

BOOK REVIEW

Pascal Génot and Olivier Thomas (2023) *Bourdieu: Une enquête algérienne*, Paris: Steinkis

Matthias Fringant

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Graphic novels are not among the usually reviewed works in scientific journals. At best, they seem to be means of vulgarising existing knowledge and will rather provoke suspicion on the part of professional academics. Graphic novels specifically dealing with the history and sociology of the human and social sciences are not new (see for instance Goodwin and Burr 2012). Some, by focusing on specific thinkers (for instance Maier and Simon 2012, 2013), can be understood as a stage of the latter's canonisation. Pascal Génot and Olivier Thomas's *Bourdieu: Une enquête algérienne* is somewhat different. In an original way, it contributes not only to a series of recent publications on Bourdieu's early sociological work in colonial Algeria (Pérez 2023 [2022], Yacine 2022), but also to the history of sociology in colonial contexts (Steinmetz 2023).

The French graphic novel relates Pierre Bourdieu's (1930-2002) experience of Algeria as a soldier and a social scientist during the war of independence (1954-1962). Written by screenwriter Pascal Génot and drawn by cartoonist Olivier Thomas, the book rests upon a substantial documentary inquiry conducted with the help of Saadi Chikhi. Perhaps in connection with the current interest for the history of (de-)colonisation, the novel has been a commercial success with not only four reprints and more than 10,000 copies sold, but also a large and enthusiastic media coverage.¹ In addition, at least two positive reviews have been published in established academic journals.² As successful as this reception seems, it has nevertheless been limited to the French-speaking world. To my knowledge, there has so far been no English review dedicated to the novel.³ In what follows, I shall first describe the book – its aims, its approach and its main contents following its original plan – before reflecting on how it can contribute to two larger issues: the specific contribution of graphic novels to scientific knowledge and its diffusion; and current debates on the relationship between (history of) sociology and colonialism.

¹ In France, the book has been positively mentioned by at least three media focusing on cartoons (*ActuaBD*, *BubbleBD* and *BDZoom*), one regional newspaper (*Sud Ouest*) and four nation-wide media (*Libération*, *Slate*, *FranceTVInfo*, *TV5Monde* and *Fnac*).

² First, by sociologist Joachim Benet Rivière in *Images du travail, travail des images* (Benet Rivière 2024), and shortly afterwards by linguist Smaïl Djaoud in *Lectures* (Djaoud 2024).

³ An exception is an unpublished text by sociologist Johan Heilbron entitled "How to decolonise social science? Pierre Bourdieu, Abdelmalek Sayad and 'colonial sociology'".

As Génot himself explains at the beginning of the book in a sort of *mise en abyme*, the story started when he was invited as a screenwriting teacher to the 2011 edition of an international comics festival in Algiers. By then, he had already written two fictional comics and was thinking about starting a documentary one. This idea grew as he stumbled upon a mysterious photograph of Algerian writer Mouloud Feraoun (1913-1962) and Pierre Bourdieu. Shot around 1958 in Algiers, the picture featured in a book dedicated to Feraoun. Génot was intrigued as he was acquainted only with Bourdieu's later and more widely known works. He started reading a few studies on the relationship between the sociologist and Algeria (for instance Bourdieu 2008 and Martin-Criado 2008). This turned out to be the first stage of a proper inquiry. During an eight year period, Génot not only systematised his readings on the topic but also made three trips to Algeria (in 2014 and 2015), allowing him to take photographs and conduct more than twenty interviews with witnesses and researchers, some of whom shed new light on this matter. Génot also accessed the French national archive dedicated to French colonial presence overseas located in Aix-en-Provence.

In treating his abundant material, Génot had a particular example in mind: Maltese American cartoonist Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza: A Graphic Novel* (Sacco 2009). In this pioneer documentary comics, Sacco articulated original research work in Gaza with the narrative of the slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza in 1956. Génot tried to build upon this strategy by choosing an auto-fictional posture, in which nothing is purely fictional but most of the events are re-imagined. In six mainly chronological chapters, the novel thus alternates between the story of the inquiry conducted by the auto-fictional character named Pascal and Pierre Bourdieu's story in Algeria.

