

Georges Balandier and the Postwar Reconstruction of French Sociology

Jean-Pierre Dozon

IN **CAHIERS D'ÉTUDES AFRICAINES** 2017/4 No 228 , PAGES 809 TO 818

PUBLISHER **ÉDITIONS DE L'EHESS**

ISSN 0008-0055

DOI 10.4000/etudesafricaines.21526

Uploaded: 11/29/2017

Article available online at

<https://shs.cairn.info/journal-cahiers-d-etudes-africaines-2017-4-page-809?lang=en>



Discover the contents of this issue, follow the journal by email, subscribe...
Scan this QR code to access the page for this issue on Cairn.info.



Electronic distribution Cairn.info for Éditions de l'EHESS.

You are authorized to reproduce this article within the limits of the terms of use of Cairn.info or, where applicable, the terms and conditions of the license subscribed to by your institution. Details and conditions can be found at cairn.info/copyright.

Unless otherwise provided by law, the digital use of these resources for educational purposes is subject to authorization by the Publisher or, where applicable, by the collective management organization authorized for this purpose. This is particularly the case in France with the CFC, which is the approved organization in this area.

Georges Balandier and the Postwar Reconstruction of French Sociology

There is no doubt that we should continue to consider Georges Balandier as the dominant figure of “Africanism” in French, or, more precisely, of African Studies since the 1950s. This had already been highlighted at the time of his retirement, a whole three decades ago, through the enthusiastic homages that were dedicated to him by his students from the 1960s: including Claude Meillassoux, Marc Augé, Marc-Henri Pialt, Emmanuel Terray, Gérard Althabe, Jean Bazin, Pierre Bonnafé, Michel Izard, Claudine Vidal, Jean-Loup Amselle, Jean Copans, and many others.¹ These figures, some of whom died well before him, followed in his footsteps and made fine contributions to African Studies in French in the 1970s and 1980s, and also brought them to a large international audience.

However, despite the warmth of the homages and the respect that was paid to him at the home institution of this man who had deeply influenced the career of every one of them, it seems to me that something remained unspoken in them and, beyond these homages, in the field of research in African Studies that broadly derived from his work. Indeed, although everyone clearly knew that Balandier (1951, 1955, 1985 [1955]) had situated his work under the flag of the *socius* (the works *Sociologie des Brazzavilles noires* and *Sociologie actuelle de l’Afrique noire* exemplified this concept), by recognizing the “colonial situation” and taking an interest in the world of cities and workers, in the attempts by colonized people to take back initiative, and in liberation movements, and that he had therefore distanced himself somewhat from a certain concept of *ethnos* that continued to be the organizing principle of works of African Studies in the form of monographs of ethnic studies, there was little mention of the fact that he identified, first and foremost, as a sociologist.²

1. See the twenty-four authors who contributed to the work *Afrique plurielle, Afrique actuelle* (collective, 1986).
2. This is indicated, if proof were needed, by the other heading under which he pursued his work, or the other institutional wing of the Center for African Studies (Centre d’études africaines, CEAF) in the Practical School of Advanced Studies (École pratique des hautes études, EPHE, which became the School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, École des hautes études en sciences sociales, EHES), namely the Laboratory of Sociology and African Geography (Laboratoire de sociologie et de

