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En Route to the "Summit of the Art of Sociology"

Pierre Bourdieu's Self-Reflexive Practice in the Light of the Photographic Archive

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The comprehensive publication, after 40 years, of Pierre Bourdieu's photographs from Algeria signifies the 'unpacking', in the Benjaminian sense of the term, of an archive. It's a question of taking every single photograph separately in one's hands, telling its story – subject, date and place of origin, the circumstances in which the photograph was taken – and examining it in various discursive contexts within its owner's practice.[1] Through this archival logic, the photographs arrange Bourdieu's various forms of practice in new combinations that generate shifts in meaning.[2] In these [combinations], they illustrate, substantiate and support the theories that have been developed in the scientific writings, occasionally even generating some themselves. At the same time, however, they also go beyond this rather one-sided use to which they have been put and act as a distorting mirror to the theories that enlarges, transforms or combines in other ways individual elements with unusual clarity. This effect is pursued in the

following reflections. The different ways in which the Algerian photographs have been used since Bourdieu's return to France in 1961 form the context of this discussion: on the one hand, their almost total neglect within his scholarly work in the 40 years following his return; on the other, a return to them at a time that was chronologically close to the research on a "sociological self-experiment", which he had been pursuing since 2000.[3]

Fundamental to the significance that the photographs have for Bourdieu's practice, it seems, is the fact that, while they are only represent a section of the quantity of documents collated at the time, they provide information about a specific photographic gaze. What shines forth from this gaze is a habitus that is decisive for Bourdieu's practice, as well as a position shaped by this habitus. In several respects, a form of ambivalence and inner conflict on Bourdieu's part manifests itself in both of these – in relation to his subject, his scholarly discipline and his intellectual milieu –which may be interpreted both as the mainspring of his work and the basis for its political meaning.

First of all, then, a theme that many of the photographs have in common is the examination of "different, dissonant realities"[4]: the intersection of different temporal and spatial structures that occurred as a result of the collision between the cultures of an agrarian and an industrial society, during the historical phase of radical upheaval in the 1950s and 1960s. The socioeconomic, religious, urban or technical implications find expression in photographs of the contrasts between traditional and new buildings and in images of rural mechanization, as well as those of the goods on offer at newspaper kiosks, of exhibits and visitors at a trade fair or of the work in winegrowing. While, as a whole, they fit together to form a portrait of a phase of social development in Algeria, the contrasts embodied in the image exemplify, at the same time, a

moment of the incompatibility that can be traced throughout Bourdieu's development like a leitmotiv. Again and again, he talks retrospectively in *Ein soziologischer Selbstversuch* [translated as *A Sociological Self-Experiment*] about his "divided" habitus, which he claims is the result of a "reconciliation of contradictions".[5] Contributing factors to this habitus were both his own social origins, which set him apart from the dominant provenances of the scientific and intellectual field, and his self-reflexive scientific method, which brought him into conflict with the disciplines within which he moved – with philosophy at first and then with sociology, in particular. But above all, his challenge to break down the "scholastic bias" through which the world is observed from the outside as a spectacle, and to add to it an attitude of engaged, sympathetic participation meant that he found himself in an ambivalent position within the intellectual field.[6] Given this "double
life" that he experienced, his sympathy for the figure of the *amahbul* – an otherworldly, unpredictable personality with a keen mind, who falls "between two stools, between different lifestyles, different cultures, sometimes even between the religions", but whom "people nonetheless listen to and respect in great measure" – is as unsurprising as the photographic choice of subjects in which the meeting of cultural, social or economic discrepancies is manifested.[7]

