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Review: "Fielding Transnationalism" by Julian Go and Monika Krause

Author: Björn Holm

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Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
14195 Berlin

Contact information:
For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.

Fielding Transnationalism

Edited by Julian Go and Monika Krause, Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016. Pp. 242, Paperback $34.95, ISBN: 978-1-1192-3787-7

REVIEWED BY BJÖRN HOLM

Recent years have seen an upsurge in academic interest for using the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu to conduct historical analysis.[1] *Fielding Transnationalism,* the result of a workshop held in 2014 at Boston University, is the latest fruit of this trend, an attempt to demonstrate how the Bourdieusian concept of *fields* can be fruitfully put to use to analyze border-crossing historical phenomena. Contributions span from theory-laden discussions of Bourdieu to heavily empirical works where theory plays a minuscule role in the background. The actual "fielding", it seems, is quite a variable affair.

In a way, this variation can be seen as the natural outcome of the book's argument. In the introduction, Julian Go and Monika Krause convincingly argue that Bourdieu's theory is pliable enough to be helpful in a wide range of circumstances, and especially in cases where other frameworks prove to be too crude or dogmatic. This centerpiece is brimful of analytical inspiration and does a good job of explaining what Bourdieusian field theory is in a straightforward way – no small feat, considering the notorious academic verbiage produced by the theorist himself. Historians looking to expand their conceptual toolbox will be well-served to read it closely.

The theory under survey is markedly open-ended. Throughout his career, Bourdieu always underscored the importance of paying close empirical attention to circumstance. For him, a field denotes a hierarchically ordered set of *relations* with struggles ruled by specific "rules of the game", which render the field distinguishable from other modes of organization. These rules also outline the constellation of different kinds of capitals (e.g. cultural, social, and material) relevant to the field and their internal exchange rates for symbolic capital (legitimacy), as well as the field's relationship to other fields. The actors competing over positions in the field can be either people or organizations, so that the company of Volvo can be conceptualized as a field, but also as an actor in the field of car manufacturing.

There is no universal blueprint. The task to empirically determine the variables relevant in a particular field and fill the concepts with concrete meaning is left to the individual researcher. While Bourdieu's research traditionally focused on national cases, his theory is profoundly *relational,* knowing of no borders, and the authors insist that fields come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. In other

[1] E.g. Philip S. Gorski (ed.), *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

words, there is nothing inherent to the model that precludes it from being applied to transnational relations. Field theory is proposed as a non-teleological, highly empirical, and scalable alternative to other frameworks that have been used for the study of global events, many of which tend to postulate *a priori* logics of causality and focus on specific scales of analysis.

Unavoidably, the individual articles of the volume can only hint at the versatility of this transnationally extended theory. Three of them touch upon how new global arenas are formed or relate to the national. In a theoretical text, Larissa Buchholz posits that new fields can emerge not only by defining a practice autonomous from other fields, but also by defining a new *level* upon which struggles take place. She exemplifies this process with her own research on the international art scene. Her addition of *relative vertical autonomy* to the Bourdieusian dictionary seems necessary if we want to understand the various ways in which national fields relate to their global counterparts, how their logics clash or overlap, under what circumstances ideas transfer between levels, and how these transfers change them.

The study by Shai M. Dromi is another good example of how field theory elucidates the national-global complex, focusing on the budding years of the Red Cross movement in the 1800s. Somewhat paradoxically, the organization made use of nationalist rhetorics and imagery to establish itself in accordance with the local norms in different nations, while at the same time drawing upon its transnationality as an important source of legitimacy. This article is a challenge to the idea of blind transfers of ideas between levels and the assumption that humanitarian organizations are dichotomously counterposed to nationalism.

Nicholas Hoover Wilson looks at a struggle between two East India Company administrators in the 18th century with regard to corruption and the proper role of the state, tracing in it the transition to modern British imperialism. He uses Bourdieusian theory to understand the emergence of an "interest in disinterest" as the ruling idea on this field, but leaves the causal analysis of change to other theorists within the sociology of organizations. Whereas the theme is transnational, his use of Bourdieu is not, leaving the chapter more in line with traditional tendencies to cherry-pick among the frenchman's concepts.

Three other contributions consider how logics spread through field connections and struggles. In a thoroughly theorized and detailed version of Christopher Bayly's homogenization of forms, Martin Petzke makes use of Bourdieu's full range of concepts to show how campaigns of the international Christian missionary field prompted the emergence of a more formalized Hinduism.[2] The proselytizing efforts of Christians altered the rules of the game in the Indian religious field by quantifying the number of followers, which led to competition between the different religions of the area. Through a discussion of how Muslims and Hindus

[2] Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

gradually adapted to this new logic, the article makes a good case for using field analysis to pinpoint the spread of globalization.

Exploring a more contemporary theme, Lisa Stampnitzky shows how the US decision to publicly defend its use of torture during and after the Iraq War is best understood as a conscious strategy to respond to the emergence and strength of a transnational human rights infrastructure. Empirically-based, transnational Bourdieusian field theory here turns out to be better equipped than traditional theories on the spread of human rights, which tend to postulate that states will increasingly adhere to human rights norms in rhetorics, if not in practice.

