

An Interview with Neil Fligstein

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As graduate students we seek to cross the divide: from student to teacher, from apprentice to professor. The transition from one side to the other requires not only theoretical and methodological training, but also professional socialization. It is sometimes easy to forget that our education is a gradual process, which takes place on many fronts. This past March, I had the opportunity to interview Neil Fligstein, the Class of 1939 Chancellor's Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, about the decisions and difficulties involved in becoming and being a sociologist and what the view looks like from the other side.

Professor Fligstein's insights into the field of sociology come from thirty years of experience as a practicing sociologist. He has published prolifically on many subjects, including corporate organization, institutional theory, the European Union, organizational theory, and the sociology of work. In addition to his professorial duties, Professor Fligstein is the director of Berkeley's Center for Culture, Organization, and Politics at the Institute of Industrial Relations, a center that brings together scholars from a number of disciplines to accomplish its mission of uncovering "how social arrangements evolve to organize new social spaces." Such a multidisciplinary approach is evident in much of Fligstein's work, above all in his current work on fields. With field theory, Professor Fligstein has advanced a synthetic theory that elaborates on the dynamics of local social orders by drawing on the contributions of multiple sociological subfields and neighbouring disciplines. Most recently, Professor Fligstein completed a book entitled *Euroclash* that explains the incomplete integration of the European Union. In the following interview, Fligstein provides an account of how he came to study these subjects, his views on sociology, and even a little bit about what he does in his spare time.¹

Nicole Denier: What led you to pursue graduate studies in sociology?

Neil Fligstein: At the time I was actually studying cognitive psychology. I was interested in language and language acquisition as an undergraduate and I wrote a senior thesis about this topic. I had applied to and accepted at graduate school to study psycholinguistics and then I backed out at the last moment because I just decided it was too obscure (whatever that meant to me at the time). So I spent a year not being in school almost two years actually by the time it was over. I had always been interested in sociology and had taken as many classes in sociology as I had in psychology. I don't know—for some reason I decided that sociology wasn't as obscure. So then I decided to go study sociology. I was just more interested I guess in social problems. I was involved in social movements. I helped found a newspaper at some point, lots of community work

¹This interview transpired on March 30 2009. It has been edited for clarity and length.

and things. Like many graduate students who go into sociology, I thought that I was going to go do that. So studying it would be okay.

ND: Much of your work deals with topics that deal with both economics and sociology. How did you become interested in those areas?

NF: I had a long conversation once with Mark Granovetter about this. We were always economic sociologists. There wasn't a field at the time but this was what we were all doing. When I went to graduate school I was very interested in American society and felt at the time that we understood very little at that point, very little about American society. We understood little about how it evolved and how it really worked, particularly around the way the economy had evolved. At that moment, this was in the seventies, the only kind of theory we had about that was Marxism. I think most people kind of went through a Marxist phase because that was the only theory there was at the time. That theory turned out to be pretty unsatisfying too for most people because it never got you down to the level of what people are actually doing—that was what I was always interested in.

Talcott Parsons, at one point, gave up economics to the economists. He made this distinction between economy and society. He had this schema of four cells and he was willing to say that the economy was in his schema—but that it belonged to the economists. He was going to give that one to the economists and the economy worked the way they said it worked. Sociologists got the rest. That was his partitioning of the world and I think sociology, for about 20 or 30 years, obeyed those dictates uncritically. They certainly accepted that line. In the seventies and eighties, I think sociologists started to break that down. They did not view the economy as somehow distinct from society.

ND: So you see a definite link between sociology and economics?

NF: Yeah, I mean it's a David and Goliath kind of thing. We're the little guys and they're the big guys, and they continue to win. But the way I see it, economists have a failed theory and they recognize it at this historical moment. I don't think they recognized it twenty years ago, but I think now they see it now as a failed theory. If you get off stage with economists, they'll admit to you that the model doesn't work and its assumptions are wrong. Take the current economic crisis. When Alan Greenspan gets up and says, 'I thought people's self interest would keep them from losing hundreds and hundreds of billions of dollars,' you know there is a problem in the theory. I still think economists control the ideological apparatus in a number of different ways. I guess my goal as a scholar is to say let's take them over. If you want to think big, you might as well think big. Obviously I say that whimsically, but I think that they haven't done a really good job and they don't have a really good model. We're all suffering from it in some way, shape, or form.

ND: That puts sociology in a good position, but what do you think are the challenges for sociology to overcome in the next few years?

