Why did colonialism end in the twentieth century? And more broadly, how do global norms change? This talk extends Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory to explain how and why colonialism became excised from the repertoire of global power and therefore offer a broader approach for understanding global change. The talk shows that colonial fields generated “subversive” struggles initiated by anti-colonial nationalists (the “challengers”) offering a new heterodoxy against the prevailing orthodoxy and rules of the existing global field of empires. Field homologies facilitated the globalization of this struggle. Ultimately, the new pressures compelled dominant empires to adopt anticolonial nationalism as a new form of symbolic capital, leading to a rejection around the world of empire as a viable political form. Postcolonial theory’s emphasis upon subaltern agency is complemented here by field theory’s relationalism, allowing us to see how colonized peoples initiated this transformation and served to constrain imperial action and profoundly changed the global order.

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