La critique est aisée, mais l’art est difficile. A critical anthropology put to the test of decolonization: Lessons from New Caledonia

Natacha Gagné
Université Laval, Canada

Marie Salaün
Université de Paris, France

Abstract
This article focuses on anthropologists’ analyses of decolonization struggles in relationship to past and present movements for self-determination. We begin by highlighting the relevance of Georges Balandier’s model of the “colonial situation” for the understanding of these struggles. Next, we show that, as Pierre Bourdieu, following Balandier, suggested, the analysis of these struggles cannot forego an analysis of the position of the researchers themselves in the situation. This brings to light the difficulty of constructing one’s “atopic position” as a researcher in decolonization processes. We aim to show that the theoretical precepts which anthropologists adopt (and the precepts’ moral underpinnings) lead them to minimize or overlook the political aspects of decolonization processes. This involves a certain blindness to the concrete conditions—economic, social, and political—that have led to the situation in question. We explore in detail the example of “critical” analyses of the “Kanak People’s School System” (École populaire kanak, EPK)—a nationalist Kanak project, aimed at decolonizing the New Caledonia school system in the mid-1980s. We also briefly look at “critical” interpretations of a recent initiative undertaken by a segment of the Kanak population involving the establishment of a written “customary law” in civil (and potentially criminal) matters, which tends to distance itself from the nationalist strategy.

Corresponding author:
Natacha Gagné, Département d’anthropologie, Université Laval, 1030 avenue des Sciences-Humaines, Québec, Canada G1V 0A6.
Email: natacha.gagne@ant.ulaval.ca
Introduction

As attentive observers over the past two decades of efforts made towards decolonization, we have been interested in struggles for self-determination, processes of resistance to colonial powers and self-affirmation, the relationships between minority and majority populations, and modes of coexistence. Our research takes place in Oceania—a region that is emblematic of the contemporary diversity of the faces of sovereignty (Gagné and Salaün, 2010; Gagné, 2020). A large spectrum of possible paths towards self-determination can be found here. Indeed, we observe today the persistence and the emergence or resurgence of struggles that differ in their aim, their strategies, and the social movements that support them. They may be part of separatist, autonomist, regionalist, or Indigenous movements, for example. These strategies are not mutually exclusive, and may be in competition with each other, and at the mercy of the restructuring of local political fields.

In our research in Oceania, which has led us from New Caledonia to Hawai‘i, from New Zealand to French Polynesia, we have sought to recontextualize these claims and movements, their successes and challenges, within the global situation and thus within their relationships, over time, to the rest of the world. This approach breaks with the idea of seeing a simple “diffusion” of models developed elsewhere within the social movements of the Pacific. It also turns away from an approach that has long prevailed with respect to insular populations of the Pacific. Indeed, they have often been studied in isolation from each other, like a series of discrete units. This perspective is most certainly linked to territorial borders imposed during colonial history, to methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002) as well as to the “monographic” character of anthropological fieldwork in the tradition of participatory observation. This is precisely what Epeli Hau‘ofa1 (1993: 7) meant when he insisted on the necessity of decentralizing our focus:

There is a gulf of difference between viewing the Pacific as “islands in a far sea” and as “a sea of islands.” The first emphasises dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centres of power. When you focus this way you stress the smallness and remoteness of the islands. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships.

While colonization saw the diversified integration of Oceanian populations into national and regional systems, the processes of decolonization bring to light the variability and complexity of political action. There are a number of concepts—often understood to be binary dichotomies—which are still sometimes used to account for this variability in modalities and finalities that are, in our view, irrelevant, such as: Polynesia—
Melanesia, French model of colonization–British model of colonization, subsistence economy–market economy, custom–modernity, “authentic” tradition–“invented” tradition, chiefdoms–big men systems. Rather than putting things into neatly defined boxes, we find it much more suggestive to “look at ranges of political possibilities and tensions and conflicts among them,” as Burbank and Cooper (2010: 8) put it, with respect to the varieties of imperial rule in world history. Instead of sharp lines and binary logic, we prefer a situational framework, such as the one proposed by the French anthropologist Georges Balandier as early as the 1950s. This situational approach is not only heuristic for analyzing local claims and social movements, but also heuristic for considering the involvement of researchers, from colonial to (post)colonial situations.

In this article, we have chosen to focus less on the struggles of decolonization per se, and more on the analyses of these struggles by anthropologists and other social scientists. Readers familiar with current debates in anthropological theory might have a feeling of déjà vu, as discussions about the production of knowledge and the social positioning of intellectuals have gone from being novel insights to being commonplace. We propose to contribute to this debate in a manner which aims to be original in two ways: by bringing to bear a relatively poorly known empirical example, that of New Caledonia, and offering a different perspective, namely that of French-style critical social sciences as they have been developed in France following Pierre Bourdieu.

To illustrate the difficulty of analyzing emancipation movements, the case of the Indigenous (Kanak) struggles in New Caledonia appears to be particularly suggestive. The fate of New Caledonia in the French Empire is unique from many points of view: as a penal colony, as a settlement colony, as the only French colony in which the Indigenous population was placed in reservations at the end of the 19th century in the same way in which the British proceeded in some of their settler colonies (Merle and Muckle, 2019). Like French Polynesia, New Caledonia did not gain the status of an independent state at the time of the dissolution of the French Empire which occurred between the end of the First Indochina War (1954) and the end of the Algerian War (1962). Having become an overseas territory of the French Republic, New Caledonia would remain solidly tied to metropolitan France until the Kanak, an Indigenous people who were being progressively made into a numerical minority by a massive immigration that was organized from Paris, took the initiative of contesting French domination by demanding the independence of their archipelago (Aldrich, 1986; Bensa and Wittersheim, 1998; Chappell, 2014; Connell, 1987). The confrontation between the militants of the independence movement and the supporters of a French New Caledonia would reach a peak between 1984 and 1988, taking the form of a quasi-civil war until the tragedy of Ouvéa, in which a hostage-taking would end with the deaths of 19 Kanak militants and two French soldiers. The 1988 Matignon-Oudinot Accords put an end to the violent period of the “Events.” This agreement provided for, in particular, a referendum regarding self-determination. The Nouméa Accord, in 1998, extended the first accord and proposed an original mode of decolonization, based on a schedule which provided for the progressive and irreversible transfer of the powers of the French state to local representative institutions with, eventually, in 2018, the organization of a referendum on New Caledonia’s accession to independence.
Therefore, some 30 years after violent unrest over the question of independence from France, long-awaited consultations on self-determination made New Caledonia the focus of international media once again. Although the results of the 4 November 2018 referendum showed that 56.67% voted to remain part of France (against 43.33% who voted to leave), this did not put an end to the decolonization process. On the contrary, for the independentists, it was a first victory, since the polls and political commentators had announced a crushing victory of the “no” of up to 70%. On 4 October 2020, during a second referendum, the gap narrowed between the “yes” and the “no” to independence. The “no” option won with only 53.26% of the vote. This gives the independentists hope for a victory in the third referendum. One further referendum on independence in 2021 rejected independence after a boycott called by the independence movement.

