George Steinmetz
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Part 2 | Session 9 | 20 Jun 2024 | Decolonizing Knowledge, between the Humanities and the Social Sciences

Postcolonial Theory and Field Theory - George Steinmetz (U Michigan) moderated by Gregor Dobler (U Freiburg)

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This talk will examine different approaches to analyzing the relations between colonialism and social science. Within the humanities, postcolonial theory has been the most directly relevant to questions of "decolonizing" social knowledge. Within the social sciences, the first intellectual to call explicitly for "decolonizing sociology" and to propose a method and theory for carrying that out was Pierre Bourdieu. I will discuss postcolonial theory and Bourdieusian sociology as complementary approaches to the problem of understanding social science in colonial contexts.

I will then develop examples of several key issues raised by a combined Bourdieusian-postcolonial approach. One concerns the conditions under which intellectuals are able to push against and beyond the constraints of unjust political situations and to develop innovative and critical ideas. A second issue is the ability of thinkers to change their theoretical perspectives over the course of their lifetimes. A third problem relates to the relative autonomy of scientific fields and the effects of fields on thinking and on some specific features of texts. This illustrates the potential autonomy of cultural production under colonial conditions.

The talk's conclusion returns to the idea of a careful, tolerant, and liberal approach to decolonizing knowledge that hews to the best ideas in the humanities and social

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sciences.

Literature

George Steinmetz, “Sociology and Colonialism in the British and French Empires, 1940s-1960s.” *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 89, no. 3 (September, 2017), pp. 601-648

George Steinmetz, “Durkheim’s Critique of Colonialism and Empire”. *Modern Intellectual History* (forthcoming)



G. Steinmetz | Photo credit: Annette Hornischer / American Academy in Berlin

George Steinmetz *is the Charles Tilly Collegiate Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology at the University of Michigan and a Corresponding Member of the Centre de Sociologie européenne, Paris. He is a social theorist and a historical sociologist of states, empires, and social science. He is currently working on two main projects. The first is a project on the emergence of sociology in the former British and*

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French overseas colonies between the 1930s and the 1960s. The second is a reconstruction of sociology as historical socioanalysis. He has also worked on Germany and several of its former colonies (Namibia, Samoa, and Qingdao, China), on social policy at the local and central levels in imperial Germany, on visual sociology, on the rise and fall of the city of Detroit, on the epistemology of the human sciences, and on political and cultural theory.

***Gregor Dobler** is Professor of Ethnology at the Albert-Ludwig-University of Freiburg since 2010. He research focuses on economic, political and religious ethnology of southern Africa and France. After studying in Freiburg, Berlin and Bayreuth, he received his doctorate in Bayreuth and was an assistant at the Ethnological Seminar in Basel from 2002 to 2010.*