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Photographs in Context

Pierre Bourdieu's Photographic Documentary Accounts in Algeria, 1957-1961

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For this paper, I made a selection of Pierre Bourdieu's photographs, taken in Algeria in the period between 1957 and 1961 – a sample taken from the photographic archive that Bourdieu entrusted to us with the aim of arranging an exhibition and book-publishing project. Organized by the *Fondation Pierre Bourdieu* in Geneva and *Camera Austria* in Graz between 2001 and 2003 and travelling internationally since then, this exhibition and the accompanying publication make Bourdieu's photographic documentary accounts available to the public for the first time because, once he had taken these photographs, Pierre Bourdieu had released only a few for publication.

Those familiar with Bourdieu's early writings on Algeria may know the photographs chosen as cover images for the first editions of the following books by him: *Le déracinement* (with Abdelmalek Sayad); *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* (with Alain Darbel et al.); *Algérie 60* and *Le sens pratique*. Some other photographs have appeared in magazines in connection with articles by Bourdieu. However, many

prints (including several of the images used in publications) are no longer in the archive; in some cases, the negative too is missing.[1]

Bourdieu mentioned that many of the 2,000 or so pictures, taken during four years of work altogether, had gone missing because of various changes of residence. He also stated that he didn't keep all the negatives but that, at a very early stage, he already wanted to make a selection. Though it is no longer possible to reconstruct these processes and decisions from the structure of the available images, the intended selection nevertheless points towards an interesting aspect of Bourdieu's handling of photography: the compilation of the images follows an archival plan, according to which the pictures, along with interviews, recordings, sketches, data from questionnaires and statistical surveys, are archived for later use. The decision to preserve one photograph and reject another also indicates that the visual information stored in them, their factual content, needs to be read in the context of the research and in light of the facts established within this context.

When – knowing the photographic archive – one reads *The Uprooting: The Crisis of Traditional Agriculture in Algeria* or Bourdieu's first book, *The Sociology of Algeria,* one actually experiences a series of *déjà-vus*. The reading and interpretation of the images are informed by the highly complex account of the living conditions, undergoing profound change, of Algeria's rural population and their fate and chances of survival during the colony's war of independence in light of the effects of French colonial policy since 1830 (especially since the reform of land ownership rights in 1863, which was designed to destroy communal land ownership and the clan structures on which the traditional societies were based). The "subjects" of the images, their factual, denotative content allow us only occasional glimpses of the consequences of profound social upheaval without the

supplementary analysis that the writings provide to complete the picture.

The scholarly investigation of socio-political facts and the practice of situating them in a precise, historical framework, supported by statistically derived data, extends as far as the documentation and analysis of details that often appear ephemeral to us: for instance, a record of the forms of dress (western and traditional dress in varying combinations), or of the ways the inhabitants of the resettlement camps choose to go about their daily tasks, is taken as evidence of how far the colonial reorganization of space has become inscribed in the landscape as much as in the behaviour of the people forced into this new spatial planning. The complementarity offered by the text enables us to perceive the knowledge stored in the images more accurately, providing us with the necessary vocabulary to interpret visual information that is often open to more than one reading. In short, only textual supplementation allows us to acknowledge the image's meaning, the determination of which is so highly context-sensitive in photography. Only thus do the gestures in the exchange between people, their often fleeting presence, speak of a real experience; only thus are we able to recognize their use in the way buildings and objects are arranged, or to understand their logic as the result of the prevailing power relations.

Unlike the written records, which became established in his books, Bourdieu's photographs seem to have had an almost exclusively "private" function: over decades, they served as memory supports for him for the repeated study and analysis of the Algerian experiences. Bourdieu did not realize their "use value" as a pictorial corpus in publications (for instance as scholarly material or as a visual narrative to supplement the writings). But there are draft outlines for arranging an exhibition involving a trial montage of

images and texts, which enabled us to decide how to contextualize the photographic corpus using extracts from the writings on Algeria.

Photography was an appropriate recording technique for Pierre Bourdieu's project to bear witness to actual events in Algeria, but he did not pursue it further in his professional practice (except for a study on marriage customs in his native village of Lasseube in Béarn, carried out in 1962 on his return from Algeria, in collaboration with Abdelmalek Sayad). Bourdieu was an enthusiastic photographer, with a lively interest in the technology of the medium as much as its aesthetics, as his major study of the social definition of photography which was commissioned by Kodak and carried out by a team, impressively demonstrates.[2] However, it is interesting that Bourdieu did not acquiesce to his friends' request that he himself deal with developing negatives or making prints (thereby maintaining the artistic-technical autonomy that is typical of the politically engaged amateur photographer as well as the artist). As a scholar, he favoured the division of labour, confining himself to taking the photographs and subsequently leaving it to a photographer in Algiers to carry out the desired processing.