Ever since the Kanak struggles began in the 1970s, this population has been scrutinized by French social scientists. By focusing on the trouble some of these social scientists have had in analyzing the Kanak emancipation movements, we wish to exemplify the difficulty of finding an “atopic position” when it is built on shifting political and epistemological sands. What Michel Naepels (2011) has called the “atopic position” of the ethnographer—that is, an ethnographical synthesis of multiple social positions, which above all must not be confused “with an impossible absence of participation’ or social integration” (Naepels, 2011: 57)—seems now more than ever to be a topical issue. The reflexive turn has not done away with the difficulty of constructing one’s objectivity as a researcher in the (post)colonial “situations” under study. Questioning the discipline’s requirement of objectivity is neither an outdated craze nor mere tilting at windmills.

We will begin by recalling the contribution of an analysis of colonization and its effects in terms of “situation,” as laid out by Georges Balandier in the early 1950s. We next explain why, according to us, the context of decolonization does not facilitate consideration of the configuration of the power relationships in the analysis of mobilizations that favor emancipation. We will show that the theoretical precepts with which anthropologists align themselves (and their political and moral underpinnings) often cause them to oscillate between two attitudes that are completely opposed, epistemologically speaking. This duality has consequences that are oddly similar in practice when the analysis of decolonization is at stake: both history and the political context often disappear from consideration. Consequently, anthropologists take a political and often moral stance rather than providing a rigorous analysis of the “situation” under study, which, according to Georges Balandier’s 1951 definition may be defined by a series of economic, political, cultural, social, juridical, and administrative conditions.

By ignoring a research agenda that would account for the (post)colonial situation as “a total social phenomenon” (Balandier, [1951] 1966: 56), some anthropologists continue to help to conceal the historical and contemporary realities of Indigenous peoples. This has been set forth in a particularly lucid fashion by Pierre Bourdieu, who emphasizes the importance of a critical approach, that is to say, of an approach “by means of critique.” However, Bourdieu’s successors often have run into a reality principle, which is that reflexivity is “easier said than done” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). We will illustrate the difficulties encountered by anthropologists trained in Bourdieu’s school with reference
to two examples of how the Kanak liberation movements in New Caledonia have been analyzed.

**The “colonial situation”: A decisive development**

First published in 1951 in the journal *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, Balandier’s seminal text, “La situation coloniale” [“The Colonial Situation”] was slightly reworked to form the first chapter of his *Sociologie actuelle de l’Afrique noire* [Contemporary Sociology of Black Africa] (1955). Notably inspired by Gluckman (1940a and 1940b) —“its most important predecessor and companion piece” (Cooper, 2002: 49)—and Marcel Mauss, Balandier insists on the importance of grasping “the colonial situation as a whole, and as a system” (Balandier, 1951: 76). The new approach thus includes both the colonized and the colonizing societies, as well as their interactions, which are “multi-leveled (and always latently conflictual)” (Saada, 2002: 2).

The novelty is thus that the colonizers, and the colonial empire in which they participate, are included in the analysis, whereas the colonizer and the colonial empire did not enter into the field of vision of the large majority of anthropologists, who, to use Balandier’s terms, took into account to a very unequal extent the particular situation which imposes itself on peoples subjugated by colonial action. He thus simultaneously rejects two types of anthropological practice:

On the one hand, we find researchers obsessed with the pursuit of the ethnologically pure, with the unaltered fact miraculously preserved in its primitive state, or else investigators entirely absorbed with theoretical speculations regarding the destiny of civilizations or the origins of society. And on the other hand, we find researchers engaged in numerous practical investigations of very limited scope, satisfied with a comfortable empiricism scarcely surpassing the level of using a technique. (Balandier, 1966 (1951): 35).

Then, for Balandier, as for Gluckman, the populations studied by anthropologists should not be studied by themselves or as free of any “contamination,” but should be analyzed within the context of “the global society of which they are a part, and the colonial situation that it created” (Balandier, 1951: 76). Balandier’s text was intended as a critique of the Africanist and political anthropology of the time, a decontextualized and ahistorical anthropology which did not give enough attention to colonial worlds. It encouraged a “shift in emphasis from cultural formations—whether the ideology of the colonizer or the traditions of the colonized—to historical, economic, and political perspectives” (Saada, 2002: 2).

Gluckman and Balandier thus shared the conviction that instead of a juxtaposition of distinct “races” or cultures, the colonial terrain must be understood as a system of relations which should be thought of as “strategies with multiple partners, changing according to circumstances and opportunity” (Balandier, 2003: 156). This interplay of relationships is also in motion (Balandier, 2002: 5; Gagné and Salaün, 2017), which creates the global situation and participates in its dynamism (Ciavolella and Wittersheim, 2016; Colin, 2016).
The recent rediscovery of the approach elaborated in the early 1950s by Balandier drew new attention to the “colonial situation,” and was the occasion for deepening the dialogue not only between anthropologists and historians, but also between American and French scholars (see Saada 2001, 2002). Balandier’s 1951 essay was used by these researchers in the new (or renewed) field of “Colonial Studies” (see Cooper, 2005), whose approach focuses on a meticulous analysis of a local colonial situation in order to uncover the actual lived complexities of its social morphology. This new trend of studies emphasizes the importance of questioning dichotomies such as colonizer-colonized, West-East, and North-South, and inspires research that cuts through those artificial boundaries (see Cooper, 2005; Cooper and Stoler, 1997; Dulucq and Zytnicki, 2005; Saada, 2002; for reviews, see Gagné, 2012; Ciavolella and Wittersheim, 2016). This perspective on the colonial situation also considers the convergence of themes between one colonial theatre and another, which gives a new impulse to comparative analyses of colonizations (Sibeud, 2004a: 94). Moreover, there is an insistence on the need to vary the focal distance or the scale by establishing a distinction between the colonial dimension—explored through monographs—and the imperial dimension, whose characteristics are shared by metropoles and colonies. This jeu d’échelles (literally “play of scales”) presents a true challenge, since it forces analysts to constantly cross the persistent divisions of culture areas (Sibeud, 2004a: 95). The occasion of Georges Balandier’s death in 2016 spurred a new appreciation of his pioneering contribution, especially his situational and dynamic approach, and emphasized its relevance for today.

