

V Ecologies and Fields

The notion of linked ecologies thus entails a general view of the social process. We can think of that process as comprising an ontological continuum much of which settles itself out into linked ecologies that develop and change, that sometimes amalgamate or disintegrate out of existence and that sometimes divide or emerge into it. As I said at the outset, this view of social ontology is midway between the traditional poles of individualism and emergentism.

It is useful to contrast this view with the alternative view of Pierre Bourdieu, according to which the social world is loosely organized into fields. (FN 35) The field concept received varying definitions at varying points in Bourdieu's work, but since my aim here is merely to draw some broad comparisons between the concepts of field and ecology, I shall refer mainly to the clearest empirical exposition of the field concept, the analysis of the 19th century French literary field contained in the essay "The Field of Cultural Production" (1993) and later much elaborated in *Les regles de l'art* (1998).

Bourdieu's and my approaches have much in common. First, they are both concerned with locating actors relative to other actors. They refuse to consider social actors in unrelated, mass terms. Second, they agree that

locations in social space are not given ex ante - by functions or by some rule system - but are rather enacted in the process of social life and in particular in the process of relating to other actors. Third, they both agree that there are units or collections of social locations that are usefully considered as macro structures - fields and ecologies. And we both see processes of conflict and competition as crucial to understanding the internal evolution of these collections of social locations.

These are important similarities, and it is not surprising that Dezalay (1992) and others have argued for a close connection between the two approaches. On the other hand, there are also important differences. A first difference is that the root metaphor of Bourdieu's field concept, despite many protestations on his part, is in fact economic. It is not microeconomic in the literal sense; it does not concern price theory and elasticities and cobwebs. But it does rely quite directly on economic metaphors. Capital, inheritance, the "economy of symbolic goods," and so on are among the core concepts of Bourdieu's analysis. By contrast, the ecology concept mixes the biological notions of the competition and coexistence of organisms in spaces with more strategic conceptions drawing on legal and political language (jurisdiction, settlement, etc.), although I have never shied away from the economic language of demand and supply. My metaphoric universe is much broader than Bourdieu's, and I have not allowed any single metaphor to take a central position in my thinking.

Beyond this global difference, there are differences involving both the topological and the temporal aspects of our approaches. The central topological difference, from which all the others flow, is that Bourdieu emphasizes the concept of domination. The very dimensions of fields are defined by relations of domination. The structure of fields is derived from oppositions which in turn always have a dominant and a subordinate pole. Bourdieu does complexify this model by nesting oppositions sometimes - for example, the literary field is subordinate to the field of power but still has its own internal dominants and subordinates and these can have curiously chiasmic relations with the larger field. But this nesting simply emphasizes the importance of dominance and subordination.

My concept of ecologies has no concept of dominance or subordination. In fact, I have emphasized the empirical fact that dominant professions often destroy themselves by a ruinous exercise of domination, so restricting demand as to drive clients to expedients that proves deadly to that very dominance. I treat the topological location of this or that profession as a completely empirical matter, defined by competition that can be in many dimensions, over many things, with many different groups. I do not see interprofessional relations as fundamentally oppositional, but as fundamentally competitive. It is striking that Bourdieu dared draw pictures of the fields he analyzed. While I considered such diagrams for the System of Professions, I decided that the

ensuing topology would be far too complex and multidimensional to draw, not to mention the fact that drawing it would lead to reification of its dimensions, when the book's core argument was that even they were established by competition, rather than given.

The two concepts also seem, at least to me, quite different in their emphasis on dynamics and statics. For all its appearance of dynamism, Bourdieu's concept of field is largely static (cf. Fabiani 1999). Its dynamism is purely oppositional, a sort of mechanized dialectic in which avant garde succeeds avant garde and so on. By contrast, the concept of ecology is far more fluid and dynamic, capturing more aspects of difference and more empirical diversity in the way actors act and groupings of actors change.

