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The Knotted Web of Dominations. Epistemological Investment in the Anthropology of Work

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Abstract

In the globalized world, work presents itself as a nub of actualization of intermixed relations of domination. How does the ethnological analysis study such intermixed relations? To answer the question the first part of the paper compares the anthropological approaches that Pierre Bourdieu and Gérard Althabe designed in the key period of decolonization. They both broke with colonial ethnography through the analysis of relations of colonial domination in the field of work. Bourdieu's approach is structuralist and he combines ethnography and sociological analysis to display the symbolic structure of the social positions. Althabe's ethnologic approach is constructivist and tries to show the production of social relations by the power of imagination.

In the second part of the paper three researches are briefly presented: prostitution in the brothels of Potosi in Bolivia, the job of the highly qualified women of University of Canton in China, work in the building industry in Oran in Algeria by way of a return to the Bourdieu's work. In these very different situations, the analysis lays stress on the means by which the social agents build their social relations.

Keywords

Pierre Bourdieu, Gérard Althabe, domination, work, epistemology

1. Introduction

This article is the fruit of a collective effort by a team engaged in comparative research on *work and its representations* in today's world. Its aim is to clarify the epistemological basis of ethnological research on the terrain. How can we look at work from an anthropological point of view and understand it? Currently used in both sociology and anthropology, the term "ethnography" seems to stand to common sense: apparently, its implicitly empirical approach requires no outside justification. As a result, its foundations are rarely questioned. But what justifies this, exactly? By definition ethnological observation focuses on a particular micro-social space. Work, however, is seen as an instance of domination relationships that tangle and link up with one another. How should this conjunction be analysed in a globalised world, and how does it all relate to work? Are workers prisoners of the social conditions produced and reproduced by the structures of domination? Or do they themselves produce

their own social relationships?

In undertaking this clarification we start by rereading an early work—little known though remarkable—by Pierre Bourdieu: *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie*, published in 1963. Bourdieu is laying the foundations for his sociological and anthropological work that is to come. It takes us back to the period that forms a pivot between the late Fifties and the early Sixties: that of decolonisation. Today the intellectual impact of decolonisation and of the struggles for liberation in what was known at the time as the "Third World" has to a large extent been forgotten. It was in the context of the Algerian war of independence that Bourdieu began his investigations, laying the foundations a highly original *oeuvre*, one of the most important of the later 20th Century. A multitude of currents were developing in sociological and anthropological thinking, discussing the Marxist paradigm, adopting it as a theoretical posture, opposing it, reworking it to open new conceptual perspectives, or articulating it to structuralism or to Freudian theory—to mention only the more salient developments. A period of particular moment in critical epistemology, renewing sociological and anthropological thinking, it involved thinking out relationships of domination and at the same time setting up a concerted critique of imperialism, which was seen as an expansionary phase of the capitalist system. This same movement that saw the blossoming of Bourdieu's oeuvre, also saw a new development in French anthropology, which at the time was under a double influence: that of traditional colonial ethnology and that—preponderant—of Lévi-Strauss. This situation came in for critical re-examination, in particular by Georges Balandier, in his studies of colonial domination. Gérard Althabe also took part in this decisive break, re-examining the epistemological basis of the ethnological approach.

In this article, though we start out by re-reading Bourdieu's *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie*, and then move on to the thinking of Georges Balandier and Gérard Althabe, our aim is not to come up with an umpteenth critique of Bourdieu's sociology, nor do we wish to minimise his contribution. We would like simply to take his foundational work as a basis for an examination of the postulates and epistemological stance that characterise his sociology and anthropology, and then to show how these differ from those of Althabe. We find that they almost mirror one another. Bourdieu remains faithful to a basically structuralist approach, adapting it in an original way so that he can account for domination relationships in terms of the mechanisms that reproduce them. His sociological investigation and ethnographical approach are combined to grasp "objectively" the symbolical structures of positions in society, positions both objective and subjectivated. Althabe, on the contrary, is constructivist, focusing on the *production* of social relationships; he sees ethnological investigation as a mode of knowledge based on communication between the investigator and the subjects whose world he is trying to understand. Following in the footsteps of Georges Balandier, he studies the ways in which his subjects invent their world by remodelling domination relationships, using the resources of imagination. Bourdieu, studying the position occupied by the dominated in the dominator's world, focuses on the symbolic mechanisms that make it possible to reproduce relations of domination. Althabe shows how

the world of the dominator takes on meaning in the eyes of the dominated.

After elucidating the epistemological postulates that, according to Althabe, underpin ethnological investigation, we illustrate his approach by setting out briefly its results in three very different terrains: prostitution in the brothels of Potosí in Bolivia; employment of highly qualified women at the university of Canton; and—incidentally an allusion to Bourdieu's oeuvre—labour in the construction sector in Oran, Algeria. In all three situations—each in a way at the "antipodes" of the others—we will try to understand how agents produce their social relations by imagining ways of re-thinking and playing out differently the domination relationships inherent in their work.

2. Pierre Bourdieu and Labour in Algeria

Of Bourdieu's numerous publications, *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* (1963) is the only one to deal with labour. It is also no doubt the least known. In his subsequent writings, Bourdieu would continue making use of ethnographic material collected in Kabylie at the beginning of his career, but he was never to extend or expand this particular study on the condition of workers and the nature of labour situations. The 550-page book is by no means an "easy read". The first part consists of a series of tables of statistics drawn up and analysed by three statisticians (Darbel, Rivet, & Seibel, 1963). Bourdieu writes the second part: a sociological study filling out the quantitative data with some sixty biographical interviews. This format complicates reading, but it is intentional: at the very end of a bitter war that the French government would refuse for another two decades to call by its proper name—while the revolutionary spirit of the times tended to idealise it—the authors had apparently decided to force the French public to face the facts. The aim of scientific objectivity was to debunk the flawed "certainties" of both colonial and revolutionary discourse. These are the seeds of the scientific rigour—the objectivation and unveiling/deconstruction—that were to shape Bourdieu's entire oeuvre.

