

The Imperial Entanglements of Sociology and the Problem of Scientific Autonomy in Germany, France, and the United States

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Sociologists and Empires: Outline of a Project

My current research project is a history of sociologists who have analyzed, theorized, advised, and criticized empires. My project has five conceptual and empirical components. The first involves reconstructing the legacy of sociological theories of empire. There is growing interest among sociologists in the study of colonialism and empire and in the related project of 'decolonizing' sociology (Steinmetz 2006, 2013; Randeria 1999; Bhambra 2007; Connell 2007; Kemple/Mawani 2009; Gutiérrez Rodríguez et al. 2010; Boatcă/Spohn 2010). At the same time there is a great deal of disciplinary amnesia, even among specialists in colonialism, about valuable earlier sociological contributions to the study of empire formation and to topics like colonial cultural hybridity.

The second part of my project tracks the ebb and flow of sociological interest in empires and tries to make sense of these historical shifts. This part of the project was inspired by Connell's (1997) important article, which detailed the colonial interests of the founding generation of American sociologists. This article also implicitly suggested that sociologists' focus on domestic rather than international phenomena is not necessarily driven by ongoing geopolitical or imperial events. I have found that most of the leading French sociologists focused on colonialism and decolonization during the 1950s and 1960s (Steinmetz 2009a) and that German sociologists became more – not less – focused on imperialism during the Weimar Republic, even though Germany had lost its colonies at Versailles (Steinmetz 2009b). It has long been argued that British sociologists ignored colonialism after 1945 even as the British Empire was crumbling (Turner 2006), but this has now been disproven (Steinmetz 2012). Sociology has seemed to respond to external geopolitics, however, since 2001, when the US entered an intensified imperial phase (Harvey 2003; Steinmetz 2003). In retrospect, however, we may realize that the current wave of imperial studies in sociology arose largely in response to events within academic fields.

The third part of my project entails rethinking scientific fields in *spatial* and *transnational* terms. This approach is particularly important in the history of colonial science, whose fields have often been configured according to the geopolitical scale and shape of empires. Of course cultural fields often exceed the boundaries of the nation state (Bourdieu 1998: 41; Casanova 2004). But colonial science fields almost

always encompass metropolitan and peripheral sites and sometimes connect different peripheral locations to one another. Imperial scientists' careers move through spaces defined by the very empires they study. This can be seen in the research trajectory of the sociologist Georges Balandier, who moved from one French West African colony to another during the 1940s and 1950s. A different pattern is revealed by the careers of sociologists Abdelmalek Sayad (Bourdieu/Sayad 1964; Sayad 2004) and Albert Memmi (Pérès 2002; Memmi 1957), both of them intellectual migrants from North African colonies. Norbert Elias was driven out of the Nazi empire to France and then Britain and then took up a sociology professorship in 1962 in independent Ghana (Korte 2004).

Fourth, I ask why some sociologists who study empires are able to maintain a degree of intellectual distance from external imperial interests, while others align their work closely with these extrinsic demands. Here there are both social and psychic mechanisms at work, which underscores the need for a *socioanalytic* rather than simply a sociological approach (Steinmetz 2009b). At the end of this paper I will discuss the determinants of scientific autonomy and heteronomy and methods of identifying them.

The fifth set of questions is inspired by postcolonial theory, which argues that metropolitan culture is shaped in important and often hidden ways by imperial ideologies. Many of sociology's classical theoretical approaches have been shaped by ideas generated in imperial contact zones or re-imported from colonies (Steinmetz 2006). Even more abstract ontological and epistemological assumptions may have roots in empire. For example, sociology's entrenched "methodological nationalism" (Martins 1974) – the equation between society and the nation-state – may have been reinforced by the typical political configuration of the modern empire as an asymmetrical power relation between a core state and one or more colonial states. Nonetheless, postcolonial critics often downplay the ability of cultural fields to provide a buffer or a 'prism of refraction' through which external discourses must pass in order to be taken up inside a given cultural field. I will illustrate this latter point through a brief discussion of Max Weber's "Konfuzianismus und Taoismus" in his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*.

