Field and Ecology

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Abstract
This article offers a theoretical comparison between field and ecology, as developed by Pierre Bourdieu and the Chicago School of sociology. While field theory and ecological theory share similar conceptualizations of actors, positions, and relations, and while they converge in their views on structural isomorphism, temporality, and social psychology, they are quite different on several other scores: power and inequality, endogeneity, heterogeneity, metaphorical sources, and abstraction. With a fine-grained comparison of the two approaches, this article provides the basis for a continuous dialogue among social theorists and empirical researchers regarding the nature of social space, its structural and processual composition, and how it changes over time.

Keywords
field, ecology, social space, Bourdieu, Chicago School

“The truth of the interaction,” Bourdieu (2005:148) liked to say, “is not to be found in the interaction itself” but rather in the structure that encompasses it. In his own work, he accordingly developed a field-theoretic approach that prioritized structure over interaction. The target of many of Bourdieu’s criticisms was symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969), a sociological tradition emerging out of the Second Chicago School in the postwar era. But oddly enough, in his prolific writings, he did not make much effort to engage with the human ecology of the first Chicago School (Park and Burgess [1921] 1969), an approach closely resembling his own field theory, much less to take on later versions of ecological theorizing. Nor have many proponents of an ecological approach critically engaged with Bourdieu’s work. The only prominent exception has been a fragment of an essay posted on Abbott’s personal website (Abbott 2005a)—an exception, we might say, that proves the rule.

The present essay seeks to initiate a mutual engagement between field and ecology in sociological theory. As elaborated by Bourdieu ([1992] 1996, 2005), field theory conceptualizes society as structured spaces in which agents with habitus and capital struggle for dominant positions. The ecological approach (Abbott 1988a, 2005b; Faris 1967; Gaziano 1996; Hawley 1986; Park 1936; Park and Burgess [1921] 1969) theorizes society as interactional spaces with competing actors and fluid locations. The two theories use distinct languages to describe similar structures and processes. After a brief overview of field-theoretic and ecological approaches, we lay out the assumptions they have in common and discuss

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more specific similarities regarding structural isomorphism, temporality, and social psychology. We then provide a fine-grained comparison of their differences along five dimensions: power and inequality, endogeneity, heterogeneity, metaphorical sources, and abstraction. Finally, we offer tentative thoughts on the lessons the two approaches can draw from each other as well as the possibility of their potential convergence.

To facilitate the comparison, we focus analytically on space while leaving time a subordinate consideration; we do so because of the primarily spatial orientation of both field theory and ecological theory, not because they (or we) consider time unimportant in its own right. Ideally, a sociological approach would treat space and time as of coequal analytic significance. As the body of sociological literature on field and ecology is immense, we also limit the discussion to a handful of classic, robust formulations of both approaches. We focus on Bourdieu’s elaboration of field theory in his own writings, the first Chicago School’s development of human ecology, and its later adaptations by Hawley, Abbott, and population ecologists.

THE SPATIAL VIEW OF SOCIETY

Field and ecology are theoretical metaphors for characterizing social space (Silber 1995). Any comparison between them accordingly must start from the nature of social space.1 How is a social space different from a social structure, a social system, or a social network? In the most abstract sense, a social space is defined by actors and positions and the relations that associate them (Abbott 2005b; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Actors, or what Bourdieu calls “agents,” can be individuals, groups, or even complex social entities such as industries or states, but they must maintain a certain degree of autonomy in purposive action and possess some forms of capital. Positions are referential locations in a social space; actors experience different structural constraints depending on which positions in the social space they happen to occupy. Actors and positions are not naturally or mechanically connected but rather are constituted and delimited by the relations between them, a relational process that Abbott (2005b:248) labels “ligation.” Or, in Bourdieu’s ([1997] 2000:134) words, actors are “situated in a place in social space, a distinct and distinctive place which can be characterized by the position it occupies relative to other places (above, below, between, etc.) and the distance . . . that separates it from them.”

Regardless of metaphors such as field or ecology, the aforementioned three elements are necessary for any social space to exist. Among them, actor is what distinguishes space from structure, position is what distinguishes it from system, and the relation between actor and position is what distinguishes it from network. A social structure (Martin 2009) primarily is concerned with the structural shape of social life, not the autonomy of actors within it. A structural analysis often minimizes the purposive action of individual actors in changing the macrostructure.2 A social system (Luhmann [1984] 1995; Parsons 1937, 1951) primarily is concerned with the functions and roles of actors, not their spatial positions. An actor can change its role in the system without moving to another position or vice versa. A social network (Burt 1992, 2005; White 2002, 2008) primarily is concerned with the structural ties between actors, not the spatial relations between actor and position. A network remains unchanged so long as the pattern and strength of ties between actors do not change, even if their spatial positions shift.

The spatial view of society is an analytic approach that mediates between structural constraint and individual autonomy. This is true for both field and ecology. The Bourdieuan field, as Gorski (2013:328) summarizes it, is both a “force field” and a “playing field” for individual actors in it. On the one hand, actors are constrained by the configuration of forces
in the field, as determined by the distribution of capitals at play and the rules of the game, themselves a structural inheritance from earlier power-weighted contestations; on the other hand, based on their habitus (which in turn are products of their structural positions and social trajectories), actors also can utilize various forms of capital to achieve different positions and statuses in the field. The primary form of relation in the field is power struggles, which produce dominance and subordination, or stratified relations among actors. Each field has its own *nomos*, or “fundamental law” (Bourdieu [1997] 2000:96), which is “specific and irreducible” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:97) to those that regulate other fields. Altogether, a number of such relatively autonomous fields make up the social cosmos. Bourdieu even extends the field-theoretic idea to include spaces of what he calls “position-takings” (e.g., statements, programs, manifestos, agendas, styles)—a kind of symbolic order—as well as spaces of dispositions or types of habitus.