Travail et travailleurs en Algérie came out a few years after the author's *Sociologie de l'Algérie* (1958), and was followed in 1964 by *Le déracinement* (co-authored with Abdelmalek Sayad). The three books are complementary, each throwing light on the others. The first undermines the dogma of "French" Algeria: it deals only with what were still known as "indigenous" societies, in separate chapters (on Kabyles, Chaouia, Mozabites and Arabic speakers), and subsequently brings them together on the "shared basis" of colonial alienation. "European" society is absent: a silent prophecy of its eventual exodus. *Le Déracinement* studies the consequences of the forced displacement of villagers and their regrouping in special camps. This military strategy prolonged the de-structuring undertaken by colonisation, and completed the transformation of Algerian society. Undermining the economic foundations of local societies, breaking up the mechanisms that ensured solidarity, and accelerating the "crisis of traditional farming", it led to the exodus of the peasantry who moved into the peripheries and shantytowns of the cities of Algeria—and even of France.

This final phase of the Algerian war of independence was the context in which Bourdieu launched out

into research. He showed how the colonial system (dispossession of land rights, de-structuring of tribal organisation, displacement of persons) gave rise to an alienated, exploitable urban sub-proletariat. At some length he studies the discrepancies between the attitudes of this group that, socialised in "traditional" societies that were based on agriculture, now found itself caught up in a new system of wage-labour that was linked to the capitalism brought in by colonisation. A sociology of dispossession: of landless peasants, of labourers without labour and without trades, without relevant skills; of city-dwellers without cities, traditionalists by mere default, out of despair, alienated, exploited, and unable to adjust to the system of exploitation. The core problems on which *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* focuses are related to those raised in somewhat different terms in the Marxist thinking that was prevalent at the time: "proletarianisation" and the "transition to capitalism", i.e., the integration into the capitalist system of the Algerian proletariat.

Bourdieu had not yet formulated his key concepts. It is "attitude" and "adaptation" that lie at the heart of his demonstration of the distortions inherent in the colonial system in Algeria. Subsequently, in an effort to stand apart from the vocabularies of both psycho-sociology and Marxism (exploitation, alienation, class, proletariat and sub-proletariat) he was eventually to forge new concepts such as "habitus" and "disposition". Bourdieu's approach is no doubt *anthropological*, insofar as his aim is to bring out the coherent nature of traditional Algerian societies, in particular by examining their economy and work, de-constructing these notions and putting them back into their proper socio-cultural contexts. This contribution to the properly anthropological analysis of labour is fundamental, in particular when he stresses the fact that the very notion of labour is completely absent from the agricultural systems of traditional societies (Note 1). "Labour" emerges during the process of proletarianisation, in the confrontation between "uprooted" peasants and the unemployment that deprives them of a properly social existence. In an urban context, according to Bourdieu, this disconnects the economic from the social functions of work.

It was perhaps the colonial system in Algeria that prompted Bourdieu to de-construct the categories of economics. He was later to extract these categories from their framework and to set them up as concepts for modelling social relationships (differentiating between different forms of capital, as an accompaniment to the theory of fields): a way of putting economics back where it belonged. As to the concept of symbolical domination that was to play a major role in Bourdieu's subsequent work, it was apparently the key that enabled him to grasp colonial domination and its extreme violence as a form. Albert Memmi (1957) had just published his *Portrait du colonisé*, lauded by Jean-Paul Sartre. Franz Fanon (1961) had analysed the de-personalisation suffered by people who were colonised (Note 2). In Bourdieu's view, the colonial subject was alienated by a system that prevented him lastingly from becoming aware of his alienation.

It should be noted here that Bourdieu was dissenting from the intellectual mainstream of the time; middle-of-the-road French thinkers were unwilling or unable to jettison the colonial mindset that

justified the war and its cruelties. Bourdieu disagreed with the ethnologists of the colonial domain—even those who, like Germaine Tillion, claimed to side with the "natives" (Note 3). He attacked the entire colonial system of domination—its explicit and implicit violence; yet at the same time he avoided making heroes of the "people" and the revolutionary fellah. From the outset, there is in his work an austere insistence on scientific rigour and objectivity; this is all the more remarkable as he was conducting his research in a country that was at war: his way of harnessing scientific knowledge to make a stand. *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* analyses the social conditions of the urban proletariat, but remains oddly detached from the war. It focuses on what could be described in Marxist terms as class-consciousness—but in order to show that in fact, in this case at least, there was no such thing. The proletarians and sub-proletarians of Algeria are not aware of the system that exploits them: they cannot be described as revolutionary (Note 4).

Bourdieu's approach has some similarities with that of two other anthropologists of the same period, Georges Balandier and Gérard Althabe. Their work, however, has rarely been compared to his. In 1955, Balandier published two studies: *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire* and *Sociologie des Brazzavilles noires*. Balandier stresses social dynamics, whereas Bourdieu is more structuralist in his approach. It should be pointed out, however, that they share a major concern: that of moving beyond the hidebound colonial ethnology that had proved unable to understand change and to relativise the colonial context. Gérard Althabe (1963), who studied unemployment in Brazzaville in 1958, showed, like Bourdieu, that the categories of labour and unemployment were not a true fit. The practices and representations developed by the society he was studying were something else. He pointed out, however, that this non-correspondence did not "over-determine" individuals. Subsequently, in analysing society in Madagascar (1969) and in reconstructing the logics implicated in the Congo war (1972), he was to integrate colonial domination into the very core of his investigatory practice. Bourdieu, Balandier and Althabe each have their own way of thinking, but all of them break out of the context of (French) science at the time of decolonisation, and in particular with the ethnological approach of the mainstream. This led them to study fields that had hitherto been ignored: colonial domination, urban situations and labour.

Unsurprisingly, Bourdieu found himself "excluded from the family", as Alban Bensa has put it (Note 5); in academic anthropology he was seen exclusively as a sociologist. Mainstream anthropology also fought an obstinate rearguard battle against the urban anthropology inaugurated by Althabe in the French suburbs in the 1970s.