Stephanie L. Mudge and Antoine Vauchez try to explain the European Central Bank's somewhat unexpectedly wide-ranging investment in science as a *field effect* of the interconnections of the organization with the financial world, politics, and academia. The article argues that enquiring into the multiple interconnections of an organization facilitates our understanding of the particularities and "accidents" ruling it.

Two of the essays focus on the field of sociology itself. George Steinmetz explains the dynamics of the French sociological field in the 20th century and how it related to colonial settings. His essay also outlines some of the potential advantages of seeing empires as networks of fields. He asserts that field theory enables the researcher to conceive of subalterns and elites as actors within the same interconnected framework without making Eurocentric assumptions as to the logic ruling each constituent part. Needless to say, these circumstantial analyses can also take into account power disparities and differences between metropole and different colonies, as well as between individual colonies. In Steinmetz' words, they "[refuse] to separate colonizer and colonized, metropole and colony, culture and economics, but [see] these as inextricably linked elements of an extremely complex figurational and relational whole" (p.99).

Monika Krause discusses how "model systems" express power disparities within academia. With the help of field theory, she argues, we can dissect hierarchies in global fields and start thinking about how to deal with them constructively. Given the enormous gulf still separating canonical history accounts and narratives of events seen as "peripheral", this theme holds special relevance in global history. As an example, she touches upon the question of the English language as an academic capital, which has leading journals soliciting the opinions of relatively inexperienced native English speakers over far more merited professors abroad.

Last but not least, Angéle Christin's ethnographical study of e-newsrooms in France and the US makes it clear that some border-crossing relationships are too unbalanced to be described as fields. Nevertheless, her essay illustrates that the search for fields leads to meaningful insights about the nature of global interactions. A basic survey of the autonomy of different logics or spheres of practice, whether in form or level, allows us to map different *types* of interconnectivity. Here, the field concept fruitfully serves as a frame of reference.

Such specific uses are important to underline, because they point towards the rewards of taking the time to familiarize oneself with the language of Bourdieu. While the present volume's theme holds significant interdisciplinary potential, all of the contributors are trained sociologists. Without clear-cut and easy-to-understand examples of the usefulness of the theory, it will be difficult to proselytize the use of Bourdieu beyond these disciplinary borders. In most countries, the discipline of "historical sociology" does not even exist. Many historians still have deep-seated misgivings about theorizing their narratives at all, instead relying on commonsensical language completely devoid of mumbo-jumbo. Conversely, Bourdieu argued that a complicated language was important for sociology, as it granted the discipline academic capital.[3] This difference in pedagogical perspective has perhaps always been there, albeit the introduction to the volume at hand competently manifests that the lines are blurry at best.

Indeed, nowadays, many historians navigate tricky theories with almost the same ease as political scientists. Most would agree, however, that the theorizing has to add significant value to the narrative for it to be worthwhile. In this respect, the pliability of Bourdieusian field theory in all its might is not just its greatest asset, but also its Achilles' heel. Bourdieu's more well-known and broadly used concept of *habitus,* for instance, has the advantage of constituting just a single word to explain. A theory should never be an end in itself, and most theories that require the historian to do as much explaining as Bourdieu does instead gather some of their academic value from favoring certain outcomes. In the introduction, Julian Go and Monika Krause argue that Foucauldian governmentality's vision of an ever-expanding discursive power or World System Theory's economic bipolarity where the core dominates the periphery, to name but two examples, contribute very significantly to any research endeavor by introducing pre-ordained, far-reaching causal implications. Undoubtedly, field theory's open empirical approach is both harder to explain and harder to adapt as an academic *agenda*. For many historians, I am sure, Bourdieu's concepts might really seem like gobbledygook, devoid of any obvious analytical trade-off.

Yet with patience, field theory can give the historian a means of narrating with great detail without losing track of the bigger picture. Take, for instance, the term "entanglement", so over-used in global history as a shortcut for denoting complex relations. Identifying the structures in Bourdieusian terms could help us specify exactly what we mean with such terms in concrete situations, a fact amply illustrated by George Steinmetz', Christin's, and Petzke's articles in the volume, among others. Barring a few exceptions, however, the articles at hand seldom discuss global-scale structures in great detail. To a large extent, this is an effect of the article format and the focus on the theory itself.

[3] E.g. Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1993).

Arguably, however, transnational field theory would be better suited for so-called grand narratives than many other models, not least because it forces the analyst to take both cultural and economic capitals into account without presuming *a priori* the dominance of one or the other. The system's scalability enables the historian to zoom in and out among linked analytical levels. Its empiricism allows us to unite causal processes of different kinds into the same framework. In an earlier work, for instance, Julian Go has revealed how the Bourdieusian concept of symbolic capital helps in explaining the development in colonial policy from direct to indirect rule over the centuries as a result of changes in exchange rates for different kinds of capitals in the international arena.[4] Sadly, the concept of capital is barely touched upon in the contributions to this volume, excepting the introduction. Instead, most essays are more interested in the spread of field logics than the actual struggles contained in them. But what would a large-scale Bourdieusian analysis of the Great Divergence look like? Or one of the spread of civil rights and state revolutions starting in the 18th century? If and when more such grandiose questions are asked, which hopefully is just a matter of time, *Fielding Transnationalism* will be an excellent starting point for theoretical inspiration.

[4] Julian Go, *Patterns of Empire: the British and American Empires, 1688 to Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).