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Field Meets Context

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Hundreds of French colonial social scientists, 20-some French colonies in post-World War II Africa, more than a dozen research organizations in France and its colonies overseas, a wide range of academic disciplines (extending from geography to philosophy, anthropology, and sociology), and the careers and ideas of four towering social thinkers (Raymond Aron, Jacques Berque, Georges Balandier, and Pierre Bourdieu): these are just some of the topics examined in George Steinmetz's new book, *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought: French Sociology and the Overseas Empire*.

Given my specialization, I want to concentrate on the book's contribution to what used to be called the "sociology of knowledge," but nowadays is often referred to as the "sociology of ideas" or the study of "knowledge production." In this area, Steinmetz's book stands as an exemplar of what scholarship should be: an original, theory-driven, empirical analysis of major historical developments of contemporary importance – in this case, of social-scientific thinking about empire, imperialism, and colonized peoples.

In this review, I want to especially spotlight the theory component of the analysis presented in the book. Steinmetz characterizes his study as an effort to formulate and apply “a neo-Bourdieuian historical sociology of science.” This approach, he explains, “builds on [Pierre Bourdieu’s] main ideas while revising them to different degrees” (Steinmetz 2023: 19). In particular, focusing on Bourdieu’s core concept of fields (elaborated below), Steinmetz argues that social-scientific fields, which Bourdieu treated as relatively autonomous spaces of knowledge production, should also be:

situated within wider enviroing *contexts*, which may be patterned [inter alia, by] . . . dominant cultural discourses . . . or the political, economic, and social forces that sometimes stamp an entire epoch . . . [and] shape activity within fields, whose autonomy from their environments is always relative (ibid.).

Proceeding in this vein, not only does Steinmetz wield Bourdieusian theory to understand the development of the field of French sociology and its “colonial subfield,” he plumbs their sociohistorical contexts, including various “distant” national and international “political contexts” and “intellectual contexts” as well as multiple cultural contexts more “proximate” to the field of sociology (ibid.: 25–26).

Steinmetz presents this heavy inclusion of context as a step toward broadening Bourdieu’s field theory – and so it is. But, in my reading, Steinmetz does more than this. Incorporating context in the ways that he does, he moves beyond Bourdieusian field analysis in significant ways.

To appreciate this move, it is useful to recognize that Bourdieu himself almost never spoke of “context” as such. The concept is not even indexed in the recent 700-page *Oxford Handbook of Pierre Bourdieu* (Medviez and Sallaz 2018). Occasionally we find him referring to phenomena that we might reasonably gloss as contextual, as when he alludes to the external “social cosmos in which [any scientific field] is embedded” or to “external economic, political, and religious powers” (Bourdieu 1990: 298; 2005 [1995]:105).

But, when theorizing knowledge production, Bourdieu did not dwell on these factors.¹ To the contrary, he objected to theories that would give these factors any independent weight. Here his argument is that “the efficacy of external factors, economic crises, technical transformations, political revolutions, or quite simply social demand . . . can *only* be exercised by the intermediary of the . . . structure of the field” (ibid. 1996 [1992]: 204) – conceptualized as a relatively “closed and separate microcosm,” which is constituted by a specific set of “objective relations between positions” that exist in an agonistic, hierarchical ordering (of dominance and subordination) and whose incumbents struggle with one another to attain or retain the scarce rewards that the field offers (ibid. 1990: 298). This internal dynamic is what Bourdieu called the “logic” of a field, and it is a driving force in all social-scientific (and other) fields.

Continuing to the issue of most importance here, Bourdieu insists that to explain a field member’s ideas – his, her, or their “position-takings,” as he calls them – the person’s field position is “the *true principle* of the position-takings of different

¹This is true regarding Bourdieu’s many programmatic statements; in his historical case studies, he sometimes presents a more complex picture (Camic 2011; 2013).

producers, of the competition which pits them against each other, of the alliances they form, or the works they produce or defend” (ibid. 1996 [1992]: 204). Or, in Bourdieu’s most direct statement: “position-takings arise quasi-mechanically – that is, almost independently of the agent’s consciousness and will – from the relationship between positions” (ibid. 1993 [1983]: 59).

Steinmetz puts forth a fundamentally different argument. Without questioning that social-scientific fields work in Bourdieusian ways, Steinmetz maintains (as I noted above) that, in regard to French colonial sociology, there existed “causal factors located outside the sociological field proper” – factors that were among the “determinants” of French sociology and its colonial branch (Steinmetz 2023: 25). According to Steinmetz’s historical evidence, so important were these external factors historically that they take up the first third of his book, where “field” appears relatively sparingly. Challenging the Bourdieusian thesis that fields operate according to a one-size-fits-all “logic,” Steinmetz furthermore holds that the contextual factors he discusses are forces that operate in “an unpredictable, contingent, conjunctural manner” (ibid.: 193). In his view, in other words, while field position can be highly consequential, there is – contra Bourdieu – no singular “true principle” that determined the position-takings that were constitutive of French colonial social science.