NF: What I have found most frustrating about sociology is that it is so Balkanized. One of the most depressing things about sociology is when I look at the American Sociological Association and see that there are forty-four sections, which could be reduced to about six. It tends to create these Balkanized theory groups (for lack of a better term) that are engaged in a discourse with ten other people. From a graduate student's point of view, that's the hardest thing to face in the field—how fragmented it is. The problem is that there just aren't that many people. There are only about 15,000 sociologists in North America, I think. It was bad when I was a graduate student twenty-five years ago, it's much worse now. It's very frustrating for people and it's hard to overcome. One of the things I like about the construction of something called economic sociology is that for the first time in 30 years there is a synthetic field—not a field which wants to break the field into smaller and smaller parts—but a field that wants to say that politics and law and economic processes and organizations and social movements are all part of the same thing. So to me, this is what this economic sociology thing is all about. It is more synthetic than breaking it into a smaller piece.

ND: Similarly, your field theory has the possibility to span a number of areas. You're not so optimistic about it overcoming the differences between the institutionalisms in economics, political science, and sociology. But do you think it can bridge the gaps within sociology?

NF: I'm an optimistic person. I hope that it becomes more synthetic. People have moved so far from (I'll use a dirty word) a general theory of society or a theory of society that it's not in their vocabulary any more. It was so discredited so long ago that you're a bad person if you even have that thought. It's a big taboo in sociology to say that, you know, there really is a general theory of society. Again, you get off stage with people and you talk to them and a lot of people think there is a general theory of society.

ND: So what do you think is the next step for field theory then? Do you think it could evolve then into a more general theory?

NF: I think field theory is a huge breakthrough. It cuts across the social sciences. There are about 8 or 10 words that people use to talk about fields. The most generic way of talking about it is meso-level social order. When you say field everyone thinks you're talking about Pierre Bourdieu. But Bourdieu made the same discovery that people studying organizations did, that people in game theory did, that historical institutionalists did. And none of them knew him. All of these things were discovered at the same time.

[University of Wisconsin sociologist and fellow field theorist] John Levi Martin and I have a standing joke that we're working on the theory of everything. So we call it the TOE when we're hanging out together. That is a joke! But I think with field theory, you come back to what do human beings do and how they make collective action happen. Sometimes it's hard to do; sometimes it's not so hard to do. But the fact that we do it all the time must mean that it's part human nature, it's part of what people do. Sociologists tend toward understanding action in groups, yet we don't even think about it most of the time. Field theory is about that: how groups of people and groups of groups do

these kinds of interactions and watch other people and reference other people and take positions, a very generic level of social process. I figure a lot of people are ready to hear that message in sociology. Hopefully, it will go a little further beyond where it is right now.

I was at this meeting in the early part of the 1990s right when new institutionalism was becoming popular, a meeting which would ultimately lead to Peter Hall's famous paper, *Political Science and the Three Institutionalisms*. The funny thing about that meeting was that all the people in the room—many political scientists and economists, some but not many sociologists—they all realized that other people were talking about what they were talking about. Of course, they preferred their own language to talk about it. My imagery of this is of people walking backwards and they kind of run into each other kind of startled: 'Whoa, that's how we talk about this!' We're looking at the same thing, and that's the part of it I count on. You were asking me about being optimistic or pessimistic, that's the part I'm counting on. People will turn around and realize, wow, we're working on the same thing, and you see it in ways in different literatures in sociology.

ND: Venturing away from how you view the discipline, what makes a project personally enjoyable to you? Or working as a sociologist?

NF: I'll tell you, I'll tell you the truth, can you handle the truth? There are two parts of it. As a scholar, there are just a few things that you really, really care about, and you spend your whole life studying them. I believe that is in fact what I have done. So, what you really care about that, that's one level. The other level is that you just become obsessed with something and you want to understand it. Until you finally grasp it, you're not happy. I guess it's really egocentric and petty bourgeois. It is both those things. Guilty as charged. But, that's what happens with me. I get obsessed about it and I can't let it go and it's in my mind and I keep coming back to it and keep thinking about it. I'm neurotic about it until I have a kind of closure. I don't always know going in what the answer is—that's another part of it, the struggle. I think it's a masochistic thing: I like the struggle. I'm not so sure I enjoy it, it's frustrating, annoying, and it makes you unhappy sometimes. But when it's over, I like to feel at the end of it, that I figured something out.

I finished a book last year called *Euroclash* about Europe and European economic and political integration. It took me a long time to figure that book out. I had been thinking about it on and off for about 15 years. Twice I almost stopped writing the book because I couldn't figure out what I wanted to do. I just couldn't get it, couldn't break through it. And then I don't remember when it happened, but I had this breakthrough and it just all flowed. I'm very proud of it; I think I did exactly what I wanted to do. I think I have grasped what is the central dynamic of what is going on in Western Europe at the moment. Whether anybody else agrees, they can decide for themselves. But I feel that I understand it.

ND: So your work seems to be driven by a very personal desire to understand something, but do you think there is a role or responsibility for sociologists in a broader sense, in the public sphere?