In most of the paper I will concentrate on the second and fourth points, concerning the ebb and flow of sociological interest in empires over the past century and the question of scientific autonomy versus heteronomy. I have organized my comments by country, focusing on the United States, France, and Germany.¹ This mode of presentation may seem to contradict my comments about methodological nationalism. But scientific fields, including colonial and imperial ones, have nation-

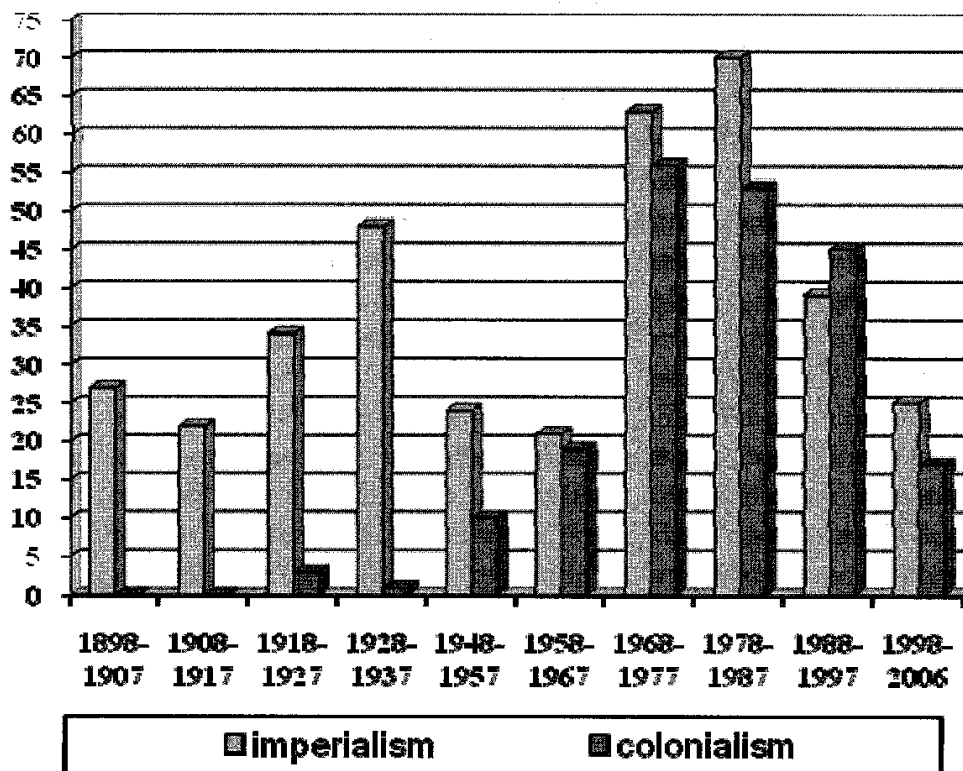
1 Given the space limits here I cannot look at British sociologists or sociologists who came from the former colonies.

al as well as transnational colorations (Heilbron 2008): The nation-state is not simply a phantasm but also an institutional reality that powerfully shapes social science. Yet my discussion will also explode the constraints of the nation-state centered approach soon enough.

