
George STEINMETZ, *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought: French Sociology and the Overseas Empire*
(Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2023, 551 p.)

One of the most influential recent debates in sociology, and in social science in general, has focused on the question of coloniality. The decolonial turn interrogates the universalist ambitions and claims of “Western knowledge” and rejects Eurocentric epistemologies. It aims to dislocate the colonial logic of the contemporary world and recover the non-Western and non-European contributions to knowledge that have been marginalised or deliberately disregarded. Moreover, the decolonial paradigm argues that colonial relations have historically shaped all modern institutions, and that coloniality continues to ground existing knowledge systems and socio-economic relations, including capitalism, racism, imperialism, and patriarchy. Hence, in this understanding, as the existing colonialities perpetuate global inequalities and epistemic injustice, it is necessary to decolonise, and eventually dispense with, these “Western-centric” knowledge claims.

The beginning of the decolonial turn is usually traced to the pioneering contributions of Latin American sociologists such as Aníbal Quijano, Walter D Mignolo, and Maria Lugones, who analysed the foundational legacies of coloniality in the contemporary world and aimed to show how these legacies are reproduced through the dominant Eurocentric systems of knowledge. Decolonial sociologists such as Gurinder Bhambra, Manuela Boatcă, Syed Farid Alatas, and Ali Meghji, to name but a few, have explored how sociology as an academic discipline reinforced the epistemological divides between the West and the rest. As Boatcă, Costa, and Gutiérrez Rodríguez [2010: 1–2]¹ argue, sociology developed as an attempt to understand a modernity in which “Western societies” had become “a universal parameter for defining what modern societies

¹ Manuela S. BOATCĂ, Sérgio COSTA and Encarnacion GUTIÉRREZ RODRÍGUEZ, 2010. *Introduction: Decolonising European sociology: different paths towards a pending project, in*

M. S. Costa Boatcă and E. Gutiérrez Rodríguez, eds, *Decolonising European Sociology* (London, Routledge).

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are and the processes of their emergence as the path to be followed by other, modernising countries". They aim to show how "under a sociological lens, 'non-Western societies'" appear as economically, politically, and culturally incomplete and lacking in the face of the modern pattern, which is exclusively inferred from "Western societies".

The decolonial turn in sociology has generated a rethinking of the existing university curricula and has also initiated extensive discussions on the direction of sociological research. Some decolonial scholars have emphasised the discriminatory origins of classical sociology, with Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and others being held responsible for reproducing orientalist discourses about Africa, Asia, and Australia. For example, Meghji [2020: 23]² argues that Durkheim relied extensively on anthropological and ethnographic studies of indigenous populations "to reproduce colonial ideas of savagery, civilisation and societal evolution". Bhambra [2014]³ has also been highly critical of the "European exceptionalism" that runs through the work of both Marx and Weber. She describes Marx's references to "the Asiatic mode of production" and Weber's view of Chinese culture as deeply orientalist and even bordering on racism. Moreover, the classical sociologists are perceived to be indifferent to the global interconnectedness of the social world: "The 'global', insofar as it can be inferred from the writings of Marx and Weber, was the space in which processes initiated in Europe came to play out as 'world-historical'. There was little discussion of how the global might be understood in terms of processes not directly identified as capitalist but nonetheless contributing to modernity (for example, colonial settlement, dispossession, enslavement, and other forms of appropriation)" [Bhambra 2014: 7]. Decolonial scholars have also critically interrogated the contributions of many contemporary sociological thinkers, including Beck, Bourdieu, Giddens, Wallerstein, Mann, and Eisenstadt, and have deemed these scholars responsible for creating and reproducing deeply Eurocentric views of the world [Meghji 2020; Bhambra 2014].

While many sociologists have demonstrated openness towards the decolonial paradigm, and have expanded their syllabi to include more sociological research from the Global South or incorporated non-Western analyses into their research and writing, others have been more sceptical or hostile towards the project of decoloniality. These critiques of decolonial perspectives have focused on the essentialist epistemologies

² Ali MEGHJI, 2020. *Decolonising Sociology: An Introduction* (Cambridge, Polity).