We know, from his conversations about Algeria, how well photography corresponded to his concept of *participant observatio*, and scholarly critical distance and objectification.[3] The experiences during his "apprenticeship" in Algeria (which had begun with military service in 1955) meant a genuine "conversion" for the young academic, which would permanently shape his view of all aspects of the social, and of the economic and cultural conditions of social action. Bourdieu's reflexivity, his ability to constantly question his position and his actions in the particular situation, and above all the vigilance he acquired from the

incredible weight of experience, were the prerequisites that enabled him to cope with the most difficult situations and establish a firm foundation of trust with the victims of oppression and expulsion, thus making real work possible at all in a war situation – in this "social laboratory" as he called Algeria.

Photography interested him on several levels. It represents the detached observation and objectification of the academic and renders the fact of observing a self-conscious act. It allows one to absorb directly and at the closest possible range details whose meaning may be overlooked at the precise moment of perception, or which one may not be able to study closely in the field, details which in this way are archived and ready for investigation on a subsequent occasion. Photography does indeed create, on the one hand, a certain distance, but it also opens up communication because it shows interest in the subject of the observation, in the fate of people and is, as Bourdieu said: "bound up with the relationship I maintained with my subject at that time, and at no time did I ever forget that I was dealing with people, people whom I encountered with a gaze [...]."[4] It was the people who represented Bourdieu's central interest.

Pierre Bourdieu's photographic work stands in the tradition of a politically engaged, humanistic photography, such as we know from the large-scale documentary accounts (thematically close to Bourdieu's work) of the misery of dispossessed farmers, or of people in 1930s America eking out a wretched existence as tenant farmers or agricultural labourers. Closely related in chronological terms, we find in French photography (e.g. in Robert Doisneau's work) in the immediate post-war period a trend towards a humanistic documentarism, which – always mindful of commenting on the images in accompanying texts – also granted visibility for the first time to "ordinary people", the homeless,

workers, street life, public festivals and brought them to public attention through publication in the major magazines. In the same period, in 1955, the exhibition "The Family of Man", which was organized for the Museum of Modern Art and presented worldwide (and which Roland Barthes discussed in 1957 as one of the *Mythologies*),
offered an exemplary, de-historicizing portrayal of the *conditio humana,* in which it removed any contextual embeddedness from the photography, thus transforming it into a vehicle for the mythification of all human activity.

Discussion about the portrayal of the social and the political has always accompanied the debate on photography. Among the aspects of postcolonialism, we must assign a central role in the analysis and interpretation of images, in the current time frame, to the virulent issues regarding the representation of the Other. In this task – which is to avoid instances of the picturesque and its unmasking exoticism (so aptly illustrating our ideological distortions) – Pierre Bourdieu's reflexivity, documented in his images from Algeria and the accompanying texts in such a memorable way, can be of use to us.

Le déracinement / **The Uprooting**

In the following discussion, I would like to deal more closely with the concept of "uprooting" – *Le déracinement* – with specific reference to its use in Pierre Bourdieu's works on Algeria. This concept is both the title and the central theme of one of his first publications, which he wrote with his co-author, Abdelmalek Sayad. (Sayad later became one of the most important analysts of migration from the Maghreb to Europe). The fieldwork and research on which the book is based were carried out jointly with a

group of Bourdieu's students from the university in Algiers, where he taught philosophy and sociology after completing his military service in 1957, while the book itself was published somewhat later in 1964.[5]

Bourdieu's fieldwork on the uprooting of Algeria's rural population and the birth of an urban (sub-)proletariat in that country are crucial for an understanding of what shaped his socio-political stance, and also brings to light the connection that existed from the very beginning between his academic and his political commitment. We can only grasp the complexity and originality of Bourdieu's thinking by placing it in the social and political context that contributed to its development: an Algerian society exposed to the effects of 130 years of colonial rule and the subsequent war of independence. In this situation, which was shaped by political tensions and where no reliable data whatsoever existed about a society in a state of upheaval as dramatic as it was rapid, Bourdieu was forced to carry out his own investigations and to turn to a section of Algerian society whose conception of itself was shaken to the core by this upheaval – the uprooted farmers (*paysans déracinés*) – in order to make the material and moral misery of an entire people comprehensible through empirical observation.

Bourdieu and his Algerian colleagues were above all interested in two correlating factors of the crisis: first, the colonial expropriations of land, which had forced thousands of peasant farmers to migrate to the cities and to France since 1880; and secondly, the French resettlement policy of the war years, when millions of people were resettled in government-built camps. The resultant crisis in traditional economic and social life was observed from the perspective of uprooting, a crisis that brought in its wake the destruction of traditional family structures, the collapse of social values and extreme instability. As a result of these events,

not alone did farmers become welfare recipients and migrant workers become day labourers in the colonial masters' fields, but resettlement also led to the virtual disappearance of agrarian resources and a weakening of the old traditions of solidarity.