Over and above that, forms of what is apparently incompatible in the photographs also possess a structural dimension, in so far as these become evident in the form of varying repetition. It becomes clear, even from what remains of the reduced corpus that Bourdieu wasn't satisfied with single photographs, but took a large number of photographs of specific places or situations, each time varying slightly the times or the positions for the images. Only the

extensive exhibition of the photographs enabled one to see the work groups, such as those portrayed by the photographs on the street in Aïn Aghbel, Collo[8], at the crossroads or at the newspaper kiosk in Blida[9], the resettlement camps of Djebabra, Chélif[10] or the sulphurization of the vine stalks on the plain of Mitidja.[11] These photo series invalidate the documentary power of the single photograph; only when everything is viewed as a whole do they connect the visual subject and temporalize it. And not least, they reveal the photographic act furthermore as an act of representation, thereby confronting a subjectivism with the intended objectivism of the photographic. The mediation between objective and subjective access, which Bourdieu undertook in *Un art moyen* a few years after his return from Algeria,[12] is an early expression of his demand to make the scientific processes of objectification themselves the object of scientific objectification on every occasion. This was consolidated further in various contexts in the years that followed.[13] What is more, the doubt about the authority of scientific statements and research results, which Bourdieu himself also used to distance himself from his discipline, manifests itself in the way he repeatedly approached the same or similar motives. Instead of simply declaring: "that's how it is"[14], what is shown in the photograph stands for one of several possible manifestations. What is presented is adjusted to a changeable reference frame of positions, which are taken at a specific point in time. Applied to his practice as whole, this "flightiness" with which he refuses to accept a "narrowing of the subject area", this "radical doubt" that takes the scholarly doxa and its rules as its subject, led to an "impossible position" for Bourdieu himself within the microcosm of the sociological field, and turned him into an "outlaw".[15]

The inner conflict that is reflected thematically and structurally in the photographs continues both in the position that Bourdieu, as a photographer, adopted towards his subjects and in the way he used the resulting photographs. On the one hand, the respectful distance with which he treated his photographed counterpart is typical of his images. There are no revealing snapshots, confrontational close-ups or arranged group portraits to be seen. Instead, the images often record people from an oblique angle, from a rear view or as *profils perdus*, not capturing them as motionless statues, but rather allowing the people to drift past them. In a street in Collo, the women carrying water wander past the camera individually and in groups [16]; at a crossroads in Blida, a broad spectrum of passers-by is caught in the image section with a barely noticeable shift in position;[17] passages, streets and rows of houses - the arrangement of people and objects in rows too -- in their alignments they all leave the way out into the pictorial depth to the side.[18] Even where those photographed, in the images from Aïn Aghbel[19] for example, turn towards the photographer and look directly at the camera, he himself keeps his distance and allows the people space to move and be in the image.

On the other hand, Bourdieu's objective in using the photographic medium was to "understand", in order to reduce distance and create proximity to what he photographed. For Bourdieu, the photographs don't just illustrate his "love for the country"; they were also intended as evidence for the Algerian farmers and city-dwellers of his claim: "I am interested in you, I am on your side"[20]. For him, they are proof of his self-imposed demand not to "think of the photographic counterpart as a *subject*", but *"to engage with him"* [21]. He regretfully attributes to "scholastic irresponsibility" the fact that, in his own assessment, he "betrayed" the engaged, political dimension of this early photographic practice

in his subsequent work [22]. Leaving aside this academically perspectivated self-accusation, his action also finds an appropriate mirror in the medium-specificity of photography. As a media process that *oscillates between distance and proximity*, photography corresponds to Bourdieu's own social, scientific and intellectual split. The ambivalence between solidarity with the victims on the one hand and complicity on the other, between respect for the individual subject and his/her transformation into a sociological and ethnographic object of research, or between scientific observation and political readiness for action, is captured and reflected in the properties of the photographic medium.

The properties of absence and belatedness that are inherent in photography mean that its documentary quality, intended for temporal as well as physical distance, can assume greater importance as well. Accordingly, Bourdieu's photographs, once they were produced, above all served the memory of something that was – in the process of upheaval –already almost over.[23] As a result, they changed from acts of social rapprochement to material reservoirs of memory. As "stock", a fund of images stored for a subsequent use while at the same time being legitimized by this use alone, they moved away from their original functional directness and presence. While still a symbolic pledge in the exchange of sympathetic for observational interest in Algeria, the use of the photographs was focused on scientific objectification after Bourdieu's return to France.