The first chapter recounts both the history of Pascal's inquiry and Bourdieu's biography until the latter's arrival in Algeria in 1956. The reader learns several well-known facts about Bourdieu's life. Pierre Félix Bourdieu was born in the rural village of Denguin in South-West France in 1930. He was the only child of Noémie, coming from a family of landowners, and Albert, coming from a peasant's family. The latter dedicated his life to his job as a postman in Lasseube, another small village nearby Denguin where the Bourdieus moved shortly after Pierre's birth. Pierre was a talented, albeit agitated, pupil. From 1941 to 1947 he became a student in a boarding school at Pau – one of the major cities in the area. Thanks to his good grades, he was admitted in 1948 to *Louis-le-Grand* in Paris, by then one of the most prestigious schools of the country preparing students for the entry exams for the *Grandes Écoles*. In 1951 he was admitted to *École Normale Supérieure de la rue d'Ulm*, once again an institution at the top of the French educational system. In 1954, just after he obtained the *agrégation de philosophie*, one of the most difficult national academic competitions, he became a philosophy teacher in a high school in Moulins, a small city in the middle of France. He also started a PhD in philosophy under the supervision of philosopher of science Georges Canguilhem.⁴ As promising as this career in philosophy seemed to be, it was cut short by war. In late 1955, Bourdieu had to stop teaching as he was called to arms after the beginning of Algerian war of independence. These biographical facts as such are not new. What is new is the way in which they are narrated. Indeed, the graphical presentation enables the reader to relate to young Bourdieu in a livelier way than academic books may be able to do.

Having set the biographical context, Chapter two briefly describes Bourdieu's first moments in Algeria. After a military preparation in Germany and France and a hard boat trip, Bourdieu landed in Algeria in the spring of 1956. From there, he was sent to an air base in Orléansville, between Algiers

⁴ Up to this day, the best works on the formation of the young Bourdieu are from Collard (2021, 2022 and 2024).

and Oran. As Chapter three explains, Bourdieu's stay in Orléansville was very short. He was immediately sent to Algiers to the *Gouvernement général*, a central institution of French colonial power. There he wrote texts for the information service in the context of the *action psychologique* – an expression used by the French army to describe war propaganda – until the end of his military enrolment in late 1957.

Being uncomfortable working for the French army in Algiers, Bourdieu started thinking about a sociological project on the transformations of Algeria under the effects of colonialism, an idea that would lead to *Sociologie de l'Algérie* (Bourdieu 1958). Thanks to the help of historians like André Nouschi (1922-2017), Bourdieu aimed to understand in a more accurate way (than for instance Raymond Aron and Germaine Tillion) what was actually occurring in Algeria (see Aron 1957 and Tillion 1957). Thanks to an insightful interview, Génot can establish that Fadhila Sahraoui, an ex-activist for the liberation of Algeria, and Bourdieu met in Paris in spring of 1958. Sahraoui explains that she met a very informed albeit tormented Bourdieu who asked her how he could help, before he went back to Algiers, not as a soldier but as a philosophy teacher. As noted by Smaïl Djaoud (2024), this important information is nowhere to be found in previous studies on Bourdieu's work in colonial Algeria.

Chapter four recounts that when he came back to Algiers in late 1958, Bourdieu had published *Sociologie de l'Algérie*, a short synthesis relying extensively on the existing literature and published in the prestigious "Que sais-je?" book series for vulgarising knowledge at the Presses universitaires de France. As a philosophy teacher at the University of Algiers, Bourdieu met students and soon-to-be collaborators like Fanny Colona, Alain Accardo and, most importantly, Abdelmalek Sayad (1933-1998). Thanks to interviews, Génot uncovers the story of the picture that triggered his own inquiry. Shortly after its publication, Bourdieu gave a copy of *Sociologie de l'Algérie* to Mouloud Feraoun and then visited him on multiple occasions to ask him questions about Kabyle customs and discuss the book. The picture was then taken by one of Feraoun's daughters.

Chapter five centres on Bourdieu's first anthropological and sociological inquiries that started in mid-1959. In the context of the Constantine Plan, a social and economic program introduced in 1958 by President Charles de Gaulle to lessen the gap between citizens of French Algeria and Metropolitan France, French colonial administration needed information on the Algerian population. Bourdieu received grants to begin some ethnographic inquiries to complete the statistical parts conducted by French statisticians. In the meantime, after the publication of *Sociologie de l'Algérie*, he was contacted by Raymond Aron who had been impressed by the book. The latter asked Bourdieu to help him run a new social science research centre in Paris – what should become the *Centre de sociologie européenne* (Duval, Heilbron and Issenhuth 2022). Between late 1959 and 1961, Bourdieu thus made round-trips between France and Algeria. As he was only partly in Algeria, Abdelmalek Sayad supervised the inquiries about the effects on colonialism on the life conditions of Algerian workers. Out of this work would later emerge *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* (Bourdieu, Darbel, Rivet and Sebel 1963 [2021]). Chapter six then discusses Bourdieu and Sayad's inquiries in Kabylia that started in mid-1960. The two sociologists tried to focus specifically on the long-term effects of displacements on the Algerian population. They published their results in *Le Déracinement* (Bourdieu and Sayad 1964).