The idea of a “situation” allows one at the same time to pay particular attention to the concrete facts, to the contingencies and to the agency of the actors and to describe in a precise manner those aspects of the situation which are “boiling over,” “emerging,” “contradictory,” “crises,” and even “conflicts” (see Agier, 2017: 926). An approach of this kind to the “current,” that is to say, to that which is in the process of existing and happening at a precise moment in history, also allows one to “place the people, the practices and the speech which emerge from the inquiry in a ‘situated’ system of meaning” (Agier, 2017: 926). As Dianteill and Manetta have emphasized, since the dynamic anthropology which Balandier proposes is an engaged anthropology in the existential sense, “the subjective engagement of researchers in their field guides their analyses as much as the data they collect” (2018). Like those whom they study, the anthropologists or sociologists and the science which they practice must also be understood within the global society in the heart of which they are located (see de L’Estoile, 2017; Laurière and Mary, 2019b; Sibeud 2004b). As Benoît de L’Estoile (2017) has shown with regard to the emergence, after 1945, of the “dynamic socio-anthropology” of Africa as a “new sub-discipline”, and the contributors to the collection *Ethnologues en situation coloniale [Ethnologists in Colonial Situations]* (Laurière and Mary, 2019b), have shown regarding the construction of ethnographic knowledge from 1930 to 1960, this approach allows one to grasp the structure of the social and political fields within which researchers make a place for themselves and inquiries are carried out. The “situation” is thus conceived of as an “instrument of investigation” (Sibeud, 2004b: 5), participating in an understanding of the conditions of the emergence of situated processes of knowledge” (Laurière and Mary, 2019a: 10).
In all these analyses, Laurière and Mary (2019a: 11) mention the “colonial situation” which “must take into account the heterogeneity of ethnological situations (from protectorates to colonies, from camps to reservations, from war situations to migratory situations).” Thus, one finds here a first requirement. To this one must add a second requirement: one must fully integrate the analysis of power relationships within the colony as a social formation. This amounts to conceiving of these relationships as “hegemonic transactions” (Bayart and Bertrand, 2006). Colonized people do not undergo colonial exploitation; they are actors of their destiny within the asymmetric framework of the situation. The understanding of these “hegemonic transactions,” which include the various ways in which “dominated” populations seize opportunities for affirmation and resistance, requires a systematic spatial and temporal localization. As André Mary (2019: 36) writes: “This colonial configuration cannot be apprehended in a uniquely objective and unilateral manner since it includes an essential interactive dimension and imposes on the observer a ‘reciprocity of perspectives’ which takes into account the point of view of the colonized as much as the dominant point of view, which is that of the colonizers.”

This reciprocity of perspectives, necessary in order to understand the latent conflict of the colonial situation, becomes all the more necessary when one seeks to describe the situation of decolonization, especially since this situation is openly conflictual. It becomes all the more necessary for the observer to adopt “a view from afar.” The non-determinist character of the anthropology proposed by Balandier (Elbez, 2018) has the advantage of allowing the model to be applied outside of its original scope. It is thus useful for thinking through (post)colonial situations (Balandier, 1971, 2002; Smouts, 2007) outside of its original African terrain.

**Considering history and politics: (still) an oddly challenging task**

The questions surrounding Indigenous peoples and the politics of decolonization are still difficult for anthropologists to examine today. As Pierre Bourdieu states: “[T]his is a task which is difficult, thankless, sometimes dangerous” (Bensa and Bourdieu, 1985: 83). Pierre Bourdieu’s critical sociology has a certain affinity with Balandier’s situational anthropology, a dynamic anthropology which takes an interest in shifting power dynamics. If, as Copans emphasizes, in an Algeria engaged in a war of liberation, Bourdieu was, when all is said and done, a “witness who stood aloof from the colonial situation, a sociologist of the effects of colonialism more than of the ideological mechanisms of subjugation (or liberation) or of the practices of colonization” (Copans, 2016), Bourdieu insists in his work as a whole on the necessity of understanding the historical and social conditions of the societies under study.7 It is for this reason that he appeals in his work to the necessity of reflecting on the “position [of the researcher] in the colonial political space” (Bensa and Bourdieu, 1985: 70). In his words, “ethnological work in a colonial situation (…) obligates one to undertake an epistemological reflection on identity and otherness, identification and distancing” (Bourdieu in Bensa and Bourdieu, 1985: 75).
Our review of the anthropological work of the past 30 years revealed two key tendencies: (1) essentially ideological readings, which are authorized by (2) a denial of actual situations. In the first tendency, anthropologists see themselves as being a priori in favor of Indigenous peoples and their claims, which often leads them to insist upon the distinguishing factors of these peoples, the qualities that constitute their specificity: for example, a particular relationship to the land, to non-humans, and to their environment; the primacy of a collective and consensual logic, and so on. These works are certainly worthy of interest for their analysis of Indigenous universes of meanings and ways of being in the world. However, anthropologists who adopt this position are often less interested in the relations of Indigenous peoples with the rest of the world, including the majority population and the state—that is in the “situation” in Balandier’s sense—and more in what constitutes their fundamental difference or even their timeless “essence.” With regard to this point, Bourdieu emphasizes the fact that “[t]he colonialist vision imprisons the colonized in an essence; the anticolonialist reversal, whether carried out by the colonized themselves or by ‘sympathizers,’ ethnologists or not, can imprison the colonized in an inverted form of the essence, which remains no less an essence, a nature” (Bensa and Bourdieu, 1985: 82).

In the second tendency, because Indigenous claims do often involve a certain form of essentialism, anthropologists feel the responsibility to unravel the processes of the construction of identity. It is only one step further from the scientific enterprise of deconstruction to denunciation. And here we arrive at a key point: this approach presupposes that colonization pushed Indigenous populations from a lived culture to a performed—and thus inauthentic—one. Anthropologists then feel obliged to denounce the inauthenticity of the representations of self which come from Indigenous people themselves. This undertaking was in full force in the 1980s when several anthropologists took part in the well-known debate, central to the discipline, about “the invention of tradition.”

In both tendencies, anthropologists help to mask the historical and contemporary realities of Indigenous peoples. They draw attention to identity politics and cultural essentialism while minimizing or overlooking the political aspects of these processes and thus, the real power relationships. In both cases, then, there is a certain blindness to the concrete conditions of the production of a discourse on the self, and the emergence of forms of struggle linked to the conditions of existence. And in both cases, we learn very little about the particular circumstances—economic, social, and political—that have led to the situation in question. It seems, then, that either way they find themselves far from the aim of anthropology, which is to show all aspects of a situation, without denying the concrete conditions in which it came about.

Bourdieu already reached similar conclusions concerning sociologists in the mid-1980s:

The colonial situation pushes to the limit the alternative which the sociologist discussing dominated classes faces: [1] that of a passionate “populism” which functions in the logic of projection, or even of fantasy, and which attributes to the dominated all the virtues which the dominant group refuses to acknowledge in them, authenticity, etc., with the researcher acting in this case as a grand initiate who reveals the secrets of the tribe;
that of a more or less sublimated racism (ethnic or class based), which there is no need to describe at length. Apart from the fact that the “populist” vision is often merely a generous but naïve inversion of the “racist” vision, the two opposed visions in most cases have in common the fact that they claim to be based on a type of privileged knowledge, that of the initiate or the intimate, in order to imprison their object in an essence (in Bensa and Bourdieu, 1985: 74–75).

Beyond essentialism: A critical support, that is a support through critique

The great advantage of the approach defended by Pierre Bourdieu is that it allows one, in principle, to avoid the dead end constituted by each of the two opposed approaches which we have just mentioned. Bourdieu’s approach dismisses both the “pro” and the “anti,” the defenders and the denigrators, by reminding us that the object of the social sciences should above all be to support liberation movements “through critique”:

I therefore believe that the only useful support which the ethnologist or sociologist can offer is a critical support, a support through critique. The understanding without naïveté or indulgence which research in the field requires is just as necessary in the analysis of liberation movements. This must be asserted firmly at a moment where the discovery of the not very democratic character of many new states leads many people, in the name of the retrospective guilt which they feel for the indulgence which guilt had inspired in them, to a sort of disenchanted indifference: these unhappy experiences impose on us more than ever the duty to try to think in a realistic manner about the contemporary situation of societies which are in the process of liberation and about the future, which often has little relation to millenarian hopes, which is inscribed in those societies in a state of potentiality, and which the irresponsible utopianism of ignorance contributes to bringing about by not giving itself the intellectual and material means of preventing it. (Bourdieu in Bensa and Bourdieu, 1985: 83)

Here one should no doubt contextualize, that is to say, historicize. The conditions in which support was given to colonized peoples in Africa at the beginning of the 1950s in Balandier’s time are not the same as the conditions in which support was given to the Kanak people at the beginning of the period of quasi-civil war that shook New Caledonia from 1984 to 1988. What separates these two “situations” is, as Bourdieu notes, the experience of a wave of decolonization in Africa and Asia. Far from having fulfilled the promise of an emancipation of peoples through accession to full state sovereignty, decolonization rather revealed the persistence of ties of dependency between the former colonies and their former metropoles on the one hand, and the difficulty of putting into practice the democratic principles, which for a time had been incarnated by the nationalist leaders, before they controlled the state apparatus.

