FQS FORUM: QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH SOZIALFORSCHUNG

Volume 22, No. 3, Art. 5
September 2021

Relational Sociology on a Global Scale: Field-Theoretical Perspectives on Cross-Cultural Comparison and the Re-Figuration of Space(s)

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Key words: comparative sociology; cross-cultural comparison; field theory; field of power; figurational sociology; international comparison; sociology of space; relationality; re-figuration of space

Abstract: Comparison, as a fundamental operation in the social sciences, is anything but a clearly defined method. Rather, there is a highly heterogeneous field of comparative approaches with different intellectual traditions, ideas of "comparison," specific problems, and research strategies. In fact, different streams of comparative studies exist in parallel, each highly elaborated in its own way but largely ignoring the achievements of the other tradition and thus ultimately wasting analytical potential—namely cross-national studies (often associated with quantitative methods and explanatory objectives) on the one hand and cross-cultural studies or cultural comparisons (usually associated with qualitative methods and hermeneutical approaches) on the other. However, contemporary social sciences are confronted with an increasingly complex global reality that can no longer be described on the basis of one-dimensional frames of reference. Drawing on the basic methodological principle of relationality, the aim of our article is to develop Pierre BOURDIEU's theory of fields and social spaces in a direction that allows different approaches to comparison to be made fruitful on the basis of a common frame of reference. Based on this generalized framework, national, international, and transnational comparisons become possible without having to essentialize or hypostasize specific reference frames and corresponding units of analysis.

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Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research (ISSN 1438-5627)

1. Introduction: The Two Comparative Sociologies

Sociology and the discovery of societal contingency, the very idea of difference, and the "operation called 'Vergleichen'" (MATTHES, 1992a) have been intimately linked since the early days of the discipline. Comparison has been prominently stressed as a fundamental sociological method by authors such as Auguste COMTE (1877 [1830-1842]), Max WEBER (1963 [1920]), and Émile DURKHEIM, who even insisted that "[c]omparative sociology is not a special branch of sociology; it is sociology itself" (1982 [1895], p.157, also LUHMANN, 1995). [1]

Today, under conditions of globality, this assessment seems to require less justification than ever before. However, comparison in the social sciences, in general, and in sociology, in particular, is anything but an unambiguous concept. On the contrary, there is a highly heterogeneous field of comparative approaches with different intellectual traditions, diverging ideas of "comparison," specific problems, and research strategies. The overall consequence is that different streams of comparative studies exist in parallel, each highly elaborated in its own way but largely ignoring the achievements of the respective other tradition and thus ultimately wasting analytical potential. In this context, we will distinguish between two *major traditions in comparative social sciences*, namely

1. *cross-national studies* (often associated with quantitative methods and explanatory objectives), on the one hand; and
2. *cross-cultural studies or cultural comparisons* (usually associated with qualitative methods and hermeneutic approaches), on the other. [2]

By drawing on the fundamental methodological principle of relationality, our article aims to contribute to a generalized framework that offers a flexible basis for these different yet interrelated approaches to comparison. As we will show, this foundation is not only suitable for raising awareness of both their potential and their risks, but in return also promotes their reconciliation. [3]

Cross-national studies, on the one hand, constitute a broad multi-disciplinary field that ranges from legal studies and political sciences to different branches of sociology. By treating (national) legal and political entities as the objects of comparison, cross-national research in sociology analyzes a wide branch of subjects covering all substantial fields of the discipline: from the comparative study of educational systems, labor markets, and family structures to questions of demography, social integration, and dimensions and determinants of social inequalities. Either for pragmatic reasons, or because national (political, legal) boundaries are already inscribed into the respective research question, *nation-states* and/or *national societies are usually treated as quasi-natural starting points with well-defined institutional and geographical borders*. Examples for such comparisons between nation-states include the study of political systems and power distributions (VAN DETH, 1998), questions of education, work and occupation (BLOSSFELD & HOFMEISTER, 2006; GORARD & SMITH, 2004), and the comparative study of family matters (MASTEKAASA, 1994).

Furthermore, the majority of research in cross-national studies puts a strong focus on economic issues and indicators, reaching back to Adam SMITH's first important contribution on the wealth of nations. Most recently, the vigorous debate over Thomas PIKETTY's "Capital" (2014 [2013]) drew further attention to this ideal-typical understanding of societal comparison as a project of comparing national entities based on economic indicators. [4]

A major drawback of any research in which nation-states are used as proxies for "societies" in this manner is that such reasoning cannot account for the dramatic structural and epistemological changes that have taken place over the course of the past decades or for the fact that the nation-state has arguably lost its analytical primacy for the understanding of modern society. It is not without reason that contemporary sociology frames these developments in theoretical terms such as "globalization" (BECK, 1999 [1997]; GIDDENS, 1991; HELD & McGREW, 2007) or "transnationalization" (FAIST, 2000; PRIES, 2011; WEISS, 2005). Further, and as both BOURDIEU (2014 [2012]) and WIMMER and GLICK-SCHILLER (2002) argued, an unquestioned "national" framing of society naturalizes the world in which we are living, thus reproducing ("political") distinctions that are in essence arbitrary. To make matters worse, this tends to perpetuate a specific (namely: usually Western) logic of reasoning and an appurtenant hegemonic position of certain categories, ideas, and worldviews. [5]

On the other hand, there is a longstanding discussion in the humanities (and on the "humanities" pole of sociology) that engages with comparison in different ways under the headline of *(cross-)cultural comparison* (MATTHES, 1992b; OSTERHAMMEL, 2011; SRUBAR, RENN & WENZEL, 2005). Since the early days of sociology—and similar to the tradition of cross-national research mentioned above—"cultures" have typically been treated as more or less clear-cut entities, conceived in a largely HERDERIAN, "totalizing" manner as relatively homogeneous and all-encompassing containers and externally as units that could be distinguished from other "cultures." "Culture" was understood as a *holistic system of social behavior*—an entire way of life including its underlying norms and values, collective ways of thinking and feeling, and its corresponding practices and institutions—and identified with *concrete populations and communities, their specific historic traditions, and clearly definable (container-type) territories shared by these communities*. [6]

Over the last decades, this holistic concept of culture/society has been widely discredited in the humanities, not least in light of the "cultural turn" that has led to a much more general understanding of "culture" (BACHMANN-MEDICK, 2016 [2006]; BONNELL & HUNT, 1999; RECKWITZ, 2000). Here, the term refers to symbolic orders, systems of meaning and signification, and corresponding differences and heterogeneities in a broader sense. At least in its more radical variants, this "revolution" in the humanities has led to an understanding according to which "the social" and "the cultural" are largely used synonymously: Any sort of practice, materiality, or social structure appears as a cultural product in this perspective, shelving the treatment of "culture" as a separate area of society, both geographically and intra-societally. However, this shift of perspective, while

largely free from any form of methodological nationalism, may itself seem problematic for two reasons:

1. because it seems at least doubtful whether relevant differences between larger societal contexts can still be adequately grasped with the help of an overly flexible analytical concept of culture, which in principle considers *all* social facts as cultural and ultimately dissolves them into a ubiquitous play of differences; and
2. because this "wide" notion of culture also runs the risk of "culturalist reductionism," namely of denying the role of materiality, economic factors, social structures, or power relations in favor of culture and cultural differences, thereby losing important traditions and perspectives on—or dimensions of—sociological comparison. [7]

In summary, we observe a rather polarized landscape of comparative approaches both in the humanities and the social sciences in general and in sociology in particular. While the discussed practices of comparison face logically similar problems—not only since the times of "globalization" and "transnationalization"—they differ widely with regard to their methodological and theoretical presuppositions and, hence, seem to be frustratingly incompatible in crucial aspects. Further, empirical transformations of societies affect the conceptualization of society (including nations and cultures) themselves and, by implication, also have shaped our understanding of societal comparison. *The diverse processes described as "globalization" or "transnationalization" have rendered an assumed homogeneity of (national or cultural) "containers" and their fundamental alterity toward each other flawed*. At the same time, the interdependency of global sociality also operates as a motor for processes of re-nationalization and regionalization, revealing a dialectic that manifests itself in concepts such as "glocalization" (NAESS, 2016; ROBERTSON, 1995) as well as the prominence of ideas of hybridity and fluidity. In order to conduct meaningful "cross-national" or "cross-cultural" comparisons, contemporary sociology must therefore manage *the balancing act of not falling back into HERDERIAN container thinking while at the same time being able to keep a large variety of heterogeneous social entities comparable along a plurality of (cultural, material, etc.) dimensions*. Thus, we need an approach that allows for a more flexible choice of units and dimensions of comparison without reifying or naturalizing them. Finally, one appurtenant problem consists in dissolving the excessively tight coupling of "society" or "culture" on the one hand, and physical territory on the other, hence leading directly to questions regarding the role of geographical space and its re-figuration as posed by the present special issue (BAUR, CASTILLO ULLOA, MENNELL & MILLION, 2021, see also KNOBLAUCH & LÖW, 2017; PRIES, 2005). [8]