³ Gurminder K. BHAMBRA, 2014. *Connected Sociologies* (London, Bloomsbury).

that underpin some decolonial views, while others have identified radical relativism and a lack of historical nuance in some decolonial analyses. Olúfẹ̀mi Táíwò [2022]⁴ argues that decolonial theory often conflates coloniality, imperialism, and modernity. This conflation often generates rather one-sided and simplistic views of complex historical processes. Others have emphasised the analytical problems that stem from deeply normative views that centre on victimhood and, as such, paradoxically deny agency to the marginalised populations in the non-Western world.

Nevertheless, regardless of where contemporary sociologists stand in this ongoing debate, there have been no comprehensive attempts to provide a historical sociology of coloniality and decoloniality in the development of sociology as an academic discipline. The ongoing debates seem to be mostly present-centric and highly politicised, while often contributing very little to an understanding of the historical dynamics of imperial rule and colonial resistance, and their relationship with sociology. George Steinmetz's new book offers the first systematic and in-depth empirical analysis of the role colonialism has played in the rise of modern social thought. More specifically, Steinmetz provides a historical and sociological study of the institutional relationships between the French imperial project and the development of French sociology.

Social Thought and the Imperial Project

Over more than 550 pages, Steinmetz explores in great detail the historical transformation of French social thought. His spotlight is on the post-World War II French empire. The book is divided into four parts. The first part zooms in on the sociology of colonies and the role of empires in the history of science, including the social sciences and humanities. Here, Steinmetz confronts the disciplinary amnesia which still underpins conventional narratives about the origins and institutionalisation of sociology. Rather than being a marginal theme, as demonstrated in this book, more than half of the postwar French sociologists researched on colonial topics or have worked in the colonies. His particular focus is the centrality of colonies for the development of sociological research in the period from 1945 to 1960. In this introductory part of the book Steinmetz develops his own theoretical framework—a

⁴ Olúfẹ̀mi Táíwò, 2022. *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously* (London, Hurst).

neo-Bourdieuian historical sociology of science which is then used to analyse the relationship between the French imperial project and sociology. This approach differs from the mainstream decolonial perspectives in many respects. For one thing, instead of the “confessional” approach that prioritises one’s demographic characteristics, neo-Bourdieuians emphasise the reflexivity of auto-analysis. In other words, saying that one writes as a representative of a particular group should not imply that this is a permanent and fixed social position, nor that the insider has some special access to knowledge. While social background is important, “participation in educational and scientific fields can dramatically transform scientists’ habitus, interests, and conscious and unconscious thought. That is why it is much more important to analyse the history of the field of knowledge and its intersections with the individual, rather than focusing on scientists’ demographic properties” [23]. Steinmetz is critical of standpoint epistemology, which insists that insiders have immediate and thus privileged access to knowledge about their own situations. If this were the case, and only French sociologists could understand and explain French society, then there would not be such a huge lacuna in French sociology in terms of the country’s colonial legacy. Standpoint epistemology is unable to detect these inherent biases and the institutionalised forms of analytical blindness. In contrast, this book aims to use neo-Bourdieuian reflexive auto-analysis to show how one can analyse colonial legacies while simultaneously acknowledging such biases.

The book’s second part explores the political contexts of colonial social thought in postwar France. Its focus is on the institutional settings that gave birth to colonial social science. Steinmetz looks at the ways French empire used social science to further its colonial objectives and at how, according to most polls from that time, the metropolitan French public consistently supported the imperial project. The rise of developmental colonialism in the postwar period favoured very close cooperation between government officials and social scientists: while the imperial authorities required sociological expertise on their colonial subjects, sociologists were eager to benefit from these employment opportunities and from the abundance of resources provided for their research on colonial themes. In this context, Steinmetz charts the unprecedented growth of the French—and some international—academic institutions (UNESCO, the Rockefeller Foundation, or the International Sociological Association) that were directly linked with the expansion of the colonial project. It is no historical accident that the expansion of the welfare state in the period from 1946 to 1966 took place in parallel with the proliferation of colonialism’s educational and research infrastructure.

