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## Comments on the photographic documentations of Pierre Bourdieu

in: *Pierre Bourdieu, In Algerien. Zeugnisse der Entwurzelung.*

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Translated by Richard Watts

“Working on a scientific analysis of Algerian society struggling for independence also implies attempting to understand the principles and aims of this struggle and to make them understood [...]”<sup>1</sup>

This exhibition (and the accompanying book) present the first extensive selection of Pierre Bourdieu’s photographic documentations to the public, material that Pierre Bourdieu – with some few exceptions – refrained from publishing for more than forty years: the photographs assembled here were taken in Algeria in the years between 1958 and 1961 and add an important facet to Bourdieu’s ethnographic and sociological studies at a time marked by the tragic circumstances of the colonial war.

In an interview held by Franz Schultheis with Pierre Bourdieu for Camera Austria International photographic magazine – that marks the start of the joint work on this project – Bourdieu sets his photographic practice in the context of his anthropological and sociological work, commenting on it in a retrospective of what was for him a crucial period in Algeria, his emotional ties to this country, his respect for its people, whom he sought to vindicate in all of his works. He was interested in photography in several respects: it represents the detached observation of the scientist and, at the same time, makes us aware of the very fact of observing; it allows us to capture details, immediately and from an intimate distance, that we may overlook or not be able to study in depth at the moment of perceiving them. Photography is “interwoven with the relationship that I have had to my subject at any particular time, and not for a moment did I forget that my subject is people, human beings whom I have encountered from a perspective that – at the risk of sounding ridiculous – I would refer to as caring, often touched.”<sup>2</sup> These pictures are also a means of communicating with the people in whom Bourdieu was primarily interested: Peasants without land, deported to the Centres de Regroupement (Resettlement Camps), compelled to inactivity or stranded in the cities; families whose status is threatening to break up, subsisting under miserable conditions in the cities; the poverty of the unemployed and the uprooted millions.

But these photographs are above all the result of scientific work, and in this sense they must be viewed in a constructive context together with the texts that he wrote at the same time, and thus have a specific historical and thematic framework. The first task in our work, then, was to scrutinise the photographic documentations for contexts that Pierre Bourdieu analyses in his writings. We attempted to read Pierre Bourdieu’s archive and all of the circumstances of this collection of negatives and prints, comments and the collection of sketches contained in

the *fiches d’Algerie* (collection of notes from Algeria), in the context of Bourdieu’s studies. Pierre Bourdieu himself had already begun to tentatively combine pictures and texts, and we were able to follow this model.

Since taking these photographs, Pierre Bourdieu only published few of them, and the vast majority of his photographic documentations has so far remained unknown. Those familiar with Bourdieu’s work will recognise the photographs that were chosen as cover pictures for the first editions of his books: *Le Deracinement* (with Abdelmalek Sayad); *Travail et travailleurs en Algerie* (with Alain Darbel et al.); *Algerie 60* and *Le Sens pratique*. But photographs from the collection were also used for articles and magazine interviews. Numerous photographs used in publications, however, can no longer be found in the archive and in some cases there is not even a negative as a great many of the perhaps 2000 pictures taken in the four years of work were lost during moves.

The archive currently comprises 994 negatives (format 6 cm × 6 cm), 216 contact and work prints (format between 6 cm × 6 cm and a maximum of 12.5 cm × 12.5 cm). The main body of the archive, alongside the negatives, comprises 230 large-format prints with a format of 23 cm × 23 cm and a smaller group with a format of 30 cm × 30 cm, that Pierre Bourdieu collated in three themed albums. There are no negatives of 93 of these 230 prints, i.e. these prints are now the only sources available to us. All titles and dates are given by Pierre Bourdieu, place names have been added where it was possible to derive them unequivocally from the photos or from publications. We retained the numbering of the negatives as the archive numbers of the pictures, with a system of letters indicating whether the archive contains an original print with a negative (O), an original print without a negative (R) or only the negative (N). Finally, we created work prints from all negatives and scans of all original photos and the main pictures of the exhibition and book so as to avoid the risk of further damage to the originals. The photographs published by Pierre Bourdieu himself were important guidelines for selecting the photographs which were to be presented in the exhibition and the book, as were the pictures that he commented on in his interview about Algeria. Almost all of the existing exhibition-format prints were included as we feel that they represent pictures already selected by Bourdieu. Pierre Bourdieu had compiled these prints in three photo albums. The arrangement of the photos in the albums and the hand-written comments were recorded so that we could use them as guidelines for thematic groups. Our editorial and curatorial work was intended to convey to the viewer/reader what decisions Bourdieu made – in his photography and with regard to the selection and arrangement of the pictures – and, at the same time, to visualise the situation of the archive.