The expression “Françafrique” was coined to designate the relationship, qualified as neocolonial, maintained by France with its former African colonies: a mixture of interference and unconditional support to authoritarian regimes which submit themselves to its influence. The analysis of Kanak nationalism is anachronistic in a sense, in that it takes
place more than two decades after the end of the Algerian war, which acted as an official end to the French colonial empire, and thus this analysis is inevitably shaped by the disenchantment of intellectuals with respect to the very concept of “decolonization.”

“To think in a realistic manner about the present of societies which are in the process of liberation,” as Bourdieu invites us to do (Bensa and Bourdieu, 1985: 83) just like Balandier, is all the more difficult when this present is marked by violence. This was the case during the insurrectional period from 1984 to 1988, which opposed independentist Kanak militants to “loyalist” New Caledonians who supported the maintenance of the territory within the French Republic and the French security forces. There was symbolic violence, such as the destruction of a ballot box by a leader from the FLNKS (Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste [Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front]) which, in November 1984, marked the beginning of the insurgency, but there was also physical violence, such as police brutality against anti-establishment protesters, which killed several people.

Although metropolitan French scientists working in French state organizations claimed to have a neutral and objective view—being, as they were, at a distance—their claim was questionable. Their personal interests were not those of the New Caledonians, neither separatist nor loyalist; they were concerned as French citizens by the explosion of colonial disputes in this far-flung speck of the colonial Empire. Moreover, social science researchers were not spared by this violence, as was shown by the bomb attack against the sociologist Jean-Marie Kohler’s boat in the port of Nouméa in 1985, the burning of ethnologist Jean Guiart’s house in the same year (Mokaddem, 2013: 189), and the expulsion, at the request of the French minister of overseas departments and territories, of the anthropologist Alban Bensa in 1987, who was declared persona non grata in the archipelago because of his open support for the independence movement (Trépied, 2018: 202).

This difficulty of “thinking in a realistic manner” was experienced very concretely by those who adopt the perspective of “critical” social sciences—which, in the French sociological tradition, are informed by the thought of Pierre Bourdieu and his project of “unveiling” the reality of power relations. It seems to us that some of Bourdieu’s successors have a paradoxical tendency to forget, and thus to obscure, the fact that discourses on the self and representations of the self are strategies with a political aim, and part of a political agenda. In a word, the definition of identity, and the need for it, are produced in a particular systemic context, within the framework of social struggles.

We wish to illustrate this point by means of two examples, which are distant in time: the first example took place at the beginning of the “Events,” from 1984 to 1985, and the second example, which we will take up more briefly in conclusion, took place 30 years later, when, locally, alongside the Kanak nationalist claim, there emerged a social movement claiming to base itself on Indigenous rights, as they are understood by the United Nations (Demmer, 2007; Graff, 2012, 2017). Apart from the fact that the researchers whose work we are going to present are participants in a common intellectual project, namely that of giving an account of contemporary social issues in New Caledonia, they also share a common academic approach, in that they identify themselves as working within the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu’s critical sociology.
In the turmoil of the “events”: Wacquant and the Kanak people’s school system

In 1983, Loïc J. D. Wacquant arrived in Nouméa, New Caledonia, to fulfill his military service in the technical assistance corps. For civil service as a sociologist, he was assigned to a research center of ORSTOM (Office de la recherche scientifique et technique outre-mer [Office of Overseas Scientific and Technical Research]), which had evolved out of France’s former office for colonial research (Office de la recherche scientifique coloniale [ORSC]). Wacquant worked under the direction of Jean-Marie Kohler within the program “Reproduction et transformation d’une société dominée dans le Pacifique” [“Reproduction and Transformation of a Dominated Society in the Pacific”], a project that fell within the theoretical framework of the “sociology of education and cultural domination,” inspired by Pierre Bourdieu. The goal of this approach was to reveal, describe, and explain the relationships that develop between the educational and the social order. As he put it in an interview conducted in 2009, this experience provided him “with two years of practical training in sociological practice in a thorny context which made it especially instructive” (Wacquant, 2009: 105). The “thorny context” in question was that of a violent Indigenous (Kanak) uprising against the French state and its local supporters, settlers of European origin and non-European descendants of indentured immigration. Between 1984 and 1988—a period of uprisings known as “les Événements” (the Events)—New Caledonia was wracked by violent clashes after an election boycott launched by the independence movement Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS, Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front).

We are particularly interested in Wacquant’s contribution to a debate, which took place in 1985, about the Écoles populaires kanak [Kanak People’s School System], a project, by nationalist Kanak activists, to create a school system that would break from what they called the “colonial school system.” What leads us to be interested in this aspect of Wacquant’s work? In the first place because the school system, in this French territory in the South Pacific, a 24-hour plane ride away from mainland France, began quite suddenly in the late 1960s to pose a problem. Questions, criticisms, and debates arose around it, as statistics indicated the extent of scholastic inequalities between ethnic groups despite enjoying formal equality as French citizens for the previous two decades (Soriano, 2013). The Kanak nationalist movement that emerged was, as a result, fully engaged with the educational issue. Alan Ward (1982: 49) commented at the time: “Education—the content of curricula, staffing, etc.—is, along with land, the most important focus of Kanak protest and pressure, leading to boycotts, sit-ins and other forms of challenge to the authorities, and occasional confrontations with the forces of law and order.” Education is thus of central importance for those who are interested in colonial disputes in their local forms.

A further reason for our interest is that one of the two authors of the present text, Marie Salaün, encountered Wacquant’s writings at the beginning of the 1990s, while she was beginning a PhD thesis on the history of the schooling of the Kanak. Her dissertation (2000) which was later published as a book (Salaün 2005) aimed to test the theses of Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) in
order to understand the legacy of the colonial educational policies in New Caledonia. By the time Marie Salaün arrived in New Caledonia to carry out her research in 1994, a few years after Wacquant’s stay, the situation had changed: the Matignon-Oudinot Accords signed in 1988 put in place a framework which led to an unprecedented process of “rectification” or “rebalancing” between the ethnic groups of the territory. Wacquant’s work was at that time, and still is, the most suggestive attempt at understanding educational inequalities in New Caledonia upon which she could rely.

