A Strategic Action Field's Approach to the Historical Emergence and Transformation of the Tunisian Political Field

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A good deal of social theory adresses issues of social change and stability. Attempts at explaining social change, or lack thereof, have sparked some heated debates, which are still ongoing in a number of disciplines. Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, in their 2012 book, *A Theory of Fields*, introduce a novel theoretical approach to the subject. Combining insights from Social Movements Theory and Organizational sociology, and drawing from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Fligstein and McAdam (hereafter F&M) offer an original conceptual toolbox: the Strategic Action Fields approach (hereafter SAF), which they intend to be of use across disciplinary boundaries and to stand as a corrective to the unwarranted balkanization of the scholarly efforts aimed at the study of social change across disciplines and subfields (2012, 4). This short paper will begin with an introduction of the conceptual components of F&M's framework, after which it will apply said framework to analyze the emergence and evolution of the political field in post-independence Tunisia.

1. Brief Overview of the SAF Approach

As one can guess, the main concept in the SAF framework is the idea of fields. In many social scientific undertakings, the concept of fields is often used in its Bourdieusian sense. F&M propose a somewhat different formulation. Emphasizing the *strategic* character of action within what they view as "the basic structural building block of modern political/organizational life in the economy, civil society, and the state"(2012, 3), F&M define SAF as:

> "a constructed mesolevel social order in which actors (who can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationship to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field."(2012, 9)

For F&M, the constructed nature of SAFs is apparent in both the way that membership in the field is construed and in the shared understandings underlying the field. Concerning membership, F&M argue that it is determined both on a relational and situational basis. This means that the boundaries of the field, and the actors included within it, are defined according to their

stakes in its central issue, and to the recognition they receive from other actors as belonging within the shifting boundaries of that field (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 10). As for the shared understandings, F&M consider them to be socially and historically constructed[1], and to span four main areas: an understanding of what is at stake, the power distribution, the valid forms of action and organization within the field, and of the "interpretative frames" that different actors use to make sense of the interactions taking place within the field (2012, 11).

The different types of actors within an SAF can be divided into two main categories, depending on the positions they occupy within the field: incumbents and challengers. Incumbents are the ones holding "disproportionate" power over a particular SAF, along with the ability to shape it in a way that they *expect* to favor their interests. Challengers are the ones with less power and limited control over the field. In some cases, there can be a third category of actors, which F&M refer to as "internal governance units" (hereafter IGUs), that are actors tasked with overseeing the functioning of a given field and ensuring its continued existence (2012, 13–14).

To explain why actors engage in strategic action, F&M introduce the concept of "social skill". They define it as "the ability to induce cooperation by appealing to and helping to create shared meanings and collective identities" (2012, 46). This ability is the central microfoundation upon which they base their theory of why and how actors engage in strategic action within an SAF, in a way that could at times overcome the resource limitations constraining them (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 16–17). At the macrolevel, F&M posit that SAFs can be "embedded" in and/or interlinked with other fields, to varying degrees. This means that developments occurring in one field could potentially reverberate into other proximate fields. The less autonomous a field is, the more vulnerable it is to such effects. Additionally, some SAFs tend to consist of a number of embedded fields, in similar fashion to a set of Russian matryoshka dolls (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). These factors constitute another potential source of dynamism and change within the framework.

2. Political SAF Emergence in post-independence Tunisia

The main aim of this paper is to assess the usefulness and the analytical power of the SAF theoretical framework. To do so, this paper examines the emergence and evolution of the post-independence political field in Tunisia through the conceptual lenses provided by F&M's framework. This case being quite different from those that served as a basis for the framework's elaboration[2], it should provide a fitting testing ground for its flexibility and for the transferability of some of its theoretical claims.