Like many contemporary European theorists, Bourdieu seeks to bridge objectivism and subjectivism as well as structure and agency (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Brubaker 1985; Lebaron 2003; Sallaz and Zavisca 2007). Consider first the more subjectivist and agentic moment in his theory. As Martin (2003) suggests, the concept of field has three meanings: namely, a topological area, an organization of forces, and a battlefield of contestation. Bourdieu’s use of this concept contains all those meanings but emphasizes the third one, which views actors as playing a game according to the rules of the field and sometimes even as creating new rules for an emerging field. This tension between structure and agency in the Bourdieuan field is well illustrated in *The Rules of Art*, where writers and artists’ “conquest of autonomy” for the French literary field is characterized as a double rupture with bourgeois and literary institutions, while the result of their conquest is seen as the emergence of “a paradoxical universe in which freedom from institutions is found inscribed in those institutions” (Bourdieu [1992] 1996:258).

However, it also is evident that field theory is closer to objectivism and structuralism than it is to the other end of the continuum. This point is made explicitly in *The Social Structures of the Economy*, in which Bourdieu argues that field theory stands opposed to both “the atomistic, mechanistic vision” of neoclassical economics and “the interactionist vision” according to which “the economic and social order can be reduced to a host of interacting individuals” (Bourdieu 2005:197). Although field theory inextricably is bound up with a conception of the habitus as generator of sometimes creative, innovative strategies of action, and although contestation over dominance in a field is part of the very definition of fields, Bourdieu’s approach hardly can be said to exaggerate the agency of actors, individual or collective. In any of the fields that Bourdieu studies, such as art, academia, or the housing market (Bourdieu [1984] 1988, [1989] 1996, [1992] 1996, 2005), actors’ position in fields strongly shapes what they are able to do and even what they are able to conceive of doing.

The “interactionist vision” that Bourdieu refers to, and from which he distances himself, probably is the symbolic interactionism of the postwar-era Second Chicago School (Blumer 1969). Yet in his prolific writings Bourdieu rarely engages with the ecological approach of the first Chicago School, an approach that closely resembles his field theory. Human ecology, defined as “a study of the spatial and temporal relations of human beings as affected by the selective, distributive, and accommodative forces of the environment” (McKenzie 1924:288), is a theory of social space with emphasis on the adaptation of actors to their social environment as well as on the ecological interaction among actors. Similar to field theory, it characterizes “a social structure that is less unified than a machine or an organism, but that is considerably more unified than is a social world made up of the autonomous, atomic beings of classical liberalism or the probabilistically interacting rational actors of microeconomics” (Abbott 2005b:248).
In their influential *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, Park and Burgess ([1921] 1969:280) build on Simmel’s (1950, 1971) concept of reciprocal relationship and propose interaction as “the fundamental social process” for both persons and groups. Competition, as the basic form of interaction, “invariably tends to create an impersonal social order in which each individual, being free to pursue his own profit, and, in a sense, compelled to do so[,] . . . inevitably contributes through the mutual exchange of services so established to the common welfare” (Park and Burgess [1921] 1969:507). This subtle process is termed “competitive co-operation” and conceived as the central mechanism of “the ecological conception of society” (Park and Burgess [1921] 1969:559).

With the collective efforts of Park and his students, human ecology reached its heyday in the burgeoning city of Chicago in the 1920s–30s (Anderson 1923; Cressey 1932; Hoyt 1933; Wirth 1928, 1938; Zorbaugh 1929), but its popularity declined soon after Park’s departure from the University of Chicago in 1936. The reasons are at least threefold. First, the Chicago sociologists devoted their empirical studies almost entirely to “the city” (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1967; Wirth 1938) and were increasingly considered by scholars of later generations as merely a school of urban sociology (Gieryn 2006; Hannerz 1980; Lindner [1990] 1996; Theodorson 1982).

Second, the rise of Parsons’s (1937) structural-functionalist theory presented a major intellectual challenge to the Chicago School, which often was criticized for being “atheoretical” (Shils 1948). Parsons’s exclusion of Simmel and American pragmatism from his landscape of classical social theory, which primarily consists of Durkheim, Weber, and Pareto, had a major impact on the direction of sociological theorizing in midcentury (Joas and Knöbl [2004] 2009). In effect, it marginalized the Chicago School and removed human ecology from the central territory of American sociology in the postwar era. Finally, as Coleman (1990) argues, the decline of the Chicago School also was due to a decline in the mid-twentieth century in the kinds of empirical problems on which the school had focused, such as immigration, social disorganization, and urban deviance.

It was not until the 1970–80s that the ecological approach began to revive in a few areas of sociology, most notably organizational analysis (Hannan and Freeman 1977, 1989), political sociology (Wallerstein 1976; Zhao 1998), and the sociology of professions (Abbott 1988a). This coincided with the rise of Bourdieu’s field theory and may reflect a broader shift of sociological theorizing from variable-based, substantialist approaches to emergent, relational perspectives (Emirbayer 1997). One notable theoretical shift in these new ecological models is that they often conceptualize “ecology” as an abstract, metaphorical space (e.g., the system of professions or the organizational field) rather than as a concrete, physical space (e.g., the city of Chicago), as in the original Chicago School human ecology. But even in this period, ecological theory seems to suffer from doubt regarding its applicability to empirical analysis. Indeed, this is a common critique of both Hannan and Freeman’s (1977) population ecology (e.g., Young 1988) and Abbott’s (1988a) system of professions.

