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## **The women’s cause in a field: rethinking the architecture of collective protest in the era of movement institutionalization**

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Abstract:

This article introduces the concept of women’s cause field, which refers to the relational structure of groups mostly devoted to the advancement of women in a variety of social settings, cutting across the line between civil society and political institutions. Unlike the women’s movement, the women’s cause field encompasses a set of both extra-institutional and intra-institutional mobilizing structures. This concept expands on scholarship on institutional activism, and on field and network theory. Beyond the case of the women’s movement, it provides a new framework – the notion of cause field – to capture the architecture of specialized collective protest in the era of movement institutionalization, distinct from, and complementary to, the concept of social movement.

Keywords:

Women’s movement; feminism; field theory; institutional activism; collective protest

In the past 20 years, definitional debates over the concept of social movement have been at the center of social movement theory. The classical, political process view of social movements as ‘rational attempts by excluded groups to mobilize sufficient political leverage to advance collective interests through noninstitutionalized means’ (McAdam, 1982, p. 20) has been discarded for being too narrow and rigid. After the protest cycle of the 1960s and 1970s, social movements in many Western Democracies have become increasingly institutionalized, as they have borrowed the organizational and action repertoires that used to be the distinctive feature of established polity members, and as their ideas and actors have entered policy-making arenas (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008; Banaszak, 2010; Giugni & Passy, 1998; Katzenstein, 1998a; Meyer & Tarrow, 1998; Rootes, 1999). Distinctions between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, ‘incumbents’ and ‘challengers’, as well as between ‘institutional’ and ‘non-institutional’ politics, have become increasingly fuzzy. Moreover, it has been acknowledged that social movements target a wide range of institutions and cultural norms, beyond State authorities. In this context, one of the challenges encountered by social movement scholars has been to provide a definition of social movements that could be wide and flexible enough to account for the ‘diversity of contemporary change efforts’ (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008, p. 75) without diluting the analytical distinction between protest politics and ‘politics as usual’. While it has been increasingly difficult to associate social movements with distinctive discourses, repertoires of action, or targets (Fillieule, 2009), they have remained equated with a set of actors (often referred to as Social Movement Organizations, SMOs) located *outside* of political institutions. Following a consensual definition in the field, the concept of social movement refers to a set of “collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity *outside of institutional and organizational channels* [my emphasis] for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority” (Snow, Soule, Kriesi, & McCammon, 2018, p. 10). Whereas a series of works have addressed institutional activism, they have mainly remained centered on dynamics internal to institutions (Banaszak, 2010; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Eisenstein, 1995; Pettinicchio, 2012; Santoro & McGuire, 1997; Sawer, 1990). A category that would capture a structure of collective protest that is fueled by both extra and intra-institutional actors is still lacking.

It is this challenge that the concept of *women’s cause field*<sup>1</sup> seeks to address. As such it offers a new framework to conceptualize the architecture of collective protest, which is

distinct from, and complementary to, the notion of social movement. The concept weaves together two distinct bodies of literature: scholarship on intra-institutional protest, which has particularly developed in the subfield of women's movements and feminism; and conceptualizations of social movements as relational structures – field theory and network analysis. In bringing the focus on a configuration of collective protest that spans across the movement/institution dividing line, it significantly expands over both.

The women's cause field refers to the relational structure of groups mostly devoted to advancing women/challenging the gender order in a variety of social settings, cutting across the line between civil society and political institutions. Unlike the women's movement, the women's cause field encompasses a set of both extra-institutional and intra-institutional collective actors. The term 'women's cause' has a generic meaning: far from designating a unique, unequivocal perspective and/or a single issue, the women's cause refers to a wide array of particular causes associated to the advancement of women (gender violence, pay equity, sexual harassment, women's political representation...), and to a variety of (potentially conflicting) definitions of women's interests, beyond the self-identified 'feminist' movement (Ferree & Mueller, 2004). Drawing mainly on Bourdieu's definition of 'social fields' (1984), while integrating the insights of other social movement theorists (Ancelovici, in this issue; Bourdieu, 1984; Diani, 2003; Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, 2012; Mathieu, in this issue; Ray, 2000; Staggenborg, 1998), I use the concept of field to emphasize the *relational structure* of collective mobilizations converging around the women's cause: i.e. the set of groups that, in a given context, are primarily and explicitly dedicated to the goal of improving the status of women and/or challenging the gender order. Like other social fields, the women's cause field is marked by competition and power relations, but also by a set of social ties, common interests and shared understandings that can foster cooperation among its members (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012; Hoffman, 1999; Mathieu, in this issue). The women's cause field combines the concept of field with insights from the literature on intra-institutional protest. While social movement scholars using the concept of field have generally left untouched the movement/institution line, the notion of women's cause field encompasses a set of mobilizing structures on both sides of this divide, and that are themselves embedded in a diversity of fields: not only women's movement organizations and informal groups, but also women's sections of political parties (within the partisan field), women's rights bureaucratic bodies (within the State