Sociology and Empire in the United States

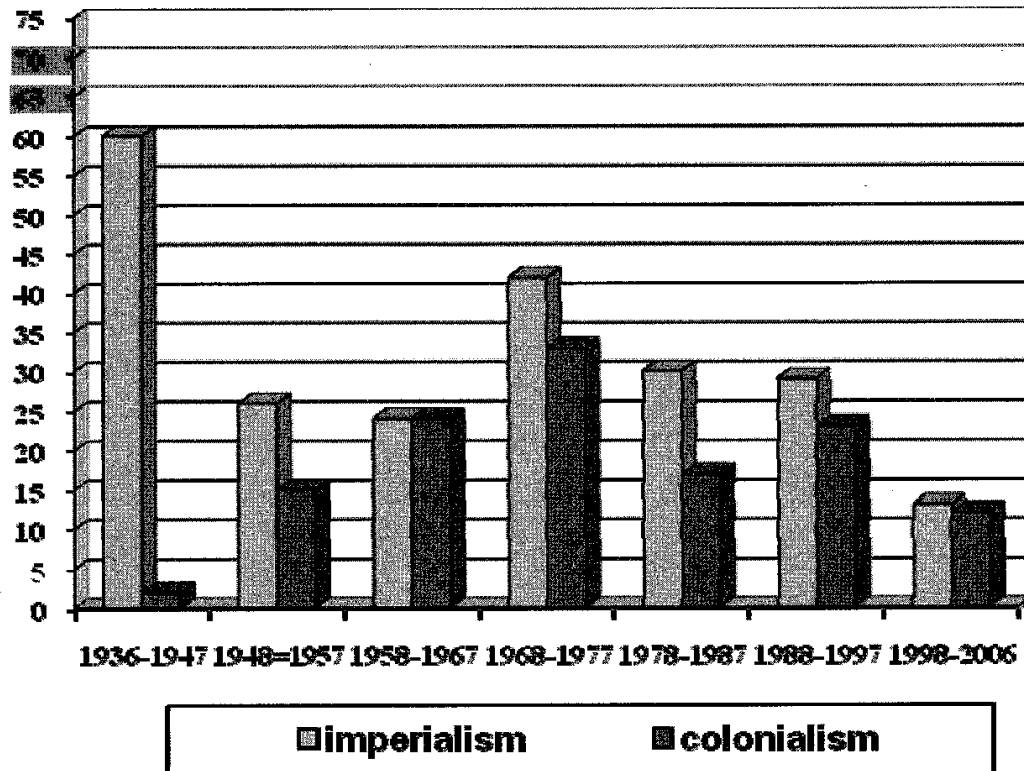
Connell (1997: 1535) argued that American sociologists were concerned with questions of global difference before WWI but turned inward toward questions of “social difference and social disorder within the metropole” after 1918. I am finding a much more complex pattern. The 1930s actually marked one high point for discussions of empire in the *AJS* and *ASR*, the two leading US sociology journals (Figures 1, 2).

Figure 1: Number of mentions of the words “imperialism” and “colonialism” in the pages of the *American Journal of Sociology*, 1898-2006



Source: American Journal of Sociology (JSTOR online searchable version).

Figure 2: Number of mentions of the words “imperialism” and “colonialism” in the pages of the *American Sociological Review*, 1936-2006



Source: American Sociological Review (JSTOR online searchable version).

The American sociologists who discussed imperialism during the 1920s and 1930s, however, rarely supported empire, in contrast to the mixed situation before 1914. Wisconsin sociologist Edward Ross now turned against imperialism and racism and wrote a critical report for the League of Nations on labor in the Portuguese colonies (Ross 1925). Ross suggested that he was “altogether in sympathy with Oriental resistance to Western aggression” (Ross 1934: 172). Sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois (1915) connected overseas empire to the oppression of blacks in the United States and argued that colonialism *underdeveloped* the colonies, turning them into the “slums of the world” and destroying indigenous culture (Du Bois 1945: 17). Du Bois argued in the pages of the *American Journal of Sociology* that the social sciences themselves were being “deliberately used as instruments to prove the inferiority of the majority of the people of the world” (1944: 455).

Colonialism and informal empire continued to figure as important topics in American sociology after 1945, initially in the guise of modernization theory and

area studies. American foreign policy was increasingly oriented toward an imperial but non-colonial approach that eschewed conquest and direct control over foreign states. Modernization theory provided a blueprint for this *difference-effacing* form of empire (Gilman 2003). But if modernization theory applied a uniform developmental model to the entire postcolonial world, the American state also sought more detailed information about specific sites of geopolitical interest and supported this demand with programs like the Title VI grants for foreign language and area studies. American sociology became increasingly international in its focus due to the overseas experiences of many sociologists during WWII, the influx of European émigrés, the rise in area studies funding, and the influx of students from the former European colonies and zones of US imperial influence, some of whom studied colonialism and postcolonialism (e.g. Hermassi 1972; Magubane 2010).