This leads to a central paradox in the historical development of ecological theory: The theory has been criticized both for its atheoretical tendency and for its lack of usefulness for empirical analysis. To some extent, the difficulty stems from the changed meaning of empirical research in American sociology in the postwar era. As sociological theory moved toward the “middle range” (Merton 1968), empirical research was characterized by a proliferation of variable-based investigations (Abbott 1988b). The holistic and interactional approach of human ecology fundamentally is incompatible with this dominant methodology of sociological research. And unlike Bourdieu’s wide applications of his field theory to various research topics, followers of human ecology, most notably Hawley (1944, 1968, 1986) and Abbott (1988a, 2005b), did not persist in making the theory amiable for empirical work. Nevertheless, as both a theory and a methodology, ecology remains an important alternative to field in studying society as social space.
SIMILARITIES BETWEEN FIELD AND ECOLOGY

One important similarity between field and ecology is their common emphasis on structural isomorphism. Isomorphism is a major principle in human ecology, particularly in Hawley’s (1968, 1986) version. It maintains that with increasing ecological interaction, the structural diversity of complex units becomes isomorphic to the diversity of their environments. This general principle was adopted by Hannan and Freeman (1977) in organization theory and then made popular by the neoinstitutionalists (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977). In Bourdieu’s vocabulary, a concept strikingly similar to isomorphism is homology. Homology highlights the close similarities in form among fields, such as that between the literary field and the field of power (Bourdieu [1992] 1996) or that between the space of capital and the space of lifestyles (Bourdieu [1979] 1984); it also can refer to the close similarities in form among spaces of positions and spaces of position-takings as well as among either or both of the aforementioned and spaces of dispositions. But sometimes the term also is used to characterize the structural equivalence between positions in the same field (e.g., Bourdieu 2005).

Abbott’s (2005b) “linked ecologies” framework is a recent example of this isomorphic principle in theorizing social space. Instead of using the two existing concepts (i.e., isomorphism and homology), Abbott coins new concepts such as “hinges” or “avatars” to describe this synchronic feature. Hinges are issues that provide “dual rewards” for actors in two different ecologies, such as medical licensing for both doctors in the professional ecology and civil servants in the political ecology (Abbott 2005b:255). Avatar is “an institutionalized hinge” that an actor creates in an adjacent ecology as its representative; an example would be academic specialists in computer science (Abbott 2005b:265–66). Both hinges and avatars reflect a tendency for two ecologies to converge in their formal structures.

In addition to their shared feature of structural isomorphism, field and ecology also exhibit similar approaches to conceptualizing time. Both Bourdieu and the Chicago School conceive of the social world as consisting of processes and relations (Emirbayer 1997), which constitute both actors and positions in a social space (Abbott 2005b). However, unlike social network theorists (e.g., Burt 1992, 2005; Granovetter 1985), neither Bourdieu nor the Chicago School conceives of social space as merely a set of static structural conditions for actors’ rational behavior. Field theory is deeply concerned with the trajectories over time of social actors and the positions they occupy. In Distinction, Bourdieu ([1979] 1984:264) stresses over and again that not only synchrony but also diachrony matter. An individual’s position in social space is defined not only by the structure of his or her assets—“that is, . . . the relative weights of the economic capital and cultural capital he possesses”—but also by his or her social trajectory, “which, through the corresponding mode of acquisition, governs his relationship to those assets.” Elsewhere, Bourdieu (e.g., [1984] 1988; [1992] 1996) also speaks of the importance of temporal dynamics such as social aging and the “order of succession,” processes through which fields ordinarily are reproduced.

Similarly, the spatial and temporal movements of actors through interaction are at the heart of human ecology (Park et al. 1967). Competition, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation, the four great types of interaction that Park and Burgess ([1921] 1969) discuss in detail, are all concepts for explaining temporal changes in the spatial allocation and inter-relations of social groups in the urban ecological system. In Burgess’s classic essay “The Growth of the City” (Park et al. 1967:47–62) and in McKenzie’s (1968) essays on human ecology, the affinity between spatial change and temporal change is even more salient. For Abbott, the legacy of the first Chicago School is “to see social structures as fluctuating and geographic” (Abbott 1988a:xxv)—an insight fundamental to his own ecological model of
professions as well. This precisely is the essence of “natural history” in human ecology, or the history of “surviving species” (Park et al. 1967:80).

Therefore, field and ecology are theories for explaining not only the structural configuration of a social space but also its change over time. This temporal aspect enables the two theories to transcend the static nature of much of social network analysis (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994) and to move toward a more dynamic approach to social life. It also allows them to move beyond the variable-based causal view that simplifies temporal change as the succession of variables’ values over time (Abbott 1988b, 2001). As Bourdieu puts it, “time is what practical activity produces in the very act whereby it produces itself” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:138); hence it is inseparable from interactions in social space, regardless of the specific form (e.g., competition, conflict, or exchange) these interactions may take.