field), feminist academic networks and centers (within the academic field), women’s business networks (within the business field), women’s cultural institutions such as bookstores and festivals (within the cultural field), women’s sections within religious institutions (within the religious field), etc.

The notion of women’s cause field was coined in a specific national context (France in the 1990s) and associated with the study of a women’s movement campaign. However, I argue that this framework can be productively mobilized to capture the architecture of collective protest around other causes – extending the notion of women’s cause field to that of *cause field*.

This article is divided into four sections. The first one quickly presents the case study from which the concept of women’s cause field emerged. The second section details how the concept expands on insights from scholarship on intra-institutional protest as well as on fields and networks. The third section sketches out the distinctive features of the women’s cause field. The last section delineates the main contributions of the concept to social movement theory.

### **1.From case study to concept building: explaining the success of the campaign for gender parity in France**

The concept of women’s cause field initially emerged from a specific case study, namely the campaign for gender ‘parity’ in political representation in France during the 1990s (Bereni 2007, 2015). In the beginning of the 1990s, a small network of women’s groups started a campaign around the claim of ‘parity’ (*parité*), calling for a law that would mandate ‘a strict numerical equality’ between the sexes ‘in all assemblies of the nation’ (Gaspard, Le Gall, & Servan-Schreiber, 1992). Parity campaigners targeted political parties, government leaders, and the media, engaging in a variety of activities, such as demonstrations in front of the Parliament, petitions and manifestos, conferences and public meetings, letter-writing campaigns, books and press articles, or women’s only electoral lists. During the first years of the campaign, the success of the claim appeared highly unlikely, because of the weaknesses of the movement (small size, sharp internal divisions, lack of media attention...), and because of the strong legal, intellectual, and political resistances it encountered, in a very male-dominated political field (in the early 1990s, women accounted for 5% of the French Parliament). Yet, within less than ten years, the claim of parity translated into a major institutional reform, comprised of a constitutional amendment (1999) and a legislative statute (2000)

mandating a 50% sex-based quota on electoral lists in most political elections. Beyond this legal change, the campaign for gender parity also had a discursive impact: by the early 2000s, the 'balanced presence' of both sexes increasingly became a requisite for many sites of power outside of the political arena (Lépinard, 2016). While political opportunities certainly were a factor (such as the obsession of French political elites for what appeared as an increasing gap with their constituents), I found that the *cross-sectional dimension* of the movement for gender parity was essential in the successful trajectory of the claim. The campaign attracted women from varied ideological backgrounds and mobilizing in behalf of women and for women in a large array of social settings, inside and outside political institutions. The movement for gender parity not only encompassed self-identified women's movement organizations and groups located in the realm of civil society, but also members of women's sections within political parties and elected assemblies, members of women's rights structures within the State bureaucracy, and members of feminist academic networks and centers. These institutional actors participated in the campaign for gender parity, within their institutional settings, and using institutional channels of action (expertise, lobbying...). Rather than envisioning themselves as the 'relays' or 'allies' of an external feminist campaign, they self-identified as an integral part of a transversal 'movement for parity'. The cross-sectional dimension of the gender parity campaign didn't emerge out of nowhere. It derived from a pre-existing, relational structure of groups continuously devoted to the women's cause, pertaining to a wide range of ideological stances and located in a variety of sites within and outside of political institutions. I developed the concept of women's cause field to capture this transversal architecture of contemporary women's protest, beyond the 'peaks' of visible campaigns (such as the gender parity campaign). Before detailing the meaning and theoretical contribution of the concept, I turn to its theoretical sources.

