

## ALGERIAN INQUIRIES AND COLONIAL SOCIOLOGY

*A Joint Interview with Amín Pérez and  
George Steinmetz*

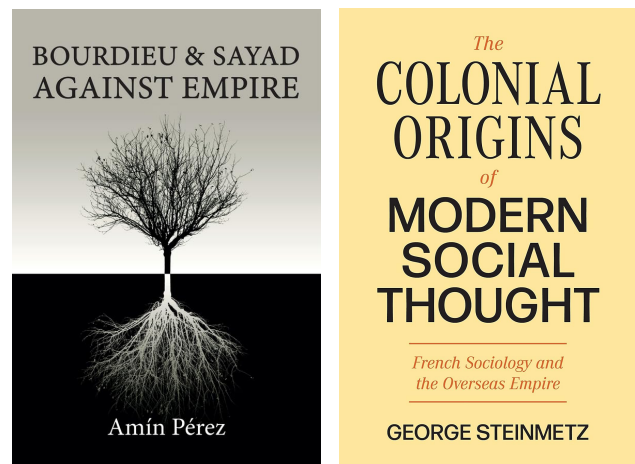
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Two recently published and thoroughly researched books shed new light on the significance of Pierre Bourdieu's Algerian studies. In *Bourdieu and Sayad Against Empire: Forging Sociology in Anticolonial Struggle* (2024), Amín Pérez presents an in-depth account of the collaboration between Bourdieu and Sayad. Drawing on unpublished correspondence and other archival material, he vividly details their collaborative efforts, showing how their unlikely encounter produced a new way of practicing sociology.

*The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Theory. French Sociology and the Overseas Empire* (2023) by George Steinmetz offers a broadly conceived historical sociology of "colonial sociology" in France. Reconstructing this largely forgotten and repressed disciplinary "subfield" from roughly 1910 to

1960, the last part of the book portrays some of its most eminent figures: Raymond Aron, Georges Balandier, Jacques Berque and Pierre Bourdieu.

Beyond the specific cases they study, both books raise broader questions about conducting field work, colonialism, social science, and, more generally, about the relationship between scholarship and commitment. Since both studies complement each other quite well, we conducted a joint interview with both authors via email exchanges.



Amín Pérez is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Quebec in Montreal. George Steinmetz is Charles Tilly Collegiate Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology at the University of Michigan.

*Q: Both of your books are the result of many years of extensive research, including archival work, interviews, and detailed text analysis. Could you tell us how your books came about?*

**Amin Pérez (AP):** I began this research with an interest in the work and trajectory of Abdelmalek Sayad. While consulting his personal papers, I was struck by the significance of his early research during the colonial era and the importance of his collaboration with Pierre Bourdieu. Gradually, I focused on this period, during which the two young men engaged with sociology to understand the social, economic, and political violence of colonialism and to uncover possible paths to decolonization.

On the one hand, my objective was to revisit this period through a biographical analysis of both actors and a socio-historical study of the academic, intellectual, and political context before, during and after the war. This perspective offered me a unique lens to unveil the sociological reasons that drew them to sociology during the anticolonial struggle. There is an elective affinity between their atypical trajectories and sociology, viewed as a marginal, heretical, and critical science of colonialism. This approach also allowed me to uncover the social origins that led them to craft a form of political intervention based on sociological studies. This stood in opposition to the ethnocentric framework of “government intellectuals” who legitimized the unequal organization of colonial society, minimized the political mechanisms at the heart of the material and symbolic disarray of the colonized, and proposed reforms that did not

challenge the colonial order. Additionally, their approach remained vigilant against the false illusions of some anticolonial narratives expressed by “total intellectuals” regarding the means to transcend colonial domination.