Hand in hand with this appropriation of his photographs for his own sociological research, the photographic medium became established, on the one hand, in Bourdieu's scholarly work as an object of research as he began his directly related work on *Un art moyen*. On the other hand, however, it disappeared almost completely as illustrative material. Until the current publication of

the existing archival stock, the photographs only surfaced individually as covers on the French editions of some of his books or as illustrations; the overwhelming majority remained invisible and unused. A self-restraint appears in this use of the photographs, which remained behind both Bourdieu's photography-related research and also behind the disciplinary independence that had taken him from philosophy towards a self-taught sociology and anthropology. In 2001, he attributes this in retrospect to the fact that the photographs were not sufficiently "serious" and "scientific", but rather seemed "narcissistic" and "self-satisfied" to him since they captured his gaze, which he himself described as "affectionate, often moved too".[24] Clearly, it is these very characteristics, for the sake of which he had used the photographic images in the first instance, which are responsible for their later exclusion. The fact that he freely submitted to scholarly regulation at the time, and only afterwards saw an untapped potential in the orientation of the photographs, is touched on somewhat cautiously in the 2001 interview.[25] Such formulations suggest that the renunciation of his own photographs since the 1960s should be regarded as a self-positioning strategy within the scholarly field. He sacrificed them in the process of his disciplinary change probably to the demands of scholarly recognition, since the photographic image had been banished from sociology early on, having been used initially in a rather more journalistic manner.[26]

Nevertheless, the rigidity of this submission to the rules of the discipline is astonishing. By suppressing the medium, Bourdieu suppressed not only a means of expression that embodied, in its own split, the demand of "participant observation" exceptionally well, and that furthermore could quite succinctly visualize his own "impossible position" both thematically and structurally. He also relinquished a medium that could have served – linking both of

these aspects – as a means of "participant objectification" as this was increasingly to become more significant for Bourdieu's research and theory formation. This feat of strength, which he imposed on himself, highlights all the more the late about-turn that one has to see in his readiness to publish the photographs eventually after 40 years. For while his own photography is largely excluded from the self-reflexive analysis until his death, his decision to publish it is carried out within the historical context of a specific development of his practice, which in fact substantiated the significance of the dissonant habitus and the concept of "participant objectification".

First of all, this concerns proximity to the subject, the "*libido sciendi*" [27]. It links Bourdieu's photographic research methods with specific interview techniques. As he sees it, both forms of data collection distinguish the ethnologists positively, compared with the sociologists, since they are prepared "to confront reality themselves, to photograph it personally, to question it in person", instead of inserting interviewers with questionnaires in between and looking at social conditions from a detached position with abstract conceptual schemes.[28] In the 1990s, in the context of his work on *La misère du monde* (1993), he subjected the interview technique to an in-depth critical reflection. Bourdieu meets the social problems of cultural and social asymmetry as well as the attendant effects of symbolic power, inscribed in this constellation of participant objectification, with an attitude linking a "type of intellectual love" with the constant surveillance of his own point of view.[29] The openness and receptiveness, as defined there, "that cause one to make the problems of the interviewee one's own", and "to accept and understand [him] for what he is, in all his specificity", also distinguish Bourdieu's use of photography.[30] However, he lacks the self-analytical approach to his own position as photographer, with which, for the purposes of the interview

technique, he insists on an interviewer's conception of him/herself in the sense of a "point of view with regard to a point of view". [31] In this respect, one notices the absence of opinion statement on his own position – permeated by power relations specific, for instance, to his education and profession– vis-à-vis the people he photographed in Algeria. Something similar is true for the absent problematization of imaging methods as well as of the "market" in which they are traded – aspects which in fact were part of his investigation into the uses of photography from 1965, without including, however, his own photographic practice. Finally, there is an absence too of all perspectives, by which the photographs might have been brought into relation with other statements or methods of Bourdieu's, for example the question of the use and function of symbolic capital which becomes noticeable within the context of the publication of the images.

