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## **Pierre Bourdieu and Algeria. An elective affinity.**

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Translated by Richard Watts

“The understanding view of the ethnologist with which I regarded Algeria, I was also able to apply to myself, the people from my home, my parents, my father’s and my mother’s accent, re-appropriating it all in a totally undramatic manner – for this is one of the greatest problems of uprooted intellectuals whose only remaining option seems to be the choice between populism and bashful self-denial (as a reaction to the symbolic power of class society). I encountered these people, who are very like the Kabyles and with whom I spent my youth, from the perspective of understanding that is mandatory in ethnology and which defines it as a scientific discipline. Engaging in photography, first in Algeria and then in Béarn, was an important companion that definitely contributed a great deal to this change of perspective, that presupposed a veritable – and I don’t think this is too strong a word – conversion of my senses. Photography, you see, is an expression of the distance of the observer, who collects data and never forgets that he is collecting data (which is not always easy in such familial situations as a village ball); but at the same time photography also assumes familiarity, attention to and a sensitivity with regard to even the least perceptible of details, details that the observer can only immediately understand and interpret thanks to this very familiarity, a sensitivity for the infinitely small detail of a situation that even the most attentive of ethnologists generally fails to notice. But photography is equally tightly 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 as touched, even.”<sup>1</sup>

The photographs that Pierre Bourdieu took in the course of his ethnological and sociological research work during the Algerian war of liberation allow a new angle on his view of the social world. These photographs, that lay buried in dusty boxes for forty years, testify to an initiation journey and a profound biographical conversion, that were the starting-point of an extraordinary scientific and intellectual trajectory.

Pierre Bourdieu’s vocation for the sociologist’s profession began to crystallise at the end of the nineteen-fifties, in an Algeria shaken by an exceptionally brutal colonial war and torn by anachronisms and burning social contradictions. In this, as he himself called it, giant “social laboratory” he subjected himself with increasing consciousness and methodology to a radical conversion that was founded on laborious work – in the almost analytical sense of the word – on the philosopher’s habitus that his teachers at the *École Normale Supérieure* in

Paris had sought to instil in him. In view of the crisis situations that he experienced at first hand and the omnipresent dangers with which he saw himself faced during his years in Algeria, however, his profound aversion to the scholastic general’s view and his inability to “act the philosopher” would take a critical, constructive turn.

### **Context of origin of a sociological view**

This initiation journey on which Bourdieu was to embark as a newly-qualified philosopher, returning, four years later, as a field-tested sociologist, opened up a theoretical, empirical approach to the social world that is characteristic of his work, an approach that, being self-taught, he had to develop for the most part on his own, under exigent, dangerous conditions. In this climate of physical and symbolic violence, the young Pierre Bourdieu forged his conceptual weapons and methodological tools, that would help him, first on location and later in France, to formulate a comprehensive, coherent theory of the social world and to test it in a wide range of research fields. This Algeria, so foreign and yet, in many respects, so like the rural everyday world of Béarn, seemed in every respect to resist the utilitarian spirit of capitalism and the one-dimensional rationality of the economic man (“business is business”), given that this still largely agrarian society was still firmly rooted in traditions according to which the logic of exchange was always fundamentally founded on the principle of honour and the “ethics of brotherly love” (Max Weber). The – in every sense – violent introduction of foreign economic principles (the rapid destruction of an agricultural mode of production and the concomitant traditional solidarity relationships, the growing economic and social precarity of wide sections of the population, and their geographical and cultural uprootedness) made this society in upheaval a particularly fascinating field of sociological observation and analysis. This raised a number of fundamental questions such as: what happens to a society when it is confronted with radically new economic and social conditions that run counter to all of its generations-old rules? How does its characteristic traditional economic habitus limit the field of possibilities of its economic actors, trapped in their traditional logic, and how does it pre-structure what is thinkable and unthinkable? What are the economic conditions for accessing economic rationality? What do such terms as “credit” and „savings“ mean in such a context?

The young Pierre Bourdieu asks these questions with astonishing theoretical maturity by translating the philosophical questions that arose during his studies at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* into empirical sociological questions. He incorporates his philosophical knowledge into an analysis of interdependences between economic structures and temporal structures. His in-

interest in the phenomenology of emotional structures, the subject of his doctoral thesis, planned but never written, manifests itself in an analysis of forms of suffering that result from the clash of mental and emotional dispositions – the habitus of the social actors – and the economic and social structures imposed by colonial society.

### A “casual” sociologist

Having the feeling of being left empty-handed in view of this vast social laboratory in a state of war, that made field research a veritable adventure, he threw himself with total commitment into his work, experimenting, testing and using all possible ethnological and sociological research techniques. From participant observation to depth interview, from reconstructing kinship systems to analysing the Kabyle house as the architectural implementation of cosmological views and classifications of the world, from the statistical survey of household and time budgets that he carried out with his friends working for INSEE, The French statistics office, from systematic observation of modes of gender-specific division of labour and the associated forms of male domination to analysing the logic of gift exchange, from creating topographical sketches of the physical space of a Kabyle community to the systematic use of photography as an instrument of documentation and testimony – all research techniques, all methodological approaches and instruments were put to the service of untiring field research work. As a firm opponent of French colonialism and military oppression, Bourdieu saw his research in the compass of a radical political and committed approach: he wanted to bear witness to all that he saw, to understand a totally unsettled social world rife with contradictions and anachronisms. In view of the unbearable violence of what he was seeing, he found his sole refuge from sheer desperation in reflective detachment and a stance that he would later refer to as “participant objectivation”.

