

An interview with Pierre Bourdieu by Franz Schultheis

Pictures from Algeria

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Translated by Richard Watts

Franz Schultheis: *Pierre Bourdieu, when you agreed to allow us to view the photographs that you took during your stay in Algeria, and that had been lying in boxes for forty years, you also promised to give us an interview about your use of photography for your ethnographic field research and sociological studies on site. Let us start with a very down-to-earth question. What camera did you use to take the photos in Algeria?*

Pierre Bourdieu: It was a camera that I had bought in Germany. A Zeiss Ikonflex. Unfortunately, the camera got broken on my trip to the United States in the sixties, which I regretted very much. If I find the time, I sometimes have a look around second-hand photography shops to see if I can find the same camera again, but several people have already told me that you cannot get hold of it any more. The Zeiss Ikonflex cameras were the cutting edge of technology in Germany at the time. That's where I bought mine. It must have been the first year I started earning my own money (I was appointed professor in 1955). Incidentally, I think I smuggled it to France ... It had a very special lens, which is why it was so expensive. Apart from that it was identical to the classical Rolleiflex model with the viewfinder on top of the body ... That was very useful to me because there were often situations in Algeria where it was very ticklish to take photographs, and this way I could take them without anyone noticing. For example, I also had a Leica; I had friends in Algeria who were professional photographers, and I asked them for advice as one of the problems in Algeria is the very, very bright light that destroys every picture, so I needed their advice. Well, and almost all of these friends used a Leica, that was the usual camera for professionals at the time, but it means that you have to be standing opposite the person you are photographing. But often enough that was not possible – for instance if you wanted to photograph a woman in a country where that is frowned upon, etc. In some cases, I got a permit, for example during my field research in the Collo or Orléansville regions. So, of course, I took a lot of photos there, and the people were happy about it. These photos also include a series of pretty dramatic pictures of a circumcision – the father asked me to take them: “Come and take some picture”. Photography was a way of relating to people and of being welcome. Afterwards I would send them the photos.

F. S. *Did you develop these photos yourself?*

P.B. I only bought all the equipment much later, because all of my photographer friends said, a real photographer develops his own photos, because only while you are developing do you see the true quality of the photos, and you can work with the

material, blowing up specific details, for example. But I was not able to do it at the time, but I did have a little photo lab in Algiers that worked pretty quickly, and I could tell them exactly what I wanted. I had contact prints made and little positives; later on I talked with the man from the lab a bit longer and I ordered some more complicated things. Because I was taking a lot of photos at the time, he was very interested and I gave him a free hand, although I did always try to keep control of everything as well, after a fashion.

F.S. *In a way, you were already fascinated by photography even before you left for Algeria. Had you been planning to make systematic use of photography during your stay? Was it a proper project?*

P.B. I took this thing very seriously, I started notebooks, sticking the negatives in them, and I had shoeboxes that I sorted the film material into. And then I bought little celluloid bags and put the photos in them, writing a number on each of them and then entering the number in the notebook with the negatives stuck in them. But I had a problem: should I keep all the film material? I tended to keep a lot because the material had two functions: a documentary function on the one hand. Sometimes I would take photos for the simple reason of being able to remember something, later to be able to describe it, or I would photograph objects that I couldn't take with me. But there was something else, too: photography was – how can I put it – a way of looking. There is this petty bourgeois spontaneous sociology (that petty bourgeois writer Daninos in France, for example) that makes fun of people who set out on their tourist excursions with cameras over their shoulders, and then do not even really see the landscape because they are so busy taking photographs. I always thought that was class racism. In my case, at least, it was a way of sharpening my eye, of looking more closely, of finding a way to approach a particular subject ... During my years in Algeria, I often accompanied photographers doing photo reportages, and I noticed that they never spoke to the people they were photographing; they knew next to nothing about them.

So there were different kinds of photographs. For example, there was a marriage lamp that I photographed, so that I could study how it had been made later on; or a grain mill, etc. On the other hand, I took photos of things that appealed to me. I remember a photo of a little girl with plaits, with her little sister standing by her side. You might have thought it was a fifteenth-century German Madonna. Or this other photo I really like, too – I still remember, it was on the outskirts of a slum – it is a picture of a little girl who was just about 80 cm tall, she was carrying a loaf of bread pressed against her belly; it was almost as big as the girl. The photo is very sober and reserved; the girl

stands out against the white wall that she is standing in front of.