A final shared feature of field and ecology has to do with the very similar social psychologies with which they are connected. These center on relatively unreflective dispositions—that drive action; these social psychologies also recognize, however, that whenever perplexing or indeterminate situations arise, taken-for-granted modes of thinking, perceiving, feeling, and acting give way (at least ideally) to creative and reflective problem solving. The Chicago School closely follows Dewey and Mead in stressing the continual alternation between dispositional and problem-solving activity. “Habit,” observe Park and Burgess ([1921] 1969:766), “represents a situation where the definition [of the situation] is working.” So long as this continues working, the habitual course of action is followed. However, when habits are no longer adequate, . . . [t]his is the point at which we have unrest—a heightened emotional state, random movements, unregulated behavior—and this continues until the situation is redefined. The unrest is associated with conditions in which the individual or society feels unable to act. It represents energy, and the problem is to use it constructively. (Park and Burgess [1921] 1969:766)

Effective use of the moment involves a formulation of new definitions of the situation, perhaps even of new habits of action, better suited for addressing the problematic circumstances at hand. This applies to collectivities as well as to individuals. Human communities can experience social disorganization, but this also can be intelligently addressed through efforts at social reorganization and reconstruction. As McKenzie (1924:292) puts it, “Whatever the innovation may be that disturbs the equilibrium of the community, there is a tendency toward a new cycle of adjustment.”

The social psychology associated with field theory similarly features individual as well as collective actors who, most of the time, pursue strategies of action generated by deep-seated systems of dispositions—their habitus—in close synchronization with the fields of practice—habitats—in which they were formed. Bourdieu quotes approvingly a line by Leibniz to the effect that we are practical “in three-quarters of our actions” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:131). He also observes, however, that in problematic circumstances, more reflective action may be needed. “Times of crises, in which the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures is brutally disrupted, constitute a class of circumstances when indeed ‘rational choice’ may take over” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:131). While there may be subtle differences between field and ecology when it comes to the theory of action, the convergences between the two are striking.

From the discussion of their similarities in this section, it is fair to say that field and ecology belong to the same family in sociological theory, the family that conceptualizes society as relational in nature and social relations as structured processes, driven by habitual action.
punctuated by moments of reflective problem solving. To make an analogy, field and ecology resemble two cousins raised in different cultures since early childhood so that they develop distinct dispositions and speak different languages but nonetheless have common genes in their bodies. The next section discusses some important differences between these two theoretical approaches—along five dimensions.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FIELD AND ECOLOGY

The first significant difference between field and ecology has to do with power and inequality. Field theory arguably is an effort to explain inequality in social structures—and power is at the heart of it. For Bourdieu (1993:73), the structure of the field is “a state of the power relations among the agents or institutions engaged in the struggle.” Dominance in the field is based on an actor’s capital and structural position, and often it is achieved through power struggles. The dominated, on the other hand, do not always exhibit submission to their subordinate positions, but they can exert a certain force of active resistance (e.g., in student activism) or creative action (e.g., in the artistic and intellectual fields) (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Both dominance and subordination are a manifestation of power relations in the social space.

The importance of power in field theory most clearly can be observed in the unique concept of “the field of power,” defined as “the space of relations of force between agents or between institutions having in common the possession of the capital necessary to occupy the dominant positions in different fields” (Bourdieu [1992] 1996:215). It is the social space where dominant actors in different fields, holding different forms of capital, “confront each other using strategies aimed at preserving or transforming these relations of power” (Bourdieu [1989] 1996:264–65). The opposition in the field of power is homologous with oppositions in other fields such as the economic field, the university field, or the field of cultural production. It is both a struggle over “the power to dictate the dominant principle of domination” and a struggle over “the legitimate principle of legitimation and, inseparably, the legitimate mode of reproduction of the foundations of domination” (Bourdieu [1989] 1996:265). It is in the field of power that an “organic solidarity in the division of the labor of domination” (Bourdieu [1989] 1996:187) is achieved.

Ecological theory, in contrast, has few concepts for explaining power and inequality. It assumes that relations between social actors are fundamentally competitive and, consequently, that competitions produce spatial settlements and structural equilibriums in the ecology. For instance, Abbott (1988a:135) acknowledges that his ecological theory of professions is not a power model but rather a competitive and equilibrating model that “believes the equilibrating forces prevail, assuming that no profession delivering bad services can stand indefinitely against competent outsiders, however powerful it may be.” In this sense, ecological theory indeed resembles the plant ecology in which different species grow side by side and compete for spaces and resources but do not produce food chains or natural enemies as in the animal world. Field theory, in contrast, depicts a complex and hierarchical human society in which power relations produce not only spatial boundaries and jurisdictional settlements but, more importantly, class boundaries and the system of social stratification.

Blunt ignorance of power and inequality can be a serious weakness of ecological theory, but it also enables Chicago School sociologists to develop a unique Simmelian perspective for theorizing society, a perspective that emphasizes symbiosis and equilibrium (Simmel 1950, 1971). This perspective assumes that human beings are like interdependent species exchanging resources and competing for turf in order to survive in an ecology. Precisely through such interactions, an ecology’s internal equilibrium is maintained. In other words,
the basic view of human nature in ecological theory is more cooperative and less coercive than in field theory. The best illustration of this is Park and Burgess’s ([1921] 1969) concept of competitive cooperation, which we mentioned previously.

