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# The United States in the World Today: How Sociologists Think About It and Why It Matters

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## Keywords

global and transnational sociology, hegemony, foreign policy, Pax Americana, world society theory, Marxism, postcolonial theory, field theory

## Abstract

The study of policy alone often means domestic policy, of interest to generalist sociologists interested in how political ideas are turned into domestic legislation, executive action, and/or court litigation. Foreign policy, as the financial, commercial, diplomatic and military relations of a state with foreign states, remains a niche subfield. But foreign relations should be conceived of as the broader set of entanglements between societies, encompassing transnational movements, expert networks, and fields. Then, sociological theories of foreign relations can interest generalist sociologists. In this review, we illustrate how this broad view of foreign relations applies to the study of the United States in the world today (USitWT) by first surveying how sociologists of the world society and world system have focused on transnational relations and the place of the United States in their dynamics, and how they have engaged with the question of power. We then demonstrate how field theorists' study of transnational fields can allow sociologists to reconceptualize the historical role of the USitWT by highlighting continuities between European colonial governmentalities and current US transnational practices. This field perspective can allow sociologists to understand the USitWT as transnational, postcolonial, or neo-colonial governmentality, depending on the sociological and historical depth and range of its relation with different parts of the world.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The United States in the world today (USitWT) is a classic theme among history books and memoirs written by political leaders, foreign policy experts, and professional diplomats. Works in this vein are generally concerned with whether, and if so, how, the United States has lost its postwar prominence—compared with Japan, then Europe, then China—and what can be done about it (Nye 1990, 2010), or alternatively, how the United States can spread liberal values, multilateralism, and support for democracy around the world (Ikenberry & Slaughter 2006). Within academic circles, diplomatic historians (Gaddis 2005), historians of US foreign policy (Hogan 1998, Trachtenberg 1999, Friedberg 2000), and international relations scholars (Allin & Jones 2012) contribute to these larger discussions by drawing on newly released diplomatic archives or by reflecting on broader theoretical discussions about the role of states in international politics. Their essays draw important conclusions for new generations, as undergraduate courses like *The United States and The World* typically attract large numbers of students in US universities across the country.

Sociologists seldom intervene in these debates, including US sociologists, who nevertheless might be best positioned to study the role of the United States in the world. Their absence may come as a surprise. Sociologists show a deep interest in global economic orders and social inequality, democracies in war and peace, gender equality and antidiscrimination policies, and freedom of expression and security: All of these topics have a global dimension, which would require US sociologists to understand how international mechanisms affect domestic outcomes at home. So why have they left the study of the USitWT to other disciplines?

There are many explanations for why sociology has, with a few exceptions, largely avoided this discussion. Two reasons stand out. First is the professionalization of the discipline since the end of the Vietnam War: In the 1980s, US sociologists were incentivized by a robust reward system to demarcate themselves from the study of international politics, which was seen as contentious, politicized, and based on scarce and largely unreliable qualitative data such as memoirs of statesmen and slowly and scantily declassified archives (Hanhimäki & Westad 2004). The rare US sociologists who have studied human rights, development and globalization in a transnational perspective since the 1980s have been inspired by a positivist and seemingly value-neutral epistemology that has encouraged them to produce theories on generic units of the world society (Meyer et al. 1975) with a certain level of generality—by focusing on states, experts, or international organizations (IOs), rather than a specific state like the United States or a specific IO like the European Union (EU). From this epistemological standpoint, the study of the USitWT appears less scientific than journalistic, and hence less professional than the study of the world society.

Second, despite calls to abandon sociology's inherent "methodological nationalism" (Burawoy 2005), many US sociologists have privileged the study of domestic US social problems because of the latter's urgency—especially, but not only, in the eras of Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Trump. Methodologically, it appeared intuitive to look for proximate causes and effects to domestic US problems and hence to study the domestic context before looking abroad for actions the United States may have taken in the world that could later boomerang back into US politics. For instance, US sociologists have looked within the US domestic history of slavery for the explanation of pervading racism in the United States, rising economic inequality, or the reproduction of sexism and patriarchy in US firms and families. Less often have they compared the rise of Jim Crow laws with interwar European colonialism(s), or the entanglements between the social, cultural, political, and legal manifestations of interwar colonial power conceived as a transnational field, which may tie the US experience with other parts of the world, and what postwar anticolonial movements meant and achieved in each case.

For all these reasons, sociology has yet to consider the USitWT as a topic worth the constitution of a specific subfield—but it should. Or should it? Narrowly conceived, this field of study could be approximated as the sociology of foreign policy in the post–Cold War era. But if we restrict it to this narrow view, it is not clear if US mainstream sociology can greatly invest in, and benefit from, the study of the USitWT, for two main reasons. First, sociologists often assert that the study of policy is too narrow a topic and is worth leaving to political scientists. Ideological and political discourses, and bureaucratic life in the administrations in charge of implementing, monitoring, and enforcing policies, are the topics of countless books and articles in public policy analysis, political science (Hall 1989), and administrative law—largely outside US sociology.<sup>1</sup> It is even truer for the study of foreign policy, with the exception of a few works of organizational sociology (including, but not limited to, those by military sociologists). So why would generalist sociologists invest in this already populated field, when policymaking mechanisms operating in foreign policy are even less familiar to sociologists than social processes involved in the making of social, economic, cultural, or scientific policies?

Second, “foreign policy” is an administrative category constructed by the state itself to draw a boundary between foreign and domestic elements. Claiming to conduct foreign policy interventions allows the state to take actions it could not take in the domestic context (spying, arresting without court orders, deporting, etc.). If sociologists claim to be sociologists of foreign policy, then they may take such administrative categories for granted and end up essentializing the reality of the “foreign,” homogenizing all relationships between “us” and “them,” and endorsing the viewpoint of state agencies on their reality. In applying this viewpoint to the study of US foreign policy, sociologists would risk duplicating wholesale within academia the US-centered viewpoints of US diplomatic and military bureaucracies as well as think tanks whose goal is to shape future US foreign policy (Katzenstein 1996). In that case, it may be best to leave the expertise in foreign policy analysis to political scientists and associated disciplines focusing on the study of policy.