The most influential research organisations in metropolitan France were simultaneously the principal institutions of colonial sociology—for example, CNRS, ORSTOM, IFAN, the Office of Colonial Scientific Research, and the Superior Council of Overseas Colonial Research.

In the third part of the book, Steinmetz explores the intellectual context of post-World War II French sociology. He zooms in on the ways colonialism was approached across different social science disciplines and then looks at the key theoretical and methodological debates within French sociology. One of the many interesting debates here is on the status of “primitivism” in the study of non-Western societies. Steinmetz analyses the key contributions by the leading representatives of ethno-sociology, including Roger Bastide, Charles Le Coeur, Maurice Leenhardt, and Jacques Soustelle among others, and shows how “primitivising ideology” was a colonial invention. The introduction of indirect rule in the colonies entailed reliance on the local “native” authorities. Hence, “anthropologists were called upon to identify native leaders, reconstruct their customs, and contribute to the codification of customary law. This context strengthened anthropologists’ predilection for seeking out the most foreign, exotic, or traditional populations for study”. Consequently, the policy of indirect rule reinforced customary law and the dominance of native leaders, thus creating the idea of “primitivism” and “primitive mentalities” [139]. This part of the book also offers a prosopography of French postwar social scientists and shows how much of Parisian intellectual and academic life was shaped by the imperial project. While legal scholars were devising various laws, regulations, and decrees (i.e. the state of exception) to justify the unequal treatment of colonial subjects, economists were advancing theories that emphasised the compatibility of imperialism and free trade, whereas anthropologists and philosophers such as Levy-Bruhl were differentiating the “primitive” mentality, which was allegedly defined by prelogical thought and mysticism, from the rational, logical, modern European mentality. The most extreme justification of imperial rule came from the psychologists and psychoanalysts, who tended to treat the colonialisised populations as being mentally ill *per se*. For example, French psychiatrist Jacques-Joseph Moreau insisted that Muslim group prayer is likely to cause insanity, while British ethno-psychiatrist John Colin Carothers argued that “all primitive Africans are psychopathic, in that their personalities are by European standards immature” [117].

Part Four offers a historical sociology of French colonial sociological research for the period 1918–1965. Steinmetz explores the social structure of French sociology and shows how dominant colonial-centred

themes were in metropolitan France. He also assesses the influence of colonial specialists vis-à-vis sociologists who studied other topics, and finds that the colonial sociologists maintained a very similar professional standing and prestige to their noncolonial counterparts. Rather than being marginal, colonial sociologists held the key positions in leading French academic institutions such as the College de France and L'École Pratique des Hautes Études, and at the Sorbonne. However, while the metropolitan-based colonial sociologists were in a privileged position, this was not the case of many sociologists based in the colonies. One such group consisted of scholars who worked in the French colonial administration or cooperated with the military and police in the colonies. These sociologists often contributed to policies that were deeply harmful to the local population, including involuntary displacement programmes. As French public opinion gradually shifted away from enthusiasm for colonialism, and as metropolitan intellectuals started resenting the imperial project, these administration-embedded sociologists became highly unpopular. The other, even more marginalised group was that of indigenous sociologists, who often faced unsurmountable obstacles in their academic careers and in their personal lives too. As Steinmetz shows, only a very small number of indigenous sociologists, such as Francois N'Sougan Agblemagnon from Togo, Manga Bekombo from Cameroon, Albert Memmi and Paul Sebag from Tunisia, and later Abdelmalek Sayad from Algeria, would eventually be recognised for their important contributions to sociological research.

