproduction, and transformation of social fields that also takes seriously the importance of micro foundations and macro structures, especially the state, in field-level dynamics.

Fligstein and McAdam situate their work against established mesolevel approaches (primarily Bourdieusian, network, neo- and historical institutionalist), which they criticize for being overly or insufficiently strategic in their view of human agency, uncritically consensual or conflictual, too static or dynamic, and inattentive to interdependencies between fields. Their own contribution attempts to split a number of differences by arguing that social actors are motivated to dominate *and* collaborate in pursuit of shared meaning and social stability (what they refer to as the "existential functions of the social"); that fields are socially constructed *and* materially constrained; that institutional change is incremental *and* dramatic, characterized by continuous and occasionally transformative jockeying for position among incumbents and challengers (i.e., strategic actors with exceptional ability to achieve coordinated action) in the context of shifting resources and opportunities; and that fields are independently constituted *and* embedded in influential external relationships. This pluralistic impulse is noteworthy but also likely unsatisfying for readers who see the social world in starker terms (or who want clearer guidelines for doing so).

The book itself is the product of a long collaboration and the payoff is a very detailed discussion of almost every imaginable aspect (and potential criticism) of the proposed framework. The first four chapters lay out the authors' conceptual apparatus (micro foundations, macro considerations, and the core theory of strategic fields), drawing on a range of examples. While this material is quite abstract, chapter 5 deploys the proposed

framework to explain two seemingly distinct cases—the southern Civil Rights movement and the more recent rise and decline of the mortgage securities industry. Rather than a theory-testing exercise, the purpose is to illustrate commonalities in processes of field emergence, settlement, and transformation across cases. This endeavor is suggestive, but not completely convincing. It is telling that the case analyses are stronger on detailing historical developments and field-level interdependencies without much explicit attention to the presumably central role of social skill in strategic action. The authors also miss an opportunity to address some of the more complex issues raised throughout the book with respect to the interconnectedness of strategic action fields. If we consider the fact that the subprime mortgage market, which the authors locate in the emergence of the "housing strategic action field" in 1969, disproportionately targeted blacks and others on the edge of financial stability, it is worth considering why there were no strategic actors protecting group interests (unions, civil rights groups, community-based organizations, or consumer protection advocates), and how this is likely linked to the reconfiguration of the "field of racial politics" after the decline of the Civil Rights movement circa 1968.

That said, a real strength of *A Theory of Fields* is the authors' willingness to be explicit about the conceptual and methodological difficulties involved in implementing their proposed perspective (the focus of chap. 6). The central one, which starts nagging at the reader early on, is identifying the boundaries around fields and the connections between them—especially given that the "basic imagery . . . is one of a society consisting of millions of strategic action fields linked by various types of relations" (p. 101). How to make sense of this empirically is daunting, and the authors' prescription to look for shared understandings to determine field boundaries was unsatisfying. I was also skeptical about the notion of strategic actors having some exceptional ability to take the standpoint of others in order to create collective identities and a shared worldview. This process may be how social movement activists mobilize participants and supporters, but to suggest that powerful incumbents secure dominance through intersubjective acuity implies, for example, that male corporate executives (or full professors) maintain their position by understanding women's distinctive concerns and convincing them to accept constrained mobility in order to maximize field stability. I credit the authors with introducing a "contentious politics" perspective into the study of fields, but the underlying conceptualization of power is relatively thin (also a criticism of this approach in the social movement field from which it is drawn).

Sociologists wondering what all this talk of fields is about may want to read *A Theory of Fields* along with other core definitional statements. On its own, the book is an important reference for graduate students in social

movement and organizational studies, especially the chapter on the methodological complexities of studying fields empirically. Advanced scholars in these areas may benefit less from a full reading of the book, but the central point about the embeddedness of fields is one that needs to be taken seriously in future work in organizational, political, and economic sociology. The authors, however, aspire to reach a wider audience. Here the primary contribution is that the work reflects a sustained effort to theorize the meso-level social orders that structure much of our daily lives without skirting the question of the micro foundations of social action or the macrolevel constraints that ultimately provide the resources and opportunities for social stability and change. The core questions of the "micro-macro link" that animated theory and scholarship in the 1980s are reintroduced front and center, and all of us would benefit from reading *A Theory of Fields* as a model of integrative social analysis, even if the theory of social action and the conceptualization of strategic action fields may not be entirely persuasive. As Fligstein and McAdam note in their conclusion, this book, although a long time in the making, is intended as a starting point for further conversation within and across cognate subfields and disciplines. And it is a good starting point, indeed.

War in Social Thought: Hobbes to the Present. By Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013. Pp. x+325. $35.00.

Michael Mann
University of California, Los Angeles

War in Social Thought was originally published in 2008 in German. It was well received, rightly so, since it is a balanced, insightful, and well-written overview of the way social scientists in the West have treated the topic of war over the last 350 years. Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl admit at the outset that their task is a difficult one, since by and large social scientists have practiced the "suppression of war." Though war has been important in influencing social theory, the authors say, it has been rarely present in theories themselves. Social scientists have preferred either not to think much about war or to assert that human progress will make it obsolete. Their neglect of war, which along with capitalism and the nation-state has remained the most striking form of human activity of the last 100 years, still endures (although analysis of current American militarism is now a growth industry). But when one considers that without wars there would have probably been no communist or fascist regimes, no American hegemony, a much slower process of decolonization, and many other different outcomes, the neglect remains insupportable. So, since this work is a very good review of the sociology of war, I recommend it to all sociologists.