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*Cultural Sociology* 2011 5: 45  
DOI: 10.1177/1749975510389912

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# Bourdieu, Historicity, and Historical Sociology

Cultural Sociology

5(1) 45–66

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DOI: 10.1177/1749975510389912

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**George Steinmetz**

University of Michigan, USA

## Abstract

This article examines Bourdieu's contributions to history and historical sociology. Bourdieu has often been misread as an ahistorical 'reproduction theorist' whose work does not allow for diachronic change or human agency. The article argues that both reproduction *and* social change, constraint *and* freedom, are at the heart of Bourdieu's project. Bourdieu's key concepts – habitus, field, cultural and symbolic capital – are all inherently historical. Bourdieu deploys his basic categories using a distinctly historicist social epistemology organized around the ideas of conjuncture, contingency, overdetermination, and radical discontinuity. The origins of Bourdieu's historicism are traced to his teachers at the *École Normale Supérieure* and to the long-standing aspirations among French historians and sociologists to unify the two disciplines. The historical nature of Bourdieu's work is also signalled by its pervasive influence on historians and the historical work of his former students and colleagues. Bourdieu allowed sociology to historicize itself to a greater extent than other French sociologists.

## Keywords

Bourdieu, French sociology, habitus, historical sociology, historicism, social epistemology, social field, symbolic capital

## Introduction

*Sociology and history are destined to merge into a common discipline where the elements of both become combined and unified.*

mile Durkheim (1899: iii)<sup>1</sup>

*I have already written . . . that sociology and history made up one single adventure, both two different sides of the same cloth but the very stuff of that cloth itself, the entire substance of its yarn.*

Fernand Braudel (1980: 69)

*The concepts of history or sociology should both always be picked up with historical tweezers.*

Pierre Bourdieu (1995: 116)

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## Corresponding author:

George Steinmetz, Department of Sociology, University of Michigan, LSA Building, Room 3001, 500 S State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA.

Email: [geoste@umich.edu](mailto:geoste@umich.edu)

This article explores Bourdieu's contributions to history and historical sociology. Bourdieu has been widely misunderstood as an ahistorical 'reproduction theorist' whose approach does not allow for diachronic change. In fact, *both* social reproduction and social change are at the very heart of Bourdieu's project. Bourdieu's main theoretical concepts – habitus, field, cultural and symbolic capital – are all inherently historical. Indeed, for Bourdieu, 'every social object is historical' (Charle and Roche, 2002). More than any other French sociologist, Bourdieu allowed French sociology to historicize itself – to achieve a merger of history and sociology that had been discussed by Durkheim and the founders of the *Annales* School but never fully accepted by sociologists.<sup>2</sup> He was 'one of the most forceful proponents of an epistemological tradition in which history and sociology are considered essentially the same thing' (Vincent, 2004: 134). Bourdieu described his own work as 'social history' (1991: 107; 1995, 1996) and praised Max Weber's 'extraordinary efforts to sketch a historical sociology or sociological history of religion, economics, and law' (Bourdieu 2000a: 127). The journal Bourdieu founded in 1975, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, was dedicated to the unity of sociology and history (and indeed of all of the social sciences). Bourdieu hoped that 'history would be a historical sociology of the past and sociology would be a social history of the present' (1995: 111). It is in the writing of Bourdieu and his colleagues and students that we should look for the French analogue to Weimar-era German *Geschichtssoziologie* (Weber, 1997) or current Anglo-American 'historical sociology'.

Bourdieu has also had a pervasive influence on the work of professional historians (Burke, 1990, 2004), and is one of just ten sociologists included in the *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing* (Boyd, 1999). Historians in Germany associated with the 'history of everyday life' (*Alltagsgeschichte*) and the related school of historical anthropology engaged with Bourdieu's work throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Berdahl et al., 1982; Lüdtkke, 1995; Medick, 1987), while the social historians of the 'Bielefeld school' adopted Bourdieu as their leading theorist in the second half of the 1990s, as they tentatively embraced certain forms of cultural history (Berger, 2001; Wehler, 1998).

Bourdieu's embrace by historians does not necessarily prove that his theory is inherently historical, however.<sup>3</sup> This article attempts to substantiate this claim in two ways. The first section summarizes the relations between sociology and history in France in order to show how natural it was for Bourdieu to develop a historical sociology. The second section addresses critiques of Bourdieu as an ahistorical structuralist who overemphasizes the limits on human action (Stedman Jones, 2002). Here I argue that the central concepts in Bourdieu's oeuvre are inherently historical, and that Bourdieu's empirical work deploys these basic categories in ways that suggest a distinctly historical social epistemology that is open to conjuncture, contingency, and radical discontinuity.

## History and Sociology in France

Each national sociological field has differed with respect to the sociology-history nexus. German sociology had a powerfully historicist orientation during the Weimar period, but the three dozen historical sociologists who came to the United States as refugees after 1933 failed to spark much interest in their neohistoricist orientation (Steinmetz, 2009a). After 1945 German historical sociology was unable to re-establish itself. Starting in the

1960s social historians in Germany began claiming a proximity to sociology while remaining largely aloof from developments in actual sociological research and theory. Historical interests only emerged to any significant degree in American sociology after the 1970s. A separate subsection for historical sociology was finally created in the American Sociological Association in 1980, and this section is today one of the largest in the association.

In France, however, sociologists and historians have called for the unification of their two disciplines since the founding of sociology as an academic discipline in the 1890s. But the relationship between the two disciplines has been configured in distinctive ways that make it difficult for Anglo-American sociologists to perceive Bourdieu as a historical sociologist. The phrase *sociologie historique* (historical sociology) is rarely used,<sup>4</sup> but this does not mean that French sociologists do not practice a historical version of sociology. Bourdieu invited ‘certain young historians to join the editorial committee of *Actes de la recherche*’ (Chartier, 2002: 85). *Actes* became ‘a venue for historiographic debate’, publishing ‘at least 70 articles between 1975 and 1993 by historians who were often well-known and for whom the journal was thus not a form of scientific exile nor a last resort’ (Christin, 2006: 148). For more than 35 years the relations between historians and sociologists have been intense and reciprocal.