The last part of the book zooms in on the four key French sociologists—Raymond Aron, Jacques Berque, Georges Balandier, and Pierre Bourdieu. By focusing on the individual trajectories of their intellectual development and academic careers, Steinmetz shows how their key concepts and theories developed in the context of the colonial experience. Aron was one of the first French sociologists who provided a systematic study of empire and colonialism. In his comparative historical analysis of Nazi imperialism, French colonialism, and the informal American empire during the Cold War, Aron was able to identify different social processes that have generated very different imperial forms. Berque is a largely forgotten figure today, but as Steinmetz shows, he coined the concept of “decolonial” and was a pioneer in the study of colonial societies using the decolonial paradigm. Berque successfully combined theoretical analysis with ethnography and archival research to generate innovative and de-orientalised studies of Maghreb and other Islamic societies. Balandier was also a pioneer of decolonial sociological analysis. His 1951 article on the colonial situation in Africa offered a potent model of relational sociology long

before such an approach had become influential in European or North American academic research. By focusing on the totality of the colonial experience in Africa, Balandier developed a process-centred historical sociology (“sociologie vivante”) that deeply contrasted with the then-dominant ahistorical structuralism. As Steinmetz emphasises [303], while Claude Lévi-Strauss in his highly popular book *Tristes tropiques* “orientalises the tropics” and looks for “the undiluted primitive cultures,” Balandier’s *Ambiguous Africa* is a model of self-reflexivity in which historical sociology is deployed to untangle complex and highly dynamic social processes: “Balandier’s approach is historical in its overdetermined, processualist refusal of closure, telos, and societal ‘achievement’” [308].

In a similar vein, Bourdieu’s intellectual contributions have been traced to colonial settings. Steinmetz shows convincingly that many of Bourdieu’s key concepts and theories, such as habitus, cultural and symbolic capital, social practice, strategy, domination, and social fields, as well as his distinct understanding of reflexivity, originated during his time in Algeria. For example, his highly influential theory of habitus as a durable set of predispositions developed in part from the amalgamation of ideas from Erwin Panofsky, Husserl, and Aristotle, among others, with the Algerian Kabyle Berbers’ notion of *niya*. The Kabyle word *niya* stands for “a certain manner of being and acting, a permanent, general and transposable disposition in the face of the world and other men” [340]. Steinmetz also shows how Bourdieu engaged very early in what would today be described as decolonial analysis, without necessarily perpetuating a mythological “nostalgia for the agrarian paradises” [334]. In his lectures and publications from the 1970s he advocated a “decolonisation of sociology”. Perhaps more than any other French sociologist, Bourdieu developed the potent analytical tools for a self-reflexive scholarship that allows for in-depth examination of the colonial legacy. As Steinmetz demonstrates, Bourdieu’s three epistemic breaks in the research process (a break with one’s own prenotions; a break with the spontaneous views of the actors being studied; and a break with the researcher’s initial objectivating descriptions) all offer a much better guide to social research than do standpoint epistemologies [344–345].

Sociology after Empire

The decolonial critique is indispensable for a better understanding of the world we inhabit today. It seems rather pointless to deny the colossal

impact that the imperial projects have left on nearly every aspect of social life, including academia. There is no doubt that sociology, just like any other discipline, is not only a child of the Enlightenment but also an orphan of imperialism and colonialism. Sociological analyses were integral to the reproduction of the colonial order, and many sociologies have generated knowledge that sustained the sharp global hierarchies between the imperial metropolises and colonial peripheries. Some sociologists also devised influential theories that posited the inherent cultural or racial divisions whereby white Europeans were deemed superior to the populations living in the colonies. Sociological research also played an important role in providing “evidence” to justify the unequal treatment of different people. Furthermore, sociologists collaborated with imperial authorities to implement various discriminatory policies against colonised populations, including forced displacement and resettlement programmes. There are many other ways in which sociologists helped legitimise the empire. A decolonial critique is extremely valuable in identifying and analysing these colonial legacies and the ways they remain embedded in contemporary academic institutions.

