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Foreword: picturing Algeria by Pierre Bourdieu

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Picturing Algeria Pierre Bourdieu

Foreword by Craig Calhoun

Pierre Bourdieu is famous today as one of the most influential social scientists of the 20th century. His writings inform analyses in sociology, anthropology, history, literature, and a range of other fields. And his influence extended to politics. His books on the reproduction of inequality in education informed 1960s protests. Decades later, his attacks on neoliberal globalization were among the most resonant. But in this book, we are introduced to Pierre Bourdieu at the beginning of his career, and through photographs more than words. The photographs come from Bourdieu's years in Algeria during what became in the end the successful struggle for independence from French colonial rule. They are accompanied by passages from his texts about Algeria, but the images command the book.

These images are valuable in themselves. They take us to a time of great social drama amid wrenching social change. Many are memorable simply as photographs. But they are also valuable as a source of insight into the formation of Bourdieu's very distinctive and powerful intellectual perspective. They are not simply part of a youthful project, somehow prior to Bourdieu's sociology and anthropology. Taking these photographs was an intrinsic part of Bourdieu's research into Algerian society in the late 1950s and early 1960s. They and the fieldwork come to an end when he had to leave the country literally under cover of night after threats of violence from far right wing colonists. The photographs bridge the two sides of Bourdieu's account of Algeria: his partially reconstructive exploration of how traditional Kabyle society worked and his very present tense examination of the uprooting of peasants by forced resettlement and urban labor markets. But though they images shed light on the ethnography it is important that they are not contained by it. They are not mere illustrations but occasions for further thought.

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In October 1955, the twenty-five year old Pierre Bourdieu arrived in Algeria to complete his national service.¹ A graduate of the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure, he had refused the easy path followed by most peers when drafted - entering the Reserve Officer's College. Still, his initial assignment was to a relatively privileged post with the Army Psychological Services in Versailles. He was deployed to Algeria only after he made clear his opposition to the French struggle to hold on to the colony - engaging in heated arguments, even with those who outranked him (a fact no one who knew Bourdieu will be surprised to discover). Being sent to the actual war was a punishment.

Bourdieu sailed to Algeria in the company of working class and peasant soldiers with whom he identified as the son of a provincial postman. He tried, not entirely successfully, to persuade them of the problems with French occupation. As he realized, their very

¹ Bourdieu tells some of the story in *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* (Polity 2004).

recognition that he had voluntarily (but perhaps only temporarily) renounced some of the privilege conferred by elite education only accentuated the class division between them. Assigned to national service as a clerk in the bureaucracy of the French army, he found himself working for a colonial administration he would come increasingly to hate as it repressed a growing insurrection. But Bourdieu's hatred was not only for the violence of the French military, but for the larger colonial project and the ways it disrupted and damaged the lives of individuals and the collective life of communities. He entered a country torn apart by not just by colonialism but also by the introduction of capitalist markets and consequent social transformation. It was in this context that Bourdieu developed the concept of "symbolic violence" to refer to the many ways in which people's dignity and capacity to organize their own lives were wounded – from the forced unveiling of women to the disruptions a new cash economy brought to long-term relations of honor and debt to the categorization of the rural as backward and the denigration of Berber languages (by Arabophones as well as Francophones).

Bourdieu was initially posted to boring duty with an army air unit in the Chellif Valley, 150 kilometers west of Algiers. Before long, however, he was reassigned to Algiers. The move was a favor from a senior officer who was also from Béarn, the same rural province as Bourdieu. Bourdieu's mother had interceded on his behalf.

Mothers don't get enough credit in histories of social science, and Bourdieu's made a second crucial contribution to his career, even more basic to this book. She bought him a Leica camera. This came a little later, though, as Bourdieu's engagement with Algeria grew deeper and became a crucial, formative influence on his career and life.

The photographs in this collection date from 1957-60. By the time most were taken, Bourdieu had completed national service, written a book, and voluntarily returned to Algeria as a university lecturer. They are neither the completely naïve snapshots of a newcomer nor products of a fully-formed sociologist or anthropologist. Bourdieu did not deploy his camera artlessly, simply to record, as in a few years he would describe French peasants doing in his book on photography. His camera was a Leica not a Kodak Brownie and his ambitions were greater. And the young Bourdieu was a good photographer; his pictures offer interesting, sometimes beautiful compositions. But when Bourdieu looked back on these photographs nearly a lifetime later, he said that the ones that moved him most were the most naïve. The young man was ambitious but the older man recognized that the camera served him better when it recorded a scene that made him think more deeply on reexamination than when it illustrated what he already thought was going on.