Bourdieu’s students and colleagues publish historical books and articles, sometimes in history journals.<sup>5</sup> Historical sociologists associated with Bourdieu include: Johan Heilbron (1995), a historian of social science; Laurent Jeanpierre (2004), historian of exiled French scholars in the United States during WWII; Victor Karady (2004, 2008), historian of universities, social science, and Central European Jewry; Roland Lardinois (2003), historian of India and Indology; Remi Lenoir (2003), historian of the family, familial science, and family policy; Francine Muel-Dreyfus (1983, 2001), historian of schoolteachers and of gender politics in Vichy France; Michel Pollak, historian of Austrian politics and social science (see Israël and Voldman, 2008); Gisèle Sapiro (1999), historian of French writers and literature and global fields of translation; and Christian Topalov (1994), historian of unemployment, cities, and French sociology. The work of these scholars is based on a deep familiarity with primary sources, often including historical archives. They typically historicize their own conceptual categories and objects of analysis, combine interpretative methods with explanation, and follow a basically historicist strategy of analysis that is open to contingency, complex overdetermination, and shifting conjunctures of causes.

How did Bourdieu and his associates become so historically oriented? On the surface, Bourdieu’s background in philosophy and his early studies of Algeria and Béarn and the French educational system do not seem especially propitious to a historicizing orientation. Bourdieu’s historical orientation seems to have had several sources. His original philosophical orientation toward the philosophers Canguilhem, Bachelard, and Koyré pushed him toward a form of epistemological reflexivity that is linked to a historicization of science (e.g. Canguilhem, 1988).<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu (1991: 248) later recalled that Thomas Kuhn’s theory of scientific revolutions ‘did not strike [him] as a scientific revolution’, given his familiarity with this heterodox French philosophical tradition. Bourdieu consistently emphasized the need for sociology to be accompanied by a ‘sociology of sociology’, and many of his students have conducted research in the history of social science

or combine the social history of a given analytic object with the history of the specialized knowledge of that object (e.g. Lenoir, 2003). This orientation also seems to have its roots among the historical philosophers at the postwar *École Normale Supérieure*, a group that also played a crucial role in the intellectual formation of Michel Foucault, whom Bourdieu called ‘an irreplaceable figure’ (1984: 1).

A second source of Bourdieu’s historicism was his insistence on overcoming the polarization between anti-empirical theoreticism and atheoretical empiricism in sociology. Bourdieu noted (somewhat prematurely) in 1991 that ‘a good proportion of the producers of sociology in the United States have freed themselves from the positivist paradigm’ and pointed to the ‘development of “historical” currents that have brought the historical dimension back into sociological analysis, especially analysis of the state’ (1991: 258). In his posthumously published ‘sketch for a self analysis’ he specifically named Charles Tilly as one of four figures who were especially important for his own research (Bourdieu, 2007: 3).<sup>7</sup>

The third reason for Bourdieu’s turn to history has to do with the French traditions of calling for a unity of history and sociology. This aspiration for unity started with Émile Durkheim and his original group of colleagues. Durkheim dedicated his Latin doctoral dissertation to historian Fustel de Coulanges and argued in the preface to the first volume of *L’Année sociologique* that sociology and history were destined to ‘merge into a common discipline where the elements of both become combined and unified’ (Durkheim, 1899: iii). Several years later Durkheim argued that ‘there is no sociology worthy of the name which does not possess a historical character’ (1908/1982: 211). Durkheim’s group was open to traditional and newer forms of historiography, and included Louis Gernet, a historian of ancient Greece (Humphries, 1971), Marcel Granet, a Sinologist and Chinese historian, and Henri Hubert, historian of the Celts and the Germanic peoples. Durkheim developed close ties with Henri Berr, founder of the *Revue de synthèse historique*, a journal devoted to synthesizing history and the social sciences from the direction of history (Lukes, 1973; Siegel, 1970). This latter example underscores another peculiarity of the French situation, which is that aspirations to merge the two disciplines came from *both* directions. Berr wrote the foreword to the book *From Tribe to Empire*, co-authored by Durkheim’s sociologist colleague Georges Davy and Egyptologist Alexandre Moret (Moret and Davy, 1926). Maurice Halbwachs, the ‘most Durkheimian of the interwar Durkheimians’ (Craig, 1983: 263), wrote pathbreaking studies of collective historical memory and of the conflicting historical narratives of the Holy Land (Halbwachs, 1992).<sup>8</sup> At Strasbourg from 1919 to 1935, Halbwachs gravitated toward historical questions and associated with historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, founders of the new historical journal *Annales*. Halbwachs became ‘a loyal and devoted member’ of *Annales*’ editorial board and contributed ‘a number of articles and reviews’, even if he was always seen by the professional historians as a bit of an outsider (Cosser, 1992: 11; Hutton, 1993: 75–6). Halbwachs was speaking for most of the Durkheimians when he suggested that sociologists in France, unlike those in Germany and the US, believed ‘that sociology has a distinct domain which does not overlap with the facts studied by historians’ (Halbwachs, 1932: 81) – but he published these words in the pages of *Annales*. After 1945 sociologist Georges Friedmann was formally associated with *Annales* and Georges Gurvitch worked with Fernand Braudel, the key figure in *Annales* during the middle third of the 20th century (Burke, 1990).

Despite their open-minded statements about the merger of the two disciplines, Halbwachs and Durkheim followed Comte in seeing history as subordinate to sociology (Lukes, 1982). French historians (and anthropologists) have therefore been wary of the Durkheimians' so-called *sociological imperialism* (Chartier, 2002; Mercier, 1966). As Braudel recalled, a historian with whom he discussed this issue during a boat trip to Brazil in 1936 'would not waver from [the] point of view' that 'anything which *recurred* in the past belonged to the domain of sociology'. This left the historians with only 'the unique event, which blooms for a single day and then fades never again to be held between one's fingers' (Braudel, 1980: 67) – and Braudel was famously uninterested in such events.

The key French difference is that despite these threats and anxieties about hostile disciplinary takeovers, sociologists and historians worked together much more closely in France than in the USA (Hexter, 1972).<sup>9</sup> Durkheimian sociology's close connections to historians were reinvigorated when *L'Année sociologique* began publishing again after 1945. Historian Louis Gernet served as the journal's General Secretary from 1947 until his death in 1961, and books by historians were regularly reviewed.<sup>10</sup> The *Annales* group reciprocated this interest. Fernand Braudel 'testified to the effect that Durkheim and the *L'Année sociologique* had in inspiring the ... *Annales* school' (Thompson, 1982: 42–3), and his own work was oriented toward sociology (Rojas, 1992).

