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AFRICAN SOCIETIES IN TRANSITION

The doctoral theses of Georges Balandier, professor at the Ecole des Hautes-Etudes—*Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire* ("Current Sociology of Negro Africa") and *Sociologie des Brazzavilles noires* ("Sociology of the Negro Brazzavilles")—are the culmination of studies undertaken in French Equatorial Africa while he was working in the Office de la Recherche scientifique Outre-Mer (French Bureau of Scientific Research Overseas). They are equally far removed from metaphysical sociology and from a static ethnography which seeks pure states and original traditions. They treat a moving present, ethnic groups already formed, African societies concerned about European intervention and about their own deveoping future. "Sociology," Louis Wirth used to say, "is the science and the art of human relations." Humanity is indeed the object of sociology, but sociology should be as well a tool for humanity. Balandier's work is a precious tool for understanding present-day Africa beyond what appears on the surface, and perhaps even for helping to construct the new Africa.

Dominating his great study is the notion of the "colonial situation," used before by Mannoni in his *Psychologie de la Colonisation* (Psychology

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of Colonization). This situation creates a state of potential crisis, a "socio-pathology," which implies tensions and reveals for each of the colonized societies its potentialities for resistance and adaptation. Two groups of peoples are studied from this point of view, the Fang of the Gabon, and the Ba-Kongo near Brazzaville.

Both groups have undergone the same effects of the colonial situation and of contact with modern civilization: transformation of economic conditions, partial change to a monetary economy, wage-earning, sensitivity to crises, dislocation of old groupings, social mobility and instability, development of cities, and difficulty of the uprooted to regroup because of the precariousness of the economic structure. Often, because of the overwhelming strength of the colonizing power, the colonized react clandestinely, adding to the degradations and the antagonisms of the society but also revealing tendencies toward a new unity. These general phenomena show divergent aspects in the two groups, however, because of their differing social cohesion and history.

The Fang are rather recent immigrants, "detached conquerors" whose demographic equilibrium is shaky, who lack both an organized hierarchy and religious links with the earth. The growing of cacao has transformed many of them into peasants and developed among the more advanced the idea of a grouping by clan and by village; this is conceived as a new and democratic means by which these former conquerors may escape from their new feeling of inferiority toward the whites. One neo-pagan cult, the Bwiti, is tending to create a link with the ancestors and to exalt the idea of Fang power. Their traditional anarchy has prevented widespread regrouping. Like many African peoples (and like the peoples of Gaul before Caesar, one might add), the Fang had but a "micro-history" without national traditions. The barriers which marked the old groups are broken, but mobility remains. The very instability of their institutions makes study and observation of them difficult.

The Ba-Kongo, on the other hand, have a history, that of the Congo kingdom, christianized for some time by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. The other Congolese call them *Kongo mindélé* (the whites of the Congo). They were better prepared for contact with the whites and for the colonial situation. Their social structure is also more solid, with the institution of chieftains, matrilinear clans joined by alliances, and attachment to the earth. The Ba-Kongo contributed heavily to the population of Brazzaville; they made themselves the principal food suppliers of the area, and a large number of "evolved" individuals have come from their ranks;

among them there has been no absolute break between town- and country-dwellers, but a constant interchange of population and mutual aid. Therefore the crises of adaptation of this society are less internal than external; its movements constitute above all a reaction against the dominant white society, whether by the "amicalism" which deified the dead political leader, André Matswa, or by the messianism of Simon Kimbangu, seeking to reconcile with the ancestor cult a religion inspired by Christianity. In both cases may be seen attempts to escape white influence, to remain apart, to take the initiative and try for unification.

In the case of both the Fang and the Ba-Kongo, we see efforts to adjust an attitude of "counter-acculturation" and return to traditional values conceived as a lost golden age, along with the desire to attain equality in moving toward modernity, to reorganize with a view toward emancipation. Hence the off-balance and unstable character of the movements, called by Gurvitch the "effervescent and innovating collective behaviors" of people poorly integrated in a new African ensemble whose forms as yet exist only in barest outline.