## **2. Bringing together reflections on institutional activism and field theory**

The concept of women's cause field expands on two distinct bodies of literature: scholarship on institutional activism, and conceptualizations of social movements as relational structures (field theory and network analysis).

### ***Protesting from within***

Social movement institutionalization, which refers both to ‘the professionalization of their activities and [to] the regularization of their access to policy-makers’ (Rootes, 1999, p. 1), is commonly associated with co-option, deradicalization, ‘de-politicization’ (dilution of their conflictual dimension: see Thörn & Svenberg, 2016) and, eventually, fading. As Giugni, McAdam and Tilly put it, ‘it may well be that, by thoroughly legitimating and institutionalizing protest, the western democracies will render it increasingly ineffective as a social-change vehicle’ (M. Giugni, McAdam, & Tilly, 1998, p. 233) – going back to the idea of a ‘movement becalmed’ (M. Zald & Ash, 1966). In most social movement scholarship, institutional actors are not, by definition, included within the realm of social movements and collective protest.

Feminist policy and women’s movement scholars have been particularly central in challenging the widespread dichotomy between movements and institutions, as more and more feminist settings have proliferated within a variety of political institutions over the last decades. From the body of literature on state feminism (McBride, Mazur, & Lovenduski, 2010) to the insights of feminist institutionalism (Krook & Mackay, 2011; Mackay & Waylen, 2009), gender and politics scholars have explored the impact of feminism on political institutions and public policies. While many of these works have not frontally engaged with social movement debates, women’s movements scholars have brought these lines of reflection into social movement theory, fueling a critique of the routinized opposition between movement and institutional politics, and even pinpointing a ‘movement-state intersection’, in Banaszak’s terms (see among other works : Andrew & Maddison, 2010; Banaszak, 2010; Eisenstein, 1995; Katzenstein, 1998a; Roth, 2004; Sawyer, 2010; Bereni & Revillard, 2018; Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005). The concept of women’s cause field builds on five main insights from this body of literature.

First, these studies have contributed to define outsider/challenger status as the result of marginalization within, rather than exclusion from, power institutions. For instance, U.S. feminist bureaucrats could be considered as ‘outsiders inside the State’ because they had been structurally marginal (numerically, organizationally, symbolically) in the male-dominated federal government (Banaszak, 2010).

Second, this body of scholarship has offered a framework for understanding how insider activists might be able to pursue social change while being constrained by, and loyal to, the dominant norms of the organization they belong to. In her landmark study of

women's claim making within the Catholic Church and the Military in the United States, Katzenstein (1998a) argued that feminist proponents within these institutional settings had multiple 'accountabilities' (organizational, discursive and financial), which bound them to both the institutional *and* the movement realms.

A third important contribution from this body of literature is the emphasis placed on the organizational settings that render possible the development of social activism within institutions. Katzenstein's concept of 'organizational habitats' refers to 'spaces where women advocates of equality can assemble, where discussion can occur, and where the organizing for institutional change can originate.' (Katzenstein, 1998b, p. 197).

Drawing on the French case, Anne Revillard and I (2018) have argued that women's rights bureaucratic bodies have been more than 'free spaces' in which members of dominated groups find themselves relatively protected from elite control (Evans & Boyte, 1986). Rather, they have operated since the 1970s as *movement institutions*: institutionally engrained with a specific protest dimension, these bodies have fostered the deployment of feminist activism inside and outside the State, beyond echoing, and relaying, ideas from the movement outside.

A fourth critical contribution of this body of research has consisted in showing that there is no necessary link between institutionalization and deradicalization and/or depoliticization. To be sure, institutionalization impacts the forms and the content of protest. Feminist protest developing within mainstream institutions is mostly 'unobtrusive' (Katzenstein, 1998a), 'under the radar' (Banaszak, 2010), using forms of action that are acceptable within the institutional setting where they develop. In many instances, institutionalization does favor the development of moderate over radical definitions of feminism and trigger a process of depoliticization. However, feminist activism inside institutions can take radical tones in certain contexts (Andrew & McLaren, 2014; Banaszak, 2010; Katzenstein, 1998a).