a. Actors and Power Distribution

The principal actor on the nascent Tunisian political field was the Neo-Destour party (hereafter ND). The party, which was at the core of the struggle for independence from the French authorities, was formed following a split with the more conservative and somewhat aristocratic Destour party. Unlike the older Destour, the ND opted for a less elitist approach to mobilization, and succeeded in drawing support from all social classes, thus acquiring a very large membership, dwarfing most other organized political forces in the country. It was led by Habib Bourguiba and Salah Ben Youssef, both charismatic, and shrewd politicians, who were able to capitalize on the prestige they accumulated through the roles that they played during the struggle for independence. At the formative stages of the Tunisian political field, the ND, and some other actors (such as the UGTT[3] labor union), were all united around the common aim of achieving independence from France, with any lingering ideological disagreements, on socioeconomic policy issues for instance, rarely coming to the fore.

Nonetheless, there was some factionalization within the ND putting the Bourguiba faction at odds with some of its allies on a number of policy issues. These differences would gain in salience following the 1955 Internal Autonomy agreements with France. The main challenger group was the Youssefist faction, headed by Salah Ben Youssef, who was the then secretary general of the ND. The Youssefists opposed what they viewed as the "soft" Bourguibist approach to negotiations with France, advocating for the country to adopt a more intransigent and pan-Arabist policy line. They also disapproved of the socially progressist and secularist ideas espoused by Bourguiba, instead favoring a more conservative and traditionalist approach.

As for the UGTT, it also had some disagreements with the official party line after independence. The strong union, especially under the leadership of Ahmed Ben Salah, considered that its political role should evolve towards more autonomy from both the ND and the state in the post-independence context. It also had reservations over the social and economic policies advocated by the ND. Thus, it had a number of disagreements on a great deal of political and socioeconomic issues with the ND (Adam and Granai 1964; Ben Hamida 1990; Ben Hamida 1994).

Other than the ND and the corporatists organizations associated with it, there was little in the form of real alternative political actors. Both the Destour and the old Tunisian *Parti Communiste* were quite inactive and did not have much influence beyond their headquarters by this point (Moore 1962, 463).

The monarchy, which was still in place at the time, and conserved a modicum of power during the early days of independence, was rapidly sidelined by the ND, which managed to position itself in most state institutions as soon as the French relinquished their control over the country. In fact, even before its ultimate abolition, it could be argued that the Bey had already been pushed outside of the newly emerging post-independence political field, as it had

already been agreed by then that his role would be at most a ceremonial one (Debbasch 1964).
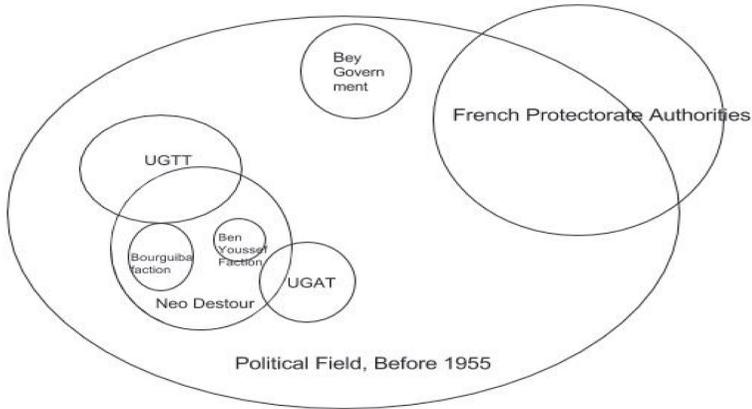
b. SAF Analysis

Figure 1: Tunisian Political SAF, before 1955

In the Tunisian case, the antecedent conditions that shaped the emerging post-independence SAF and the actors within it could be attributed to the jockeying for positions that took place in the aftermath of the pre-independence SAF's collapse (see figure 1), which pitted the incumbent French protectorate authorities against a set of nationalist challengers united around the independence frame. The emergence of the post-independence SAF can only be properly assessed within this historical perspective, as the resource distribution, largely favoring the ND at the expense of other actors, as well as the predominant interpretive frames of the field, and the rules of the field, are all products of the ND's successful campaign to redefine the post-independence SAF's rules and borders to its advantage. The ND's takeover was achieved principally through the Bourguibist faction's success in taking control of both the IGUs in the larger national political field (such as the ministry of interior) and of those within the internal ND party field, and using the two in combination to dominate both fields, avoid fragmentation along factional lines, and eject both internal and external challengers (such as the French) outside the institutionalized politics SAF.