Like Durkheim, the *Annales* school understood individual events as ephemeral and epiphenomenal. They called for historians to focus instead on deeper, more 'structural' levels of history and on the totalization of a series of separate subsystems into a functional whole dominated by the economy. Whereas 19th-century French historians had concentrated on high politics and unique events, the 'event' was now equated with the political level. *Annales* historiography became correspondingly more oriented toward the social and the economic. Similarly, Durkheimian sociology de-emphasized political phenomena and could not even find a pigeonhole for topics like war, revolution, and political organization in the classificatory scheme of the *L'Année sociologique* (Favre, 1983).<sup>11</sup> After 1945 Febvre and Braudel solidified their relationship to sociology by associating their journal with the newly founded Sixth Section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*. The idea of a unity of history and sociology was so powerful that even the main sociological opponent of this alliance (Gurvitch, 1957) felt compelled to include an essay by Braudel calling for the unity of history and sociology in the introductory section to his two-volume *Traité de sociologie* (Gurvitch, 1958). In 1970 the Sixth Section of the *École Pratique* and the *Annales* journal moved into the new *Maison des Sciences de l'Homme*, which Braudel helped establish with funds from the Ford Foundation and the French education ministry. The *École's* Sixth Section was dominated by historians, specifically by the *Annales* group (Lepetit, 1996), but these historians worked in close proximity to sociologists like Bourdieu and Aron. In 1972, history offered the 'greatest number of courses of any particular discipline' at the *École* and 'the persistent outreach of history to the economic and social sciences, a central paradigm of the *Annales* school, [was] firmly implanted in the History offerings of the Sixth Section' (Hexter, 1972: 490). A number of seminars were entitled "'Histoire et sociologie" of this or that area' (Hexter, 1972: 491). In 1975 the Sixth Section became the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS). The EHESS has been so strongly dominated by historians that the collective volume on its own history is edited by two historians who

give pride of place to history. The volume begins with chapters on the *Annales* and the field of 'social history' (Revel and Wachtel, 1996). Braudel thus effectively retained Durkheim's unity of history and sociology while reversing the balance of power between the two disciplines, establishing

a kind of hegemony of history over the other human sciences: while in general barriers were eliminated between disciplines, these disciplines were not considered equal in importance, history being accorded a preferred position, especially vis-à-vis social psychology and sociology and even more so vis-à-vis economics . . . The essential point is to make clear the differences between the *Revue de synthèse*, whose theme was the colloquy of the human sciences, and the *Annales*, which constituted a sort of Common Market, with history as the preponderant power. (Braudel, 1968: 349)

As Braudel noted, history 'wanted somehow to become an impossible universal science of man' (1980: 68) – a remarkable mirroring or mimetism of the Durkheimian sociologists' earlier aspirations (Burgièrre, 1979). More recently a historian remarked that 'France is ... perhaps the only place where social sciences are institutionally organized around [the] discipline' of history (Lepetit, 1996: 31).

That is not quite correct, of course. The *Annales* school did not succeed in hegemonizing the social sciences. Yet historians interacted more intensively with sociologists, on more levels, in France than in other countries. Members of the *Annales*' second generation such as Ernest Labrousse used quantitative historical data, which brought them closer to statistical sociologists. In the 1960s *Annales* historians began focusing on collective 'mentalities', whose long-term changes they connected to allegedly deeper sociohistorical structures. Several members of the third generation, including Georges Duby and Michel Vovelle, were partly inspired by neo-Marxist theories of ideology (Burke, 1990) and the Durkheimian concept of a 'system of collective representations'. In the fourth generation some *Annales* historians turned to ethnohistory, drawing on a range of social theorists including Bourdieu, whose 'replacement of the concept of "rules" ... by more flexible concepts such as "strategy" and "habitus" ... affected the practice of French historians ... pervasively' (Burke, 1990: 80). A central figure in the historians' reception of Bourdieu was Roger Chartier, who followed Bourdieu in making the step beyond viewing social structures as purely objective to an understanding of the 'reciprocal relations of conceptual systems and social relations' (Chartier, 1988: 45). Chartier (2002) described historians as owing a 'collective debt' to Bourdieu. Thus although 'there is no such thing as a self-conscious "school" of Bourdieusian history' in France (Vincent, 2004), many historians have drawn heavily on his work, including Christophe Charle (1990, 1991, 1993), Olivier Christin (2005), Claude Gauvard (1991), and Romain Bertrand (2005). An even more recent project is *socio-histoire*, which 'does not seek to historicize sociology nor to sociologize history but to develop a practical dialogue between these two disciplines' (Zimmermann, 2001: 5–6). The main proponent of *socio-histoire*, Gérard Noiriel (1990, 1996, 2006), has discussed Bourdieu extensively. Some French historians associated with the 'new social history' (Lepetit, 1995) turned against Bourdieu, but this still did not entail a rejection of sociology so much as mimic a line of struggle within the sociology field. As Stedman Jones (2002) remarks, these 'new' social historians threw in their lot with the 'pragmaticist'

sociology of Luc Boltanski. Most recently the subtitle of *Annales* was changed to *Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, which puts history first but continues to include sociology (within ‘social sciences’) as a privileged interlocutor. French historians and sociologists have interacted intensively in a number of different ways for over a century without either group gaining the upper hand permanently.

## Habitus, Field and Cultural/Symbolic Capital as Historical Concepts

Each of Bourdieu’s main theoretical concepts (habitus, cultural and symbolic capital, and field) is inherently historical, in three specific senses. First, these concepts designate objects or structures that exist in a specific time and place and that are not omni-historical or universal – even if the range of their application is sometimes as broad as the entire sweep of modernity or capitalism. Second, each of these concepts is described as a form of incorporated history. Third, Bourdieu deploys his basic categories in ways that suggest an inherently historical or historicist social epistemology, one that is open to conjuncture, contingency, and radical discontinuity.

### *The Habitus and History*

Habitus is not necessarily adapted to its situation nor necessarily coherent. (Bourdieu, 2000b: 160)

The core of the Bourdieusian social ontology is the relationship between social structures, individual habitus, and practice. Critics of Bourdieu as a reproduction theorist argue that *habitus* is objectively synchronized with the social structures that produce it, creating a sociological *huis clos* of endless repetition. They argue that there is no agency on the part of the actor (Cronin, 1996) and no reflexivity, except perhaps among the sociologists themselves (Bohman, 1999). Some of these critiques are focused on Bourdieu’s research on education from the 1960s (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964/1979, 1970/1977), which tended to be translated and read in the United States before his other work (Gemperle, 2009). But even Bourdieu’s research on education has a historical dimension that is usually ignored.