If I speak here of something unspoken, that is, of something that should have been made explicit and would certainly have warranted some reflection, it is because the majority of those who paid homage to him, his students from the 1960s, identified far more with anthropology than with sociology. This fact is undoubtedly a matter for investigation in what would be an important chapter in a history of contemporary social sciences. But as I do not intend to undertake this investigation here, I shall limit myself to making an observation that is perfectly well known, that several of his students were also the promoters of a field known as economic anthropology or Marxist anthropology. While drawing inspiration from the major representatives of British anthropology, some of them drew on the structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss in order to stage a fairly radical critique of the discipline (Meillassoux, Amselle) or, conversely, found in the same structuralist anthropology the ideal resource for advancing the discipline even further (Augé, Izard). In other words, although, for this generation, Balandier had been intellectually and practically decisive (notably because of the important doctoral and professorial theses that he supervised), Marx, Althusser, Evans-Pritchard, and Lévi-Strauss were also major influences in various measures, and as a result the work of these students contributed more to the corpus of anthropology than of sociology. And even though Balandier certainly did not resent this, since he was proud of the movement or the result as a whole and considered that these works were not the product of a school, of which, in any case, he did not want to be the founder (Balandier 2009, 45–47), he nonetheless occasionally expressed a certain gentle irony towards approaches that he considered too systematic, or even too dogmatic. I would suggest that this irony was the very same one that he applied to his own work in African Studies and that he continued to apply to new areas of fieldwork;³ that is, an irony that he applied to historical situations, and the metamorphoses and dynamic elements that they generated, or again to a *socius* that, in order to be understood, required first and foremost a receptiveness to that quality that made it an opening towards the unknown.

However, this application of irony, this *topos*, this receptiveness of Balandier, needs to be mapped a little more precisely with regard to its contours and its reference points. This is what I shall attempt to do, beginning, if I may, from a personal experience. About fifteen years ago, G. Balandier did me the honor of inviting me to join the editorial board of the journal *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, of which he was the director, with Michel Wieviorka working as his deputy.⁴ I was not, of course, on foreign ground, since I had previously acted as a reader there for important articles on social classes, texts

géographie africaines, in the CNRS). He was the founder of both these institutions (in 1957 and 1967 respectively).

3. He would soon come to call these new areas of fieldwork “the new New Worlds” (Balandier 2001).
4. The journal came to an end in 2011.

as remarkable as those by Roger Bastide on forms of messianism or by Paul Mercier on tribalism in Africa. And besides, I knew some of the members of the editorial board, Michel Wieviorka, but also André Akoun and especially Pierre Ansart, who had been my teacher at the end of the 1960s and whose books on anarchism and Proudhon I had read with great enthusiasm.

But although I was not on foreign ground, I nonetheless found myself in a world that was a little less familiar to me, as it happened, in a world of sociologists who, apart from Balandier himself, had no African or non-European experience, and in which I was the only person to be labeled, or to identify, as an anthropologist;⁵ and this was owing, undoubtedly, to the fact that I had largely been shaped by this context of African Studies that I mentioned earlier.⁶

What I have related here would undoubtedly be of no interest if I had not soon noticed that Georges Balandier himself was, unlike me, quite at home at the heart of the *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*. I would even be tempted to say, and this is at least how it seemed to me, that he appeared more at home than he may have been at the heart of the world of African Studies where I had known him since he had supervised my thesis in the 1970s. This was largely to do with intellectual issues and the course of personal careers.

I therefore propose to explain these issues, while admitting once more from the outset that they would warrant a more detailed analysis in terms of the history of social sciences in France and the intellectual and professional careers involved, including the matter that I mentioned earlier regarding those of Balandier's students who were more inclined to identify as anthropologists than as sociologists.

In fact, speaking of the *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* and the way in which Georges Balandier was at home there leads us to speak first about someone else, a figure inseparable from the history of the social sciences, although he is a little forgotten today; namely, Georges Gurvitch, with whom Georges Balandier had close personal and professional relations for almost twenty years.

Indeed, Gurvitch is a forgotten figure of this history, and forgotten for quite some time, since his death in 1965. Even if we can always imagine that he might be rediscovered one day, particularly for his works in the area of legal

-
5. Perhaps the most accurate label would have been socio-anthropologist, a term that began to be used at the turn of the 2000s in the wake of a new journal and field of studies on development and health that is well represented by the works of J.-P. Olivier de Sardan. But even though we can speak of socio-anthropology as an interdisciplinary field (and one which Balandier, in his own way, had anticipated since he himself identified as anthropologist, sociologist, and writer), the fact remains that the term socio-anthropologist is only rarely used.
 6. As it happens, when I was recruited by the scientific and technical board of the Office for Overseas Scientific and Technical Research (Office de la recherche scientifique et technique d'outre mer, ORSTOM, now the IRD), of which G. Balandier was then president, I was labeled a sociologist. It was only later that I became an anthropologist, without any strong insistence on my part and without it significantly changing my way of working.