In this review, we argue that studying the USitWT means something quite different from the sociology of US foreign policy, or the study of the United States *and* the world, as if the United States were neither a part of the world nor itself coconstituted by the rest of the world. We argue that the study of the USitWT should consider that the boundary between “us” (domestic) and “them” (foreign) is multifaceted, contingent, and multiscalar—in other words, that the relationships between the United States and other parts of the world may be multiple (following, for instance, state-to-state relations or semicolonial arrangements of indirect or direct control), inherited from sometimes long-forgotten historical contingencies (Go 2011), and sustained by many different kinds of actors at all levels (from personal relationships between highly networked individuals to routine relations between public agencies). This perspective thus envisions societies in general, and US society in particular, as intrinsically open to alterity as well as constituted by a

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<sup>1</sup>The scope of this review article excludes the great number of (often excellent) academic outputs devoted to studying the domestic bureaucratic mechanisms driving the conceptualization, adoption, and implementation of foreign policy: For a classic analysis of foreign policy determinants, readers are directed to Allison (1971), and later, Goldstein & Keohane (1993) or Sagan (1994). Often, research that takes foreign policy administrations as sites of study is lumped together in the neo-institutionalist school of international relations (IR), which famously disputes with the IR realists (Jervis 1976, Krasner 1983) the importance of domestic versus external factors as determinants of foreign policy decisions. The decision to exclude all IR literature from our review article, including that of the constructivists, some of whom try to straddle the boundary between realists and neo-institutionalists (Kratochwil 1989), is an important limitation. But it is peripheral to the goal of this review.

plurality of socio-legal orders coexisting at the same time.<sup>2</sup> Thus, whereas the sociology of foreign policy would constitute a niche subfield populated by military sociologists, diplomatic historical sociologists, and organizational sociologists of the state, the study of the USitWT could be a general interest perspective for all sociologists, even those not primarily interested in military affairs, diplomatic state policy, or colonial history.

For this field to develop along these lines, sociologists must succeed in taking up key theoretical and political challenges—in particular, how to conceive of the question of power in transnational relations. We first survey a range of studies in the sociology of globalization and development, coalescing around world society theory in sociology and studies of acculturation processes in anthropology, which view the US influence in the world as mostly ideational and supportive of progressive values, thus escaping the question of power. Second, to illustrate how the study of the USitWT raises the question of power for generalist sociologists, we survey various sociological literatures beyond the narrow sociology of foreign policy, such as Marxist scholars of the capitalist world system and sociologists of the global diffusion of neoliberal policies. In particular, we focus on their explanation of power as ideology, in the Marxian sense, and infrastructural power, related to hard economic and military factors. Third, we show how field theorists have further complexified this question of power in general, and US power more specifically, by socializing it in the creation of transnational fields. Fourth, we demonstrate how the question of the emergence and transformation of transnational fields can be related to the historical sociology of colonial fields and colonial governmentalities. We conclude from this survey that sociologists in new subfields (like the study of neoliberalism, globalization, empires, or colonialism) make theoretical, epistemological, and ethical assumptions, too often implicitly, about the USitWT, which should be examined through theoretical critical scrutiny in order to avoid falling into essentializing or provincializing perspectives on a range of contemporary social issues.

## **2. THE PAX AMERICANA OF WORLD SOCIETY THEORISTS IN DISPUTE**

During the Cold War, a relatively peaceful and stable division of labor seems to have structured the relationship between three US disciplines: political science, history, and sociology. Claiming expertise over analysis of the USitWT, political science not only produced knowledge about contemporary developments in US foreign policy but also educated the future cadres of policymakers destined to manage the US Departments of State, Defense, Commerce or the Treasury. Second, history, and especially diplomatic history, sought to interpret official declassified diplomatic archives and oral history repositories (Hanhimäki & Westad 2004) while writing for a broad public on historical world negotiations in which the United States played a key role—from the Treaty of Versailles conference in 1919 to the Yalta Conference, the Détente, or the collapse of the Soviet Union. Third, sociology has long focused on comparative studies of society, revolutions, and revolutionary states (Skocpol 1979), which provided theoretical models as to why states would choose to turn away from the so-called free world. This Parsonian division of labor, overdetermined by the Cold War, for instance, implicated sociologists in the creation of Sovietology programs in academia, as well as in the design of a political strategy for US intervention in the revolutionary Global South through aid and development programs aimed at winning the hearts and minds of decolonizing nations (Gilman 2003).

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<sup>2</sup>This perspective is deeply associated with the legal pluralist tradition, which had largely disappeared from US and French sociology (Mallard 2020) but not from anthropology.

Since the end of the Vietnam War, ten years after the independence wave of the 1960s, scholars following Meyer et al.'s (1997) world society approach to USitWT have redefined how sociology could play a role in the analysis of a postindependence Pax Americana. Like their Parsonian predecessors, they focused on how the United States has affected the diffusion of global scripts related to development, social norms, and human rights rather than on international security issues. But they also developed an original approach to world affairs by arguing that a world society, made up of a club of independent sovereign nation-states, has emerged out of the participation in multilateral forums of newly independent state representatives and their experts, in which the latter exchange ideas, normative beliefs and "global scripts" horizontally in a way that produces a high level of convergence across the globe. According to these neo-Durkheimian scholars, cultural values such as progress and modernity have served as overarching referents, espoused by the newly independent nation-states of the 1960s, which go beyond the adoption of norms of equality of states and sovereign independence that have characterized the world society since the 1960s. International law itself cannot account for the fact the new world society since the 1960s has converged toward the adoption of the same global scripts, with all states willing to appear more modern than their neighbors, whether modernity means pushing further the definition and protection of human rights (Frank & Moss 2017), gender equality (Lerch et al. 2022), science education (Drori et al. 2003), or environmental policy (Longhofer & Schofer 2010).

Although world society theorists rarely study the world society (or societies) that preceded the Pax Americana, the postindependence world order of equal sovereign nation-states that they describe stands in contrast with the prewar world of European empires, engaged in vertical projects of norm diffusion within their peripheries through some degree of semisovereignty, economic dependency, and semilegal autonomy. This major shift from the age of colonial globalization to decolonial globalization is assumed to be an effect of the US leadership during the Cold War and the 1990s, when the United States was perceived as the new benevolent hegemon, fighting to defend territorial integrity (as in the case of Kuwait or Bosnia in the 1990s) and acting in favor of rule-of-law reforms through multilateral institutions, from the United Nations (UN) to international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs). Thus, in world society theory, which was mostly developed at California-based universities (Stanford University and the University of California, Irvine, being central hubs), sociologists resurrected the liberal belief in the possibility of a globalized world of nation-states without empires (Meyer et al. 1997) and united around the defense of the values in the UN Charter. That vision could fit in harmony with post-Vietnam US ambitions to serve as benevolent leader in this new horizontal system of states emerging in the Global South, on which the European colonial powers, or the Soviet Union, had lost their grip.