These postwar trends reshaped US sociology. The African Studies Association was created in 1957 and its directors and presidents in the 1960s and 1970s included sociologists E. Franklin Frazier, Leo Kuper, and Immanuel Wallerstein. Sociologists such as Robert Cooley Angell, William O. Brown, John Collier, Oliver Cromwell Cox, E. Franklin Frazier, and Horace Miner, whose work was limited to domestic American topics before the war, now broadened their focus to include colonial and postcolonial societies. Angell, who held positions in UNESCO and the International Sociological Association, argued that American sociology had reached maturity with the “throwing off of colonialism in the 1950s” which had sparked a “great interest in underdeveloped world” (Angell ca. 1962). Brown, who had written his Chicago sociology PhD dissertation in 1930 on American race prejudice, became deeply involved with Africa and colonialism during WWII as Chief of the African Section of the Office of Strategic Services. As Professor of Sociology at Boston University after the war Brown established the first African Studies Center in the US and forged close connections to the networks of the British Colonial Social Science Research Council and the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Lusaka. John Collier, the pioneer of the so-called New Deal for Native Americans during the Great Depression, became a Professor of Sociology at City College of New York and began connecting the plight of Native Americans to that of overseas colonies, aligning himself with the British Fabian Colonial Bureau (Collier 1947). Frazier (1955) seems to have become interested in colonialism while serving as Chief of the Division of Applied Social Sciences of UNESCO (1951-1953). Miner shifted his focus from French Canada to Northern Africa during his military service in WWII.

Sociology and Empire in France

From the late 19th century until the late 1960s, French sociologists' interest in colonialism was intense, reaching a crescendo during the Algerian War of Independence. One reason for this emphasis was the legacy of Durkheim and Mauss, who saw overseas colonies and ancient land empires as central sociological objects. This imperial orientation went well beyond the use of data gathered in colonial settings. Sociologist Georges Davy collaborated with an Egyptologist on a study that used Durkheim's theory of totemism to make sense of the centralization of power in ancient Egypt (Moret/Davy 1926). Marcel Mauss, the most influential teacher of sociologists and ethnographers in interwar France, co-founded the *Institut d'Ethnologie*, whose mandate was to study the colonies (Lévy-Bruhl 1925). Many of Mauss' students, including some who defined themselves as sociologists and were part of the burgeoning sociological field, conducted fieldwork in overseas colonies (e.g. Roger Bastide, Maurice Leenhardt, René Maunier, Paul Mus, and Maxime Rodinson). The other contenders for leadership of French sociology at the turn of the 20th century – René Worms, Frédéric Le Play, and Gabriel Tarde – also studied colonialism and empire (Worms 1908; Le Play 1906: 450-451; Toscano 2007).

French science policy reinforced French sociology's interest in imperial phenomena (Steinmetz 2009a). A worldwide array of colonial research institutions, from New Caledonia to Madagascar, sponsored sociological research. This differed markedly from the British situation, in which colonial social science was dominated by anthropology – at least until WWII, when the British Colonial Office also began to prefer the language of sociology in colonial research funding and government posts (hiring 'Government Sociologists' rather than 'Government Anthropologists' in many of the colonies, for example).² For example, the French Scientific Mission in Morocco, founded in 1904, sponsored research that was closer to Durkheimian sociology than to Orientalist literary traditions (Schmitz 1998: 109-110). Indeed, the entire Moroccan Scientific Mission was transformed into a 'Sociological Section' of the French colonial government in 1919 (Brown 1976: 195). Sociology was strongly represented in the French Institute of Black Africa (*IFAN*), created in 1936, and in ORSTOM (Office de la recherche scientifique et technique outre-

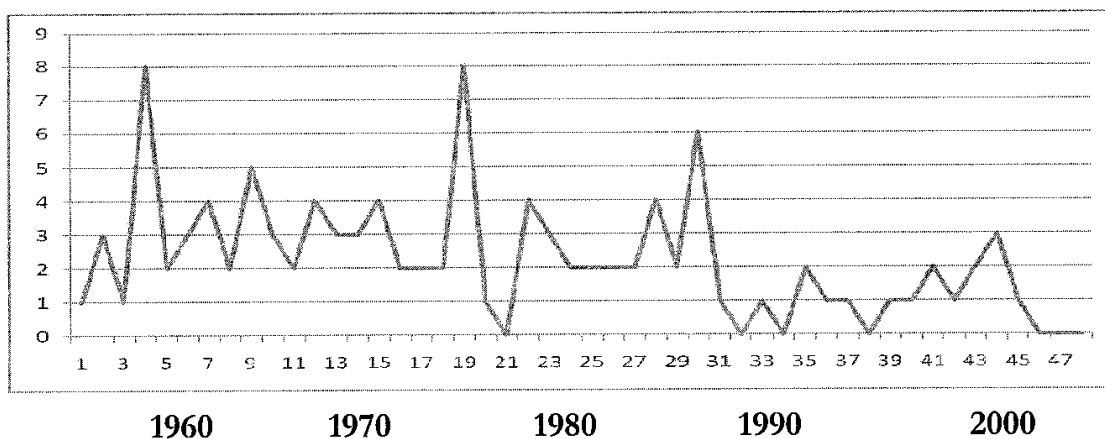
2 I discuss this shift to preference for sociology within the British Colonial Office during and after WWII in my forthcoming book (Steinmetz forthcoming). The memoirs of British Social Anthropologists suggest that many felt that power, funding, and academic posts were slipping away from them to sociology. But this was not because the government had lost interest in the colonies, by any means. Many inside the Colonial Office believed that Africans saw anthropology as tainted by colonial racism, while sociology promised to analyze Africans using the same conceptual tools applied to European society. The government was still focused at this time on reforming rather than backing out of colonial rule in Africa. The idea of sociology appealed as a new framework for managing modernizing, urbanizing, detribalizing colonial societies.

