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LA SITUATION COLONIALE

The Colonial Situation

In the year 1951 the French anthropologist Georges Balandier published "La situation coloniale: approche théorique" in the "Cahiers internationaux de sociologie" (Balandier, 1951; Document 1). His message was that social scientists needed to change radically their approach to global interaction. At the age of thirty-one, and marked intellectually by the disavowals in European self-confidence caused by the Nazi Regime, he designed a research agenda that would account for colonial social relations as a totality. Balandier envisioned a connected historical dynamics of colonized peoples and colonizing societies that was not marked by a fundamental dichotomy between the West and the rest. It can still capture global imagination today.

With this anthology I wish to highlight the curious afterlife of Balandier's text in the intellectual history of the recent past. As a matter of fact, "La situation coloniale" has remained a textual source of irritation and inspiration ever since its original publication. This is so because the colonial situation, which Balandier suggested to study, has remained in place despite the formation of new states in the Global South, despite the formal end of imperial rule in most parts of the world during the 1960s, and despite the economic and technological change that has transformed the world since 1951.

The following sections locate Balandier's argument historically. They sketch the role of social scientific expertise in late colonialism and ask to what extent scholars of post-colonial studies should read Balandier.

Situating late colonialism

Georges Balandier made himself heard in the middle of a major transition in colonialism. European expansion dates back five hundred years. But during the last two decades of this millennial imposition, namely between the end of World War Two and the 1960s, when the UN declared imperialism a crime, European colonialism changed dramatically. The geographical scale of the Empires diminished but the intensity of colonial rule grew.

In the years immediately following World War Two the European imperial powers lost their possessions in Asia. In 1947 India became independent from the British Empire; and the Dutch lost control over Indonesia while the French engaged in a war in Vietnam and were about to do the same in Algeria in order to save their Empire. Colonial imagination was still lively in Europe and no one (including Balandier) would have thought at that time that imperial forms of rule would give way to a global order of nations so quickly.

During the German occupation in World War Two the very idea of independent France had survived only thanks to its Overseas Territories, mainly in Africa. In the subsequent Fourth Republic, visions of France were voiced that encompassed not a hexagon, but a global "union française" (Cooper 2014). Modernizing the Empire thus was a necessity for French politicians. Concurrently, the British treasury was confronted with a severe dollar shortage in the immediate post-war years that put the economic development of the African territories high up on the domestic agenda. It is no wonder that in the early debates on European integration the African continent played a crucial role. The Belgian and the Portuguese Empires were not deeply concerned with the Asian hot spots, but these powers also reconfigured their colonial presence in Africa. Germany and Italy had long lost their colonial titles but none of their imperial aspirations. As Europe was in shambles, Africa caught the collective imagination of Europeans as a source of regaining strength. A new Euro-African space was consigned that refuelled colonial fantasies (Shipway 2008; Hansen/Jonson 2014).

In 1951 Balandier diagnosed the advent of a new "phase technique de la colonisation faisant suite à la phase politico-administrative" (Balandier 1951, 44). In his time the raising of a flag over a non-European territory in order to claim political ownership, or the establishment of (sometimes) heavily armed small pockets of administration, or the moral denigration of local peoples, were no longer sufficient practices of colonial rule. Rather, high modern power needed to intervene technically in the daily life of the subjected communities and eventually change the individual identity of all persons under rule.

However, the political legitimation of such ventures was in question. With the spread of knowledge about German atrocities during World War Two the assumption of supremacy of the white race was morally difficult to hold. Quests for legal equity had been voiced by colonial subjects for decades (Manela 2007) and now could no longer be ignored on the grounds of an assumed anthropological difference. Also, the cost of colonial regimes turned out difficult to explain to European taxpayers. New schemes of social security became a domestic priority in Europe that were too expensive for colonial administrators to also implement overseas. African organized labour increasingly voiced demands to be included into such highly modern conceptions of governance as well (Cooper 1997). These claims eventually lead to the creation of new states out of the former European empires - but did not end the "phase technique" in North-South relations.

Balandier and colonial science after World War Two

Balandier's "phase technique de la colonisation" meant the spread of social engineering also to the colonies (Bonneuil 2000, Document 2). The social sciences became an important governmental tool in late colonialism and anthropologists were challenged to satisfy this demand. In this historical situation scholars defined new discursive strands that dominated

global communication beyond the formal end of European colonialism into the post-colonial era of "development". Much of current social theory dates back to the middle decades of the 20th century. It seems important to recall the ambiguities of those years.

