

Geopolitics of Translation

An Interview with Gisèle Sapiro

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As publishing markets become increasingly international, sociology looks at the translation of work in the social sciences and humanities. Gisèle Sapiro shows the effects that the crossover between the academic and publishing spheres has on translation practices.

Gisèle Sapiro is Director of the European Centre for Sociology and Political Science. She edited the collective volumes *Pierre Bourdieu, sociologue* (Fayard: 2004) and *Pour une histoire des sciences sociales* (Fayard: 2004) and has written several books of reference on the sociology of knowledge production, the intellectual field, and the international circulation of ideas, including *Translatio. Le marché de la traduction en France à l'heure de la mondialisation* (CNRS: 2008), *Les Contradictions de la globalisation éditoriale* (Nouveau Monde: 2009), and *L'Espace intellectuel en Europe, XIXe-XXIe siècles: de la formation des États-nations à la mondialisation* (La Découverte: 2009). The author and her research team have published a series of reports on literary exchange in the era of globalisation. After *Traduire la littérature et les sciences humaines* and *Paris-New York*, the latest of these accounts, *Les Sciences humaines et sociales françaises en traduction*, published online in July 2014, presents some of the directions taken by the [European project](#) she is coordinating on international cooperation in the social sciences and humanities.

Books and Ideas: In the general context where the publishing market is becoming increasingly fragile and where competition between publishing houses is fierce, what are the specificities of the publishing field in the social sciences and humanities?

Gisèle Sapiro: Books and journal articles are the two accepted written forms for disseminating research results in the humanities. Unlike the natural sciences, books continue to play a major role in producing knowledge in the social sciences and humanities, even though they carry more or less weight depending on the discipline: this weight is substantial in the more literary disciplines, like philosophy and history, and decreases as we move towards disciplines that have adopted the model of the natural sciences, for example psychology or economics. Sociology and anthropology lie somewhere between these two extremes. Unlike journals, which are restricted to specialist readership, book publications ensure that research results – whether original or works of synthesis – are disseminated beyond the academic world. They are also a major vehicle for international intellectual exchange, whether in the original language, if it is a lingua franca, or in translation.

Our study takes the second case and focuses on the translation of French-language books in the humanities in three countries presenting contrasting situations: the United States, which has seen a relative decline in this respect since the end of the 1990s but retains an attachment to “French Theory” and an interest in certain fields; the United Kingdom, where the disengagement of the major university publishers like Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press is particularly off-set by the fairly intense publishing activity of independent publishing houses such as Polity Press (the leading translators of French

humanities) and a few small politically-committed publishers; and Argentina, where, conversely, such translations are increasing rapidly.¹

Publishing in the humanities falls within the spheres of both academia and publishing, which each have their own specific rules and ways of functioning. The field of publishing is subject to economic constraints that have become more pronounced since the 1990s, with the phenomenon of concentration and rationalisation. These constraints affect all sectors, including the academic book market which, in certain countries – particularly the United States and the United Kingdom – is separate from general publishing (with the exception of a few small publishers in the UK). This separation exists both in terms of production and circulation, unlike many European countries such as France, Italy, and Spain, or Latin American countries, such as Argentina, where a substantial portion of humanities books are published by general publishers. While academic publishing obeys the rules of the academic world (peer review), it is increasingly attentive to the question of profitability, particularly given that purchases by university libraries have decreased due to the high cost of subscriptions to scientific journals under the monopoly of large private groups. General publishers aim to reach a non-academic readership with publications in the humanities, so as to contribute to intellectual debate in society. In order to widen their market, English-language academic publishers, which rarely reach a non-academic readership – the huge success of the English translation of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* is an exception to this rule – target the student audience with textbooks or survey essays, or aim to widen their readership beyond national borders. The British market only accounts for 25% of the sales of Cambridge University Press, for example, with 44% sold in the United States and 31% in the rest of the world, thus confirming that the market really is global. For books in French, the chances of crossing the border beyond French-speaking countries depends largely on translation. However, our study shows that books published by general publishers have more chance of being translated than those published by university presses.

The main agents of this circulation are the publishers who bring out books in the humanities, the translators who transpose them into the target language – and who are either professionals or academics – and the academics involved in the process because they hold positions as editors for specific collections, sit on the boards of university presses, suggest texts, give opinions according to the current procedures of Anglo-American academic publishing (i.e. submission to external reviewers who are specialists in the field), and review books in academic journals or in the press. Literary agents, however, play almost no role in this circulation, bar a few exceptions.