Against this background, we aim to contribute to a *generalized analytical perspective that enables researchers to integrate different practices and traditions of social comparison* by emphasizing the logic of the operation of comparison itself as a common denominator. Indeed, to draw a comparison

means to *relate*, both in logical and in practical terms. Therefore, we will start by discussing this underlying principle of relationality in the context of comparative research. In the course of the argument, we will draw on a generalized version of BOURDIEUSIAN field theory as outlined in a number of previous publications (SCHMITZ & WITTE, 2017; SCHMITZ, HEIBERGER & BLASIUS, 2015; SCHMITZ, WITTE & GENGNAGEL, 2017; WITTE, 2014). We contend that this approach, due to its consequent relational view, provides us with greater analytical flexibility as it allows for a broad range of reference systems and units of comparison and, eventually, also for a flexible conceptualization of geographic and social or cultural spaces as well as their interdependencies and dynamics. [9]

2. Spaces, Fields, and Comparison

2.1 Relationalism and comparison

Regardless of the respective paradigmatic and methodological approach, comparative research runs the principal *risk of essentializing traits and entities*, thereby opposing the basic logic of relationality, which is constitutive for field theory in particular, and arguably also for modern sociology in general. Essentialism, here, can mean using a (single) specific unit of analysis (human actors, societies, regions, nations, groups of nations, cultures, etc.) based on the assumption of its ascribed ontological or at least methodological priority (RAGIN, 1981). The danger of essentialism, hence, concerns both the units and the reference systems of comparison (such as economic indicators, cultural differences, etc.). Prominently, essentialism manifests itself when units—e.g., container-like "societies" or "cultures"—are compared in a (seemingly) "direct" way or when a linearly nested hierarchy of geographical spaces is assumed (KNOBLAUCH & LÖW, 2017). Therefore, the key problems of comparative research—the *definition* of "relevant units of analysis" (SCHRIEWER, 2003, p.33)[1] and the *decision about the reference system of comparison*, namely the *tertium comparationis*—both already entail the risk of essentialism. Likewise, DESROSIÈRES (1990) pointed out that every comparison is based on the assumption of a type of unit, such as humans or nation-states, and thus on the assumption of analytical equivalence and fundamental uniformity between these units; an assumption that is at the same time the necessary prerequisite for attributing differences between these units (and thus for the comparison itself). Based on this perspective, he stressed that the act of comparing is always a genuine practice of classifying and constructing (units and differences) as well and therefore a practice that depends on non-trivial preconditions, such as the researcher's habitus, conventions, political and ideological implications, etc. [10]

In order to avoid the pitfalls of essentialization, comparison therefore requires concepts that abandon the idea of any naturally given ("primary") units of analysis and instead allow for the ascription of societal differences with regard to a broad plurality of reference systems. Where, and in what sense, societal or cultural difference may be observed, and how meaningful comparison can be conducted,

1 All translations from non-English texts are ours.

then turns into a principally open question that may vary according to the respective research question. Yet, in doing so, any research decision must be sensitive toward its contingent nature. Such analytical reflexivity must include different accounts and aspects of society, thus applying a general understanding of the ways actors, physical spaces, institutional settings, etc. may constitute a societal interrelation. Just as this requires simultaneously taking into account a plurality of intersecting reference systems (regions, cultures, nations, etc.), it also implies the possibility of acknowledging multiple intersecting (or "hybrid") entities. [11]

As noted in the introduction, comparison refers to the operation of relating in a logically and practically fundamental sense. Starting with this insight, we will now draw on the sociology of BOURDIEU for our purposes, holding that his approach offers one of the most elaborated and consequent forms of relational reasoning in sociology. To be fair, at first glance one may get the impression that BOURDIEU does not differ much from those fiercely criticized authors that have fallen into the trap of *methodological nationalism,* which, according to the defining work of WIMMER and GLICK SCHILLER, can be understood as the "assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world" (2002, p.302). [12]

In fact, in his empirical studies, BOURDIEU never cared to actually apply his mature theoretical framework of the 1980s and 1990s to any other societies except France, and even less to comparative cross-national questions. However, already in his earliest works, he was concerned with the colonial relation between Algeria and France, which he discussed not only as two national social spaces in their interdependence but also with regard to their mutual interpenetration of national, cultural, and institutional borders. Over two decades later, and faced with the critique that the theory presented in "Distinction" was restricted to the French case, BOURDIEU (1998a [1994], pp.1-19) made it unambiguously clear that while his findings on the socio-economic and cultural structure of late 1960s France could not simply be transferred to Japan, East Germany, or the Soviet Union, he nevertheless thought of it as a "universal model." In order to be applied to other cases, this model required "transformations" precisely because of its relational nature, and depending on the characteristic traits of the society in question. In short, whereas it is true that BOURDIEU never systematically engaged in empirical studies of a comparative nature, the question of comparison indeed constitutes a subtle red thread of his *œuvre*. In fact, he even envisioned systematic comparison as a crucial long-term goal of his approach, speaking of his "dream one day [...] to produce a comparative sociology of fields" (GLENN, 2010, p.45). [13]

What emphasizes the analytical link between comparison and relation is the "idea of difference" that BOURDIEU programmatically placed "at the basis of the very notion of space" (1996, p.11), the latter understood as "a set of distinct and coexisting positions which are exterior to one another and which are defined in relation to one another through relations of proximity, vicinity, or distance" (ibid.). Already at this epistemological level, he stressed the *principle of relationality as*

an antidote to essentialist and substantialist thinking, not least in the realm of comparison:

> "The substantialist mode of thought, which characterizes common sense—and racism—and which is inclined to treat the activities and preferences specific to certain individuals or groups in a society at a certain moment as if they were substantial properties, inscribed once and for all in a sort of biological or cultural essence, leads to the same kind of error, whether one is comparing different societies or successive periods in the same society" (1998a [1994], p.4). [14]

In turn, BOURDIEU has repeatedly stressed the comparative qualities of his approach at the more concrete level of theory construction as well:

> "It is a reminder that comparison is possible only from system to system, and that the search for direct equivalence between features seized in isolation, whether, appearing at first sight different, they prove to be 'functionally' or technically equivalent or nominally identical (the practice of golf in France and Japan, for instance), risks unduly identifying structurally different properties or wrongly distinguishing structurally identical properties" (1996, p.10). [15]

Furthermore, what particularly qualifies BOURDIEUSIAN sociology for comparative purposes is its foundation in constructivist assumptions and its use of "open concepts"—as "a permanent reminder that concepts have no definition other than systemic ones" (BOURDIEU & WACQUANT, 1992, p.96), that they "can be defined [...] only within the theoretical system they constitute, not in isolation" (ibid.), and that they are "designed to be put to work empirically in systematic fashion" (ibid.). Accordingly, the crucial questions both for the relevant units of analysis and for the respective *tertium comparationis* of a comparison do not have to be answered *ad hoc*, but must be developed and derived from the respective research problem and according to criteria of (theoretical and substantial) appropriateness over the course of the comparative process. [16]

In sum, the *relational approach* to societal and cultural comparison in the BOURDIEUSIAN sense, if taken seriously, offers several analytical advantages:

- It allows for research to start with relations instead of entities (e.g., actors) that are assumed a priori. As a consequence, this implies that analyses are not restricted to relations between human actors either, but instead may include any other type of entities (such as organizations or nations). Contrary to popular belief, even constructing fields of human actors does not follow from an underlying methodological individualism, but rather helps to reveal precisely how actors and identities are socially constituted and how they only emerge out of the mechanisms of fields and social spaces. Agency, in turn, is treated as the result of practices of (scientific) attribution, but this holds true for all sorts of actors in any field under consideration. Accordingly, comparative analysis might as well focus on institutional actors or even nation-states, as long as it does not substantialize any such entity (that is,

forget that "human actors," "nations," etc. always present highly constructed objects).