F.S. *And when did you start taking photos systematically? Was that after your military service?*

P.B. Yes, exactly. It was in the late fifties. I had the idea to take photos of situations that really touched me because different, dissonant realities merged into each other in them. I particularly like one of these photos: it is a picture I took in broad daylight in Orléansville in summer, at one of the hottest spots in Algeria. The picture is of an advertising sign for a driving school, with a road winding its way between fir woods, and an advert for fridges right next to it. I was amused by this kind of mixing realities. I used another very typical photo for the cover of the book *Algérie 60*². It's a picture of two men wearing turbans – really traditional Arabs – sitting on a car bumper (incidentally, a bit further back you can see my own car, a Renault Dauphine); so these men are sitting there, deep in a serious conversation.

F.S. *If you look at these photos, you are faced with the following question: you can tell that they are not tourist photos, but rather photographs that were taken very consciously. So the photos have a very specific purpose. You say yourself that you took photos in order to objectify, to create a distance, or to make time stand still for a moment. The thought would seem to suggest itself, then, that there is an intrinsic link between the objectification achieved by means of the photographic view and the ethnological approach that you were developing at the time as a self-taught ethnologist. That both views, then – the ethnologist's or anthropologist's and the photographer's – have an elective affinity.*

P.B. Yes, I am sure you are right there; in both cases there was this objectifying and loving, detached and yet intimate relationship to the object, something similar to humour. There are a number of photos that I took in the Collo region, in a pretty dramatic situation. I was in the hands of people who had the power over life or death – my life, but also the lives of the people who were with me. It is a series of pictures of people sitting, discussing and drinking coffee under a big olive tree. In this case, taking photos was a way of saying to them, „I'm interested in you, I'm on your side, I'll listen to you, I'll testify to what you're going through”.

For example, there is another series of photos, that are not particularly aesthetic, that I took in a place called Aïn Aghbel and in another place called Kerker. The military had herded people together who had previously been living scattered around the mountains and resettled them in a kind of terraced houses styled on a Roman castrum. Against the advice of my friends, I had set out into the mountains on foot to look at the destroyed villages, and I found houses that had had their roof taken off to force people to leave. They had not been burned down, but they were no longer inhabitable. And I came across clay pitchers in the houses (something I had already begun researching in a different village, Aïn Aghbel: there are places where everything that we would call furnishings is made of fired clay, made and shaped by the women); in Kabylia they call them aqoufis, those

big clay grain pitchers decorated with drawings. The drawings are often of snakes, snakes being a symbol of resurrection. And although the situation was so sad, I was happy to be able to take photographs – it was all so contradictory. I was only able to take photos of these houses and immovables because they had no roofs any more...

This is very characteristic of the experience I had there, a quite extraordinary experience. I was very moved by and sensitive to the suffering of the people there, but at the same time I also had the detachment of an observer, as manifested by the fact that I was taking photos. All this came to mind when I was reading Germaine Tillion, an ethnologist who worked on a different region in Algeria, Aurès; in her book *Ravenbruck* she relates that she was forced to see people die in a concentration camp, and every time someone died, she made a notch. She was just working as a professional ethnologist, and in her book she says it helped her keep going. So I thought about this and I said to myself, you're a funny guy.

It was here, in this village with the olive tree, that people started talking to us on the first day after our arrival – no, not the first day, it was the second day, the first day was much more dramatic, but I won't go into that here, it would sound like heroic pathos; so on the second day after we arrived they started telling us things like: “I used to have this, I used to have that, I had ten goats, I had three sheep”, they enumerated all the things they had lost, and I wrote down as much as I could together with three other people. I recorded the catastrophe, and at the same time I intended to analyse it all with the methods available to me with a kind of irresponsibility – and that was really a scholastic irresponsibility, I realise that in retrospect – while I would always say to myself: “Poor Bourdieu, with the pathetic instruments you've got, you're not up to it, you would have to know everything and understand everything, psychoanalysis, economy...”. I performed Rorschach tests, I did what I could to understand – and at the same time I intended to collect rituals, for example the ritual at the start of spring. And these people told me stories, stories of man-eaters, and they told me about the games they always played: they took some olives from the olive tree under which they were sitting, olives that were not yet fully ripe, and they threw them up into the air. Then you have to catch them on the back of your hand, and depending on how many olives you drop, someone hits you with three or four fingers. Under that olive tree I interviewed guys between thirty and fifty years old, and some of them had a weapon concealed under their djellaba. So they would play there (if you dropped two, you got hit with two fingers, if you dropped three, then with three fingers), and they hit very, very hard, playing like children. Now that's something very typical of my relationship to this country.