This different reading of dynamism extends to the sources for change in fields/ecologies. For Bourdieu, change is always refracted through the problems of dominance and superordination, while for me change enters the professional ecology from all different sides - from social structural changes that restructure demand, from cultural changes that redefine jurisdictions, from internal idea change in professions, from developments by adjacent competitors and so on. To be sure, Bourdieu is principally concerned (in the work on literature) not with professions but with a particular kind of idea-generating field, that of literary production. But in my own analyses of such an ecology - the ecology of disciplines in *Chaos of Disciplines* - I developed, once again, a looser and more empirical model than did Bourdieu. Unlike

Bourdieu I do not read the history of disciplines backwards, looking back teleologically from a "conquest of autonomy." Quite the contrary, I regard disciplinary history as largely empirical, capable of differentiation and dedifferentiation, of redefinition, sliding, and renegotiation.

Even to the extent that like Bourdieu I do emphasize the importance of oppositions in generating new ideas, these are not dominant/subordinate oppositions. Moreover the relations between them over time do not necessarily involve a regular succession of avant-gardes, which is only one among many possibilities, along with pendulum-swinging, sliding of meaning, and so on. I also consider a system of overlapping and interpenetrating disciplines moving through the same turf and stealing ideas shamelessly from each other, a far more empirically complex world than Bourdieu's hierarchy of genres and subgenres, stretched onto a procrustean if parsimonious bed of dominance. I also generalize my structural models beyond oppositions to talk about fractal similarity generally in social structures, whereas Bourdieu focuses only on homomorphism between similar oppositions.

Finally, Bourdieu's concept of field does not endogenize the actors and indeed the unit (field) itself, as does the concept of ecology. The boundedness of an ecology is purely empirical, whereas Bourdieu's teleological approach takes the separability of fields almost for granted. Moreover, in the ecological view actors themselves can merge, divide, and reshape in all kinds

of pseudopodic ways. Indeed, I have argued that social actors emerge and disappear through the arbitrary creation and moving of boundaries - that social things come from boundaries, rather than boundaries being produced around things or by regular oppositions. (Abbott 2001b, c. 9) I thus take a considerably more empirical and fluid conception of social ontology than does Bourdieu, not only in my concepts of the topology and dynamics of macro units, but also in my concepts of the actors themselves. (FN 36)

All of this proceeds from a fundamental difference of theoretical orientation. Bourdieu stands in the classical European theoretical tradition. One can see his heritage of Hegelianism and Marxism just below the surface, just as one can see in his exacting maps of distinction the old-regime hand of Charles Loyseau. I on the other hand draw on the pragmatist and processual philosophical tradition, a mixture of Americans and heterodox Europeans. My concept of ecology arises not by the loosening up or putting into motion of structuralism, but by an attempt to find regularity in a social world first imagined as utterly fluid. My regularities arise in iterations and algorithms. Bourdieu's arise in structural form.

It should thus be apparent that there is not so much affinity between Bourdieu's conception of social structure and my own as there is a kind of accidental resemblance. We have come by quite different roads to a somewhat similar place. But the topology, the dynamics, and above all the basic theoretical vocabulary and stance are in fact quite different.

+++++

35. The question of the relation of my work to Bourdieu's has been raised by several people, starting with Yves Dezalay, who remarked that my arguments "do not replace the theory of fields but complete them by insisting on what happens at the frontiers between different bodies of expertise" (1992:38, AA translation). For various reasons, my own reading and use of Bourdieu's work has been quite limited. For this paper, I have relied primarily on "The Field of Cultural Production" (1993) and *Les regles de l'art* (1998).

36. Bourdieu's account of the *champ litteraire* often invokes this kind of fluid mixing and matching of different images, genres, and the like, but at the same time it takes the field as a given thing, changing in the mechanical, structural manner produced by the successive oppositions. The latter image is the more dominant one, but Bourdieu was too insightful to have missed the importance of freer processes. All the same, these two sides of the analysis are never openly recognized, and so their contradiction is never resolved. In the last analysis, the account is structural and almost static. It lacks a sense of the openness and possibility of history, the degree to which all structures, however small or large, must ford the desperate waters of the present on their way into the future. For comparison with my views, see Abbott 2001 c. 7, 8, and epilogue.