- (Comparative) field analyses, just like the (comparative) investigation of social spaces, are by definition attentive to social structures, resources (capital), power relations, and systems of domination, as well as to symbolic orders, semantic and discursive structures, cultural dynamics in the narrower sense, and the inner logics and conflicts of worldviews and interpretations.
- The general concepts of *social spaces* and *fields*, thanks to their abstract character, allow us to think of the reference system of geographical space in terms of both material and symbolic relations (KNOBLAUCH & LÖW, 2017, p.5). At the same time, both concepts—the concept of *field* and that of *social space*—refer to physical spaces and places, to positions, spatial distances, and relations, and not in an incidental, but, on the contrary, in a constitutive sense. Against this backdrop, it seems indeed plausible to think of spaces and fields as *assemblages* that relate actors, objects, and geographical spaces in the way that KNOBLAUCH and LÖW have suggested. [17]

2.2 Comparing national social spaces

The most evident concept that BOURDIEU's relational sociology can offer for the comparison of societal entities is the notion of *social space*. Social space, first and foremost, serves as the conceptual framework for the construction and analysis of social structures and class relations, thereby largely amounting to a notion of *society*. It is constructed by way of identifying the respective dominant forms of capital and their distribution (such as economic, political, cultural, or social capital), the relative positions of (e.g., human or organizational) actors that result from this distribution, and their ensuing typical dispositions and practices. BOURDIEU (1984 [1979]) originally popularized this approach with his analysis of 1960s France—as a national unit—in "Distinction." [18]

In terms of comparative research, the bulk of existing studies that try to transfer this model to other national societies is typically focused on a single country, albeit often contrasting their cases with the French one and, hence, being "implicitly comparative" (KANE, 2003, p.407; also BLASIUS & WINKLER, 1989). Explicit attempts to compare the structures and cultural logics of different national social spaces are less frequent but can be found, for instance, in MELE (2015) or PURHONEN and WRIGHT (2013). Comparison, in this sense, means juxtaposing two or more (national) social spaces: that is to say, in the simplest case, the (human) population and capital structure of two national societies. In these cases, the *tertium comparationis* is constituted by the latent capital structures of the spaces in question, and by the manifest traits of actors, such as typical lifestyle practices. Whereas this is a straightforward task for traditional comparative social research, a problem arises here that can be summarized under the heading of *harmonization*:

- The latent material and symbolic ordering principles of national social spaces may be fully homologous in a structural sense (e.g., with respect to the distribution of cultural capital), yet the respective manifest variables may differ significantly (e.g., with regard to the question of what actually constitutes high cultural capital in the individual cases).
- Furthermore, cultural capital, to stick to this example, may be of quintessential importance for the endogenous structuration of one national society, whereas it can be merely a subordinate structuring principle in another. [19]

This twofold pitfall, often overlooked or ignored in comparative studies, renders direct comparisons problematic endeavors, and any attempt to straightforwardly interpret the empirical findings of "Distinction" as an implicit or even explicit *tertium comparationis* is ultimately misleading. In fact, this means that findings referring to different capital structures do not disprove BOURDIEU's "theory" as is sometimes claimed. On the contrary, it is a rather naïve misconception to simply adopt BOURDIEU's indicators for lifestyles and occupational backgrounds in 1960s France in one or another fashion for the construction of other national social spaces. [20]

What follows is that *comparative research at the level of national social spaces must abstract from the respective contents in which structures, differences, and social and symbolic boundaries may manifest, materialize, and instantiate* (HOLT, 1997). We will return to this point later on. First, we will show in the next section how nations themselves can be compared in their interrelational structure: namely, in the context of an international field of power that serves as one possible *tertium comparationis*. [21]

2.3 Social space and physical space

Genealogically, BOURDIEU's double use of the notion of space starts with conceptual (including epistemological and anthropological) assumptions about the relation of bodies and spaces:

- As *physical bodies*, actors (particularly, yet not exclusively, human actors) are situated in a *physical space* in which, just like objects, they occupy a definable place at any given point in time.
- As *social agents*, (any type of) actors are situated in a *social space* that places them in relation to other agents (1996, p.11). [22]

These agents, and accordingly also their social practice, must therefore be understood as inherently spatial (KNOBLAUCH, 2017, pp.293-300). An essential point of BOURDIEU's use of spatial concepts, then, is that *physical and social space are mutually linked*. The relations between (e.g., human or institutional) actors and their practices in social space tend to "retranslate" themselves into relations in physical space—as BOURDIEU phrased it: "in the form of a definite distributional arrangement of agents and properties" (1996, p.12). In this sense, he also speaks of appropriated physical space as "reified social space"

(BOURDIEU, 2000 [1997], p.134). As these formulations indicate, social space and physical space do not simply mirror each other, with proximity and distance in the social space entirely corresponding to proximity and distance in the physical space and vice versa; rather, they possess a *relative autonomy from each other*. [23]

In addition, *the relation of social and physical space may be re-figured and take entirely different forms*, especially during times of far-reaching social transformations, as BOURDIEU illustrated by drawing on the example of matrimonial markets in the rural region of Béarn. In "The Bachelors' Ball," BOURDIEU (2008 [2002]) showed how the symbolic capital of Béarnese first-born men was devaluated in the 1960s through the opening of the marriage market. Processes of modernization, economic development, and, in particular, improved infrastructure and urbanization led to a massive integration of geographical space. This, in turn, resulted in a unification of partner markets, putting the elder sons of families from rural areas in particular under a new kind of rivalry with distinguished men from the cities, to the advantage of the latter. What might look like a particular finding from the sociology of the family here in fact constitutes a significant change in the relation of social space and physical space in general. As a consequence of this re-figuration of spaces, and of the convergence of previously distant partner markets, the agents' symbolic goods became subject to manifold processes of symbolic standardization and hierarchization. The modernization of France, hence, further increased relations of symbolic domination and social inequality between different social classes, the transformation of regional marriage markets being one of the social forces involved in this process (REED-DANAHAY, 2017; SCHMITZ, 2017). [24]

As this example shows, *positionality* and *regionality* constitute important aspects of the social space approach that are handled in a specifically relational way. Social space and physical space are both understood with regard to their relative autonomy and via their possible reciprocal impact; the incorporation of social structures in habitus and the bodily nature of physical practice constitute one important link between these two notions of space. As physical space and territory have long been treated as definitional criteria of societies, this account bears immediate *implications for comparative sociology*:

- On the one hand, it shows that *conceptions of society have to be flexible regarding the extent of convergence between social and physical spaces*; in other words, we cannot assume *a priori* that societies in the sense of social spaces can be easily identified with demarcated territories in the sense of physical ones. Importantly, this is not to say that the comparison of societies in the sense of "territorialized" social spaces is principally flawed: if, for example, the distribution of crucial resources (such as cultural capital) is dependent on institutions that follow this very "territorial" logic (e.g., centralized educational systems), a corresponding comparison may still constitute a meaningful endeavor—which eventually becomes an empirical question.

- On the other hand, the example demonstrates that the *comparison between societies must be sensitive toward possibly different forms of interconnecting social and physical spaces*, and toward the ways in which these respective relations may change over time. [25]

2.4 Social fields and comparison

While the concept of *social space* is used to assess entire societies in terms of their social and symbolic structure, the concept of *field* serves a comparable purpose for the analysis of relatively autonomous social *spheres*: the legal field, politics, religion, the arts, etc. Just like in the case of comparing national social spaces, this may comprise human and non-human actors, practices, discourses, etc. Fields typically entail a certain *doxa*, a conflictual polar structure with orthodox and heterodox positions and practices, a specific set of basic rules conceptualized as *nomos*, particular sorts of capitals (often sub-forms of cultural capital) for which the field's actors contest, and a specific *illusio* according to which this very competition is experienced as being worthwhile. At the actor level, this *illusio* is internalized as a field-specific *libido*, namely as part of a more encompassing dispositional structure that is treated as the field-specific layer of habitus. [26]

Accordingly, the concept of *field* allows for analyses that focus on these *differentiated social spheres and their comparison both within and between different societal contexts*. Beyond field theory, but increasingly also with the help of field-theoretical concepts, this is of course the domain of a number of well-established and venerable sub-disciplines, such as comparative law, comparative politics, comparative religion, comparative literature and art, etc. [27]

What field theory offers in this context is a set of formal theoretical tools that facilitate the analysis and comparison of the fields in question independently of their empirical contents. Comparison, then, can mean contrasting

- different national social fields (e.g., the American literary field and the American religious field);
- seemingly identical social fields in different national societies (e.g., the scientific field in Germany and Brazil);
- seemingly identical fields in different regions of world society (e.g., the European vs. the Eastern Asian field of religion); or
- seemingly different fields that may perform similar or equivalent functions in their respective societal contexts (e.g., educational and religious fields in different civilizations with regard to their contribution to socialization). [28]

