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Globe-trotting Sociology

Grégory Dahou, Antoine Vauchez

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In the course of numerous inquiries and several hundred interviews conducted since the 1980s, Yves Dezalay - most often than not accompanied by his sidekick Bryant Garth - has charted an original path at the heart of the sociology of globalization. Anchored in the theory of social fields and forms of social capital pioneered by Pierre Bourdieu, but always eclectic in his own theoretical stance, Dezalay has constructed a unique account of the intricate relationship between law, power and globalization tracking the internationalization strategies of national elites and the transformation of forms of State knowledge.

Resolutely off the beaten track, avoiding being confined in the bibliography and the questioning of a single chapel (sociology of elites, sociology of law, sociology of the State, etc.), his work is as singular as it is inescapable for anyone who wants to study what "internationalization" means and does to national fields of power, their elites and the forms of legitimacy. Despite (or maybe because of) his reluctance to engage in abstract grand theory or to "position" himself in the canonical exercise of the "state of the art", his work is being used today in a large variety of research domains and by several generations of scholars in sub-fields of inquiry as diverse as area studies, postcolonial studies, European studies, world system scholars, and domains such as human rights, international law, philanthropy, international elites, legal education, etc. And yet, despite its originality and large diffusion, his work has so far rarely been discussed as such and still needs a serious and systematic account (see however : Siméant 2003; Munger, 2012).

Nearly thirty years ago or so, Dezalay published his (still untranslated) *Marchands de droit* (*Merchants of Law*, 1992). Taken from his Ph.D, the book marked the first venturing of field theory into international settings - a terrain that Pierre Bourdieu himself had very seldom envisaged and explored. Bringing field theory in close contact with Abbott's sociology of professions, the book set the stage for a new research agenda that brings to the forefront the battles over the definition of good governance and introduces one of its key players ie Anglo-American multinational law firms. While their transformative role had so far been in large part neglected, Dezalay showed how law firms' internationalization strategies hit Europe in the 1980s triggering a profound re-definition of Europe's legal establishments. His second book *Dealing in Virtue. International Commercial Arbitration and the Construction of a Transnational Legal Order* (the first to be written together with Bryant Garth: Chicago University Press, 1998), followed up on this sociological inquiry into the intersections between law and globalization -pointing at how the « mass-production » of professional lawyers by US law schools and law firms, and their specialized knowledge, was transforming the field of international private justice (ie commercial arbitration) that had long been

dominated by « the small club of cosmopolitan European professors and senior barristers with generalist knowledge ».¹

Yet, in retrospect, it is *The Internationalization of Palace Wars. Lawyers, Economists, and the Contest to Transform Latin American States* (Chicago University Press, 2002) that appears as a turning point for a variety of sociologists, political scientists and legal scholars as the book was able to connect the globalization of law and legal elites not only to professional battles but also this time more broadly to national power struggles over State reform. As Dezalay and Garth were exploring these battles at the core of Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico), they identified a grey zone somewhere in-between these turbulent national fields of power and a fast-growing transnational field of State expertise populated with Ivy League scholars, NGO activists, philanthropic foundations, international financial institutions, American law firms, lawyers and economics, etc. Something critical was happening there in this ever-thicker transnational layer of import-export of State knowledge, and acknowledging it allowed to move beyond the schematic “multi-level” account that separated “national” and “inter/transnational” stages, as transnationalist scholars of various breeds had it at the time. In this framework, American hegemony was not merely about economic domination of the North as dependency theorists would have it : it was best understood in its complexity as a *field-effect* whereby peripheries such as Chilian or Brazilian fields of power has been taken over by the very professional and expert battles (“palace wars”) that ran through the American field of power.