In an interview on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the independence of many African states that was conducted by Alexandre Bonche in 2010 (Document 3), Georges Balandier talked of his fascination as a child with the exotic overseas world that was on display at the "Exposition Coloniale" in Paris in 1931. We can understand the rest of his intellectual life as an anthropologist as having partly been dedicated to a fundamental critique of this fantasy.

After the War Balandier ventured to Senegal. In his 1957 book "Afrique ambiguë" he wrote:

"Lorsque j'arrivai à Dakar en 1946, j'étais surtout animé par une volonté de fuite et de dépaysement. L'expérience ethnologique que je souhaitais avait la valeur d'une retraite au sens original du mot: je désirais disposer d'un recul suffisant pour mieux me reprendre en mains après une époque ne m'ayant guère laissé le temps de la réflexion; j'éprouvais le besoin d'accéder à une forme d'existence radicalement nouvelle. J'abordais l'Afrique moins pour elle qu'en fonction de moi-même" (Balandier 1957, 275).

The young anthropologist quickly lost sight of the object, on which he had intended to produce new knowledge. Contrary to his expectation of being confronted with a completely exotic world, what he found in the capital of French West Africa was an ambiguous complex of different historical trajectories and socio-political identities of which he himself turned out to be an integral part. He started to check his romantic childhood imagination against his own present situation in the colonial context. In this, the analytical instruments that he had gathered during his studies in Paris were of little help. Rather, Africa became his "Sorbonne", as he somewhat romantically declared in the 2010 interview.

When Balandier arrived in Dakar, anthropology was a discipline held in high esteem by colonial administrators because this art of describing distant cultural formations promised a way of making sense out of the everyday routines of the many subjects under their rule (Tilley and Gordon 2007; Tilley 2011). French scholars like Marcel Griaule, for example, were captivated by the rich material culture of the Dogon (Griaule 1938). They produced a scientific vision of this West African social collective that changed the life of the Dogon dramatically. In the 2010 interview, Georges Balandier expresses his wonder that when one visited the Dogon, the local guide would cite from Griaule's work in order to explain "true" Africa. The anthropological description had itself become a part of what it presented as its object.

Among French intellectuals the concept of a "mission civilisatrice" had lost plausibility around 1950 (Kalter 2011). A case in point is Alain Resnais' documentary "Les statues meurent aussi" (Document 4) which the French censorship authority immediately banned. The film criticized the Western notion of a "high culture" as opposed to "primitive" social life and focused on the destructive effects of colonial expansion. Authors like Jean-Paul Sartre or Octavio Mannoni produced philosophical and psychological analyses of the moral ambivalence in European expansion (Lamouchi 1996; Mannoni 1950). In 1952 Frantz Fanon radicalized Mannoni's notion of a "colonial situation" that - to Fanon's view - produced historically new hybrid identities (Fanon 1952, Chapter 4).

Balandier stood in this intellectual context. As an anthropologist, he broke with the tradition of studying distant cultures as remnants of a distant "primitive" past and he criticised those

grand narratives of the human condition that set the European experience as a template for the modernization of the colonies. Such notions, he argued, transported a simplistic dichotomy between the West and the rest of the world. Instead, he suggested focusing on the present situation in the Overseas Territories. He stated that the fundamental separation between Western and non-Western ways of organizing collective life was not a sound basis for analysing the colonial present, but rather one of the characteristic traits of the "colonial situation" itself, that needed to be subject to social scientific study. He understood the making of dichotomies as a contingent way of dealing with ambivalence. He ventured into neighbouring disciplines in his search for a new analytical foundation.

The text "La situation coloniale" consists of a quick tour through other academic disciplines than anthropology - such as psychology, history, economics and sociology - in order to construct a new theoretical approach. Balandier took up the notion of a "colonial situation" from Mannoni. An even more important reference was the work of Louis Wirth, a member of the Chicago School of Sociology, who had studied the "ghetto" as a specifically modern hybrid constellation in Western cities (Wirth 1928). British anthropologists had taken up this Germano-American strand of social scientific thought and produced a Manchester School of Social Anthropology that focused not on the assumedly pristine, but on the ambivalence of current socio-economic change, mainly in the Zambian Copperbelt (Werbner 1984).