Books and Ideas: How would you describe the conditions and obstacles that can facilitate or hinder the translation of a book in the social sciences or humanities? How can a book's potential for dissemination be evaluated?

Gisèle Sapiro: There are many obstacles, which can be of a political, economic, or cultural nature. Political obstacles are a hindrance in countries where freedom of expression is restricted. In the cases we have examined, economic obstacles are by far the biggest issue: translation is an expensive endeavour and English-language publishers are increasingly hesitant to embark on it. Twenty-five years ago, Cambridge University Press translated between 10, 12, and 15 books a year from French. Today, this figure is down to 2 or 3 where contemporary authors are concerned, in addition to 2 or 3 classics. Similarly, many American university presses have drastically reduced their investment in translation: it is the case for Stanford University Press, for example, which in the past published a great number of the

¹ Gisèle Sapiro (ed.), [*Sciences humaines et sociales en traduction: les livres français aux Etats-Unis, au Royaume-Uni et en Argentine*](#) (Paris: Institut français/CESSP, 2014).

“French Theory” authors. Cultural obstacles then also come to bear: some themes will be considered too local, for example a book on France has little chance of being translated unless it focuses on specific periods or aspects such as the Second World War or intellectual life; writing style is also sometimes mentioned as an obstacle: one English publisher contrasted “the structural writing” of French researchers with the “narrative” form that prevails in Anglo-American writing; finally, cultural obstacles can also concern negotiations, the language of contracts, publishing and legal traditions (copyright vs. royalties) etc., not to mention translation problems.

This therefore raises the question of the reasons for translating, which was central in our study. In general, the chances that a book in the humanities will be translated depend on several factors. First, the centrality of the language in which it is written, with translations mainly circulating between central languages like English and French towards peripheral languages; second, the collective symbolic capital accumulated by a national tradition in a particular field: for example, German and French philosophy both have a lot of prestige, whereas American philosophy has only recently gained recognition; the individual symbolic capital associated with the author’s name: the “French Theory” authors – Barthes, Foucault, Derrida – continue to be systematically translated (a chapter of our study is devoted to the enterprise of translating Derrida’s seminars); the reputation of the publisher: in terms of the number of titles translated in the countries studied, the Editions du Seuil comes first in the humanities, ahead of Gallimard, which is top of the list in literature; the topic of the book: speculative essays circulate more than empirical studies – philosophy came first among all disciplines in terms of the number of books translated – but there are also fashionable themes, for example, the Second World War or gastronomy for a while in the United States, or Islam since 9/11; national and international reception of the book: the sale of books in the country of origin and in foreign-language translations are taken into account in the decision-making process; the social capital of the author in the country in question, although this variable is not independent from his/her symbolic capital internationally as illustrated by invitations to attend conferences or give lectures.

Once the decision has been made to translate, a long process begins that is still paved with obstacles: in terms of drawing up a contract, for example, the French publisher can demand that the author has the right to review the translation, which does not come under copyright legislation in which moral rights are transferred along with exploitation rights; in terms of the choice of translator: as most renowned are also the most expensive, publishers sometimes call on students with no experience who do not always finish the job or whose work requires substantial revision; in terms of what Roger Chartier calls the “*mise en livre*” (putting together of a book), in other words the choice of title, cover, blurb; and in terms of promotion: humanities books published in the United States and the United Kingdom are rarely sold in book shops (except a few academic bookshops) so distribution is mainly electronic and sometimes bolstered by a visit from the author.

Books and Ideas: In your view, can we talk about an international space of social science and humanities? A space of organised exchange or a utopia?

Gisèle Sapiro: The scholarly world has always been characterised by intellectual exchange. This was the case in Europe, where Latin was the common language, but also between Europeans and other cultures, particularly Arabic or Asian philosophies. The process constructing nation-states nationalised teaching and research, but also saw the birth at the end of the 19th century of an internationalist ideology that aimed to foster exchange between countries. This was embodied during the interwar period by the League of Nations’ International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, replaced by UNESCO after the war. These

bodies favoured the circulation of models for the organisation and division of scientific work between countries. These exchanges accelerated considerably thanks to the development of means of communication and transport, as well as the new ideal of globalisation, which tends to mask the inequality of exchanges and favour American domination. It is the dominant agents within this space that tend to establish their standards. Furthermore, they are overrepresented. A survey conducted by Yves Gingras and Johan Heilbron on co-authored articles as indicative of international scientific collaborations showed that while the number of co-authors had increased sharply since the 1990s, this increase was more marked for collaboration with American researchers than between European researchers.²

