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Colonial Sociology and the Historical Sociology of the Social Sciences

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George Steinmetz's book on the colonial origins of modern social thought is an eye-opener and a game-changer. The book represents a learned, deeply researched, and admirably constructed study: broad in scope, spanning a considerable period of time and tackling a pressing problem – colonial social science – in a sophisticated and challenging manner.

Since the book has a meaning that is well beyond its specific object of study, it is worthwhile situating it in the broader context. I would say *Colonial Origins* has a fourfold significance.

First, it changes our understanding of sociology and can inspire a shift in sociologists' self-understanding. Demonstrating that, in France, "colonial sociology" was a *subfield* of considerable intellectual and institutional importance represents a discovery, perhaps a rediscovery, which should have consequences, not just for specialists in the history of sociology, but for the discipline as a whole: for the authors who will be selected for anthologies and textbooks, and, more generally, for what should be included in the thematic and theoretical repertoire of the discipline. In addition to this forward-looking dimension, there is the retrospective questioning, examining the amnesia, the active and passive modes of ignorance of this colonial past. These are social processes as well, in need of sociological scrutiny, and they are an integral part of the analysis that Steinmetz presents.

Second, and beyond the case of France, the book is a research program and a model for studying colonial sociology in other contexts, colonial and non-colonial, and an invitation to do so comparatively. Although Steinmetz announces further work himself, such an effort will hopefully be joined by others, so that the inquiries can become a collective and transnational research effort. There is every reason to examine comparable (sub-)fields in other countries, their structural dynamics as well as the intellectual production they have given rise to. To mention just one intriguing comparative question among others, have there been equivalents of figures like the Tunisian scholar Albert Memmi and the Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad, important social thinkers who were born and grew up as colonial subjects?

Third, the book contributes to the trans-disciplinary intellectual debate about colonialism, post-colonialism, and decolonization. The conclusion of the book

contains critical observations about the state of this discussion that can help to inform and hopefully provoke a broader discussion. Steinmetz criticizes several assumptions and shortcomings of the calls that have been launched for “decolonizing sociology.” He denounces the overly general categories that have shaped the debate (the opposition between “Northern” and “Southern” for example), signals improper generalizations (about Durkheim and Weber, among others), and recalls that the first calls for decolonizing the discipline actually came from “colonial sociologists” themselves. Steinmetz’s book is hardly the first sociological contribution to this debate, but he has set a new standard for what sociologists have to offer, both about the development of their own discipline and about the more general issues at stake.

A fourth and final point is that beyond the topic of colonial sociology, the book offers a general historical-sociological program for studying the social and human sciences. As such, it intervenes in a triangular constellation, one might say, that is in an intellectual space defined by three poles of inquiry. The first is represented by new forms of intellectual history (notably the so-called Cambridge school of contextual intellectual history and the originally German tradition of conceptual history). These are research programs that have flourished among historians, but they tend to remain within a largely textual and intertextual framework. The second pole is represented by science and technology studies (STS)-like approaches, which are not very historically oriented and tend to focus on micro interactions rather than on structural shifts and transformations. Concentrated on the natural sciences and technology, they have also expanded over the past decades, but are rarely concerned with the human and social sciences. The third pole is represented by new disciplinary histories that have also expanded. Although they have become historically more sophisticated, they continue to be shaped by presentist concerns as they are still often written by practitioners in departments of the discipline in question and published in journals related to those disciplines.

Situated in this tripolar intellectual space, systematic sociological approaches are relatively marginal and there is a great need, it seems to me, for historical sociology, in particular, of the (neo-)Bourdieuian kind that George Steinmetz advocates. In this sense, Steinmetz’s book is a major contribution to a relatively small but growing number of studies that have pursued this line of inquiry, but that have, as far as I can see, not yet provoked any major debate in the research area that is more broadly concerned with studying the social and human sciences.

The book itself raises a variety of questions. They will in all likelihood be taken up in more specialized settings and will concern particular research issues (like the prosopography of colonial and metropolitan sociologists during the years after 1945), interpretative questions (about certain episodes or figures), as well as theoretical problems (pertaining in particular to the neo-Bourdieuian historical sociology Steinmetz proposes, as addressed by others in this symposium).