Social skill played an important role during the early stages of the political field's emergence. Within the ND, the social skills of key individual actors were determinant in the struggle for power. The Bourguibist faction, for instance, was mainly built around the dominant personality of Habib Bourguiba, who was quite adept at showing flexibility and engaging potential challengers within the party with the aim of acquiring/ensuring their support. In the cases where cooptation could not be achieved, as in his rivalry with the Youssefist faction and their allies in the UGAT[4], Bourguiba leveraged his faction's dominance over the ND SAF's

IGUs to eliminate his opponents' organizational resource bases, starting by ejecting them from the party. In the UGAT case, which started opposing the ND policies after it fell under the influence of the Youssefist faction, it proved to be challenging for the Bourguibists to gain control over it. Thus, Bourguiba's strategy was to use his control over the ND SAF to create another organization to represent the agricultural sector, the *Union Nationale des Agriculteurs Tunisiens* (UNAT), weakening the rebellious UGAT for long enough to neutralize it. As for the Youssefist faction, Bourguiba made sure to force it out to the fringes of the political SAF, which radicalized the faction, leading it to engage in acts of political violence that almost pushed the country into civil war, and finalized their transition into clandestinity. Outside the institutionalized political SAF, the power difference was even more favorable to Bourguiba, given his control over the state's coercive apparatus. Nevertheless, in acknowledgement of their mobilizational power, he also pragmatically integrated some of the principal frames used by the Youssefists within his own platform, particularly regarding the adoption of a more nationalist line in his interactions with France concerning full independence and the situation in neighboring Algeria.

The post-independence SAF reached a sort of settlement with the National Constitutional Assembly elections of 1956, which established the ND's and Bourguiba's personal dominance over the institutionalized political field and over the state apparatus, consolidating his control over the field's IGUs and acquiring the ability to rewrite its rules to his advantage without facing any serious opposition. Other actors acknowledged this domination, and grudgingly accepted the new status quo. The UGTT had to abandon its dreams of autonomy and tow the party line. This was made easier by the leverage that control over the state SAF afforded to Bourguiba over many of the union members who were public servants (Ben Hamida 1990). The ND SAF itself was transformed and reached a new settlement that reflected the undisputed power and control acquired by the Bourguiba faction within it. The interconnectedness between the ND and the national political SAFs became even more significant. The acquisition by the Bourguiba faction of control over both the State SAF and the ND SAF allowed it to redesign the rules of the game for most other fields in the country in a manner that favored its allies and supporters. Thus the state and the party fused into one single field where the most central and powerful actor was Bourguiba and his close personal network (Nouira 1954; Moore 1962; Debbasch 1964; Willis 2012; Perkins 2014).
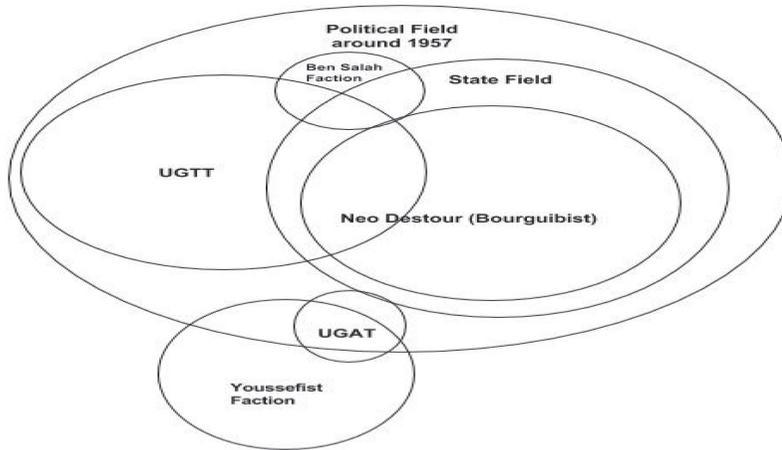
Figure 2: Political SAF, around 1957