On the other hand, the book is not an essay on their work. I don’t limit myself to analyzing what they have published. Drawing on the personal papers of Bourdieu and Sayad, including their correspondence (1958-1964), research notebooks, drafts of articles, reports of the different field studies and unpublished manuscripts, my book shifts attention to what they did to actualize a politics of social science in the age of decolonization. So, my goal was to restore the practices (choice of subjects, hypotheses, methods, field studies, etc.) that made their work possible in the anticolonial struggle. The interest of this archival study was to unveil the practice of this theory while it was in the making: through questionings, impasses, indignations, encounters, convictions, readings, field studies, and intimate and intellectual collaborations, all of which culminated in establishing a new way of doing social science.

By revisiting this moment, which Bourdieu and Sayad considered to be their most important research experience, yet remains their least known work, I sought to contribute to the understanding of the sociology they later

extended to the study of multiple fields in the postcolonial and neoliberal era.

**George Steinmetz (GS):** My book is the result of two long-term projects that converged in writing the history of French sociology and social science carried out in colonial contexts. The first project was a historical sociology of modern colonialism and its policy-making, which I started working on around 1990, just as I was finishing my first book on the origins of the German welfare state. In *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa and Southwest Africa* (2007), I explained the ongoing formation of different native policies in three different German colonies. My explanation focused on two key causal factors: cultural representations of the colonized and the field structure of the colonial state.

My second project was a historical sociology of sociology itself. I initially imagined this project as a form of self-reflexivity, a reconstruction of the field struggles and settlements that had given rise to the microcosm of American sociology in which I was participating. My first efforts focused on social scientific methods and epistemologies, as these seemed like the most powerful forces structuring US sociology's explicit conflicts and implicit doxa. However, I also realized that many American socio-

logists of the post-1945 era had been deeply involved in foreign policymaking efforts that were informed by Modernization Theory. In my contributions to the edited volume *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and its Epistemological Others* (2005), I began to thematize these relations between sociologists and US imperial policies.

In my research on colonial history, I also noticed the increasing presence of academic scholars in the overseas colonies before 1914. But there were no professional sociologists involved in colonial policymaking during this era of "high imperialism." I became curious about this absence and began to scour the writings of classical sociologists for discussions of empire and colonialism. My first publication in this area was "The Imperial Entanglements of Sociology in the United States, Britain, and France since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century," which appeared in the history journal *Ab Imperio* in 2009. My most extended effort to date is the book, *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought*, which you mentioned.<sup>1</sup> I chose to focus on French sociology for the first volume in this series, because it was the most deeply and broadly involved in colonial research among the national fields. I also wanted to provide the background for understanding the sociological origins of Bourdieu's work on Algeria, which, in some respects, is the

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<sup>1</sup> The book is forthcoming in French with *Raisons d'Agir*.

most important product of these decades of sociological research in French colonies. While other historians have focused on the philosophical sources of Bourdieu's ideas, my work shows that his ideas also emerged from a protofield of colonial sociology and social science, as well as from the Algerian colonial context.

*Q: George, you situate Bourdieu's Algerian inquiries within the tradition of "colonial sociology." Could you elaborate on what you have uncovered about this "colonial sociology" and how Bourdieu relates to this tradition?*

*GS:* By the time Bourdieu arrived on the scene, colonial sociology and social science more broadly had already made several significant discoveries and contributions. First and foremost were the traditions of Durkheim, Durkheimian sociology, and Maussian fieldwork. Durkheim had called attention to colonialism's anomie and amoralism. Some of the interwar students and followers of Mauss, such as Maurice Leenhardt, Charles Le Cœur, Roger Bastide, Jacques Berque, Michel Leiris, and Jacques Soustelle, criticized anthropology for bracketing the effects of colonialism and for avoiding colonized cultures that had been clearly stamped by European

influence. Leading ethnologists at the time showed a revulsion for "mixed" or "métis" cultures and a preference for "pure" natives, that is for "the unaltered fact, miraculously preserved in its primitive state."<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Leiris, Soustelle, Bastide, Berque, Le Cœur, and others examined the varied effects of colonialism and the new forms of cultural hybridity that resulted from colonial situations. After 1945, several new generations of sociologists took advantage of the research and employment opportunities in the overseas empire and further elaborated on themes of cultural crisis and mixing. They also continued Durkheim's practice of turning the imperial or colonial gaze back on the metropole.<sup>3</sup> Georges Balandier directed several research organizations in Africa, focusing researchers' attention on the dramatic and ongoing processes of cultural re- and de-articulation resulting from colonial situations. Balandier coined the term "colonial situation" in his 1951 article to highlight these issues.

