



BOOK REVIEW

George Steinmetz, *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought: French Sociology and the Overseas Empire* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023).

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“This entire formation of colonial sociology has been actively repressed from historical writing on the history of sociology. *Repression* is the correct word for this. It captures the combination of individual and collective processes involved in burying memory. Colonial sociology has been subject to *amnesia*—another excellent term, when used in its psychoanalytic sense. Intellectual history is a necessary step in a process of *anamnesia*, of unearthing this object”.

In this important, particularly well-documented and thorough research monograph, George Steinmetz tells the story of an intellectual historical process which has largely been repressed – in the psychoanalytical but here collective sense – during a more recent period: the close links between sociological French thought as it continued to develop in the second half of 20th century on one side, and the existence and persistence of a French colonial empire, at least until the beginning 1960s, on the other.

This “disciplinary amnesia” is at the centre of the perspective adopted by Steinmetz, who chooses to systematically investigate a very large set of authors, disciplinary and academic traditions, institutions, political and economic contexts and, of course, proposes in-depth analyses of the scientific works and various intellectual productions which were part of the intellectual horizon of the period covered by the book. Steinmetz first and foremost re-evaluates the contributions of scholars involved in development studies and deals with the paradox of the current success of history of sociology in France disentangled from its colonial past.

Largely inspired by Bourdieu, who is also an important component of his research object (especially his work in Algeria, which is at the heart of the anti-colonial turn of the 60s),

Steinmetz completes or adapts this Bourdieu(si)an perspective to his more personal views and nuances, proposing a fine qualitative assessment and an original interpretation of a general process.

To sum up this “neo-Bourdiesian” approach, the author proposes to go deeper into textual and visual analysis, which is part of any field of cultural production. More specifically, Steinmetz adds six elements of rethinking/reconstruction: relations between fields and fields and contexts; spatial coordinates; theory of the subject; explicit analysis of textual and visual elements; articulation with critical realism and post-colonial epistemology; and reflexivity. Among these six elements, the newest and more original is probably the fifth, which allows a discussion with contemporary post-colonial authors, but may also be in tension with the more objectivist moments of sociological analysis (as we will see later).

The other “reconstruction” elements are either classical additions to Bourdieu’s perspective or methodology (more “active” or “conscious” subjects, more explicit content or internal analysis), or elements which are regarded as insufficiently developed or adapted though already present in Bourdieu’s theory (like the three others). Most of the elements of rethinking are hence in direct line with Bourdieu’s own approach and can be seen as adaptations of the model to the author’s object.

The author proceeds in analytical-historical sequences centred on particular, necessarily partial, points of view, on this global interdependent process. The global picture emerges from the entire reading and can be characterized by different historical and intellectual sequences: after a rebirth of the empire and a redefinition of sociology’s tasks in the context of developmentalism after WW2, these economic and political uses are put into question and are radically overcome during and after the liberation war in Algeria. But they have had a profound impact on the path of French scientific dynamism in sociology, many years after the first brilliant moves towards the emergence of sociology as a discipline around Durkheim.

Part one is a presentation of this approach, which consists in writing a historical sociology of French colonial sociology in a very different, post-colonial context and constructing a research object which has partly been erased from the consciousness of most of our contemporary colleagues, not to speak of students or amateurs. It expands Bourdieu’s perspective in adopting an exigent “internal” analysis based on the careful reading of French texts and sources, while keeping always in mind social and political trajectories which allow us to understand intellectual contents in contexts. This procedure clearly makes the book highly interesting in the sense that it connects aspects of history which are often analysed separately and “non-relationally”, such as the geopolitics and public policies of the declining French empire; the dynamics of higher education and research after WW2 (notably with the CNRS, the ORSTOM and other important research institutions); hierarchies and relations between disciplines in a longer period; and individual trajectories and intellectual notable developments around 1946, 1950 and then the 1960s.



Part two is a synthesis of historical research on the state and the dynamics of the French empire, especially seen from a cultural and political point of view, with a chapter on the importance of colonial reconquest in France right after the second world war, including its symbolic and political dimensions; a second one on the growing need for sociological data and analyses in relation to a new (social) form of developmentalism in the colonies; and another chapter on the impact of this renewal on higher education and research, with new institutions and objectives. This is probably one of the parts where the book adds more to the existing general knowledge of French social sciences, since it recontextualises these by revisiting the centrality of the empire in many aspects of French society and political stakes after World War II. This part shows how social sciences were clearly part of this centrality, for an important if not existential component of their “identities” and evolutions.

