

REGARDS CROISÉS
Transatlantic Perspectives on the
Colonial Situation

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In the past several years, colonial studies have reemerged as an important focus for the social sciences on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet there has been little exchange or communication between scholars in France and the United States. Moreover, the apparent commonality of the subject matter often masks important differences in approach, as well as differences in the political and scholarly agendas that support such research. The editors of this special issue of *French Politics, Culture & Society* believe that the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Georges Balandier's classic article, "La situation coloniale, approche théorique" (*Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie* 11 [1951]: 44-79), presents a valuable opportunity to promote Franco-American dialogue on the colonial question. This special issue publishes some of the works presented at a conference organized in April 2001 by the Institute of French Studies of New York University and entitled "1951-2001: Transatlantic Perspectives on the *Colonial Situation*."

Balandier's article has contributed greatly to these new analyses—though in different ways in France and the United States. For this reason, reflection on Balandier's *colonial situation* permits us to confront these differences, delineate shared problematics and perhaps indicate new directions for research. Far from being a commemorative gesture, this publication is intended to start a dialogue about the conceptual tools that can be used in the analysis of the (post)colonial situation by historians, sociologists and anthropologists.

Balandier's 1951 article had two principal objectives: a critique of the functionalism then dominant in Anglo-American political anthropology and an analysis of the current crisis of the colonial world. But it also developed a range of analytical and epistemological insights that have been elaborated in

later work—Balandier's own, to be sure, as well as other more recent research on the colonial question.

Balandier's article was an invitation to consider the colonial situation as a complex "totality"—here drawing more explicitly on Marcel Mauss than on existentialist philosophy. In so doing, it designated new objects of inquiry: most prominently the colonial situation itself, but also the colonial and colonized societies that composed it and their multileveled (and always latently conflictual) interactions. The novelty of these objects called for an approach that was sociological at heart, that underscored the weaknesses of the "cultural change" paradigm, and that led the way for a critique of culturalism. This shift in emphasis from cultural formations—whether the *ideology* of the colonizer or the *traditions* of the colonized—to historical, economic, and political perspectives merits consideration in the context of current concern about where the social sciences should be headed "beyond the cultural turn." (See François Pouillon's article in this issue.)

Our goal in this publication is to bring together historians, sociologists and anthropologists whose research addresses the colonial question as it has been framed in the "modern" French Empire, i.e., the territories conquered from the nineteenth century forward, although comparative approaches have also been encouraged. In asking authors to reflect on the usefulness of the notion of the colonial situation for their own work, our goal was to produce a preliminary mapping of the field as well as start a dialogue between French and American contributors to the "new colonial studies" (Cooper).

Among other things, Balandier's text poses the question of the pertinent frame of analysis of the "colonial." How can we understand colonial and colonized societies as a "totality"? How can we understand their interactions? Is it possible to establish a working concept that will allow us to bridge the metropole and its colonies—that is to say, a coherent notion of Empire (Merle and Raffin)?

Rereading "La situation coloniale" fifty years later also allows us to reflect on the topics that have redefined the field of colonial studies, and perhaps to identify new ones. Among these are the dynamics and inner conflicts of colonial societies; the social spaces that served as zones of both contact and separation between colonial and colonized societies; the borders between groups and the question of how those borders are constructed and maintained over time (Saada). These issues also implicate the actors who more or less intentionally contributed to mapping the colonial situation: missionaries, soldiers, administrators, anthropologists, jurists, scientists, engineers, technicians, and so on (Sibeud and Conklin).

Balandier's 1951 text implicitly called for a collective effort that would combine contributions from history, anthropology, economics, political science, sociology, social psychology and psychoanalysis. While we can note that some of these disciplines—especially economics, psychology and psychoanalysis—have not played much of a role in the renewal of interest in the colo-

nial situation, we think there is much to be gained by better understanding the articulations among the fields that have figured centrally—namely, history, sociology and anthropology.

Finally, Balandier's theoretical insights were built upon the project of criticizing colonial domination. This situation is structured differently today, though strong continuities exist. The following essays are explorations of those continuities and differences and reflect the complex realities of the post-colonial condition (Balandier).