Finally, scholarship on feminist intra-institutional protest has shown that institutional settings were critical to the *continuity* of women's movement over time. Several studies found that in Western democracies, after the end of the protest cycle of the 1960s and 1970s, feminists within institutions maintained their activism while the women's movement 'outside' disappeared from the political scene. As such, institutional settings have played the role of 'abeyance structures', by which 'movements sustain themselves in nonreceptive political environments and provide continuity from one stage of mobilization to another.' (Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005; Taylor, 1989, p. 761)



While the study of feminist protest has been a critical site for challenging the great divide between movements and institutions, a series of works on other movement causes have made a similar case for better including "institutional activists" (Pettinicchio, 2012; Santoro & McGuire, 1997), 'tempered radicals' (Meyerson & Scully, 1995), or 'insider activists' (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016) into the study of social protest politics. Introducing a 'multi-institutional politics perspective', Armstrong and Bernstein called for 'breaking down' the 'distinction between members and challengers', and for considering social movement actors as 'constituted in part by the institution(s) challenged' (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008, p. 76). Based on his study of the rise of civil rights within the U.S. government, Skrentny argued that social movement could no longer be defined as 'discrete entities that exist outside of government' (Skrentny, 2002, p. 5).

The concept of women's cause field borrows to this body of literature a particular attention granted to intra-institutional protest in the definition of movement politics. However, while most of these works have put the emphasis on individual activists, and/or have tended to focus on how they shape the institutions targeted rather than broader movement processes (for a notable exception on this last point, see Banaszak 2010), the women's cause field is centered on groups rather than individuals, and, most importantly, considers women's mobilizing structures located within political institutions as a *full component* of a cross-sectional protest structure. This perspective is informed by the body of works that have conceptualized social movements as relational structures, drawing on the concept of field and on network analysis.

#### Social movements as relational structures: fields and networks

Social movement theorists have long used the notion of field to capture the relational dimension of social movement processes, and more particularly to refer to a set of social movement organizations oriented toward a particular purpose, as in the notions of 'multi-organizational field' and 'social movement industry' (Curtis & Zurcher, 1973; M. N. Zald & McCarthy, 1980). Yet, in social movement theory and beyond, the notion of field has been used in association with a diversity of frameworks and epistemological visions. The ways in which I mobilize the notion of field is highly indebted to Bourdieusian conceptual framework (Bourdieu, 1984), while integrating the insights of other social theorists, notably in the field of social movement theory (Ancelovici, in this

issue; Crossley, 2002; Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, 2012; Mathieu, in this issue; Ray, 1998, 2000).

The concept of social field (*champ social*) was coined by Bourdieu to reflect on social reproduction against the backdrop of an increased division of modern societies into specialized areas of social activities. It refers to the structure of objective relations uniting social actors with respect to a specific activity. Bourdieu notably studied the art field, the religious field, the political field, the academic field, but this concept is potentially applicable to a multiplicity of social activities. It has several defining characteristics: it puts the emphasis on *structural* relations between actors (unlike, for example, the concept of ‘arena’ introduced by Jasper and Duyvendak (2015), which focuses on instable interactions between players engaged in strategic action); a field is partially *autonomous* from the rest of the social world: it revolves around its own specific stake, its own rules of the game, and rests on specific processes of socialization (which favor the development of specific social skills and shared understandings); a field is *hierarchically structured* according to different types of capital: not only economic, cultural and social capital, but also the symbolic capital that is related to the specific social activity; a field is an *agonistic* space: social actors compete for the capital valued in the field (literary prestige, political offices, etc.).

Bringing together insights from organization and social movement theory, Fligstein and McAdam (2011, 2012) introduced the notion of ‘strategic action field’, as an expansion of the Bourdieusian concept of the field. This concept adds several critical elements to the Bourdieusian notion of field, including: a more systematic focus on collective actors (rather than individuals); a close attention to the dynamics of the broader field environment in which each field is embedded; a focus on the factors and mechanisms of field emergence and transformation (beyond the reproduction of social order); and, last but not least, the focus placed on cooperation dynamics in addition to struggles and power relations – the concept of women’s cause field is particularly indebted to this last dimension.