Still, far from being naïve, world society theorists also noted that if, since decolonization, most states have been willing to talk the talk of progressive discourse, not all of them have walked the walk—the famous decoupling between discourse and practice that these scholars have highlighted (Boli et al. 2011). The identification of such a decoupling between symbolic emulation and effective adoption of liberal policies places the onus for change on the implementation side of international and transnational rulemaking: The degree of de/coupling between norm adherence and implementation varies according to the degree to which newly independent nation-states are integrated into the liberal core of the world society (Longhofer & Jorgenson 2017). The world society literature is heavily focused on studies of liberal discourses in which Global South states have strived toward emulating US-driven approaches to market governance, rule of law, and democracy, at least in reason, if not in administrative practice. Researchers in this tradition have ignored cases in which US efforts were openly resisted, contested, and overturned. Focusing exclusively on norm diffusion at the expense of norm resistance or active geopolitical challenge takes for granted

the existence of a soft and acquiesced US liberal hegemony and does not delve into the question of how such hegemony has been constructed on the ashes of European colonialism—thus ignoring the question of ideology, in contrast to neo-Marxian approaches to global capitalism and power, to which we will soon turn. It also fails to describe the plurality of competing world societies and their normative underpinnings.

Still, world society theory has found powerful echoes among prominent IR constructivist communities of scholars interested in complexifying the mapping of global scripts and their circulation from the United States to the Global South and back, according to a cumulative process (including boomerang effects) by which progressive liberal norms are slowly but surely incorporated and translated in local scripts and repertoires of action by transnational advocacy networks (Finnemore 1993, Finnemore & Sikkink 1998, Keck & Sikkink 1998, Djelic & Andersson 2006, Dobbin et al. 2007, Bhuta 2012, Dersnah 2019). Not only did the development of world society theory in sociology reinforce the constructive move made by political scientists away from pure logics of state power, it also echoed recent findings in anthropology (Riles 2000), and the work of Merry (2006a,b; see also Destrooper & Merry 2018) in particular, which has developed along parallel but reinforcing lines. For instance, Merry's concept of "vernacularization" complements the idea of decoupling: When human rights or development discourses and scripts are developed by countries of the Global North, they need to be incorporated into local realities in the Global South through a series of contextualization processes performed by cultural brokers such as INGOs and local activists. Like world society theory, Merry's findings are buttressed by historians of human rights, who show how Western cultural scripts can have limiting effects when not translated into local codes (Moyn 2010). And again, as in the case of world society theorists, anthropologists of human rights often disregard the contributions of Global South political and legal elites to the creation of progressive global scripts: They play at the local level, by impeding or facilitating vernacularization processes, and they lack access to the global level, which remains associated with the UN and its top backers, often members of the UN Security Council. Such theorists have reintroduced a hierarchy between levels of action, which is challenged by field theorists, as well as by other anthropologists of norm diffusion, although in different ways.

Against this liberal wave of sociological, political, and anthropological studies of the USitWT, new scholarship, which does not necessarily claim to be inspired by field theory, has started to question the linear character of the diffusion model adopted by these authors. Some anthropological studies show the key role played, for instance, by Latin American experts in the construction of the international human rights (Marino 2019) and development discourse (Escobar 1995, Pinheiro 2014). Others focus on the role of Arab experts in transforming the UN into an inclusive forum for the setting of new utopias and benchmarks for development (Mallard 2019). In general, anthropology has moved away from backing world society theory with ethnographic studies of vernacularization by focusing instead on processes of vernacularization in reverse (Edelman & James 2011), in which discourses are diffused from local contexts in the Global South to UN global discourses and then discussions by US diplomats and INGOs. In fact, recent scholarship in the anthropology of IOs has criticized UN bureaucracies for maintaining biases from the age of colonization in their work practices and implicit assumptions about what constitutes modern governance, or for being stuck in a managerial iron cage that emphasizes procedural conformity with new public management rules (Cowan & Billaud 2015), adherence to audit-like culture (Strathern 2000), and technical abstraction (Zaloznaya & Hagan 2012), rather than the promotion of the progressive values with which world society theorists and previous anthropologists of human rights associated these institutions.

The approach adopted by recent ethnographies of IOs has converged with that of critical international legal theorists developing Third World approaches to international law (TWAAIL)

that defend a subaltern standpoint and go back into the distant past to analyze core discursive boundaries of the postwar US liberal script (Schrijver 1997, Anghie et al. 2003, Rajagopal 2003, Anghie 2005, Rodríguez-Garavito & de Sousa Santos 2005, Chimni 2006, Pahuja 2011). For instance, TWAIL draws a direct line between the Eurocentric, Christian roots of international law in the seventeenth century and the US liberal discourse of development and international law in the second half of the twentieth century (Koskeniemi 2001). As many of these historians of international law remind sociologists, the postwar UN order erected by the United States was meant to maintain global order through peace, security, and cooperation, without questioning the hierarchical, European-dominated colonial power structure of global affairs (Mutua 2000, Mazower 2010). Historically, the progressive global scripts that have arisen after the independence wave of the 1960s were associated less with US global dominance than with the rise of the Third World on the world stage. These ethnographies and histories of international law thus challenge the assumed pathways of global discourse diffusion, offering alternative narratives showing the richness of Global South initiatives and the presence of nonprogressive elements in US-produced global liberal scripts. But they still fail to address the seeming invincibility of US hegemony despite those challenges, and the overarching question of power in global politics, which field theorists try to address.

### 3. GLOBAL POWER AND US HEGEMONY TODAY: THE WORLD SYSTEM PERSPECTIVE

Whereas world society theorists, anthropologists of IOs, and TWAIL scholars debate about the extent to which the main global liberal scripts are US-inspired or shaped by newly independent states after the 1960s, and whether historical legacies may explain the presence of nonprogressive elements in such liberal scripts, another tradition in sociology, inspired by Marx and his epigones, has addressed the key question of how the United States has managed to secure and protect its hegemony in the world today by focusing on economic and financial issues. According to this view, if a US hegemony exists today, it relies less on liberal ideas than on the power of the US dollar, the robustness of dollarized economies worldwide, and the associated neoliberal ideology that justified the “financialization of the American economy” (Krippner 2005), which preceded or accompanied the financialization of many other economies worldwide. If US financial and cultural hegemony is associated with the rise of neoliberalism, it seems more urgent to study the role of the United States in diffusing its currency in global exchanges (Chorev 2007) than in its promotion of liberal values (Centeno & Cohen 2013). In fact, the two intellectual research programs run parallel, as neoliberalism forms a coherent package of economic and financial policy reforms that is clearly distinct from liberalism (Blyth 2013, Zuboff 2019). It is primarily concerned not with human rights protection, gender equality, or democracy promotion but with market regulation and the limits placed on public finance by private concerns.