There is no doubt that Bourdieu expended a great deal of effort to show that habitus is a product of social conditions and is *often* adjusted to the structures that produce it. Nonetheless, one of the most basic defining features of *habitus* (as opposed to mere habit) is the idea of ‘improvisation within defined limits’ (Bourdieu, 2002: 18). Bourdieu’s formula of ‘regulated improvisation’ nicely captured this combination of freedom and constraint (Sapiro, 2004). Critics of Bourdieu as a reproduction theorist focus on the ‘regulated’ half of this formula and ignore the equally important dimension of ‘improvisation’. The habitus, Bourdieu suggested, is like language: it regulates the range of possible practices without actually selecting specific practices, just as linguistic forms may limit individual utterances without in any way determining which of the infinite number of possible sentences or combinations of words are actually spoken at any given moment. Bourdieu warned explicitly against modeling social practice on rule-following and against reducing social agents to mere ‘*Träger*, “bearers” of the structures’ (Bourdieu,

1991: 252). A common summary of his core intellectual contribution is that it marks a movement in social theory ‘from rules to strategies’. Strategies are not fully inscribed in the logic of the situation or the habitus of the agent, but emerge through processes of adjustment that are located neither entirely in the unconscious nor entirely in conscious decision making. Bourdieu borrowed from Austin (1975: 16) in emphasizing ‘*misfires*’ or blips, instances in which attempted speech acts (or by extension, attempted practices of any sort) fail because of some maladaptation of practice to the situation (Austin’s ‘*infelicities*’). The flip side of misfiring is the deliberate *retraining* of habitus – a possibility that Bourdieu fully acknowledged. Indeed, one of the goals of social science, in his view, was to allow people to take control of their own conditions of existence. One way in which they might accomplish this would involve reshaping their own habitus through ‘repeated exercises ... [as in] an athletic training’ (2000b: 172).

A second way in which habitus is not meant to explain just reproduction but also change has to do with the systematic *mismatches* between habitus and field, that is, between habitus and the requirements of a current situation. Bourdieu’s discussions of the *hysteresis of habitus* and the ‘Don Quixote effect’ are meant to capture the ways in which habitus may outlive the conditions of its genesis and come out of alignment with the demands of present conditions (Bourdieu, 2000b: 159). Indeed, Bourdieu first introduced the idea of habitus in his earliest work on Algeria (Bourdieu, 1964, 1966) in order to understand *not* reproductive harmony but precisely the opposite – the nonalignment between peasants’ economic dispositions and the radically changed economic conditions of late colonial modernity (Bourdieu, 1979). Bourdieu’s second major empirical research project, on the crisis of masculine marriageability in rural Béarn (Bourdieu, 2008), was also organized around a *failure* of social reproduction. A central figure in this account is the *disjuncture* between peasant men’s traditional dispositions and the more urbanized habitus of the village world and of rural women who have become accustomed to urban life and urbanized men.

Bourdieu also recognized that some habituses are the result of socially heterogeneous situations and are therefore internally *riven* or ‘cleft’. He spoke of a ‘*destabilized habitus*, torn by contradiction and internal division’ (Bourdieu, 2000b: 160, emphasis added). Theorists from Freud and Weber to Bourdieu have recognized that human subjectivity is never as unified and coherent as is suggested by reductionist models like rational choice theory. Weber saw human subjectivity as torn between different forms of rationality (or between rationality and irrationality), and modern subjects as traversed by habits and ideologies (e.g. ascetic Protestantism) originating in historical conditions that have become invisible to them. Freud introduced a fundamental schism into the human subject by pitting the unconscious against the conscious. Human subjectivity for Freud was riddled with ambivalence, mutually incompatible identifications, contradictory motivations, and actions whose motives are obscure to the actors carrying them out. Bourdieu’s theory of the subject is not only completely compatible with psychoanalysis but can profit from a rethinking along Freudian and Lacanian lines (Steinmetz, 2006).

Bourdieu also insisted that different people with the same habitus and the same holdings of inherited cultural capital may respond differently when cast into the same field of activity. He modeled his own sociological analysis of the genesis of the French literary field in *The Rules of Art* on Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education*. In the prologue to *The*

*Rules of Art* Bourdieu argues that Flaubert's analysis of the differing trajectories of a group of young bourgeois men thrown into Parisian society in the 1830s is a model for Bourdieu's own sociology of the semi-autonomous field. Just as Freud shows that no two people respond identically to the Oedipus drama, Flaubert proposes that the question whether an heir will be 'disposed to inherit or not', or 'to simply maintain the inheritance or to augment it' (Bourdieu, 1996: 10) cannot be explained by a universal model or a single mechanism such as social class or rationality. Above all it will have to consider the 'relation to the father and the mother'. The ambivalence of the central figure, Frédéric, with respect to his own inheritance 'may find its principle in his *ambivalence* towards his mother, a double personage, obviously feminine, but also masculine in that she substitutes for the disappeared father' (Bourdieu, 1996: 10). Frédéric's participation in the dual universes of art and money allows him a 'deferral, for a time, of determinations', an experience of social indetermination, of 'the virtual possession of a plurality of possibilities between which one will not and cannot choose' (Bourdieu, 1996: 19, 25). Like his central character, Flaubert tried 'to keep himself in the indeterminate position, that *neutral place* where one can soar above groups and their conflicts' (Bourdieu, 1996: 26), refusing the opposing alternatives that structured the literary field and succeeding instead in creating an entirely new position in that field. Of course Flaubert's success in this regard was predicated on his possession of immense cultural and economic capital. But the point is that neither Frédéric, nor Flaubert himself, nor anyone else, is fully determined by his preexisting habitus or holdings of capital or by the array of possibilities existing at the moment of entering a new field.