3. Epistemological Positions in the Colonial Context

Bourdieu indicates his epistemological position only briefly in a foreword to his personal part of *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie*. He begins with a reply to an article dated 1950 in which Michel Leiris maintains that in the colonial situation an ethnologist cannot possibly be objective. It is thus

explicitly the idea of scientific objectivity that Bourdieu is interested in imposing in his investigation of the core process of dispossession and alienation in the colonial system. Mocking Leiris—justifiably—he asserts that:

"[…] for the ethnologist there is an absolute imperative that is not ethical but scientific: there is no conduct, attitude or ideology that can be described, understood or explained objectively without reference to the existential situation of the colonised person such as it is determined by the action of the economic and social forces that characterise the colonial system. To proceed in any other way would be to hide, by means of a surreptitious ontological manoeuvre, the arrangement that constitutes the very essence of the situation: the system of 'relationships that are determined, necessarily and independently of individual volition (Note 6)' to which attitudes and conduct refer. Such is the ethnologist's responsibility".

Bourdieu continues:

"A purely ethnographical approach would encounter a reality too vast, too complex and too mobile to warrant any imaginable generalisation of the conclusions drawn from monographies, even though there were many of them; one would run the risk of having striking particular facts relegating to the background more important but less obvious aspects of reality. […] On the other hand, only an ethnographic knowledge of labour problems in rural and urban societies could provide a body of working hypotheses for use in elaborating the questionnaire".

It is worthwhile pausing to consider these suggestions. On the one hand, Bourdieu faces up to a problem: that of understanding a society in a colonial situation—a problem, however, that had been dealt with by Balandier almost a decade previously—a fact that he had decided to ignore. Balandier imported into France British discussions of "social change" and "societies' responses to colonisation". He theorised the colonial situation as an interpretative framework that could enable one to grasp forms of social organisation more dynamically. He also stressed the need to pay attention to the rebirth of initiatives in societies in the current context of decolonisation—renewals often dominated, incidentally, by religious movements. This is why Balandier and his Africanist successors paid such close attention to the religious movements that were emerging everywhere in reaction to colonisation (Note 7). The Algeria studied by Bourdieu was of course a colonised society; but it was also involved in a war of liberation. This "elephant in the room" seems to escape Bourdieu's notice in *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie*—though, as we have already pointed out, he never hides the dispossessions suffered, both material and cultural, and the depth of the resultant alienation. As to the religious dimension, it figures merely as part of a "traditionalism of despair" (just as Orientalist scholars before Bourdieu had deplored the impoverishment of Islam in the Maghreb), whereas actually it was a decisive factor in mobilising the population against the colonisers.

Ignoring Balandier's work, but borrowing from Marx his principle of unveiling the system of "determinate relationships that are both necessary and independent of individual volition", Bourdieu

takes up an epistemological stance close to that of Lévi-Strauss who distinguishes between the "cold societies" (traditional) that have to be approached by means of ethnography, and the modern "hot societies" whose social structures can be grasped only by means of statistics.

Although Bourdieu tries to resist the attraction of Lévi-Strauss, its initial influence shows up, particularly in his combination of an ethnographic approach and statistical tools. It can also be seen in the attention he pays to the symbolic dimension, at the expense of the imaginary one. The anthropology of Lévi-Strauss is imprisoned in the symbolical order of colonialism; Bourdieu, on the other hand, witnessing the paroxysmal violence of the Algerian context, is led to attack frontally the de-structuring effects of colonial relationships and the two forms of violence they imply, one in the symbolical and the other in the practical order, each strengthening the other. Bourdieu's entire oeuvre was to be marked by his effort to think out anew the dominant paradigms of his time—anthropological structuralism, the structuralism of Althusser, Marxism in general, and the psychoanalysis of Freud and of Lacan—and to build this into a theory of the structures of social positioning and the ways in which these are incorporated and interiorised.

Already germinating in this inaugural investigation, this idea posits that the social subject or group depends on the structure of social relationships. These are produced by the structure, and are not autonomous. Material conditions, status and subjectivity are determined by positions occupied in the overall system of social positioning: the agent is "acted out", as Bourdieu was later to say: agents are unable to find their way, or even to think or to imagine outside the overarching system. He makes this clear at the end of his foreword:

"On reading a homogeneous group of interviews, a sort of typical portrait emerged of the person characteristic of the category. Often better knowledge of such and such an individual whom one had formerly met at the café La Marsa, in the Casbah or at the Mahieddine housing complex, provided an intuitive link that enabled one to perceive as a living whole the scattered members encountered in different interviews. […] Based on unchallengeable statistics and on methodical analysis, the selection of typical individuals enables one to return, after a long detour, without running the risk of falling back into impressionistic intuitions and the traditional methods of ethnography".

Comparing Bourdieu's approach to that of Althabe, we soon realise that their orientations are diametrical opposites. Althabe (in the former Belgian Congo and French Congo and in Madagascar) shows how foreign the logics of colonisation and wage-labour are to the societies he is studying. First and foremost, however, he shows the meaning that these logics take on in the respective universes of these societies. His surveys are centred on the social universe and on the dynamics mobilised to solve the crises opened up by external domination. It is this approach that is used to make armed conflicts *intelligible*: the armed conflicts that break out in neo-colonial Madagascar (the 1972 revolt) and in the Congo (the war following independence) (1972, 2000).

The Algerian context, it should be pointed out, is the result of a special type of colonisation, a process

during which the so-called indigenous population was pushed out of its own space, dispossessed, and replaced by a foreign imported society. Thus to a far greater extent than anywhere else on the African continent (except on its southern tip), the "natives" were forced to find a place for themselves in a world foreign to them, and in which they were assigned an inferior status. This specific context accentuates no doubt the difference between Althabe's and Bourdieu's approaches. In Bourdieu's view, the categories proper to traditional thinking are either destroyed or at least damaged, and workers are forced by need to adapt to a context that is new to them: that of work in the capitalist system. The system of relations imposed by colonisation and capitalism is central to his analysis. Bourdieu thus observes the position of colonised people in the colonial system; in other words, he observes the position of the dominated in the dominator's world. Althabe, on the other hand, analyses the place occupied by the dominator in the world of the dominated. It is in this that his stance is original. As the researcher comes from the dominator's world, Althabe investigates his *own* position in the universe he is studying and his involvement in the process of investigation (Note 8). In a way, this is his reply to the question put by Michel Leiris. In contrast, Bourdieu responds with the careful objectivation that he was to theorise later in his concept of epistemic breakaway.