For many researchers, these exchanges are therefore not a utopia but a reality; however, the distribution of this reality is uneven. Certain countries remain largely excluded from such exchanges due to a lack of material and symbolic means – this is the case for African countries, for example. We are currently conducting a survey within the framework of the European project INTERCO-SSH (International Cooperation in the SSH)³ on comparative forms of institutionalisation and circulation of ideas. British researchers, for example, are very present in European projects, whereas French researchers much less so. This is not only to do with language but because, from a very early stage, British universities invested in establishing systems providing support for project preparation, some aspects of which are very technical and require specialist knowledge. These projects offer many countries the chance to become international, but national spaces are often divided between a pole with an international focus and a pole focused on the national space. In small countries, with peripheral languages, one strategy for developing international presence often entails choosing to write in the English language, a choice still rarely made by French researchers – at least where books are concerned. Regarding articles, the propensity to write in English varies across the disciplines – in this regard, economics and psychology can once again be contrasted with law or history – and according to specialism – for example, specialists in English or American literature, as opposed to specialists in French literature. However, it does not suffice to write in English in order to be read in the United States. It is also necessary to publish in journals that are part of researchers' horizon of reference in a given field. In sociology, for example, French journals are very rarely cited by American sociologists, as shown by a survey conducted by the CNRS in 2004; the translation of these journals into English has not changed this situation, as Yves Gingras and Sébastien Mosbah-Natanson have observed.⁴

Should we opt for English as the language of communication in social science and humanities research, following the example of the natural sciences? Adopting a universal language has always been science's dream, as it facilitates intercultural exchange and reduces the risk of misunderstandings. However, in the social sciences and humanities – aside from the inequalities that exist in the face of the English language, which could only be reduced by reorganising the whole educational system around this language from early childhood – there are epistemological advantages in moving from one language to another. Translation allows us to put into perspective our analytical categories, which are firmly grounded in national culture due to the conditions in which these disciplines were institutionalised from the end of the 19th century onwards. Adopting a single language would no doubt entail the impoverishment of thinking in these fields. Moreover, it is not simply a question of language,

² Yves Gingras and Johan Heilbron, "L'internationalisation de la recherche en sciences sociales et humaines en Europe (1980-2006)", in Gisèle Sapiro (ed.), *L'espace intellectuel en Europe. De la formation des États-nations à la mondialisation XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009), pp. 359-388.

³ <http://www.interco-ssh.eu/>

⁴ Yves Gingras and Sébastien Mosbah-Natanson, "Les sciences sociales françaises entre ancrage local et visibilité internationale", *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 51, n°2 (2010), pp. 305-321.

but also of modes of reasoning and writing that can vary from one national tradition to another. And unifying this space would mean establishing standards.

In order to know what is in circulation, the European project INTERCO-SSH has widened the survey on translations conducted in the present study to other languages and other countries, thus extending previous research carried out on French translations in the social sciences and humanities since the 1980s.⁵ The survey conducted by Gustavo Sorá and the Argentinian team has thrown into light the increasing investment of Argentinian publishers in French social sciences and humanities, since the 1980s. The continuation of this survey in the context of the INTERCO-SSH project has already shown that the number of translations from French is higher than those from English during the same period.

However translation alone is not enough to explain the circulation of ideas. In the INTERCO-SSH project, research is conducted on modes of circulation of paradigms, theories, methods, and controversies, as well as on the reception of the great thinkers. Until “the Matthew effect” comes into play, meaning that big names are automatically translated, importing foreign authors involves a complex circuit of actors in the academic field who can use them to create a new research field, to call into question the prevailing orthodoxy of their field of reference, or to constitute an empirical research programme. In this way, the translation into English of Bourdieu’s *Distinction* published by Harvard University in 1984 contributed to developing and establishing the sociology of culture in the United States.⁶ His theory of cultural capital served to construct a programme of empirical research on the cultural practices of Americans.

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⁵ Gisèle Sapiro and Ioana Popa, “Traduire les sciences humaines et sociales: logiques éditoriales et enjeux scientifiques”, in Gisèle Sapiro (ed.), *Translatio. Le marché de la traduction en France à l’ère de la mondialisation* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2008), chap. 4.

⁶ See Philippe Coulangeon and Julien Duval, *Trente ans après La Distinction de Pierre Bourdieu* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013). On translations of Bourdieu, see also Gisèle Sapiro and Mauricio Bustamante, “Translation as a measure of international consecration: mapping the world distribution of Bourdieu’s books in translation”, *Sociologica*, 2-3 (2009).