A further correction of the mistaken idea that habitus produces behavior mechanically or automatically in Bourdieu is suggested by his comments concerning Frédéric's relation to his parents, his *ambivalence* towards his mother. Bourdieu's thinking became increasingly psychoanalytic over time. This was not only true of his work on gender and sexuality and on the problems of inheritance – where it might be expected – but also infiltrated his analyses of 'macrosociological' objects. In *Homo Academicus* Bourdieu spoke about 'investments' in 'identifications' (1988: 172). In *Pascalian Meditations* Bourdieu referred to individual differences in the ability to form an integrated habitus. An overaccommodating personality, he suggested in this final major theoretical statement, may form a 'rigid, self-enclosed, overintegrated habitus', while an opportunist or adaptive personality type might allow the habitus to dissolve 'into a kind of *mens momentanea*, incapable of ... having an integrated sense of self' (2000b: 161). Although social aging might partly explain the transition from an adaptive to a rigid habitus, neither age nor class could be the only mechanism at work.

Once we acknowledge Bourdieu's opening up of an irreducibly psychic level in his socioanalysis we can also dismantle another argument about his alleged ahistoricism, the claim that his view of human nature was entirely *agonistic* (e.g. Martin, 2003: 33). Of course agonistic views of human nature are not inherently unhistorical, as shown for example by Carl Schmitt's decisionism. But a social field cannot possibly be based exclusively on conflict and competition, since all participants in a field share a similar *illusio* and libidinal investment in the game, and depend on one other for reciprocal recognition of their holdings of symbolic capital and the ranked distinction of their practices and perceptions. Fields are based as much on identifications with and recognitions of the

Other as on friend-enemy constellations. Bourdieu suggests for example that the *family* is a kind of micro field, calling it an ‘elementary social unit’. The family, like any other kind of field, is characterized not only by ambivalence and conflict, but also by ‘mutual recognition, exchange of justifications for existing and reasons for being, mutual testimony of trust’ (Bourdieu, 1998: 112): it is a ‘loving dyad’. By acknowledging the complexity of identifications and motivations guiding actors in any field, Bourdieu distances himself even more from any reductionist shortcut from habitus to behavior. Historical change within the field may still be *explicable* after the fact, but it becomes less *predictable*. That openness to radical rupture, accident, unprecedented invention, and conjunctural contingency is a hallmark of the best, most historical versions of historical sociology.

A final aspect of the inherently historical character of habitus becomes evident once we recognize that habitus is constantly reconstituted through ongoing participation in specific fields.<sup>12</sup>

### Field Theory and History

A field ... is not an *apparatus* following the semi-automatic logic of a *discipline* and capable of converting every action into the simple *execution* of a rule. (Bourdieu, 1990a: 88)

There are several respects in which Bourdieusian fields are entirely historical. First, fields do not exist in all times and places, and are not omni-historical. Undifferentiated societies, according to Bourdieu, do not have fields that are relatively autonomous from the dominant powers (Bourdieu, 1988).<sup>13</sup> French historians have debated whether a semi-autonomous cultural field emerged in France only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or whether the *Académie française* ‘at the moment of its creation’ in the 17<sup>th</sup> century already ‘represented an early version of a field with some autonomy from power’ (Chartier, 2002: 83). Such a determination can only be made with historical evidence, not in the abstract. But clearly a society must have an institutionalized concentration of power in order for there to be fields at all, since the first defining characteristic of a field is the effort to carve out some degree of autonomy from society-wide dominant powers (like the state or the economically ruling class) for a certain specialized kind of practice.

Bourdieu’s theory of fields is also inherently historical insofar as it always involves reconstructing the historical genesis of a partially autonomous realm of activity by a group of *nomothets* or field-founders. When Bourdieu says that a field has its own stakes and *illusio*, and that all participants agree on the value of the activity around which a field is organized, he is also saying that the field is historical insofar as it creates a separate universe that did not exist before. Conversely, many forms of activity simply do not cohere in field-like ways.

Even an established field is inherently mutable. All fields are characterized by a permanent struggle over the ‘dominant principle of domination’, that is, over the ranking of different performances and perceptions, over the definition of what counts as distinction. But some fields are more *settled* than others. The more dynamic fields, like art and fashion, are prone to continuous small revolutions. They exhibit a constant churning and cycling of dominant and dominated groups, in which newcomers challenge hegemonic taste and the status of established elites. Another form of historical

dynamism within fields involves shifts in the overall balance of power between the autonomous and heteronomous poles. Bourdieu also emphasizes the creation of entirely new positions within existing fields, as in his discussion of Flaubert. I have argued that Max Weber created a novel position in the German fields of sociology and social science, one situated between the *geisteswissenschaftliche* and *naturwissenschaftliche* poles (Steinmetz, 2010a). At the limit, a field may be taken over by actors located at the heteronomous pole and thereby lose its autonomy and merge with another field. Fields may also be eliminated from outside or from above, as in the abolition of Marxism-Leninism as a university field after the collapse of eastern European socialism or the Nazi state's destruction of independent art and literature.

A historical account of society-wide events necessarily involves analyzing multiple fields in relation to one another. Since each field is relatively autonomous from all of the others and is governed by its own internal temporality, pace, and rhythm, the relations among fields are not governed by any overarching logic that guarantees their harmonious coexistence. Explaining changes at the societal level therefore involves looking for events or forces that simultaneously erode the autonomy of several fields or bring them into a temporary harmony, or looking for accidental resonances among autonomous fields that produce unpredictable conjunctural social effects. I will turn to this question of society-wide historical events in the conclusion.

### *Cultural and Symbolic Capital and Diachronic Change*

Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and symbolic capital are also deeply historical. This historicity is obscured somewhat by Bourdieu's ironic or disdainful comments about Marxism during the early part of his career, comments that suggest that his idea of capital was originally closer to mainstream economics than to Marxist economics. Bourdieu drew heavily on Marxist ideas of domination and conflict in this period but he seemed unable to engage seriously with the most sophisticated neo-Marxist thinkers in France during the 1960s and 1970s. Yet Louis Althusser was Bourdieu's teacher at the ENS, and Bourdieu seems to have gotten certain key ideas from Althusser. Bourdieu's central concept of 'relative autonomy' emerged first in Althusserian neo-Marxism and its theory of the capitalist state (Poulantzas, 1973; see also Kennedy, 2006). Bourdieu's account of the crisis of May 1968 in *Homo Academicus* (1988) follows an explanatory strategy that is very similar to Althusser's in 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' (Althusser, 1990). Bourdieu never acknowledged his debt to Althusser until his posthumous auto-analysis (Bourdieu, 2007), perhaps due to the 'anxiety of influence', but also because of his almost instinctive distaste for the French Communist Party and for political parties in general.