While in Bourdieu’s framework no field is totally autonomous from the rest of the social world, some social fields display a higher degree of autonomy than others. Compared to other fields, the women’s cause field lacks powerful ‘internal governance units’, which are charged, in any given field, with ‘overseeing compliance with field rules’ (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, pp. 13–14). Therefore, it can be characterized as a ‘weak’ field, and shares structural features with the concept of ‘space of social

movement' (Mathieu, in this issue), whose relative autonomy *vis-à-vis* neighboring, stronger fields (most notably the political field), expands and shrinks according to the historical context<sup>2</sup>. Several field theorists have granted a central importance to field 'embeddedness'. Fligstein & McAdam point to the 'broader environment within which any given strategic action field is embedded', and on the 'linkages between the fields', emphasizing how fields (notably the field of social movements) are shaped by pressures from external fields (notably the State field) (2012, pp. 18-24). Likewise, in her study of women's movements in India, Ray argues that 'social movements that are oppositional to the state or the present government are embedded in a protest field, which is in turn, embedded in the wider political field' (Ray, 1998, p. 23). By contrast, the women's cause field displays a specific, higher form of embeddedness. It is not only that the women's cause field is shaped by external fields. It is, structurally, a site of *intersection* between multiple social fields, and the fact that its actors are also inscribed in a variety of other fields is essential to its internal dynamics.

In sum, field theory informs the notion of women's cause field in many respects. However, unlike general field theories, the notion of women's cause field is *not* primarily intended to explain the broad logics of social change and social order. Here, the framework of field is leveraged to capture a relational structure of groups centered around a common purpose, across the line ordinarily drawn between the realm of social movements and that of political institutions.

The concept of women's cause field also builds on a body of literature that has put networks at the center of social movement theory (Diani, 2003; Krinsky & Crossley, 2014). In particular, an 'analysis based on relational patterns' (Diani 2003) allows to capture the continuity of social movements, and to broaden their definition beyond 'a collection of SMOs' (Staggenborg, 1998). The notion of 'social movement community' (SMC) has been defined as a network of 'actors who share and advance the goals of a social movement', including not only 'movement organizations' but also 'individual movement adherents who do not necessarily belong to SMOs; institutionalized movement supporters; alternative institutions; and cultural groups' (Staggenborg, 1998). SMC participants share a common collective identity, and engage sporadically in overtly political actions.

The women's cause field shares certain features with the concept of SMC: it refers to a diversity of actors beyond SMOs, including institutionalized actors, and it puts the emphasis on the continuity of social protest over time, beyond its visible episodes. Yet,

unlike the notion of SMC, the women's cause field refers to a set of mobilizing structures (rather than 'individual movement participants'); it places a great importance on groups nested within mainstream political institutions (beyond 'alternative institutions'); it primarily captures the architecture of women's protest at the national level (while SMCs have been more often studied at the local scale); it designates a configuration of collectives that have contrasted, sometimes conflicting visions of the women's cause (the notion of 'collective identity' appears too strong to characterize their shared understandings).

### **3. Mapping the women's cause field**

Groups, rather than individuals, are the basic unit of the women's cause field. Empirically, when it comes to mapping the field, it is easier to identify groups and organizations that are mainly devoted to advancing women/challenging the gender order (from their public platforms or historical records) than to assess individual commitment to the women's cause. Collective structures are also a more stable unit than individuals. Because the women's cause field is an ideal-typical category, its boundaries are fluid: there is an ongoing variation in the array of mobilizing structures that can be counted in or out of the field. A single group can be included and excluded at different times, depending on the centrality of its public commitment to the women's cause, and depending on its embeddedness in the field's networks. Importantly, political and social movement organizations that are *not* primarily devoted to the women's cause (such as parties, unions, or SMOs that are mainly devoted to other causes) are counted out. By contrast, the 'groups' or 'section' dedicated to the women's cause *within* these organizations are considered as full part of the women's cause field.