Finally, Génot also develops the legacy of the inquiries conducted by Bourdieu, Sayad and their collaborators. Bourdieu came back to Paris in the middle of the year 1960 to become Raymond Aron's assistant at the Sorbonne. While Sayad continued fieldwork on his own until 1963, Bourdieu used the research techniques learned in Algeria to initiate a new body of inquiries in France, all while

reflecting on a possible theoretical generalisation. Via further transnational mediations, this attempt led to what would later be called “reflexive sociology” – a sociology wary of its own conditions of production and the use of social scientific knowledge.

A second legacy of Bourdieu and Sayad’s works is, according to Génot, how they can be used to think about postcolonial Algeria. While they were doing fieldwork, Bourdieu and Sayad engaged in a dialogue with revolutionary thinkers, with whom they disagreed. For instance, Fanon’s thesis on peasants and workers as revolutionary forces (Fanon 1961) was wrong in their eyes. In some of their works, Bourdieu and Sayad emphasised the fact that a revolutionary consciousness requires a kind of stability nowhere to be found among peasants and workers in Algeria. Moreover, they feared that power could be seized by the actors of the revolution. History proved them right, and this might be important to reflect on the historical roots of contemporary movements of protest in Algeria (such as Hirak in 2019, as Génot suggests at the end of the novel), bridging the gap between past and present.

If not immune to criticism,⁵ *Bourdieu: Une enquête algérienne* can be the starting point for a set of two reflections for scholars in the history and sociology of the social sciences. The first has to do with the specificity of graphic novels in relation to scientific knowledge. It is often said that graphic novels are an alternative kind of writing that could have a broader impact than conventional books. In this perspective, Génot’s graphic novel might be interpreted as an interesting case of the diffusion of the history of the social sciences to the wider public. Interestingly, Génot himself (2024), however, contests this idea. According to him, as far as impact is concerned, graphic novels are likely to be less efficient than other media such as videos.⁶ If graphic novels as a way of broadcasting science on a large scale seems endangered by other modes of expression, Génot sees their specificity in how they can experiment with ways of narrating reality. In the case of *Bourdieu: Une enquête algérienne*, the articulation of two interwoven narratives – inspired by Joe Sacco’s solution – seems to be a fruitful way to introduce to an important yet not well-known part of an œuvre that can be intimidating by its sheer scope. By linking Bourdieu’s inquiries on Algeria to his own investigation, Génot found an interesting way of both questioning the timeliness of a relatively esoteric work and bringing it to a larger audience that might be interested in the topic of colonialism.

The second point is related to the history of the social sciences. As we have seen, the book both rests upon and represents an original contribution to the recent literature on Bourdieu and Algeria. But it can also be used to think about a larger debate on (the history of) sociology and colonialism. For instance, in a quite influential book dealing with this topic, Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell (2007) calls for more equal patterns of knowledge circulation after a long history of either ignorance or data mining of the global South by Western social scientists. To make her point, Connell centres on three of these scientists, James Coleman, Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu. Her analysis draws upon the reading of one of each author’s book, in the case of Bourdieu *The Logic of Practice* (1990 [1980]). In Connell’s eyes, Bourdieu’s book is an exemplary attempt of a so-called universal social theory both built on data mining from Algeria but also ignorant of Algerian thinkers and their problematics. In 2007, when she wrote *Southern Theory*, English translations of Bourdieu and

⁵ In his review, Smaïl Djaoud notes a couple of factual inaccuracies and regrets that Génot did not make a more systematic use of the French national archive.

⁶ This seems to be true if one compares the 10,000 copies of the book sold to the number of views of one of the main French sociological Youtubers, Gregoire Simpson. Simpson uses his videos to introduce the works of various sociologists, for instance Pierre Bourdieu’s *Masculine Domination* or Raewyn Connell’s *Masculinities*. The first video reaches 42,000 views, the second one more than 150,000.

Sayad's empirical works were unavailable. Some of them such as *Travail and Travailleurs en Algérie* still are, but *Le Déracinement* has recently been translated to English (Bourdieu and Sayad 2020 [1964]). Not only these new translations but also a current broader interest for the role of the social sciences in colonial contexts might help foster a better global understanding of Bourdieu's work in and on colonial Algeria. Contrary to Connell, Julian Go has suggested in an article and a book that Bourdieu's early work develops a fully-fledged theory of colonialism and thus anticipates later developments found in postcolonial theory (Go 2013 and 2016). More recently, through a broad empirical study focusing on what he calls the French subfield of colonial sociology, George Steinmetz has drawn on Bourdieu's tools to offer new insights on the large categories and oppositions shaping the current debates about social sciences and (post)colonialism (Steinmetz 2023). Through the focus on Bourdieu's theoretical synthesis in *The Logic of Practice*, his early work has too often been reduced to an abstract social theory (for the various studies coming together in Bourdieu's theory of practice, see Heilbron 2011). After work done by others, Génot's graphic novel can help to understand Bourdieu's work in Algeria rather as an original endeavour that might still be relevant for studying the complex conditions of production and use of the social sciences in both colonial and postcolonial contexts.

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