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Sociological Investigations

From Photographic Evidence to Thick Description in the Work of Pierre Bourdieu

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Pierre Bourdieu's photographic works: marginal items or key elements?

On 23 January 2003, around 150 photographs taken by Pierre Bourdieu in Algeria nearly fifty years earlier were displayed for the first time in an exhibition at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris. A year after his death, the exhibition made an almost totally unknown facet of his creative work accessible to a public who, though generally very surprised, were also completely taken with this discovery. These people were as a rule familiar with Bourdieu's work, had held one or other of his books in their hands and had leafed through or read it. They had of course also *seen* the current cover, but had barely *taken note* of it; had they done so, they would have been far less surprised. For several volumes of the original French editions, edited by Bourdieu himself, reproduce photographs from this same fund: a girl with brushwood for

roofing new settler dwellings (*Le déracinement*, Paris 1964); two men in turbans seated on the running board of an old car (*Algerie 60*, Paris 1977); a farm labourer on the threshing floor (*Le sens pratique*, Paris 1980); a group of farmers watching a village dance (*Le bal des célibataires*, Paris 2002). What are we to make of such a longstanding failure to notice this visual sociology of Bourdieu's, which has provoked such surprise and enthusiasm? It is always risky to work with negative evidence, and the author of these lines will be all the more prudent since he has himself suffered from this "blind spot" when dealing with Bourdieu's work. It may be possible, however, to derive some information about these problems by placing them in a broader context and examining the status of Bourdieu's photographs – for Bourdieu himself as well as for the reception of his work. We can then discuss what value ought to be assigned to Bourdieu's photographs and the extent to which they can be considered *professional*. Here Bourdieu himself should also have something to say.

Pierre Bourdieu talks about his photographic practice in Algeria

The prelude to the examination of Pierre Bourdieu's photography was a conversation I had with him at the Collège de France in June 2001[1], which he begins by telling how he bought himself the best camera available on the market at the time. He made a special trip to Germany for it, shelling out the first money he had ever earned for himself as a secondary-school teacher. He then describes the advantages of his Zeiss Ikoflex camera for the photographic work to be done in Algeria; deals professionally with the problem of the light conditions; and talks about friends who were professional photographers, from whom he has sought advice. He also describes how photography was able to open some useful doors in fieldwork.[2]

F.S.: "In a way, you were already fascinated by photography before you left for Algeria. Had you been planning to make systematically 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 Ihad 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. [...] 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."

Here, Bourdieu provides information about what photography means to him. Having stressed the degree of almost professional care with which he handled the material, he talks himself about the different uses of photography. The fact that Bourdieu talks about these photographs without having them there in front of him leads one to conclude that he had quite recently held them in his hands and viewed them – indeed, that he had gone right through the entire collection – since the images referred to belonged to quite different contexts. The broad range of photographic functions mentioned can, in our opinion, be summarized and systematized as follows:

a) to secure evidence: to record something observed and transitory and to preserve it on celluloid (evidence)

b) to store and preserve observations for a specific later use (ethnological materials)

c) to bring about a transformation of the gaze, forcing one to see (objectification)

d) to offer pegs on which to hang subjects (to generate questions – construct topics)

e) to satisfy and document aesthetic needs (in short, to take photographs!)

As one can see, Bourdieu's relationship to photography is perfectly reflective and reflexive, though scarcely formulated according to the "rules of this art" and its educated discourses. Such an unorthodox and spontaneous description is all the more surprising since Bourdieu, thanks to his now classic studies of the use of photography, would have had a broad range of "educated" ideas and theoretical concepts at his disposal, in order to express his

relationship with photography in a manner befitting his status, in terms of intellectual eloquence.

