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Comments on the Photographic Documentations of Pierre Bourdieu*

in *Pierre Bourdieu: In Algerien, Zeugnisse der Entwurzelung*, edited by Franz Schultheis and Christine Frisinghelli (Graz: Edition Camera Austria, 2003), pp. 217–30.

Translated by Richard Watts

“In the Algeria of the late fifties and early sixties, then struggling for its independence, to work towards a scientific analysis of Algerian society meant trying to understand and explain the real foundations and objectives of that struggle”¹

The exhibition *Pierre Bourdieu: In Algerien, Zeugnisse der Entwurzelung* (In Algeria; Testimonies of Uprooting) and the accompanying book (both 2003) present the first extensive selection of Pierre Bourdieu’s photographic documentation work to the public, material that Bourdieu—with a few exceptions—refrained from publishing for more than forty years: the photographs assembled here were taken in Algeria in the years between 1957 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.²

In an interview with Pierre Bourdieu conducted by Franz Schultheis for *Camera Austria International*—marking the start of the joint work on this project—Bourdieu sets his photographic practice in the context of his anthropological and sociological work. Looking back on what for him had been a crucial period in Algeria, he comments on his emotional ties to this country and his respect for its people, whom he sought to vindicate in all of his works.³ 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.”⁴ These pictures are also a means of communicating with the people in whom Bourdieu was primarily interested: Kabyle 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 urban conditions; 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 direct 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 scrutinize the photographic documentation of contexts that Pierre Bourdieu analyzes in his writings. We attempted to read Bourdieu’s archive—and all of the circumstances of this collection of negatives and prints,

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

After taking these photographs, Pierre Bourdieu published but few of them, and the vast majority of his photographic documentation work has so far remained unknown. Those familiar with Bourdieu’s work will recognize the photographs that were chosen as cover pictures for the first editions of his books: *Le Deracinement* (The Uprooting, with Abdelmalek Sayad), *Travail et travailleurs en Algerie* (with Alain Darbel et al.), *Algerie 60*, and *Le Sens pratique* (The Logic of Practice). But photographs from the collection were also used for articles and magazine interviews. Numerous photos illustrating 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 2,000 pictures taken in the five years of work were lost during moves.

When the archive was transferred in 2001, it contained around 600 objects. In late 2017, a second group of negatives and prints was discovered and made its way into the archive as well. The archive currently (2021) comprises 994 negatives (format 6 × 6 cm), 9 color slides (format 35 mm), and 216 contact and work prints (format between 6 × 6 cm and a maximum of 12.5 × 12.5 cm). The main body of the archive, alongside the negatives, comprises 230 large-format prints with a format of 24 × 24 cm and a smaller group with a format of 30 × 30 cm, collated by Pierre Bourdieu in three themed albums. There are no negatives of 107 of these 230 prints, that is, these prints are now the only sources available to us. All titles and dates are given by 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 (N, P), only the negative (N), or an original print without a negative (R). In 2019, scans or digital work prints were made of all negatives and original photographs, so as to avoid the risk of further damage to the originals. The digital archive currently encompasses 1,153 objects.

The photographs published by Pierre Bourdieu himself were important guidelines for selecting the photographs which were to be presented in the exhibition *Pierre Bourdieu: In Algeria, Testimonies of Uprooting*, as were the pictures that he commented on in his interview about Algeria with Franz Schultheis.⁵ Almost all of the existing exhibition-format prints were included, as we feel that they represent pictures already select-

ed by Bourdieu. The arrangement of the photos in the three albums and the handwritten comments were recorded so that we could use them as guidelines for thematic groups. As an example of this, in both the book and the exhibition we showed an excerpt of an image sequence that Bourdieu took from an album.⁶ 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 visualize the situation of the archive.