I will restrict my specific comments to the last part of the book, which presents four case studies of major social thinkers (Aron, Berque, Balandier, and Bourdieu). I find the treatment of the four cases a bit uneven. In the case of Aron, for example, the socioanalytic dimension, which is present in the account of Berque and Balandier, and which has a central place in the theoretical framework, seems to be largely missing. Aron’s work about empire and colonialism is reconstructed, but it is less clear how one can understand Aron’s orientation (for example, why

did he oppose the Durkheimians so vehemently, why did he refuse a chair in Bordeaux, and why was his initial focus on international politics and political ideas?).

About Bourdieu, I would say that the chapter contains both a stronger and a weaker version of the argument that the Algerian experience was of foundational importance. According to the strong version, Bourdieu's main concepts are basically all generated by the Algerian experience and can, therefore, be seen as "southern" concepts, which were then circulated back to the metropole. The argument, however, risks pushing the analysis a bit too far. The weaker version recognizes the foundational importance of the Algerian experience, but without specifically tracing the main concepts to the Algerian work because they emerged in a research dynamic that was both longer in time and broader in scope. This dynamic critically includes the research about Bourdieu's native village in the Béarn region, which coincided with the Algerian research (having started in 1959) and was closely connected to the Algerian work. The precocious dialectic between the Algerian and the Béarn research, furthermore, is essential also for the socio-analytical dimension of Bourdieu's research (see Heilbron and Issenhuth 2022). When Bourdieu was recruited by Aron at the Center for European sociology in 1961, launching a whole series of new research projects (on education, cultural practices, and economic transformations), they had, one could say, this double foundation. The concept of "habitus," for example, is informed by the Algerian research, but the actual concept first emerges in the 1962 Béarn article (which precedes the 1964 book with Sayad on *The Uprooting*).

Without questioning the foundational significance of the Algerian work, one can thus discuss how to interpret its meaning. In his recent book on Bourdieu and Sayad, Amín Pérez, for example, has a somewhat different view of this foundational importance (Pérez 2022). My own account is slightly different again. The Algerian experience, I would say, is foundational in the sense that Bourdieu developed an innovative research practice during these early years. This practice was almost from the start intertwined with the Béarn research, and it was this research practice that became the foundation for all of Bourdieu's subsequent work. Emerging in and through this particular mode of doing research, some of Bourdieu's concepts appeared relatively early (habitus); others a bit later (cultural capital and field), with all of them being enriched, elaborated, and corrected in subsequent research enterprises (for an in-depth analysis of the research dynamics of the first decade of Bourdieu's career, see Duval et al. 2022).

The precise interpretation of the Algerian experience for Bourdieu's sociology is merely one example of the more detailed questions that Steinmetz's book inevitably raises. These questions will undoubtedly be explored and debated in the appropriate settings, further enriching a sociological understanding of colonialism and the human sciences.


References

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Response to My Readers

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Each of the discussants brings out a distinct and difficult set of issues, to which I will try to respond. Anne Kwaschik’s own work (e.g., Kwaschik 2020) calls attention to colonial regimes’ increasing reliance on science, which I also find borne out in my own research. Kwaschik also discusses disciplinarity, including the possibility that a focus on disciplines may be less apt in colonial contexts. This problem has several different dimensions. The first is rooted in the fact that colonial institutions preferred interdisciplinarity “team” research; this preference is a theme in my book. Insisting on disciplinary specificity was sometimes a version of field-level resistance against external, contextual pressures. The second dimension relates to her point that “sociology was constituted together and against anthropology.” This mutual constitution was an important aspect of the French and British postwar scientific spheres. Scholars moved back and forth across disciplinary boundaries, which remained fluid. I identify two collective movements. The first, starting immediately after the Second World War, was a movement from anthropology into sociology. Sociology was widely seen at the time as being more politically progressive, more anticolonial and antiracist, and better able to deal analytically with the massive changes occurring in the colonies. A countermovement from sociology into anthropology began in the 1960s, as French sociology became more focused on the metropolitan homeland and lost some of its earlier epistemic and methodological openness. The permeability of the boundaries between disciplines made it possible for scholars to migrate or to keep a foot in two disciplines, as was the case for scholars such as Georges Balandier, Peter Worsley, Michael Banton, and even Pierre Bourdieu. Balandier’s views were widely echoed and emulated by many of his students.

The third point is that disciplinary frontiers gradually became less open in this period. There were several sources of scientific pillarization, including external agencies (UNESCO and CNRS). In addition to critiques of anthropology as