

Camera Austria

In Algeria: An Initiation Trip to Familiar Foreign Parts.

Pierre Bourdieu in an interview with Maria A. Loyola,
Paris October 27, 1999.

Excerpt from the long version of the film “La sociologie est un sport de combat” (Sociology is a Martial Art) by Pierre Carles, C-P Productions 2003

Of course, beginnings are important to all of us. Youth is the time when we begin to develop, when we devise our world view. And I had the—I almost said “good fortune”, although at the time I actually perceived what was later undoubtedly to be the great opportunity of my life as a misfortune. Well, I was sent off to Algeria as a soldier. I was totally hopeless and very frustrated, after all it was a punishment. It was a punishment for my critical statements regarding the Algerian War, and I found the whole thing quite terrible. I remember on the journey over there saying to my comrades, simple second-class soldiers all of them, like me, “This is terrible, it’s colonialism, etc.” They were all nice guys, mostly illiterate—it was as if they had lumped all the illiterate men and troublemakers from the west of France into this battalion. There were some communist workers from the Renault factories and a couple of intellectual troublemakers, not many though, because many intellectuals, I might add, became reserve officers, because the communist party told them that it would be important to have reserve officers if it came to it. I never got this motto myself. I wanted to be a second-class soldier like everyone else.

So I arrived in Algeria and I was certainly not best pleased. My comrades said, “You’ll get us all killed with your crazy ideas!”, because they could all still remember the stories about Vietnam. It was all very sad, not exactly enjoyable at any rate. And so I started working, for political reasons among other things. So my political commitment is not a recent thing at all. I thought that all the talk in the intellectual circles in Paris was all out of touch with reality, and that you really have to investigate things as they happen on the spot. So I started writing a little book, and once it was all done I intended to come back to philosophy. But then I began to get more and more interested in it all, even though I carried on with philosophy – up to around about 1964, I think. During the day I would conduct my field research, and at night I would read Husserl, writing things about the structures of the consciousness of time. I started getting into ethnology and then sociology. I taught sociology in Algiers. That’s also where I met Sayad, who was one of my students. At the end of the year, I asked Sayad and a number of other students whether they wanted to do field research with me, and that was a very important step for me, without a doubt.

I conducted sociology under difficult circumstances. There was a war, the dangers were very real and threatening. Yes, that was something very important, something that would set me apart from the other sociologists. I am referring to the other renowned sociologists in France at the time. There are some similar cases, Aron Cicourel comes to mind, for example, a great American

sociologist. He grew up on the outskirts of Los Angeles. He once told me how he used to race against coloured rivals. The guys running next to him said, “If you win I’ll cut your throat!” And they weren’t joking. So he already started learning sociology during his youth, in practice and under difficult conditions, etc. This also explains how, with many problems, he can push aside a whole number of crazy ideas from the start. He wrote wonderful things about delinquency, where he - how shall I put it - well, he knew a lot about what he was talking about, not only as a detached observer. Well and that’s why he simply didn’t ask certain idiotic questions in the first place that three quarters of all American sociologists would have been certain to ask. There is such a thing as capital of knowledge about the social world that you inherit from your milieu, your social experience. It’s exactly as I just said, you cannot conduct sociology with this alone, but it’s a good thing to have some of it, if you can manage to translate it into scientific questions, watchfulness, etc.

Well, my social experience was a little of this nature. My world was not the world of Parisian intellectuals, and my experience in Algeria augmented this alienness. As I said, I conducted research under dangerous conditions here, and once or twice my life depended on the answer I was to give to someone. Under the conditions of civil war, a war of liberation, my only protection was my honest face and my manner, my caution—and I learned a great deal from all that.

You can read a lot of things in textbooks on methodology, but there is also a lot you can’t, because, of course, they withhold the essential parts. I had to learn by doing, because I always had to consider everything and watch out very carefully. In the evening we would have working meetings with Sayad and some others – I had a look at the photos of them again recently – and we would constantly be asking questions like, “What shall we do? The guy said that...” There was also a young woman, a protestant, who arrived with crates of CIMADE donations, a church charity, sharing them out to the people. Some of us said to her, “What’s this nonsense, we’re sociologists!” I can still remember this guy I really liked. He got killed by the OAS. He turned round and said to me, “It’s true, isn’t it, Bourdieu, you couldn’t care less that they’re poor and unhappy. You couldn’t give a damn, could you?” I replied, “Well..” It was all about eliminating this humanitarian way of thinking – you bring people presents and then you leave again, just like that, and with a clear conscience. We had discussions about what it means to conduct science, day in, day out, that were, one might say, almost metaphysical. Well it all got my grey matter working

hard, got me thinking a great deal. In retrospect I think that I came back with a tremendous capital of knowledge. I got old very quickly, compared to a young sociologist who would have carried out his little laborious study on the staff of a secondary school, for example. But at the same time I also got a whole lot of problems and many questions. Overall, I have thrived on the capital that I acquired in these years, not a capital of ideas, but a capital of problems. Voilà!”