It is extremely difficult to speak about all of this in the right way. It was far from being a concentration camp. The conditions were dramatic, but not as dramatic as was often claimed. And I was there and I saw it all, and it was all so complicated and went far beyond my means! When they told me things, it would sometimes take me two or three days to understand it all, complicated names of places or tribes, numbers of lost cattle,

and other lost commodities, and I was totally overcome by it all; in this respect any help was good, and photography was really a way of trying to come to terms with the shock of this devastating reality. There was a place there, very nearby, called Kerkeria, a vast place that they had built up right in the middle of a swampy plain that people could not cultivate as they did not have any ploughs or draught animals that would have been strong enough. So they settled people there, two or three thousand of them, it was vast, and this kind of suburb without a city was really tragic. I did the most crazy thing in my life there: a consumer study styled on the INSEE, the French National Institute for Statistics. A consumer study is a very time-consuming affair. You turn up with your questionnaire and you ask people, "What did you buy yesterday?" Candles, bread, carrots, ... They list everything and put a cross next to yes or no. They come again two days later, three times altogether. It was a vast task to organise and conduct such a study in such a difficult situation – even if I was not alone, there were three or four of us. This whole study did not lead to any special results except for the fact that this population, that seemed to be totally destroyed, homogenised, levelled and reduced to the lowest level of poverty, displayed a normal distribution – there were all the differences that you find in a normal population, a normal distribution.

F.S. *Listening to you, I get the impression that you were not pursuing a specific project but rather that you were going in various directions, and that you wanted to go through the whole spectrum of sociology in a very short period.*

P.B. Yes, but what could we have done differently? What do you do when faced with such an overwhelming, oppressive reality? Of course there was a risk of being overwhelmed by it all and of creating a completely mad chronicle trying to recount everything. One of the great mistakes I made was not to keep a diary. I had all these separate scraps, everything was totally chaotic – it was all just very difficult, we had little time, and it was very exhausting.

F.S. *A specific question: although you did not keep a diary, I am fairly sure you could locate everything very quickly and very reliably if you were to look at the photos, and if you saw the little girl sitting on the ground you could definitely say "oh yes, that was here or there", couldn't you? So the photos are memory aids, that are very...*

P.B. Yes, I can definitely say that was in Orléansville, that was in Cheraïa...

F.S. *So these memory aids are very important, and you would have to see whether, based upon them, ...*

P.B. I should have done that... but I just didn't have the energy for it. We worked from six in the morning until three in the morning, it was simply unthinkable. Sayad was the only one who stuck it out, the others were totally shattered, it really was a tough time.

F.S. *To come back to the question of the perspective: the focus is on emotional aspects, and then there is the rift that is very important to you, a rift between a world about to disappear with its familiar forms, and a new world that is becoming established very quickly. That is to say, the non-simultaneity of the objects. What structures the sociological perspective in your book "Travail et travailleurs en Algérie"³ seems to be the vast difference between time structures and economic structures, and one might say that the same leitmotifs can be found in your photos, i.e. in the photographic perspective of the social world...*

P.B. There is a photo that is very typical of this that I used for the cover of *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie*. It's a picture of farm workers on the Mitidja plain nearby Algiers. They are working in line, spraying sulphate that is being pumped through a hose linking them to a machine transporting the sulphate. Five or six of them are moving forward, perhaps more. The picture is a very good portrayal of the circumstances of these people and, at the same time, you see the industrialisation of farm work on these big colonial farms that, compared to the French farming industry, were very advanced. I spoke briefly with some of these people, who earned a pittance as farm workers and who worked their own little plot of land on the edge of the big estates...

F.S. *In view of what you have said about the way you conceived and took these photos, I wonder what might be an adequate form of reception and presentation. The important thing is to create a link to your ethnological research and the books about your beginnings, when you were analysing the same subject that we see in your photos. Although it would seem appropriate to link up these two aspects, at the same time I would be a bit chary of doing so as this would, at first glance, appear to be an even more spontaneous and simplifying approach than simply looking for descriptions of situations in the texts, stories that remind us of what the photos depict.*

P.B. It is perfectly natural to link the content of my research and my photos. One of the things that interested me most in Algeria, for example, is what I called the "economy of poverty" or the "economy of slums". Normally, the slums were perceived (not only by racist, but also naive observers) as something dirty, ugly, disorderly, thrown together, etc., whereas, in truth, it is a place for a very complex life, for a real economy with an inherent logic, where you see a great deal of resourcefulness, an economy that at least offers a lot of people a minimum with which to survive and, above all, for social survival – i.e. to escape the shame for a self-respecting man of doing nothing and contributing nothing to his family's livelihood. I took a lot of photos on this subject, photos of all the hawkers and street vendors, and I was really amazed at the resourcefulness and energy in these unusual buildings, that were reminiscent of shop windows or a shop; or this motley collection of displays on the ground (which also interested me from an aesthetic point of view as it was a very baroque scene); the pharmacists I interviewed, who were selling almost all sources of traditional magic, whose names I wrote down, aphrodisiacs, etc.