Consequently, when Chicago School sociologists use concepts of dominance and subordination, their emphasis is on the spatial and functional differentiation of actors and positions, such as dominant centers and subordinate parts in a city or an empire (McKenzie 1927) or the dominance of oligarchic professions over subordinate groups in the system of work (Abbott 1988a). Chicago School sociologists do not necessarily imply coercive relations between actors or status hierarchies between positions. In contrast, Bourdieu’s concepts of dominance and subordination contain a strong coercive tendency reminiscent of Marxian and Weberian social theories. This is true not only in the case of physical or social relations but also in the case of symbolic violence, where the dominant actor exerts violence with the complicity of the dominated in everyday social practice (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

A second fundamental difference between field and ecology has to do with endogeneity. Bourdieu insists that although every field has its own rules, no field ever can be an entirely endogenous space impervious to external influences. No field is entirely autonomous. Field theory also recognizes the intricate interrelations among fields. For instance, a field can be disaggregated into several smaller fields, such as the field of buyers, field of builders, and field of state regulators in the housing market (Bourdieu 2005). A field also can be subordinate to another field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), as the nineteenth-century French literary field was to the broader French field of power (Bourdieu [1992] 1996). Although Bourdieu has been criticized for inadequately theorizing the spaces between fields (Eyal 2013b; Fligstein and McAdam 2012), the concept of field is flexible enough to characterize the complexity of social relations across field boundaries. Indeed, much of the recent growth in the applications of field theory in sociology specifically addresses this issue (e.g., Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Medvetz 2012; Stampnitzky 2013).

In contrast, the various ecological models the Chicago School sociologists have proposed all share a strong assumption of the endogeneity of social space. In classical urban ecology, the spatial mobility of racial and ethnic groups in the city of Chicago is analyzed in terms of competition, symbiosis, and succession, often without taking into account the life experiences of these immigrant groups prior to their arrival in the city (Park et al. 1967; Wirth 1938; Zorbaugh 1929). The only exception is Thomas and Znaniecki’s (1918–20) study of the Polish peasant, a work that analyzes the social disorganization and reorganization of this immigrant population in both their sending and receiving countries. In contemporary ecological theories such as Abbott’s (1988a) system of professions or Hannan and Freeman’s (1977, 1989) population ecology, the focus remains on interactions within the boundaries of the ecology, often reducing external social structures to mere passive conditions for ecological processes. Even in the more recent “linked ecologies” framework that claims to problematize ecological boundaries, each of the two adjacent ecologies still largely maintains its endogeneity, such that they only are linked by mechanical concepts such as hinges or avatars (Abbott 2005b).

As a consequence of its strong assumptions regarding endogeneity, ecological theory prioritizes processes of interaction over preexisting structures in constituting social space. Take Abbott’s (1988a) ecological theory of professions. Passive concepts such as “audience” or “system disturbance” are used to describe external influences on the system of professions (e.g., legal system, public opinion, technology, organization) without giving any autonomy of action to these external social entities. The structure and change of this system primarily are produced by jurisdictional conflicts between professions—that is, interactions between actors within the ecology. Similarly, the core concepts of classical human ecology (e.g., competition, conflict, accommodation, assimilation) mostly are about interaction, not
preexisting structure. Authors from the Second Chicago School further developed this focus on interaction into symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969), a major paradigm for microsociology, but the holistic ecological view of society is lost in their writings.

To a large extent, the theoretical orientation of the first Chicago School reflects the social conditions of the city of Chicago in the early twentieth century, likened vividly by Weber to “a man whose skin had been peeled off and whose intestines were seen at work” (Bulmer 1984:xvi). Bourdieu’s field theory, in comparison, is a sociological manifestation of the older and more hierarchical French society, or perhaps European societies more generally, where social relations have been reproduced for centuries and constitute a complex and interconnected web. Consequently, it is unrealistic to construct a highly endogenous and processual concept of field that minimizes objective relations and preexisting structures. In a sense, this theoretical difference between field and ecology reflects the different empirical conditions of French and American societies as well as their national ideologies: French society is hierarchical and full of historical legacies, whereas American society is mobile and full of possibilities (or at least understands itself as such).

While a student of Bourdieu might argue that field is a less rigid and more applicable approach than ecology because of its greater flexibility in theorizing the topology of social space and the relationship between structure and interaction (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), a student of the Chicago School might make the counterargument that ecology is a more dynamic and processual approach than field because it assumes that social entities, including both actors and positions, are not predetermined by preexisting structures but rather are produced in the process of social interaction (Abbott 2005b). In Abbott’s (1995) words, they are not things with boundaries but things of boundaries. This ontological assumption may restrict the capacity of ecological theory to analyze stable and institutionalized social structures, which is the strength of field theory, but it also enables ecological theorists to trace the emergence and transformation of complex social structures from a dynamic processual perspective.

A third difference between field and ecology has to do with the heterogeneity of social space. Most ecological models in sociology are highly homogeneous and usually include only one type of actor such as ethnic groups in a city (Park et al. 1967), organizations in an organizational field (Hannan and Freeman 1977), nation-states in a world system (Wallerstein 1976), or professions in an area of work (Abbott 1988a). Although actors in an ecology may differ significantly in their status and capital, they usually belong to the same sociological category. In comparison, fields are heterogeneous in that actors from different sociological categories can coexist in the same social space. For instance, the housing market that Bourdieu (2005) analyzes as an economic field is composed of a number of different kinds of actors, such as buyers, builders, and state regulators. Or, the field of automobile manufacturers would encompass not just one type of entity (e.g., all car manufacturers) but all the entities that play one role or another in the activity in question (e.g., car manufacturers and steel suppliers, dealers, consumers, insurers, and local and federal government agencies regulating the manufacture and operation of cars) (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008).