Bourdieu was in the process of teaching himself how to be a social scientist and especially a fieldworker. He tried out a range of techniques: surveys, observations, indepth interviews, sketches of village geography and houses, and even Rorschach tests. Photography was one crucial way in which Bourdieu gathered data – and also developed his sociological eye.

Some of the photographs document research sites and served as mnemonic devices to spark his memory later. Some, rather more artfully, try to make a point. By his own

account, Bourdieu was drawn especially to photograph scenes that foregrounded transitions and dislocations, the contrast between old and new; “situations that spoke to me because they expressed dissonance” as he told Franz Schultheis.² There are striking and sometimes quite wonderful examples here. More than a few focus on veiled women – riding a scooter, buying a newspaper, in front of a shop selling radios. Others show peasant men in the city, often with a tiny capital of objects for sale, often looking uncomfortable.

A shy, or perhaps better, a private man for all his later public prominence, Bourdieu was conscious of the voyeurism of photography. He did not shrink from photographing much that seemed more private than public – even a girl’s circumcision. But many of his photographs are shot from an oblique angle or show their subjects from the back. As Kravagna notes, the subjects of Bourdieu’s photographs seem often to be in retreat; they seldom look back at the camera.³ Indeed, Bourdieu eventually replaced the Leica his mother had given him with a Rolleiflex because of the advantage a through-the-top viewfinder offered to a photographer who wanted to be unobtrusive. Beyond personal diffidence (and he was self-confident at the same time as shy), Bourdieu was conscious that he was manifestly a Frenchman photographing Algerians.

Neither Bourdieu’s photography nor his fieldwork was without background and agenda. He came to Algeria at odds with colonialism, yet indirectly informed by it. If justification for colonial rule came in the idea of a *mission civilisatrice*, and more basically the notion that “the natives” simply lacked civilization, much early anthropology was devoted to demonstrating that the societies into which colonialism intervened were in fact civilized, had culture, had an organized way of life. So too the early work of Bourdieu. Indeed, Bourdieu reports that at first he shied away from reporting on ritual practices because these would be taken as evidence of the primitivism of the Kabyle.⁴ Conversely, if the basic fact of colonialism was domination, then the ethical imperative for the researcher was to make domination manifest. Steeped in Bachelard’s epistemology and history of science, Bourdieu embraced the notion that knowledge was created in a series of corrective moves. The effort to understand Algeria and Algerians was part of the necessary correction for colonialism itself. But there was the danger of overcorrection. The natives could be represented as inhabiting a more completely functional and internally closed culture and society than was ever historically real. And colonialism could be represented as so completely domination that its seductions and the motivations for collaboration were hidden.⁵ Or, taking the Bachelardian opposite perspective could lead the anthropologist to leave colonialism itself out of the picture in seeking to portray

² Interview with Pierre Bourdieu, in the present book.

³ See Christian Kravagna, “Bourdieu’s Photography of Coevalness,” *Transversal*, 12/2007: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0308/kravagna/en> and Les Back “Portrayal and Betrayal: Bourdieu, photography, and sociological life,” *The Sociological Review* 57 #3 (2009): 471-89.

⁴ *The Logic of Practice*, (Stanford University Press 1990, orig. 1980), p. 3.

⁵ But see Fanny Colonna on how easily documenting domination could itself become one-sided, underestimating the resources the dominated have for reinterpretation, resistance, and open struggle; “The Phantom of Dispossession,” in Jane E. Goodman and Paul E. Silverstein, eds.: *Bourdieu in Algeria*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.

autonomous native society: the French seldom appear as such in Bourdieu's account of colonial Algeria and very little in these pictures (though note the tank seen through the back window of Bourdieu's car).