This concern for observation takes on its full meaning in the anthropologists' determination to steer clear not only of the colonial ideological frame, but also of the revolutionary awareness that was developing at the time in Algeria and throughout the world; decolonisation was interacting with other anti-imperialist struggles and with the cold war, under the aegis of Marxism—the dominant paradigm. Proletarians and peasantry—the "damned of the earth" (as Fanon put it)—were given a revolutionary mission. French intellectuals of the period, ensconced in their salons and offices, were all too often revolutionary first and foremost "by proxy", as Althabe ironises in his autobiography (2005) (Note 9). It is from this sort of revolutionary mythology that Bourdieu distances himself when he asserts that Algerian proletarians are not revolutionary, showing that they are not really aware of the system that exploits and alienates them. To this mythology, he opposes sociological objectivity, examining in turn all the components of the relationship to capitalism: the relation to time, to the maximisation of effort, to calculation, to monetary income, and to urban dwelling, grasping the various levels of integration into the system of capitalist labour and the attitudes it entails.

This, too, is a way of deconstructing colonial discourse on the "native". Bourdieu develops his point by examining the various components on which it is based, in particular as regards the "native/civilised" categorisation. In the colonial imagination the "native" is irrational, lazy, and incapable of calculation: in a nutshell, a grown-up child, wily, thieving, lying, and so forth, ad nauseam. His improvidence is a leitmotif that persists throughout practically the entire colonial period (Darmon, 2009). All of these points are elucidated and debunked methodically.

Bourdieu's epistemological stance thus consists in distancing himself from representations, challenging and deconstructing them by comparing them to the "objective" reality revealed by sociology. The role

of the latter is to elucidate the structure of social positioning in order to deduce from it the actors' (or agents', to use Bourdieu's subsequent terminology) systems of representation and worldview.

In *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie*, Bourdieu holds that the objective conditions of one's existence—i.e., one's position in the system of capitalist exploitation—determine one's representations and views. The more one is dominated and dispossessed materially and culturally, the stricter the determination. This determination, however, is not based on the objective structure of production relationships, as in Marxist theory, but on the structure of social positions. This formulation makes it possible to incorporate two forms of inequality: inequality of material conditions of existence, and inequality of the ability to become aware of the nature of the system of domination—and therefore of the forms of subjectivation entailed by it. The most proletarianised segments of the population—the sub-proletarians—are totally unable to perceive the system that alienates them. Unable to project themselves into the future, they have no dreams of it. In reply the interviewer's questions they are constrained—at best—to plan "impossible possibilities" for their lives. Here too we note that this approach is the diametrical opposite of that of Althabe (1969, 1998), who finds "imaginary transcendences" in situations of oppression and conceptualises them. Here we see the limitations of Bourdieu's approach. His findings can be compared to those of Franz Fanon, to which he disdainfully alludes and that he rejects. Fanon (1961) contrasts, for example, the city of the colonised population and the city of the colonials:

"The city of the colonised population is famished, hungry for bread, for meat, for shoes, for coal, for light. On its knees, it crouches, prostrate: a city of niggers, of wogs. The colonised inhabitants covet the colonials' city, looking at it hungrily, dreaming of possession. Possession of all sorts: they want to sit at the settler's table, to lie in his bed, and perhaps to sleep with his wife. To be colonised is to be envious. The coloniser is not unaware of this; he catches the look that strays in the eyes of the colonised subject, and tells himself bitterly, without lowering his guard: 'They want to take our place'. And it's true. There is no colonised subject who does not dream at least once a day of taking over the place of the colonial".

One can understand Bourdieu's desire to set aside revolutionary mythologies and to come to grips with the actual social conditions of workers' existence. But the lack of any reference to the anti-colonial war that was going on, and his claim that proletarians are not revolutionary, both point to a blind spot in his thinking—a point of primordial importance. One could object to this that the Algerian conflict did not break out against the capitalist system as such—the "objective" system of domination and exploitation—but against the regime of foreign domination and oppression. At the centre of Fanon's analysis is the relation between the colonised subject and the colonial system as such, that incidentally he sees as a superstructure that is at the same time an infrastructure:

"It is neither its factories, nor its properties, nor its bank accounts that characterise the 'ruling class'. The rulers first and foremost are the people who have come from elsewhere, people who are not like

the natives, they are 'other' (*Ibidem*)".

Yet nothing in Bourdieu's book explains how the different social fractions of the Algerian population position themselves in regard to the armed conflict, or more broadly to the system of political, ideological and military oppression—which at the time was at its most intense. We should not forget that Bourdieu explains in his foreword that:

"There is no type of conduct, attitude or ideology that can be described, understood and explained objectively without any reference to the existential situation of the colonised individual as determined by the *action of the economic and social forces characteristic of the colonial system*".

Bourdieu's analysis is in fact entirely based on relationships with the capitalist system, and in particular with the imposition of a particular rationalised form of labour that differs from productive activity in traditional Algerian societies. It is here that we realise the limitations of his work. His project of showing up modes of domination and subjectivation comes up against two obstacles. On the one hand, the objectivistic stance aimed at keeping the Algerian conflict out of the study—but how could the war *not* be a basic component of the "existential situation of the colonised subject?" On the other hand, his study is based on the hypothesis that the "objective" structures of domination are based on the capitalist system. He does turn to Max Weber to distance himself from the Marxist paradigm, but nonetheless continues to see production relationships as fundamental. But can colonial domination really be reduced to production relations? Deprived of its colonial dimension, domination in Algeria is unintelligible—as is the war of independence that had broken out six years previously.

Bourdieu means to do justice to the workers' view of their condition, but envisages this condition essentially in relation to the capitalist system. It is not the overall view of the world developed by these proletarians that is central to Bourdieu's study. It is perhaps in this that an approach focusing on ethnological investigation diverges from an approach based on statistics and using ethnographic surveys merely as an optional resource.

4. Althabe's Principles of Ethnological Investigation

When Gerard Althabe started out in urban ethnology in the mid-1970s, he ran into the same epistemological problem as Bourdieu. At the time in French anthropology (unlike its British and American counterparts), Lévi-Strauss was a hegemonic authority. Althabe (1998) outlines the two arguments advanced:

"—Ethnology has no object [in contemporary urban societies], as its domain, that of interpersonal exchange, is not autonomous; all that one can perceive is an actualisation of global communication systems;—only in a framework that maximises distance (i.e., the condition of reciprocal alterity) is it possible to construct knowledge from the inside (one of the basic aims of ethnology). When the ethnologist approaches a social universe in which he is one of the actors, he is unable to free himself from the complicity that links him to his interviewees, and remains trapped in the representations he

shares with them. The knowledge that he produces is a captive of their perspectives".