The greater heterogeneity of actors in a field sometimes can be accompanied by the greater heterogeneity of their relations with each other. In the previous housing market example, these social relations vary from client relations between house buyers and construction firms to competitive relations between firms and regulatory relations between bureaucratic agencies and firms (Bourdieu 2005). In other fields that Bourdieu studies, such as the literary field ([1992] 1996), the academic field ([1984] 1988), and the juridical field (1987), actors and their relations are more homogeneous. This flexibility in theorizing social relations is missing in ecological theory, which recognizes the diversity of social interaction but often prioritizes one type of interaction in a given ecology.
A fourth difference between field theory and ecological theory has to do with the distinct *metaphors* they use in developing theory. Abbott (2005a) argues that the root metaphor of field theory is economic, whereas the root metaphor of ecological theory is biological. However, Bourdieu in fact uses a wide range of concepts that originate from various sources, most notably physics, economics, and anthropology. The metaphor of field is reminiscent of the physical sciences, particularly classical electromagnetism (Martin 2003). Indeed, Bourdieu’s concept of field sometimes is analogous to the magnetic field, which “exerts a force upon all those who come within its range” while “those who experience these ‘pulls’ are generally not aware of their source” (Bourdieu 1987:806). Capital arguably is an economic concept, although the ways in which Bourdieu uses it are far broader than in economics or Marxian sociology. Habitus is a concept that dates back to Aristotle, but Bourdieu adapts it directly from anthropologists in his work on Algerian kinship (Bourdieu [1972] 1977; Wacquant 2004, 2009). Symbolic violence also is a concept with deep anthropological roots (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In short, Bourdieu’s diverse vocabulary reflects his broad training in philosophy and the social sciences, and therefore it is imprecise to say that the root metaphor of field theory is economic.

Competition, symbiosis, accommodation, assimilation, succession—the metaphors of the first Chicago School indeed are predominantly biological. Or, more precisely, they present a social world that resembles plant ecology, in which plant species coexist, grow, mature, and die. Biological metaphors are not so salient in the writings of certain contemporary ecological theorists such as Abbott (1988a), who, when describing properties of the system of professions, instead uses concepts such as jurisdiction, settlement, oligarchy, and demographic rigidity. But in population ecology (Hannan and Freeman 1977, 1989), which is heavily influenced by Hawley (1968), core concepts such as selection, isomorphism, and niche certainly do manifest a biological tinge, although economic terms such as optimization and opportunity cost also are utilized. These metaphorical choices further suggest an epistemological closeness to the Simmelian view of social process, which was well known to Chicago sociologists during the early decades of the twentieth century.

The last (and closely related) important difference between field and ecology has to do with the place of abstraction in their respective approaches to studying social life. Bourdieu often insists that fields are constructed concepts and, as such, abstractions generated in the act of investigating the social world (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron [1968] 1973). Fields are models for understanding social reality. As Bourdieu (1992:43–44) puts it, “the scientific fact is *constructed*. . . . [T]his is the decisive moment of scientific practice, the moment of maximum vigilance. It is the moment of the construction of the object.” If there is an analytic departure to be made from this objectivizing approach, which involves effecting an epistemological break with common sense, it is to be found in the recognition that one also must effect a “break with the break” and incorporate into one’s analyses the subjective, commonsensical orientations of actors immersed in practical activities in the field. Both moments are necessary for sociological investigation. This dual approach to abstraction is reflected also in field theory’s ways of conceiving of social space, sometimes in highly abstract spatial models (as in correspondence analysis diagrams or even the field diagrams so well known to students of Bourdieu) and sometimes in more concrete, physical mappings of locales in everyday life, as when Bourdieu speaks of the different regions of the Kabyle house (Bourdieu [1984] 1979) or of the geographic distribution of elements of the French field of power across a map of nineteenth-century Paris (Bourdieu [1992] 1996).

Ecological theory also moves back and forth between these two orientations toward abstraction, although it does so largely in reverse order. The first Chicago School hardly regards biological, ecological processes as an abstract model for conceptualizing social
life. Rather, it conceives of social life itself as ecological or biological. There is little abstraction here. Similarly, early Chicago sociologists understand social space in physical, geographic terms, as in their famous, emblematic maps of Chicago areas and neighborhoods. But later ecological theorists, including Abbott and the population ecologists, proceed with more abstract models. Their understandings of space, too, become more metaphorical and less concrete. But on the whole, abstraction is less prominent in ecological theory than it is in field theory, a difference that can be traced back to their respective commitments to working from actors’ subjective viewpoints. Bourdieu is profoundly suspicious (as was Durkheim) of prenotions—“the preconstructed is everywhere” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:235)—while ecological theorists, particularly those of the first Chicago School, concern themselves more centrally with actors’ own (as opposed to social scientists’) perspectives on the social world.

FIELD AND ECOLOGY IN DIALOGUE

What can field and ecology learn from one another? In this section, we offer some tentative thoughts on the potential improvements in, and rapprochement between, field theory and ecological theory in future research. We concede that some of the differences discussed in the previous section are fundamental and hard to overcome. The distinction between power/inequality and competition/symbiosis is one such difference. But other differences, particularly the ones regarding endogeneity and heterogeneity, can be overcome with modifications of some unnecessary assumptions. Even the difference between structure and interaction can be partly accommodated in a spatial theory of society.

We begin with the lessons that ecological theory can learn from Bourdieu. As discussed previously, ecology has strong assumptions regarding the endogeneity and homogeneity of social space. These assumptions enable Chicago School sociologists to demarcate the ecological system from its environment and to control the heterogeneity of its internal actors, but they also make the theory less adaptable to the great complexity of social actors and structural constraints. To some extent, ecological theory’s lack of applications in empirical research stems from this analytic rigidity. Bourdieu’s field theory offers at least three lessons on how to modify those strong assumptions—as well as ecology’s stance on the question of power relations—and on how to make ecology a more flexible concept.

