

George STEINMETZ, *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought*
(Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2023, 576 p.)

First of all, George Steinmetz has to be congratulated and thanked for writing this spectacular book. It is a book that is about much more than French, or French colonial sociology. There is a lot that we can learn from it from an American sociology perspective. The nature of the discussions in French academia in France's late imperial period was not unique to France but can be applied to Western social sciences in general. After being exposed to radical French theories for so long, from Bourdieu to Foucault, Deleuze, Fanon, Sartre, Althusser, and so on, we have become accustomed to seeing French academia as progressive. But as the book shows, French academia in general has not been particularly progressive and antiracist. The book puts this group of French colonial sociologists in the context of the general reactionary academic environment of their time.

Taking into consideration the dominant scientific racism and social evolutionism in French social sciences back then enables us to appreciate the breakthroughs and achievements of the French colonial sociologists even more. Modern scientific racism was pretty much a French product. The book shows that in the 1930s to 1960s, the doctrine of biological racism formulated by 19th-century French writer Arthur de Gobineau was prominent in France's social sciences. According to this racist view, different races were different biological groups or human subspecies, and they were so different in character that you could not apply the same social categories when studying these different peoples. This kind of biological, genetically based racism was everywhere in France and in the Western world. At the same time, there was another extreme of evolutionary universalism, which assumed that all societies followed the same path of evolution. Under this perspective, we would not need to study Indian development so seriously because instead, we could just study sixteenth-century England as an equivalent of today's India at the same stage of development. Even today, this kind of thinking prevails. As such, you can imagine how much racist and evolutionist thinking this group of colonial sociologists in France had to overcome in the 1930s–1960s. As Steinmetz shows, this group of colonial sociologists includes

those who compared agrarian France with agrarian Arab economies on an equal footing (Jacques Berque). Some developed concepts from observations in Algerian society and applied them to metropolitan France (Pierre Bourdieu). These exercises were nothing short of revolutionary in the context of the high levels of racism and evolutionism in France and Western social science in general.

In light of this, the book shows us a critical juncture or magical moment at which pathbreaking ideas and modes of social inquiry could emerge and circulate in different locales within the French Empire and at the intersections of mainstream institutions and colonial resistance. The cross-boundary movement and flow of people enabled those people to acquire a transnational and historical perspective. The fluidity of empire and the resistance against it also enabled them to overcome orientalism, which sees Eastern or non-Western societies as static and ontologically different wholes. The rediscovery of the French colonial sociologists and their historical, transnational, and de-orientalized perspectives makes a great contribution to the decolonization of sociology and the social sciences at large today. The many obsolete paradigms the French colonial sociologists dismantled are still impediments to our sociological inquiry at the present time.

Besides my general agreement with and admiration of the book, I have four questions and one disagreement. My first question is why the memory and practice of colonial sociology were suppressed later on. How did French sociology get back to the traditional division of labor of disciplines, where sociology deals with industrialized societies, anthropology with underdeveloped tribal societies, and area studies with old non-Western civilizations? Why did this suppression of memory and practice happen after the flowering of colonial sociology in the 1930s–1960s?

Also, the book mentions Bourdieu's *Homo Academicus* in passing. The one interesting thing about *Homo Academicus* is that in it, Bourdieu explained the 1968 uprising in Paris from the perspective of a reproduction crisis of the ruling elite and a higher education crisis. He diagnosed that many sociology students were facing a credentials crisis due to the large number of students and the relatively low number of job prospects in their discipline. These students, mostly from bourgeois family backgrounds, were experiencing a crisis of downward mobility. He provided a class analysis of the students and a political economy of the disciplines to explain why so many sociology students were at the forefront of the student uprising. So, my second question is about students of colonial sociology. As any academic institution cannot sustain itself without

enrolled students, what are the backgrounds of students in colonial sociology, and how do they shape the outlook of the field? Did the marginality of the discipline and the students help create a space for them to see things that mainstream disciplines (e.g., philosophy, which is privileged in France) might not see, just as the crisis of class reproduction among sociology students led them to be revolutionary and to go to the barricades in 1968?

My third question concerns the choice of colonial sociologists that the book selects as case studies. Why not choose the examples of those who originated from the colonies instead of scholars who were from France and then went to the colonies? For examples, there were Albert Memmi and Anuar Abdel-Malek, both of whom are discussed nonsystemically in the book. They originated from the colonies or French spheres of influence. They were Arab Jews and Tunisians by ethnicity, and later taught in Paris. Some of this group went back to Maghreb. I would like to hear more about these cases and their thoughts and contributions. How were they compared with the colonial sociologists who were French in origin?

