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## **Fieldwork with photography: Pierre Bourdieu's photographic testimonies of Algeria in the fifties.**

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*Ladies and gentlemen, first I would like to thank you for inviting me to this meeting. I'm very glad to be here with you in order to talk on Pierre Bourdieu, his social science and especially the sociological and ethnographical photography he practised in Algeria in the later 1950's.*

*Let's try and talk about Bourdieu, his ethnographic studies from Algeria and the role of photography within this work.*

*Since the 1960s, even photography-lovers with little interest in sociology will most likely be familiar with Pierre Bourdieu thanks to his investigation of this "illegitimate art" in a book that has already become a classic. But the fact that Bourdieu took up the camera himself in order to back up his ethnological field studies in Algeria in the fifties with the aid of photographic testimonies was largely unknown until his death. Only a few of these several hundreds of photos were published on the cover of one or the other of Bourdieu's works, albeit practically unnoticed by the public.*

*I had the chance to discover these interesting documents, a sort of missing link in the idea we had of Pierre Bourdieu and his sociology till then, when I was working with him on the German version of his book « Algeria 1960 »*

*During the course of one of the conversations we had on his Algeria studies, he suddenly mentioned photos dating back to this period and my spontaneous curiosity prompted me to ask him if I could have a glance at them.*

*As these photographs were stored away among some old cartoons in one of the rooms of his Centre of European Sociology, Bourdieu promised to show them to me after having put them into some kind of order. Some weeks later, he gave me some albums with about 700 hundred photographs. Looking for the first time at these pictures taken in Algeria some forty years ago, I had the feeling I knew them already rather well, and as I had never encountered them before, this feeling of « déjà vu » was quite strange and astonishing. Later on I would understand that while working on the German version of « Algeria 1960 », I had become quite familiar with Bourdieu's ethnographic studies and his **thick descriptions** of the Algerian world and that one and the same view of social reality was at work in his writings and his photography. One could say that I discovered a sort of visualization of the ethnological and sociological observations I already knew so well.*

*I fell in love with this photography at once and so I spontaneously suggested to Bourdieu the idea of presenting this unknown facet of his ethnology to the public, an idea that Pierre Bourdieu initially viewed with some scepticism as he did not want the artistic-aesthetic quality of his photos to be overrated.*

However, together with Christine Frisinghelli from Camera Austria, I was able to convince him to see in these photos from Algeria first and foremost important primary ethnographic material which, according to the rules of qualitative social research with regard to identifying and securing relevant traces and testimonies of a foreign social world, has the same cognitive value, for example, as observation records or statements made by ethnographic informants. The photographic material, then, must not be viewed and interpreted independently of the specific scientific interest upon which the selection of motifs, the respective angle, the inclusion of context in the composition of the picture, and thus the construction of the object to be recorded itself, depends, if we wish to avoid subscribing to an ahistorical aesthetic purism, ignoring the context-specific social significance and political dimension of these pictures. The pictures were already "**framed**" and dated because of the conditions under which they were made and they are entrenched in a clear socio-historical context, aiming to document – in Bourdieu's own words: to **objectify** – this context in a specific way.

The context he was concerned with was characterized by profound contradictions and paradoxes and this made it, as Bourdieu said himself, a sort of giant sociological laboratory:

### **Algeria as a giant sociological laboratory full of historical contradictions and cultural lags :**

- A pre-capitalist system (pre-market-logic) and its « anti-economist ethics of economy » have to face the brutal enforcement of capitalist, profoundly foreign, economic principles.
- A traditional society and a pre-modern habitus meet with a new mode of economic commerce and logic of action that is inconsistent with all social rules that have been valid for generations (ethic of brotherliness, reciprocity of gifts, etc.)?
- This kind of brutal economic change meant that "there is no longer any such thing as 'dishonour', no longer a fear of abandoning the land or selling it to strangers, no longer a feeling of shame at abandoning a father or a mother in poverty. Now there is no hesitation before taking

up any expedient, any ruse, in order to live... There is no longer any obstacle to the individualism that is part and parcel of the modern economy: within large groupings, or large masses of isolated individuals, each is protected by his or her anonymity. Each feels responsible for himself or herself, but for himself or herself alone."