For scholars of neoliberalism as opposed to liberalism, the former operates as an ideology in the Marxian sense and not in the neo-Durkheimian sense of a symbolic system of classification, which world society theorists give to the liberal scripts they study. Indeed, neoliberalism illustrates three key aspects of Marxist understandings of ideology. First, neoliberalism is presented by the United States and Washington, DC-based international financial institutions (IFIs) as the only readily available ideology for the development and financial health of nations since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Centeno & Cohen 2012). Neoliberals thus essentialize its historical necessity by naturalizing socially constructed facts into essential features. Second, rather than evolving according to a scientific logic of trial and error, this ideology leaves unexamined its conditions of success or failure—in fact, IFIs have notoriously evaded acknowledging responsibility when their

prescriptions created or accelerated financial crises in the 1990s and 2000s (Best 2005, Mallard & McGoey 2018). Third, the core assumptions of the neoliberal ideology are presented as universal financial and economic remedies valid everywhere (Flandreau 2006, Özgöde 2022), despite the fact that they have a specific genealogy related to US economic thinking and the Reaganomics (Balachandran et al. 2018) of the 1980s, which explains why these remedies are also called the Washington Consensus (Samuelson 1989). This alleged universal validity is also contradicted by the reality of specific neoliberal prescriptions that have been applied to different crises and different countries by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) during financial crises: Financial rescue programs have often varied in nature, scope, and impact (Pénet 2018), in large part due to the specific historical relations entertained by the United States and the target countries of neoliberal programs. For example, the management of the 2008–2012 US and European financial crises differed deeply from that of South Asia in the 1990s (Tooze 2018).

Still, among scholars of neoliberalism, differences exist in how one should interpret the role of the USitWT in diffusing the neoliberal script—or, rather, ideology. Some scholars cast the role of the United States as important, but accessory, while others attempt to demonstrate that neoliberalism cannot be properly understood without excavating the unique economic and political (including military) dominance exerted by the United States on other parts of the world since the end of the Cold War. According to the former, the neoliberal ideology exerts its power autonomously, as if the US government and its multiple agencies, associated experts, and policy forums were merely agents of diffusion of the market rules associated with the Washington Consensus, pushing either directly, through the influence of the US Department of the Treasury and Department of Commerce, or indirectly, through friendly US states and IFIs like the IMF, the World Bank, or the EU (Fourcade-Gourinchas & Babb 2002). In their view, the US hegemon is captured and constrained by the power of ideology; it is neoliberalism itself that is conceived as an ideological “empire” (Hardt & Negri 2001), whose capital may be Washington, DC (along with Brussels, where the EU is located, and Geneva; see Slobodian 2018), but in which the United States is cast purely as a white knight of the neoliberal order (Dezalay & Garth 2002).

Other neo-Marxian students of global capitalism, associated with world system theory (Wallerstein 1983, Arrighi 1994), challenge this vision of neoliberalism and the role of the USitWT in creating the new capitalist global order. They associate the rise of neoliberalism with the changes in the infrastructure (Kingsbury & Maisley 2021) of world markets that lead to the US financial hegemony—especially after the free floating of the US dollar, with the Federal Reserve taking a role as lender of last resort for the global economy. Here, the driver of neoliberal diffusion is not the specific characteristics of neoliberal ideas and practices (e.g., their essentializing, dehistoricizing, and universalizing characteristics) but the hard characteristics of US power in transforming the rules of global capitalism: trade flows, investment patterns, changing circuits of capital accumulation (Fairbrother 2014), and the role of US military power in the protection of US capital worldwide, which all conspired to place the United States in a hegemonic position in the late twentieth century. For world system theorists, neoliberalism is indeed the reflection of a hegemonic rather than nonhegemonic period. During hegemonic periods, there is a dominant power that enforces free trade, the opening of markets, and financialization of the economy (Chase-Dunn 1998, Mallard & Sgard 2016). In such periods, financial capital is centralized within the hegemon’s jurisdiction, leading to the disciplining of challengers by the issuance of broad market exclusions from the leading global capital market, now located in New York City (Farrell & Newman 2019b). A century ago, that role was still played by the British Empire. Today, it is indeed played by the United States because of its vast military and financial resources. Neoliberal policies have thus constituted an essential part of the foreign policy of the United States in economic and financial matters, which explains the inconsistency in how neoliberal principles are



applied in different financial crises to different countries. Neoliberalism alone could not have persisted for so long without the US economic and military hegemony post-1989: In the absence of the US competitive hedge, blocs would have continued to enforce strong boundaries against cross-bloc trade, investment, and financial interdependence, making neoliberal prescriptions impossible to realize (Wallerstein 1983).

To demonstrate how the United States historically gained that hegemonic position, Marxist sociologists have drawn on dependency theory scholarship (Wallerstein 1974, Chase-Dunn 1975, Cardoso & Faletto 1979, Evans 1979) to show, for instance, how the US government and US multinational companies (MNCs) have kept peripheral nations from the Global South in a state of underdevelopment by acquiring the surplus generated from the latter's productive resources, even after decolonization and the wave of postindependence nationalizations of the 1970s. Marxist theorists emphasize how US and European extractive industries continued to operate unchallenged even in postcolonial African contexts in the 1970s (Burawoy 1974, Onimode 1978). First, as post-war European reconstruction required sizeable foreign investment from the United States and led to large overseas expansion of originally US companies (Skully 1976), new Western MNCs rebuilt on the accumulation of such injected capital to reaffirm their presence in postcolonial African markets in the 1950s and 1960s, and to delegitimize self-rule in economic affairs there. Second, even after the wave of nationalization of extractive industries in the 1970s by newly independent nations, which imperiled the power of Western MNCs, the US and European capitalists regrouped to dominate global trade, and acquire immense profits from it, by moving away from direct control of national extractive industries to direct control of global trade flows (Blas & Farchy 2021). In the 1980s and 1990s, global traders built their empires on the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of China to reproduce the conditions of monopoly financial capitalism (Schumpeter 1919, Hardt & Negri 2001, Harvey 2003) that had long benefited European empires.<sup>3</sup> Mergers between traders and extractive MNCs—especially in the energy sector—occurred in the 2000s, which gave rise to the new giant mining and trading companies that today occupy the role held by concessionary companies in the colonial era (Craven 2007, Balachandran et al. 2018). Meanwhile, newly independent states that inherited large public debts from the colonial period fell into debt traps, which gave their private creditors undue influence over domestic policy and made it impossible to develop strong industrial policies (Bedjaoui 1978).