My fourth question is about the absence of French Indochina in the story. The book contains a long discussion about the French-dependency school in economics, covering scholars like Samir Amin. It is a very interesting area. In French economics, a sector of radical political economists emerged in the 1950s, and scholars from Indochina played a key role. Many anticolonial intellectuals from Indochina turned to Marxism during their studies in Paris and constituted the core of the French-dependency school. They were the Asian Marxists whom Samir Amin had close connections with. For example, many leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime had Ph.D.s in economics from prestigious French universities. Khieu Samphan, the Khmer Rouge's Brother Number Four and the right-hand man of Pol Pot until the latter's final days, was the most notorious example. He gained his Ph.D. in economics from the Sorbonne in 1959. His dissertation, *Cambodia's Economy and Industrial Development*, has been cited by and has inspired a whole generation of dependency-school scholars. In contrast, I wonder why there was a relative lack of scholars with an Indo-Chinese background in colonial sociology, which seems to be predominated by scholars from or working on Africa and the Arab world.

Besides my questions, I have a slight disagreement with one argument in the book. In the concluding chapter, Steinmetz outlines a strategy for decolonizing sociology. I share his passion for saving our discipline's canons from casual cancelation. Steinmetz suggests that we could resist the call for casual cancelation by reading the canons' works more

carefully. By reading them more thoroughly, we may find that they are actually not that problematic. The examples of Max Weber and Carl Schmitt were discussed. My disagreement is that for many of our canons, even if we fully understand their works and read every word written in them, we can still identify some major problems and limitations. Of course, we shouldn't just cancel the canons simply because the views on race and gender expressed in them do not meet our standards today. But we must recognize the limitations and biases that they inherited from their times. We do not need to pretend they are perfectly politically correct by present-day standards. It would be impossible for this to be the case anyway.

For example, Weber's works on India and China grouped the two civilizations together and generalized them according to some simplistic common characteristics of what he called "Asiatic religion" (in contrast to Christianity). Weber's works on China and India were grounded on the works of the many biased or even racist Sinologists and Indologists of his times. Besides the substance, his framework of comparison is highly problematic. When discussing Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, he treats each of these internally diverse religious traditions as a homogeneous whole, unchanged for thousands of years, jumping between examples from a text written in 100 BCE and practices as carried out in 1600 CE. However, when analyzing Christianity, he specifically focuses on Calvinism in certain parts of Europe during the seventeenth century.

This approach leads to an unbalanced comparison between an oversimplified and generic Eastern religion with a nuanced understanding of a specific Christian sect in a very particular time and space in Europe. The conclusion from this highly imbalanced comparison is problematic. It is problematic no matter how many times we read Weber carefully.¹ We should confront this problem head-on rather than sweeping it under the carpet. This kind of imbalanced comparison still haunts comparative historical sociology today.

Regarding Carl Schmitt, there have been accusations that his theory is driven by anti-Semitism, based on his personal diary and his letters. Steinmetz seems to suggest we could separate his theory from his personal political convictions and not cancel his theory because of the latter. But it is important to note that while there may not be explicit anti-Semitic content

¹ Ho-fung HUNG, 2003, "Orientalist Knowledge and Social Theories: China and the European Conceptions of East-West Differences from 1600 to 1900," *Sociological Theory*, 21 (3) : 254-280.

in his writing, there could still be implicit and intentionally covered biases that drive his theory. We can only discover these biases through his political activities. We cannot easily separate the two. In Jim Crow America, politicians and intellectuals claimed they supported the literacy test that disenfranchised African Americans, not because of race, but because they really believed you needed a certain educational level to vote responsibly. By finding out the privately expressed racist views and political activities of the politicians and intellectuals who took that position, you could likely infer that their public opinion about educational level and voting was just a pretext and cover for their true racist reasoning. Carl Schmitt's reasoning against liberal democracy may be purely philosophical and there was not much anti-Semitic thought in his writings (although some say there was). But he was a senior, card-carrying member of the Nazi Party, which accused liberalism as well as socialism of being "Jewish" corrupting influences that weakened German will and sovereignty.² Schmitt was such a committed Nazi that even after 1945 he refused to denazify, so he was banned from teaching in any German universities. This all shows that anti-Semitism was deeply ingrained in his theory, and we cannot separate his theory and writing from this underlying prejudice, though I know the reverse is quite a popular position among many contemporary fans of Carl Schmitt on both the left and the right who seek to rescue his theory for his theory's sake. But it is a position that is increasingly difficult to defend.

To decolonize sociology, I agree with the idea that we should not cancel everyone who may have held racist views or political positions, but rather frankly confront their limitations and problems while contextualizing their contributions. We must be alert to their biases and critically engage with their works. We need to resist the temptation of elevating our canons to sainthood and assume they are flawless. It is evident that the concluding chapter's discussion about decolonizing sociology is intended to be a conversation starter and reflection stimulator after more than 500 pages of powerful, meticulous investigation of the genesis and demise of French colonial sociology. The book's brief concluding note has surely fulfilled its purpose and opened up critical debate on the matter in our discipline.

H O - F U N G H U N G

² See Raphael GROSS, 2007, *Carl Schmitt Holocaust, and German Legal Theory* (Madison, MI, the University of Wisconsin Press) and *the Jews: The "Jewish Question," the*