In doing so, the respective *tertium comparationis* can be seen in the underlying field structure of the objects of comparison as well as in the individual concepts of field theory, such as *doxa* or *illusio* (e.g., the Italian vs. the Canadian legal *doxa*). It should be noted that comparison of what have previously been called "similar" fields in different national societies is faced with a quintessential problem: more

often than not, the use of unified labels such as "religion," "science," or "law" obscures the fact that these notions may signify, include, and exclude very different things in different contexts, potentially leading to dangers of—unknowingly—comparing things that are "different" at a much more fundamental level, even reaching beyond what is usually discussed under the headings of, for example, "incommensurability" or "functional (in)equivalence" (BACHLEITNER, WEICHBOLD, ASCHAUER & PAUSCH, 2013; BHABHA, 1994; BOURDIEU & PASSERON, 1967). From a field-theoretical perspective, however, a large part of these questions may be tackled in terms of *field boundaries*, since the "field of law," for example, denotes something different depending on whether or to what extent it also includes religious authorities or precisely excludes them from juridical practice. Particularly in comparison with competing approaches, field theory offers a strong analytical starting point for examining and treating these problems, as attention is drawn to the respective relations between different fields (whereby boundaries and their shifting, just as in physical space, essentially constitute and transform the relations between spaces in the first place; LÖW & WEIDENHAUS, 2017). Diverging boundaries between these fields may then move into the center of comparative research as constantly contested objects in the struggles of the fields involved; and it almost goes without saying that such transformations of field boundaries are particularly reflected in the dispositions and practices of actors that may be affected and altered by them (for instance, one may think of the growing influence of economic logics on scientific practice, as illustrated by WIECZOREK, BEYER and MÜNCH (2017) for the case of US chemistry, or by GENGNAGEL, BEYER, BAIER and MÜNCH (2019), drawing on the example of the European Research Council). [29]

Another noteworthy implication of this account can be seen in the various patterns in which seemingly identical social fields can successfully claim and control physical space or elude its influence: for instance, with regard to their relative autonomy from physical space, similar to what is discussed as "rescaling" or "de-" and "reterritorialization" by Neil BRENNER (1999) or even in the sense of Gilles DELEUZE and Félix GUATTARI (1987 [1980]). At the same time, the dynamics of social fields may also transform physical and geographic spaces (or vice versa for that matter). Economic fields, particularly labor markets and real-estate sectors, for instance, produce effects on the urban-rural divide and the distribution of actors' capabilities to appropriate physical space, both at the regional (as is the topic of the current debate on housing prices and "rent sharks") and global level (as BAUMAN, 2005, among many others has trenchantly analyzed in terms of voluntary versus forced mobility). A classic example of the effects physical space may have on the dynamics of social fields, in turn, can be seen in Karl WITTFOGEL's (1957, p.11) thesis of "hydraulic societies." According to WITTFOGEL, certain civilizations with specific geographic conditions that implied an increased demand for elaborated systems of irrigation and flood control have contributed significantly to the development and institutionalization of social fields, such as bureaucracy as well as the political and military fields. In summary, the concept of *re-figuration* thus gains a second meaning that refers to such *dynamic processes in and between social fields that*

affect their institutional settings or geographic conditions (and vice versa) in ways that may differ considerably between different societal or cultural contexts. [30]

3. The Nation-State and the Field of Power

Whereas the previous arguments showed that BOURDIEU's relational sociology is not necessarily bound to national social spaces, it is likewise true that he often used the nation-state as an implicit analytical frame. Thus, in order to develop a more flexible theoretical account, we need to modify some of its underlying and sometimes rigid assumptions. For that purpose, we will start by briefly reconstructing BOURDIEU's original account of the state as a meta-field. [31]

3.1 Comparing nation-states as (meta-)fields

Within BOURDIEU's theory, the *nation-state* is conceptualized in principle as a social field with its own material and symbolic conflicts and mechanisms of integration (2014 [2012]). Thus, from an analytical viewpoint, the nation-state appears as yet another field alongside the aforementioned relatively autonomous social spheres. Yet, the editors of BOURDIEU's lectures "On the State" contended:

> "[T]he state may even appear as the field par excellence, even, in BOURDIEU's expression, a 'meta-field', because 'the state is meta', a field of struggle in which the stake is the determination of the position that the different fields (economic, intellectual, artistic, etc.) should legitimately occupy in relation to one another. As a result, one could put forward the idea that the state is the almost necessary product of a double process: on the one hand, the differentiation of societies into relatively autonomous fields, and on the other hand, the emergence of a space that concentrates powers over the latter, and in which the struggles are between the fields themselves, between these new agents of history" (CHAMPAGNE, LENOIR, POUPEAU & RIVIÈRE, 2014 [2012], p.380). [32]

In other words, and in contrast to other fields, the state as a *meta-field* is conceived as a "power over powers" (BOURDIEU, 2014 [2012], p.197), at the same time representing the arena in which national elites of different social fields (politics, law, economy, etc.) encounter and compete over "meta-capital," whose possession allows for the relative value of field-specific capitals and their respective exchange rates to be defined. In this sense, BOURDIEU also prominently described the nation-state as the "central bank of symbolic capital" (p.122). [33]

Hand in hand with this rather institutionalist account of the nation-state as a (meta-)field of power goes the unsurprising fact that BOURDIEU determined the boundaries of this field of power via the nation-state's *borders* and, thus, by *territorial and geographical criteria* (pp.70f.). This is clearly evident when BOURDIEU and WACQUANT (1992, p.112) assumed that the monopolization of symbolic capital took place within the "boundaries of a given territory," unmistakably referring to territory in the classical sense: namely as a core feature of modern statehood (JELLINEK, 1900). [34]

In this sense, that is to say as a specific institutional and geographic figuration of different fields and/or field elites analytically limited by national borders, the state plays a first possible role in comparative studies—prominently in but not limited to the political sciences (comparative social policy and the comparative study of welfare states presenting an important example from sociology, for instance, ESPING-ANDERSEN, 1990). By drawing on the concept of the "field or power," field theory allows for such studies to be conducted in the framework of a general theory of society, thereby bringing to the table all the conceptual tools that it has to offer (habitus, *doxa*, capitals, etc.). Starting from here, WACQUANT already envisioned a comparative approach to national fields of power in his preface to the English translation of "La Noblesse d'État:"

> "Distinguishing the (specific) empirical findings from the (general) theoretical model contained in *The State Nobility* suggests an agenda for a comparative, *genetic and structural sociology of national fields of power* that would, for each society, catalog efficient forms of capital, specify the social and historical determinants of their degrees of differentiation, distance, and antagonism, and evaluate the part played by the system of elite schools (or functionally equivalent institutions) in regulating the relations they entertain" (1996, p.xv). [35]

Indeed, the "nation-state as field of power" perspective also allows a number of other questions to be asked and answered that are highly relevant in the context of cross-national and cross-cultural comparisons. Similar to the perspective of national social spaces, it draws our attention to

- the ways in which field-specific processes of reproduction and legitimation differ in various societies;
- how power relations between different social spheres are balanced;
- the ways in which different nation-state fields are involved therein;
- the question of how different functions are fulfilled by functional equivalents in different national fields of power; and
- the ways in which national integration is achieved (or disintegration occurs) in a geographically and institutionally defined body ("Körperschaft"). [36]

Indeed, these rather abstract questions derived from field theory motivate more specific empirical research in the context of different research traditions: How, to give some other examples, is religious practice regulated (or religious freedom protected) in different countries by state law, that is to say by legal means? What is the effect of legal and political measures on the dynamics and characteristics of "Varieties of Capitalism" (HALL & SOSKICE, 2001)? What heterodox (economic, political, or other) influences endanger the freedom of science, and how do these heteronomous influences change over time in different contexts (GENGNAGEL, WITTE & SCHMITZ, 2016)? How do inequality effects of educational fields, job markets, or politics, for example, interact within the organizational and legitimatory frameworks provided by different nation-states? And what dominant players are involved in the "division of labor of domination" (BOURDIEU & WACQUANT, 1992, p.25) in different countries? [37]

Further, by drawing on the nation-state as an essentially territorially limited concept and as an institution based on the very idea of control over a clearly defined geographical space, this analytical perspective also calls our attention to questions concerning