Pierre Bourdieu describes the production conditions of this documentation, that was created methodically but at the same time under great emotional pressure, as follows: he intended, for example, to describe types of clothing in order to relate the different possibilities of combining European and adaptations of traditional clothing with the social traits of their wearers; he secretly recorded conversations in public places with the idea of investigating the conditions of transition from one language into another; he conducted interviews with informers, questionnaire surveys, evaluation of archives, tests in schools, and discussions in welfare centres. "This somewhat exaggerated libido sciendi, engendered by a passion for everything connected with this country and its people, and also by the secret and constant sense of guilt and resistance in view of so much suffering and such great injustice, knew no respite or limit. ... the simple wish to assimilate all of these events in myself induced me to continue a dogged task with my heart and soul that enabled me to be up to the experiences whose unworthy and helpless witness I was, and of which I wanted to render an account at all costs."<sup>3</sup>

Pierre Bourdieu's photographic work in Algeria in the 1950s is set in the tradition of committed humanistic photography as we know it (also in terms of the similarity of content) from the large-scale documentations of poverty of landless farmers or of a population eking out an existence as sharecroppers or farm workers in the USA in the 1930s. Above all James Agee's and Walker Evans' joint text/image work, their lucid, committed and dignified description of the miserable life of three leasehold farmer families in "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men"<sup>4</sup> (a description that equally critically discusses their own activity of describing) marked a turning-point in the reflexivity of documentary / artistically committed work and could offer a point of reference in the analysis of these photographs. For in a similar manner, Bourdieu succeeds in creating a basis of trust and a distance of respect that allow him to engage in a photographic practice that documents his commitment, his veracity and his affection (and, in view of this perhaps already bold comparison, we must not forget that this work was done in a state of war, where it is only coincidences that often decide between life and death).

It was very illuminating for us to recognise the precision with which Bourdieu approached the subject of his study as a photographer in the sense of complete photographic coverage of a given context. He veritably circled around the objects of his research with his camera, always selecting different perspectives and approaches to his "object". Or he recorded everything that happened in front of his camera as a passive observer: for example, there is a sequence of almost twenty pictures of a crossroads in Blida in which passers-by walk past Bourdieu's camera from the same angle of view. A similar series features pictures of a newspaper kiosk in the square not far from this street corner in Blida, where, like a running film, changing groups of children and adults crowd around the magazine displays. Because Bourdieu worked with a rangefinder camera, the plane of view in his photographs is always very low; the possibility of operating the camera at chest height allowed him to take photos even in difficult situations and almost unnoticed without having to raise the camera up to eye level.

Our collaboration with Pierre Bourdieu began in 2000, to begin with under very different circumstances than would be decisive with regard to the creation of this book. The reason being that 2000 was a political watershed for us (in Austria): with the Austrian Freedom Party now in the coalition government, it seemed that a xenophobic and anti-intellectual consensus had become hegemonic in Austria, justifying fears that a reduction of complexity could become the leitmotif of a new political line in Austria. In this political setting and at this time, Bourdieu supported the debate conducted in our magazine, publishing his first text with us, "Against a politics of depoliticisation", an important statement in connection with the European social movement against a politics of globalisation and neoliberalism that he demanded.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, it was Franz Schultheis, acting as mediator between Bourdieu and the curatorial team of Camera Austria, who presented to us Bourdieu's largely unpublished photographic archive that he had created during his field-specific ethnological studies in Algeria in the 1950s. Bourdieu was initially sceptical about an exhibition and publication project, as he did not wish to see the artistic, aesthetic effect of his photos overrated. And it was also important for us to consider whether a project so emphatically entrenched in the art context as Camera Austria could be a suitable institution to process Bourdieu's ethnographically defined photographic material. But particularly against the backdrop of Bourdieu's exploration of the photography medium and his essays on the definition and analysis of the field of art and its effects in society, it appeared extremely interesting to us to subject Bourdieu's photographic documents themselves to an analysis. But the opportunity of scrutinising this significant body of photographs also implied returning to our core sphere, the processing of photographic material and its societal, political and cultural importance, and discussing these photographs and Bourdieu's position, also in the context of art, by presenting this exhibition at Camera Austria exhibition space at Kunsthau Graz in autumn 2003.<sup>6</sup>

#### Acknowledgement:

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- 1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Sozialer Sinn. Kritik der theoretischen Vernunft (The Logic of Practice)*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1987, p. 8.
- 2 Pierre Bourdieu / Franz Schultheis, interview, *Camera Austria* No. 75, Graz 2001, German / English.
- 3 Pierre Bourdieu, *Ein soziologischer Selbstversuch*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2002.
- 4 James Agee, Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin 1941.
- 5 *Camera Austria* Nr. 72, Graz 2000.
- 6 The following members of the Camera Austria curator team are significantly involved in designing the exhibition and developing the book project: Christine Frisinghelli, Seiichi Furuya, Maren Luebbke-Tidow, Anja Rösch and Manfred Willmann.