pluralism, a subject that currently happens to be rapidly developing, he seems to be thoroughly forgotten as a sociologist. G. Gurvitch was nonetheless the central character of sociology in the post-War years, or rather, the one who worked to reconstruct the discipline after the deportation and death of the last great follower of Durkheim, Maurice Halbwachs (of whom Georges Balandier was, incidentally, the student) and after the silent retirement of Marcel Mauss, who died in 1950.

To give a measure of this character, I shall recall some elements of his biography. A Russian Jew, Gurvitch was educated both in law and philosophy and, most importantly, he was active during the October Revolution, and met Lenin, but remained loyal to the movement of the Workers' Councils, as he soon understood the despotic turn of the Bolshevik regime. This is why he chose the path of exile. After Berlin and Prague, he arrived in France in 1925 where, after a short time, he became a citizen. In France he worked particularly on German philosophy, notably phenomenology, and also on the sociology of law, he frequented the milieu of followers of Durkheim, and during the War, now once again an exile in the United States, he discovered American sociology with its great empirical investigations.

These circumstances provided the rich intellectual heritage and the political and cultural experiences with which Georges Gurvitch came to occupy an absolutely central position in the development of French sociology in the post-War period or, more precisely, as I have said, in its reconstruction, like the reconstruction of French society itself, since the Durkheim School then no longer had any surviving representatives. At the very least there were no longer any representatives in France, although a certain Durkheimian heritage had continued to enrich itself on the other side of the Channel with the great "structural-functionalist" tradition maintained by C. Radcliffe Brown, E. Evans-Pritchard, and many other figures in British anthropology.

In terms of institutions, we owe to Georges Gurvitch the creation in 1946 of the first (and for a long time the only) laboratory under the aegis of the CNRS, the Center for Sociological Studies (Centre d'études sociologiques, CES), at precisely the same time as the journal *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, which picked up the baton from, while also relaunching, the journal *L'Année sociologique* founded by Durkheim in 1898. The *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* remained until 1960 one of the great journals of sociology, with importance on the international stage through its publication of notable texts. Is there any need to recall that it was in this journal that Balandier (1951) published his famous text on the "colonial situation"?

It also fell to Gurvitch, by now professor at the Sorbonne, to found in 1950, at the Presses universitaires de France, the famous collection "Bibliothèque de sociologie contemporaine," which published a whole series of works by Gurvitch, republished a large part of the works of Mauss, and published Balandier's *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire*, Bastide's *Les religions africaines au Brésil*, and also the French translation of *African Systems of Marriage*

and *Kinship* (Radcliffe-Brown & Forde 1953). A little later again, in 1958, he founded the International Association of French-Language Sociologists (Association internationale des sociologues de langue française), of which, besides, Georges Balandier later became the president.

It is obvious that, throughout these years, Georges Gurvitch was a man of considerable influence, and was unusually enterprising. It is very revealing that the editorial board of the journal *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* included foremost figures from the social sciences. To mention only a few names, it included Georges Friedman, Henri Lefebvre, Fernand Braudel, Jacques Berque, Roger Bastide, but also Claude Lévi-Strauss. It is well known that relations between Lévi-Strauss and Gurvitch quickly broke down and that structuralism, at the turn of the 1960s, or more precisely at the point of the linguistic turn in the 1960s, came to the fore with Lévi-Strauss himself as the leading figure, calling the discipline of sociology into question by considering that the real sociology was henceforth ethnology or anthropology, which admittedly concerned themselves with societies of limited size or complexity, but were all the more relevant because of this.