- how different national fields of power diachronically emerged over time by successfully claiming the legitimate control over geographic regions;
- how they synchronically organize themselves territorially; and
- how they exert control over their territories and their internal and external geographic boundaries (e.g., by enforcing the recognition of the administrative definition of districts). [38]

As fruitful as this perspective might be, it *remains bound to (national) societies* that are analyzed individually and for themselves, reducing the comparative project conceived by WACQUANT to a rather "internalistic" endeavor. The units of comparison in this analytical account are still the very entities comprised by a nation-state, such as the human actors forming a national population or the plurality of national fields and their relations. [39]

3.2 Toward a general frame of reference

Although BOURDIEU's approach as developed up to here already provides valuable tools for comparative purposes, it is still explicitly "nationalist" in a methodological sense and, hence, limited to a number of specific research interests. In order to overcome this limitation, we will now elaborate on a more general understanding of spaces, fields, and ultimately their comparison by way of applying the logic of relationality in a more rigorous manner. [40]

3.2.1 Comparison in the international field of power

A first way of deriving a relational reference system is constituted by inter-national comparisons that use national entities as their starting point—not merely out of inattentiveness or carelessness but for the substantial reason that the nation-state itself constitutes the main empirical object of concern. As previously mentioned, field theory principally allows for the application of its open concepts at any conceivable "level" or on any subject, which thus also includes the possibility to construct *international* fields. Regarding the corresponding units of analysis, this perspective can motivate

- international comparisons of nation-states in an institutional sense; or
- international comparisons of nation-states including their respective populations and all other entities that a given state successfully claims to comprise. [41]

In this perspective, the *tertium comparationis* is constituted by an *international field of power*. In this sense, SCHMITZ et al. (2015) applied a field-theoretical approach to nation-states, thereby using the international field of nation-states as

the corresponding *tertium*. By interpreting the international field of power as an empirical outcome of the more comprehensive global field of power that will be outlined later, they analyzed an integrated data set from different social fields at the country level, applying a multiple-factor analysis and demonstrating that this international field can be described by two dimensions: *meta-capital*, on the one hand, and *internal functionality or institutional capital*, on the other. [42]

This analysis already implies a critique of methodological nationalism insofar as nation-states' internal institutional stability and functionality as well as their external relations are shown to vary significantly along different sources of power and meaning (political, economic, military, religious, etc.), thus revealing the constructed and contingent nature of the purportedly "natural" unit of the nation-state. The authors also show how institutional capital—understood as the disposal of high internal functionality of institutions of different kinds (bureaucratic processes, infrastructure, postal services, voting systems, healthcare, social security, control of corruption, etc.) and membership in important global institutions such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) or the European Union—relates dominating and dominated nation-states in an international field of power. Moreover, this analysis illustrates that the very concept of the nation-state is most adequately used in the very region of its historical development, namely Western Europe. Countries that do not equally dispose of the institutional means of what is called a functioning state system can only be described as nation-states to a lesser extent; instead, the fact itself that they are treated as "deficient" nation-states according to the hegemonic Western ideal model can be understood in the context of symbolic domination between different countries. Likewise, the study argues that the concept of the nation-state is less appropriate if it aims to describe the position and structure of the United States and China, since these countries have more in common with the classical form of empires. In effect, *the very status of "statehood," and therefore the adequacy of treating entities as "nation-states" in a homogenous sense, can already be interpreted as an effect of these entities' positions both in the global social and physical space*—and of the corresponding positions of those (Western) state actors that have successfully monopolized the very definition of what makes a "nation-state." [43]

In short, the field of power, just as the current state of individual fields and their relative autonomies, cannot be understood without referring to the constitutive effects of other fields. What follows from this insight is the fact that the symbolically legitimate attribution of the term and status of nation-state itself is produced within the field of power. Thus, the respective appropriateness of different ways to construct international fields is a direct function of the relative autonomy of national fields *vis-à-vis* all other social fields. With regard to the relation of physical and social spaces, the construction of an international field of power demonstrates how the geographic conditions of world society and its constitutive structure of power/meaning relations between nation-states impact each other (thus illustrating what we have described as "double regionality" in SCHMITZ & WITTE, 2017, pp.180f.—a figure of thought that we will revisit in Section 4.3). [44]

At the same time, the *objective proximity of entities in social space does not necessarily correspond to vicinity in the geographical sense*. While this may be the case in certain areas (e.g., in some parts of Europe), countries with largely similar features may be located in very different parts of the world. While this may be a trivial insight (consider "the West" and its relations to Australia, or Japan), it bears an important implication, namely that comparative units that can plausibly be encapsulated in terms of political, economic, cultural, or other similarities may span highly heterogeneous and distant parts of physical space, while equally meaningful differences may be observable in highly condensed regions of direct vicinity. [45]

The analysis shows that working with the international field of power as the *tertium comparationis* and using nation-states as entities of comparison is indeed possible within the relational framework. Yet, to the extent to which national spaces impact each other and to the extent to which they are affected by third instances (other transversal fields, regional modes of societalization etc.), any such comparison necessarily reaches its limits (which is the case, for example, when BOURDIEU, 2002 [1990], discussed the international circulation of symbolic goods; see ATKINSON, 2019). [46]

3.2.2 From nation-states to the global field of power/meaning

As the previous discussion has shown, and as is debated in diverse fields of the humanities and social sciences, starting with the nation-state as an unquestioned entity prevents us from addressing the different manifestations of societalization, as well as the variety of possible interrelations between sociality and geographic spaces, and ultimately merely allows for a strongly limited framework of societal comparison. Among the most prominent reasons for the shift of focus that now seems inevitable is the *growing importance of social entities that operate "below" or "above" the national level*: from regional social movements to transnational networks, and from supranational institutions to global organizations or corporations. Likewise, in many cases, *the boundaries of social fields can be described less convincingly than ever as national boundaries*, with the global economy serving merely as a prime example. For the context outlined in the introduction, namely the schism between cross-national and cross-cultural research and the different types of "container thinking" present in both traditions, one further reason consists in acknowledging that "culture" and cultural patterns may manifest in forms that *cut across national entities* more often than not: either because relevant cultural differences can be observed within a single national framework or because cultural analysis aims at large-scale civilizational contexts, ultimately rendering the identification of "cross-cultural" comparison with "cross-national" analyses fundamentally flawed (HEPP, 2009). [47]

Against this backdrop, in recent years a growing number of authors has taken up BOURDIEUSIAN concepts for the purpose of analyzing phenomena beyond and across nation-states and national societies (SCHMIDT-WELLENBURG & BERNHARD, 2020). Despite the valuable empirical insights such research can provide, we argue that field theory in its original form is systematically

overburdened with their integration. However, we argue that field theory's potential can be exploited more comprehensively once its core concept of the "field of power" is modified and freed from its unnecessarily "nationalist" connotation (SCHMITZ & WITTE, 2017, 2020; SCHMITZ et al., 2015). Hence, we propose sustaining the concept's basic intentions and functions but modifying it in a way that meets the demands of a transnational and global sociology without having to dismiss national units of investigation as principally irrelevant. A consequently relational conception of the field of power must encompass the entirety of the power relations of agents involved, including those of the dominated classes. Once this modification has been accomplished, the field of power can be reconceptualized in the following way:

> "The field of power is a perspective on the social space that focuses on field effects and field-specific practices in the context of their interdependencies. This perspective is therefore distinct from those which exclusively consider the practices in the social space or of specific classes (and effects thereof), and from those concentrating on apparently autonomous fields. In taking the effects of the field of power on specific fields to be fundamentally constitutive for all fields, the process of stratificatory differentiation can be read as the manifestation of effects of multiple processes of differentiations and de-differentiations of fields. The boundaries of the field of power are the boundaries of society itself" (SCHMITZ et al., 2017, p.69). [48]

If we take this generalized field of power as a starting point, the *nation-state* may now be repositioned accordingly: it can be understood not only as an embedding instance or frame (which still remains a possible construction of course), but also as being a field that itself is embedded in the field of power. By implication, the nation-state must also be comprehended as being affected and structured by different social fields—as being one field in the field of power among others, allowing for the entire toolbox of field theory to be applied. This perspective permits one to pose the question of how and to what extent the nation-state manages to defend its own field boundaries against other fields, just like it allows for the examination of ways in which it succeeds (or fails) to impose its rules and logics on other social fields (or, *vice versa*, in what ways it is "intruded" by other field logics). Further, the proposed modification allows for a more consistent reconciliation of the two principles of differentiation that are at the core of BOURDIEUSIAN sociology: the social space approach and the theory of social fields. [49]