Let us begin by noting that Wacquant and Salaün’s indictment of the educational system was shared by Kanak nationalist leaders. Both their readings and experiences had convinced them that the situation in New Caledonia in the 1980s was one of the best illustrations of Bourdieu and Passeron’s assertion that “[a]ll pedagogic action is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power” (1990: 5). The arbitrariness of white domination in New Caledonia was never as apparent as during the times when Kanak nationalist claims challenged the legitimacy of the French presence. Kanak children’s difficulties at “French” schools were simply a logical consequence of the incongruity of the content and pedagogy at work in this “imported” school system. The educational establishment showed itself to be what it fundamentally was: an expression of the cultural imperialism of mainland France. Studying the way schools contributed to maintaining the status quo between communities amounted to exposing their role as an instrument in the subjugation of the Kanak. But here is where the consensus between scientists and activists comes to a halt.

By characterizing the debate about the New Caledonian school system as “urgent” and “intense,” Kohler and Wacquant were explicitly recognizing its place in a conflict that was above all political. “Because it is a matrix of culture, and the Melanesian nationalist movement finds one of its most powerful mobilizing catalysts in the cultural-authenticity thematic, the school constitutes a central issue in New Caledonian social struggles” (Kohler and Wacquant, 1985a: 12). But they rejected the “ideologies” involved, since they were attempting to break from the terms that had enclosed the question until then:

The school system is thus doubly involved in politics. From the point of view of the Melanesians, it is a matter of, on one hand, reinforcing and perpetuating difference by removing Indigenous youth from the integrative power of the existing educational system, and on the other, of conceiving of a school system that would be a site of diffusion of the emerging Kanak nationalism. Conversely, the upholders of the present educational order insist upon the imperative necessity to keep the schools out of socio-political conflicts. The (ritual) proclamation of pedagogical neutrality serves as a cover for the defense of the cultural and social status quo (Kohler and Wacquant, 1985a: 14).

This “breaking from” existing divides involved a double rupture in terms of theory—with the “educational conservatism” of the French authorities on the one hand, and with the “educational oneirism” (Kohler and Wacquant, 1985a: 10) of separatist leaders on the other. The separatist leaders proposed a school system that would better respect Kanak culture—Kohler and Wacquant called this “utopic” and criticized it for maintaining
the illusions of all those who are expecting the event of educational democracy to come about simply through pedagogical-cultural innovations (….). To comfort Melanesians by looking to them for solutions to problems that are only present because of and in the articulation of their communities and the capitalist structures put in place by colonialism is to condemn them to find only false solutions, just like the night owl who looks for his lost keys under the first streetlamp, on the pretext that this is where he finds the best lighting (Kohler and Wacquant, 1985a: 184).

The task of critical sociology was “to break the mirror of Culture” in which separatists see themselves:

[T]hese discussions about the school system are revealed to also be the school system’s own discussions. Developed by social agents who are trained by and for the educational system and stamped by the seal of categories of Christian thought (so far as the Melanesians are concerned), they structure themselves around moral, psychological and culturalist oppositions that forbid thinking about education in any other than scholastic terms. The one (the dominant ideology) leads us to believe that the educational institution is completely independent of social relationships, while the other (the dominated ideology) aims to dissolve the schools in the society (…). [This] is where the necessity arises to break the mirror of Culture and to proceed to a sociology of structural factors, that would determine scholastic careers, social trajectories and the links that form between them (Kohler and Wacquant, 1985a: 33).

Challenging the cognitive privilege of the ethnic insider—“speaking in the name of the Indigenous person, in his or her language or about his or her place gives no guarantee that one will tell the truth about the instruments of social domination, of which s/he is the object” (Kohler and Wacquant 1985a: 203), Kohler and Wacquant (1985a: 202) denounced a “sociological solipsism”:

When s/he reasons exclusively in terms of attitude, mentality, cultural values and authenticity, the analyst can freely project his or her relationship to the object onto the object itself. Melanesian society is thus placed outside historical laws, and credited with a sociological otherness that, in one fell swoop, cancels out the sociologist’s knowledge and makes absolute that knowledge that is (supposedly) held in the Indigenous language.

It follows that the analysis of the Kanak world, which had long been monopolized by ethnologists, would tend instead to become the subject of a critical sociology focused on the consequences of their marginal insertion in the local capitalism:

It is no longer possible, as it had been until just recently, to only consider the line of separation due to the history between the Melanesian people and everyone else. The recent emergence of urbanized Melanesian social layers, of a small political and administrative elite that is linked to the nationalist movement, as well as the changes in social structure brought about the massive influx of Polynesian immigrants, the unequal fallout of the nickel boom, the growth of an administrative sector that, to a greater and greater extent, makes up for the
agricultural and mining decline, and the effects of the rising global rates of education [have called this into question again] (Kohler and Wacquant, 1985a: 40).

According to Kohler and Wacquant, ethnic (cultural) affiliation thus becomes just one among several factors of social positioning within the colonial system, which endures in many ways. From now on, the fact of being Kanak is no longer in and of itself something that can explain academic failure. It would be better to substitute other variables for the ethnic variable, ones that arise from the changes that have recently affected Kanak society. “Urbanity,” or the fact of residing in the Greater Nouméa area and no longer in the bush, as well as “class” or “layer” of insertion in the local capitalist system, are much stronger determinants of children’s scholastic careers:

Insofar as, under the effect of current transformations in the colonial mode of domination, the Melanesian milieu tends to differentiate itself socially and sees the constitution of new social strata, with strategies that are by necessity twofold (ascending the dominant socio-professional hierarchy, conserving village relationships within the system) and original, it is no longer possible to limit oneself to a statistical ethnic reading of the relationships between the school system and the Melanesian people (Kohler and Wacquant, 1985a: 203).

Calling it utopic and alternate history, they denounce the nationalist project of a Kanak school system as a “model of a society that is (re)constructed on a precolonial type institutional base” (Kohler and Wacquant 1985a: 184). They consider such a project to be limited to “the eternal time of a Melanesian identity that escapes history” (1985a: 184). This project was effectively twofold, because it was a matter of (1) rejecting the dominant educational forms and norms in order to (2) restore an “authentic” Melanesian society, informed by the notion of custom.

Since the school system was a reverse image of the dominant educational ideology, limited to the realm of culture, it was “incapable of breaking culturalist mindsets [which nationalists share] with the dominant educational discourse” (Kohler and Wacquant 1985b: 1669). While this dominant discourse attributed children’s failure in the regular system to the maladjustment of Kanak culture, the EPK’s project fell into the same culturalist “trap” when it proposed to remediate this by introducing custom into the schools. These reflections and counterpropositions were, according to Kohler and Wacquant, articulated in the same register—cultural and moral—but from the standpoint of the dominated social and scholastic positions.

The “Kanak School System” thus represented an impasse:

This image of the school system adds to the original confusion between cultural heritage and type of social organisation, and makes it possible, through a conceptual conjuring trick that is as successful as it is unconscious, to present traditional society as an up-to-date social model. But being an illiterate society, and with a low level of division of labour, it is also necessarily a society without a school system (Kohler and Wacquant, 1985b: 1670).
Because it arises from “sociological fantasy,” the alternative school system was condemned “to only be able to counter the contradictions of the dominant discourse and practices it justifies with the contradictions of a scholastic and social utopia” (Kohler and Wacquant 1985b: 1671).