- rapid decline of traditional agricultural production methods
- economic precarization and social uprooting as the fate of wide sections of the population
- emergence of a new subproletariat
- forms of social suffering accompanying this state of social uprooting and anomie

In the face of this extraordinary situation, Bourdieu accomplishes an equally extraordinary biographical conversion: from the brilliant graduate of the Parisian elite Ecole Normale Supérieure, who is predestined for an academic career as a philosopher, he trains himself to become a researcher by means of constant radicalization of his own intellectual and political standards and incessant experimentation with all available quantitative and qualitative methods of social research: "In view of the dramatic situation in Algeria, I wanted to make myself useful and decided to undertake a study on Algerian society, in order to make it a bit clearer to people back home what was happening in this country. I wanted to testify to what was going on before my eyes."

## **Transparency**

*Methods, strategies and instruments of social research experimented with by Pierre Bourdieu as self training during his ethnological and sociological fieldwork in Algeria :*

*Observation, description, analysis and theoretical framing on*

- Architecture as a mirror of cosmological order
- Body-techniques (hexis)
- Elementary forms of exchange (the ethics of gift exchange and reciprocity)
- Family strategies of social reproduction (intergenerational transmission of material and non material goods)
- Household-budget-analysis
- Oral history, popular poetics and beliefs
- Participatory observation/objectivation

- Photographical visualization of social structures
- Codes of honour and the logic of symbolic capital
- Qualitative Interview
- Relationships between religion and economic ethics
- Rituals of sociability
- Sexual division of labour
- Social inequalities in housing
- Social representations of work
- Socioanalysis based on oral testimonies
- Structures of parenthood and genealogical order
- Structures of social space (market places, cemeteries and so on)
- Structures of time in agrarian society
- Surveys on consumption and life style and statistical analysis
- Time-budget-analysis
- Vestimentary codes
- Visualization of social structures (drawings)

Even now, in the first years of his self-training as a sociologist, Bourdieu refers back to the methodology of an interpretative sociology whose aim it is to apprehend social actors in their necessity and to comprehend why they act and live as they do and not differently. He listens to and is interested in those who lack both the material and symbolic means of leaving traces in history and thus of existing socially. But the sociologist not only devotes to them his time and personal interest, but also lends them his pen, testifying to their personal history and allowing objective social structures, empirically observable regularities and statistically demonstrable links to emerge from the orbit of an irreducible subjective uniqueness. Photography, too, obeys this urge to testify, to overcome moments of intense personal dismay by means of the distance of the lens and, analogously to the cognitive instrument of the interpretative interview, to secure traces.

Perhaps this is a very personal way out of the dilemma of the colonial constellation, the "original sin of the intellectual from the land of the colonial masters". He works off his share in the collective guilt by, in the words of Marx, wielding the weapons of criticism to criticise weapons and by putting his scientific expertise at the service of a view of Algerian conditions that runs counter to the customary racist stereotypes with which colonial modernizers label "developing countries". His aim was to make visible the symbolic violence in the eye of the colonial master when he elevates his ingrained moral, aesthetic or economic categories of thinking and acting to a universal yardstick, quite simply depicting the "other" or "foreign" in categories of underdevelopment and imperfection.

Bourdieu's photos, and he makes no secret of this, are full of affection and sympathy for these people, and this emotional commitment is manifested with far greater immediacy than in the sociological discourse which, as Bourdieu himself emphasises, sacrifices much more to the scientific norm of permanent symbolization of distance and "objectivity" by means of self-restraint and censorship than he may have bargained for: "The tremendous upheavals of this Algerian society in transition shaped and amplified my somewhat crazy clutching to scientism quite substantially. When I was doing my interviews or taking pictures there, I was so emotionally churned up that I tried to get a grip on my uncertainty by means of this shield of scientism."

