
BOOK REVIEW

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

Idriss Jebari, Trinity College Dublin
JEBARII@tcd.ie

In *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought*, George Steinmetz departs from the “disciplinary amnesia” in the field of sociology toward the way “colonialism, like fascism, goes almost unmentioned” in the discipline’s history, and produces this “intellectual history [as] anamnesia” (Steinmetz, 2023: 24, 29, 39). Such is the breadth of Steinmetz’s book that a single review would not do it full justice, but we can safely say that it has definitively demonstrated the profound entanglements, even entwinement, between French sociology and empire. First, colonial sociology (and the sociology of colonialism) in post-War France is represented by “around half of the French sociologists” (p. 10). Second, it is in colonial sociology where one will find the first draft of conceptual insights that these sociologists later deployed for the study of metropolitan France (pp. 9, 34) – and which are so well-known in global academia.

Throughout the book’s first three sections, Steinmetz offers a methodical and complete account of the themes, professions, institutions, and individuals which allows us to claim with great certainty that colonialism was a decisive factor for the formulation of French sociology in the mid-20th century. Here, the author produces an authoritative history of knowledge production combined with a history of colonialism and decolonization grounded in the French, German and Anglophone sociological traditions. Steinmetz draws a Bourdieusian field-study of French sociology (pp. 14, 17, 315), with a strong chronological focus on the mid-century in France and the late colonial period of the 1940s and 1950s (p. 7). The book’s ambition is to develop a transnational and trans-temporal field that integrates metropolitan France and its former colonies dynamically (North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa) (p. 20), and one which covers the period from the 1930s to the 1960s, across independence while holding relevance for the present (p. 28). The object, approach and chronological barriers are convincing and match the strength of its ambition.



The author chose to offer a complete and detailed chronicle of the sociological field, its institutions and its people, often in a counter-intuitive sequence, which comes at the expense of a more accessible and narrative approach. This includes a lengthy listing of curriculum forms and their numbers in higher education (chapter nine); the network of institutions across the French empire (chapter five); the relationship between sociology and other disciplines in French academia (chapters six and seven); and the way colonial developmentalism persisted after political independence through the role of experts (chapter three).

We can imagine how this book will be used as a starting point and then enriched by further studies, many of which are in the author's own list of publications. One comes out with important observations regarding the relationship between disciplinary fields, especially sociology and ethnology; the demarcation between metropolitan theorists and fieldwork specialists, and the hierarchy that develops between them; relationships between figures and institutions in the field; the centrality of the late-colonial period (1950s) as a generative moment for sociologists of colonialism to produce original epistemological insights; the importance of combining sociological works, individual biography, and contexts in order to reconstitute the conceptual value of key terms in the field (field, context, author, and text p. 19); and the genealogy of key conceptual frameworks in the study of societies in the Global South including the "colonial situation" (Balandier), historical sociology of tradition (Berque), or the social and cultural habitus (Bourdieu; see page 341 for an explanation of the mechanism of circulation of ideas from colonies to metropolitan France).

The central contribution of this book in this reader's view lies in how Steinmetz explains how the late colonial situation created the conditions for an "epistemic break" in the discipline regarding the colonial situation and its influence on the sociological field (p. 24). In other words, the author explains how a set of original insights were produced as a "specific form of reflexivity... to make sense of the underlying social logics of practice" (p. 22). The four figures on which the author devotes specific chapters (Raymond Aron, Georges Balandier, Jacques Berque and Pierre Bourdieu) were inserted in the "colonial situation" and were able to overcome existing tools of the colonial infrastructure of knowledge production, to "objectify the scientific fields and the field of power they [found] themselves in... and carry out a historical sociology of their own scientific field, its categories, positions, and polarizations leading up to the present" (pp. 22-23). As Steinmetz writes in the chapter devoted to Bourdieu (the culmination of this thesis), "the present book has reconstructed some of the conditions of possibility for the genesis of Bourdieu's analytic framework, and thus my own" (p. 315). As such, we learn as much about the object of their sociology (the colonial cultures and societies) as we do about the meaning of their works for the field of French sociology writ large.