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

So it was his taste for paradoxes, contradictions, asymmetries and historical breaks that was in no small way responsible for shaping Bourdieu's choice of subject. This might be interpreted purely as an aesthetic disposition, which one also comes across in established, i.e. "real", photographers. With Bourdieu, however, this tendency refers above all to the concept of the "sociological laboratory", which he used to describe Algeria's socio-historic situation. By this he meant primarily the tensions arising from the convergence of tradition with a rapid modernization dictated by external circumstances, tensions expressed directly at the level of habitus and hexis of the people affected.

> *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."
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> 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'."

Here, Bourdieu refers directly to the particular quality of documenting with photography: on the one hand, it allows – indeed forces – a distance vis-a-vis the Other; on the other, it facilitates participation. In this respect, photography also offered an effective counterweight to the scientifically dry reports and evidence that, because of the scalpel-like precision of Bourdieu's formulations, gave rise again and again to the suspicion that he was emotionally detached – a suspicion that is exposed here as narrow and superficial. But let us listen some more to what he has to say:

> "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 Kerkera. The military had herded people together who had previouslybeen 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 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. "

Here we see, on the one hand, the connection between colonialism, destruction and the facilitation of scientific fieldwork already mentioned by Bourdieu in *The Logic of Practice*, a topic beyond the scope of the present discussion. On the other hand, we find the link between photographic and discursive visualization that is central to our investigation. In this instance, it concerns pieces of furniture in a Kabyle house and the functions they fulfil. In his earlier writings from Algeria, Bourdieu had described them with meticulous precision. And readers who became familiar with these

highly detailed explanations as visualizations of a hitherto unknown objective world, before "rediscovering" – often decades later – these very same objects captured on celluloid, surely cannot help feeling a sense of *déjà-vu*. Here, it is reasonable to assume that Bourdieu made use of these very dense and precise descriptions of the Kabyles' everyday material world, as he did elsewhere with his photographic evidence, in order to pursue back home, calmly and very patiently, a material anthropology on the basis of his photographic archive.

He did this by gradually evolving from a Parisian intellectual and philosopher into an ethnological and sociological fieldworker; in a process of self-learning, he experimented with a broad range of scientific methods and instruments, which included visual anthropology and sociology in the form of photography. It is therefore essential beforehand to situate and interpret Bourdieu's photography within the context of this fieldwork, giving it the same heuristic status as the qualitative interview or the establishing of genealogies.

Random research: "It was all fine by me!"

A reminder: on completion of his military service, Bourdieu really throws himself into research work as a young assistant at the university of Algiers. He travels a lot, observing even apparently banal everyday scenes with curiosity; he travels from village to village with the INSEE researchers; he draws up his first questionnaire for research into the styles of consumption and life of different sections of the population; he takes part in a study of "Work and Workers in Algeria"; he interviews dozens of informants himself; he takes several hundred photographs – whether on trips with journalists, alone or accompanied by his

friend, Sayad. He is interested in the classic ethnological objects: farming calendars, woven goods, pottery, sayings, folk wisdom, poetry and rites of passage. However, he tries at the same time to deal with quite different, and hitherto greatly neglected, areas of cultural practice. As Bourdieu writes in *The Logic of Practice,* these practices include, among other things, the structuring and orienting of time (subdivisions of the year, the day, of a person's life), the structuring and organization of space – especially domestic interiors, body movements and body parts, children's games and the rituals of early childhood, values (*nif* and *h'urma*) and gender-specific divisions of labour, colours and traditional interpretations of dreams, etc. The analyses of these social branches were not meant to be abruptly juxtaposed with one another. Rather, in their basic structures or formative dimensions, they would be systematically reduced by means of synoptic presentations, which would allow homologous and contrastive relationships to be filtered out, related to one another and analysed transversally. In such an analysis, for example, common patterns in the symbolic ordering of rural rites, of phases in the cycle of life or in women's work would then crystallize.

