

## Between Shadows and Knowledge: Doing Sociology in Time of War\*

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### Book Review

What is the role of sociology in the face of systematic violence by a ferocious regime, in its last years of life, against a population that claims independence? Under what material and psychological conditions were two young researchers – a French professor and his Algerian student – able to conduct field research in conflict zones seized by the French colonial army and paramilitary forces? To what extent did the *in loco* experience leave strong marks on their critical conceptions about the social world, their respective agendas of future research, and not least, galvanize a fraternal relationship between them throughout their lives? These are some of the questions that guide Amín Pérez's book, *Bourdieu & Sayad Against Empire: forging Sociology in Anticolonial Struggle*, which reflects on the beginning of the intellectual trajectory of Pierre Bourdieu and Abdelmalek Sayad in the period of the Algerian War of Independence.

Released by Polity Press in 2023, *Bourdieu & Sayad Against Empire* is a translation by Andrew Brown of *Combattre en sociologues. Pierre Bourdieu & Abdelmalek Sayad dans une guerre de libération (Algérie, 1958-1964)*, originally published by Éditions Agone in 2022. It must be recalled that 2022 was a very particular year. Firstly, it was the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Algerian War of Independence. A war that ended 132 years of French invasion, marked by constant violence, the dismantling of Algerian rural life, and massive displacements of its population. By the end of the war, between 250,000 to 400,000 Algerian lives were lost (according to the Algerian state, the death toll may have been 1.5 million). Secondly, 2022 was 20 years since the death of Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002).

Before examining the book, it is worth noting that *Bourdieu & Sayad Against Empire* recently won the History of Sociology and Social Thought Distinguished Scholarly Publication Award 2024 by the American Sociological Association

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(ASA). This emphasizes how Pérez's book is an original intellectual exercise that traces the connections between Bourdieu's and Sayad's sociology and the years of the anti-colonial liberation wars of the so-called Third World against the imperial powers, particularly, in Algeria (1954-1962).

Regarding the composition of the book, I first highlight Pérez's robust review of Pierre Bourdieu's and Abdelmalek Sayad's sociological research, and how carefully Pérez investigated the intellectual milieu in Algeria during the last years of French colonization. Perhaps the book's greatest distinction is Pérez's hunt for and analysis of documents. The book is the result of research conducted at the public and private archives of Abdelmalek Sayad and Pierre Bourdieu, maintained by their families, libraries and various associations, archives, and museums in France and Algeria. Pérez also interviewed key people who were part of the two young sociologists' sociological journey in Algeria.

*Bourdieu & Sayad Against Empire* is organized in two parts. The first, *Sociology as Emancipation*, offers an engaging and fluid narrative. It works like a Bildungsroman that explores the psychological and moral growth of the two sociologists from childhood to adulthood. The first chapter, supported by ample documentation, weaves a careful analysis of their personal, family, educational, and professional trajectories. Pérez demonstrates how their political affinities, developed from their social experiences in the provinces of Beni Djellil and Béarn respectively, gave them the ability to follow paths to their conceptions of reality that differed from what each was destined to follow: in Bourdieu's case this would have been a scholastic Marxism, while Sayad had faced an exclusionary nationalism.

Chapter 2, *Resisting in War-Torn Algeria*, presents a turning point in their personal and intellectual trajectories. Following Sayad, Bourdieu joined the "liberals", which was a left-wing movement committed "to a moral position of resistance both against those who accepted colonial inequalities and sought to preserve an Algeria without Algerians, and against those who advocated armed action against the French occupation" (Pérez, 2023, p. 39). Sayad and Bourdieu understood this movement could bring several progressive agendas to an independent Algeria without being subservient to nationalist movements like the FLN, or to the excessively moderate positions "exemplified by the writer Albert Camus and the ethnologist Germaine Tillion, who did not speak out openly for the end of colonization" (Pérez, 2023, p. 40). It is under these conditions that in Chapter 3 we see Bourdieu and Sayad, as professor and student at the University of Algiers, respectively, turning to sociology as a source of understanding and action.

The sociology of Bourdieu and Sayad emerges with greater prominence in the second part of the book, *Liberation through Knowledge*, which has three chapters. It traces Bourdieu, Sayad and their team of researchers as they conduct

detailed fieldwork in Algeria. More than an anticolonial science, their sociology was a scientific tool committed to exposing the colonial order and its contradictions in Algeria's rural and urban social lives. Bourdieu and Sayad deployed their knowledge to elaborate a rigorous analysis of colonial society, and its mechanisms of production and reproduction of domination. Pérez analyses the sociologists' critical position on the course of the war of independence and, above all, the concern they both had for the aftermath. The war for Algerian liberation and its social forces required scientific rigor to be understood. In this vein, sociology played a crucial role. According to them, Algeria could no longer be held hostage to a static vision of a country divided between Arabs, Kabyles and Europeans, but should be seen as a developing nation that, once independent, could achieve political autonomy, take its own path, and become capable of resolving its internal contradictions.