These two aspects are closely linked. Bourdieu, as we have seen, responds to the challenge by assigning centrality to the statistical/questionnaire survey, seen as the only way of identifying the arrangement of social positions that constitutes the basic architecture of society. Ethnographic investigation complements this statistical approach. Upstream, it identifies pertinent questions. Downstream, it produces comprehensive knowledge that enables us to understand, on the one hand, the composition of social positioning (and especially the representations and ideological developments that stem from it) and, on the other hand, the modes of subjectivation entailed by domination. Seen from Bourdieu's point of view, social agents and relationships do admittedly enjoy a "relative autonomy", but this autonomy is only secondary: it is still subject to the basic logics that structure social fields. Its autonomy exists only in a determinate form, governed by the overall structure of social positions. As to the second aspect of Lévi-Strauss' approach—the alterity of the investigator in relation to the groups he studies—Bourdieu deals with it by adopting an objectivistic stance; one of his central concepts—as yet unformulated in *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie*—was to be developed later: that of the "epistemic breakaway"; it was to unfold throughout his oeuvre. This concept integrates all the means, including language, that the sociologist can mobilise to disengage himself from "common sense"; he deconstructs the latter and objectifies agents' representations by deriving them from their social positions. In sum, this "epistemic breakaway" enables Bourdieu to attain a scientific objectivity that can replace the "distanced view" of Lévi-Strauss. But whereas the basic alterity is not treated as a problem by Lévi-Strauss, who sees it as self-evident, Bourdieu's "epistemic breakaway" is obtained by means of an elaborate construction: that of a properly scientific objectivity.

Althabe's solution to the problem formulated by Lévi-Strauss is the diametrical opposite of Bourdieu's. In his view, the very possibility of ethnological investigation presupposes that the social groups to be investigated actually produce their relationships in relative autonomy, independently (to some extent) of the global structuring of society (i.e., in particular independently of the capitalist system of production, class formation and political domination). This relative autonomy, central to Althabe's approach, is totally absent from Bourdieu's work on Algeria. Set against Bourdieu's view, the autonomy in Althabe's approach appears, so to speak, not so much relative as total: the actors are treated as subjects, and not as mere objects. They produce the interpersonal exchanges that occupy and absorb them. If there were no autonomy at such a micro-social level, no *ethnological* investigation would be possible. But this hypothesis does not negate or even neutralise the overall domination; on the contrary, it shows how the overall relation of domination enters into particular, localised groups; how it is signified, represented, staged and practiced by the actors, as part of the very dynamics of the production of their relationships, and in configurations that are always singular. It is precisely in studying "from the inside" the ways in which the actors of such-and-such a group develop relationships, reworking the overall domination, that that domination can be properly analysed and understood. From

this point of view, the problem of assigning too much importance to "striking particular facts" (Note 10) is not posed in the same way: these facts can correspond to significant phenomena, and reveal important processes that Bourdieu's approach would relegate to a secondary zone.

Cultural distance—the "distanced eye" without which, according to Lévi-Strauss, no ethnological enquiry is possible, and the "epistemic breakaway" that is central to Bourdieu's oeuvre—are both "reset" by Althabe, who reverses the terms of the problem. Ethnological investigation *starts out* by abolishing the distance and the break between the researcher and the subjects of his research; he has to start out by devising together with his subject a means of communication. His method consists in interacting personally with the people he is studying so as to get to know the internal logics of their social group. The objectivation will thus consist in understanding their mutual relationship, i.e., in grasping the way in which the subjects integrate the researcher and his survey into their internal relationships, or, to put it differently, the way in which they give meaning to his research (Note 11).

Our own approach is more in line with Balandier's and Althabe's than with Bourdieu's. It consists precisely in reconstituting by means of ethnological investigation the universe of its subjects: the ways in which they give meaning to their world and social relations; the conjunctions and disjunctions that they make between the various social fields and forms of domination that make up their universe (family and gender, relations with the State, religion, etc.). We attempt to reconstitute the symbolic architecture and imaginary constructions that articulate labour relationships to other social fields. Whereas Bourdieu centres his study of Algerian workers on the modalities and processes involved in their integration into the capitalist universe that has been implanted by colonisation, we focus rather on the ways in which modes of domination take root in the universe of the subjects by studying the ways in which the subjects adapt them. Our aim is thus to reveal the singularity of each situation and, in examining its relationship to the overall context, to pinpoint the factors that make it singular. How do the subjects articulate the different forms of domination? What meanings do they give to them? By what means do they integrate them into their lives, rise above them, or even subvert them?

We would like to illustrate this approach and its results by briefly outlining work carried out on prostitutes in Bolivia, on university-educated women in China, and on construction workers in Algeria.

5. Prostitution in Bolivia: From Theoretical Object to an Emergent Subject (Note 12)

Prostitution, and the intense discussion it gives rise to throughout the world, together provide an excellent terrain for the study of domination relationships and the way in which they are interpreted today. Female prostitution demonstrates at least two forms of domination: the domination of women by men, and that of persons by the market. This leads to an oscillation between two attitudes. On one hand individuals have a right to dispose of their own bodies, and this should be defended. On the other hand prostitution dispossesses prostitutes of their free will, their desire and their dignity in a paroxysm of emblematic domination, and this should be denounced. The assertion of individual rights leads to

recognition of prostitution as work; the denunciation of sexual slavery annuls this categorisation. Between these two polar positions, there are stances that are more ambivalent (Note 13), but debate on the issue generally ends in a dialogue of the deaf, the opposing interpretations apparently being irreconcilable. Even the distinction between prostitution that is freely chosen and prostitution that is forced (the slave trade) is not really consensual: over and above the various reasons for entering into prostitution, its effect on individuals is also controversial.

The issue echoes oddly the divergent ways of comprehending domination as a social phenomenon. Proponents of the sex-slavery interpretation stress the steamroller effect of constraints and dominations on the prostitutes, dispossessing them of their bodies and volition. Sex-work militants, in contrast, focus on the prostitutes' margins of autonomy: i.e., the leeway that enables them to alter the meaning of domination, to circumvent it, and even to limit and subvert it.