However, before his influence diminished, at that same point in the 1960s, thereby demonstrating that his work towards the reconstruction of sociology in France had been useful and effective, Georges Gurvitch had, alongside his editorial and institutional enterprises, produced a thoroughly original body of work. Paradoxically, it was undoubtedly the great originality of this work, notably in its conceptual apparatus and its typologies, that made it unappealing even to those who were close to its author and contributed to its soon being neglected. For example, one might think of the famous “levels of depth,” (Gurvitch 1950) which were intended to allow a layered, vertical view of social reality, taking in everything from its morphological aspects through to the psychic states of individuals. Another example would be the “total social phenomena” that, through their plurality, and therefore quite differently from in Mauss’ thought, conferred movement and dynamism to this social reality or, more precisely, to social life. Despite the aridity of his conceptual apparatus, their approach does not fail to evoke a certain surprise and admiration. In effect, his work, or rather his undertaking to reconstruct sociology in France, drew explicitly on the heritage of Durkheim, in order to found a discipline with all the rigor of a science while endowing it, thanks to this scientific nature itself, with a practical and political dimension, which also intended to repatriate a large part of the Marxist heritage, especially that of the early Marx. As it happens, this concerned the work of Marx before the “epistemological break,” as Althusser would later describe it (1996a, b), whose work, although largely forgotten today, had, as we know, a considerable impact at the start of the 1970s (especially in the field of African Studies).

The repatriation of the early Marx was that of a young philosopher who, grounded in Hegelian dialectic, conceived of the human world as being driven by a double movement. On the one hand there is a movement that tends to

alienate this world in its own works and institutions, and on the other hand there is a movement that reveals the potential for this world to liberate itself from them and to produce new and more appropriate ones. This early Marx was also still close to the French social philosophers Saint-Simon and Proudhon, whom Gurvitch restored to their previous importance beyond their application in the Durkheimian tradition, since he remained loyal to the ideals of self-organization and cooperation from his youth, and to social rights and legal pluralism.

However, Gurvitch also did much more than attempt to reconcile Durkheim with the theorists of socialism. Somewhat in defiance of the German sociology of Max Weber and Georges Simmel (whom he considered to be insufficiently attentive to the complexity of social life), and although he remained grounded in German philosophy (Hegel, Fichte, Marx, Dilthey, Husserl, etc.), he made French social philosophers the pillars of the reconstruction of sociology in France and, in doing so, gave it a firm empirical basis that he considered essential to its establishment as a science. A little like Adorno discovering the great sociological investigations in the United States, Gurvitch would in a sense import his knowledge of North-American sociology, that of the Chicago School, of Moreno's sociometry, of the large opinion polls of George Gallup, in order to instill in French sociology this empiricist attitude that he would go as far as calling "hyper-empiricist." And even though, like Adorno, he distanced himself from this American sociology that he considered, in the final judgment, too technocratic, inattentive to unknown social productions, and uninterested in explaining the dynamics of social life, this sociology nonetheless inspired a large number of studies and methods with the Center for Sociological Studies, notably regarding work in the field of agricultural and manual workers. In the same way, owing to his concern to grasp all levels of social reality, especially the most individual level, that of the individual psyche (in this matter he distinguished himself from the Durkheim School in order to engage once again with the early Marx, for whom individual and society exist in a relation of compenetration and reciprocal immanence), Gurvitch was largely open to psychology and social psychology. One of his followers, Roger Bastide, would later make this particular approach his own.

I must end my discussion of Georges Gurvitch here, as one might start to believe that this text is dedicated to him rather than to Georges Balandier. Nonetheless, it seems useful to have made this detour via this central figure of the sociology of the post-War period. Balandier paid homage to him several times, notably by means of a book on his life and work (Balandier 1972), in which we can clearly see what I would call the tendency to take a position, the loyalty, and the intellectual consistency of Georges Balandier.