This committed objectivation also corresponds to his way of using the photographic lens: materialising and memorising observations. But these images of Algeria, as we see them today, have attained another function, for they can also serve as a mirror. Our contemporary societies are faced with a brutal neoliberal radicalisation of capitalism and its market-economy logic. By visualising such social contexts, these photographs help us better understand the dimensions and consequences of current economic and social upheavals, that are affecting more and more sections of the population. They too are faced with a new economic logic, that demands completely flexible and mobile labour innocent of history and ties, a logic that simply cannot be reconciled with their fundamental thought and action schemas. The parallel between the “deruralised” farmer from Kabylie and the damaged, deregulated employee of today’s capitalist societies is obvious, and we need only compare the testimonies presented in the collective work “The Weight of the World” supervised by Pierre Bourdieu with the testimonies summarised forty years before in the two works *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* and *Le Déracinement*. It is quite credible, then, when, towards the end of his life, Pierre Bourdieu said of his Algerian research: “This is my oldest and at the same time my most current work.”

However, this implies that we are dealing with a societal and

political question of pre-eminent topicality; a topicality due not least to a sociological objectivation made possible by a militant use of photography. Pierre Bourdieu’s photographs are being made accessible to the public for the first time here – not counting the few pictures used to illustrate the covers of some of Bourdieu’s works. Here we see Bourdieu’s view, a sociological view common to all of the pictures. At the same time, however, the view is a profoundly political one. As Pierre Bourdieu emphasised on many occasions in our conversations, he not only saw his photographs as testimonies, but also as a form of political commitment: seeing in order to make something visible, understanding in order to make something understandable.

### Images of Algeria: a book – an exhibition

At the end of this introduction it seems appropriate to mention the various stages in realising this project. When the book *Algérie 60<sup>e</sup>* was being prepared for German publication in 1999, Pierre Bourdieu told me of his ethnological and sociological work in Algeria in the late 1950s and of the hundreds of photographs that he had taken at that time. After several conversations about this period and about the key role of his Algerian research with regard to the development of his theory of the social world, he finally showed me a few hundred of his pictures – the others, according to his estimate around one thousand photographs, had been lost in the course of several moves. Noticing my great interest in the photographs with regard to my attempt to reconstruct this Algerian experience, he finally consented to having them made accessible to the public at an exhibition and in a book, despite all the humming and hawing to be expected in view of Pierre Bourdieu’s modesty and shyness.<sup>3</sup> In the end, we found the ideal partner for this project in Camera Austria, as this artists founded institution held all the important cards in the field of artistic photography and Camera Austria International photography magazine had already published interviews with Pierre Bourdieu. The aim was for Bourdieu to play the role of ethnographic informer in our collaboration, and to “frame” the photographs in their chronological, geographical and thematic contexts. At the same time, the pictures were to serve him as aide-mémoires for a biographical reconstruction of these crucial years of his life. Pierre Bourdieu was able to accompany this project until autumn 2001, after which, to our great dismay, we were forced to complete the work without him. We tried to stick as close as possible to the meaning that, according to his comments in various conversations, he had wanted to give to this project. In the form of a book and an exhibition that opened on 23 January 2003, exactly one year after his death, at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, as a kind of sneak preview, and then, officially, on 14 November 2003 at the Camera Austria exhibition space at Kunsthau Graz, we were able to make this photographic work accessible to the public so as to pay tribute to Pierre Bourdieu and to express how important he remains for us.

- 1 From the conversation between Pierre Bourdieu and Franz Schultheis, Collège de France, 26 June 2001, in: Pierre Bourdieu. *In Algerien. Zeugnisse der Entwurzelung*, Camera Austria: Graz, see p. 49.
- 2 Pierre Bourdieu: *Die zwei Gesichter der Arbeit*, Constance: UVK, 2000.
- 3 It is very important for us to thank those people who contributed significantly to the realisation of this project at various stages thanks to their expertise and practical support: Fadila Boughanemi, Salah Bouhmedja, Daniela Böhm-ler, Andrea Buss-Notter, Pierre Carles, Christian Ghasarian, Marc-Olivier Gonseth, Jacques Hainard, Melk Imboden, Peter Scheiffele, Eva Schrey, Anna Schlosser, Kristina Schulz, Thierry Wendling, Tassadit Yacine, Nicola Yazgi. My thanks are due also to Remi Lenoir for his critical reading of this text and his intelligent suggestions, and to Christine Frisinghelli for the always inspiring transdisciplinary collaboration.