There were also very picturesque butcher's shops (those three big, triangular wooden stands with cuts of meat hanging on them) – a typical subject for a photographer in search of picturesque, exotic scenes. I myself always had hypotheses about the organisation of space on my mind: there is a layout plan of the village with a certain structure, a structure of a house; and I also discovered that the distribution of graves in the cemetery corresponded roughly to the layout of the village based on clans. And I wondered, will I find the same structure in the markets? That reminds me of a photo I took in a cemetery: a Cassoulet tin filled with water on an anonymous grave. On the seventh day after someone has died, you have to bring water to their grave in order to capture the female soul; in this case it was a Cassoulet tin that had previously contained a taboo product: pork.

F.S. *When you returned to France, you very soon began your research on photography⁴. How did you arrive at that idea? Was it someone else who gave you the idea?*

P.B. I do not remember exactly, and I would not want to tell you any nonsense. But I do know that it was connected with the fact that Raymond Aron appointed me director of the general secretariat of a research centre that he had just founded. I was not particularly self-confident in those days and I thought that it would be a good thing to get another source of income, in case I was not very successful, then it would not be that bad if ... So I signed a contract with Kodak.

Photography is a subject that I was very interested in. Of course, what I had in mind was the fact that photography is the only practice with an artistic dimension that is accessible to everyone, and at the same time it is the only cultural asset that everyone consumes. I wanted to take this indirect approach to arrive at a general aesthetic theory. It was both a very modest and very ambitious undertaking. People tend to say that photos of the common people are terrible, etc., and at first I wanted to understand why that was; I wanted to try and do justice to the fact, for example, that these pictures are usually taken face on, that they depict relationships between people – these things that gave the whole thing a certain necessity, that also had the effect of rehabilitation. What I then did was to analyse a collection of photos, the collection of my childhood friend Jeannot. I took one photo after another, totally soaked them up, and I think I found a great deal of things in this shoe-box.

F.S. *But as you said, you already observed professional photographers when you were taking photos in Algeria, and you said to yourself, "I wouldn't have taken that photo" or "I would have done it differently", or sometimes "I would have done it exactly the same way". So there was already a reflectivity in your dealing with photography, a kind of beginning, a point of departure for reflection...*

P.B. Yes, that's right. But if the professional photographers did sometimes take photos that I would have like to have taken, too, photos of the strangest things, they also did a lot of things I would not have done, things that just looked painterly. I think – apart from occasional flukes – it was not easy for them to take

an unconventional view of this society, a view that was not exclusively picturesque by design: a weaver at work, women coming home from the well. One of my "most typical" photos is of a veiled woman on a moped – it is a photo they could have taken as well. That is the "easiest" aspect of what I wanted to understand. There is an anecdote that sums up my experience in this country very well (a strange country in which I had a constant sense of tragedy – I was very scared, at night in my dreams as well... – and yet I saw a lot of funny things too that made me laugh or smile); it is a story that expresses this dual, contradictory and ambivalent experience very well, an experience that I always found it very hard to express or convey here in France – indeed, it was even difficult in Algeria with the bourgeois Algerian town-dwellers; I am thinking about a young student from an important family of the Koulouchlis who took part in our studies of the urban milieu (she wrote to me just recently), and who could not conceal a certain feeling of fear mixed with disgust in view of the people who would often touch me in a rather ridiculous, pitiful attempt to stage or underline their poverty and misfortune. (That is why I liked the way men like Mouloud Farraoun would look when he was telling me of his disputes with schoolchildren's parents, or the way Abdelmalek Sayad would often look at the people we met with amusement and yet slightly touched). But to get back to my story; I was just driving out of a parking space one day, when along came a young, veiled woman who saw me hesitate to drive my car out, and she turned round and said to me under her veil: "Well then, darling, are you going to knock me down?!"