To start, it is important to highlight the fact that this criticism of the use of “custom” as a model for society is entirely in keeping with Roger Keesing’s (1982) line of argument during the same period. In a text examining contemporary uses of the notion of kastom in identity discourses within young Melanesian states (Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands), he emphasized the diversity of realities hidden behind a single term:

The uses of kastom illustrate in particularly striking ways the nature of political ideologies and the role of abstract symbols in them: the extent to which deep contradictions can be disguised and denied; the diverse uses to which such abstract symbols can be put, to defend old ways or change them radically, to assert national or supra-national unity or promote regional separatism, and so on (Keesing 1982: 297).

However, probably because they are inspired by other theoretical referents, while also being indifferent to the debate among Oceanist anthropologists of the time about “the invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), Kohler and Wacquant did not take into account an essential aspect of Keesing’s analysis: “Kastom is an apt and powerful symbol precisely because it can mean (almost) all things to all people” (1982:297). And this aspect is just as important in a political struggle such as that of the Kanak people in the 1980s. Furthermore, Kohler and Wacquant were also indifferent to the global system within which the Kanak struggle was positioned.

We must also point out that it is rare for Indigenous intellectuals, particularly in the French context, to take the trouble to respond directly to such criticisms. Thus, the following statement from June 1987 by Marie-Adèle Néchéré-Jorédié, founder of the EPK in Canala, stands out. The interview was conducted by three French linguists—Claire Moyse-Faurie, Françoise Ozanne-Rivierre, and Jean-Claude Rivierre—who were specialists in Kanak languages and notably engaged in the production of educational tools alongside Kanak activists. It has to be remembered that this kind of political engagement by French social scientists was not the rule at the time, but the exception. The question asked by the linguists refers directly to the critiques expressed by Wacquant and Kohler mentioned above and with which they clearly do not agree:

What do you think of those specialists who’ve described the EPK as a kind of Messianic movement preaching return to an “eternal” Kanak tradition?

MA Jorédié: My first reaction is to say that, without belittling their competence, those specialists are paid to write. My second reaction: it’s true that there are factors that led us to make hypotheses and suppositions, and the specialists have made use of them. My third reaction: I’ve never seen any of these people in an EPK; they’ve never bothered to come and see me to ask what I was doing or to ask the parents what they were doing. My fourth reaction:
it’s good they’ve written like that, because it is a warning to us. We have to take care (Néchérö-Jorédié, 1989: 266).

She then adds: “I can’t predict what’s going to happen now with the kids who come out of the EPK. I don’t know the real difficulties of [social and professional] integration. But we need to be ourselves, too. We don’t always want to be looking for our faces in the white mirror. We’re done with that” (Néchérö-Jorédié, 1989: 266).

Anthropologist Alban Bensa commented on Kohler and Wacquant’s article on behalf of Indigenous leaders, in a sense, in an issue of the journal Les temps modernes published at the time of the outbreak of the “Events.” After insisting on the fact that we must resituate the “propositions of a Kanak school system” within the political situation of the time, Bensa (1985: 1687) wrote:

What are the causes of scholastic failure? What school system should we envision within the context of Kanak independence? These are the two major questions raised by parents of students, by teachers and researchers, concerned about a more just future. This massive debate of ideas, inscribed within a political struggle that aims to enable the Canaque people to be the masters of their shared destiny, has given rise to various propositions, whether retrograde or progressive, utopic or realist...; but the debate has never succeeded in developing a unilateral ideology of a “return to custom,” nor in embracing an outdated project that would have been officially taken up by separatist political parties.

By not criticizing the pre-reflexive opposition between Tradition and Modernity, J.-M. Kohler and L. Wacquant are led to reify, in the section of their article about the “Kanak school system,” (...) the elements of a debate of ideas that was simply trying, beyond all hypotheses, to imagine teaching conditions that would be better adapted, more effective, and more modern.12

Indeed, it is surprising that a social science, concerned with revealing the reality of relationships of domination, would be so unconcerned with the objective balance of power between Kanak nationalist leaders and the French state (and those of its citizens who wanted to keep New Caledonia as part of the Republic). Could someone really, in all good faith, criticize the essentialism and the culturalism of the separatist rhetoric without addressing this context? Could one reasonably be surprised by the fact that the scholastic counter-ideology fell within the very register of hegemonic thought, but from a dominated position? Wouldn’t one have to be naive, in some sense, to denounce the contradictory character of claims in favor of “another school system” contained within a framework that is only marginally different from that of the type of school system they are intending to get beyond? Had Bourdieu’s followers forgotten that “[t]he man who deliberates on his culture is already cultivated and the questions of the man who thinks he is questioning the principles of his upbringing still have their roots in his upbringing” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970: 52–53), and that in New Caledonia as elsewhere, “organic” intellectuals are the product of the colonial educational
system? Can we really reproach the Kanak people for brandishing the weapons of cultural identity, and the affirmation of difference, in their struggle against French colonialism?
In the end, it was only in retrospect that Wacquant could write:

It was an extraordinary social experience for an apprentice-sociologist to conduct research on the school system, urbanisation, and social change in the context of an insurrection, under a state of emergency, and to observe in real time the struggles between colonials and independence forces, and to have to reflect in a concrete way about the civic role of social science (2009: 105).

If we consider Wacquant’s tendency to minimize the concrete conditions of the formation of the nationalist project when he was in New Caledonia, it becomes clear that this declaration was only possible with hindsight. This fact is truly paradoxical, inasmuch as he asserted elsewhere that “one must understand the Kanak world and its transformations by situating them in a twofold system of determinations, the first part produced by segmentary Indigenous social structures, the other part by colonial institutions” (Wacquant, 1986: 64).

In 1985, as Kohler and Wacquant were voicing their scepticism, Kanak separatist leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou wrote, ironically:

Where culture is concerned, no-one is against us. Only fools disparage the claim of Kanak uniqueness. But we wouldn’t have this problem if we had the military might to be able to tell France where to go. In this field of culture, there are no adversaries. There are only idiots who say that the claim of Kanak specificity is baloney. But if we had the military power to tell France to go to hell, this wouldn’t even be a problem (2006: 181).

Kohler and Wacquant were hardly “idiots,” to use Tjibaou’s term, and they eventually acknowledged that they knew from experience the context in which the Kanak initiative took place: “The political action carried out by the Kanak independentists has its specific temporality and constraints that we can fully appreciate” (Kohler and Wacquant, 1985c: 2124). However, they deliberately made a “choice,” that of embracing an “objective” science, and thus risked finding themselves at odds with the Kanak political struggle. They justified this “choice” in the following way, illustrating at the same time their lucidity and the difficulty of putting into practice the program of a critical sociology:

Sociological work has, to use Braudel’s language, its own duration, which is not necessarily in sync with the struggle on the ground. While the first seeks ultimately to unravel the reproduction/transformation mechanisms of social and symbolic structures, the latter aims to overthrow, establish, and strengthen a series of localized power relationships in the short term. Should we stifle, or even silence, an objective analysis from the moment it does not seem totally and immediately aligned with Melanesian ideology? Even at the risk of further enhancing the blind spots and useless illusions (including those at a strictly political level) it fosters? (Kohler and Wacquant, 1985c: 2124)
By saying this, Kohler and Wacquant paradoxically left out the understanding of the larger colonial situation that had already been voiced, namely the reality of the coloniality of power, which contributes to the concealment of the historical and political realities of the Kanak people, and undermines understanding of their schooling initiatives.