Equipped with this modification, we gain greater flexibility in comparing fields and spaces, as the nation-state has lost its unquestioned status as the *tertium comparationis*, handing over this function to the very relations of fields in their entirety. Thus, the *nation-state itself becomes but one unit of comparison alongside other fields and spaces that, together, form a more general reference system* (the meta *tertium comparationis*). The field of power, at least in the last analytical instance, can now only be meaningfully conceived as a truly global one (SCHMITZ et al., 2017). Similar to the system-theoretical concept of "World Society" (LUHMANN, 1982), the "global field of power" then forms the broadest possible frame of reference, that is, it describes the maximum attainable scope of

sociality (without, however, prematurely answering the question of whether its global character is realized through communication, observation, practice or interaction, indirect forms of affection, etc.) and thus replaces a comprehensive concept of "society" within the framework of field theory. [50]

Finally, for the sake of precision and in order to avoid false impressions of one-sidedness, we should now also remind ourselves of the principally equal status of relations of power and meaning in field theory. To mark this persuasion, we will thus subsequently speak of the *global field of power/meaning,* understood as a field-theoretical perspective on the global social space. These modifications of field theory in general, and of the field of power in particular, allow for strategies of comparison that are clearly more flexible in their dealing with different sorts of fields and actors, since the nation-state does not operate as an unquestioned *tertium comparationis* anymore, moving the relations of fields in their widest possible extent—the global—into the focus. Therefore, the global field of power/meaning as an analytical meta-field allows us to analyze more figurations than merely those expressed by a nation-state (either as a theoretical idea or as an empirical realization). Consequently, the problem of an excessively tight coupling of geographic space and sociality is solved by way of providing a *variety of reference systems* (different spaces, fields etc.), which *do not define the relation between geographic space and social space/fields a priori* (e.g., the geographic extent of a social field can vary) and *allow for the analysis of processes of re-figuration* (since, for instance, the organization of a certain territory by means of field effects can vary over time). [51]

4. Analytical Implications for Comparison and the Re-Figuration of Spaces

The relational perspective as outlined so far allows for the comparison of social entities (spaces or fields) on what other authors might label different "levels" of the social, or, more precisely, a comparison that does not force us to define these entities' extension *a priori* (SCHMITZ & WITTE, 2020; SCHNEICKERT, SCHMITZ & WITTE, 2020). Whether or not regional or subnational, national, supra- or transnational, or even fully "global" fields of this or that practice can be (re-)constructed—and whether or not they may then be analyzed in terms of cultural or societal difference—cannot be decided in an abstract and general way, but only in light of the respective interplay of empirical evidence, analytical interests, and theoretical premises. It also follows from generalized field theory that national, international, or any other kinds of fields *analytically* all constitute different specifications of the global field of power/meaning and (which basically amounts to the same) that they all eventually point to the global field of power/meaning as the widest possible frame of reference. Thus, the term *global* entails two distinct semantic levels in this context, referring to both

- the widest possible *empirical* reference (i.e., the globe and the processes it comprises); and
- the most general *analytical* perspective on any sort of entities, relations, and mechanisms that may be of interest. [52]

4.1 Pluralizing the concept of boundaries

One special implication following from the outlined approach concerns the meaning of *borders* and *boundaries*. Beginning with the distinction of physical and social spaces, we may first distinguish between corresponding types of *boundaries*, depending on whether we are referring to *territorial borders* or *limitations of social spaces and fields*. Borders (in the geographical sense) have always been considered a constitutive aspect of the classical notion of the nation-state. However, the idea of a homogenous and unambiguous territory is—and, in fact, has always been—all too simplistic. Already from this perspective, we may quickly acknowledge that a state typically features different kinds of borders, such as land, sea, or airspace borders, which are far from congruent. At the same time, nation-states' territories may feature internal borders (due to foreign enclaves or embassies, for example), as well as borders that are situated outside of its core (such as in the case of embassies, exclaves, or unincorporated territories). As a field, however, a nation-state also possesses institutional, cultural, and symbolic borders, which can never be defined with absolute certainty. [53]

From the perspective of the field of power/meaning—in which the nation-state represents one type of field among others—the empirical question for boundaries and processes of demarcation arises in a pluralized form (also BECK, 2008). While it has always been a core duty of the state to secure the integrity of its *territorial* borders, we may now also add the task of defending and safeguarding its borders *as a field* against other fields' attempts of intrusion (e.g., those of the transnational or global economy or of transnational or global law). Thereby, the *contestedness of the nation-state's various borders* and boundaries gains attention, both in a territorial sense and regarding other non-state fields. [54]

In this light, the extent to which a certain nation-state's multiple borders are homologous and rigid may be treated as an indicator of its closeness to the ideal-typical assumption of *container-like societies* (BOURDIEU, 1991 [1982], pp.222f.). If this homology of multiple borders is weak, the state in question may seem closer to the constructivist critique, according to which the nation-state is merely an illusion or common myth. Yet, the empirical case of heterologous borders is of particular interest for studies dealing with questions of re-figuration. [55]

Likewise, *other entities (social fields, regions, organizations)* can be analyzed not only in relation to their *institutional borders*, but also with respect to their *geographic extension*. To give but two examples, supposedly "global" fields, such as the economy and science, may then be compared as regards their respective scale or extent, in terms of their (internal or external) structuration by regions or

countries, and with respect to possible asynchronicities resulting therefrom. Likewise, organizational fields may be queried for their geographical extension on different dimensions: for instance, with regard to the relevant spaces of staff recruitment, their areas of operation, their range of influence, and so forth. [56]

4.2 Comparing nation-state re-figurations

From a historical perspective, BOURDIEU (2014 [2012]) showed that the establishment of the classical Western European model of the nation-state can be interpreted as a shift of power balances that reached its critical phase between the 16th and 18th centuries and led to a highly specific new configuration of different fields, to the advantage of the juridical field and its corps in particular. If one uses this sketch as a starting point, *different types of state organization*—for example, the ideal-types of capitalist, socialist, or theocratic states—can be described as configurations of differentiated fields in national fields of power that differ *according* to the relative power and autonomy of the individual fields involved (i.e., in the case of the aforementioned ideal-types, configurations in which the economic field, the political field, or the religious field have accumulated a relative dominance over the others). By implication, *processes of transformation of the state and statehood* then become addressable as transformations in the field of power/meaning or as re-figurations of field relations. [57]

Accompanying these transformations of social space and field relations, the re-figuration of nation-states also points to *transformations of the socially relevant dimensions of physical spaces*. In a certain sense, both the emergence of the dynastic state and the subsequent rise of the modern nation-state can be interpreted as successive processes of de-localization and *de-particularization* (or, both spatially and socially, universalization) (BOURDIEU, 2014 [2012], pp.222-228, 235-248). [58]

The well-established debate over the *nation-state's possible loss or gain of relevance* can thereby be reframed in a more differentiated and genuinely comparative manner, since this very gain or loss is far from being identical across all possible positions in the global field of power/meaning. Depending on their position in global social and physical space, certain states may profit from the rise of a global economy in terms of their own autonomy and power, which may, in turn, manifest in the way in which they are capable of asserting their own normative standards, values, and institutions compared to other states, as well as in the degree to which they remain capable of controlling their territory. What seems to be a mechanism of isomorphy from the perspective of neo-institutionalism (MEYER, BOLI, THOMAS & RAMIREZ, 1997), for instance, may thus be described as an effect of large-scale relations of symbolic domination; the adoption of specific ideas and models of statehood therefore cannot be explained by referring to institutional logics or cultural dynamics alone, but must also take into account the historically developed power relations between different types of social and political order. [59]

Against this backdrop, systematic assessments are also possible with regard to the comparative question of *which* nation-state fields display a relatively high degree of autonomy in relation to other nation-states, organizational entities, or fields, such as the economic field (and, accordingly, the question of *which* nation-states can control or even extend their territories). [60]

4.3 Double regionality

Another insight that can be drawn from the twofold concept of space is that *proximity in social spaces does not necessarily converge with vicinity in the physical sense*. Two given fields, as well as two given milieus or classes, for instance, may principally resemble each other in cultural terms or strongly vary independently of their geographical distance (and also principally independently of their historical remoteness). [61]