#### ***Ideological variety***

The women's cause field rests on a broad definition of the women's cause. It encompasses all mobilizing structures that, in a given historical context, explicitly speak *on behalf of women and for women* (Beckwith, 2000; Ferree & Mueller, 2004), meaning that: 1) women are the main participants and take the lead of the mobilization; 2) women, or the social figures that are associated to women (mothers, sisters, daughters...), are considered as the mobilization constituents; 3) the advancement of women's 'rights', 'status', 'condition', etc., is placed at the core of the collective's

concerns, even if the gender order is not frontally and fully challenged, and even if the label 'feminist' is not used.

Historically, women have organized based on their gender identity to carry out a variety of activities (knitting, steaming, praying, etc.) or to pursue a variety of so-called 'social' and 'political' goals (peace, social reform, nationalism, etc.), without necessarily seeking to advance women and/or challenge gender hierarchies. Some women's organizations have even devoted an important part of their energies fighting against feminist ideas. Women who gather as women without explicitly seeking to advance women's status are not included in the field. However, the analytical boundary between feminist and non-feminist mobilizing should not be reified. Many women's organizations and individual activists challenge certain aspect of the gender order, while embracing conservative views on other aspects of this order. The boundary between the women's cause field and a broader universe of women's mobilizations is therefore blurry. It should be drawn on a case-by-case basis, considering not only the organization's discourse but also its degree of integration into the relational structure of the field (participation in common events and campaigns, integration in formal and informal networks). For instance, a women's catholic organization putting the advancement of women among its main goals and participating in certain women's rights campaigns (for gender parity, against gender violence...) along with other women's movement organizations, while remaining silent toward other feminist campaigns (abortion, LGBT rights...), would be counted in. By contrast, a pro-life women's organization, while publicly asserting its purpose to act in the name of women and for women, wouldn't be comprised in the field if it is fully isolated from the networks of the women's cause field.

The women's cause field encompasses a variety of potentially conflicting definitions of the women's cause. There is no consensus on the 'interests' of women and on what it means to 'advance' them – because of the entanglement of power relations (class, race and ethnicity, age, sexuality...) that structure the category of women (hooks, 1981; Riley, 1988), and because women's movements have historically been interwoven in a variety of other collective struggles and political ideologies. I use the term *stream* to refer to the varying ideological regions of the women's cause field. There are potentially as many (overlapping) streams as there are ideological ways to define women's cause in a given context: socialist, liberal, radical, queer, etc.

### ***Multi-sectorial mobilizations***

While the ideological variety has already been taken into account by the existing scholarship on women’s movements (and more broadly on social movements), the multi-sectorial dimension of the women’s cause field, which intersects with various social fields both outside and inside political institutions, appears as its major distinctive feature.

What is usually called the ‘women’s movement’ is only one *pole* of the field of the women’s cause. I call it the *autonomous pole* of the field, because it refers to the set of groups and organizations that, at a given moment, strongly affirm their organizational and symbolic autonomy in the promotion of the women’s cause. This pole undoubtedly occupies a central position in the field, with regard to its relative size (number of groups and activists), its centrality in the network structure (activists in this pole are likely to have more connections with other poles than those of the other poles with one another), and its symbolic legitimacy (women’s struggles are historically associated with self-identified autonomous organizations located in the civil society). However, I argue that this pole is not always the driving force behind women’s collective struggles, or the origin of women’s protest. In some circumstances, (e.g., when the autonomous women’s movement is in abeyance, or when women’s concerns gain prominence on the governmental agenda), other poles of the field might play a crucial role in fueling feminist protest (Bereni & Revillard, 2018).

The other poles of the women’s cause field are *embedded* in a diversity of other social fields. In other words, they form intersecting zones between the women’s cause field and other – often much wider – social fields (see Figure 1). In my study of the movement for gender parity (Bereni, 2015), I found that three embedded poles of the women’s cause field played a major role in the campaign: the *electoral-partisan pole*, which refers to groups and their participants that are devoted to women within the electoral-political field, namely in political parties and in elected assemblies; the *academic pole*, which refers to the groups and institutional settings supporting feminist views and women within academia; and the *state pole*, which refers to the women’s rights bodies at different levels of the government bureaucracy.

