Tribute To
Pierre Bourdieu

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Pierre Bourdieu has just passed away at a time when the political and cultural scenes are in dire need of both his scientific and political contributions. As early as 1985, Bourdieu lent his full support to Mouloud Mammeri’s efforts to produce the journal *Awal* at the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, thus giving Berbers—a linguistic minority—a means of expression that was not easily acquired in Algeria. Bourdieu’s relationship with Algeria, however, goes back to the time when Algeria was struggling for independence, as far back as 1955. Indeed, it is within the context of an exacerbated conflict that the sensibilities of this budding sociologist would be heightened and he would elect to channel his energies into social issues. From then on, Algeria and, more specifically, the Kabylie region, became the subject matter of his research.

It is, therefore, neither superfluous nor exaggerated to state that Algeria was one of the main milestones in the process of Pierre Bourdieu’s intellectual conversion. It made of him, whose original leaning was towards philosophy, the outstanding sociologist he eventually became. This drastic change was brought about by a history that is simple yet complex, rich but tormented, which gave birth to his keen sensitivity and tireless quest.

From the outset, it was clear to Bourdieu that if he was to truly apprehend Algerian society, he had first of all to rid himself of the ethnocentric approach so specific to Europeans. This original position is implemented through the cultural practices of the colonized that were denied by the colonial establishment via its intellectuals and academics and, later, by the Algerian elite that fell victim of its own acculturation. For in reality the colonization process was a long-term venture. The typical attitude of the Algerian rulers and elite, was that
of rejecting their original culture—in the same way as the colonizers did—because they perceived it as being the cause of their alleged inferiority. Peasants at first, the Algerians remained farmers no more, by denying their original identity, they quite simply lost their identity altogether. All these imposed changes stirred up an indefatigable will to put an end to the war and to the colonial system that fuelled it.

On the other hand, as is still the case in Algeria today, one can easily understand how those in power develop the same ability to dominate and put up resistance and how war can be a double-edged sword in as much as it is an admission of the dominator’s policy but also a smokescreen which—using violence as an excuse—legitimizes violence, as peace would imply the end of the ruling system. In 1960, Bourdieu wrote:

War unveils, and brings to light, the true underlying principles of the colonial order, that is, the force by means of which the dominating caste keeps a tight rein on the dominated one. Understandably, therefore, peace represents the worst scenario for some members of the ruling caste. Without the use of force, nothing will counterbalance the force channeled at the root revolt against the situation of inferiority.

The fact is that the colonial system can only be dismantled if it is radically challenged. While firmly opposing the colonial policy, Pierre Bourdieu was also aware of the dangers of a revolution imposed upon an age-old Mediterranean culture, as is the Berber world.

Ideologists supporting the FLN after 1962, some of whom were virtually uneducated, others alienated, could not understand the author’s reticence in relation to their political project (socialist agrarian reform and self-management). Yet, this reticence echoed that of the farmers and workers themselves and would culminate in a patently obvious failure of this policy. His keen sense of observation yielded an objective analysis of the “uncertain” future of an independent Algeria, holding its destiny in its own hands. Events proved Bourdieu’s premonitions right. Far from being out of date, this work is still worth meditating upon, for it sheds light on the problems Algeria is facing today which stem from those that were left unresolved yesterday. The mechanisms of dom-
ination unveiled by the author follow one single logic. What sets them apart are their goals and not the means they adopted. Otherwise, how else could one explain the fact that, as has been the case in the past, it is the youth (here as elsewhere, in Palestinian camps for example) who act as channels by means of which a society, totally mutilated and torn apart by different protagonists, may express itself?

This is especially true of youngsters aged 15 to 20: molded by war, brimming with the radicalism typical of adolescence, forward looking, oblivious of a past in which many of their older compatriots are rooted, despite themselves, often driven by a spirit of revolt and negativism which at times separates them from their elders. And the psychological schism between generations is often exacerbated by actual separation.4

That is, the young people’s revolt brought about a change in the political context. When the latter changed, the relation between those members of society who were dominated and their dominators altered, noted Bourdieu. War, with its violence and exposure of the balance of power, proved that the dominating position may be put into question and, with it, even the position of the dominated. When war breaks out, “decolonization has already begun,” not only in reality but also in people’s minds.

Thus, Algeria made it possible for Bourdieu to discover, at the same time as this torn-apart nation was doing so itself, the deeply rooted political foundations of the French system. By means of, and thanks to, colonization, the central power represented an exaggerated picture of the violent relations that crystallized during the war. Colonial France was to the young sociologist the perfect model of cynicism, of racial and cultural discrimination.

Understanding Algerian society, its structures, its reticence, its guile, was also a way of understanding the system that made it so, and from there, to make these very mechanisms intelligible to French society. Were it not for Algeria, Bourdieu would have had a different perception of the workings of the French system in France.

Teeming with information, Bourdieu’s work deserves to be studied thoroughly; it is a wealth of objective and subjective
data which characterize a deciding moment in history. Understanding its deep significance requires, however, the transcendence of that period of history, both in space and time, in order to apply it to models of domination of a larger scale.

It is the relationships between dominator and dominated that every system produces, which are revealed to the reader. Beyond the sorrow, the suffering and the danger, the precarious years spent in Algeria furthered the young sociologist's intellectual maturity and were a determining factor in his career. How can Algeria's influence in all of the author's works be ignored? That was how Bourdieu remained steadfast in his original convictions for forty years. His political determination was definitely related to Algeria's colonial past. It can be said that the Algerian experience was the cornerstone of all the convictions he later embraced.

True to himself, Bourdieu continued to support those who are dominated in Algeria, in Europe and in the Middle East. With the demise of this symbolic figure, the world of the underprivileged has lost one of its staunchest supporters, the void he leaves behind will be difficult to fill.

Notes

1. Pierre Bourdieu was to give Awal an interview about events in the Kabylie region, speaking of his own first-hand experience. Fate decided otherwise.