Nonetheless, Bourdieu was willing in some contexts to refer to his own approach as a 'generalized Marxism' (Bourdieu, 1983: 316). He was extremely concerned to distinguish his notion of capital from Gary Becker's idea of human capital and from mainstream economists. Over time Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital began to attach itself to various other Marxian ideas. He described the struggle over cultural and symbolic capital as giving rise to an *accumulation* of capital. Just as the accumulation of economic capital for its own sake is the *raison d'être* and defining feature of economic capitalism in Marx, so

the accumulation of cultural capital for its own sake is the defining characteristic of cultural fields for Bourdieu. Bourdieu introduced the idea of the *conversion* of economic into cultural capital (and vice-versa) and the conversion of generic cultural capital into field-specific symbolic capital. These discussions recall Marx's analysis of the complex relations between value, exchange value, and prices. Bourdieu (1986) argued that the common denominator underlying economic, cultural and social capital is the *labor time* necessary for its production. For Marx, value is a function of average, socially necessary abstract labor time. One difference between Marx's capital and Bourdieu's cultural capital hinges on the idea of 'socially necessary' labor time. For Marx this is defined as 'the labor-time socially necessary is that required to produce an article under the normal conditions of production, and with the average degree of skill and intensity prevalent at the time' (Marx, 1967: 39). Bourdieu never addressed the problem of whether the labor that goes into producing or increasing cultural capital is *abstract* or *concrete* labor, in Marx's sense, or whether cultural capital is a function of the average time necessary under certain social conditions to produce cultural value or is rather simply a function of the amount of clock time invested in its production. I think we can easily dismiss the second suggestion: longer educational periods do not necessarily yield more cultural capital than shorter educational periods. Each unit of time spent on educational training does not yield the same amount of cultural capital. The question of whether the value of cultural capital is commensurated in the manner suggested by Marx's analysis of value as a function of socially-necessary abstract labor time is more difficult. It *would* be possible to conceive of mechanisms by which heterogeneous cultural capitals could be commensurated. Bourdieu gropes toward such a mechanism with his structuralist language of homologies between fields and of a field's 'index of refraction'. He suggests that the habitus itself is capable of making these analogical and homological leaps, transferring deeper structural principles of perception and practice into new fields. And by defining *the state* as the central bank of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1999) he pointed toward one institutionalized mechanism that might codify and stabilize rates of conversion among forms of capital.

Just as Bourdieu underscores the modernity of fields by showing that their existence depends on a certain level of concentrated power, he points to the modernity of cultural capital by modeling some of its central features on Marx's theory of capitalism. The semi-Marxist understanding of cultural capital in Bourdieu gives the concept a doubly historical character. To the extent that it is like economic capital, cultural capital could only exist under specific sociopolitical conditions. For Marx capitalism and the accumulation of capital for its own sake are inherently modern phenomena. In Bourdieu, a system of cultural capital can only function in a context of unified cultural 'markets'—in other words, fields— and of an institution like the state which can regulate conversions of generic cultural capital into both economic and social capital and into field-specific forms of symbolic capital.

## Towards Neo-historicism

A social law is a historical law, which perpetuates itself so long as it is allowed to operate ... [Sociology] merely records ... the logic that is characteristic of a *particular game*, at a particular moment. (Bourdieu, 1993: 26)

We can turn finally to Bourdieu's own historical studies. It would be possible to show, of course, that *all* of his studies are historical. Even his most 'structuralist' studies like *Reproduction* and *The Inheritors* reveal an attention to the temporal structuring of human experience and the historical genesis of social objects and categories. I will focus here on the successive revisions of Bourdieu's *Sociologie de l'Algérie* (*Sociology of Algeria*) and his other writings on Algeria, and on his analysis of May 1968 in *Homo Academicus*. Taken together, these writings illustrate the ways in which his thinking became increasingly historical.

*Sociologie de l'Algérie*, Bourdieu's (1959a) first publication, posed the historical question of the reactions of different groups of Algerians to what he called the 'clash of civilizations' or 'the total disruption and disrupted totality' in late colonial Algeria (Bourdieu, 1958: 119). The first 90 pages of the book consist of separate chapters on the Kabyle, Chaoui, Mozabite Berbers, and Arab-speakers. This was a fairly standard way of dividing up indigenous Algerian society, but it avoided treating these cultures as existing outside of time in an 'anthropological present'. In this respect Bourdieu was responding to the most recent French ethnological writing at the time, which had broken with the ahistoricity of earlier ethnologists like Marcel Griaule, whose writing 'almost never referred to the colonial context' (Arditi, 1990). In France, research on African cultures was often perceived as 'sociological' during the middle decades of the 20th century if it broke with the earlier anthropological preference for the 'pure savage' or if it moved up from the village level to the tribal, national, or global level (Bastide, 1964).

These studies had also introduced historicity into the study of the peoples previously seen as lacking history. Ethnosociologists such as Georges Balandier, Roger Bastide, Michel Leiris, Maurice Leenhardt, René Maunier, Paul Mercier, and Jacques Soustelle had been describing dynamic changes in non-western cultures in response to colonialism, focusing on cultural mixing rather than a linear evolution toward civilization, and active responses to the west, including anticolonial resistance. Balandier's *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire* (1955) compared the effects of precolonial history and colonial rule on the differing patterns of collective action among two colonized cultures. Bastide (1948) – an *agrégé* in philosophy like the Bourdieu who had moved into ethnology and eventually held a chair in sociology – focused on the 'interpenetration of cultures', describing the Brazilian *candomblé* as a coherent African religious system. Soustelle's second doctoral thesis focused on the partially Europeanized Otomi Indians, whose entire culture was a veritable battlefield, the site of a 'clash of civilizations' (Soustelle 1937: 253). Otomi culture was 'an original synthesis' rather than a stage in a linear process of acculturation (Soustelle, 1971: 137). In a revision of his book *Gens de la Grande Terre*, Leenhardt located New Caledonian indigenous life within a historical narrative of European colonization and proposed that the colony could become a syncretic society, with cultural transfers ('*le jeu de transferts*') moving in both directions between colonizer and colonized (Leenhardt, 1953: 213, 221–3). The first volume of Maunier's *Sociology of Colonies* proposed an analysis of colonial mimicry, the reciprocal imitation by colonizer and the colonized, including the 'conversion of the conqueror by the conquered' (Maunier, 1949: 535). According to Maunier (1930a, 1930b), institutions had borrowed in both directions, between 'indigènes and Europeans'. Leiris forged the model of the ethnologist as anticolonial critic in the 1930s and introduced 'a reflection on the

history of [colonized] societies' as a 'mélange' of 'African roots and Occidental civilization' (Arditi, 1990: 96–7; Leiris, 1992: 19).