This blank space in Bourdieu's writings becomes all the more obvious in light of the development of areas of research like visual ethnography, visual studies and the new cultural studies as they have been emerging since the late 1980s, but also in light of the development of fine art. The revaluation of the visual in the context of academic analysis and theory formation on the one hand, and the self-critical examination of its premises and conditions through artistic institutional critique on the other, were initially without consequences for Bourdieu's work, although in the 1990s there was some contact with Hans Haacke and Andrea Fraser, main advocates of this artistic direction. Yet it is precisely these who allow an interpretation of Bourdieu's late acceptance of the publication of his photographs in the sense of a self-designing archival practice. From the standpoint of a process of "institutional critique", the exhibition of the Algerian images transfers the storage status of his photographic collection to a temporality that

enables the archive to be used as a "point of view with regard to a point of view". In the course of this transformation, photography can begin to operate as one of Bourdieu's practices, which from a position of equal status can have a meaningproducing effect on the other practices.[32] Firstly, it vigorously reinforces the significance of participant objectification and emphasizes – as does the interview technique – a form of "understanding" that combines an affective and mental proximity to a counterpart with the awareness of the unbridgeable social distance. Furthermore, this strengthening of the aspect of sympathy, the reason why he had originally regarded the photographs as unsuitable for use and why he resorted to academic self-censorship, means that Bourdieu develops it into a self-consciously pronounced outsider criterion within his principal disciplinary field in the 1990s. If the "commitment" [33] that is evident in the photographs contributed, in his own assessment, to a potential weakening of his position in the sociological field in the 1960s and 70s, then 30 years later it rather strengthens his positions in the interviews, in the performative reliance on his already established academic status, - his position as a scientist who is marked with the distinctive features of an intermediate position.

From this perspective, the return to the photographs, to a collection of data from his earliest research in the field of sociology and ethnology, unifies his entire scholarly practice and subsumes it under the methodological imprint of participant objectification. Between empathy and distance, commitment and observation, the published photographs allow the battles for the power to define meaning in the scholarly field relevant for Bourdieu, with their temporary winners and losers, their victims, strategies and positioning, to become visible. Moreover, the balancing act between the contrasting values always reveals Bourdieu's position as

one that is established in the areas of intersection between different fields – with their respective media, positions and strategies. The exhibition of his images from Algeria finally revises the 40-year exclusion of photography, exposes the premises and assumptions that determined this exclusion, allows the objectification of his own objectifying work, which he interprets as a step towards the "summit of the art of sociology".[34] In this respect, the willingness to publish the photographs at the end of his life constitutes a form of retrospective view, self-critical and reinterpretative, that should be seen both in parallel with his textual "self-experiment" and as a completion of it.[35] It allows a view of the rules that regulate the discourse production within the relationship of Bourdieu´s habitus to his "market", which is constituted by the developments in the sciences related to the visual as well as in fine art; it permits an understanding of Bourdieu's various positionings and changes of place in the course of his life story; and it steers clear of the trap of autobiography, which Bourdieu so expressly opposed in his writings, by allowing his own scholarly field, through its recontextualization in relation to the visual, to become subject and object of the self-reflexive analysis.

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[1] See Walter Benjamin, "Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus. Eine Rede über das Sammeln" (1931), in: Walter Benjamin, *Medienästhetische Schriften*, Frankfurt a. M. 2002, pp.175–182. [Writings on Media Aesthetics].

[2] On the politics of the endowment and shifting of meaning within archival practices, see Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive" in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Blasted Allegories. An Anthology of Writings by*

Contemporary Artists, New York /Cambridge, Mass. / London 1987 (1993), pp. 114–127; (extract from Allan Sekula, "Photography between Labour and Capital", in: Benjamin H. D. Buchloh / Robert Wilkie (eds), *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures. A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton, 1948-1968. Photographs by Leslie Shedden*, Halifax 1983).