Bourdieu relied heavily on this legacy of colonial sociological research, although he credited anthropologists such as Germaine Tillion more prominently. He cited Balandier's article on the colonial situation in the first edition of his *Sociologie de l'Algérie*. This book is

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<sup>2</sup> The original quote is: "du fait inaltéré et conservé miraculeusement dans sa primitivité." (Balandier, 1951, p. 45).

<sup>3</sup> I provide several examples of this gesture of reversing the colonial gaze in Durkheim's writing

in Steinmetz (forthcoming). Durkheim's vision is the direct opposite of an "imperial gaze," *pace* Connell (1997, 1523); similarly Julian Go, (2016, p. 4).

unique insofar as its final chapter develops a succinct theory of the colony and the colonial state. However, this was not an entirely original move, as Balandier had been involved in a similar project. Bourdieu and Sayad argued that “the models of behavior and the economic ethos imported by colonization coexist, in each subject’s mind, with the models and ethos inherited from ancestral tradition” (Bourdieu and Sayad, 1964, p. 163).

Bourdieu also described the Algerian colony as a divided and culturally hybrid space — central themes in French colonial social science since the 1930s. He argued that a “Gestalt switch” was necessary for the observer to perceive the empirical colonial social situation, due to the “doubling” of social reality and the fact that “the models of behavior and the economic ethos imported by colonization coexist, in each subject’s mind, with the models and ethos inherited from ancestral tradition.”<sup>4</sup> Although it is correct to view this as one of the origins of Bourdieu’s mature theory of the *cleft habitus*, it is also clear that themes of cultural splitting and division were already widespread in writings on colonialism.

Bourdieu’s focus on the reflexive agency of Algerian workers in *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* (1963) resonated with the work of Balandier and Mercier

(1952) and others who had made similar arguments about Africans faced with external cultural incursions.

Bourdieu argued further that Arab tribal names constituted a resource that conferred “an ascendancy” on the group, an “immense prestige,” contributing to the accumulation of a “*capital of combined power and prestige*.”<sup>5</sup> (Bourdieu, 1962, p. 88) This discussion directly echoes Berque’s 1954 article “*Qu’est-ce qu’une tribu nord-africaine?*,” which studied tribal names as “signs, regulated by their own laws.” (1954, p. 263) Bourdieu later credited Berque with providing him “countless starting points and invaluable points of reference.” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 3)

I could provide other examples of how Bourdieu drew on extant forms of colonial sociology in his early work. What is equally important is that Bourdieu represents, in many ways, the *culmination* of this form of sociology and its transformation into something post-colonial, in the sense that it draws on colonial origins but returns them to general sociology. This does not imply that Bourdieu’s work requires some sort of “decolonization,” however, since the work he relied on was already quite autonomous from the colonial political context.

*Q: Amin, in your study, you not only highlight the collaboration between*

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Emphasis added.

*Bourdieu and Sayad in their early years, but also emphasize its importance for the actual insights they produced and the ways they transformed the practice of anthropology and sociology.*

**AP:** I sought to trace the elements that made their unorthodox practices possible. Field studies were already conducted in colonial situations by administrators, ethnologists, and sociologists. However, doing it in wartime and on war, I mean on directly political themes instead of following the cultural topics of colonial science; doing it alongside colonized writers, poets, activists, and intellectuals; producing knowledge from subaltern experience, and combining statistics, ethnography, historical archives, photography and other methods, all this was something quite different from existing practices.

