
BOOK REVIEW

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

Magne P. Flemmen, University of Oslo
m.p.flemmen@sosgeo.uio.no

Classical social theory, and indeed social theory more broadly, has underestimated the significance of colonialism in shaping modern societies and social theory itself. It is perhaps fair to state, as has Giddens (1981: 23-24), that both classical and more contemporary accounts hinge on “unfolding” models of social change, explaining the emergence of transformations of modernity in strictly internal terms, as an unfolding of logics or tensions inherent to these societies. Recent scholarship has shown how the classical authors were by no means oblivious to imperialism and colonialism, but their conceptual frameworks did not give it the central place it ought to have. Seidman aptly labeled this as the “colonial unconscious of classical sociology” (Seidman, 2013). In a recent contribution, Bhambra and Holmwood (2021) call for a renewing of social theory in light of how the significance of colonialism and imperialism have been repressed, not by the classics themselves, but by their successors (such as Giddens). The authors identify central fictions in classical social theory and its inheritance, one of these being the idea that sociological reasoning is not fundamentally historically formed. This is where George Steinmetz’ new, meticulously researched book comes in.

Steinmetz recovers the centrality of colonialism to modern social thought, which he argues, much in the same way as Bhambra and Holwood, has been forgotten by the field. It should perhaps, in the first place, be clarified that “modern social thought” principally refers to post-war French sociology. Steinmetz develops a detailed account of how French sociology developed in close connection with the French colonial state, highlighting the profound influence of this relationship on the work of French sociologists. Moving from the encompassing analysis of all of French sociology in the middle of the 20th century, he follows through with a detailed exposition of the role of colonialism in the works of key figures Raymond Aron, Jacques Berque, Georges Balandier and Pierre Bourdieu.



Interestingly, the work of Bourdieu is both object, method and medicine here. Of course, it is a bit misleading to refer to Bourdieu as the object of the analysis, as Steinmetz' scope is obviously broader – it does deal with “modern social thought”, or at least a strand of it. On another level, it isn't that misleading. The chapter delving into Bourdieu's work is the second to last chapter, and it opens by saying that, from one angle, the book can be read as a reconstruction of the conditions of possibility for the genesis of Bourdieu's approach. Steinmetz thus gives the impression that this is what the whole book is leading up to: as he writes in the beginning of that chapter, “We now have assembled the tools with which to analyze the genesis of Bourdieu's theoretical framework” (p. 315).

This reconstruction of the conditions of possibility, and the assembling of tools, is crucially achieved through an application of Bourdieu's approach of field analysis. And when Steinmetz, by way of conclusion, addresses the broader debate on decolonizing sociology, he argues that Bourdieusian reflexivity is exactly what the doctor ordered.

After meticulously tracing the historical roots of sociology's entanglement with colonialism in France, Steinmetz delineates the key characteristics of the French sociological field during this period. He observes that colonial sociologists, constituting nearly half the field's practitioners, nearly formed a distinct subfield within French sociology. Their work, Steinmetz asserts, diverged significantly—and favorably, in his view—from the prevailing trends in metropolitan France, not to mention the United States. I will elaborate on this point further in the subsequent discussion.

Steinmetz unequivocally demonstrates the profound impact of colonialism on French sociology. However, he also highlights that the four sociologists of his focus were not oblivious to colonialism, nor were they apologists or supporters of the French state's actions in Algeria. His work effectively debunks the notion that these authors require a “decolonizing purge”. Raymond Aron, often seen through a negative lens by scholars influenced by Pierre Bourdieu, emerges as a figure with significant critical insights. Aron's astute observations on the humiliation, racism, and seizure of sovereignty inherent to modern colonialism anticipate contemporary debates in post- and decolonial theory.

The case of Aron is in a certain sense emblematic here. Steinmetz argues that the majority of sociologists engaged with colonialism did not unequivocally endorse its crimes or condone its oppressive nature. In fact, French sociology as a whole gradually adopted a critical stance towards colonialism, and the four sociologists on which Steinmetz focuses exemplify this tendency.

Steinmetz book adds considerable detail and depth to our understanding of the historical entwinement of modern sociology with colonialism. Not being a specialist in decolonization, post-coloniality, French sociology, or intellectual history in general, I approach this work with a keen interest in its implications for contemporary sociology and sociological practice.

On one level, Steinmetz's account offers a reassuring perspective. It demonstrates that even though prominent figures in sociology were deeply involved with, and even fundamentally shaped by, France's colonial project, they remained remarkably critical of its underpinnings



and consequences. Contrary to the notion that their work was tainted by complicity, Steinmetz reveals their ability to maintain independent and critical perspectives, exhibiting a remarkable scholarly autonomy even within the constraints of a heteronomous context.

