



# A Theory of Fields

*Neil Fligstein, Doug McAdam*

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Finding ways to understand the nature of social change and social order—from political movements to market meltdowns—is one of the enduring problems of social science. *A Theory of Fields* draws together far-ranging insights from social movement theory, organizational theory, and economic and political sociology to construct a general theory of social organization and strategic action.

In a work of remarkable synthesis, imagination, and analysis, Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam propose that social change and social order can be understood through what they call strategic action fields. They posit that these fields are the general building blocks of political and economic life, civil society, and the state, and the fundamental form of order in our world today. Similar to Russian dolls, they are nested and connected in a broader environment of almost countless proximate and overlapping fields. Fields are mutually dependent; change in one often triggers change in another. At the core of the theory is an account of how social actors fashion and maintain order in a given field. This sociological theory of action, what they call "social skill," helps explain what individuals do in strategic action fields to gain cooperation or engage in competition.

To demonstrate the breadth of the theory, Fligstein and McAdam make its abstract principles concrete through extended case studies of the Civil Rights Movement and the rise and fall of the market for mortgages in the U.S. since the 1960s. The book also provides a "how-to" guide to help others implement the approach and discusses methodological issues.

With a bold new approach, *A Theory of Fields* offers both a rigorous and practically applicable way of thinking through and making sense of social order and change—and how one emerges from the other—in modern, complex societies.

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