My interest was in restoring the results of this unlikely collaboration between Bourdieu and Sayad within the context of extreme racial segregation and social stratification in this settler colony. As George states, their book *Uprooting* (orig. 1964, Eng. translation 2020) is “the first instance of co-authored sociological work on colonialism by a metropolitan citizen and a former colonial ‘subject’” (Steinmetz, 2023, p. 330).

It was a synergy in which each was nourished by their particular and common perspectives. Before meeting Sayad, Bourdieu worked directly with Algerian writers, poets, and intellectuals engaged

in the anti-colonial cause. The collaboration with Sayad and other actors from the Association for Demographic, Economic, and Social Research (ARDES) contributed to the formulation of a reflexive and committed sociology. Indeed, this work amid the war forced them to be constantly vigilant about the conditions of their field studies. They had to break with the categories used in metropolitan questionnaires that did not correspond to the realities of colonial society, question the scientific representations imposed on the colonial world, and be cautious with the ordinary discourses of the populations. In my book, I show how these reflections led them to apply different methodologies, such as forming mixed teams of European and Algerian interviewers to provide a way out of the national framework (both “Eurocentric” and local”). Also, their different, at once intimate and distanced perspectives on the crisis of peasantry in their respective hometowns – Bourdieu in Béarn, France and Sayad in Aghbala, Algeria – were decisive in breaking away from an ethnology that emphasized the differences between “modern” and “primitive worlds,” and in breaking with ethnocentric and essentialist views of the peasant world.

The collaboration between the young philosopher (Bourdieu) and the anti-colonial activist (Sayad) also shaped a way of politically intervening based on sociological knowledge. As Bourdieu

pointed out during the neoliberal era, there was a need to go beyond idealism and sociology and “propose sociologically grounded utopias” (Bourdieu, 2000). This form of intellectual intervention has its roots in this colonial moment. It was a sociology forged as far from “conservative intellectuals” and their academism as from some of the “total intellectuals” who not only spoke in the name of the colonized but were also disconnected from the reality they intended to change.

Sayad once insisted that, beyond learning the sociological craft from Bourdieu, he discovered through him that sociology could write differently about politics – that it could “account for, explain and provide a deeper understanding of social reality” (Sayad, 2002, p. 65). Their field studies on the historical dispossession and pauperization of the colonized produced by colonial capitalism – accelerated by the war and the forced resettlement camps – were crucial in portraying the concrete conditions of existence of the Algerian masses. This was also essential for understanding the means necessary for the anticolonial liberation and social emancipation of the colonized.

*Q: The debates about colonialism today tend to be dominated by “postcolonial studies” and the widespread call to*

*“decolonize” the social sciences. How would you situate your respective books vis-à-vis these debates?*

**GS:** Calls for “decolonizing” sociology and revising its theoretical canons have become extremely rancorous. It is more urgent than ever to clarify the stakes in this ongoing struggle and to carefully re-examine the works of “canonical” theorists as well as those being proposed as alternatives. This is one of the aims of *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought*, which, like my previous work, integrates postcolonial and Bourdieusian theory.

As the language of postcolonial theory has taken root in sociology, the ideas and evolution of the original theorists have been largely ignored. Indeed, some of the most compelling arguments against displacing thinkers such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Bourdieu from sociology’s “canon” are provided by the very postcolonial theorists invoked as authorities for canon revision.<sup>6</sup> In its original formulations, postcolonial theory focused on literary texts, cultural works, and forms of subjectivity in colonial contexts. It emerged in the humanities during a period of intense theoretical discussion characterized by careful and generally nonreductive readings of literary texts. Poststructuralism and psychoanalysis were central to it. Many postcolonial

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<sup>6</sup> My first uses of postcolonial theory in sociology were in Steinmetz (2002). When I turned to “decolonizing” sociology, however, I first fell into

the “logic of the trial” (Loïc Wacquant). I now regret that I had not yet taken Bourdieu’s advice (1976); see Steinmetz (2006).

interventions foregrounded the hybridity and undecidability of colonial discourse or called attention to the ways in which some colonial-era writers pushed against dominant Eurocentric tropes and scientific frames.