With that compass in hand, Dezalay has turned into a globe-trotting sociologist moving across continents from North American to Latin America or Asia (*Asian Legal Revivals Lawyers in the Shadow of Empire*), or even in some empirical vignettes to the Middle-East (*Dealing in Virtue*). It may sound surprising that Europe never appears as a prime *locus* of his research, but the fact of the matter is, it is actually ubiquitous all the way through : as a starting point since it is indeed the competition between European Empires that initially paved the way for the formation of a transnational field of technologies of good government. As Dezalay puts it, (post-)colonial peripheries were not just a battleground *between* Empires but also *within* “imperial societies” across the various competing elites, professionals and forms of expertise (in particular law, economics) and that made up a market of import-export of State knowledge; but also as an endpoint since “Europe” itself progressively became a periphery in its own rights.

Along this long thread of books, Yves Dezalay has brought Pierre Bourdieu's key concepts to the international terrain allowing to test their ability to circulate beyond State borders, but also assessing their limits in accounting for the specific level of porosity and indifferentiation of transnational fields². Over the years, he has also been able to craft an analytical toolbox of his own with heuristic concepts that range from the “heirs” and “gentlemen-lawyers” of European power elites to the “off-shore counters” of American hegemony, including multi-positioned brokers, “compradores” and other “double agents” of

¹ Yves Dezalay and Bryant Garth, Merchants of Law as Moral Entrepreneurs : Constructions International Justice from the Competition for Transnational Business Disputes’. *Law and Society Review*. 29(1). 1995, p. 27-64.

² Antoine Vauchez, “Interstitial Power ? A Weak Field Approach to Transnational Settings”, *International Political Sociology*, 2011, p. 340-345; see also Gisèle Sapiro, « Le champ est-il national ? La théorie de la différenciation sociale au prisme de l'histoire globale », *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 2013/5 (N° 200), 70-85.

internationalization which make up a rich equipment for anyone who today tries its hands at global investigation. These are all notions that help to give complexity and social and professional flesh to internationalization strategies by embedding them in a multiplicity of intertwined national and transnational fields.

This theoretical ambition that connects micro-meso-macro levels is served by a research protocol that is both original and demanding due to the extremely pragmatic nature of the survey strategies, from the ways in which fields of inquiry are accessed to the ways in which interviews are conducted, and the empirical material is accumulated over the years across more than a dozen countries. Suffice it to recall Yves Dezalay's advice to researchers to apply the "double agent" strategy to their very field of research (see the interview in this issue) which places him at odds with a methodological literature that too often elevates interviews with elites to the status of "art". Key to his empirical strategy is the focus on social and professional trajectories of actors as main empirical material : as he and Bryant Garth track individual moves and bring them in relation to each other, they have offered a concrete research strategy into portraying the "relational collective biography" of national and transnational fields of power. This methodology allows to identify (national and international) breeding grounds, points of passage, and hubs for the conversion of different forms of capital as well as changing patterns in career paths and professional hierarchies; thereby, it becomes possible to map out the various segments of the politics, government, academia and business at the both the national and the transnational level without ever sticking to one level, one sector, one institution, but rather looking taking the interplay, the circulation, and the double games of actors as the core entry point.

As his purpose and toolbox has gained in scope and breadth, Dezalay has progressively forged a sociology theory of Western domination (as well as of the sedimentation and spread of the neo-liberal doxa) closely embedded in the reproductive strategies (social, family and professional) of national elites (both in the center and in the periphery), the continuous recomposition of State knowledge, and the complex relations of competition and complementarity that structure the American field power (between public interest lawyers and Chicago boys, human rights and business law, etc.). In an intellectual context in which the injunctions to so-called "medium-range" theories can inhibit generalization and theoretical abstraction *à la* Wallerstein, he has been able to provide sociologists a sophisticated research strategy and agenda of globalization connecting micro-, meso- and macro-level through the complex and changing entanglement of national and transnational social fields -thereby providing a concrete and powerful alternative to the vulgate about the "retreat of the State", the rise of a transnational capitalist class and the lazy opposition between the global and the local.

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