Bourdieu was able to profit from these increasingly historical ways of thinking about precolonial and colonized societies. Although he did not cite much of this work, he had clearly read it.<sup>14</sup> Using a formula strongly indebted to Bastide, Bourdieu referred to the 'kaleidoscopic mechanism of cultural interpenetration' (1958: 90). The 'only real solution', Bourdieu concluded, was 'one that would allow the Algerian to forge a new civilization' that would respect tradition while adapting itself to the 'demands of the modern world' (1958: 126). Like the new ethnology – and unlike Lévi-Strauss's structuralism – Bourdieu analyzed the Kabyle as a historical culture that had been reshaped by long periods of contact with Arab and French conquerors. Turning to the Arab-speakers, Bourdieu wrote that few societies 'pose the problem of the relations between sociology and history more sharply', since they had 'suffered the most directly and the most profoundly from the shock of colonization' (1958: 60). Bourdieu adopted Balandier's concept of the 'colonial situation' (Balandier, 1951; Bourdieu, 1958: 117), which pointed away from linear evolutionary paths of political development and insisted that colonialism was a distinct, *sui generis* social formation.

In other parts of his first book, however, Bourdieu fell back on a modernization-theoretic language in which colonialism was described as simply speeding up a linear process of social development. This was revealed in Bourdieu's language of *traditional* resistance to 'contact with the Occidental world' or the 'modern world' (1958: 55–7). In the book's final chapter Bourdieu analyzed the 'law of unequal rates of change' according to which some aspects of the cultural system change more rapidly than others, creating 'disequilibria' (1958: 116). This simplifying juxtaposition of the 'modern' and the 'traditional' was perpetuated in Bourdieu's (1959b) subsequent analyses of the 'inner logic of traditional Algerian civilization' and his essay on 'The Kabyle House or the World Reversed' (Bourdieu, 1979). In an essay written for the social welfare office of colonial Algiers in 1959 he referred to the 'original', 'traditional, integral Algerian society' as 'inert' (*statique*) (Bourdieu, 1959b: 41).

Despite these residual elements of social evolutionism and modernization theory, Bourdieu continued pushing his analysis of Algeria in more historical directions. Whereas the first edition of *Sociologie de l'Algérie* included a note saying that it was 'unfortunate that I cannot analyze the structure of European society' in Algeria (Bourdieu, 1958: 117), the second edition, published in 1961, included a longer discussion of French land annexations and settlements, and concluded with a description of the war making a 'tabula rasa of a civilization that could no longer be discussed except in the past tense' (Bourdieu, 1961b: 107–18, 125). Bourdieu published an article called 'The Revolution within the Revolution' that addressed the 'special form this war acquired because of its being waged in this unique situation' (Bourdieu, 1961a: 28–9), namely, as a colonial war. In an English-language book called *The Algerians*, published in 1962, Bourdieu was careful to distinguish the 'traditionalism of the traditional society' from 'colonial traditionalism', which he defined as 'ways of behavior which in appearance had remained unchanged' but which 'were in fact endowed with a very different meaning and form' (1962: 156).<sup>15</sup> He also discussed the massive forced resettlements of Algerians into 'disciplined spaces', villages that quickly obtained the aspect of 'dead cities' and that were

designed along the plan of a 'Roman camp' (1962: 170–1, 2004: 461). The third edition of *Sociologie de l'Algérie* ends with a section entitled 'from the revolutionary war to the revolution' (1963a: 124–5). Bourdieu continued to update this final section. An 'updated third edition' released in 1970 concluded more 'structurally' with a section on 'the structure of class relations' (1970: 123–5), and this has been retained up to the present edition (Bourdieu, 2006). In the meantime, however, Bourdieu published *Le Déracinement* with Abdelmalek Sayad (1964), which broke with modernization theory by focusing on the active smashing of indigenous society through violent resettlement and the creation of a specific new form of society dominated neither by European 'modernity' nor indigenous 'tradition'. This entire conjuncture was summarized under the heading 'two histories, two societies' (Bourdieu and Sayad, 1964: 29). But Bourdieu and Sayad still spoke here of a 'pathological *acceleration*' due to colonialism (1964: 35), a language that suggested that non-European societies were incapable of internal 'acceleration', that history moved in a single direction, and that a balanced process of modernization was one in which the economic, cultural, and political subsystems all advanced at the same pace.

This was Bourdieu's early work, of course, written when he was still seeking a place in a new discipline and looking for a theoretical position outside of 'blissful' structuralism (Bourdieu 1990b: 9). Bourdieu's mature historical approach can be seen in the discussion of May 1968 in *Homo Academicus*, which was written after he had interacted with practicing historians for many years.

Historical sociology at a minimum is defined by a refusal of general theory – of the idea that a single causal mechanism can explain any and all historical events – and a willingness to explore overdetermination, conjunctures, accidents, and the unprecedented and unique event (see the work of e.g. Althusser, Bhaskar, Sewell, Steinmetz). Although this is not *classical* historicism (Iggers, 1997), which refused explanation and comparison (including comparison across underlying processes or mechanisms; Steinmetz, 2004), this is a form of post-Rickertian historicism insofar as it preserves the uniqueness of the event – especially the structure-changing, non-trivial event – while also attempting to explain the event in terms of a conjuncture of separate, contingently intersecting causal chains.