According to what we call "double regionality" (SCHMITZ & WITTE, 2017, pp.180f.), phenomena (processes or entities such as certain actors or fields) in the global field of power/meaning can always be located both in the physical or geographical and in the global social space—positions that are analytically distinct but often empirically related. The most striking case for this interdependence may be seen in the global distinction between north and south, the Global South not only being situated in the geographical south, but also representing the "lower" echelons of global social structure, thus constituting a prime example of the metaphorical and value-laden imaginary of "up" and "down" (WITTE, 2016). This logic does not only manifest itself in artistic representations or maps, however, but also in scientific visualizations. It is anything but a coincidence, therefore, that the well-known textbook illustrations of BOURDIEUSIAN fields and spaces are often rotated in an otherwise arbitrary fashion to present actors with insufficient capitals at the bottom of the graphics and actors with high degrees of capital at the top. Yet, the example also illustrates dissonances and incongruities in the global field of power/meaning, given that, for example, Australia and New Zealand are of course not to be considered part of the Global South (SCHMITZ et al., 2015, p.255). [62]

Moreover, the principal relationality between (global) social and physical spaces and the concept of *double regionality* can also be useful in field-theoretical terms. Notably, BOURDIEU (2018) argued that "the various fields or, if one prefers, [...] the different social spaces physically objectified [...] tend to overlap with one another" (p.109), just like KNOBLAUCH and LÖW (2017, p.12) suggested that one single physical location can be affected by simultaneous orders and frames (which they termed "polycontexturalization"). From this perspective, large-scale societal processes, for instance, of economization, juridification, etc., should also be considered with regard to their spatially differential manifestations since both their actual meaning and their effects may differ strongly in various regions of the social and physical space of world society (KOEHRSEN, 2019, pointed in a similar direction). [63]

Likewise, transformations of (transnational) social fields may be viewed in light of the *power relations between state fields and geographical regions*. To give but one example, the noticeable gain or loss of the relevance and legitimacy of certain religions (e.g., Islam versus Christianity) in public discourse does not follow from their position in the global religious field alone, but also—and significantly—from the position that geographically localizable nations, in which the respective communities of faith (here: Muslims versus Christians) constitute the majority or at least a significant proportion of the population, occupy in the global field of power/meaning. Against this backdrop, field theory does not stimulate premature assumptions of homogeneity (neither in the sense of social space nor geographically), but rather gives room to examine and compare regionally specific structural patterns in transnational and global contexts. [64]

4.4 Comparing transnational fields

In a complementary sense, we may now also examine hierarchies and asynchronicities in the global field of power/meaning with regard to the relative autonomy of social fields *from* nation-states (in plural)—which may be interpreted as the respective *fields' degrees of transnationality*. Furthermore, generalized field theory can be used to inform analyses of such *relatively* transnational social fields and their relations of power, autonomy, homology, and intrusion, refuting axiomatic and ahistorical assumptions of field-specific autonomies (regardless of whether they refer to state fields or other types) and moving (dis-)similarities of internal structures and hierarchy principles between different fields into the focus. In contrast to other theoretical frameworks, field theory also invites us to consider *"chains" of inclusion and exclusion* over different fields, on the one hand, and the *permeability and practical contestedness of boundaries* between (state and non-state, national and transnational) fields, on the other. [65]

Moreover, classic questions of *comparing civilizations* (EISENSTADT, 2003) may be posed equally fruitfully in field-theoretical terms. The impact of religious worldviews on *long-term historical traditions and corresponding path dependencies*, for instance, can be analyzed as the relative power of religious fields *vis-à-vis* other fields: that is to say, as the capability to legitimately enforce their beliefs and values (their *nomos*, *doxa*, etc.) beyond their own borders (for instance, as a forceful heteronomy in political fields). In this context, it is almost redundant to stress that these relations are subject to change and historical processes. The comparative study of secularization processes, for example (a rich field of research by now, see only KÜNKLER, MADELEY & SHANKAR, 2018; WOHLRAB-SAHR & BURCHARDT, 2012), may draw on field theory not only by describing these processes as shifting power relations between religious and other fields, but also by taking into account the relations and interferences of different religious fields and field configurations (be they constructed as national fields, such as the Indian and the Japanese field of religion, as larger regional fields, such as the East Asian versus the Middle Eastern religious fields, or as overarching fields of power/meaning, again national or otherwise). [66]

4.5 Plurality and contestedness of reference systems

Our account of comparison prompts us to reflect on any specific comparative analysis against the backdrop of generalized field theory. This implies that, for example, while it enables us to construct an international field of power, we need to keep in mind that all underlying decisions are of a provisional character: our observations and findings can and, in fact, must be continuously reflected against other possible entities and reference systems. The above-mentioned finding that nations in an international field of power actually differ in terms of the degree of their "nationness" is directly related to the question of how transnational fields (such as the economy) affect these national fields in different ways (e.g., by weakening territorial units or, on the contrary, by supporting national autonomy). Conveniently, our approach also implies the possibility of considering and incorporating several reference systems within the same study. We may, for example, start by comparing national units (such as "countries") and gradually add alternative reference systems (such as different transnational fields of varying extension) to the analysis. In doing so, we could likewise decide to add the examination of cultural differences to the equation and discover patterns that may (or may not) cut across both aforementioned dimensions (i.e., which may manifest at levels "above," "below," or "beyond" the national, and *vice versa*). However, it is important to keep in mind that none of these reference systems can be assigned an ontological primacy. Rather, we emphasize the socially contested character of reference systems and entities of comparison, namely as a result of increased inner-scientific struggles and of societal competition over the "appropriate" means and criteria of perceiving society. [67]

4.6 Social space, physical space, and digital space

The scope of the relational approach also becomes evident in light of the fact that it allows us to reflect on more recent social transformations and to conceptualize them. These include what are often referred to as "digital spaces" and their interrelations with physical and social spaces (being aware of the limits inherent in the spatial metaphor of "cyberspace" and related concepts). Following KNOBLAUCH and LÖW (2017), we can indeed consider the transformation of communication through the new media as an essential factor contributing to the re-figuration of both physical and social spaces. [68]

Using the case of digital partner markets, SCHMITZ (2017), for instance, showed that digital "spaces" and the processes they entail not only contribute to the reproduction of structures in "analogue" social spaces, but that, in doing so, the structure of the social space also tends to retranslate itself into the offline physical space: like the latter in its traditional sense, the digital space of these partner markets is genuinely structured by social distances that are reproduced in the course of reciprocal classification practices. Accordingly, an idea (and often a promise) frequently invoked in this case—namely that "digitization" naturally implies a relativization of the relevance of the physical proximity between agents—is itself relativized. While some actors are able to attract partners from further afield, others are restricted to their position in social and, thus, in physical space.

Hence, the lively debate about the space-boundedness of the lower classes repeats itself in the allegedly "place-free" sphere of a dating platform, and the digital space engenders effects of re-placement both in a social and in a geographical sense (p.190). Thus, this work shows that digitalization can bring together previously spatially *and* socially separated groups of people. Digital infrastructures make it possible to overcome physical distances between actors, practices, ideas, discourses, etc.; and as a result, previously locally and communicatively segregated positions and dispositions are also moving closer together (with potential for both association *and* dissociation). [69]

Another example in this context is the re-figuration of the national public sphere resulting from the transformation of the field of mass media and its digitalization. Today we observe a massive expansion of this field and thus an increasing medialization of society with ever new forms of media formats, such as YouTube channels, blogs, social networks, etc. However, this should not be misunderstood as a mere increase in the power and autonomy of the mass media field. Some new media formats do not have to adapt their products to economic logics and consumption patterns to the same extent as classic mass media had to. Some of these projects are even one-(wo)man endeavors, and yet they can reach a larger audience than some of the much larger newspapers, or radio and television stations. However, the digitalization of the mass media field also follows an economic logic based mainly on the power of click numbers, "likes," the number of followers, and so on. The media economy is therefore probably more than ever an economy of attention. In this game, the classic mass media lose their old sinecures and are exposed to increased competition. [70]

In this sense, a decreasing autonomy of the mass media field becomes apparent, given that the field and its formerly dominant actors are no longer able to defend and maintain its borders. With the proliferation of blogs, forums, social networks, and platforms like Twitter or Instagram, anyone can become a producer of mass media products at any time today (as indicated by neologisms like "prosumer" or "produser"), thus weakening the institutional filtering function that was constitutive for traditional mass media systems. What in HABERMASIAN conceptions of the public sphere was classically regarded as its necessary condition, namely the relative autonomy of the media system both vis-à-vis institutionalized politics and the informal politics of everyday interaction, is now called into question by the fact that field boundaries are much easier to overcome. Socially and politically extreme positions that were once filtered out are now increasingly represented in the field and find their respective recipients. Moreover, not only do "alternative" media represent and (re-)produce specific political positions, but also the classic mass media, which used to be at least conceptually committed to neutrality, must increasingly orient themselves to their shrunken clientele. As a consequence of this pressure, a decrease in autonomy and an even stronger stylistic and ideological orientation toward those milieus that still consume traditional media can be assumed. [71]