In this process, questions and interests often develop spontaneously, the motivation for which seems to be determined by the desire to *understand*: why social conditions are as they are, why the people living in them live the way they do and think the way they think, and act in one way and not another. This question concerning the historicity of the social world is demonstrated in the work of the young Bourdieu in the most diverse details, which at first sight can appear outlandish or perhaps already recall Bourdieu's later motto – modelled on Flaubert – that "Art consists of depicting banal facts well". For him, it's about the densest possible description of a foreign culture by means of the most

varied detailed images and descriptions, which should gradually reveal themselves in their interdependence and cohesion.

The outstanding qualities of his research include, as we all know, empirically grounded theory and methodological innovation, unconventional combinations of the most diverse research strategies, as well as the analytical clarity with which he then handled the empirical data acquired. Of great interest then, in retrospect, for an understanding of his work is the question of how far Bourdieu has already become familiar, in this phase of self-taught, independent initiation, with the methods and techniques of fieldwork, and acquired his practical research know-how through learning by doing.[3] In the discussion with him, it often seemed as if a practical, empirical knowledge in dealing with social research had become habitually embedded in his work very early on, and had intensified into a general habitus where methodological reflexivity had become a reflex or a basic disposition, which asserted itself from his very first steps into the field of research, and which was confirmed and reinforced through every subsequent step, and gradually crystallized in a recurrent learning process with the contours familiar to us today.

Alongside the above-mentioned objects and contexts, which Bourdieu explored during his time in Algeria, he gained access to a variety of areas using the most diverse methods such as participant observation, qualitative interviews or the establishment of genealogies, sketches and maps. We will now clarify in two selected subject areas the role intended for photography within this orchestra of diverse approaches and methods.

Thick description

Thanks to the photographic evidence from his fieldwork in Algeria, brought to light shortly before his death, it is possible to reconstruct how intensively the young Bourdieu pursued the business of ethnographical observation, recording a multitude of social scenarios in word and image.[4] The technique of dense description or "total description", as described in the introduction to the "Béarn Studies", collated into a single volume shortly after his death, would then be perfected by Bourdieu in the participating observation at a village dance during his brief return to his home country, so much so that he duplicates, both in words and photographic images, this key situation for an understanding of the misery of enforced celibacy afflicting farmers in his native village. And he structures both representations of this social situation so complementarily, that his dense description seems like a reading of the accompanying images, or else a specific visualization of the circumstances he portrays. Throughout his life, Bourdieu will cultivate this type of photographic gaze applied to everyday social situations, people and objects and, in portraying his interlocutors and the world they live in, for example, he will further systematize them for *The Weight of the World*.

The logic of things

Before Bourdieu's photographic gaze became familiar to us, materialized in hundreds of images from this period, his early writings were already indirectly offering possible access. In them, we find many meticulous descriptions of household and other items of practical use, furniture, beams, ornaments, etc. from Algeria's everyday rural environment. Among these in particular, we find descriptions of objects that, directly or indirectly, referred to daily logics of behaviour such as the safeguarding of supplies and the development of precautions. For example, there are detailed

descriptions of large clay containers for grain, etc., which reveal a hole at a specific height above their base. Citing these, Bourdieu explains in detail that the Algerian farmer certainly didn't lack concepts of economic planning and foresight; rather, by using such simple devices as this indicator of the stock level (if you were able to see the container's cavity through the hole, then stock was running low and precautions were necessary), he in fact displayed a very efficient form of economic rationality – however much this might have been denied him because of the ethnocentric misjudgements of western observers.[5]

Bourdieu got his ethnographic informants or, more directly, the people he questioned to explain the functions of these objects accurately to him, and then tried to decode the practical meaning materialized in them. The fact that he also dedicated very many of his photographs to this type of reified social practice shows that, in his first steps into ethnological terrain, he was well and truly on the road to a sociology of everyday objects. This sociology would reappear, moreover, in the selection of photographic illustrations accompanying the approach to class-specific everyday worlds and aesthetics in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

Habitat and Habitus

The same is true of the detailed descriptions of social sign systems marking the symbolic order, for which one finds a multiplicity of clues in Bourdieu's essay on the Kabyle house. These clues appear *before one's eyes* once again in his recently discovered photographic work, in a directly tangible form. Here, the young Bourdieu develops an approach to the analysis of the everyday world, which is rapidly to become a classic of structuralist fieldwork, in which – to borrow Elias' s expression – he uses architecture as an indicator

of social relationships, while at the same time interpreting it as the material expression of cosmological concepts of order.