Since Bourdieu is now such a towering figure in the discipline, it is of some considerable interest to know what to make of his approach and legacy in the light of his involvement with colonialism. Doubtlessly, Steinmetz feels something like this too, as he is indeed quite committed to a “Bourdieuian” position. Steinmetz’s book title refers to the colonial origins of social thought, but it would be at least as correct to say, as Meghji (2021) has, that the roots of Bourdieu’s ideas are anti-colonial. This is no less important as one strand of the now dizzying range of criticisms of Bourdieu claims that he embraced colonial myths. Steinmetz forcefully rebuts this. As is probably the case with all bodies of work of a magnitude comparable to Bourdieu’s, it is possible to find quotes or excerpts that could be made out to underwrite almost any interpretation. Consider the sprawling debates on the interpretations of Marx. Steinmetz’ uses his comprehensive overview of Bourdieu’s work, not to cherry pick in this manner, but rather unpack the general thrust of Bourdieu’s work, which he argues is fiercely opposed to colonialism.

Steinmetz suggests that the core ideas of Bourdieu’s can be gleaned in his early work on Algeria. For instance, he argues that Bourdieu’s awareness of the autonomy-heteronomy opposition, so central to the “mature” analyses of fields, arose out of his own experience with heteronomy: during his military service, he was tasked with writing reports that obfuscated the coloniality of Algeria. Beyond that, he shows, or at least suggests, that Bourdieu’s key concepts – habitus, field, capital – originated in these early works in Algeria. “Originated” is perhaps not the best term for this; when Steinmetz discusses the concept of field, he speaks of early “traces” of it during Bourdieu’s time in Algeria. When discussing cultural capital, he says Bourdieu “adumbrated” it in the way he had begun “to think of prestige and honor as resources, or forms of capital”. In this, Steinmetz implicitly challenges established accounts, which trace the concept of cultural capital to the mid-1960s, prior to which Bourdieu and Passeron spoke of “cultural inheritance” or “privilege” (Heilbron, 2021). Steinmetz does quote from one passage in *The Algerians* in which Bourdieu writes of a “capital of combined power and prestige”, in a comparison with capital in the more conventional sense. Be that as it may, one could be excused for getting the impression that Steinmetz is reading the history of the concepts in reverse, going from the developed concepts backwards in time to find something reminiscent of them in earlier periods.

In the conclusion, Steinmetz spells out implications for the ongoing debates on decolonizing sociology. He warns against condemning colonial-era thinkers with reference to isolated sentences and passages; against decontextualized accounts; failing to situate authors in the dynamics of their fields; and a failure to differentiate between scholarly, political and private genres of writing. I mentioned above that Steinmetz not only explains Bourdieu through a Bourdieuian analysis, but also offers up Bourdieuian reflexivity as “an essential part of any program for decolonizing sociology”. Steinmetz offers a wonderfully clear exposition of how “Bourdieuian reflexivity” differs from standpoint epistemology, with which it shares some



crucial insights. Steinmetz outlines at least four epistemic breaks, crucial to this reflexivity. The first is breaking with one's spontaneous pre-notions (à la the Durkheim of *Suicide*). The second is a break with the empirical level of surface appearances. The third is a break with the pre-notions of the people one is studying, and the fourth concerns avoiding scholastic fallacies, in breaking with one's initial objectivizing scientific constructions.

The book concludes by emphasizing the importance of caution and epistemic vigilance for those engaged in the decolonization of sociology. However, it would have been beneficial if Steinmetz had delved deeper into the broader implications of his work for sociology as a whole. A reasonable reading, in my view, is that the specific form of modern social thought explored in this work should not be outrightly condemned or discarded. Instead, it has the potential to be further applied and expanded upon, perhaps even more extensively than it is at present.

An intriguing aspect of the book is the contrast it draws between colonial sociology and the prevailing trends in Metropolitan France (and the United States). While colonial sociologists developed a critical, anti-positivist, and historically sensitive approach to sociology, their counterparts in the metropole, and arguably in the US as well, gravitated toward the opposite. The tumultuous terrain of Algeria, on the eve of the War of Independence, where French imperialism had wreaked havoc on local social structures, provided fertile ground for sociological innovation. One could even get the impression that this context had more in common with the turbulent period of classical sociology, than what could be said of the prosperous and stable conditions enjoyed by the leading figures of what Giddens (1982: 1-2) called the "orthodox consensus" of post-war sociology, principally marked by functionalism, positivism, and the theory of industrial society. "Colonial situations are horrifying and unjust" as Steinmetz writes, but they "could also be generative of startling insights". Given the generalizing intent, at least as evidenced in the book title, it would be interesting to know whether this holds for modern social thought more generally,

References

- Bhambra GK and Holmwood J (2021) *Colonialism and modern social theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens A (1981) *A contemporary critique of historical materialism*. London: Macmillan.
- Giddens A (1982) *Profiles and critiques in social theory*. London: The Macmillan Press.
- Heilbron J (2021) *Capital culturel*. In: Sapiro G (ed) *Dictionnaire international Bourdieu*. Paris: CNRS Editions.
- Meghji A (2021) *Decolonizing sociology : an introduction*. Cambridge, UK, Medford, MA: Polity Press.