This is the kind of historicist strategy adopted by Bourdieu in accounting for the events of May 1968 in France in *Homo Academicus*, in a chapter entitled 'the critical moment'. Here Bourdieu breaks with any residual notion of a simple trajectory from tradition to modernity. The crisis is explained instead by the 'synchronization of crises latent in different fields', the transformation of a 'regional crisis' into 'a general crisis, a historical event' (Bourdieu, 1988: 173). This occurs when the '*acceleration*' produced by a regional crisis is able to bring about a '*coincidence*' of events which, given the different *tempo* which each field adopts in its relative autonomy, should normally start or finish in dispersed order or, in other words, succeed each other without necessarily organizing themselves into a unified causal series' (Bourdieu 1988). Similarly, Althusser had discussed the fusion of a vast array of 'radically heterogeneous' contradictions into a 'ruptural unity' under the heading of 'overdetermination' (Althusser, 1990: 100). The purity of a single contradiction motoring history would, Althusser added, 'be the exception' (Althusser, 1990: 106). In moving toward a more adequate historicism, Bourdieu had arrived at a position very close to that of his erstwhile teacher – but that is another story.

## Notes

1. All translations in this article are my own unless otherwise stated.
2. As I show in Steinmetz (2009b), a number of French colonial sociologists also moved toward an explicitly historical approach between 1945 and 1965.
3. One historian associated with the sociologist Luc Boltanski, Bourdieu's former student and long-time rival, described the latter's approach as ahistorical (Lepetit, 1995), but this has to be seen in light of Boltanski's Oedipalized attack on his more famous *maître-penseur* and father-figure. Boltanski (b. 1947) was referred to 45 times in the three leading US-based sociology journals (*AJS*, *ASR* and *Social Forces*) between 1970 and 2008, while Bourdieu was referred to 641 times in that same time period – a ratio of more than 14 to 1. (Calculations by the author; data from JSTOR and University of Chicago Press for *AJS*; JSTOR and Ingenta for *ASR*; and JSTOR 1960–2004 and Project Muse for *Social Forces*.)
4. A recent article asserts that '*sociologie historique* seems to be gradually asserting itself as a real trend' in France (Meyran, 2004), but neither of the French scholars discussed in this article is a sociologist. One, Gérard Noiriel (discussed below), is a historian who promotes the idea of 'socio-histoire' (Noiriel, 2006); the other is a political scientist, Yves Déloye (1997).
5. In addition to the scholars listed in the text, Bourdieu supervised a number of *Thèses du 3ème* cycle that qualify as historical sociology, including Colonna (1971), Fabiani (1980), Heinich (1981), Lambert (1982), and Ponton (1977) – the latter a sociologist who publishes in history journals (e.g. Ponton, 1980).
6. *The Craft of Sociology* (Bourdieu et al., 1968/1991) was rooted philosophically in the work of Canguilhem and Bachelard and included C. Wright Mills's critique of 'abstracted empiricism'. Bourdieu also rejected Lazarsfeld's 'positivistic epistemology' (Bourdieu, 1991: 247).
7. Charles Tilly, it should be recalled, was a major exception to the rule of aloofness from actual historians among American historical sociologists, holding a joint appointment in history and sociology at Michigan from 1969 to 1984, where he supervised doctoral theses in history as well as sociology, and going on to create the Committee on Historical Studies at the New School (Steinmetz, 2010b).
8. Halbwachs started his academic career as a philosopher at Göttingen in 1904 but left philosophy for sociology, obtaining the first university chair in sociology in France at the University of Strasbourg in 1922 (Craig, 1983). Halbwachs does not seem to have been sympathetic to or even aware of the neohistoricist sociology that emerged in Germany during the Weimar Republic.
9. An American project of rapprochement between history and sociology emerged briefly around the journal *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, founded in 1958 by historian Sylvia Thrupp and sociologist Edward Shils, but the journal ultimately proved less interesting to sociologists than to anthropologists. Another stillborn effort was the volume *Sociology and History* (Cahnman and Boskoff, 1964), which had little resonance in either discipline.
10. After Roger Bastide's death in 1974 the position of General Secretary of *L'Année sociologique* was eliminated. The highest position was now the 'President of the Editorial Committee', held by Boudon from 1978 to 2003. In a note to readers in 1995 Boudon announced a break with the journal's tradition by radically reducing the book review section, a move that would allow the journal to 'better respond to the expectations of the *sociological* community in France and abroad' (*Année Sociologique* 1995: 7; emphasis added). The journal now began devoting entire issues to American sociological trends like rational choice theory and publishing articles in English by mainstream, ahistorical American sociologists.
11. Of course a few members of Durkheim's circle published on the sociology of the state and other political topics, including occasionally Durkheim himself (1975: 157-202).

12. Bourdieu's early studies of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty point to another respect in which his concept of habitus is inherently historical, one that cannot be followed up here. Bourdieu wrote a proposal for a *thèse d'état* on *Structures temporelles de la vie affective* (temporal structures of affective life) and continued 'to write each evening on the structure of temporal existence according to Husserl' (2008a: 40) while writing his *Sociologie de l'Algérie* (see below).
13. Of course some anthropologists have deployed Bourdieu's notion of habitus in less differentiated societies. Bourdieu first introduced the concept to describe the traditional dispositions of Algerian peasants, but this was before he had theorized habitus. In effect these studies are not actually using Bourdieu's mature concept of habitus, which can only be understood in relation to field, but are pointing instead to mere *habits*.
14. Bourdieu arrived in Algeria in 1956, just after the departure of Soustelle in January, who had governed the colony in 1955. In Algeria he discussed Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques* and Germaine Tillion's *Algeria 1957* with André Nouschi (Nouschi, 2003). Bourdieu's first book review, published in 1960, was on Bastide's *Les religions africaines au Brésil* (Bastide, 1960; Bourdieu, 1960). Bourdieu cites Balandier and uses his concept of the 'colonial situation'. He attacks Leiris in his contribution to *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* (Bourdieu, 1963b).
15. *The Algerians* combines the 1961 French edition of *Sociologie de l'Algérie* with the 1961 article 'Revolution within the Revolution' and some previously unpublished material on the Kabyle house (which would appear in French in 1970).

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George Steinmetz is the Charles Tilly Professor of Sociology and German Studies at the University of Michigan. His work includes *Regulating the Social: The Welfare State and Local Politics in Imperial Germany* (Princeton University Press), *State/Culture: State Formation after the Cultural Turn* (Cornell University Press), *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences* (Duke University Press), *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (University of Chicago Press), and the documentary film 'Detroit; Ruin of a City' (2006), co-directed with Michael Chanan. He is currently completing a study of sociologists' entanglements in colonial and noncolonial empires and editing *Sociology and Empire* (Duke University Press, forthcoming). He is the founder and co-editor of the series *Politics, History, and Culture* at Duke University Press.