Figure 1: The Women’s cause field: a partial representation (applied to the case of the campaign for gender parity in France, 1990s) ABOUT HERE

The women's cause field includes as many poles as there are social fields within which collectives devoted to the advancement of women develop. Since fields are analytical constructs that can apply to an unlimited range of social realities, a variety of poles, with different defining principles and perimeters, can be singled out, depending on the case study and the research questions at stake: e.g., a social movement pole (women's sections of social movement organizations), a union pole (women's sections of unions), a religious pole (groups devoted to improving the status of women within religious institutions), a business pole (networks dedicated to the promotion of women in business settings), etc.

### ***Structural heterogeneity and mechanisms of convergence***

The women's cause field is highly heterogeneous. Firstly, as noted before, it is an ideological battlefield, permanently marked by divisions, controversies, and conflicts. Secondly, because the mobilizing structures that make up the women's cause field are nested in various social fields, they are not exclusively devoted to the women's cause, and their visions of this cause is most of the time intertwined with the specific stakes of the other fields they belong to. For example, feminist academic networks might, most of the time, be primarily concerned with the advancement of women and feminist perspectives *within* the academic field, or concerned with non-gendered stakes of the field, rather than oriented toward transversal struggles around the women's cause. Yet, in spite of these centrifugal forces, the various components of the field are structurally linked together by *three mechanisms of convergence*. While similar mechanisms have been identified in social movement theory (Curtis & Zurcher, 1973; Diani, 2003; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012; Mische, 2003; Staggenborg, 1991), their specificity is that they apply to a cross-sectional field, fostering convergences between actors that are located outside and inside political institutions.

The first mechanism of convergence lies in individuals' *multiple affiliations*, which often cut across the lines between different poles and streams of the field. The individuals who circulate (in the course of their lives or simultaneously) between different ideological streams and sectorial poles of the field might act as brokers, facilitating the circulation of ideas, strategies, goals, and the building of potential coalitions. The second mechanism of convergence is the interlock of (mostly weak) *organizational ties*. In the last twenty years, in France like in many other countries, umbrella organizations and advocacy networks have developed, linking together

women's mobilizing structures from various settings (women's associations, women's party sections, feminist bureaucratic instances...) and from various ideological backgrounds around specific issues, such as the fight against gender violence, or the battle for gender quotas in decision-making sites. The third mechanism of convergence lies in what I have termed *sites of convergence*. This notion refers to the events and writings that reach out to a variety of women's advocates stemming from a multiplicity of social settings. The annual celebration of the international women's rights day is one of the important sites of convergence. State feminism institutions, both at the national and international levels, have played an important role in fostering sites of convergence over the past thirty years (cf. the United Nations women's conferences regularly held since 1975). There is a multiplicity of other events that function as sites of convergence: cultural festivals, conferences, commemorations, etc. Writings might also work as sites of convergence, shaping and circulating discourses on the women's cause. These sites of convergence, whatever their audience, favor the creation of new ties between women's groups activists who do not usually get along, or might ignore each other's existence. They also allow the circulation of shared visions of the cause of women, and, possibly, the emergence of common frames (Benford & Snow, 2000).

Many conflicts might arise from the tangle of links and interactions between the actors of the field: actors who used to ignore each other might be led to fight against each other's views (going back to the 'agonistic' dimension of Bourdieu's notion of field). However, convergence mechanisms tend to give to the actors of the field the sense of belonging to a 'self-referential' universe (Mathieu, in this issue), distinct from other fields because of its own stakes, its shared understandings, and its specific lines of division. In certain historical contexts, under favorable circumstances that have been identified by social movement theory (coalition and framing work, political opportunities...), these mechanisms of convergence can give birth to cross-sectional campaigns around common women's claims, involving various components of the women's cause field – although *not* the whole field.

In sum, the women's cause field has three defining characteristics. Firstly, and primarily, it *cuts across the lines traditionally drawn between movements and institutions*. This is the distinctive feature vis-à-vis the category of women's movement. Second, like other conceptualizations of social movements, it puts the emphasis on the *continuity* of women's mobilizing over time. The women's cause field is associated with women's collective challenges to gender hierarchies that take place continuously,



and in many cases, unobtrusively. Third, the concept draws attention to the mechanisms of *convergence* that can sporadically foster cross-sectional campaigns among a highly heterogeneous structure of collective actors acting on behalf of women and for women. The concept of women's cause field goes beyond the two main bodies of literature it draws on. On the one hand, works on institutional activism have most often remained institution-centered, focusing on how institutions shape insider activism and on how in turn insider activism shape institutions. On the other hand, social movement theorists using the concept of field have remained movement-centered, applying the framework to characterize the relational structure of social movement actors, outside of institutional lines. The added value of the concept of women's cause field is to bring institutional activism into a broader relational structure of collective protest, including both extra-institutional and intra-institutional actors. It thus breaks with the routinized, often reified distinction between collective protest and institutional politics.