Nevertheless, what is often missing in mainstream decolonial scholarship is historical breadth and sociological nuance. As Steinmetz convincingly shows, mainstream decolonial approaches rarely undertake in-depth historical analyses that can generate complex, contradictory, and unexpected findings. As is evident from reading this highly insightful book, French colonialism was not a uniform, one-dimensional, and static instrument of oppression. Instead, the imperial project was constantly changing and evolving and, in this process, it generated multifaceted and unforeseen social configurations. Steinmetz clearly demonstrates how, from the very early days of colonialism, institutional repression also gave birth to organised resistance, and how the relationships between the imperial centre and the colonies generated violence but also spurred creativity. It was in these colonial settings that sociology developed more reflective and process-oriented perspectives. It is no coincidence that the colonies, rather than the imperial metropolis, engendered novel sociological ideas and new ways of thinking. The hegemony of rigid structuralism in French academia was cracked, and eventually undermined, by the relational and processual approaches that originated in the colonial peripheries. The leading French sociologists of the 20th century such as Bourdieu, Arron, Balandier, Berque, and others all developed their original sociological theories in colonial settings and in interaction with colonial subjects. It is this direct experience of colonialism that shaped the character of contemporary sociology.

Furthermore, as Steinmetz shows, the rejection of colonialism is not a recent phenomenon. Although some sociologists supported imperialism and benefited from colonial conquests, many others were strong opponents of colonial expansion. Berque, Balandier, Bourdieu, and others denounced that expansion, but also devised new analytical ways to understand imperial domination. Although Steinmetz focuses mostly on the postwar period, this line of thinking can be traced back to Durkheim, Mauss, and many other classical French sociologists who did not in fact “reproduce the colonial ideas of savagery”, as claimed by Meghji and other representatives of contemporary decolonial approaches, but were highly critical of imperialism and regularly emphasised the epistemological equality of diverse human and social experiences throughout the world [Fournier 2006].⁵ In mainstream decolonial critique, these important complexities, confrontations, and paradoxes are all reduced to a one-dimensional view of repression where there is no room for local resistance and creativity.

Steinmetz’s study also shows that many recently articulated ideas about coloniality are not new but were developed and well known in the mid-20th century. Concepts such as “decolonial”, the “colonial situation”, and the “decolonisation of sociology” were an integral part of the sociological vocabulary from the 1950s onwards. All these concepts and many others were created in colonial settings and were deployed successfully to understand the dialectical relationships between the imperial centres and the colonies. Significantly, the way these concepts were used shows how early decolonial sociology was much more reflexive and process-oriented than some strands of the contemporary decolonial paradigm, which are often marred by essentialist language and what Rogers Brubaker [2004]⁶ calls hard groupism. While the classics of French decolonial scholarship were well aware that coloniality generates ambiguous and contradictory relationships whereby the colonised subjects experience violence but also consciously adopt some social practices from the imperial centres, contemporary decolonial approaches often lack this analytical subtlety. The early decolonial scholars, including indigenous sociologists such as Abdelmalek Sayad, Manga Bekombo, and Francois N’Sougan Agblemagnon, understood well that imperial legacies cannot be reversed and that sociological analyses will always remain shaped by the history of colonial violence. The organised brutality of the imperial project

⁵ Marcel FOURNIER, 2005. *Marcel Mauss: A Biography* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).

⁶ Roger BRUBAKER, 2004. *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press).

remains part and parcel of the shared historical experience, and as such, knowledge, including sociological insights, will always be tainted by this violent past. One cannot dispense with the legacies of “Western-centric” knowledge. Hence, genuine decoloniality cannot be a project of purification or of collective repentance. There is no going back, and historical injustices cannot be undone. As Berque made clear, one could not unmake the conditions generated by colonisation, and that is why he later preferred the concept *dépossession* to that of decolonialisation. In this context, the classical decolonial approach often offers more than many contemporary decolonial perspectives.