[3] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Ein soziologischer Selbstversuch*, Frankfurt a. M. 2002. [Engl.: A sociological self-experiment]. For the background to this publication, see Franz Schultheis, "Nachwort", in: Ibid., pp. 133–151. For the background to the exhibition of Bourdieu's photographs, see Franz Schultheis, "Pierre Bourdieu und Algerien. Eine Wahlverwandtschaft", in: Franz Schultheis / Christine Frisinghelli (eds), *Pierre Bourdieu. In Algerien. Zeugnisse der Entwurzelung*, Graz 2003, pp. 9–20, esp. p. 18 ff. ["Pierre Bourdieu and Algeria. An elective affinity", in Franz Schultheis / Christine Frisinghelli (eds), *Pierre Bourdieu in Algeria. Testimonies of Uprooting]*.

[4] Pierre Bourdieu in "Images from Algeria. An interview with Pierre Bourdieu by Franz Schultheis at the Collège de France, Paris, 26 June 2001", in: Schultheis / Frisinghelli 2003, op. cit., pp. 21–51, here p. 28. [For an online translation of the interview, see www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/sociology/soc-magazine2007.pdf].

[5]On his divided relationship with the intellectual field, see Bourdieu 2002, op. cit., p. 66. On his own description of the dissonant habitus, see also ibid., p. 81 and p. 116 ff.

[6] In this context, Loïc Wacquant distinguishes three forms of bias which, in Bourdieu's opinion, can impair the sociological view: the "social" bias, related to origins; the "academic" bias, formed as a

result of the sociological discipline; and the “intellectualistic” bias, which determines the relationship to the world. See Loïc J.D. Wacquant, “Auf dem Weg zu einer Sozialpraxeologie. Struktur und Logik der Soziologie Pierre Bourdieus”, in: Pierre Bourdieu / Loïc J. D. Wacquant (eds), *Reflexive Anthropologie*, Frankfurt a. M. 1996, pp. 17–93, here p. 66 ff. [French title: Pierre Bourdieu, Loïc Wacquant (eds), *Réponses. Pour une anthropologie réflexive*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992); English: *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.] The latter two forms are contributing factors to scholastic bias, which Bourdieu critiques in various contexts. See for example Pierre Bourdieu, “Narzisstische Reflexivität und wissenschaftliche Reflexivität”, in: Eberhard Berg / Martin Fuchs (eds.), *Kultur, soziale Praxis, Text. Die Krise der ethnographischen Repräsentation*, Frankfurt a. M. 1993, pp. 365–374, esp. p. 371, and Pierre Bourdieu, *Meditationen. Zur Kritik der scholastischen Vernunft*, Frankfurt a. M. 2001. [“Critique of Scholastic Reason”, in *Pascalian Meditations*, (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 2000).

[7] On the figure of the *amahbul* (also spelled *ahmabul*), see Bourdieu 2002, op. cit., p. 63 ff.

[8] See reproduction in: Schultheis / Frisinghelli 2003, op. cit., p. 122 ff.

[9] See reproduction in: ibid., pp. 220–228, p. 200, p. 203 and installation shot in the exhibition at the Hamburger Deichtorhallen 2006 No. 47.

[10] See reproduction in: ibid., pp. 87-90.

[11] See reproduction in: ibid., p. 153.

[12]The original edition in French was published in 1965 with the title: *Un art moyen. Essais sur les usages sociaux de la photographie.* The German translation of the study was published as Pierre Bourdieu / Luc Boltanski / Robert Castel / Jean Claude Chamberon / Gérard Lagneau / Dominique Schnapper, *Eine illegitime Kunst. Die sozialen Gebrauchsweisen der Photographie*, Frankfurt a. M. 1981. [English: *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, tr. S. Whiteside (Stanford: Stanford U.P, 1996)].