If we read Bourdieu's photos alternately with his writings from this period, and if we see both media as complementary approaches not only to a social world that is becoming increasingly alien to us, but also, and above all, to an image of the human being that is rapidly being washed away by the erosive forces of modernism, these photos provide a wealth of sociological material illustrating the habitus and ethos of pre-modern man and his inherent dignity. With his theory of the economic conditions of access to rationality, Bourdieu attacks head on the racist-biased stereotype of an Algerian population that is virtually incapable of being modernized and civilized.

The usual prejudices concerning the purported inability of these people to live in "well-ordered conditions" (lack of domestic hygiene, lack of economic planning, little motivation to work, unreliability, etc.) were a consummate means of legitimising the colonial constellation, just as today's theories of the "culture of poverty" explain and justify the existence of social exclusion by taking recourse to quasi-genetic patterns of reproduction. So, as materialistic as Bourdieu's theory of the priority of material living and working conditions may initially have appeared, it is in fact a view that precisely unmasks and criticizes the symbolic relations of domination with an emancipatory thrust by conceding to a dominated group an economic and social practice with its own logic and self-will, conclusively portraying how these practices were only shattered by the destructive influences of colonization.

Bourdieu himself – contrary to the purported evidence of ingrained categories of thought and action – had to struggle hard to achieve his insight into a different view of work, effort, benefit and profit that is diametrically opposed to our modern view, whereby all economic activities are socially entrenched and not reduced to the mantra "business is business" and whereby money has not yet become an end in itself. The aim of Bourdieu's endeavours to secure traces of a world in decline, in words and images, was from the outset a strategy of rehabilitating the everyday. If these early photos already convincingly display the later leitmotif of Bourdieu's sociology – according to a dictum of Flaubert "To paint the banal well" – the reason is not least the self-imposed constant

obligation of reflective distance to what he sees and of forbidding himself to melt with philanthropic maudlin sentimentality.

All the fundamental subjects of Bourdieu's sociology are already present in this early stage: he inquires about the underlying rules of exchange and the "total social facts" applied in this context (Mauss), the social integration of economization, the relation of time structures and rationality, the symbolic orders of society, relations of domination between the genders, generations and social classes, or about the socio-historical conditions of possibility of what was deemed to be the universal rational calculation of *homo economicus*; questions, then, that are equally key cognitive issues in his most recent writings.

Bourdieu's seminal field research, now for the first time complemented by a photographic component, in which ethnology, anthropology and sociology are inseparably linked and which Bourdieu recently rightly referred to as his "earliest and most current work", offers an insight into the status nascendi of Bourdieu's sociology in all its elementary forms and contents. Alongside this historical dimension of his work, and indeed far exceeding it,

Bourdieu's photography also retains its character as impressive socio-historical photographic material. It testifies to a social world full of non-simultaneities, whose people even today have not overcome their homelessness and uprootedness – an estrangement both from tradition and modernism. Perhaps the tragedy of Algeria expressed in Bourdieu's photographs is precisely that they seem not to have lost any of their relevance and realism even today, four decades later.

*But at the same time, we have to stress the importance of the Algerian experience for the biographic trajectory of Bourdieu and his way of becoming a sociologist and intellectual of a very special kind. In order to make this point understood, I would prefer to listen to Bourdieu himself speaking about this period of his life:*

**Photography in fieldwork: Pierre Bourdieu talking about the conversion of his view of the social world, the others and himself:**

„ 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.“

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.“

*Unfortunately, Bourdieu left us before having realized this project and together with Christine I had to go along without him. We are glad that the scientific community of sociologists, anthropologists and ethnologists interested in the works of Bourdieu today can use his photography, as we are doing at this very moment, to complete the picture we have of his view of social reality and to discover a new facet of his scientific work.*

*Thank you very much for your attention*