Consequently, this development also leads to a mass media field that is increasingly subject to the political antagonisms of society and thus also to

polarizations of the political field. Although mass media fields have arguably always been homologous to political fields, this can be stated to an even greater extent today. As can be observed in light of current developments, the enlarged media field is therefore losing its ability to contribute to national integration and even threatens to contribute to social *dis*integration due to its highly politicized and polarized constitution. The basic mechanism underlying this observation is well known: In his late media-critical essay "On Television," BOURDIEU (1998b [1996]) discussed how this medium exerts symbolic domination over its audience and thereby contributes to national (cultural and cognitive) integration. In view of the current fragmentation of the informational production field with its diverse (now predominantly digital) and only weakly institutionalized offerings, this integrative contribution has become largely absent. Where in Germany, for example, the consumption of the large public broadcasters has unified the most diverse classes and milieus over many years, we are now dealing with a rather particularized media field consisting not only of public and private suppliers, but also of local, national, transnational, and global or globally oriented providers. [72]

What we can observe, accordingly, is an even stronger correspondence between the different formats and contents of the mass media, on the one hand, and their consumers, on the other. Socio-demographic, economic, cultural, and political factors have a steadily growing influence over who consumes which medium (for example, in the form of a separation and diversification not only of the readers of liberal vs. conservative newspapers, but also of the consumers of different types of media). If, however, the positions of agents in both social space and the political field are thus more closely linked to the media through which they obtain information, and if the field of mass media is subject to a process of dramatic pluralization and fragmentation, then this also has an impact on the images of social reality that are thereby conveyed and established. To speak of a national public sphere in the singular therefore seems less justified than ever before given the abolition of its necessary preconditions as postulated by HABERMAS (2008, pp.163-172): namely, a high degree of institutionalization and autonomy of the media field. Instead of a highly autonomous, strongly institutionalized mass media field and a common public sphere, to which different positions could (indeed, must) refer *comparatively* unanimously (p.171), we are witnessing the emergence of an extremely polarized "field of ideological production" (BOURDIEU, 1984 [1979], p.399). In this field, different images of *the* public sphere are drawn, and the respective *other* images of the public sphere are presented not as representations of social conditions, but as societal problems. In the "established" media, the views of reality and the images of the public sphere as they are created in "alternative" media are criticized, while these "alternative" media in turn criticize the false image of the public sphere that the "traditional" media draw. Thus we no longer find a common recursive connection to a single public sphere, but rather a competition in which the respective images of the public sphere reappear in antagonistic contexts as objects of critique. Indeed, even the media coverage of the respective other side itself becomes an event worth reporting in the course of this antagonism. [73]

In short, this pluralization of the media, essentially fueled by the process of digitalization, corresponds to a particularization of increasingly unconnected consumer milieus (or milieus that are only connected by antagonisms), which can no longer be integrated by a nationally structured mass media field. Where different cultural and political milieus used to be spatially separated but were communicatively integrated through mass media consumption, their physical distance is now overcome in digital space, which not only leads to a further internal integration of these milieus, but also to a simultaneous disintegration and polarization of societal discourse as a whole. Insofar as national integration is weakened by a media field that has been digitalized (and transnationalized) in this sense, another type of field boundaries—namely the boundaries of the field of the nation-state—is also weakened, which eventually indicates the weakening of the nation-state as such. But while we have so far tacitly assumed ideal-typical Western cases, an important field of comparative questions opens up here since other nation-state fields may well profit from similar digital transformations: either when it is possible to force the unification of the field (as in China where digital media are controlled to such an extent that "alternative" representations of Chinese society have become a rarity) or when media can be used to exert influence over other societies (for example, through foreign broadcast stations or by manipulating online political discourses). [74]

To summarize, although medialization has reached an all-time high, we should be careful to deduce from this a growing autonomy of the mass media field in every respect. Societal and political discourses have increasingly become structured by a hot-take attention economy that is in turn subject to the political antagonisms of our days, leading to a media field that is no longer capable of maintaining its institutional and cultural boundaries without simultaneously excluding different positions and dispositions. Ultimately, the effect of these processes seems to be the erosion of standards that have long structured the fields of mass media and the production and consumption of information. They are replaced by an increasingly disintegrated, competitive market for symbolic goods, which suffers from economic pressure, political partisanship, and underregulation, while facilitating manipulation and disinformation, corroborating mutual distrust, and allowing both orthodox worldviews to be consolidated and heterodox conspiracy theories to flourish, thus rendering the foundational narrative of the Internet as a democratizing medium that would expand and promote rational societal discourse increasingly absurd. [75]

5. Conclusion: Field Theory as a General Comparative Framework

Current sociology faces the problem of how to conceptually handle a social reality that seems to radically question old certainties of what constitutes society as its pivotal object. The concept of national societies, unambiguously definable in geographical, institutional, and social terms—with the nation-state as both its ideal type and central institutional frame—has at least lost its natural self-evidence. Whereas this concept of society has always been fraught with problems, the ramifications of an ever-increasing empirical complexity and the effects of ongoing re-figurations of social relations significantly contribute to the

aggravation of this long-standing conceptual issue, calling for flexible concepts and strategies of comparison. [76]

While this situation already poses grave epistemological hurdles for contemporary sociology, the operation of "comparison" raises a number of further (again epistemological, but also theoretical, methodological, and empirical) questions that are answered in highly heterogeneous ways in the field of the social sciences and the humanities. This non-exhaustive list of questions includes the choice of certain units of comparison and of *tertia comparationis*, the role of national entities as either unquestioned points of reference (or at least as methodological proxies), and whether "culture" and "cultural difference" constitute crucial concepts of comparison or simply represent empty "culturalist" talk. While cross-national or cross-cultural comparisons seem natural and rather unproblematic for some, others consider even the very operation of comparison impossible as a whole. In short, while sociology (among other disciplines) is faced with serious analytical and hermeneutical challenges, the same frictions and cleavages that have long encumbered sociological research tend to be reproduced within the current situation in the field of comparative studies (in the broadest sense). [77]

Among many others, one troublesome dichotomy exists between social order and social change, or stability and dynamics. In this context, it should be mentioned that Norbert ELIAS's core concept of *figuration*, which appears so prominently both in our article and in this special issue as a whole, already exhibits a genuinely processual character. From this perspective, which stresses the ever-processual nature of human figurations in general, *the notion of "re-figuration" does not simply emphasize the fact that figurations are subject to continuous alteration, and does not just highlight its reproductive aspects either, but also points to processes of fundamental qualitative change that may affect figurations in their entirety*. Furthermore, whereas the notion of *figuration* always expresses the relation between social and physical spaces, the concept of *re-figuration* draws equal attention to the spatial reorganization of the social and to the social transformation of geographic space. [78]

In the end, and despite fundamental differences, any comparative project—implicitly or explicitly—rests on the operation of relating. The main proposal of this article was to take the analytical primacy of relations seriously and to develop a flexible understanding of comparison that could enable researchers to compare the seemingly incomparable (a statement that, on a side note, already presupposes a comparison). The approach outlined here does not burden itself with stark presuppositions, but rather stresses relationality as its sole determining axiom: the units of comparison can be freely chosen according to the theoretical and empirical requirements at hand, and, moreover, different units can be compared simultaneously (human actors, organizations, nations, etc.). In addition, it appears possible to integrate several reference systems at once, such as national and international fields, as any number of references can be derived from generalized field theory. [79]

This theory, in turn, proves to be a full-fledged theory of society—and at the same time, a framework for *cross-societal comparison* since it undermines the equation of "society" with ultimately contingent reference systems and the associated units, thus enabling the comparison of a wide variety of social figurations, including but not limited to national or other (cultural, institutional, material, etc.) forms. The resulting analytical flexibility seems to be a particular strength at a time when the social sciences are called upon to provide descriptions of a world that is increasingly interrelated and characterized by interdependencies—not least because global society itself is essentially characterized by fierce competition for the legitimate criteria of precisely these descriptions. [80]

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Citation

Witte, Daniel & Schmitz, Andreas (2021). Relational sociology on a global scale: Field-theoretical perspectives on cross-cultural comparison and the re-figuration of space(s) [80 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *22*(3), Art. 5, http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-22.3.3772.