NF: I have a very complicated set of opinions on this subject. In America, it's very difficult to be part of public discussions because there isn't much public discussion going on. For the last 25 years in American politics, the way intellectual discussion fits into American politics is that Congress has a hearing and whoever is running the hearing says I'm going to bring in people who are going to say what I want them to say. This is the model of the hired gun. If you want to become part of a political process you have to take a role that people who are running the political process are willing to give you. So this kind of Habermasian idea of a civil society where there is a set of conversations going on—I don't think that happens very much in American society. I don't know if it happens in Canadian society, I doubt it. Ironically, I've been in Europe on more occasions where I've been in situations like that. I've been at more than one conference in different societies where amazing things happen, where you get representatives of business, representatives of labor, and academics and they're talking. The goal isn't to come up with THE plan, but the goal is to say 'what are the possible things here?' and 'what do the important interest groups in society believe?' Now, it's easier to do this in a smaller society, like the Netherlands, but I've been in conversations like that in Germany and Italy. It's a different kind of political conversation.

I think it's very hard to be a public intellectual. I think the people who do that are really amazing. It's a skill. The ability to explain something succinctly and clearly is something I stand in awe of. I actually don't have that skill. I think of things in this really dense and complex way and it's very difficult to translate that into a thousand-word op-ed piece in a newspaper. Look at someone like Paul Krugman, who does that very well, and is probably the leading public intellectual in American society. I think, at this point, he has like 3 or 4 people who work with him or for him, who help him. But it is still quite amazing. His column is always clear and well-argued. To do that is an art form. That is now his full time job; he doesn't just do that after ten o'clock at night or something. That's not how it works; those columns are his job.

It's hard to connect your work back to a larger public. The opportunities are not always there. I think the way that you have a bigger impact, oddly enough, is through teaching, getting up and talking in front of a class. Last semester, I taught an economy and society class to undergraduates while this whole financial crisis was going on, it was like a laboratory. Everyday I would bring something in from the newspaper and we would talk about it. I would talk a little, a few of them would jump in, and I would say look, here are the concepts we are learning, how do you interpret this stuff, what is going on behind the words. At the end of it, a bunch of them got it; they got a lot of it. To me, that's the place you see a more direct impact on people's thinking, when you're teaching.

There are people who think there's this whole public sociology thing. Being at Berkeley I get to be around some of it. There are students, who were excited about this idea for a while, kind of burned out on it. I think everybody's burned out on it. But I think one reason is, if you really want to go be in a social movement, you should go be in a social movement. I think anybody who has participated in social movements knows that those that do the work get the say. Nobody wants some social science type to come in and to act like the philosopher king. What activists are going to tell the intellectual is: will you stuff envelopes, will you make phone calls, will you stand on street corners, and will you

go to meetings. That's what they want people to do, they don't want people to engage in theoretical analysis—they want people. So the whole idea is a nonstarter. If people want to be members of social movements, they should go do that.

There were two reasons I left social movements. One was that they were crashing and it was all ending. It was very clear in the mid-seventies that social movements were going away. The other was that I had to make a living. So I worked for a while in a paint factory. I was a union paint maker. And I had a boss and decided that wasn't very much fun. I knew I wasn't going to do that forever. I actually made really good money—that's why I did it—it was the day when being a factory worker you made good money relative to other people in society. But, like I said, I didn't want a boss and social movements were ending so I became a professor. That's the whimsical way of looking back and seeing it.

But I think, to be theoretical at this point, I think we're sort of back to the Max Weber problem about intellectuals and politics. Weber thought that it was good that politicians should make political decisions. They should seek out the advice of people, but they should make political decisions. He was very comfortable with that tension. I think Weber recognized that you had to choose either scholarship as a vocation or politics as a vocation, and maybe he was right.

ND: Beyond your vocation as a scholar, what do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

NF: I always paint. It's a hobby—my house is filled with things I've painted over time. I love art. I like to paint because it's not verbal, but it requires the same kind of attention to detail that doing scholarship does. I was always totally blown away by renaissance painting because I could just never figure out how somebody could actually do that, how they could make something look so realistic. So I took lessons in Renaissance painting to learn the techniques. It turns out anybody can draw and anybody can paint. A lot of it is technique, understanding a few simple rules about proportion and getting proportions right. That's a lot of what renaissance painting was: someone actually sat down and figured out that someone's face has a certain relationship to their body; that the three parts of the body, the legs, the face, and the torso. Once you can do that you can draw because it's true of all shapes. Everything is about getting everything in the right proportion. The rest is all about detail. So to be able to go to a gallery and understand how it was done, how the layers were laid down, and what the person was trying to do is really incredible.

ND: So from working in a paint factory to become a Renaissance painter [and a sociologist too].

Nicole Denier is a PhD student in Sociology at McGill University. She is interested in how the state mediates work life, specifically transitions in and out of employment. Together with Professor Michael Smith, she is working on a project that uses panel data to explore income and behaviour after job loss in the United States. Nicole can be reached at nicole.denier@mail.mcgill.ca.

Further Reading

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