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Bourdieu had spent 1956 and 1957 reading through all the literature on Algeria he could find. His new assignment in Algiers placed him in the documentation and information service of the General Government. This provided him with access to a good library. He made intensive use of it, and also began to build a range of contacts with Algerian intellectuals and French Algerians sympathetic to the Algerians.⁶

As Bourdieu read, he developed the plan of writing a synthetic account of the colony. This was an unsurprising, if ambitious move for a brilliant young ENS graduate contemplating an academic career. It was also a political move, as Bourdieu intended the book to inform debates over Algerian independence and specifically to provide a deeper picture of the country to Left intellectuals – not least Jean-Paul Sartre – whom Bourdieu thought advocated a cause without really understanding its social circumstances.

Sociologie de l'Algerie appeared in 1958, based overwhelmingly on the existing literature of ethnographers, missionaries, and officials (often read against the grain of authors' original interpretations), informed a little by Bourdieu's own interviews and contacts, and perhaps more by simply the experience of living in Algeria.⁷ It focuses mainly on Algeria's three main "traditional" Berber societies, more briefly on the Arabophone population (urbanites, nomads, and the recently or partially settled), and then on the factors that knit the groups together very imperfectly: Islam, markets, and colonialism. It closes with an account of alienation, deculturation, and the emergence of a class society. The book's theoretical argument was not greatly developed but presaged Bourdieu's later work in many ways. In a sense, the book's analytic framework was a Durkheimian account of social solidarity counterposed to an examination of the effects of colonial domination. Above all, without using the word "habitus," Bourdieu began to develop an account of the ways Algeria's different traditional societies gave their members an implicit sense of how to live – "real psychological dispositions" based on "cultural apprenticeship" – and how the colonialism both undermined the political economy of traditional societies and created new circumstances to which traditional dispositions were inadequate. The book found a readership and had some impact, not least among the Left intelligentsia Bourdieu had set out to inform. He was invited to write for *Esprit* and *Les Temps Modernes*.

Sociologie d'Algerie might have remained simply the work of a precocious (and angry) young man had Bourdieu stayed in France and written his contemplated doctoral thesis

⁶ See Tassadit Yacine, "Pierre Bourdieu in Algeria at War: notes on the birth of an engaged ethnosociology," *Ethnography* 5 #4 (2004): 487-510.

⁷ See Azzedine Haddour's examination of Bourdieu's work in relation to some of the most important of these others, especially Germain Tillion: "Bread and Wine: Bourdieu's photography of colonial Algeria," *The Sociological Review*, 57 #3: 385-405.

on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. But Bourdieu did not let his first book mark the end of a troubling Algerian phase; he made it the beginning of a commitment to the country, especially to the Kabyles peasants and migrants with whom he identified, as well as to social science. Taking up a new *métier* involved shifting not just his theoretical readings but also his own habitus. Bourdieu began to teach himself to be a fieldworker, an analyst of empirical data, a theorist not simply of universal truths but of concrete conjunctures and contradictions. Here the camera played an important role.

Bourdieu returned to Algeria in 1958, taking up an appointment as a lecturer at the University of Algiers. Despite his training and position as a philosopher, Bourdieu found his way out of the library and off campus. This helped shape his lifelong project of doing philosophical work by concrete sociological investigation rather than just abstract reflection. He traveled around the country when he could and simply walked the streets in Algiers. He got to know dissidents among the French in Algeria, including not least members of the White Fathers and other religious orders. Importantly, he developed relationships with some of his Algerian students, especially the few who came from Kabyle peasant backgrounds, *miraculés* like himself.⁸ Most prominent among these, Abdelmalek Sayad became Bourdieu's assistant and collaborator, a friend until his death three years before Bourdieu's own, and in his own right a major analyst of migrants and migration. Indeed, Sayad accompanied Bourdieu not just on his Algerian research trips but also on an extended stay in Bourdieu's native village in the Béarn. They worked together writing up their Algerian studies – notably for the book *Les Déracinées* – but this sojourn also became a kind of sociological experiment, as Bourdieu looked at the effects of administrative and market centralization in his native village in relationship to what he had seen in Algeria.⁹

Despite his lack of prior fieldwork experience, Bourdieu was taken on as part of a large research effort organized by the Association for Demographic, Economic, and Social Research (ARDES, the Algerian branch of the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies, INSÉE). As he would do more than once in his career, Bourdieu redefined the projects – and gathered collaborators. The result was two remarkable books. One, *Travail et Travailleurs* (with Alain Darbel, Jean-Paul Rivet, and Claude Seibel) examined the lives of labor migrants, workers in the new metropolitan economy of colonial Algeria. The other, *Les Déracinés*, co-authored with Sayad, portrayed the crisis of traditional agriculture and the resettlement camps created by a brutal policy of forcibly uprooting peasants in order to try to squelch resistance to the colonial war. The photographs published here date mostly from the same time as this research.

