

BOOK REVIEW

Response to the *Serendipities* reviewers of *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought*

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I am grateful to the reviewers for their probing comments on my book. In the limited space available I will try to respond to their main critiques.

I

Frederic Lebaron's insightful review begins by recognizing that I chose to “investigate a very large set of authors, disciplinary and academic traditions, institutions, political and economic contexts”, while also proposing “in-depth analyses of scientific works and more largely of all sorts of intellectual productions, which were part of the intellectual horizon of the period covered by the book”. Lebaron also notes that my book connects aspects of a history which are often analysed separately, such as “geopolitics and public policies of the declining French empire, the dynamics of higher education and research after WW2 ... hierarchies and relations between disciplines in a longer period, individual trajectories and notable intellectual developments”.

The part of the book that Lebaron finds least satisfactory is its explanation of the French collective amnesia concerning this colonial sociology. Lebaron writes that “the history of ‘tiers-mondisme’ in the 1960s, its incredible burgeoning around 68 in the academy, and its violent rejection by French dominant ideology in the 1980s, may be more serious hypotheses than the ‘presentism’ and ‘positivism’ of today’s discipline, which seem rather poor candidates”. I agree that I was probably projecting too much of the American context onto the French material when speaking of positivism and presentism. I do emphasize throughout the book that the postwar French sociologists developed a sociology that was opposed to American positivism, critical, and often historical (see Flemmen’s review here).

I still believe that the entire colonial formation was massively repressed, not just in France but also in Britain, after independence, at least among the majority of the European population. Perhaps Lebaron is suggesting that “tiers-mondisme” was not only solidarity with the postcolonial “third world” but also helped to elide or obfuscate the massive importance of the preceding colonial period by refocusing attention on global capitalist

inequality in the present. This would be a way of combining my idea about the importance of presentism with Lebaron's theme of 1960s 'tiers-mondisme'.

I do not reject quantitative or statistical research at all, as a critical realist and Bourdieusian. Instead, I agree with Lebaron that it would be interesting to integrate methods and approaches developed by the empirical sociology of fields and social spaces, such as a statistical multidimensional exploration of biographical data, including analyses of the relationships between positions, trajectories and position-takings, and their evolutions in different contexts, as well as network analysis. Now that I have the entire prosopographic dataset it should be possible to complete such an analysis.

II

Magne Flemmen's fascinating review raises two critical questions. The first suggests that my account of the colonial origins of Bourdieu's concepts might give the impression that I am merely seeking resemblances of the concepts in earlier periods. Readers of this journal might understand this argument as a version of Merton's critique of fallacy of adumbration (Merton 1968). Merton singled out the distinctions between rediscoveries, prediscoveries, "genuine anticipations," and "pseudo-anticipations" in which "resemblance is typically confined to an incidental use of some of the same words as the later version" (Ibid.: 15).

There are two senses in which these colonial origins are, I think, more than Mertonian pseudo-anticipations. First, these earlier ideas are occurring *within* the same writer, whereas Merton was concerned with similarities between earlier and later writers. Second, there is a great deal of evidence that the early Bourdieu in Algeria was thinking along lines similar to his later concepts of cultural capital, habitus, reflexivity, and field. As Flemmen acknowledges, I quote Bourdieu from *The Algerians*, comparing a "capital of combined power and prestige", in a comparison with capital in the more conventional sense. I also provide evidence that Bourdieu was thinking through Kurt Lewin's field theory in 1959 in an attempt to frame Kabyle struggles over honor (Steinmetz 2017; 2022: 324; 2023: 338).

Habitus is the clearest example of a concept that Bourdieu was already developing in his early Algerian analyses. In *Le Déracinement*, Bourdieu and Sayad define habitus in terms very similar to Bourdieu's mature understanding of it as corporeal and mental dispositions: "the peasant's being is above all a certain manner of being, a habitus, a permanent and general disposition before the world and others". This is an embodied structure, since the peasant's "whole corporeal habitus is 'made' within the space of his customary movements". Habitus is described as being relatively durable, surviving some changes in external conditions. The peasant can therefore "remain a peasant even when he no longer has the possibility of behaving like one". The authors discuss the habitus of the "authentic" or "bunniyya peasant", who exudes "niyya" - a Kabyle word meaning "a certain manner of being and acting, a permanent, general and transposable disposition in the face of the world and other men" (Bourdieu and Sayad 2000: 61). This formulation is identical to Bourdieu's later definition of habitus as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions" (1977: 72).



Bourdieu approached his analysis of Algerian workers and the unemployed and sub-proletarians in epistemological terms that foreshadow his later theory of reflexivity. The unemployed he argued were “not sufficiently detached from their condition to posit it as [an] object”. Their “aspirations and demands, even their revolt, are expressed within the framework and logic of the system”, i.e., in terms of the sorts of spontaneous prenotions that Bourdieu argued were the first target of scientific reflexivity (2013: 159-160). Fully employed workers are better able to reflexively project their subjectivities into the future, Bourdieu suggested, and a fortiori, to embark on an “active, creative and conscious participation in a common work”, that is, on the common work of creating an independent Algeria (Bourdieu 2013: 114).

In short, only the field concept appears as a mere trace in the Algerian work; the other concepts are much more than pseudo-anticipations.

Flemmen’s second critical point is that I could have delved deeper into the broader implications of my work for sociology as a whole. He gives an example of such an implication by comparing the late colonial conjuncture and the “turbulent period of classical sociology”, contrasting both to the “orthodox consensus” of postwar American sociology, which was “principally marked by functionalism, positivism, and the theory of industrial society”. I think there are at least three points I make in the book that can be taken as general implications.