mer). Sociologists Paul Mercier and Georges Balandier both directed West African *IFAN* research centers after the war (Calame-Griaule 1977: 128; Balandier 1977). The French state's efforts to reform its colonial empire after 1945 led to a further expansion of colonial research institutes and organizations.

Sociological interest in imperial topics increased sharply in the decades after 1945. This initially reflected the French experience of Nazism and the postwar reconfiguration of global geopolitics. In *The Age of Empires*, Raymond Aron (1945) argued that France should unify the European nation-states into a bloc against the three great 'empires', which at this moment included the UK as well as the US and USSR. Aron switched into the Algerian independence camp in 1957 and published extensively on colonialism and imperialism. Lecturers at the *Centre d'études sociologiques*, created in 1946, included Roger Bastide (1948), a specialist in post-slavery Afro-Brazilian culture, on "the interpenetration of civilizations," and André Leroi-Gourhan (1949) on the Japanese colonization of the Ainu people of Hokkaido.

We can get a good sense of the centrality of imperial topics after 1945 by tracking the contents of the leading French sociology journals. Sociologist Bastide edited the *Année sociologique* until 1974, and he devoted considerable space to colonialism, postcolonialism, and non-western cultures. Sociologist Balandier, author of a famous article on "the colonial situation" (1951), edited the *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* from the mid-1950s until 2011 and focused intensely on colonial topics during the early decades. Even the more professionally oriented *Revue française de sociologie* published several articles each year on colonial and imperial themes during its first three decades, though these topics have almost disappeared in recent years (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Number of articles published annually in *Revue française de sociologie* discussing imperial or colonial topics, Vol. 1 (1960) through Vol. 45 (2004)



Source: *Revue française de sociologie* (JSTOR online searchable version).

Sociology and Empire in Germany

German sociology emerged before 1914 in the context of a nationwide debate over the pros and cons of land-based continental imperialism and overseas colonialism. German sociology also grew out of a specific array of disciplines that had studied ancient and modern empires, including history, ethnology, historical economics, and *Staatwissenschaften*. Most of the founders of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* and holders of the earliest German university chairs for Sociology analyzed colonialism and empire. Max Weber presented an original interpretation of the Roman empire (1891) and discussed imperialism in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Alfred Weber published a detailed critique of the new 'protectionist imperialism' (Weber 1904). Albert Schäffle wrote a book-length article (Schäffle 1886-1888) on colonial politics. Leopold von Wiese (1914a, 1914b) published extensively on British colonialism, and was known even after WWII as an expert on India (1956). Franz Oppenheimer (1926) combined a Marxist theory of economic imperialism with a Gumpłowiczian theory of political imperialism. Albert Vierkandt (1896), who held the first Sociology chair at Berlin University, published a book on the categories of *Kulturvölker* and *Naturvölker*, which were central to German colonial native policy before 1914.

After 1918 a number of German sociologists resisted the Marxist redefinition of the word imperialism as an intrinsically economic rather than political-military phenomenon. Max Weber agreed with Hintze and Schumpeter that the military conquest theory of empire was not obsolete. Sociologist Walter Sulzbach (1929) argued that imperialism had existed *before* capitalism and that capitalist accumulation was not necessarily or typically linked to foreign conquest (also Salz 1931).