Conclusion: “criticism is easy, but art is difficult”

Almost thirty years after the publication of Kohler and Wacquant’s article, and only a few years before the first referendum for self-determination provided for under the Nouméa Accord, Alban Bensa (mentioned above) and one of the present authors, Marie Salaün, was among the six co-signatories of an article written by Christine Demmer and Christine Salomon (2013). This article criticized, along very similar lines, an initiative supported by a segment of the Kanak population (which tends to distance itself from the FLNKS nationalist strategy) that considers sovereignty to be a matter of recognition of Indigenous collective rights, more than a matter of “independence” (i.e. the creation of Kanaky as a sovereign country). This initiative involves the establishment of a written “customary law” or so-called “judicial custom” in civil (and potentially criminal) matters. In short, it has its roots in the 1999 Organic law resulting from the Nouméa Accord, which states that (Kanak) persons with “customary” civil status “are governed by their customs in matters of civil law.” Demmer and Salomon (2013) begin by recalling historical evidence, setting the record straight about the colonial genesis of this “judicial custom”: in fact, it corresponds to an old proposal—which remained unrealized—put forward by the magistrates of the colonial era and missionaries who accompanied the Kanak people on the road to full citizenship after 1946 (Demmer and Salomon, 2013: 67–68). By doing this, the authors take a political stand—they denounce the contradictory character of an initiative that, although aimed at decolonizing the justice system, follows the basic principles of colonial justice. Indeed, the proposal perpetuates the great divide between native sujets (subjects) and citoyens (citizens) in terms of their rights and obligations under colonial rule. In an article on legal pluralism in New Caledonia, Dickins Morrison (2016: 484–486) gives a clear summary of their main argument:

Demmer and Salomon (2013) maintain that the courts are fixing Kanak identity and “values” in law in an essentialist, reductionist and regressive way, which fails to take into account the continual transformation of Kanak society and social norms, contemporary realities, and the multiplicity of Kanak identities and modes of life today. Moreover, these authors argue that “judicial custom” represents a new source of social discrimination and violence rather than a victory over the denial of Kanak difference, because it reinforces certain power relations within Kanak society and penalizes the most vulnerable and dominated members thereof, such as women, youth, homosexuals, and men and clans of low social rank in the customary hierarchy.

Inevitably, the article attracted controversy and some Kanak people took the trouble to provide substantive replies. In a letter addressed to the authors in July 2013,
Elie Poigoune, president of the New Caledonian League for the Defense of Human and Citizen rights (Ligue des droits de l’Homme et du citoyen de Nouvelle-Calédonie, LDH-NC), also known as a former independence leader (see Merle, 2013), objects to the way the authors used his words, taken out of context, as an example of a Kanak who shares their view. He specifies that what he expressed in a televised interview was rather that the “customary system” should look to the general (French) system of law, in an effort to better address the rights of women and children with customary status on the long road to developing a sui generis system of law for all in New Caledonia. He also specifies that the LDH-NC sees the establishment of customary courts as the official recognition of the existence of Kanak civilization, but also as a mechanism that attempts to respect Kanak modes of conflict resolution. As we asked above in the context of the school system, in this particular situation, can we really reproach the Kanak people for rejoicing at the recognition of their cultural difference after so much denial suffered during colonial history?

In a text published in 2013 on the LDH-NC website, French historian Isabelle Merle laments the polemical nature of the article by Demmer and Salomon (2013) which, in her view, participated in polarizing the debate by not providing a thorough scientific analysis. Her comment about Demmer and Salomon (2013) sounds similar to Alban Bensa’s comment about Kohler and Wacquant in 1985 (1985a). Like the latter, Demmer and Salomon were “led to reify … the elements of a debate of ideas that was simply trying, beyond all hypotheses, to imagine [a justice system] that would be better adapted, more effective” (Bensa, 1985: 1687). However, in contrast with Kohler and Wacquant (1985a) whose analysis was published by a scholarly press, Demmer and Salomon (2013) purposely published their text in the magazine Vacarme, which is described as being “at the crossroads of political engagement, artistic creation and research.” This choice shows their political agenda as people who have been working in New Caledonia for a long time (as emphasized by Merle, 2013), and who have overtly, on several occasions, positioned themselves in favor of New Caledonia’s independence. The fact that viable alternatives to independence were emerging in the run-up to the first referendum on self-determination—in the form of better recognition of Kanak particularities through legal pluralism—forced them to speak out about the pitfalls of what they saw as a form of confinement in one’s community. The trouble is that they used their scientific legitimacy as anthropologists—founded on their proximity to the field, and not on their exteriority—to give clout to their point of view. This recent controversy, which created much more than a tempest in a teapot among anthropologists and other social scientists of New Caledonia, shows once again the difficulty of constructing our scientificity as researchers involved in colonial situations. Even those who are sensitive to Balandier’s and Bourdieu’s teachings sometimes feel torn between scientific reason, and reasons of the heart.

What many seem to forget in their intent to analyze, in a “critical” manner, the contemporary rhetorics of Indigenous peoples and their political strategies, is that discourses on the self and political acts do not exist outside of power relationships—those within which they develop—or rather, against which they are forced to react, insofar as these power relationships seem to be systematically unfavorable to them.
It is for this very reason that Balandier (2007: 22) does not fail to remind his readers that “the link to history (…) seems to be decisive (…) for distancing oneself with respect to current events, to bring to light the conditions of its development, its complexity and its ambiguities.” Thus, Indigenous peoples do not exist outside the contexts of their marginalization—which is to say outside the contingencies of their particular colonial situation. The multiple factors—legal, political, economic, social, and cultural—that define their colonial situation are the very things that give rise to their claims and movements.

One must never forget that even when they challenge the domination of which they are the victims, they always do so from a position which is “subordinated to that of the whole community,” as Wacquant himself acknowledged (1986: 57).16 In an effort to overcome Pierre Bourdieu’s critical sociology’s relative neglect of the social actors’ perspectives, Luc Boltanski’s contribution to the sociology of emancipation appears notably suggestive (2011, 2014). Following Julia Eckert’s recommendation (2016: 243–244), taking “Boltanski’s notion of situation seriously (…) opens up the possibility of the micro-analysis of macro-relations and of those processes that establish and transform historical figurations.” It allows us to understand the contingency of different logics of action embedded in always specific power relationships.

From the point of view of the analyst of Indigenous people’s mobilization, one must, along with this analysis, never forget to take into consideration the place from which one speaks, as someone who is part of a situated academic tradition and theoretical framework, and remember that one is also a citizen with a specific “historicity” (Wachtel 2014 : 41). Confronted by Indigenous self-affirmation, the researchers in the field are necessarily incorporated into the situation of which they are one of the components, which necessarily constrains them to take a side, since even the posture of scientific neutrality is itself a political stance.