Initially, their "study was part of a series of institutional commissions resulting from the Constantine plan (1958-63), the objective of which was to improve the living conditions of Muslim populations" (Pérez, 2023, p. 84). Bourdieu and Sayad worked for the newly formed *Association pour la Recherche Démographique, Économique et Sociale* (ARDES)<sup>1</sup>. As Pérez emphasizes, this provided them the opportunity to examine various social issues experienced in Algeria related to the effects of colonialism: displacement of rural populations, the impacts of modern housing on Algerian families, the rapid transition from rural to urban life, and the influence of this across generations.

Their work was committed to revealing the contradictions produced by colonialism and expose it to French readers, who knew little about the brutal violence of the French state against the Algerian population. So, it "was the war of anticolonial liberation, rather than academic objectives, that led Bourdieu and Sayad to renew their tools for analysing social reality" (Pérez, 2023, p. 118). It is, therefore, a sociology of the colonial order, produced amidst the escalating violence of the French colonial army and paramilitary OAS forces, and by the FLN counteroffensive. As Chapter 4 suggests, it is possible to follow how their sociology was mainly composed on three fronts: from listening to anticolonial peasants, activists and intellectuals; observing the impacts of war in the field and in the suburbs; and through the review and analysis of statistical data in conjunction with qualitative field research.

Bourdieu in particular was concerned with understanding sociological patterns in the transformations lived by Algerian society under colonial rule. Using statistical techniques, he explored the deep and slow transformation that the French colonial system imposed on the Algerian population and the

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<sup>1</sup> After independence ARDES became the Association Algérienne pour la Recherche Démographique, Économique et Sociale (AARDES).

economic and social impacts it produced. These methods allowed them to develop a critical understanding of the real impact of the accelerated changes that they witnessed. To this end, a critical and rigorous reading of the data collected by ARDES was fundamental. As the book presents, Bourdieu was in dialogue with Jacques Berque and accompanied Georges Balandier's work on the colonial situation. This led Bourdieu to adopt an approach concerned with restoring the historicity of the colonial societies and the political present in which they live.

An engaged ethnographic study conducted with peasants and workers, in turn, was able to denounce the forms of submission and exploitation that colonial capitalism produced daily on the large mass of Algerian workers. The use of photos, interviews and notes in field notebooks produced knowledge fundamental to portraying how the loss of land rights, the rural exodus, and the introduction of monetary exchange gradually destroyed the economic and temporal structures of traditional societies. The field research allowed a critical and dynamic analysis of static data. The result of this combination of qualitative and quantitative research can be found in the classical studies *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie*, published in 1963, and *Le Déracinement. La crise de l'agriculture traditionnelle en Algérie*, published in 1964.

For readers familiar with the work of Bourdieu and Sayad, this book is a fertile source that helps us to understand, from new perspectives gleaned through rich sources, the emergence of the thinking of these two sociologists. Pérez's book is a fundamental source that illuminates the incipient period of Sayad's sociology, and helps reveal how some topics would become important to his research agenda years later in France. In other words, Bourdieu & Sayad *Against Empire* not only revives Sayad's initial sociological concerns, which are crucial to understanding migration as a total social fact from a diachronic point of view, but also emphasizes the importance of grasping the political dimension of migration.

Bourdieu and Sayad produced a critical sociology engaged in the social emancipation of Algeria through the light of scientific knowledge. This critical sociology still reflected on the paths open to a true democratic transformation of society after the war of liberation. Moreover, it emphasizes the risks of reproducing colonial forms of domination without the colonizer after independence was won. The sixth chapter states that this "is why Bourdieu and Sayad did not conceive of sociology as an abstract and sterile reflection, but as a weapon for understanding the social world and an instrument for its political transformation" (2023, p. 159). From the journey undertaken by these two young sociologists, Pérez produces a rich meditation on the convergence of science, democracy, and rational pedagogy as elements essential to the production of human emancipation.

**Reference**

Pérez, A. (2023). *Bourdieu and Sayad Against Empire: Forging Sociology in Anticolonial Struggle*. New York, London: Polity Press, 2024.