The first lesson has to do with the relationship between social spaces. Abbott (2005b) seeks to problematize ecology’s strong assumption of endogeneity by introducing the concept of “linked ecologies,” but as we saw, each of the linked ecologies remains endogenous and is only connected with the other ecology by a set of bridging mechanisms such as hinges or avatars. Some important questions thus remain unanswered. For instance, can one ecology be divided into a few smaller ecologies? Or can two ecologies overlap in their actors and positions? For Bourdieu’s field theory, the answers to these questions are straightforward but potentially could make ecological theory less rigid and more accommodating to the complexity of social structures. Like fields, ecologies could be large or small, and they also could be divisive or mutually constitutive, not merely linked to one another. Alleviating the strong assumption of endogeneity would remove a heavy burden from ecological thinking.

The second lesson concerns the heterogeneity of actors in a social space. Ecological theory’s strong assumption of homogeneity implies that only actors in the same sociological category, such as ethnic groups in a city or organizations in an industry, coexist in an ecology. This assumption confines the ecological system to a simple, flat, two-dimensional space in which competitive relations prevail and few structural hierarchies can be found. To apply it to hierarchical and heterogeneous social structures, such as the political system, would
require a significant modification of this strong assumption. In fact, when Abbott (2005b:251–52) analyzes the political system as an ecology with a large variety of actors such as “parties, civil servants, administrative departments, pressure groups, journalists, substantive experts, and so on,” he refers to the relationship between political actors and their locations as political “bundles” rather than as “jurisdictions” because political issues are structurally overlapping and constantly rebundled. The assumption of homogeneity is already alleviated in this example. Even for the professional ecology, recent research has shown that the network among professionals and laypersons is crucial for understanding the social construction of expertise (Eyal 2013a).

What would an open and heterogeneous ecological theory look like? This can be illustrated by a revisit to Abbott’s (1988a) book The System of Professions. Although Bourdieu often dismissed the concept of “profession” as a problematic folk concept (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), his field theory could help strengthen Abbott’s book in interesting ways. Actors in the system of professions could include clients, state regulators, bureaucratic organizations, and less organized service providers in addition to professions. This could alleviate the assumptions of both endogeneity and homogeneity and make interactions in the ecological system more diverse and dynamic. Competition no longer would be the single, dominant pattern of interaction in the social space of professional services but rather one of many coexisting ecological processes, such as boundary work, exchange, and symbiosis (Liu 2015).

Once ecology becomes open and heterogeneous, the power relations between actors must be taken more seriously—and this leads to the third lesson from field theory. The reason why Bourdieu can incorporate into fields a large variety of heterogeneous actors is that dominance and subordination among actors are at the heart of his theory. In contrast, Abbott (2005a:3) insists that his concept of ecology “has no concept of dominance or subordination” because of “the empirical fact that dominant professions often destroy themselves by a ruinous exercise of domination.” Arguably, the ecological model is fundamentally competitive rather than oppositional, but even competitive actors can form structural hierarchies and power relations in a social space. Furthermore, the power relations between actors inside and outside the ecology also need to be more carefully theorized than through passive concepts such as “audience” or “system disturbance” as developed by Abbott (1988a) in his ecological theory of professions. Jurisdictional conflict is not only a process of territorial competition but also a power exercise both between professions and among a profession and its clients or state regulators.

Therefore, ecological theory has much room for improvement in future research, and field theory provides some good possibilities in terms of exogeneity, heterogeneity, and power relations. The challenge is how to maintain ecology’s competitive and processual nature while accommodating the demands of theorizing environmental forces, power relations, and structural complexities. It would be unrealistic to transform Chicago School human ecology into a theory of domination and inequality since that would be fundamentally incompatible with its theoretical orientation. Nevertheless, it is entirely possible to make ecology a more open and flexible spatial approach than in its existing versions.

What lessons can field theory draw from the Chicago School ecological tradition? Two are especially important. First, that tradition’s focus on interaction places in the foreground a vast province of sociological phenomena to which field theory partly closes itself off. While it is perhaps the pragmatist side of Chicago sociology that most clearly emphasizes interaction, its ecological dimension also highlights it through its enduring focus on competitive cooperation and other ecological processes that shape social structures. Bourdieu’s argument that the roots of interaction lie in social structures, as quoted at the beginning of this article, needs to be
modified to enable a serious inquiry into social interaction in fields. It would not be possible
to convert field theory into an interactionist theory given its deeply structural origins, but
more attention to the processes of interaction between social actors would provide stronger
analytic tools for explaining the field’s power dynamics (Emirbayer and Desmond 2015).

Second, the ecological approach is more subtle when it comes to assessing the wide vari-
ability of modes of human interaction. Power struggles arguably are among the most salient
of such forms of interaction, but other social processes underscored by Simmel and Chicago
School sociologists (e.g., competition, cooperation, accommodation, exchange) potentially
also are important. As the scope and intensity of social processes such as boundary work,
exchange, and power struggle vary from one social space to another, some spaces might
appear more competitive, others more cooperative, yet others more conflictual. Bourdieu
himself recognized that investment in a field, or what he also called the illusio (see e.g.,
Bourdieu [1994] 1998), could lead to a spirit of disinterestedness and a disposition toward
virtuous acts. In the worlds of science, art, and civil service, among others, people could
engage in cooperative as opposed to agonistic interactions. But ecological theory, especially
in its original Park and Burgess ([1921] 1969) version, makes cooperation not a special
instance but rather a coequally important instance of interaction. Perhaps this springs from a
different underlying understanding of (human) nature.