Pierre Bourdieu describes the production conditions of this documentation, which 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 garments and adaptations of traditional clothing with social traits; he secretly recorded conversations in public places with the idea of investigating the conditions of transition from one language into another; he conducted interviews, questionnaire surveys, evaluation of archives, tests in schools, and discussions in welfare centers. “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. . . . [T]he 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.”⁷

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 documentation of landless farmers living in poverty or of a populace eking out an existence as sharecroppers or farm workers in the USA in the 1930s. Above all James Agee and Walker Evans’s joint text/image work—their lucid, committed, and dignified description of the miserable life of three leasehold farmer families in the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*⁸ (a description that equally critically discusses the artists’ own activity of describing)—marked a turning point in the reflexivity of documentary or artistically committed work and could offer a point of reference in the analysis of these photographs. Indeed, in a similar manner Bourdieu succeeded in creating a basis of trust that allowed 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 recognize the precision with which Bourdieu, as a photographer, approached the subject of his study 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 an ostensibly passive observer: for example, there is a sequence of almost twenty pictures of a crossroads in Blida in which passersby walk past Bourdieu’s camera from the same angle

of view. A similar series features pictures of a newspaper kiosk on the main square 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, initially under very different circumstances than would end up being decisive with regard to the creation of the book and exhibition. 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 his demands for a European social movement against a politics of globalization and neoliberalism.⁹

Finally, it was Franz Schultheis, acting as a mediator between Bourdieu and 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 skeptical 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 photographic medium—and his essays on the definition and analysis of the field of art and its effects within society—it appeared extremely interesting to us to subject Bourdieu’s photographic documents themselves to an analysis. Yet the opportunity of scrutinizing 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 in Camera Austria’s exhibition space at Kunsthhaus Graz in the autumn of 2003.¹⁰

Acknowledgments

Our thanks are due to Pierre Bourdieu for his trust in this joint project and his cooperation right up to the time shortly before his death. We would like to thank Jérôme Bourdieu for his support and the helpful discussions, particularly during the last stage of the project. Franz Schultheis created the actual framework that allowed us to embed Bourdieu’s photographic documentations in a scientific, biographical, and historical context. Thanks to Salah Bouhmedja for the patient help in sifting through the archive and commenting on and identifying the photographs. And finally, we extend our thanks to the organizers of the “Graz 2003—Cultural Capital of Europe” program for the core funding of this complex project.

* Version of the text reviewed and updated in 2021 from *Pierre Bourdieu: In Algerien, Zeugnisse der Entwurzelung* (Graz: Edition Camera Austria, 2003). The English edition of this publication, titled *Pierre Bourdieu, Picturing Algeria*, includes a foreword by Craig Calhoun and was published by Columbia University Press, New York, in 2012. Therein, the first version of this text can be found on pages 201–14. After additional documents were added to the archive in 2017, the related data was corrected as compared to the first edition of this text. (English version revised by Dawn Michelle d’Atri.)

- 1 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 2.
- 2 Details of the accompanying English edition: *Pierre Bourdieu, Picturing Algeria* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
- 3 Pierre Bourdieu, “Participatory Objectification: Photographic Testimonies of a Declining World,” interview by Franz Schultheis, in *Camera Austria International* 75 (2001), pp. 8–14.
- 4 “Ein Gespräch mit Pierre Bourdieu von Franz Schultheis: Collège de France, Paris, 26. Juni 2001,” in *Pierre Bourdieu: In Algerien, Zeugnisse der Entwurzelung*, ed. Christine Frisinghelli and Franz Schultheis (Graz: Edition Camera Austria, 2003), pp. 21–50, esp. p. 49.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 “In Algier und Blida: Eine Bildsequenz, zusammengestellt von Pierre Bourdieu,” in *Pierre Bourdieu: In Algerien*, pp. 191–216.
- 7 Pierre Bourdieu, *Ein soziologischer Selbstversuch*, trans. Stephan Egger (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), pp. 55–56.
- 8 James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).
- 9 *Camera Austria International* 72 (2000).
- 10 The members of the Camera Austria team who were significantly involved in realizing this project (alongside the author) were the photographers Seiichi Furuya and Manfred Willmann, as well as the curators Maren Lübbke-Tidow and Anja Rösch.