In January 1960, a 27-page duplicated manuscript entitled “La maison kabyle ou le monde renversé” (“The Kabyle House or The World Reversed”) is published.[6] Ten years later, this essay is then published in a commemorative volume for Claude Lévi-Strauss and is very soon considered a classic of structuralist research. Two years later, this text then appears in slightly modified form as a chapter in *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (*Outline of a Theory of Practice)*, and finally it is presented anew in 1980 in *Le sens pratique* (*The Logic of Practice)*. What is more, this research topic will be a constant presence in the context of Bourdieu’s analysis of the gender order too. How and why is there this 20-year-long continuous (albeit indirect) revolving around a specific topic of social scientific research and reflection, which then goes far beyond it (think of *La domination masculine* 1996)? When, during a conversation mentioned earlier, Bourdieu stressed that he had acquired in Algeria a “capital of problems” that would suffice for his entire future life and work, a key characteristic feature of his thought and work becomes visible in a kind of cyclical, spiralling form of revolving around sociological issues over decades, issues discovered very early on, which never let him go and for which his photographic archive fulfilled an important role.

The fact that Bourdieu went there as a second stage, and assigned an emblematic status and an unambiguous symbolic function to these visual representatives of a specific experience with social reality, by positioning them on the covers of his books and affording them almost equal rights with the title of the specific book with which they share an affinity, no longer comes as a surprise.

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[1] In: *Pierre Bourdieu. In Algerien. Zeugnisse der Entwurzelung,* ed. by Franz Schultheis and Christine Frisinghelli, Graz 2003, pp. 19-44.

[2] Ibid., p. 23 ff.

[3] This is also of interest for an understanding of his work because, in many of his writings but most particularly in *The Misery of the World*, Bourdieu does not explicate his methodology at all, or at best he merely hints at it.

[4] For example, that group of men seated under a large olive tree on a hot afternoon, letting the intense heat of the day pass them by, belongs to such key scenes that lasted long in his memory as evocative moments of important insights into the social world, or were captured on celluloid as bearers of memory. Several discreetly shot group photos and detailed portraits of individual people or objects in this scene make it clear that Bourdieu attached to it a role that, for him personally, was important. When, in the interviews 40 years afterwards, we then hear Bourdieu report on this situation in detail, still obviously moved as he recounts how these men told him about their former possessions – land and livestock – while throwing themselves, almost childlike, into a game of juggling olives, and we read about the suffering of dispossessed farmers forcibly driven from their farms by the colonial regime, and about the process of land expropriation in his and Sayad's work *Le déracinement* (*The Uprooting)*, we can then relate to a further element of Bourdieu's fieldwork: the dense description of such key scenarios.

[5] Through the study of such indicators of the social consciousness of time, Bourdieu then returned once again to the deserted terrain of a phenomenology of time; however, in a

completely different form, with the dialectic being stood “on its feet” and integrated into a theory of practice that, as a young philosopher in Paris, he could barely have imagined possible (cf Pierre Bourdieu, *Die zwei Gesichter der Arbeit*, Konstanz 2000).

[6] Pierre Bourdieu, “La maison kabyle ou le monde renversé”, in: Bourdieu, *Deux essais sur la société kabyle*, Université de Lausanne 1960 [engl. Pierre Bourdieu, *Algeria 1960: The Disenchantment of the World, the Sense of Honour, the Kabyle House or the World Reversed*, Cambridge 1979]