This generally critical view of the rise of MNCs by Marxist scholars has constituted a mounting challenge to the viewpoint developed at the time by IR scholars of the transnational relations school (Nye & Keohane 1971), for whom the end of colonialism in the 1960s was a promise for international collaboration to solve common problems (Huntington 1973). This Marxist perspective maintains that without US military and financial hegemony, neoliberalism would not have emerged as an ideology shaping states' financial and economic policies worldwide, and also that it would not have held in the face of repeated financial crises. Therefore, its sustainability should not be interpreted as evidence that other nations have naturalized its prescriptions unquestioningly, as if they were incapable of challenging them discursively. Rather, world system theorists insist that such hegemony is backed by hard power but also that the current hegemon will end up being challenged by rising powers, as there is no end to history (Braudel 1992). Marxian studies of MNCs like those developed by Evans (1979) on the “developmental state” during the late 1970s highlighted the power imbalances between the legal capacities of newly independent states and

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<sup>3</sup>Marxist theorists follow Lenin's (1919) view of imperialism as the “highest stage of capitalism” to explain how the law of decreasing profits, caused by increasing competition in developed markets, pushes multinational companies to expand into new markets.

MNCs or information asymmetries between them (Schiller 1979). They also showed how states from the Global South could limit MNCs' power by using developmental counter-strategies (Biersteker 1980, Adler 1987)—for instance, by forcing MNCs to accept some technology transfers to national industrial champions (Kay et al. 1976, Fischer & Behrman 1979). Still, the reasons why certain countries would resist against, or go along with, the hegemon are not accounted for by world system theory, whose unit of analysis is located at the systemic level.

World system theory fails to adequately address the dynamics leading from a hegemonic to a nonhegemonic world system. Thirty years after these writings, a transition away from US hegemony may be perceptible in the new competition between the United States, China, and the EU to attract world capital and redefine market rules (Farrell & Newman 2019a), but it is not completely clear how to account for the strength of fragmentation forces. The relationships that African states have formed over the past twenty years with China—through a policy of foreign direct investment that eschews IMF-style conditionality in favor of implicit conditionalities, such as the expectation of silencing criticism of China's actions in multilateral forums like the UN—has become the focus of new literature (Brautigam 2011, Monson 2013, Siu & McGovern 2017), challenging the notion that the Washington Consensus rules the world with or without US-EU backing.

The fragmentation of global trade rules (Shaffer 2021), the weakening of the US dollar's supremacy, or the imposition of politically motivated market exclusions would come as indirect consequences of geopolitical tectonic shifts underlying the transition from a hegemonic to a non-hegemonic period.<sup>4</sup> It may be the case that, when confronted with such new challenges, the United States will turn from diffuser and enforcer of neoliberal principles into a free-riding hegemon subverting the rules of the neoliberal system in order to survive as the sole hegemon (Mallard & Sun 2022): The end of US hegemony may result in the end of neoliberalism. Still, the mechanisms at work in the creation and agony of US hegemony over world markets need to be better historicized and placed in a series of events emphasizing reversibility, contingency, and rapid shifts in not only military/economic but also cultural/sociological power in which technological innovation plays a key role (Krige 2006).

World system theorists have been criticized for focusing too much on the center of the world system and the battles between would-be hegemonies (Dezalay & Garth 2002). They fail to analyze the reasons why peripheral states comply, or do not, with the hegemon's rules. As Babb & Kentikelenis (2021, p. 534) write in a recent review of studies on neoliberalism and the rise of US hegemony, "We need to more fully understand how US 'informal empire'—based not on direct control, but on clientelistic relationships with elites in the Global South and an ever-present threat of coercion in cases of noncompliance—impacts developmental trajectories and the direction of institutional change." We may find that Global South countries are not so passive in importing neoliberal ideas and prescriptions from the United States, and that ideological battles played out domestically between different party coalitions, social movements, and expert coalitions may have had some ripple effects from the country level to the world system level. Rather than focusing exclusively on the center's state administrations, policy experts, trade patterns, security arrangements, or fiscal incentives for capital attraction, scholars have started to focus on transnational communities of policymakers and experts responsible for interpreting the norms associated with neoliberal governance in what they call transnational fields, which span national boundaries between Global North and South (Kentikelenis & Babb 2019), and which show that the formation

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<sup>4</sup>For instance, Chinese or Russian governments barter economic development against political loyalty and mutual security assurance in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Iran-China deal, the Iran-Saudi deal, and rising tensions against Russian oil and gas.

of US hegemony—and its fragilization—take place in social fields, rather than in a social vacuum filled by military and economic interstate dynamics. Understanding the articulation between country level and world system level dynamics and paying attention to socio-cultural forces at work in transnational relations that link these two levels are two main tasks that transnational field theorists try to accomplish. This is why we turn now to this field perspective in the study of the USitWT, inspired by the post-Marxian sociology of Pierre Bourdieu.

#### **4. DIVERGING PATHWAYS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: THE CONTRIBUTION OF FIELD THEORETICAL APPROACHES**

Sociological field theories, especially that developed by Bourdieu, have recently attracted the attention of sociologists, IR scholars,<sup>5</sup> political scientists, and socio-legal scholars, who study foreign policy and the role of the USitWT in transnational security arrangements, like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Mérand 2010), international nuclear security (Mallard 2014), the defense of human rights (Madsen & Verschraegen 2013), democracy promotion in Europe (Guilhot 2005) and Africa (Dezalay 2019), international criminal law (Hagan & Levi 2005), counter-terrorism (Bigo 2011, Stampnitzky 2013), foreign aid, humanitarian action, and development (Autesserre 2014, Krause 2014), to give a few examples. Field theorists are generally unsatisfied with world society and world system theories, which, to them, fail to deeply socialize the transnational pathways of diffusion of (liberal or neoliberal) ideas and policies from country to country. As Dezalay & Garth (2002, p. 8) write, when sociologists study transnational flows, there is “a temptation to decontextualize the international strategies into such categories as ‘epistemic communities’ or ‘advocacy networks,’ which highlight only the international character of the actors” and fail to capture the domestic field dynamics of “palace wars.”