The loss of the German colonies did not lead to the disappearance of colonialism as a topic of university study. During the winter semester of 1930-1931, at least 239 university courses were offered on colonial subjects (Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft 1930). One of these courses was called "the sociology of colonialism in light of contemporary Africa" (my translation) taught by Richard Thurnwald, who had come to Berlin University in 1924 as a Professor of Sociology, Ethnology, and *Völkerpsychologie*. Between 1918 and 1936 Thurnwald (e.g. 1932, 1936) developed a critical analysis of colonialism as cultural devastation, based on extensive fieldwork in New Guinea and East Africa. Thurnwald's work during this period was autonomous from government agencies and was financed mainly by institutions outside Germany (Steinmetz 2010).

All of this changed after Hitler came to power. More than half of the German sociologists were driven into exile after 1933, though some of them, like Sulzbach, continued to analyze imperialism. Many of the sociologists who stayed in Germany now saw their careers flourish as applied policy researchers (Klingemann 2009). Thurnwald began working for the Nazi colonial planning office, and in 1939 he

published a 500-page treatise outlining a Nazi approach to colonial rule in Africa. In 1940 Thurnwald joined the Nazi Party, and in 1942 he began working on reports on the labor deployment of foreign workers for the Ministry for Armaments and Munitions (*Reichsministerium für Bewaffnung und Munition*).³ Other sociologists including Carl Brinkmann, Wilhelm Mühlmann, Karl-Heinz Pfeffer, and Ernst Wilhelm Eschmann, carried out research that was directly relevant to the Nazi Empire's administration and ethnic cleansing of its occupied territories. Scientific autonomy was almost entirely eliminated in Germany, even though some sociologists, like Alfred Weber, went into a kind of inner exile.

Scientific Autonomy and Heteronomy

The problem of scientific autonomy and heteronomy can be approached on three analytic levels, which we can call textual, contextual, and psycho-phenomenological.

At the *textual* level we can explore the difference or similarity between the ideas, arguments, and tropes found in a given scientific text and those associated with the relevant imperial or colonial institutions and ideological formations. Conversely, scientific heteronomy would be suggested by closer correspondence between text and context. An example of the latter would be Thurnwald's (1939) treatment of colonial policy, whose arguments rely centrally on categories such as racial segregation, the 'Führer principle', and *Lebensraum*. An additional criterion is to examine an author's work written before the emergence of powerful external pressures. In Thurnwald's case, the most striking change is from a view of colonialism as fundamentally destructive to an effort to make 'constructive' contributions (Steinmetz 2010).

What about the *context* of scientific production? Key aspects of a field include the level and distribution of generic (economic) and field-specific resources, and the positions and strategies of members. The impact of research institutes in the French colonies kept the interest in colonialism alive while also allowing sociologists to carry out autonomous research of lasting importance (e.g. Balandier/Mercier 1952). The relative autonomy of the universities in Weimar Germany, or in the United States during the mid-1990s, made it possible for sociologists to continue analyzing colonialism despite the relative geopolitical quiescence of their respective nation-states during those years. A field may also lose its autonomy "through subjection to external forces" (Bourdieu 1998: 57). The Nazi state radi-

3 Thurnwald to *Dekan*, 31/10/1942; Thurnwald to Westermann, Feb.-May 1946; Humboldt-Universitätsarchiv, Richard Thurnwald Papers, Vol. 6: 200, 238.

cally reduced the autonomy of most scientific fields after 1933 (and eliminated some fields altogether), determining who could belong to them and who was excluded and what could be said and published, channeling resources to some lines of research and cutting off others. The correspondence between Thurnwald's analysis and Nazi doctrine after 1936 was due these sorts of extra-scientific pressure, in other words – features of the field and its environment.