Like many of his contemporaries, Balandier too was impressed by the supposed possibilities of social scientific expertise to shape a common future through social engineering. But in his view, the state of the art in the social sciences around 1951 was way too far off from offering a meaningful basis for such a venture, because racist prejudice prevented scholars from taking the conflictive presence of the "colonial situation" into full account.

The most important reference in "La situation coloniale" was Max Gluckman's critique of Bronislaw Malinowski's functionalist theory of culture contact. Malinowski had posited a distinct cultural formation of the "West" that had come into contact with an increasing number of equally distinct non-Western cultural formations in the course of European expansion since Columbus (Malinowski 1929). And he suggested understanding the outcome of this process as the emergence of a third cultural formation that to Malinowski's view was not authentic. Gluckman, in contrast, proposed analysing contact zones as a social totality in which different collective identities were constantly in the making. He accused Malinowski of sustaining a romantic view in which culture contact was a problem disturbing an otherwise peaceful order. But the reality of late colonial Africa was not peaceful. Gluckman's interest was in the analysis of conflict. Referring to the Zambian Copperbelt he declared: "We state that the Rand mines and the African tribe which supplies their labour are both parts of a single social field" (Gluckman 1947, 108). To Gluckman, Malinowski's functional theory offered no advice in the analysis of this constellation but rather obfuscated its basic mechanisms because of a specific "refusal to see conflict as a mode of integrating groups and to recognize that hostility between groups is a form of social balance" (Gluckman 1947, 111).

This debate inspired Balandier and he clearly took sides with Gluckman. His interest was in the analysis of the late colonial present in order to inform better governance. In close cooperation with Alfred Sauvy he subsequently coined the term "Third World" which they understood as a new conflictive and hybrid social reality (Sauvy 1952 Document 5; Balandier 1956, Document 6).

Balandier's "situation coloniale" as a reference for historians

Current scholarship on post-colonial issues is close to what Balandier had in mind in 1951. We can easily transpose his "situation coloniale" into a post-colonial situation that is marked by hybridity. Instead of assuming a Western cultural essence that stands opposed to a non-Western "Other", it seems more fruitful to analyse how hybrid identities were being formed and what tensions and repercussions prevailed in their construction.

Dominant conceptions of post-colonial studies do not remember Balandier. A case in point are two recent introductory texts to new approaches in colonial history by the German Scholars Harald Fischer-Tiné and Ulrike Lindner, neither of whom mentions Balandier's "Situation coloniale" (Fischer-Tiné 2010, Document 7; Lindner 2011, Document 8). But colonial historians like Jean-François Bayart in France or Frederick Cooper in the USA have been strongly influenced by the French author. In fact, "La situation coloniale" was published in an English translation in a volume edited by Immanuel Wallerstein (Balandier 1966) and a German version appeared under the auspices of Rudolf von Albertini in 1970 (Balandier 1970, Document 9). Balandier had a very broad impact on the international community of critical historians of colonialism. In 2007 he stated retrospectively: "Pour débattre des études postcoloniales, il faut tout d'abord se libérer des effets de conjoncture dominante, retrouver son autonomie de pensée, ne pas considérer que tout a commencé quelque part en Amérique, et que c'est là qu'il faudrait nécessairement porter le regard aujourd'hui" (Balandier 2007, 17).

Bayart and Cooper both used his 1951 text in order to criticise the mechanism of "othering" that was essential to colonial discourse and that - in Cooper's and Bayart's view - can still be found in much of post-colonial scholarship today. Cooper drew on Balandier when inventing the important notion of "Tensions of Empire" (Stoler and Cooper 1997). He also used "La situation coloniale" as an organizing device in a critical text on post-colonial studies (Cooper 2005). Bayart was even more explicit when reviewing French post-colonial studies. He argued in 2011 that this line of thought was a river with many more tributaries than commonly remembered and that French intellectuals had long "done our bit" (Bayart 2011; Bayart 2010). Reactions were fierce (Zecchini 2010, Document 10).

The aim of this anthology is not to reassign intellectual priorities. But re-reading Balandier's "La situation coloniale" might help in facing the perseverance of the assumption of a fundamental dichotomy between the West (dynamic future) and the rest of the world (static past). This dichotomy has remained a structuring feature in international political discourse. Interesting debates come from France (Smouts 2007). The concept of a "mission civilisatrice" still lingers on in the universe of academic thought. The design of overarching concepts that transcend the assumption of a fundamental dichotomy between the West and the rest of the world (Hall 1992) remains an unmet challenge. Recalling French critical thought of the early 1950s might be helpful in facing it.

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