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BOOK REVIEW

G. Steinmetz, *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought: French Sociology and the Overseas Empires* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023). Pages xv + 551. $45.00 hardback.

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The relatively late arrival of Anglo-American postcolonial theory in France has had a number of unfortunate consequences. Not the least of these is a pervasive idea that France is somehow in denial about its colonial past. Ever since the early 2000s – when foreign observers began to remark on the fact that scholars like Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak had been largely ignored in the French academy – there has been a persistent sense that the French somehow lack the conceptual tools with which to understand their colonial past and postcolonial present.

Such a view is open to many criticisms. For a start, it glosses over the very public debates that have taken place in the last 30 years in France over the country's imperial legacy. Indeed, these debates have been more visible in France than in any other European postcolonial nation-state, including the UK. Some of the arguments being made have not been particularly edifying. After all, France has a powerful, racist far-right that is quite willing to celebrate the imperial past. But each wave of colonial nostalgia has been met with vigorous resistance on the part of 'anti-racist' and 'anti-colonial' activists, who themselves have drawn on an extraordinarily rich Francophone tradition of writing about imperialism and colonialism.

Part of the reason this tradition has gone unrecognized, however, is that it did not primarily emanate from literary theory, critical race theory or cultural studies, as it did in the Anglo-American world. Instead, as George Steinmetz demonstrates in this wonderfully capacious book, it emerged from the empirical social sciences. It was amongst French sociologists, anthropologists, ethnologists and, to a lesser extent, historians that the most vigorous debates surrounding empire and its consequences took place in the late colonial and early postcolonial period.

Steinmetz's focus is the middle of the twentieth century – from the 1930s to the 1970s – although several chapters go back much further into the nineteenth century. During this period, he contends, the French overseas empire became a site and laboratory for the elaboration of innovative forms of 'social thought'. Specifically, Steinmetz is interested in the sub-field of *sociologie coloniale* (colonial sociology), that is, sociological research conducted 'within structures predicated on foreign sovereignty

and the rule of difference – even when its producers were explicitly critical of colonialism' (p. 12). This is not an easy field to define, and Steinmetz frequently includes social scientists who did not consider themselves (or were not considered) sociologists. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the geographical and political space in which research was conducted, rather than its content or argument, gives him a lot of leeway to explore the complexities of social thought in a colonial and postcolonial context.

Although the book is structured in five parts, it makes more sense to divide it into two sections. The first of these, which runs from Parts I to IV, explores the various political, intellectual and disciplinary contexts that shaped French colonial sociology and led to a generalized 'amnesia' about its existence after the 1970s. The approach here is recognizably that of intellectual history, where the development of ideas and research agendas is structured by institutions (universities, research centres), political events or processes (the Popular Front, the Occupation of France, the Algerian War) and academic competition (for chairs, professorships or assistantships). These contexts anchor our understanding of how, when and why certain ideas, interpretations and personalities came to the fore.

The second section, which corresponds to Part V of the book, is made up of four mini-intellectual biographies of colonial sociologists: Raymond Aron, Jacques Berque, Georges Balandier and Pierre Bourdieu. Some of these figures – especially Aron and Bourdieu – became well-known outside the field of colonial sociology, but Steinmetz is keen to show how their trajectories and arguments were deeply influenced by direct experience of French colonialism and its impact. More generally, these portraits offer a close reading of certain key texts that reveal their colonial origins or their engagement with the French overseas empire.

The overall effect of these two sections – one devoted to context, the other to individual biographies – is highly convincing. The deep relationship between colonialism and French intellectual life in the mid-twentieth century will not come as a surprise to intellectual historians of France. There are now many studies that examine, for instance, the impact of the Algerian War on figures as varied as Jacques Derrida, Albert Camus and Germaine Tillion. There is also an ample literature on the deployment of racial and colonial typologies in fields such as demography, geography and urban planning. But Steinmetz's broad view of French sociology, with his meticulous account of its colonial origins, still has plenty to offer.

The book provides fresh perspectives on unfairly neglected scholars like Balandier. It includes useful overviews of the archipelago of research institutions that existed across the French overseas empire from the 1930s onwards. It shows emphatically that an entire generation of social scientists, not all of whom became well-known or went into academia, were forced to reckon with the consequences of colonialism. Even the appendices, which list names of colonial sociologists, are revealing: to look through them is to get a sense of how influential colonial sociology actually was.

In an increasingly Anglophone intellectual landscape, we should welcome Steinmetz's heroic and nuanced reconstruction of Francophone social thought on and about colonialism. This is especially true at a time when 'decolonizing' agendas are sweeping across the Anglo-American academy. As this book reminds us, 'decolonization' is not a new concern: previous generations of scholars also had to grapple with

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the harsh realities of producing knowledge at a time of servitude, violence, domination and structural inequality. We can learn a great deal from these struggles to articulate an understanding and critique of colonialism, while still remaining true to scholarly ideals and lived experiences.

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