Part three is an analysis of various aspects of the intellectual context before the development of post-war colonial sociology. Steinmetz describes these aspects from a disciplinary point of view, recalling the ancient and long-lasting role of social sciences such as geography, law and economics in the emergence of a “colonial sociology” in a first chapter, then moving in a second one to closer disciplines, such as statistics, history, demography and anthropology, often seen as spontaneously more related to the colonies. The third chapter develops a more “internal” analysis of inter-war colonial sociology, paving the way for what will happen after WW2.

Part four is a more strictly Bourdieu-inspired sociological analysis of aspects of French and Belgium colonial sociology inserted within a larger analysis of the sociological field. The second chapter proposes, as a direct “clin d’oeil” to Pierre Bourdieu, the outline of a theory of the practice of colonial sociology. These two chapters propose a radically new vision of the history of French sociology centred on its colonial dimension (and “moment”). It clearly completes and in some ways nuances or rectifies certain elements of Johan Heilbron’s major opus on French sociology, while advancing in the same direction of a global multidimensional reconstruction of the various facets of this field (including demography of students, biographies, and the major contributions).

Part five can be described as a series of systematic monographs on four pro-eminent figures of colonial sociology, namely Georges Balandier, Raymond Aron, Jacques Berque and Pierre Bourdieu. Each proposes a new analysis of their trajectories and oeuvres, describing both as largely connected to the larger social history of French colonial sociology.

The conclusion insists on the never-ending process of de-colonising sociology which was early seen as necessary, especially by Bourdieu, and recalls the centrality of reflexivity in the process.

This book makes a very important contribution, making it a “must-read” for the community of sociologists, in France and the now independent countries but also in the rest of the World. It delivers a nuanced and balanced assessment of the contribution of sociology of development to a general perspective, putting the emphasis on a rectification of usual ways to tell the story of sociology. For example, it clearly shows the necessity of refuting the idea



of a decline of economic sociology after WW2, and after the deaths of its Durkheimian promoters, such as Halbwachs, Mauss and Simiand. Sociology has been the place of a dynamics of rich empirical and theoretical work on many various and changing colonial societies. This book is also the natural candidate to an introduction and a very advanced guide to these forgotten contributions, which need to be reassessed in consequence.

It is possible that Steinmetz's explanation of collective amnesia remains insufficient, leaving the reader a bit puzzled. The history of “tiers-mondisme” in the 1960s, its burgeoning around 1968 in the academy, and its violent rejection in the dominant ideology of France in the 1980s, are nevertheless as serious a set of hypotheses as are the “presentism” and “positivism” of the contemporary discipline. An analysis of the status of Marxism during this period, and closer investigations of avant-garde journals such as *Les Temps Modernes* (where some of the colonial sociologists published early) would have added some important elements to the comprehension of the turn during and after 1954-1962. This was also a period of a complete reset of the intellectual and political left, which has been the environment in which a new generation has been socialized.

Positivism appears in France to be much less dominant and far less arrogant and standardized than in the US, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. Its features should be nuanced, especially when it refers to an appetite for quantification and surveys, which, since the 1970s in France, is often associated with left wing or critical conceptions of sociology and demography, including within public statistics. Clearly, quantitative history and sociology in the Simiand tradition are inheritors of the Comtian positivist philosophy, and the need for quantification and statistics are also very present in Bourdieu's work, especially in contact with statisticians from the national institute of statistics (INSEE), and later with the help of Geometric Data Analysis. But this presence of a Comtian legacy, reshaped by the Durkheimians, seems largely independent from the movement towards amnesia. The conceptual apparatus and methodology developed by Bourdieu is as dynamic and processual as structural, which should also refrain from identifying quantification, statistical methodology and surveys to presentism or static structuralism.

In the same spirit, and from a more methodological and theoretical point of view, following Bourdieu's approach to historical sociology, Steinmetz could have integrated more systematically some of the methods and approaches developed by the empirical sociology of fields and social spaces, like a statistical multidimensional exploration of its biographical data, including analyses on the relationships between positions, trajectories and position-takings, and their evolutions in different contexts, which could have been crossed with his insights into network analysis.

These elements show how rich and provocative this book is for today's French (and World) sociologists. It calls for a strong reassessment of the role of colonisation in the scientific trajectory of the discipline in France, in contradiction with the consensus of historians of the discipline. – It deserves to be read, discussed and followed by new similar inquiries into the history of these important sequences of World's intellectual history, whose presence is still obvious in many of our contemporary both scientific and political debates.