Before we delve into exploring how field theory is used in such studies, we need to notice that “field” is a dangerously polysemic concept, which can mean many different things depending upon the discipline in which that concept is being used. The common-sense quality of that concept may be responsible for a poorly theorized use, as scholars may assume that a field is equivalent to its prosaic use: an ensemble of practitioners participating in the same professional activity, as well as the playground where such activity takes place. Such a characterization is not completely wrong. In fact, it is not even clear that Bourdieu intended his field theory to constitute a theory in the positivist sense. Rather, it may be a perspective: The notion of field orients our attention to the social creation of status hierarchies and the inequalities that are reproduced over various generations of political and economic elites, based on the unequal distribution of different forms of capital—social, economic, cultural—and the unequal perception of the rules of the game by those who play it in domestic contexts. Bourdieu’s (1987) theory of social reproduction insists on exclusionary mechanisms that are central to the working of a field of power: the ascription of status and resources to certain occupations and not others; the informal alliances formed between holders of economic capital and state power to exclude those who lack economic or cultural capital; and the gendered intergenerational dynamics of social transmission of capital, especially those related to the early socialization processes in family and school settings that are responsible for shaping a specific embodied habitus, which will then determine the expectations of individuals to attain, or not, certain positions of power.

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<sup>5</sup>This review focuses on the few sociological works (for instance Gibson 2012, Mallard 2014), which have focused on the security aspects of the USitWT, as a survey of security studies on the USitWT coming from the field of IR is beyond its scope.

In Bourdieuan sociological analyses, there have been two different ways of understanding how transnational power relations can be located in fields of power. On the one hand, some sociologists of political fields continue, like Bourdieu himself (1987, 1999), to locate fields of power at the national level and to dispute the possibility that fields can become transnational in the sense of being almost supranational (Dezalay & Garth 2002, 2010; Mallard 2014). Indeed, Bourdieu's (1999) theory of social reproduction in fields of power was premised on the notion that the boundaries of a field fall squarely within the scope of national jurisdictions, and that the transnational spaces (rather than fields) in which ideas, concepts, practices, and capital circulate do not have enough weight to truly affect processes of social reproduction/change at the national level. The central focus of first-generation<sup>6</sup> field theorists like Dezalay & Garth (2002) is therefore comparative in kind: They focus on multiple domestic fields of power in various Latin American countries and identify key external factors that also explain whether, and how, battling European and US hegemonies have succeeded in partially transforming the social fabric in such domestic contexts, emphasizing the importance of the educational strategies of elites from the Global North (with their foundations, NGOs, and philanthropies working abroad) and Global South (with their ties to economic or state elites). This field perspective leads them to compare how older European and newer US hegemonies have worked in four different contexts (Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico), with the goal of explaining commonalities as well as differences in the spread of neoliberalism from the Global North to Latin America, and how the latter was influenced by, and affected, the reproduction of inequalities in each country. They find that across Latin America, "the success of the import [of neoliberal policies and state-society relations that the latter presuppose] was inevitably tied to domestic palace wars [between bearers of economic or cultural/state capital] and to the international competition to export state expertises" (Dezalay & Garth 2002, p. 5) between former European "metropolises" (e.g., the former homeland/state exercising power over colonial empire,<sup>7</sup> whose center was located in London, Paris, Amsterdam, or Lisbon), against the rising power of the United States. In contrast to TWAIL scholars, who insist that flows of ideas, policies, and state reforms have started within the Global South before moving either to other parts of the Global South or to the Global North, these field theorists focus on North to South transfers, at the risk of minimizing the transnational connections in the Global South itself (for instance, from Chile to Argentina, or Brazil to Mexico). But their analysis contextualizes, in much greater detail than world society or world system theorists generally do, how domestic processes of elite control over state and society work in the Global South. And they also pay attention to what is being circulated in transnational networks—not just liberal ideas, or ready-made neoliberal policies, but cultural and economic capital.

In contrast, second-generation field theorists of Bourdieuan inspiration believe that the Bourdieuan notion of field should be expanded to cover a kind of transnational space (Go & Krause 2016, Krause 2018); for instance, the interactions between US and EU politics are located within a supranational weak field shaped by strategies of elite reproduction of US think tanks, philanthropies, and European states and their elite schools (Mudge & Vauchez 2012). Such socio-legal scholars have characterized weak fields as these transnational spaces that connect strong domestic fields, even within the Global South itself (Dezalay 2019), and which are characterized by the piling up of international institutions, transnational expert communities, norms, and rules about how to interpret norms (Guilhot 2005, Bigo 2011, Madsen & Verschraegen 2013). Still, these

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<sup>6</sup>They are first-generation in the sense that Yves Dezalay's PhD supervisor was Pierre Bourdieu himself, whereas second-generation field theorists had first-generation field theorists as PhD supervisors—for instance, Dezalay for Vauchez, Guilhot and Madsen.

<sup>7</sup>This is in contrast to the more classical sociological sense of being a metropolis, or large urban area.

transnational fields are weak, they claim, to the extent that the mechanisms for the selection of new generations of transnational insiders remain strongly anchored at the national level, where the transmission of cultural and social capital still takes place to a large extent. These first- and second-generation Bourdieuan approaches are thus not incompatible between themselves, and they also complement non-Bourdieuan approaches of transnational legal orders, which have been developed by socio-legal scholars interested in studying the role of the USitWT in international commercial law (Shaffer 2021) or finance (Halliday & Carruthers 2009, Halliday & Shaffer 2015). But while the study of such transnational fields has shed new light on complex and subtle transnational processes of legal ordering and social capital accumulation, these two branches of field theory have yet to fully address the question of the past origins of transnational fields and of their historicity.

## 5. TRANSNATIONAL, POSTCOLONIAL, OR NEO-COLONIAL FIELDS?

A few studies of transnational fields have begun to focus on historical periods that preceded the rise of an international society in which the nation-state is conceived as the sole sovereign authority over one territory—a principle that neoliberal governance and US hegemony have weakened. This new attention paid to the colonial roots of domestic fields, either in the German (Steinmetz 2007) or French (Mallard 2019) contexts, has led other neo-Bourdieuan sociologists to disentangle the colonial and metropolitan spaces that Bourdieu's field perspective wrongly assumed to be originally formed as one coherent national field associated with the former metropole (either metropolitan France or the British isles, rather than the whole French or British empires). These field theorists show that, just like US foreign policy today adopts different policies toward different regions of the world, determined by the segmentation of the orbits of diplomatic elites who circulate between Washington, DC, and these regions (Mallard 2014), the late-nineteenth-century and interwar European colonial fields were also segmented, with different elites carrying different kinds of habitus circulating in different zones of European empires: for instance, German colonial Africa versus German Asia (Steinmetz 2007, 2008) or different parts of French West Africa (Mallard 2019).