There are several shortcomings in Steinmetz's approach that undermine his core argument, primarily the absence of a dynamic, historical contextualization of the colonies and the limited recreation of a dialogue and exchange as generative of these thinkers' "reflexivity." What impact did the colonies – as a place, a history and a people – rather than colonialism

as a system, have on these figures and French sociology? On the evidence provided in these four chapters, the answer would be “very little.” Leaving aside Aron, who produced his theories of empire from Paris comparing Nazi Imperialism, French colonialism and the American Empire, we find the analysis on Berque and Balandier to be disembodied from the countries’ histories where they passed, save for their personal trajectories and encounters with the colonial administration. For example, for Berque, there is an extensive discussion of his work in Fez in the 1940s with Islamic legal scholar Zayd ibn Ali or al-Mahdi al-Wazzani, followed up with his “extensive campaign to reconcile ‘indigenous emancipation with the French presence’” and even the “progressive structural reforms” agenda of French Resident Gaston Puaux in the countryside (pp. 252-3). However, Steinmetz fails to mention the 1944 Proclamation of Independence by the Salafi nationalists in Fez, including Allal al-Fassi, which produced a significant body of writing on authenticity and tradition in the Islamic tradition and which Berque had access to, both linguistically and by being in Fez at the same time. This is a missed opportunity that makes Berque appear solitary in his work, save for later discussions on his meetings with Fanon in Tunis (p. 262) or several orientalist in France after his departure from Morocco (p. 263). There are similar tendencies for Georges Balandier, whose childhood and youth is explored at length through his literary memoirs (p. 277), but Steinmetz offers very little in terms of a dialogue with events and counterparts in Africa aside from French colonial colleagues – with the exception of Alioune Diop “an African political leader he had met at [Michel] Leiris’ apartment in Paris” leading to the launch of *Présence Africaine*, (pp. 279-81).

With Bourdieu, we are rewarded with a more thorough discussion of the impact of the Algerian war of independence and his intellectual ties with the likes of Abdelmalek Sayad, from colonial Algeria to post-independence sociology on migration in France. Indeed, Bourdieu’s fieldwork in Kabylia and his work in the French army offer the ideal set-up to experience a “shock of Algeria”, defined as “the pivotal moment” in his transition to sociology (p. 318), and often understood as his moment of reflexivity. Subsequently, Bourdieu’s conceptual insights, such as “the invention of tradition” and the cultural habitus, are grounded in the political history of Algeria (including colonial laws, the war of independence, forced labor and displacement), and the socio-cultural fieldwork into Mozabit, Chaoui and Kabyle societies. This chapter is insightful and satisfying by comparison to the other cases because it demonstrates the importance of dynamic historical contextualization, but it also confirms its absence for the other figures. As a result, Aron, Berque, and Balandier are depicted as “prophets” and geniuses (or modern day *lumières*) rather than social scientists inserted in specific contexts – which the ill-intentioned might perceive as reinforcing white-savior narratives. By being “plucked from” their environments (that are not dynamically reconstituted), the “reflexivity” of these thinkers is not fully earned.

Beyond these general remarks, this review is an opportunity to reflect on how this book engages with and will be received within the field of Arab intellectual history, and especially among North African historians of intellectual decolonization. North Africa represents one of the three major terrains of French colonial sociology, especially for Berque and Bourdieu.



North African sociologists are occasionally evoked in the book, as research partners or those attempting to gain employment in French institutions. In my discussion below, I discuss two areas where *The Colonial Origins of Social Thought* will inform debates about postcolonial politics, the history of knowledge production and the history of Arab thought from the Maghreb.

The Colonial Origins of Social Thought assists to further the conceptualization of decolonization in North Africa, not as a rupture but a reconfiguration of relations between colonizer and colonized. As identified by scholars such as Patricia Lorcin, Abdelmajid Hannoum or Osama Abi-Mershed, institutions and figures of French knowledge production were instrumental in shaping the mode of governance in French colonization – we can cite here the examples of the “Kabyle myth” and the legal regime in colonial Algeria, or the importance of the bureaux arabes as semi-military outposts. While this rich literature sheds light on the colonial era, including the French reforms meant to placate nationalist mobilization of Istiqlal, the neo-Destour or the MLTD-PPA and later FLN, how did French thinking impact post-independence development programs? The work of Muriam Haleh Davis on Algeria has shed significant light on these conceptual continuities across independence. Returning to Steinmetz’s work, historians of the post-independence North Africa will find in chapter three a fascinating discussion of efforts to “counterbalance” the movement toward independence by “katechontic efforts to shore up European control” (p. 54) in the 1940s and 1950s by reconfiguring colonial institutions of knowledge production into cooperation and assistance structures, and by rebranding the “Colonial” into the “Outre-Mer” (p. 56). Colonial science saw its “engineers, technicians and scientists become the characteristic cadres of the postwar empires... from humanistic Arabists and psychiatrists to agronomists and entomologists” (p. 57). Indeed, a great number of French scholars spent a few years as coopérants in North Africa as part of development aid frameworks (see the work of François Siino, or accounts of Michel Foucault’s stay in Tunisia in the late sixties). These French technical advisors then advised newly independent governments in North Africa on their social welfare programs, which Steinmetz demonstrates were adapted from French colonial policies (see chapter four on “colonial developmentalism”). Scholars of intellectual decolonization in North Africa will benefit from the focus on French social scientists as agents of continuity between the colonial and postcolonial social sciences in order to shed light on the early years of independence.