Edward Said's *Orientalism*, for example, is often cited for its apodictic statements about the homogeneity of orientalist discourse and its "absolute unanimity" with empire. Yet Said's thinking is much less Manichean. He singles out Jacques Berque and Maxime Rodinson as scholars "trained in the traditional Orientalist disciplines" who were "perfectly capable of freeing themselves from the old ideological straitjacket" (Said, 1978, p. 326). In his lectures on Freud from 2003, Said distinguished between texts that remain "inertly of their time" and those, like Freud's, that "brush up unstintingly against historical constraints." Texts like Freud's, Said concluded, are the ones that we "keep with us, generation after generation" (Said, 2003, p. 26-27). Jacqueline Rose, in her commentary on Said's Freud lecture, argued that "you read a historic writer not for what they failed to see, not for the ideological blind spots of their writing but for the as-yet-unlived, still-shaping history which their vision partially, tentatively, foresees and provokes" (Rose, 2003, p. 67). Said and Rose call attention to the ways in which historical writers and theorists some-

times break with the dominant assumptions of their milieu and develop new ideas about colonialism and empire.

Along different, psychoanalytic lines, Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture* (1994), emphasized the inherent "ambivalence" of colonial discourse, the "hybridity" of forms of subjectivity generated in colonial situations, and "the circulation of desire around the scene of oppression."

It is also revealing to follow the development of the thinking of Gayatri Spivak, another key figure in postcolonial criticism who is often invoked in the ongoing sociological canon struggles. Spivak seems to have become increasingly wary of uses of her ideas that minimize the unsettled and contradictory meanings of texts. In *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* from 1999, Spivak characterizes some of her earlier readings as having been based on a too "simple invocation of race and gender, with no bridle of auto-critique" (1999, p. 121).<sup>7</sup> She also came to regret her coinage "*strategic essentialism*" and eventually stopped using the term (Mounk, 2023, p. 75). In February 2024, she condemned the gesture of dismissing "great thinkers like Kant and learning nothing from them" (Spivak 2024). In sum, the textual exegeses by Said, Spivak, and Bhabha urge us to resist arguments that all

<sup>7</sup> For similar concerns about the configuring the West entirely as an "Other to be exorcised," see

Zakia Pathak, Saswati Sengupta and Sharmila Purkayastha (1991, p. 196).



discourses produced in colonial contexts are “Manichean” in their simplicity.<sup>8</sup>

As for the idea of *decolonizing* the social sciences, it is crucial to distinguish between texts that remain “inertly of their time” and those that “brush up unstintingly against historical constraints.” This requires close, careful, and contextual reading practices that pay close attention to ruptures, ambiguities, slippages, and lesser-known texts. A genuine sociology of knowledge has to follow these sorts of “best practices.” Such care has been lacking in some recent interventions in this area, for example among writers who argue that Durkheim ignored colonialism or applied an “imperial gaze” to the non-Western world. It would be a radical loss and radically anti-intellectual to exclude thinkers like Durkheim (or Bourdieu) from sociology’s reading lists (or “canon”). Indeed, the philosopher Olúfẹmi Táíwò has recently argued, “by shutting the door to the possibility of learning from our conquerors, the ideas of some of our most profound thinkers, including Senghor, are cut off from the coming generations” (Táíwò 2022, p. 137).

Bourdieu’s theory represents a very different approach to decolonizing knowledge, closer to the sociology of knowledge tradition. Bourdieu was one of the first sociologists to call for a