The first concerns the theory of reflexivity, which Flemmen summarizes. A second implication flows from the general methodological approach to writing the history and sociology of knowledge that I develop here, which combines attention to contexts at all levels, with analysis of fields (which can be considered another sort of context), textual analysis, and individual-level biographical analysis. I think this approach is relevant to all projects in the sociology of science, intellectuals, and knowledge in general.

The third implication is to warn sociologists against condemning any thinkers – not just colonial-era ones – “without carefully considering them in their contexts and taking seriously the ambiguities and uncertainties in their writing, we need to situate authors in the dynamics of their fields”, and “to differentiate between scholarly, political and private genres of writing”. This is as relevant for the founders of sociology like Durkheim, Cooley, or Simmel, who were not directly engaged in colonial situations, as for pre-sociological writers such as Kant and Hegel. Only slowly are we starting to understand the importance of Kant’s autonomy from imperialist ideologies and his explicit turn against colonialism in his later writing, for example (Khurana 2023; Willaschek 2023).

III

This brings me to the peculiar review by **Idriss Jebari**. My main reaction is that the author seems to have wanted to read and review an entirely different book than the one I wrote. The book’s other reviewers have all recognized that this is a history of sociology produced under colonial conditions between the late 1930s and the mid-1960s in the French overseas empire and focused on sociological research on colonialism. Jebari seems to be much more



interested in intellectual life in the postcolonies after independence. That's fine, but it is not my project. Moreover, postcolonial intellectual history has received much more attention than intellectual life within the late colonial empires. In addition to Jebari's own work there is Pérez on Abdelmalek Sayad (Pérez 2022); Soriano on Memmi (Soriano 2023); Brisson (2008) on Arab intellectuals in France; and Copans on the French sociology of development emerging from colonial development studies (Copans 2010). There is a handful of studies of individual colonial-era French sociologists, including Paul Mercier (Copans 2021), Georges Balandier (Copans 2014), and Charles Le Cœur (Conklin 2019). There are a few studies of Jacques Berque and entire libraries on Raymond Aron and Pierre Bourdieu. But there is to my knowledge no other book that constructs the entire field of French and Francophone colonial sociology during this period. Nor have other historians discussed the colonial-era research of figures such as François N'Sougan Agblémagnon, Manga Bekombo, Eric de Dampierre, Alfred B. Schwartz, or Marcel Soret.

Jebari also seems to have wanted me to spend more time writing a history of French colonialism. I am hardly unaware of the history of colonialism (Steinmetz 2007), but to have included such material would have burdened the book unnecessarily. Instead, I bring in specific colonial political contexts where they are relevant to particular sociologists or research projects, as in the discussion of Balandier's studies of plans to regroup Fang populations in Gabon.

A reader of Jebari's review could be forgiven for thinking that I do not discuss colonized sociologists. The book actually discusses all of them, in differing detail. There is an extended discussion of the careers and writing of the two sociologists from sub-Saharan Africa who were employed full-time by the CNRS, Agblémagnon and Bekombo during this period.

Jebari also "laments" the "absence of a female figure". Here he misses the most important point, which is that there only five or six women in the entire cohort of French colonial sociologists – fewer even than the number of indigenous or colonized sociologists. These female sociologists have been completely ignored in the secondary literature on the history of French sociology, but I bring them back into the narrative. However, most of them did not begin their careers until after decolonization. Claudine Chaulet was a research associate at the Tunis Institut des Hautes Etudes and a friend of Frantz Fanon at the end of the 1950s, and afterwards a Professor at the Sociology Faculty of the Université d'Alger who took Algerian citizenship. But Chaulet only published a single article before Algerian independence and defended her first doctoral thesis in 1970 (Chaulet 1958; 1970). I discuss Danielle Storper-Perez in my treatment of the Fann psychiatric Hospital in Dakar, Senegal, whose workers developed innovative approaches to mental illness in colonial situations. Storper-Perez, who was a sociologist, wrote her doctoral thesis on the psychiatric hospitalization of Wolof patients in Senegal, and in her book *La folie colonisée* (Colonized Madness), analyzed connections between mental illness, social and family structures, and colonialism, and discussed the inability of traditional European psychiatric methods to deal with mentally ill Africans (Storper-Perez 1968; 1974). Yet all of Storper-Perez's publications appeared after decolonization and fall outside my self-imposed frame. I also mention Lilia



Ben Salem, who took a course with Frantz Fanon at the beginning of her studies in Tunis after Tunisian independence and went on to write her doctoral thesis with George Balandier (Ben Salem 2009).

The suggestion that I am depicting Aron, Berque, and Balandier as solitary “prophets” and “geniuses” rather than as “social scientists inserted in specific contexts” is baffling. More than two thirds of the book is devoted to reconstructing the contexts of intellectual production at the levels of colonial politics, academic and scientific institutions, disciplinary fields, and intellectual milieux; these contexts are used to make sense of individual intellectual production. I argue, for example, that writing on Bourdieu has ignored his reliance on the extant body of sociological writing on colonialism by people like Balandier and Berque. As Flemmen’s review noted, I write on p. 315 that we “now have assembled the tools with which to analyze the genesis of Bourdieu’s theoretical framework”. My book is directed precisely against foundationless, contextless, accounts of intellectual self-conjuring. If anything, I may have leaned too far in the direction of contextual explanation rather than granting more importance to individual creativity, agency, innovation, and defiance of social constraints.

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