Observing the actual relationships developed in singular situations by prostitutes, however, tends to dissolve the abstract generalisations that lead to this interminable debate. The apparent unity of the category "prostitution" expressed in the notion of "sex market" does not stand up to closer examination—all the more so as commercial logics multiply configurations—and also turn out to be ambivalent (Tabet, 2005). Commercial relationships, including sexual transactions, can bring both alienation and emancipation at one and the same time; they are not freestanding, self-sufficient absolutes, but are always involved in a ruck of concrete social relationships. These have to be analysed carefully rather than judged summarily. Detailed observation of practices and representations in the brothels of Potos íin Bolivia gives an idea of the complex ambiguity of these relationships.

Bolivia is a regulatory state, which means that the practice of prostitution in brothels, in Potos íand elsewhere, is framed by laws and regulated. Prostitutes enter into prostitution and leave it freely. The public health service and the police check up on their activity. In the brothels, the women act as hostesses, encouraging customers to buy drink, and receiving a commission. Sexual intercourse takes place in rooms on an upper floor. Brothel-keepers receive a fixed commission on each act, and set working hours for the women who "live in". Thus prostitutes seem to be independent; keepers have little hold over them. However, the commission on drinks, negotiations on the price of sexual services, and frequent theft all tend to dissolve the notion of fixed-price sexual servicing. The actual objective is rather to dispossess the customer of all the money he has on his person when he comes into the establishment. Lastly, prostitutes play with clients' desires, mistreating them, disarming them, manipulating their crude language and turning it against them. Strategies of this sort aim at neutralising male pretentions to sexual and monetary power: the notions that lead men to believe that women can be reduced to the state of mere objects of their desire. Prostitution, in this particular context, appears to be paradoxical, leading prostitutes to transgress the gender assignments that are at one and the same time strongly asserted at Potos í both in the relationship to money and in family roles. By means of this transgression, prostitutes manage to gain, thanks to their earnings, recognition by society and by their

families as suppliers of income (traditionally a masculine role) and therefore also as good mothers. They can devise plans to move up in society (e.g., owning their own home, setting up a small business, making a "respectable" marriage) in ways that are normally beyond prostitutes' aspirations. Besides this, deft manoeuvring of clients can make prostitution relatively supportable. It can enable women to experiment consciously with the contingent nature of certain sexual relationships that are basic to male domination, and possibly also to move on, beyond them.

This ambivalence of prostitutes' position, as they deal with the various forms of domination that riddle the existence of women in general and of prostitutes in particular, shows up in a particular type of nocturnal dream activity that is remarkable: the "dreams of the milieu", as they call them, in which prostitutes have sexual intercourse with the devil (Absi & Douville, 2011). The devil figures as a supreme pimp, master of both the pleasure and the money that prostitution provides—while at the same time he restores the classic figure of masculine power. These dreams of erotic exchange with the devil seem to constitute an obligatory passage, a professional ritual enacted on entering the profession—and an imaginary elaboration that not only shows up the contradictions and the ambivalence of prostitution, but is also indispensible as a means of giving it meaning.

It is by no means straightforward to classify prostitution among domination relationships (of gender, socio-economic, class, etc.); in the case in point, the prostitutes of Potosí far from being passive objects of domination, come across as creative subjects, inventing relational games that enable them to open up escape routes. Moral discourse, in contrast, tends to keep the prostitutes to assigned positions that they transgress with a mixture of pleasure and shame.

Bolivian women's experiences show that prostitution is not a manifestation of monolithic domination. It does not express at all times and in all places a uniform position of the women engaged in it. To understand this, one has to find out exactly how the actors implement the domination, and not be content with examining the ways in which they are forced to submit to it. This entails listening to what they have to say about it—instead of starting out by disqualifying them on the grounds that they are "alienated". Yet—at least in the French contest—what prostitutes have to say is seldom heard, as their judgement is presumed to be invalid because of their position as objects of domination. Foregone conclusions of this sort, begging the question, are current in campaigns to eradicate prostitution. Whence the paradox that underlies the whole issue: well-meaning campaigners, seeing these women as passive victims of domination and denouncing their reduction to the state of commercial wares, mere objects of men's sexual desires, deny these women the status of subjects. And they do this just when throughout the world prostitutes are emerging—in particular by unionising as sex workers—as fully-fledged political subjects.

6. Female University Graduates in China—Scenes of Masculine Domination

The very people who fight against the subjection of women usually perceive prostitutes as passive victims of alienation at its worst. Education, on the contrary, is seen as raising awareness of domination and decreasing its deleterious effects. A survey of highly qualified women university graduates carried out in Guangdong province, China, however, paints a more complex picture. The conjunction of capitalism and communism has led in China to an even more rigid polarity of gender, strengthening the traditional masculine domination instead of dissolving it. The single-child policy that was supposed to promote equality between the sexes has often had the opposite effect. Widespread preference for male offspring leads families to contravene the ban on multiple pregnancies, or else, when the embryo turns out to be female, to opt for termination of the pregnancy. The State's policy is thwarted. Furthermore, reassertion of the norms of masculine domination in the sphere of the family is possibly also a major factor in strengthening male domination in the sphere of work. On the one hand, male predominance in kinship is at least partly responsible for the norm of hypergamy, prescribing that women should marry "above themselves" so as to rise in the social scale: a woman's husband should be better off than she is financially, socially, and professionally, to avoid undermining male power. On the other hand, the negative figure of the woman "left on the shelf", still unmarried at the age of thirty, has been the subject of campaigns in the media; single women are haunted by the idea that, should they fail to find a suitable husband, they will find themselves in a position of marked social inferiority. This nightmare can be highly destabilising, as an ethnological survey of female graduates in political science at the university of Canton has recently revealed (Selim, 2011). The higher women rise in the academic field, and the more qualified they become, the more their chances fade of finding a suitable husband: i.e., someone older, better qualified or better paid than they are. This threat to their position on the marriage market can lead them to adopt a strategy of self-devaluation, and to limit their academic, professional and financial aspirations. The logic of voluntary downgrading can thus extend from the marriage market into that of work. It can lead women to accept the sexual discrimination that is openly practiced by employers on the grounds that a possible pregnancy might conceivably affect the profitability of their enterprise. The logics of young women we interviewed are thus linked to normative prescriptions—and all of this in a context that is also warped by weighty political concerns. The Chinese Party-State fusion forces actors to respect a normative framework that affects their interior life as much as their outward behaviour. As the slightest defiance of the Party-State is immediately seen as suspicious, deviations, reconsiderations and divergences remain very cautious. Monopoly of power by the State, the Party and the males has fashioned in women reflexes that are often hidden from awareness, leading them to avoid any transgression that might make them even more vulnerable. The result is that questioning assignations of gender has now become unthinkable, no matter how much a woman has developed her awareness of the depreciation and injustice she has suffered.