In the second instance, *The Colonial Origins of Social Thought* sheds further light on the postcolonial entanglements between North African intellectuals and France and French thinkers. There are echoes in this book with the rich scholarly literature on francophone postcolonial intellectuals, especially the work of Charles Forsdick, David Murphy and Jane Hiddleston. By contrast to this literature, Steinmetz sheds light on power relations between them, which is often omitted. In chapter ten, which is devoted to an “outline of a theory of colonial sociological practice,” Steinmetz focuses on various inequalities and asymmetries including “sociologists who were born as colonized subjects [and] faced the most daunting barriers to academic success”, using Albert Memmi and Abdelmalek Sayad in North Africa as examples (p. 196). These two figures are significant because of their connection to other



figures focused on by the author, but also because they had academic careers in France. Steinmetz demonstrates their strategies to overcome marginalization, including publishing in analogous fields or enriching their fieldwork. However, the focus on Memmi and Sayad are not sufficient to paint a full picture, for which we must revert to the excellent work of Thomas Brisson, and his demonstration of the way North African and Arab sociologists were systematically marginalized in French academia with lesser employment opportunities for the same qualifications. Considering how this section of chapter ten represents “only the beginning of a fuller investigation” into “indigenous sociologists” (p. 211), we are keen to see, in future, an equally rich treatment of such sociologists.

Another oversight lies in the figures and institutions of sociological knowledge production that developed in North Africa after independence, where, despite the many interactions between individuals and their French counterparts, were firmly focused on the national horizon. In chapter five, Steinmetz notes how Berque and UNESCO oversaw the creation of sociological research centers in North Africa, especially in Tunisia, where the Centre d’Etudes et de Recherches Economiques et Sociales (CERES), attached to the University of Tunis, was populated by the first generation of post-independence graduates in sociology (Abdelkader Zghal, Lilia Ben Salem etc. see p.120). Many of the graduates had studied with Fanon, completed their higher degrees with Berque in Paris, or been inspired by Balandier’s methodological approaches on acculturation and dynamic societies (and a similar argument can be made for the sociologists at the University of Rabat). These laboratories are rightly seen as agents of decolonization on the ground, through their own publications such as *Cahiers du CERES* and the reconfigured *Bulletin Economique et Social du Maroc*, where they advised state development policies and ended up questioning their disciplinary conceptual tool kits used to better understand their societies (see my article on “Khatibi and *Les Temps Modernes* in 1977” in *The Journal of North African Studies* (2017) as an example of decolonial social thought). However, we disagree with Steinmetz’s ambitious claim that the seeds of decolonization of sociology and postcolonial thinking were planted by Bourdieu and the other three sociologists of colonialism through their embrace of reflexivity, historical sociology, criticism and the use of dynamic frameworks in their study of colonized societies and cultures (p. 348).

In this reader’s opinion, the ownership of the decolonization of sociology should be more balanced toward the formerly colonized subjects rather than writing them out of the narrative. There is value in exploring how Balandier, Berque and Bourdieu opened new possibilities for a decolonized sociology by leaning into its ties with history (p. 130) and treating these societies as fully historical and therefore as dynamic (pp. 152-4). That Bourdieu was “the first sociologist to call explicitly for ‘decolonizing sociology’” (p. 354) may owe more to mastery of the means of publication than to Bourdieu being the first scholar to attempt to think beyond the colonial epistemology. In fact, as Steinmetz notes earlier in the volume, most of these thinkers left the colonial question from the 1960s to revert back to metropolitan sociological questions (or Islamic and Arab cultural topics, for Berque). For the sociologists in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, that is when the work began – to systematically deconstruct and recompose knowledge about their societies. While The



Colonial Origins of Social Thought points our attention toward the unique reflexivity that took place in the late colonial period and its benefits “as epistemic vigilance” (p. 358) that can be applied today, we must not overlook the equal importance of generative dialogues and dynamic historical contextualization in order to develop truly global intellectual histories of colonialism and decolonization.