In this situation, self-analysis is the condition of what Bourdieu has called “participatory objectivization” (Bourdieu, 2003) as a specific type of relationship to the world and as a condition of the practice of social science. The epistemological consequences of this intrinsic link between reflection and self-reflection are important, since it is no longer possible to speak of Indigenous and colonized people and their initiatives towards decolonization from a solely theoretical or “objective” point of view. It is important to recognize that we must also do so from a political point of view, which is in no way contradictory to the demand for reflexivity in the discipline, and the requirement that it be rigorous and of a scientific nature. As Nathan Wachtel (2014: 39) reminds us, quoting Haskell (1998), “objectivity is not neutrality.” Sobriety and balance are therefore in order, as he points out. Wachtel (2014: 39) then specifies that an approach that is “overly moralistic, or militant, would be just as counterproductive as an overly sentimental [approach]. (…) The distancing of the gaze is necessary (…): this is why it is important to carry out this movement of distancing, also and above all, with respect to ourselves.” Should this challenge lead us to “let anthropology burn” (Jobson, 2020)? We do not believe so. This brings us back, however, to the difficult, but nonetheless necessary, task which we mentioned in the introduction of this article, namely that of constructing one’s atopic position as suggested by Michel Naepels (2011).
Despite the global conversation about power, positioning, and reflexivity in anthropology since the 1980s (among many others, see Escobar and Restrepo, 2009; Fabian, 2002; Glick Schiller, 2016; Harrison, 2010; Smith, 2021)—which was initiated as early as the 1940s and 1950s by Gluckman and Balandier and to which this article contributes—and as it becomes visible through it, it may well be premature to take for granted that the two tasks—studying and transforming social reality—are possible. There is still the matter of problematizing their coexistence. We agree with Viktor Stoczkowski (2008: 352) when he wrote: “It is difficult, in anthropology as elsewhere, to separate the vision of cultural phenomena we judge after having studied them, and the vision of those we judge instead of studying them”. The difficulty in analyzing Indigenous social movements illustrates this point perfectly. Those who criticize Indigenous arguments, in the name of science, provide a clear illustration of the difficulty in articulating positions that are at once epistemological and political or, to put it differently, scientific and engaged.

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ORCID iD

Natacha Gagné https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5972-843X

Notes

1. Epeli Hau’ofa (1939–2009) was born in Papua New Guinea to Tongan parents. An anthropologist and an author, he taught for several years at the University of South Pacific in Suva, Fiji. Among other projects there, he directed the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture.
2. It should be noted that the question “Do you want New Caledonia to achieve full sovereignty and become independent?” was addressed not only to the Kanak people, but to all the citizens of New Caledonia (see Graff, 2017).
3. All translations of excerpts from the French are our own unless we found existing translations. In the latter cases, the references are provided.
4. A first English translation of the text was published in the volume edited by van der Berghe, *Africa: Social Problems of Change and Conflict* (1965) and a year later a second translation appeared in the volume edited by Wallerstein, *Social Change: The Colonial Situation* (1966).

5. As emphasized by Cooper (2002: 50), if Balandier built on the “situational” analysis of the Manchester school anthropologists, the latter were “eliding the central issue of Balandier’s article. Analysis of the colonial situation was being trumped by the process of socioeconomic change that seemed to be overwhelming.” They focused largely on “the ways in which urban migrants constituted distinct sets of social relations in the mine town - notably based on class relations” (Cooper 2002: 50).

6. This project is shared by the historians of the “connected history” and “global history” approaches. For an overview of these approaches see, among others, Bertrand (2010), Douki and Minard (2007), Potter and Saha (2015), Berg (2013). See also the work of its main representative, Sanjay Subrahmanyam (2005, 2013).

7. Personal experience of the Algerian war served as the matrix for Pierre Bourdieu’s thought. He arrived in Algeria in 1955 as part of his military service. Demobilized at the end of 1957, he became an assistant lecturer in philosophy in the Faculty of Arts of the University of Algiers. In 1958, he published a *Sociology of Algeria* [*Sociologie de l’Algérie*] as part an introductory edited series entitled “Que sais-je?” [“What do I know?”]. If the first edition is strongly “culturalist and Americanist”, in Bourdieu’s own words (Bourdieu, 1958), succeeding editions show a distancing from the initial paradigm. The term “cultures” is replaced by that of “societies” or of “social systems” in 1961, and the references to a “colonial situation” in Georges Balandier’s terms are accentuated. Bourdieu’s years in Algeria were to be the occasion of a double conversion: to the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss which he was to mobilize in analysis of Kabyle societies (Bourdieu, 1972), and to statistical analysis, which he would undertake within the framework of sociographic studies ordered by the French Algerian government and the French army. He published these after the declaration of independence in 1962 (in order to avoid reprisals against his sources) in a multiauthor volume entitled *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* [*Work and Workers in Algeria*] (Bourdieu, Darbel, Rivet and Seibel, 1963), which illustrates with statistics the destructive effects of the colonial situation. To understand the foundational role of his fieldwork in colonial Algeria, see Yacine et al. (2004).

8. See Babadzan (1988), Hanson (1989), Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), Jolly and Thomas (1992), Keesing (1989), Keesing and Tonkinson (1982), Linnekin (1983, 1992), Wagner (1975). For a review, see Wittersheim (2006).

9. See Spencer, Ward and Connel (1988).

10. The Kanak people were given the status of citizens in 1946. Prior to that time, they were French subjects, which meant an inferior legal status and restricted rights in comparison to the full rights and status of the citizens of Metropolitan France.

11. The “Melanesians” designate the Indigenous peoples of New Caledonia, though “Kanak” is today the preferred term.

12. “Canaque” was the French prevalent spelling for “Kanak” until the 1980s.

13. The article was signed by Demmer and Salomon, but a footnote indicated that it was written in collaboration with Alban Bensa, Christine Hamelin, Michel Naepels, Marie Salaün, Benoît Trépied, and Éric Wittersheim. The group of signatories all had Alban Bensa as their thesis supervisor, with the exception of two who were working under the direction of researchers belonging to the same school of thought as Bensa (see Trépied 2018: 209). They have in common a multidisciplinary approach inspired by the thought of Pierre Bourdieu, which aims to “understand the historical genesis and the contemporary dynamics of the social
transformations in New Caledonia” (Trépied, 2018: 209). On Bourdieu’s approach, which Bensa follows, see Bensa, Bobbé et Alphandéry (2014).

14. Available at: http://www.ldhnc.nc/IMG/pdf/rponse_ldh-nc__larticle_droit_c_outumier_et_independance_kanak.pdf (accessed on 9 January 2019).

15. See the work of Salomon (2002, 2003, 2018) who highlighted the effects on the conditions of women and children of an androcentric and gerontocentric system. Kanak women and associations of victims of domestic violence have denounced these issues of inequality.

16. He addressed this criticism in turn to Bensa.

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**Natacha Gagné** is a full professor in the Department of Anthropology at Université Laval and has published the following books: *Being Māori in the City: Indigenous Everyday Life in Auckland* (University of Toronto Press, 2013) and *À la reconquête de la souveraineté : mouvements autochtones en Amérique latine et en Océanie* (Presses de l’Université Laval and Hermann, 2020).

**Marie Salaün** is a full professor of Social Anthropology at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Université de Paris, and has published the following books: *Décoloniser l’école? Hawai’i, Nouvelle-Calédonie. Expériences contemporaines* (Presses de
l’Université de Rennes, 2013) and *L’école indigène. Nouvelle-Calédonie. 1885-1945* (Presses de l’Université de Rennes, 2005).

They have published together *Autochtonies : vues de France et du Québec* (with M. Thibault, Presses de l’Université Laval, 2009) and *Visages de la souveraineté en Océanie* (L’Harmattan, 2010).