“decolonization of sociology” in his lecture titled “For a Sociology of Sociologists” (1976). The subtitle of that essay, “colonial sociology and the decolonization of sociology,” is omitted in the English translation, which may be one reason Bourdieu has not yet made a significant impact on the Anglophone debate on sociological canon revision. In the 1976 lecture, Bourdieu outlines an approach to the decolonization of sociology. It is a classic illustration of his historical field-analytic approach and his approach to reflexivity. Bourdieu argues for a careful reconstruction of “the specific properties” of the “relatively autonomous scientific field” in which “‘colonial’ ‘science’ was carried out.” The sociologist, he says, should trace the relations between the academic and scientific institutions in the colony, the “metropolitan science of the day,” and the state. The researcher would have to reconstruct the pertinent social properties of the participants in the colonial scientific field, as well as the polarizations and forms of habitus characterizing that scientific space. Bourdieu did not carry out this field study himself, but he showed people how to study colonial knowledge and its aftereffects on post-colonial knowledge. Like Said, Bourdieu also suggests that a key question is intellectual agency within structural

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<sup>8</sup> For a counter example which insists on a simplifying reading of these texts, see Abdul R. JanMohamed (1985, p. 61).

constraints. Bourdieu points to several ways in which some thinkers may be able to partially transcend these constraints resources rooted in habitus, field position, strategy, and reflexivity. My book is therefore directly related to these calls to decolonize the social sciences and to postcolonial theory.

**AP:** This question is particularly important. I say this because while the social and political past conditions the present, the questions of the present also determine a particular reading of the past. This happens with some current “postcolonial” critiques. The reflexive sociology developed by Bourdieu and Sayad allows us to answer some questions of the present and to dispel false debates. As George’s book shows, the call for decolonizing the social sciences is not new. Bourdieu had already made it explicit in the 1970s and put it into practice in his early works published since the late 1950s.

The reflexive sociology developed by Bourdieu and Sayad is as distant from the colonial unconscious of science as it is vigilant with respect to the “good will” of anti-colonial intellectuals. This approach is fundamental if we are not to fall into what Julian Go calls the “geopistemic essentialism” (2023) of an identity critique that tends to homogenize worlds between “North and South,” to disqualify one in advance and unconditionally vindicate the other, thereby losing sight of domination in all its forms.

Bourdieu and Sayad’s situated and historical sociology of power relations unveils the complex and dynamic realities of the colonial world. Their fine-grained and long-term analytical perspective not only provides insight into the brutality of colonial domination but also offers an understanding of the effects of symbolic violence that make this unequal system work. It also makes visible the possible margins of freedom that could break with colonial domination.

Bourdieu and Sayad’s empirically grounded theory also goes beyond a certain ideology of resistance prominent in our current debates. Their position was not based on making radical statements based on generalities, nor on imposing their desires as scientific truth. Instead, they aimed to grasp the conditions that make resistance possible. In that sense, combining ethnographic, statistical, and historical field studies contributed to clarifying the strategic possibilities of survival, political consciousness, and subversion in these contexts of extreme domination and exploitation.

My book aligns with recent efforts made by different scholars to bring post-colonial critique to the sociological arena (Go, 2016). This was precisely at the root of Bourdieu and Sayad’s sociological imagination: to understand political questions sociologically and to propose alternative politics informed by sociological knowledge.

**Q:** *Are you following up on your books in your current work?*

**AP:** Yes, I extend this work in different directions. On the one hand, I am interested in deepening some aspects of this collective fieldwork during wartime, in studying the role of Algerian literature in Bourdieu's work before he conducted fieldwork, and in concretely restituting the relations between the Algerian research experience and Bourdieu's earliest work in France. This contribution aligns with other works that aim to uncover the impact of methodologies and reflections developed in the colony within the context of the metropolis (Duval, Heilbron and Issenhuth, 2022). On the other hand, I seek to analyze the aftermath of this anti-colonial sociology in the later work of both Bourdieu and Sayad.

I am also applying the potentialities of Bourdieu and Sayad's approaches to my own fieldwork on migrant workers in a post-plantation world in the Caribbean. My goal is to put this sociology of the colonial state into work to understand the violence of the neoliberal state.

**GS:** I am currently completing a second volume on sociologists in the British empire during the same period – 1930s to 1960s. Following that, I will work on German sociologists in occupied Poland and Eastern Europe during the Nazi period. These “imperial” sociologists had an important impact on postwar West

German historical and developmental sociology as well as on social history.

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