

SYMPOSIUM

The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought: A Symposium Introduction

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This symposium represents a formal intellectual exchange that began with a vibrant session held at the Annual Meeting of the Social Science History Association (SSHA) on November 19, 2022. The session featured George Steinmetz's book, *Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought: French Sociology and the Overseas Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2023). The event reflected growing interest among social science historians in the entwined histories of, on the one hand, the formation of social science, and on the other hand, European colonialism and empire.

The conference theme, chosen by SSHA President Julian Go, was “Reverberations of Empire: Histories, Legacies & Lineages.” This symposium is designed to inform ongoing dialog and debate on this theme, in this case through critical assessment of the case of French sociology as analyzed in *Colonial Origins*. The book, in short, draws upon original archival sources and interviews to explain how the field of French sociology related colonialism from the 1930s to 60s. To frame this account, the book uses a theoretical approach to the sociology of knowledge rooted generally in Bourdieu's field theory. The book intends to open up possibilities for accounting for the formation of French sociology while also providing a model for case-comparative analysis of colonial situations and corresponding knowledges. *Colonial Origins* and the debates addressed below thus provide additional resources for reconstructing the development and “reverberations” of empire, not only as an object of study social scientific study but as entwined in complex ways with social science itself.

The symposium proceeds as follows. First, historian Anne Kwaschik questions how French sociology in the period in question fits into a longer historical situation for colonialism. How might French sociology relate to other social sciences and political contexts? Second, sociologist of colonialism Alexandre White raises questions of methodology: how can we best conduct studies of disciplinary dynamics with reference to colonialism? How does what Steinmetz call a “Neo-Bourdiesian historical sociology of science” help in this regard? White then critically questions the role of race, racist science, resistance scholarship, and censorship in the dynamics of the French academic field. Third, sociologist of science Christian Dayé interrogates Steinmetz's account of how colonial sociology, as core to the formation of French sociology, was erased from the history of the field, emphasizing how sociological theory, method, and analysis helped to construct “strangeness”

between colonies and metropole. Fourth, Charles Camic speaks to Steinmetz's sociology of knowledge by critically evaluating the theoretical relationship between "fields" (in Bourdieu's rendering, and in this case regarding the field of French sociology) and the environments or "contexts" in which fields and social practices take shape, providing lessons for how historical scholarship can better understand intellectual communities and knowledge production. Johan Heilbron provides the fifth commentary, centrally engaging how the "rediscovery" of "colonial sociology" as a serious sub-field of French sociology should inspire a reckoning with this historical amnesia along with comparative approaches to colonialism and social science. Finally, the author, George Steinmetz engages and responds to the critiques of each commentator.

Reference

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

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Reconstructing Colonial Sociology

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The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought is a milestone in the history of sociology, far-reaching in its scope and objectives, and impressive in its material and archival basis. The book should impact strongly both the history of colonialism as a cultural, scientific, and epistemic project before and after WWII, as well as the history of sociology as an academic, disciplinary and intellectual field. The book, however, reaches beyond these contexts and provides new insights for interwar and postwar French intellectual history in a broader sense as well as for the interdisciplinary history of colonial knowledge; it, finally, differentiates our view on developmentalism in the French Empire.

Following a Bourdieusian approach, Steinmetz combines contextual and textual analysis with statistical evaluations moving progressively in time and scale to the moment of interest, the period from the 1930s to the 1960s. Tackling, for the first time, a Western European sociology in the perspective of a full-fledged historical sociology, the book reveals the relevance of colonialism as a determining context for the development of the discipline. It is well known that Pierre Bourdieu has developed the essential aspects of his "theory of practice" based on his activities