Still, a debate exists between Bourdieuan sociologists who believe there is a fundamental difference between how colonial fields and contemporary transnational fields operate and those who believe there is more similarity—and continuity—than difference. Among the former, Steinmetz (2014) emphasizes that colonialism is a narrower concept than imperialism, as the former always involves the arrogation of sovereignty by a conquering power over some territory, whereas imperialism can take more subtle and informal forms of power (Steinmetz 2008). Still, other authors have highlighted the diversity of territorial sovereignty exercised under colonialism by studying chartered companies like the East India Company (Adams 1996) or the late-nineteenth-century European empires (Mallard 2019). Among the latter, some have highlighted the similarities between European interwar colonial and US postwar policy (Lazreg 2016; Go 2008b, 2020) and ideas (Slobodian 2018), as US foreign interventions can take many forms, including assertions of shared sovereignty over certain territories (Dezalay & Garth 2002, 2010).

Following the Vietnam War, sociological studies were conspicuously silent on whether the United States acted like, and as a substitute for, European empires.<sup>8</sup> But more recently, analysis of the rhetoric and practices of imperial rule—including US imperial rule (Go 2020)—and the structuring circuits through which interstate relations are defined, negotiated, and inscribed in legal or political conventions has become the focus of many sociological studies inspired by Bourdieuan sociology of fields. In fact, the roots of the US form of empire, characterized by a mix of direct and

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<sup>8</sup>In the case of Vietnam, acting to police borders was inherited from the French colonial times.

indirect rule, can be traced directly to the US colonial administration of the Philippines (Dezalay & Garth 2010), which diffused to other contexts where US embassies serve as holders of political power influencing the policies of national governments and MNCs are deputized to align the interests of the local economic elites with US geopolitical interests. Contrary to views of the US as an anti-imperialist agent (Go 2011), in many parts of the world, the United States displaced failing imperial powers in the mid-twentieth century by stepping in as the neo-imperial power to fill the void, employing the same technologies of power that European empires had previously used. The United States also developed an empire of its own prior to the wave of postwar independences (Go 2007): For instance, in the Philippines and Puerto Rico, US imperial power employed elite education as a method to achieve self-governance under informal colonial rule (Go 2008a). In this sense, the globalization that happened under the postwar Pax Americana is associated with geopolitical logics of empire (Mann 2003). Sociologists must recall that the habitus and location of colonial policymakers produced varied colonial policies, which variation has continued into the decolonization period and the shaping of state-market relations by the United States.

The consensus emerging currently among Bourdieuan scholars of empires and colonial transformations is that it is less fruitful to empirically assess the differences between US and European imperial fields than it is to disaggregate the notions of colonialism or neo-colonialism into the varied fields and practices by which they are constituted (Steinmetz 2008), whether imperial powers are the European states before the 1960s or the United States afterward. For instance, when negotiating the making of the nuclear nonproliferation regime, the United States created multiple systems of overlapping but contradictory rules that privileged the accession to nuclear weapons by US allies and with US help (whether technical, financial, or political) for European empires, while denying the right for all other states to obtain similar privileges (Mallard 2014). Such differences in US foreign policy can be related to the habitus of former European colonial policymakers and postwar US policymakers who shaped treaty-making practices to produce a segmented nuclear order, based on the distinction between Global North and Global South. Returning to the domestic US context, Go (2020) also uses field theory to demonstrate that US infrastructures and technologies of population surveillance are emblematic of colonial patterns that date back from the colonial era; other sociologists show how surveillance technologies have traveled to other contexts, like twenty-first-century Israel, where influences from the US war on terror have blended with colonial legacies from the British Mandate era (Berda 2017).<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, a neo-Bourdieuan view of postcolonial fields can illuminate processes of capital transmission and accumulation for former colonial subjects, which began in the European metropolitan and colonial fields of power long before national independence, and which shaped their anti-imperialist strategies in the new transnational field of law that emerged at the UN level with the Group of 77 (Mallard 2019). Analyzing the tensions between metropolitan and colonial fields of law in the 1930s and 1950s, Mallard shows, for instance, that Algerian second-class nationals of Muslim origin, who suffered from socio-legal discrimination in Algeria, were less likely to follow educational strategies that led them to the North African universities (where the color line was strongly policed), but rather, they looked for better opportunities in the French metropole. This constraint, paradoxically, gave them more resources to address international issues than those afforded to the French (white) citizens from North Africa who stayed there. In the French metropole, Algerian Arab students could study disciplines like international law, economics, or political science, rather than local administrative law or anthropology, which were more commonly

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<sup>9</sup>Other socio-legal scholars have investigated the continuities between legal professions and their professional ethos, especially in the British colonial and postcolonial contexts (Karpik & Halliday 2011).

taught at universities such as the University of Algiers, where Bourdieu himself taught. Later, as their countries (like Tunisia or Algeria) gained independence, the social and cultural capital that anti-imperialist expert activists had gained in the metropole was key for them to create global campaigns whose language matched the international legal norms of the postindependence age in the UN—and that the United States strongly resisted in the late 1970s and 1980s (Mallard 2019). Adopting such a field perspective on anti-imperialist strategies complexifies the narrative on decolonization developed by TWAAIL scholars (Rajagopal 2003, Chimni 2006, Craven 2007, Pahuja 2011), in which these anticolonial intellectuals/experts figure prominently, but only as Global South or Third World elites, as if their trajectories were tied only to their newly independent nation-state and not to the colonial fields in which they received their education prior to independence.

Still, if field analysis of the USitWT can highlight the (ambivalent) role of European and US universities in the education of imperialist as well as anti-imperialist elites, it does not necessarily help today's sociologists overcome epistemological challenges related to the global politics of their discipline. One limit that Bourdieuan field sociology has yet to overcome is the theoretical segregation patterns that still pervade the structuration of the field of sociology (Bhambra 2013) and the difficulties sociologists working in European or US universities face if they are to expand their sociological imaginations beyond neo-colonial mindsets and canonical references to white male European sociologists (Connell 1997, de Sousa Santos 2008), especially when they remain located in the institutions that participated in the creation and development of colonial fields of knowledge/power (Mallard 2019). The combined attention to the intellectual character of imperial rule and the role of imperial fields in establishing university centers specialized in the production of knowledge about foreign nations, including disciplines like sociology or anthropology, begs the question of how US and European sociologists uphold categories of thought that participate in the reproduction and strengthening of US (and European) imperial or neo-colonial rule—or, to the contrary, how they participate in the resistance and direct challenge of that rule (Bhambra et al. 2018). This issue raises the question of the epistemological positionality of academics in general, and US sociologists in particular, vis-à-vis the USitWT, and the consciousness they have of how their research is shaped by, and in turn influences, the relationship between the two—either stabilizing or destabilizing it.