The usefulness of the Chicago School approach for field theory can be illustrated by a
of field theory. Bourdieu analyzes three states of the French literary field, through which it
gained its autonomy from the structural domination of both the market and the state and then
differentiated into a dualist structure. In this analysis, more analytic attention is devoted to
the structural positions of artists and writers in the field than to their interactions. Bourdieu
discusses the structural and functional homologies between the spaces of authors, critics,
and consumers, but only occasionally does he emphasize other processes of interaction
besides power struggles, such as the exchange between painters and writers.

How would a Chicago School sociologist rewrite this empirical story? Instead of focusing
on structural positions in the field of cultural production, more attention would be paid to the
interactions through which different “species” of artists (e.g., Parnassians, Symbolists,
Bohemia, etc.) emerge, survive, or fall away. Besides power struggles over domination, the
boundary work by which actors define their cultural identities, the exchange by which actors
trade resources and form alliances, the assimilation by which one art form incorporates
another, and many other processes of interaction all need to be examined carefully. The
resulting analysis would show the processual dynamics of the emergence and transformation
of the social space of nineteenth-century French literature.

CONCLUSION

From the discussions in the previous section, it is evident that in the future, theories of social
space, if possible, must find a way to balance between structure and process—and between
power and competition. They are likely to be comprehensive theories that bridge the French
and American sociological traditions and that accommodate different ways of conceptual-
izing social action. This orientation already can be observed in some recent writings on
social space, particularly Fligstein and McAdam’s (2012) theory of fields and Emirbayer
and Desmond’s (2015) theory of the racial order. To develop such an approach will require
empirical studies of various social phenomena from spatial perspectives, regardless of the
metaphors they adopt. While those empirical studies are yet to come, we offer a few tentative
thoughts on the challenges that lie ahead.
The first task is to define the main components of a social space. Earlier in the article, we identified three basic components—namely, actors, positions, and the relations between them. An additional set of defining characteristics has to do with the boundaries between a social space and its environments. Every social space has an ordering principle that binds its actors together and that distinguishes the space from other spaces—what Bourdieu ([1997] 2000:96) terms nomos in his field theory. Under this ordering principle, actors inside and outside the social space engage in various forms of boundary work and exchange different forms of capital, thereby producing the spatial boundaries within and between social spaces (Eyal 2013b; Liu 2015).

The second task in theorizing social space is to develop generic theoretical instruments for explaining the emergence and transformation of social spaces over time. As we discussed, this temporal dimension is central to the constitution of both field and ecology. The emergence of a social space occurs during a highly fluid phase in which actors and positions mutually constitute each other and rapidly change their relations over space and time. The processual tools of ecological theory, such as competitive cooperation, are particularly useful for this phase because they can well capture the dynamics of interaction in the formation of social structures. As soon as actors have settled into their respective positions and the structural configuration of a social space is relatively institutionalized, however, patterns of dominance and subordination are better analyzed using Bourdieu’s relational concepts, such as habitus, capital, and symbolic power.

The third task is to analyze what Abbott (1988a) calls the “system properties” of a social space, such as connectivity, dominance, and residuality. Some social spaces are more connected, hierarchical, and densely occupied than others, just as some cities are more densely populated with a central downtown area and many interconnected roads and bridges while others are loosely connected urban sprawls with many vacant slots between neighborhoods. Such topological properties of a social space can be understood in terms of the power relations between actors, as in the Bourdieuan approach, or in terms of their social interactions, as in the Chicago School approach. A comprehensive spatial approach would incorporate into the analysis both the contents and forms of social life (Simmel 1950)—and both structure and interaction—in order more fully to explain the topology of the social space and the power dynamics within it.

Our main concern in this article has been to call for a closer dialogue among different theories of social space in the vast landscape of sociological theory. As field becomes an increasingly popular concept in sociology, social theorists have made much effort to improve or criticize Bourdieu’s field theory (e.g., Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Gorski 2013; Martin 2003). Meanwhile, the old Chicago School concept of ecology also has been revived in both general theory and a few subfields (e.g., Abbott 1988a, 2005b; Gieryn 2006; Hannan 2005; Zhao 1998). Yet these two lines of theorization have shown little evidence of mutual dialogue until today. By presenting a fine-grained comparison of field and ecology, this article has provided the theoretical basis for such a dialogue among social theorists and empirical researchers regarding the nature of social space, its structural and processual composition, and how it changes over time.

EDITOR’S NOTE
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NOTES
1. We leave for later the question as to whether space in these approaches is treated merely as an abstraction on the part of the social scientist or is considered an actual, physical reality.
2. It should be noted here, however, that in defining fields in structural terms, Bourdieu does build a notion of action also into his conceptualization, whereas many structural analysts fail to do so.

3. We do not consider here other currently influential alternatives, such as actor network theory (Latour 2005), which also feature spatial reasoning.

4. Bourdieu is influenced here by Bachelard’s “applied rationalism,” according to which real objects exist independently of the observer but also always are constituted through scientific concepts or abstractions: “The orientation of the epistemological vector seems clear. It surely points from the rational to the real” (Bachelard [1934] 1984:4). Or, as Bachelard ([1938] 2002:25) puts it elsewhere, “Nothing is self-evident. Nothing is given. Everything is constructed.” This complex position “at the crossroads between realism and rationalism” (p. 10) leaves unresolved the question as to the original nature of objects prior to their construction or constitution. Bourdieu seems to run into this perplexity, too, on occasion, as when he suggests (e.g., in the electromagnetism remark quoted previously) that fields exert effects entirely on their own, even outside the awareness or constructive mental activity of scientific observers.

REFERENCES


**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

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