Why did I suggest earlier that I had received the impression that Balandier was more at home with the *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* than he had been in the circle of African Studies, of which he was not only the principal intellectual motivator for three decades, but also to a large extent the creator of its institutions? First, because Balandier experienced at very close quarters

this blossoming of sociology around Gurvitch in the post-War period. For, even while he was conducting his fieldwork, first in Senegal, then in Central Africa, he was embarked with Gurvitch on the adventure of the *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, of which he very quickly became, at a young age, the general secretary. In effect, Balandier took part in this project for the reconstruction of sociology at the same time as he met the very people who were more or less involved in it, principally the members of the executive committee of the *Cahiers*, such as Henri Lefebvre or Georges Friedman, or again members of the executive committee of the Center for Sociological Studies, including Jean Duvignaud, Joffre Dumazedier, Alain Touraine, François-André Isambert, and Edgar Morin, who belonged to roughly the same generation as him. Besides, we might be surprised, or rather curious, about the fact that Gurvitch entrusted the responsibility of being general secretary of the journal to a young researcher concerned with the study of Africa, and not to one of his colleagues working on France, as the majority of the researchers at the Center for Sociological Studies were doing. In this respect, it is fairly surprising, although perfectly logical given his experience as general secretary, that it was Balandier who took charge of the journal after Gurvitch's death.

In any case, there was clearly a great intellectual proximity between Gurvitch and Balandier, which can be recognized in the dynamic sociology that the latter suggested as a way of approaching the configuration of Africa in the years 1950–1960. This was a configuration of a totality in movement, in the process of becoming, full of surprises and obstacles, in which human freedom (of which the movements demanding decolonization at this time were the perfect representation) combined with the weight of the past. There is no doubt that these formulations in which he tried to grasp African societies in action, subjected to contradictory movements, are largely “Gurvitchian” in their origins, even if Leiris, Camus, and Sartre, as well as the milieu that he frequented at *Présence Africaine* around Alioune Diop, also strongly inspired him and strengthened his resolution to pay attention to the unknown and to the exercise of freedom.

Besides this intellectual proximity, Balandier's attachment to Gurvitch through the *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* seems to me to be due to the fact that the journal, while being the principal mouthpiece for the renewal and development of French sociology in the post-War period, was also an important site for welcoming very diverse approaches to social life, in France or elsewhere. Whatever one might now think about the conceptual apparatus of Gurvitch, such as his “levels of depth,” his multiple intellectual references drawing on Russian, German, French, North American, philosophical, legal, sociological, and psychological sources, all of this made the *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, and the Center for Sociological Studies, an eclectic and thriving scholarly world, and a very undogmatic one.

I believe that, for Balandier, Gurvitch's legacy resides above all in this non-dogmatism or, in less religious terms, in this way of borrowing from different sources, in which the substantial theoretical and philosophical elements were

reconciled with the hyper-empirical. Subsequently, when sociology and, more broadly, the social sciences in France came to be centered more on other personalities, some judged, not necessarily without reason, that the “Gurvitchian” project was excessively syncretic, perhaps lacking in backbone. All the same, as we now know, this perspective that resulted in the neglect of Gurvitch’s legacy was often connected to fairly dogmatic positions, where sometimes one had to learn a language, or an appropriate rhetoric, in order to be admitted into the group.

This was what Georges Balandier discovered, not without a sense of irony, at the start of the 1970s in his own milieu of African Studies. Many of his students, even while subscribing to his approach and conducting their thesis under his supervision, opted for a Marxist or strongly Marxist-leaning anthropology, more or less inspired by Louis Althusser. Certainly Balandier, like Gurvitch, was not hostile to Marx, far from it. Evidently, they both, like many others, had a fondness for the early Marx, and far less for the late Marx that was so appreciated by Althusser and his followers. Balandier, as I said, drew a certain pride from this Marxist anthropology, which was, without doubt, a great moment in African Studies in French, but which eventually exhausted itself in abstract debates.

In any case, while the majority of his illustrious students called themselves anthropologists, Georges Balandier himself persisted in describing himself first and foremost as a sociologist, that is, he remained loyal to the spirit of openness or, more accurately, to the intellectual adventure of Gurvitch in the post-War period. This adventure was embodied in the *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, to which Balandier was closely connected for more than sixty years. And although Africa, and African Studies, were undoubtedly very important for him, it was certainly from this long experimentation, undertaken with Gurvitch, that he drew the resources to examine closely the mechanisms of hyper-modernity or the issues created by the “new New Worlds,” in which we are all still engaged.