⁸ The notion of a “*miraculé*” is basically that of the exception who proves the rule, the brilliant student from the countryside or disadvantaged ethnic group who succeeds despite the odds in the metropolitan educational system (and therefore may be claimed as a demonstration that the system really was meritocratic and not fundamentally biased).

⁹ Some of this work was reported in “Les relations entre les sexes dans la société paysanne”, *Les Temps modernes* 195 (August 1962): 307-31. But in his typical fashion Bourdieu worked it over repeatedly, notably in “Les stratégies matrimoniales dans le système de reproduction”, *Annales* 4-5, juillet-octobre 1972; in *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford University Press 1990) and in *The Bachelors' Ball* (University of Chicago Press 2007).

The two books are remarkable in themselves, and also an important counterpoint to the more familiar “anthropological” studies in Bourdieu’s famous *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. In French, Bourdieu’s corpus of Algerian studies presents perhaps too sharp a gulf between accounts of traditional society and the deculturation of resettlement camps and labor migration. But what is available in English is even more misleading, for Bourdieu’s studies of traditional Kabyle society stand alone. Neither *Travail et Travailleurs* nor *Les Déracinées* has been translated.¹⁰ The result is that Bourdieu’s reconstruction of traditional Kabyle society is not complemented by his analyses of the domination that befell it. Bourdieu’s brilliant, structuralist evocation of the Kabyle house should be read alongside his devastating account of the imposition of order without reference to traditional culture – houses precisely bereft of what would make them Kabyle houses – in the resettlement camps.¹¹ Of course it usually isn’t read this way in French, and the author of both studies allowed them very separate existences. But an Anglophone reader literally cannot put the two together. Moreover, the account of how traditional society worked is incorporated into Bourdieu’s main theoretical texts, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* and *The Logic of Practice*. The account of dispossession from it is not.

The same sort of gulf marks the relationship between Bourdieu’s classic study of cultural hierarchy in France, *Distinction*, and the massive book and surprise bestseller *La Misère du Monde*.¹² *Distinction*, famous for violating the conventional view that cultural taste was a realm of individual freedom rather than social determination, presented a picture of France as sharply unequal but still a unified symbolic space. The same set of principles governed the hierarchy from top to bottom. The sociologist’s task was to decode the symbolic order (and its relationship to material inequality) as it had been to decode the order of the Kabyle house. But in *Misère du Monde*, the weight of poverty and powerlessness is apparently able to speak for itself; little decoding and little theory are necessary. The realms of social suffering, of domination, and of deculturation and implicitly presented as more transparent than life in the enchantment of social and cultural order.

¹⁰ Asking why not would take us too far afield, but beyond whatever accidents of intellectual history may have intervened it would seem that there was a much greater appetite for symbolically focused studies of the traditional societies, the exotic “other” of anthropology than for messier accounts of urban poverty, exploitation, and domination. But at the same time, Bourdieu did less than he might have to integrate these two sides of his work, the account of how a cultural order worked and of the experience of deculturation.

¹¹ As Paul A. Silverstein stresses, the reality of rupture doesn’t mean there was no continuity: “Of Rooting and Uprooting: Kabyle habitus, domesticity, and structural nostalgia,” *Ethnography* 5 #4 (2004): 553-78.

¹² Bourdieu, *Distinction* (Harvard University Press 1984); Bourdieu and collaborators, *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (Stanford University Press, 2000) – the English title loses the connection to Proudhon’s *Philosophie de la misère* and Marx’s response, *Misère de la philosophie*.

Bourdieu's texts on Algeria offer something of a tragic story. There are traditional cultures, in different ways adapted to their physical environments and productive capacities, capable of reproduction so nearly perfect that they seem almost without history. To be sure Islam swept into North Africa but without destroying traditional culture; it was absorbed (and figures only very secondarily in Bourdieu's analyses). But then French colonialism brought changes that could not be absorbed, because backed by transformative economic and state power. Many were drawn from the once stable countryside by the seductions of labor markets; others were forcibly resettled by the military. Cash transactions replaced long-term relationships; texts replaced oral traditions. Urban Arabic-speakers launched a revolutionary movement against French rule, but for the Berbers it had the fatal flaw that just like the French, it offered them citizenship only on the condition of transformation, uprooting, and acceptance of new forms of domination.¹³ The housing projects of Boumediene's socialism would not be so very different from the resettlement camps of French colonialism.