In this context, globalised norms can sometimes seem nonetheless to offer a way of fissuring

domination and making an escape. Some of the "learned ladies", as they are known (the Chinese equivalent of bluestockings), opt for this strategy (Ibidem). Reconstituting individual trajectories, we have found that the discovery of gender studies—imported from the USA via Hong Kong—has generally had a significant impact on the condition of these women. When the norms of masculine domination are called into question, there have sometimes also been sudden twists and turns in hitherto exemplary scientific, professional and political careers. Adventurous women find themselves in dissidence with the Party and on the margins of society—a situation fraught with peril.

7. Workers and the State in Algeria, 50 Years after Independence

Half a century after Bourdieu—and as the country is celebrating a half-century of independence—we complete our survey of the reformulation of domination relationships (Note 14) with a return to the field of Algerian labour. In Oran in 2011 and 2012, Laurent Bazin interviewed workers employed on a building construction site, and workers employed by a State-owned construction company. As a complement, a survey was made in a former Jewish neighbourhood of the city, an enclave in its centre, which was suffering from an acute problem: that of re-housing inhabitants of insalubrious "old buildings".

In the space of 50 years, transformations affecting labour had been deep-seated. They had come together with a complete reshuffle of the stratification of the Algerian labour force. This shows up clearly in sociological studies made in the later 1980s (Note 14). The changes were linked to the forceful policy of industrialisation practiced in the 1970s, which aimed at spreading wage-labour throughout society. After this decisive initial phase, the economy was partially liberalised during the 1980s; state-owned companies were privatised, and this development gained strength with the structural adjustment brought in from 1994 to 1997, when some 500,000 employees were brutally dismissed from state-owned enterprises, at the height of the conflict between the Islamist guerrilla forces and the government during what was to become known as the "Black Decade". These twists and turns in policy led to the development of a newly rich elite linked to political power-holders, and at the same time to a massive informalisation of employment. The share of formal labour in the economy fell from three-quarters of the labour force in 1990 to about a third in 2010, while the production sector went into rapid decline.

Surveys of construction workers showed in the first place how important the relationship with the State was in defining labour and configuring work relationships. The relation with the State was ambivalent and ridden with conflict. Representations of labour still bore the mark of the period of industrialisation; wage-employment in the public sector still acted as the norm. Declaring employees to "the insurance" (i.e., to the official social insurance organisation) was the main marker of this; it meant less in terms of actual protection than as the sign of a social condition on which recognition by the State conferred a certain dignity. The State, however, came to be designated by its constant failures in the field of labour:

it failed to have its rules respected, to carry out site supervision, to guarantee protection of workers, to check corruption, to provide jobs and housing… At the time, Algerian society was highly agitated. During the year 2010, police reportedly recorded more than 10,000 incidents, whether spontaneous or organised (protest gatherings, riots, strikes, sit-ins, self-immolations, etc.), demanding jobs and housing. Demands accompanied by strikes were recorded in all sectors, and especially in the public ones. To obtain wage raises and better working conditions protesters appealed to the ultimate authority: the Head of State.

Today, a lot is still expected of the public authorities, and these expectations configure the relationship between State and citizen. The relationship is based on the idea of a debt that the State owes to society—a debt that, with the rise in oil prices, has increased enormously over the past decade (Bazin, 2013). There have been denunciations of misappropriation of the oil rent by the governing elite, by military leaders, and by the provincial (*wilaya*) administration, and their respective client networks. Workers thus locate domination mainly in the State apparatus, with its propensity to take over wealth and then circulate it through its own networks, all to the workers' detriment. Following the Tunisian revolution, the State increased the funds it injected into social services and the economy (arranging credit for the jobless, building subsidised housing, improving civil servants' pay, tweaking the cash balances of publicly- and privately-owned enterprises) with the openly avowed aim of "buying peace on the social front". But this merely had the effect of encouraging further claims and raising even further expectations of repayment by the State. Its debt to society is inextinguishable—a debt that echoes the debt to the martyrs of the war of liberation, on which the State still bases its own legitimacy. Domination has thus turned out to be highly ambivalent: Government policies are stripped of their content; their purposes are thwarted by social logics that have turned against the State its own claim to be the protector of society.

Another aspect emerging from our conversations with (male) workers is the reining-in of men's aspirations and the difficulty of living up to the norms of proper masculine repute. Men, according to a belief that is still widely held today, are supposed to provide income for their families and to ensure their upkeep. Very often our interviewees acknowledged bitterly that they were "finished" socially—a detail reminiscent of Bourdieu's book. This could be expressed in two ways: in French, "I have nothing" ("*je n'ai rien*") and, in Algerian Arabic, "I am nothing". This duality of having and being, according to the language used, is significant: it springs from a situation of bilingualism, a conjunction/disjunction of cultural references that have been sundered by political history. On one hand, Algerian society—and in particular Algerian youth—are still looking towards Europe, the ambivalent seat of imperial domination, of course, yet at the same time the source of the emancipatory model of individual accomplishment and occupational competency. On the other hand, this same society and youth increasingly are open to influences coming from the Arab Orient, including fundamentalist currents of Islam rooted in the Arabian peninsula, as the Algerian State has never renounced the dogma,

forged in the anti-colonial struggle, of Algeria as an Arab Muslim nation. The norms of social accomplishment are thus torn between two currents that still underpin and undermine the traditional references of society—references that had formerly been assaulted by colonisation, as Bourdieu had shown.