Sociologists have started to pay attention to how their precursors in sociology (de Sousa Santos 2008, Kemple & Mawani 2009, Magubane 2013) and anthropology (Asad 1973, Mallard & Terrier 2021) positioned their sciences as an art of government whose techniques could be employed for the administration of foreign societies. But as Steinmetz (2014, p. 94) writes, “to avoid false generalizations, it is crucial to conduct more systematic and careful empirical research on the variety of ways sociologists have actually interacted with colonial governments and funding agencies.” In fact, we know that some early professional sociologists, like W.E.B. Du Bois (1915), were founders of both the Anti-Imperialist League and the precursor of the American Sociological Society. How sociologists understand the location of the USitWT matters for the creation of new research questions, for the determination of the historical legacies and discontinuities between macrohistorical contexts and microsociological practices of intervention, and for how sociologists define the ethical dimension of their research, with informants in the field and colleagues across the world. Following sociologists' calls to develop a “reflexive sociology” (Bourdieu 1992, Burawoy 1998), we argue that sociologists themselves need to pay attention to inequalities structuring global knowledge production in their research collaborations: Field theory applied to global and transnational relations, both past and present, can help them do so.

Such reflexive attention to the global dynamics of evolving research agendas is needed in mainstream US sociology, and even in critical sociological research, which can sometimes remain too

provincial (or centered on domestic dynamics) today. For instance, migration has been mostly studied as a domestic question of everyday life and legality in the United States (Parreñas 2021, Monk 2015). Similarly, the legacy of slavery on the fabric of social inequalities in the United States today, which is a crucial research focus, particularly as it relates to the rise of the mass incarceration state (Western 2006, Campbell & Schoenfeld 2013), should not be studied purely as a matter of US domestic policy. Of course, these legacies can be partly attributed to specifically US forms of social control, discrimination, and US constitutional history, particularly as they relate to legal mechanisms of civil rights deprivation: namely, slavery in the nineteenth century and criminal penalties in the twentieth century, which both effectively worked to disenfranchise a vast proportion of Black men of their rights as citizens (Manza & Uggen 2008). But US sociologists should not overlook the interactions between US and European colonialisms since the late nineteenth century and contemporary issues of racism, social inequalities, and global power struggles. From the 1870s to the 1950s, while the United States endured Jim Crow laws, European societies were also fighting over the question of colonialism and the racist governance of “the color line” (Steinmetz 2008), and the two were related, since both ideologies were based on the idea of difference rather than equality. In fact, prominent US sociologists from the era, like Du Bois (1935), did not separate their criticism of colonial governments in Europe from their fight for civil rights in the United States (Morris 2017). And it is only when the US government managed to exclude from the UN and its emerging human rights machinery the question of the preservation of the US Jim Crow system in the 1950s, thanks to an alliance with British and French colonial powers, that the racist administration of populations and the civil rights struggle it triggered against it became nationalized within the domestic US field of power in the 1960s (Anderson 2003).

If generalist sociology fails to incorporate such important transnational connections by relegating them to the specialized literature in US foreign policy, it will fail to grasp important turning points and historical legacies. Ignoring the transnational dimension of many political struggles—and the role that traditional foreign policy institutions play in these struggles by building alliances abroad—may not be heavily sanctioned in the US sociology market, which, like any other academic market, emphasizes relevance to the concerns of local students, and therefore, domestic history. But the ignorance of global processes may cut off sociological work on the role of racial inequalities in the US today from important imaginative resources in social movement history. There is a postcolonial legacy to explore, apart from the postslavery legacy, in understanding US racial politics today and, by a boomerang effect, global politics of inequality today (Watson 2018, Edwards 2020), not least because of the key role that US academia in general, and US sociology in particular, plays as a standard-setter for research institutions worldwide.

## 6. CONCLUSION

After the US invasion of Afghanistan and then Iraq in the early 2000s, and the decades-long occupations that followed from these invasions, the liberal belief in the US willingness and capacity to avoid acting as an empire in the post-Cold War era can only look naïve. Still, by themselves, these twenty-first-century events have failed to destabilize theories formulated in previous eras, especially during the 1980s and 1990s, when world society theory provided US sociology with an understanding of transnational relations that seemed to fit with the US self-image as a benevolent power acting in favor of free trade, human rights, and equality in a world society of equal sovereign states that shared similar values and scripts. The fragmentation forces that target US hegemony today beg the question of how US sociologists can decenter their research agendas, methods, and scopes to incorporate more critical perspectives that would allow us to better explain seismic shifts in the world system from sociological and historical perspectives. We argue that neo-Bourdieuian



field theoretical approaches, especially when applied to studying the discontinuities and legacies between colonial and postcolonial fields, open promising venues for new research on the USitWT. In a worldwide context of economic fragmentation, characterized by mounting challenges against US economic hegemony and neoliberal governance, applying transnational field theory to study the USitWT needs to go beyond the study of US foreign policy: It must challenge the existing division of labor between various disciplines (sociology, IR, history, and economics) in order to give a fuller view of how colonial governance continued to operate in US foreign policy long after European empires were brought down by anti-imperialist struggles.

Our call for the constitution of a field of study concerned with critically locating the USitWT in political, economic, sociological, and historical terms, which goes beyond Marxian theory of the world system or liberal approaches of the world society, parallels current calls for decolonizing US sociology, although we define such an ambition in a specific way that goes beyond reinventing the sociological canon. Among those voices who call for effective decoloniality in social theory, some view decolonization in open-ended terms and aim at epistemological inclusivity by criticizing the West without rejecting it outright: They insist that modernity itself is a global phenomenon to which the Global South has contributed significantly (Chakrabarty 2007), as recent studies of vernacularization in reverse (Edelman & James 2011) of the global liberal script have showed. Today, decolonizing knowledge could mean recovering the complex, hybrid, and plurivocal nature of important concepts that were unfairly appropriated by European and US sociologists, especially during the colonial era, as TWAIL scholars have done. But it also means placing in historical contexts the unequal distribution of social, cultural, and economic capital in country-specific fields of power, as well as better situating today's academic institutions in the long history of policy/idea exporters' strategies vis-à-vis the Global South. Today, the aim of fielding (Go & Krause 2016) US sociology, and more broadly, US academic research on non-US societies, by locating it in a web of transnational and global relations should be done with the twin goals of restoring the epistemic authority of marginalized knowers and their knowledge systems and addressing historical transnational postcolonial legacies that still shape knowledge making practices. In many ways, challenges to US hegemony should constitute an opportunity for US sociologists to question the positionality of their theoretical perspectives vis-à-vis imperialist and anti-imperialist projects. If sociologists constitute the USitWT as a new field of studies, they will be in a stronger position to reflexively reread their sociological tradition and enrich mainstream US sociology.

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