In Bourdieu's texts on both Algeria and Béarn, the weight falls on the permanence of the habitus, and the consequent difficulty adjusting to new circumstances.¹⁴ Peasants in cities cling to old ways that work poorly for them. This was both a theoretically important analysis and a significant political message. In different case studies, Bourdieu offered recurrently brilliant integration of microsociology (the nature of interaction, the practical sensibility it required) with accounts at once structural and phenomenological of how traditional culture worked (through imbuing the world with symbolic meaning and thereby generating and orienting action that would effectively reproduce a way of life). But paradoxically the very capacities to generate effective practical action that enabled people to deal well with traditional society were disabling in new contexts. Late in his life, Bourdieu connected his early Algerian research to his later criticisms of neoliberal globalization:

As I was able to observe in Algeria, the unification of the economic field tends, especially through monetary unification and the generalization of monetary exchanges that follows, to hurl all social agents into an economic game for which they are not equally prepared and equipped, culturally and economically. It tends by the same token to submit them to standards objectively imposed by competition from more efficient productive forces and modes of production, as can readily be seen with small rural producers

¹³ Many Kabyle and other Berbers were nonetheless active. Bourdieu's emphasis on limits imposed by Arab dominance of the independence movement was a major difference from the otherwise largely similar views of Franz Fanon. See Bourdieu, "Révolution dans la révolution," *Esprit* 1 (January): 27-40.

¹⁴ Bourdieu would later stress the potential for revision more: "Habitus changes constantly in response to new experiences. Dispositions are subject to a kind of permanent revision, but one which is never radical because it works on the basis of premises established in the previous state," *Pascalian Meditations* (Stanford University Press 2000): 161. But what Bourdieu saw in Algeria was "a pathological acceleration of social change," as he and Sayad put it in *Le Déracinement* – precisely change so fast that the constant adjustment of the habitus could not keep up. See also discussion in Wacquant, "Following Bourdieu Into the Field," *Ethnography* 5 #4 (2004): 387-414.

who are more and more completely torn away from self-sufficiency. In short, *unification benefits the dominant*.¹⁵

Bourdieu is criticized sometimes for overestimating the unity and timelessness of Algerian societies before the French.¹⁶ Certainly there was prior history and there were internal faultlines and occasions for debate.¹⁷ Conversely, Bourdieu is said sometimes to overstate the completeness of colonial dispossession. If his written accounts threaten sometimes to totalize – to show traditional Kabyle society as perfectly integrated, or to show colonial Algeria only as a system of dispossession – these photographs reveal more of life outside those frames. Take one of the most “pre-interpreted” of the photos, the veiled woman riding a scooter. It is a strong image, but also a hackneyed one, reminiscent of others produced over and over around the world, the veil signifying tradition and a specifically gendered view of exotic Islam, the scooter signifying modernity. Yet while we read these meanings immediately in it, it is also a picture of a confident young woman moving about on her own.

Bourdieu initially thought his Algerian sojourn was just an interruption on the way to a career in philosophy. It marked instead a moment of personal transformation as he found his *métier* in sociology. In these photographs we are invited to look almost through his eyes at the world of old ways and new conditions, cultural continuity and change, that permanently and very productively gripped his imagination.

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, “Unifying to Better Dominate,” in *Firing Back* (New Press, 2002).

¹⁶ For a sample of critical articles see Jane E. Goodman and Paul A. Silverstein, *Bourdieu in Algeria: Colonial Politics, Ethnographic Practices, Theoretical Developments* (University of Nebraska Press 2009).

¹⁷ Something of this is brought out in Bourdieu’s remarkable dialogues with Mouloud Mammeri in which that legendary Kabyle intellectual makes clear the collective work and both creative and critical discourse that go into making tradition; see “Dialogue on Oral Poetry,” translated in *Ethnography* 5 #4 (2004; Orig. 1978): 511-51.