

PRACTISING THE SOCIOLOGICAL GAZE. GENDER, DOMINATION AND VISUALITY

*Bourdieu Lectures, November 19-20,
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The first impression when entering the Kunsthalle Bielefeld is one of controlled dissonance: large-format black-and-white photographs from colonial Algeria line the walls, while in the adjacent lecture hall scholars discuss gendered bodies, field structures and symbolic violence in late modern societies. The 2025 Bourdieu Lectures, titled “Geschlecht – Herrschaft – Visualität” [Gender, Domination and Visuality], unfolded precisely in this tension between historical images and contemporary diagnoses, between exhibition and symposium, between aesthetic experience and praxeological theory. Bringing together the University of Bielefeld, Zeppelin University, the University of Education Freiburg and the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna in cooperation with the Fondation Bourdieu, the

event proposed a particular way of “doing” Bourdieu today: by training a sociological gaze that is at once visual, gender-sensitive and reflexive.

A conversion of the gaze

The accompanying booklet to the exhibition “Pierre Bourdieus soziologischer Blick” explicitly frames Bourdieu’s Algerian work as a “Konversion des Blicks”, a conversion of the gaze. Drafted as a young conscript in the midst of the Algerian War of Independence, Bourdieu turned away from an academic trajectory in Parisian philosophy towards ethnographic fieldwork among Kabyle populations and displaced peasants, equipped with a camera and a notebook.

The exhibition arranges roughly thematic sections around this biographical and methodological turning point: the gendered order of the world, the visualisation of sociological concepts, colonial destruction and uprooting, enforced modernity, and the parallel processes of “Entbäuerlichung” [Urbanization] on both sides of the Mediterranean. In each section, photographs are carefully juxtaposed with quotations from Bourdieu’s own writings and later commentaries, forming text-image collages that invite visitors to read images not as illustrations, but as condensations of practical sense. A photograph of Kabyle women returning from a well, for instance, is placed

alongside dense descriptions of female hexis – bent posture, lowered gaze, restricted movement – through which Bourdieu came to conceptualise gendered dispositions as embodied honour and shame.

These curatorial choices re-enact, for a contemporary audience, the very process of learning to “see” social structures in gestures, spatial arrangements and everyday routines that Bourdieu underwent in Algeria. In this sense, the exhibition does not simply display Bourdieu’s photographs; it performs a pedagogy of the gaze, training its viewers in a praxeological way of apprehending the world.

Gender, domination and symbolic violence

The lecture programme mobilised Bourdieu’s concepts in order to interrogate contemporary gender regimes. Across two days, keynotes, workshops and colloquia traced the reach and the limits of Bourdieu’s analysis of masculine domination in fields as diverse as education, migration, queer spaces and global capitalism.

Several contributors took Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence as a starting point for re-examining forms of gendered domination that operate beyond direct physical coercion. A workshop on “Interdisciplinary dialogues on violent articulations” proposed to

treat symbolic violence as a processual analytic lens for uncovering how patriarchal orders are sustained through routine schemes of perception and evaluation in everyday practices – be it in medical visualisations of normative bodies, in juridical procedures or in the normalisation of right-wing language in public discourse.

Other panels shifted the geographical and institutional frame. A talk on South Korea read Bourdieu’s capital and gender theory against an “Asian modernity” characterised by belated industrialisation, a strong educational ethos and a rapidly transforming welfare state, asking how meritocratic distributions of economic, social and cultural capital intersect with gendered expectations in a digitalised, globally integrated society. Another contribution analysed “third path” access to higher education via vocational routes, showing how non-traditional students’ trajectories are not only constrained by economic conditions, but also by patriarchal and spatial structures in peripheral regions.

The themes of marriage, inheritance and generational transmission – central to Bourdieu’s own work on Kabyle societies and on rural Béarn – were also revisited from a gender-reflexive perspective. One project on first-generation female students, for example, re-read Bourdieu’s famous vignette of the “son” who betrays class expectations through educational upward mobility by focusing

instead on mother–daughter relations. Here, mothers emerge both as negative foil and as carriers of a familial project of mobility, complicating the paternal figure that dominates Bourdieu’s own narrative of “wounded” trajectories. Such empirically sensitive work underlines how Bourdieusian concepts can be re-oriented to account for gendered experiences that were only partially visible in the original texts.

Bourdieu Lectures as a reflexive format

A distinctive feature of the Bourdieu Lectures was their continuous movement between text, image and embodied discussion. The presence of the exhibition meant that panels on gender doxa in schools, on habitus analyses of marriage migration or on the classed and gendered structuring of social milieus unfolded only a few steps away from photographs of Kabyle houses, regroupment camps and rural festivities in Béarn.

In their combination of exhibition, digital reader, keynotes, workshops and publisher presentation, the Bourdieu Lectures 2025 offered a reflexive format for engaging with Bourdieu’s theory of practice at a time when gender orders, colonial legacies and global inequalities are being renegotiated under conditions of accelerated neoliberal capitalism. Situating the Algerian photographs at the centre, yet insisting on contemporary

re-appropriations and critiques, the Bielefeld Lectures treated Bourdieu not as a closed system, but as an open repertoire of concepts and sensibilities to be tested, revised and sometimes resisted.