This dynamic can be seen at work in the way in which the Bourguiba faction's domination over both fields was achieved (see figure 2). The first stage played out on both the national and ND levels. Using the momentum provided by the still prevalent focus on "unanimity", which was a core value for the ND and its allies within the pre-independence SAF, which pitted the nationalist movement against the French (Moore 1962, 462; Debbasch 1964, 96), as well as the prestige that he amassed for his personal role in the anti-colonial struggle and the leadership he provided during that critical phase, Bourguiba managed to convince his potential rivals within the post-independence political SAF to maintain a unanimous and unified front, and to join an alliance with him aimed at securing nationalist control over the Constitutional Assembly, which they were planning to use mostly as a political tool to challenge the French into granting Tunisia full independence (Debbasch 1964). This coalition came to be known as the *Front National* and it succeeded in dominating the assembly. The second phase was the passing of a set of internal regulations that transformed the ND into a more centralized party, and transferred most of the decision making power to the party's political bureau, forcing the assembly members to toe the party line (Moore 1962).

The last obstacle was the potential independent power base constituted by the powerful UGTT, whose leader Ahmed Ben Salah had envisioned a more autonomous role for the union within the new SAF. In an exercise of social skill and thanks to a careful deployment of the resources afforded by control over proximate SAFs, Bourguiba first started by encouraging some prominent members of the UGTT to defect and create a competing (and ultimately short-lived) union. Building up on that schism, Bourguiba then managed to have Ben Salah replaced at the head of the union by a more compliant leader (Debbasch 1964). Yet, the most significant display of social skill by Bourguiba was in what might be referred to as a policy of

strategically motivated magnanimity. For instance, Ben Hamida (1990, 139) reports how union leaders hindering Bourguiba's designs would often end up "promoted" out of the UGTT into some loftier positions within the state apparatus, which neutralizes the opponent in a manner that allows them to still "save face", and eventually switch sides in some cases.

With his control over the party and the Constitutional Assembly consolidated, Bourguiba started using the latter in a more confrontational way than it was planned to be. He encouraged the Assembly to declare itself sovereign, and then used it to abolish the monarchy, establish a republic, and assume the role of interim president. Thus, Bourguiba and his personal allies managed through their successful domination of the party to gain control of the political field's IGUs, which in turn allowed them to have control over the state, and subsequently over the wider national SAF.

3. Conclusion

As demonstrated within this paper, using the SAF framework allows for an analysis that is more sensitive to the interconnections between different fields, as well as to their embedded nature. It also draws one's attention to the role of individual actors at crucial moments characterized by high fluidity. The concept of IGUs is useful as well in how it underlines the strategic importance of specific actors within a given field. Yet, the way F&M divide actors into two categories (challengers and incumbents) with nondescript "resources" proves to be somewhat constraining and could probably benefit from further theoretical elaboration. A potentially worthwhile step in that direction could be a more nuanced conceptualization of "resources", for instance, by incorporating insights from Bourdieu's work on forms of capital (2002) and using it as a basis for the development of a more comprehensive typology of actors.

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Notes

1   "Fields are constructed in the sense that they turn on a set of understandings fashioned over time by members of the field." (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, 10)
2   The cases used by F&M (2012) to illustrate their framework were, respectively, the Civil Rights struggle and the transformation of the mortgage market, both in the US.
3   *Union Generale Tunisienne du Travails*
4   *Union Generale de l'Agriculture Tunisienne*