Caught up in several disparate modes of domination issuing contradictory injunctions, subjects find themselves envisaging death as a way of escape (Note 16). "I have nothing/I am nothing" expresses the awareness of an insupportable emptiness or lack of social existence; often this has led to spectacular public immolations. The media have ended up ridiculing them, joking in an attempt to neutralise their traumatic character. The same awareness also tempts subjects to flee to the opposite shores of the Mediterranean, either in the hope of escaping from the indignities of existence in Algeria, or to hide their shame, but also sometimes in the hope of gaining professional recognition that is unthinkable at home. *Harga*, the Algerian designation of this, means "to burn" (to burst through frontiers, burning one's papers, one's life). The symbolism is no doubt linked to that of immolation. There is a saying that it is better to be eaten by fish (in the sea), than by worms (in the grave). Religion proffers a third way of seeing death. The quest for (God's) truth and for salvation is based on legitimacy greater than that of State, a legitimacy able to neutralise the crushing material superiority of the West. This can lead to an obsession with accountancy, totting up good and bad "marks", the acts of each person being submitted to the judgement of God, in the hope of divine recognition of individual merits and paradise in an after-life.

In this framework—as in the Muslim world on the whole—relationships between men and women are strained. In clashes between Islamist currents, the State and the Western world, women are hostages. The violence is all the more intense as women have left the place assigned to them by tradition, and as men are unable to take on the responsibilities associated with their virility. The symbolism of death crops up often in interviews and conversations, expressing the threat to men's virility as it is mangled by the contradictions of society. Morbid elaborations seek in the imaginary spaces of (im)mortality ways out of the impasses of society. These elaborations are projected on to the State, often represented as a death-dealing power, in particular in the minds of young people: a tentacular entity, spreading through society to stifle them. Images of this sort often crop up when interviewees denounce the governing elite and the figure of the State. The latter is generally pointed to as the culprit responsible for the stagnation that seems to imply social death—because of its domination, its failings, its inability to shoulder its responsibilities, and its tendency to allow and encourage so few to hoard resources at the expense of so many.

8. Conclusion

To conclude we would like to point out some aspects of the thinking that has led us to compare the precursory work of Pierre Bourdieu with that of Gérard Althabe. Our aim has been to show the epistemic basis of our approach to the world of labour today, in places as diverse as Bolivia, China and Algeria. In the 1950s, Marxist thinking was preponderant, as was the liberation ideology in colonised societies. Scientific issues discussed reflected problems of development and modernisation, centred on the integration of "traditional" societies into modernity under the aegis of economic rationality. Domination and emancipation were dealt with mainly in the analysis of capitalism that was understood as a system of social relationships, the expansion of which defined imperialism. It was in this framework that labour was grasped. Changing this disposition was unthinkable. All of this being the case, the originality of an approach such as Althabe's consisted in studying the concrete ways in which domination was actually exerted. The point of departure was the awareness that was developing in colonised societies. However, seen from this point of view, labour is no longer simply a product of capitalism and imperialism; it turns out to be one of the supports on which relationships of domination are based - relationships that are a good deal more complex than had previously been expected, in both their practical and imaginary forms.

At the time, researchers considered labour without taking into account its sexual dimension; the production of gender was dealt with separately. Today, however, gender studies having become central, and almost hegemonic, sexual divisions are being articulated closely to the field of labour in order to bring out the discriminating effects of sexual inequality. Yet the importance of the State in organising domination and producing gender categories is tending to fade out (Bazin & Selim, 2012).

In bringing out certain aspects of our respective research undertakings, we have attempted in this article to illustrate a properly ethnological approach: recognising that labour lies at the heart of a complex web—indeed, a tangle—of modes of domination. This has led us to focus not so much on "objective" forms of domination that combine to catch workers in their net, and more on ways in which workers think of and imagine these modes of domination and transpose them into their practices and social relationships. The links that they themselves set up between different social fields, the projections and imaginary re-elaborations of domination are aimed not so much at putting an end to domination as at adapting to its conditions and, hopefully, changing its terms. What has to be done today is no longer to think out the links between capitalism and the colonial condition; it is rather to throw light on the complexity of the processes by which actors produce at one and the same time their social position, their relations to other actors, and the ways in which they represent all of these. And all of this in a globalised universe in which an expanding capitalism is never perceived by actors without linking it to economic inequalities—whether seen as legitimate or not—but linking it also to the ambivalent figure of the State.

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Notes

Note 1. During the same period some Marxist economic anthropology was focusing on labour, in particular with Claude Meillassoux (1960) who showed that labour had no value in African traditional societies.

Note 2. Bourdieu makes few references in his book, mentioning Fanon only summarily, and somewhat disdainfully, to distance himself from Fanon's enthusiastic support for the supposedly revolutionary nature of the Algerian peasantry.

Note 3. See his debate with Germaine Tillion in Pierre Bourdieu: *Esquisses algériennes*.

Note 4. Bourdieu makes his divergence from Marxist thinking on labour clear in "La double vérité du travail" (1996, pp. 89-90).

Note 5. In *Actes de la recherche*.

Note 6. The expression has obviously been borrowed from Marx.

Note 7. Cf., inter alia Gérard Althabe (1969); Jean Copans (1980); Marc Augé (1975).

Note 8. Cf., the conclusion in Gérard Althabe (1969).

Note 9. This remark does not apply to Frantz Fanon.

Note 10. As Bourdieu puts it in the passage quoted above.

Note 11. For a more detailed explanation cf. Gérard Althabe and Monique Selim (1998); Laurent Bazin (2005, 2010); Valeria Hernandez (2005).

Note 12. Cf., Pascale Absi (2012, 2014).

Note 13. It can reasonably be held, e.g., that it is senseless to speak of prostitution in terms of individual freedom in a world of constraints, or that the recognition of "sex-work" is first and foremost pragmatic: a claim that simply affords better protection to prostitutes.

Note 14. This cursory analysis of Algerian workers' situation as regards the State is indebted to our lengthy and stimulating discussions with Larbi Mehdi, whom we would like to thank.

Note 15. Cf., in particular the contributions Ali EL Kenz and Sa ïd Chikhi (1989).

Note 16. Mounting suicide rates are challenging the Algerian public and scientists, though remaining much lower than those recorded in Europe. Cf., Badra Moutassem-Mimouni (2010).