[13] See for example Pierre Bourdieu, "[La pratique de l'anthropologie reflexive"]. The Practice of reflexive anthropology. Introduction to a seminar at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, October 1987", in Bourdieu/Wacquant 1996, op. cit. pp. 251 – 294, here p. 294: "Participant objectification, which should be the summit of the art of sociology, can only ever be achieved, to however modest a degree, when it is based on the fullest possible objectification of the interest to be objectified, an interest that is expressed in the fact of participation; and [when it is based] on a suspension of this interest and of the portrayal that it induces."

[14] Pierre Bourdieu, *Sozialer Raum und „Klassen"*, Frankfurt a. M. 1985, p. 56. [Leçon sur la leçon]

[15] See Bourdieu 2002, op. cit., pp. 77 ff., and Bourdieu 2001, op. cit., p. 116.

[16] See reproduction in: Schultheis / Frisinghelli 2003, op. cit., p. 122 ff.

[17] See reproduction in: ibid., pp. 220-228.

[18] See reproduction in: ibid., p. 153, also: p. 157, p. 164, p.166 ff. and p. 175.

[19] See reproduction in: ibid., p. 109 ff.

[20] Bourdieu in: Schultheis / Frisinghelli 2003, op. cit., p. 32. See. ibid. also p. 24: “Photograpy was a way of getting access to people and of being accepted.”

[21] Bourdieu in: Berg / Fuchs (Ed.) 1993, op. cit., p. 371.

[22] Bourdieu in: Schultheis / Frisinghelli 2003, op. cit., p. 36.

[23] See ibid., p. 25.

[24] Ibid., p. 48 and p. 49.

[25] See. ibid.

[26] On the discussion of the use of photography in sociology, see for example Clarice Stasz, “The Early History of Visual Sociology“, in: Jon Wagner (ed.), *Images of Information*, Beverly Hills 1979, pp. 119–136, and Ulf Wuggenig, “Die Photobefragung als projektives Verfahren“, in: Henrik Kreutz (ed), *Pragmatische Analyse von Texten, Bildern und Ereignissen*, Opladen 1991, pp. 109–130.

[27] Bourdieu 2002, op. cit., p. 55.

[28] Pierre Bourdieu, „Mit den Waffen der Kritik ...“ (1983), in *Satz und Gegensatz*, Frankfurt a. M. 1993, p. 30. [“La critique armée”, Paris 1983].

[29] See Pierre Bourdieu: “Verstehen”, in: Pierre Bourdieu et al., *Das Elend der Welt*, (abridged students’ edition), Konstanz 2005, pp. 393–410, in particular p. 400 and p. 410. [English title: *The Weight of the World: Social suffering in Contemporary Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999).]

[30] Ibid., p. 400.

[31] Ibid., p. 410.

[32] The photographs appear as part of a “system of information”, as this is understood principally by Susan Sontag, and as it is composed from Bourdieu’s own various practices. See Susan Sonntag, *Über die Fotografie*, Frankfurt a. M. 1980, p. 149. [Susan Sonntag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979)]. In this relational combination, the exhibition of the photographs becomes, in the context of Bourdieu’s life’s work, an “archival practice”, which transfers what is stored into an actualised memory that generates new combinations and thereby changed meanings. On this generative understanding of the relationship between archive and memory, see for example Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, München 1999, and finally Wolfgang Ernst, *Das Gesetz des Gedächtnisses*, Berlin 2007.

[33] In line with the demands that he imposes on his own work, Bourdieu explicitly emphasizes the successful reconciliation of “*scholarship*” and “*commitment*” in his examination of Michel Foucault. See Bourdieu 2002, op. cit., p. 91 ff.

[34] Bourdieu (1987) in: Bourdieu / Wacquant 1996, op. cit., p. 294.

[35] On the self-imposed demand for “sociological self-experiment” as distinct from an autobiography, see Bourdieu 2002, op. cit., p. 9.