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Effects of Strangeness in the Production and Reception of Social Scientific Knowledge

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George Steinmetz’s *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought* marks a major contribution to a variety of literatures and scholarly concerns, including the history of the social sciences, the sociology of knowledge, and the inner mechanisms of empire. My commentary focuses on two elements of Steinmetz’s argument that can inspire further theorizing and reflection: the question of why colonial sociology has been marginalized in research on the history of French sociology, and the productiveness, in terms of social scientific reflection, of going abroad. In both cases, as I show, a sustained theorization of *strangeness* improves our understanding of the underlying mechanisms that, in these instances and beyond, inform the production and reception of social knowledge.

A more comprehensive etiology of erasure

At the end of chapter 2, under the header “The Etiology of Erasure,” Steinmetz presents “five factors that explain the obliteration of colonial sociology from disciplinary memory” (Steinmetz 2023: 44–46). First is the underdevelopment of serious research on the history of sociology. The field lacks sufficient academic establishment and profile, several topics are under-researched, and much historical writing is done by sociologists looking back at their own careers. Second, efforts to impose a certain gestalt of the discipline as presentist and neo-positivist hindered the development of historical research in sociology. Third, the repression of colonialism in European memory in general fostered the exclusion of colonialism as a topic for the historian of the social sciences. Fourth, the fear that a stigma can move from the

stigmatized to those who interact with them led scholars in the metropole to reject empirical research carried out in the colonies. Fifth, scientific metrocentrism favored studies on the West over everything else.

To be sure, none of these factors is incorrect. But still, others might have been in play as well, and a look into the burgeoning sociological literature on ignorance might help to create a more comprehensive etiology of erasure. A few years ago, I suggested that causes for non-reception might be characterized along a timescale of past, present, and future (Dayé 2019). Factors leading to non-reception may lie in the past, for instance when, due to one's academic training and the principles of the specific thought collective into which one has become socialized, the full meaning of a contribution from another thought collective might not be grasped. While I do not see such effects at play in French sociology, causes that lie in the present or are oriented toward the future do play a role.

Manifold causes for non-reception can lie in the present. Scholars might be under time pressure to produce results and therefore avoid looking left and right; they might ignore other contributions for strategic reasons (as suggested by Steinmetz's point on efforts to impose a positivistic gestalt), or simply strive to reduce the complexity of the task they set out to complete. And indeed, the colonial experience involved considerable complexities. The overseas empire was a strange place, and this strangeness challenged those who experienced it first-hand as well as those at "home" who may have felt that their lack of first-hand experience undermined their capacity to evaluate colonial sociologists' works (another possible reason for their ignorance, apart from the stigma theory).

This links to the third category of causes behind scholarly non-reception, causes that engage the future, and concern the hopes scholars have for themselves, the scientific field, or the world at large. This might have been a factor in the obliteration of the colonial origins of French sociology. Perhaps colonial sociologists not only feared becoming stigmatized themselves for having utilized the colonial regime but also they had convinced themselves that a historical period was over. Such a conviction would reasonably lead to a hope that their research was about to become obsolete, which could help to push the colonial episodes into back chambers of disciplinary memory. Perhaps French sociologists wanted to gain some distance from their own colonial embeddedness. Furthermore, not only those on the receiving end had an interest in obliteration, some senders might have had, too. Life in the colonies has never lost its strangeness, and this strangeness might have contributed to the erasure of colonial sociology from sociology's historiography.

The close strangers

The motif of strangeness runs like a thread through Steinmetz's book, not only with regard to the (failed) reception of colonial sociology in historical accounts of the discipline but also regarding the intellectually productive force that being strange engendered in those French scholars working in oversea territories. In a way, this links to the long line of reflections on the cultural and social position and capacities of the stranger, a literature that ranges from Georg Simmel's *Exkurs über den Fremden* (Simmel in Wolff 1950: 402–8; Simmel 1971: 143–49) via Robert E.

Park and Alfred Schütz to works in ethnography and cultural anthropology, where reflections on being a stranger informed questions about methodology and the craft of writing (e.g., Rabinow 2007 [1977]; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988; Stocking 1992). To live in a place where everyday life feels so utterly different than what one is accustomed to is certainly a personal and emotional challenge for the scholar involved in “fieldwork” (Adalet 2021; Bortolini 2021). But it can also trigger a process of self-reflection in which the tacit patterns of one’s own culture become apparent.

The move to the colonies forced French (and other) scholars to break with their preconceived notions of the nature of social, cultural, and societal life. In the words of Gaston Bachelard, it helped them to make an epistemological rupture (Bachelard 1984; 2002), to liberate their own reflective capacities by questioning what they hitherto had taken for granted. Bachelard’s ideas have later been taken up by French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Chamboredon, and Jean-Claude Passeron, who claimed that only by such a rupture, “the social fact is won against the illusion of immediate knowledge” by the sociologist, for whom familiarity with their “social universe is the epistemological obstacle *par excellence*” (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron 1991: 13; emphasis in original). An epistemological rupture, it seems, is more productive when one is not completely overwhelmed by the strangeness of the world outside, but instead finds amidst the strange world places and traces of the culture one feels a part of. Then, the well-known and the unknown function as poles in a field, creating intellectual tensions. Strangeness and closeness can thus enter a productive dialogue. This situation was easier to be found for French sociologists in North Africa than in other places more distant to Paris. The tension between Algerian and French culture, the Mediterranean and the Continental traditions of thought was as fundamental for the oeuvre of Albert Camus as it was intellectually productive for many other scholars and intellectuals, including those covered in Steinmetz’s book. *L’étranger proche* – the close stranger – appears to be the most fruitful position for those questioning their old culture while striving to understand a new one.

Here is another possible reason for the obliteration of colonial sociology from the historical literature. Perhaps, prior to Steinmetz, there were not many *étrangers suffisamment proches*, strangers sufficiently close to the history of French sociology to identify what now emerges as a central lacuna.

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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.