#### **4. Capturing collective protest in cause fields**

The women's cause field provides a new analytic framework for studying contemporary women's collective protest in the era of movement institutionalization. More broadly, I argue that it provides new insights for conceptualizing the architecture of other "collective efforts for promoting or resisting change" (Snow et al., 2018), beyond the case of the women's movement.

To be sure, the women's movement is in many respects a singular, 'paradigmatic' (Bereni & Revillard, 2012) social movement: it escapes the common distinction between 'new' and 'old' social movements (it has existed for more than a century while being strongly associated to the cultural claims characterizing the surge of protest of the 1960s and 1970s); it is linked to the category of women, which is an ordinary, ubiquitous identity (concerning more than half of the population), likely to be politicized without frontally challenging existing social hierarchies; finally, the women's movement has been particularly concerned by institutionalization processes over the last decades, with the proliferation of women's rights bodies at different levels of government and other power institutions. Yet, other movements present comparable features, such as those linked to other ascribed, embodied minority identities; those that are mainly oriented toward cultural change; and/or those that have experienced a similar path of institutionalization.

I contend that the concept of women's cause field could be productively extended to the study of other areas of specialized collective protest, through the more generic notion of *cause field* (environmental field, disability rights field, civil rights field, etc.).

When social movement theory emerged several decades ago, the concept of social movement was largely a synonym of collective protest. Today, it is no longer possible to overlook the intersections between protest and institutional politics. The concept of social movement, which remains associated with political action outside of institutional channels, cannot be considered as subsuming the whole reality of collective protest. The 'contentious politics' model has been an attempt to broaden the definition of collective struggles beyond the realm of social movements, as it intersects with routine political actors and processes (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). However, this model has been criticized for being both too broad (diluting the specificity of movement politics) and too narrow (restricting movement politics to episodic, public, government-centered activities) (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008). The notion of cause field is a new attempt to reflect on contemporary collective protest in a way that is distinct from, and complementary to, the concept of social movement (as well as to the contentious politics framework). The existence of a specific cause field, in a given context, should be empirically assessed, based on objective and subjective dimensions. To what extent are intra-institutional mobilizing structures engrained with protest routines? Do their members identify with a broader, self-referential space of protest? Do they belong to cross-sectional networks around a specific cause, together with movement actors outside of political institutions? Such a definition of the architecture of collective protest, intersecting but not equating with the concept of social movement, can change our understanding of how movements succeed. It *endogenizes* factors that are otherwise framed as the 'political opportunity structure' or as 'strategic alliances' with institutional (thus, implicitly, non-movement) actors – as illustrated by the case of the gender parity campaign.

Finally, it must be said that thinking collective protest in terms of *cause fields* does not discount the boundary between civil society organizations and political institutions. Constraints on, and opportunities for collective action, are shaped by this division, and it is subjectively relevant for social actors. Yet, rather than taking it for granted, and abiding by an ideology of movements and institutions as 'hostile worlds' (Zelizer, 2000), social movement scholars should empirically assess, in context, the relational

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structures in which ‘activists’ ‘advocates’, ‘professionals’ or ‘bureaucrats’ are objectively and subjectively engaged.

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<sup>1</sup> A translation from the French *espace de la cause des femmes*. I explain in a subsequent note why I use the term ‘field’ rather than ‘space’ in English.

<sup>2</sup> In French, I use the term ‘*espace*’ (space) rather than ‘*champ*’ (field), to assert this weak dimension of the women’s cause field, drawing on Lilian Mathieu’s terminology of ‘space of social movements’ (*espace des mouvements sociaux*) (Mathieu, in this issue). In sociological English, the word ‘field’ is much less associated with the ‘strong’ conception of the field of from Bourdieusian theory.