The book on the *Brazzavilles noires* offers a striking view of this "budding" Africa. Two immense black villages, Poto-Poto and Bacongo, with their straw huts among dense verdure, contrast with the European city. Races sprung from various areas rub shoulders there, not always in the most peaceful conditions. The majority of the inhabitants are young men who have broken with the subsistence economy and many of whom gain an unstable living in small trades. Various transitory social groups are formed: associations of workers, associations based on place of origin, religion, or neighborhood. Sociological uprooting brings on a state of readiness to change, tensions, and a nostalgia for lost security, which sometimes take a political turn. Relations with the whites especially conform to a certain hierarchy and proceed according to a stereotyped pattern. The advanced native, dependent upon occidental civilization, most often reacts in an African way. Balandier sketches several significant biographies. Cities, a European invention, are still but slightly structured in Africa, where they rest on an unstable economy. Only economic progress and the opening of responsibilities to the Africans can assure effective progress.

The French study of ethnology has undergone profound changes in the postwar period, with the passing of the two great masters L. Lévy-Bruhl and Marcel Mauss. It has sought new directions, and certain foreign currents, notably American anthropology, have been recognized. There have

been some attempts to renovate ethnology from within, without breaking its frontiers. The brilliant Claude Lévy-Strauss has made numerous contributions (mathematical, linguistic, etc.) to the structural analysis of societies. Marcel Griaule, before his early death, sought to examine the explanation given by the members of the society under study before making a hasty interpretation; thus he penetrated much deeper than anyone before him into the traditional Negro mentality and its cultural manifestations.

Balandier's procedure is entirely different. It is linked to the profound social and political transformations of the postwar period, and particularly to the colonial crisis. Today's ethnologists no longer have to deal with partitioned, immobile societies, but rather with a world of movement in which global influences are brought into play and which poses essentially practical problems. From this point on the division between ethnology and sociology is senseless. The techniques of both must be employed, as well as those of other human sciences such as demography and history. This gives us the usage of the word "sociology" in its broadest sense.

We have much more evidence of these widening horizons, this interpenetration of disciplines. The school of L. Febvre and of Braudel has, by use of a sociological point of view, transformed our narrow conception of history. Paul Mus, in his studies of colonial problems, has introduced the notion of relationships among groups of differing civilizations. P. Bastide has tried to forestall the frequent confusions between society and culture. For Balandier, ethnological data are but the materials of a general science of social change; they enable him, notably, to interpret local variations of a single process. But the accent is on the constants: criteria common to all situations of dependence and phenomena of change; in short, he stresses the dynamic aspects of social life.

His method of procedure clearly shows three types of theoretical influence: a) certain Marxist attitudes: particular attention to the economic aspects of colonial domination; study of the ideologies by which colonizer and colonized alike try to mask, to compensate, to justify, or to interpret relations between the races; b) phenomenological points of view: importance attached to the notion of situation; notion of the reciprocity of perspectives; c) certain key concepts of G. Gurvitch: differentiation between the level of groups and that of the forms of sociability; notions of a global society, of de-structuration and re-structuration, of innovating behaviors, and, in general, of the levels on which the action of social change may be grasped.

It is nevertheless true that his particular conceptual contribution seems an important one and that he provides ideas most useful for the understanding of retarded societies in the path of accelerated change: the idea of dependence and its consequences in clandestine behavior (ambiguous actions, attitudes of negative opposition, superficial acceptance of foreign values); the idea of a conservatism which, far from being purely formalist and sterile, "gives a meaning to innovations" by choosing among them and transforming them; finally, dominating his whole view, the idea of social mutation, linked to the total crisis of a sociocultural ensemble through the action of subsequent intervention.

Thus these works, whose aim is the analysis of the "colonial situation," go beyond this aim in both time and place. The purely "colonial" aspect will more and more tend, in the British and French countries of West Africa, to yield to democratization, economic transformation, and the promotion of local elites. On the other hand, independent and non-colonial countries, where multiple ethnic groups and various degrees of advancement are nevertheless found, may present phenomena of domination and reactions of the same kind.

It would be lessening the scope of Balandier's works to describe them merely as colonial sociology. They provide a technique for the study of an expanding world and of phenomena of contact, caused by that shrinking of the planet which will doubtless appear in the future, along with the conquest of the atom, as the principal event of the twentieth century.