F.S. *You know, that reminds me a bit of a comment by Günther Grass, that you will no doubt remember. He said "Sociology is too serious". But that's not true! Not at all! He just didn't understand that it would have been misplaced to work with humour in view of the "Weight of the World".*

P.B. In *Le Déracinement*, too, that is very similar to "The Weight of the World" in many respects, there is little room for this amusing side of things. Incidentally, if I were to look for a literary model with which to express such terrible experiences to the point of their humorous aspects, I would rather think of Arno Schmidt. I often regret not having kept a diary. I devoted myself fully to my "duty" as a researcher and witness, and I did my best to pass on these extraordinary and – sadly! – universal experiences with the resources available to me, experiences that are always linked to flight and wars of liberation. Also, I was not satisfied to bear witness to it all in the manner of a good reporter, rather I also wanted to work out the logic and transhistorical effects of these sweeping compulsory resettlements of the population. And then there is the censorship of academic decency according to which there are many things that you would not even think of talking about. And, thirty years, ago I probably would not have been able to tell you what I am telling you at the moment, or I would have said it but not in the same way as I dare to say it today.

F.S. *You can afford to today. Your work exists, and now you can go back into the past and uncover things that were previously hidden.*

P.B. Being worried about having to be sufficiently serious and scientific induced me to withdraw myself to a great extent with regard to the literary side of my work. I censored a lot of things. I think that during the early days of the Centre de sociologie européenne there was a tacit exhortation – if not an explicit rule – to delete everything that was philosophical or literary. You had to respect the tacit rules of the group. Anything else seemed to be inappropriate, narcissistic, self-satisfied. Today, I often regret that I was not able to retain the useful traces of this experience. I did experience a lot of things that put me apart from my intellectual contemporaries. I got older a lot faster... Yes, it's true, I should try to look at the photos one day and dictate all my thoughts on tape.

F.S. *Before we finish, I would like to ask you a personal question: in your opinion, what role does your experience in Algeria play in the context of social self-analysis, that you outlined in your last course at the Collège de France?*

P.B. Yvette Delsaut wrote a text about me in which she very rightly says that Algeria is what allowed me to accept myself. With the same perspective of understanding of the ethnologist with which I regarded Algeria, I could also view myself, the people from my home, my parents, my father's and my mother's pronunciation, re-appropriating it all in a totally undramatic manner – for this is one of the greatest problems of uprooted intellectuals when all that remains to them is the choice between populism and, on the contrary, shame induced by class racism. I encountered these people, who are very much akin to the Kabylis and with whom I spent my youth, from the perspective of understanding that is mandatory for ethnology, defining it as a discipline. Photography, that I first began doing in Algeria and then in Béarn, definitely contributed a great deal to this conversion of my perspective that required a genuine change of my senses – which is no exaggeration. Photography, you see, is a manifestation of the distance of the observer, who collects his data and is always aware that he is collecting data (which is not always easy in such familiar situations as balls), but at the same time photography also assumes the complete proximity of the familiar, of attention, and a sensitivity with regard to even the least perceptible of details, details that the observer can only understand and interpret thanks to his familiarity (and do we not say that someone who behaves well, is “attentive”?), a sensitivity for the infinitely small detail of an act that even the most attentive of ethnologists generally fails to notice. But photography is equally 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. That is the reason why I never stopped conducting interviews and observations (I always started my research with them, no matter what the subject), which broke with the routines of bureaucratic sociology (which I see embodied by Lazarsfeld and the Bureau of Applied Social Research at the University of Columbia, who introduced Taylorism into research), a sociology that only has access to its interviewees through intermediary interviewers and that, unlike even the

most cautious ethnologist, has no opportunity to see the interviewees or their immediate environment. The photos, that you can look at again and again at leisure, like sound recordings that you can listen to again and again (not to mention videos), allow you to discover details that escaped you at first glance or that you cannot examine at depth during an interview for reasons of discretion (during the studies for “The Weight of the World”, for example, the furnishings of the metalworker of Longwy or of his Algerian neighbour).

- 1 Extended version of the interview published in *Camera Austria* No. 75, Graz 2001, entitled Participatory Objectification: Photographic Testimonies of a Declining World, with a preface by Franz Schultheis.
- 2 *Algérie 60. Structures économiques et structures temporelles*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit 1977; English: *Algeria 1960*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979.
- 3 *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* (with A. Darbel et al.), Paris: Éditions de Minuit 1965.
- 4 *Un art moyen. Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie* (with L. Boltanski et al.), Paris: Éditions de Minuit 1965. English: *Photography. A Middle Brow Art*, London: Polity Press 1990.