*Research Institute for Development (Institut de recherche pour le développement, IRD),
African Worlds Institute (Institut des mondes africains, IMAF),
School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences
(École des hautes études en sciences sociales, EHESS).*

Translated and edited by Cadenza Academic Translations

*Translator: Dr. Sam Ferguson,
Editor: Aidan Cowlard Joyce,
Senior editor: Mark Mellor*

REFERENCE LIST

ALTHUSSER, Louis

1996a *Lire le Capital* (in collaboration with Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, [1965] Pierre Macherey, and Jacques Rancière). Paris: PUF (“Quadrige”).

1996b *Pour Marx*, augmented reprint (foreword by Étienne Balibar, postface by Louis [1965] Althusser). Paris: La Découverte.

BALANDIER, Georges

1951 “La situation coloniale: approche théorique.” *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 11: 44-79.

1955 *Sociologie actuelle de l’Afrique noire. Dynamique des changements sociaux en Afrique centrale*. Paris: PUF.

197 *Georges Gurvitch, sa vie, son œuvre*. Paris: PUF.

1985 *Sociologie des Brazzavilles noires*. Paris: Cahiers de la Fondation nationale des [1955] Sciences politiques, Presses de Sciences Po.

2001 *Le Grand Système*. Paris: Fayard.

2009 *Le dépaysement contemporain. L’immédiat et l’essentiel. Entretiens avec Joël Birman et Claudine Haroche*. Paris: PUF.

COLLECTIF

1986 *Afrique plurielle, Afrique actuelle. Hommage à Georges Balandier*. Paris: Karthala.

GURVITCH, Georges

1950 *La vocation actuelle de la sociologie*. Paris: PUF.

RADCLIFFE-BROWN, Alfred R., and Daryll FORDE (eds.).

1953 *Systèmes familiaux et matrimoniaux en Afrique*. Paris: PUF.

ABSTRACT

With a personal recollection as its point of departure, this article aims to show how Georges Balandier, while playing a major role during the most prolific period of French Africanism (1960-1980), always stayed faithful to the spirit of the *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, and to Georges Gurvitch, the founder of this review. His work, in the immediate postwar period, reconstructed French sociology, revisiting not only its heritage from the prewar period, but also drawing upon other great intellectual sources (Leiris, Camus, Sartre). Metamorphoses and social dynamisms continued to engage Balandier, whether they took place in Africa during the time of decolonization or were being produced today in the era, to use his terms, of “new New Worlds” and “surmodernity”.

Keywords: Georges Balandier, Georges Gurvitch, *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, intellectual adventure, irony, non-dogmatism, postwar, *socius*.

RÉSUMÉ

Georges Balandier et la reconstruction d'Après-guerre de la sociologie française – Parti d'un témoignage personnel, cet article vise à montrer que, s'il avait joué un rôle majeur dans ce qui fut la période la plus féconde de l'africanisme français (1960-1980), Georges Balandier est resté, jusqu'au bout, idèle à l'esprit des *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, et à Georges Gurvitch, le fondateur de cette revue. Son oeuvre, dans l'immédiat Après-guerre, reconstruit la sociologie française, puisant non seulement dans son héritage d'Avant-guerre, mais aussi dans d'autres grandes sources intellectuelles (Leiris, Camus, Sartre). Les métamorphoses et les dynamismes sociaux ont continûment mobilisé Balandier, qu'ils aient eu lieu en Afrique, au temps mouvementé de la décolonisation, ou qu'ils se produisent aujourd'hui, pour reprendre ses formules, à l'heure des « nouveaux Nouveaux mondes » et de la « surmodernité ».

Mots-clés : Georges Balandier, Georges Gurvitch, Après-guerre, aventure intellectuelle, *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, ironie, non-dogmatisme, socius.