"The farmers, driven from their hereditary dwelling places, were taken to oversized camps, the organization of which was often determined from a purely military point of view. [...] The 'resettled people' lived in a state of total dependence on military rule [...]. Despite the ban on resettling sections of the population without the civil authorities' permission, which was established at the beginning of 1959, the resettlement measures multiplied: in 1960, 2,157,000 Algerians, i.e. a quarter of the entire population, were affected by such measures. If one then factors in rural exodus, the number of individuals no longer living in their hereditary dwelling places can be estimated at three million at least, a figure corresponding to half of the rural population. This population transfer is among the most brutal in history." [6]

"It is extremely difficult to talk about all of this in the right way. [These camps were] far from being concentration camps. They were dramatic conditions, but not to the extent that was often said. And I was there and observed it all, and it was all so complicated and went far beyond my capacities! When they told me things, I sometimes needed two or three days afterwards to understand everything, complicated placenames or genealogies, numbers of lost cattle and other lost possessions, and I was then completely overwhelmed by it all, and in this respect every aid was good, and photography was basically a way of trying to cope with the shock of a devastating reality."[7]

Fieldwork in a country at war both enabled and also obliged Bourdieu to use ethnology as an important instrument of symbolic

struggle and not just as an academic discipline, far removed from any political function. He wanted Algeria to exist, to be visible and comprehensible amidst the chaos of a war that was denied and glossed over by the colonial ideology – to this day, the concept of "events" (*évènements*) is used in French terminology to refer to this war. This was one of the core issues for the young philosopher and for future sociologists; it also explains his decision to highlight, with the aid of his own empirical research, the disintegration of the structures of the native population.

French colonialization brought about dramatic changes in Algeria, which were shaped by the pre-capitalistic system and the business ethics based on that system. The brutal enforcement of foreign economic principles, the rapid decline of traditional agricultural methods of production, the growth of a new sub-proletariat, economic impoverishment and social uprooting became the fate of further sections of the population.

What happens to a society that is faced with a new logic of behaviour which contradicts every social rule that has been valid for generations? How far does the traditional economic habitus restrict the social actors' scope for action, and to what extent does it structure what is conceivable or inconceivable? What forms of suffering and poverty are concomitants of this state of social uprooting and the loss of social order?

Reading Bourdieu's photographs in conjunction with his writings from this period opens up a wealth of material to us about habitus, and the ethos of pre-modern man and his inherent dignity. With his theory about the economic conditions of an access to rationality, Bourdieu attacks head on the racist stereotype of an Algerian population, supposedly incapable of becoming modern

and civilized – an argument that was used to legitimize the colonial structure.

Bourdieu's theory of the precedence of physical living and working conditions (which may at first glance appear materialistic) helps to expose and criticize the symbolic power relations. His pioneering fieldwork provides evidence of a social world full of anachronisms, in which people have been unable – to this day – to overcome their homelessness and uprooting, and of an alienation from tradition as much as from modernity. Social anthropology, in Bourdieu's hands, served as a means of rehabilitating traditional cultures, which – in the Algerian context – was tantamount to a symbolic revolution and contradicted colonial fantasies as much as it did the revolutionary propaganda of the newly emerging Algerian elites – precisely because he saw the uprooting and the existing cultural contradictions as the core content of the nation-building project.

It is probably Algeria's greatest tragedy, expressed in Bourdieu's writings and photographs, that even today – four decades later – they have lost nothing of their relevance and realism.

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[1] The archive contains around 600 negatives in 6 x 6cm format and a further 199 contact or straight prints in formats ranging from 6 x 6cm to a maximum of 12.5 x 12.5cm in size. Aside from the negatives, the most important corpus in the archive contains 146 23 x 23cm prints and – within this group – a smaller series of 30 x 30cm prints, which had been collated and, in part, organized thematically in photo albums by Pierre Bourdieu (images from Algiers and Blida, unemployed people and street hawkers in the first album; images from the resettlement camps and from the rural areas in the second). There are no longer negatives for 26 of

these 146 prints, which means that the existing prints are the only sources we still have available. Titles and dates are not always available; where they are published, they are all, without exception, by Pierre Bourdieu; indications of place were completed in those cases where they could be deduced with certainty from available photographic material.

[2] Pierre Bourdieu / Luc Boltanski / Pierre Castel / Jean-Claude Chamboredon / Gérard Lagneau / Dominique Schnapper, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art,* tr. by Shaun Whiteside, Cambridge: Polity Press 1990. The study "Le paysan et la photographie", written in collaboration with his wife Marie-Claire Bourdieu and published in the *Revue française de sociologie* in 1965, originated at the same time as this work and partly contributed to it.

[3] Cf. "Ein Gespräch mit Pierre Bourdieu von Franz Schultheis", in: Franz Schultheis / Christine Frisinghelli (Eds.), *Pierre Bourdieu. In Algerien. Zeugnisse der Entwurzelung*, Graz 2003.

[4] Ibid., p. 49.

[5] Incidentally, the book is dedicated to Hénine Moula, one of Bourdieu's colleagues murdered by the OAS in 1961. The OAS – *Organisation Armée Secrète* / Secret Army Organization – was a secret splinter group of the French army in Algeria, which carried out terrorist attacks to force the central government to revoke their agreement with the National Liberation Front (*FLN*) and prevent independence.

[6] Pierre Bourdieu / Abdelmalek Sayad, *Le déracinement. La crise de l'agrculture traditionelle,* Paris 1964, S. 12-13.

[7] Pierre Bourdieu, in: Schultheis / Frisinghelli (Eds.), op. cit., S. 36-37.