This interpretation of Steinmetz’s argument gains textual support when we see, in the chapters of his book that examine four giants of French colonial sociology individually, that “field” often plays an ephemeral role – visible sometimes, often-times not. Steinmetz’s eye-opening chapter on Raymond Aron, for example, contains hardly any field analysis, while heavily stressing the idiosyncrasies of “biographical context.” This emphasis also accords with Steinmetz’s incisive observations about the role of non-Bourdieuian factors, such as “luck, timing, and intellectual excellence” (ibid.: 199), in the intellectual development of the thinkers in his study. (“Luck,” too, is absent from the index of the *Bourdieu Handbook*.) Frequently, Steinmetz’s explanations of the ideas of these thinkers make (or so it seems to me) little reference to the individual’s field positioning.

By no means is this a criticism, let alone critique of Steinmetz for deviating from the chapters and verses of Bourdieu’s theory. In my view, Steinmetz’s departures from Bourdieu represent a significant – and extremely fruitful – theoretical shift, which goes beyond his modest claim that he is “revising” Bourdieu. Furthermore, this theoretical shift is not something we can reduce to semantics – on the tacit assumption that the language of “field” and the language of “context” are essentially inter-translatable. I say that because in the manner that social scientists nowadays ordinarily use these two languages in their research – and they use them a lot – the two are not interchangeable. A Bourdieusian field is – to repeat – (relatively) autonomous, internally hierarchical, and agonistic. However, typically, we would not say the same about a context; for, although contexts *may* be hierarchical, agonistic, and “closed” off, oftentimes they are not (or these attributes are secondary, at best). As treated, for example, by Quentin Skinner and his followers (one school of intellectual contextualizers), a context is less a competitive battle over scarce rewards than it is an intergenerational dialog with many voices. And rather than “closed,” most real historical contexts sprawl unbounded across time and space – to the frustration of historical researchers. To conduct their research, historical scholars routinely make pragmatic decisions about where to draw the start

and finish lines of a particular context, but in principle researchers might follow contexts out further, and further, and further.

Such decisions pose empirical/methodological problems and raise theoretical issues that Bourdieusian field theory is ill-equipped to grapple with. In sharp contrast, by examining fields and contexts in tandem, Steinmetz enjoins us to confront the *differences and similarities* between the two – both as theoretical concepts and as objects of empirical investigation. Indeed, among the many achievements of Steinmetz's book is inviting us to ask (with regard to knowledge production):

- What are the respective features of fields and contexts?
- To what degree are contexts an amalgam of many different fields (and thus reduceable to them)?
- Or are fields one variety of contexts?
- If so, what are the other varieties, and what are their features? Under what historical circumstances do those varieties occur?
- To what degree are contexts nested, overlapping, or knitted together, and similarly with fields?
- What are the mechanisms (besides field struggles) by which contexts exert their effects on knowledge production?

Aside from a few of Bourdieu's own studies of knowledge production,² I am unaware of any empirical study in the area that is as innovative as Steinmetz's in terms of the major theoretical issues it broaches and the compelling ways it addresses them historically. Going beyond Bourdieu, *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought* is post-Bourdieuian scholarship at its best.

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²In particular, Bourdieu's studies of Martin Heidegger (1991 [1975]) and Gustav Flaubert (1996 [1992]).

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Colonial Sociology and the Historical Sociology of the Social Sciences

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George Steinmetz's book on the colonial origins of modern social thought is an eye-opener and a game-changer. The book represents a learned, deeply researched, and admirably constructed study: broad in scope, spanning a considerable period of time and tackling a pressing problem – colonial social science – in a sophisticated and challenging manner.

Since the book has a meaning that is well beyond its specific object of study, it is worthwhile situating it in the broader context. I would say *Colonial Origins* has a fourfold significance.

First, it changes our understanding of sociology and can inspire a shift in sociologists' self-understanding. Demonstrating that, in France, "colonial sociology" was a *subfield* of considerable intellectual and institutional importance represents a discovery, perhaps a rediscovery, which should have consequences, not just for specialists in the history of sociology, but for the discipline as a whole: for the authors who will be selected for anthologies and textbooks, and, more generally, for what should be included in the thematic and theoretical repertoire of the discipline. In addition to this forward-looking dimension, there is the retrospective questioning, examining the amnesia, the active and passive modes of ignorance of this colonial past. These are social processes as well, in need of sociological scrutiny, and they are an integral part of the analysis that Steinmetz presents.

Second, and beyond the case of France, the book is a research program and a model for studying colonial sociology in other contexts, colonial and non-colonial, and an invitation to do so comparatively. Although Steinmetz announces further work himself, such an effort will hopefully be joined by others, so that the inquiries can become a collective and transnational research effort. There is every reason to examine comparable (sub-)fields in other countries, their structural dynamics as well as the intellectual production they have given rise to. To mention just one intriguing comparative question among others, have there been equivalents of figures like the Tunisian scholar Albert Memmi and the Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad, important social thinkers who were born and grew up as colonial subjects?

Third, the book contributes to the trans-disciplinary intellectual debate about colonialism, post-colonialism, and decolonization. The conclusion of the book