The contemporary decolonial paradigm seems to possess a much better diagnostic than explanatory capacity. This perspective is generally helpful for identifying the presence of colonial ideas and practices in contemporary academic settings. It is also effective at pinpointing how imperial legacies perpetuate global social inequalities and marginalise non-European knowledge production. Nevertheless, as Steinmetz shows, its explanatory ability is limited by its embrace of standpoint epistemologies. Since standpoint theory overemphasises one’s demographic characteristics as a source of knowledge and authority, it inevitably freezes social relations and generates essentialist interpretations of social reality. Obviously, all knowledge is a product of specific social environments and our social backgrounds influence how we see and understand the world. Yet our experiences are not determined solely by our class, social status, “race”, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, nationhood, citizenship, or colonial position. As scholars we are also dynamic creatures who are shaped by our own individual biographical experiences. In this sense, Bourdieu is absolutely right that being a member of a specific collectivity does not automatically confer a privileged access to knowledge. The standpoint theory advocated by the contemporary decolonial paradigm is based on an insider epistemology that can easily slide into a form of academic populism and extreme relativism. If only women can study and understand other women, and only Kurds can explore and comprehend what it means to be a Kurd, then sociological analysis is reduced to a form of in-group therapy. Steinmetz offers a better way out. In addition to Bourdieu’s three epistemological breaks (with one’s own spontaneous prenotions, with the empirical level of surface appearances, and with the prenotions of the people the researcher is studying), Steinmetz adds the fourth dimension — “a break with one’s initial, objectivising scientific constructions, which may reify reality” [359]. These different layers of reflexivity certainly help us avoid the analytical traps of standpoint theory, which underpins

the mainstream decolonial perspectives. A genuine decolonial sociology needs to offer much more than a confessional booth.

In addition to this methodological intervention, one can also critique the contemporary decolonial paradigm for its overemphasis on culture and neglect of geopolitical and historical analysis. The imperial projects were the product of power politics, and empires have been the dominant geopolitical force for thousands of years. Hence, nearly every institution that exists today, including in academia, is in part an imperial creation. Almost all knowledge that has been generated over the course of human history, including sociology, was acquired through imperial conquests and violence. The imperial orders developed, expanded, and disappeared as a result of wars, revolutions, uprisings, and other geopolitical realities. Ultimately these changing geopolitics created the conditions for the large-scale global transformation that replaced the universe of empires with today's world of nation-states [Malešević 2019, 2013]⁷. As colonialism and imperialism are structural phenomena that have developed and expanded over long periods of time, their influence cannot be reversed or dismantled through clarion calls to decolonise everything. Instead, de-imperialisation and decolonisation always entail profound geopolitical change. It is unlikely that a focus on decolonisation of the language and the curriculum will bring about such a structural change. Instead, it seems that the performative decoloniality of academia in the Global North remains completely divorced from the deep structural inequalities of the South.

George Steinmetz has written an excellent, timely, and badly needed book. This is a very detailed and comprehensive study of the relationship between sociology and the French colonial project. It is a subtle and wide-ranging analysis, based on extensive and in-depth empirical research, which explores different facets of this relationship. Nevertheless, the book offers much more than an historical sociological analysis of the French colonial experience. It shows how complex, contradictory, and messy the links between organised violence and the creation of knowledge are. Perhaps Steinmetz could have made more use of his theoretical framework throughout the book (in the way he did in chapter 5, on the four main sociologists), and he could have engaged a bit more directly with contemporary decolonial scholarship. Nevertheless, this is a major contribution which powerfully demonstrates that there are no easy sociological answers to help us account for the legacies of colonialism and

⁷ Siniša MALEŠEVIĆ, 2019. *Grounded Nationalisms* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press); S. MALEŠEVIĆ, 2013. *Nation-States and Nationalisms* (Cambridge, Polity).

imperialism. Just like any other academic discipline, sociology emerged, developed, and prospered on the back of the colonial experience. Nevertheless, any systematic attempt to somehow cleanse sociology of these sins from the past (and present) would also eradicate most of its critical and analytical capacities. Thus, to adequately explore coloniality, one should replace the sledgehammer approach of the mainstream decolonial paradigm with a more refined sociological endoscope, capable of tracking the ambiguities, complexities, and inherent paradoxes of the imperial project.

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