What about the *psycho-phenomenological* level of analysis? Here we need to look first at individual strategies within semi-autonomous fields. The importance of examining context and individual strategy rather than pursuing a strictly textual line of analysis is revealed by the case of Max Weber's treatment of China in his *Religionssoziologie* (Weber 1920-1921). A textual postcolonial critic might be satisfied to point to the apparent synchronization between Weber's text and external imperial ideology. Weber reproduced the dominant Sinophobic tropes of European imperialism – cultural stasis, stagnation, and inferiority – and he did so in ways that exceeded the needs of his argument, claiming for example that the Chinese language had “*weder der Dichtung noch dem systematischen Denken ... die Dienste leisten können*” (ibid.: 412). Yet Weber's adoption of these offensive and ‘lowbrow’ views of China was not due to any direct support for the German imperial interests in China nor even to a generalized racism on his part, but to his strategic orientation within the German academic field. In his “Konfuzianismus und Taoismus” (1920) Weber associated himself most strongly with the arguments of China specialists Ferdinand von Richthofen (1877-1912) and J. J. M. de Groot (1892). Both men held the position of *Professor Ordinarius* at Berlin University by the time Weber was writing on China. Their location within the German Sinological field was homologous to Weber's own position in the German sociological field – they were academic mandarins in terms of their exalted academic status, but they were also ‘modernists’ with extensive practical experience in overseas imperialist settings prior to their university careers. Like Weber, they were ‘modernist mandarins’ rather than traditional German academic Mandarins with their “*höchst exklusiv literarische, buchmäßige*” education (Weber 1920: 410; Ringer 1969). Richthofen and de Groot also both happened to hold views of China located at the Sinophobic extreme of the quite diverse German Sinological field. Weber failed to cite German-language scholarship by China specialists located at lower-prestige institutions such as the Berlin *Seminar für Orientalische Sprachen* (e.g. Wang 1913), or cited them while ignoring their actual arguments. Weber completely ignored the work of older academic mandarins like Georg von der Gabelentz, who had argued against the idea of Chinese stagnation and linguistic primitiveness (Gabelentz 1888: 2-4; Leutner 1987: 35; Steinmetz 2007). A similar pattern of alignment with the most prestigious scholars in the relevant field characterizes Weber's analysis of India. Here Weber relied heavily on the work of “*hervorragenden deutschen Indologen*” (Weber 1921: 2 n. 1) like Albrecht Weber (Berlin *Ordinarius* 1867-1901) and Richard

Pischel (Berlin *Ordinarius* 1902-1908). Pischel criticized earlier Indologists for the "vehemence" with which they "insisted on the superiority of European science" to "indigenous Vedic criticism" (Pischel/Geldner 1889: IV; Sengupta 2005: 114). If Weber's analysis of India was less permeated by imperialist racism than his discussion of China, this was partly because the scholars like Pischel who dominated the German Indological field after 1900 did not typically depict India as stagnant, despotic, or racially inferior. In sum, the correspondence between Weber's analysis of China and extra-scientific imperial ideologies resulted mainly from his strategic orientation, which sought authorities in area studies fields whose positions were homologous to his own position within the sociological field.

While economic resources and political freedom are necessary conditions for scientific autonomy, they are not sufficient: We also have to consider the *desire* for autonomy (of conversely, the desire for dependence). Although I have not been able to discuss this question here, in other work I am comparing sociologists who have similar resources and face similar contextual constraints and opportunities, and who still make different decisions when invited to contribute to an imperial project. This is the properly socioanalytic level.⁴

Conclusion

We are currently caught up in two related crises: the crisis of the universities and the crisis of empire. In the United States the connections between these two crises are obvious. Military sources made up the largest share of social science funding from WWII until well into the 1960s. During the last decade, funding for social scientific counterinsurgency and military research and employment expanded again even as university jobs disappeared. There is increasing pressure "to make academic research serve political ends" (Guttenplan 2011). The most extreme example is the involvement of anthropologists as 'embedded' advisors with military troops in Afghanistan. The Defense Department's Minerva Project called on sociologists and other social scientists to discover methods for "more effective, more culturally sensitive interactions between the US military and Islamic populations."⁵

The entanglement of social scientists with empire, discussed by C. Wright Mills (1958, 1959a) and Pierre Bourdieu (1963, 1993), is thus once again our own problem. Mills insisted (1959b: 106) that "if social science is not autonomous, it cannot

4 The word "socioanalyse" was used in 1983 by Bourdieu's psychoanalytically-oriented colleague Francine Muel-Dreyfus (1983) who presented sociology as a form of psychoanalysis of the social world.

5 See Department of Defense, BAA No. W911NF-08-R-0007; <http://www.arl.army.mil/www/default.cfm?page=362>.

be a publicly responsible enterprise." Bourdieu called on intellectuals to "take their 'irresponsibilities' seriously" (1998: 27). As research and academic employment opportunities continue to shrink it becomes even more important to defend scientific autonomy, both for its own sake and as the precondition for any useful political engagement by social scientific intellectuals.

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