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## Autobiography and social climbing. The inevitable compulsion on self-reflexivity and its variants

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### Abstract

*The following essay touches on a highly interesting problem for politically sensitive adult education: What are the 'costs' of educational advancement? The answer is sought in biographies of three prominent examples: Pierre Bourdieu, Annie Ernaux and Didier Eribon. The data is based on autobiographically oriented reflections of the protagonists – symptomatically not 'classic' autobiographies. The concentration on France has to do with the fact that in the French cultural tradition this level of reflection – not least through the works of the selected authors – has gained a particular meaning. The selection itself relates to astonishing differences in the influences of historical times and the relevance of cohort experiences. The result of the analysis is undoubtedly an 'essayistic dramatisation', not a hasty generalisation, but it could stimulate scientific discussion and systematic empirical research.*

**Keywords:** anti-autobiography, habitus split, I-less remembering, social shame, compulsion to self-reflexivity

### Introduction

*Reflection and return are inseparable,  
they belong together and mingle.  
Complexity and uncertainty arise from this reflexivity.  
(Eribon, 2017, p. 9)*

Modern societies are 'climbing societies' (Nolte, 2008). The chance to break out of cramped living conditions, material misery and poor education is one of the basic rights



in modern democracies. The fact that this ‘opportunity for everyone’ (Kauder & von Beust, 2008) could only be an ‘illusion’ on closer inspection (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1971) does not put into perspective the fundamental statement of the possibility of advancement. In Western societies, the 20th century is full of such biographies of social climbing – remarkable educational advancements, successful sports or economic careers, unexpected popularity in the cultural field (cf. Alheit & Schömer, 2009, 2014; Alheit, 2018). What is usually overlooked are the ‘costs’ of such ascension processes. The German-English sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf, who caused a sensation in 1965, above all with his essayistic plea entitled ‘Education is a civil right’ (cf. Dahrendorf, 1965a), has submitted a typical sketch of the climber in his ‘Book on Germany’ (Dahrendorf, 1965b), which was published in the same year:

The path from the bottom to the top, which we have made into a metaphor for a society with equal objective and subjective opportunities, is certainly not a direct path to happiness. [...] English authors have elevated the scholarship boy to a literary figure, a social type who, due to his achievements, has worked his way up from a working-class kid to an academic. He is a sad, torn character. As a child, he was encouraged when his parents, siblings and relatives said he had brains, although even the frequent praise was accompanied by a hollow tone of alienation [...] Later, at university, the loneliness took hold a new shape. He no longer saw his parents and their house every day, ... but the others saw his parents’ house in him – and again he didn’t belong to them. (Dahrendorf, 1965b, pp. 131-132)

Social upclimbing seems to involve sacrifice. In the following essay, I am interested in three ‘quasi-autobiographies’ by authors who at least cannot be perceived as ‘sad figures’. Whether their ascents can be interpreted as ‘direct paths to happiness’ must remain open for the time being. A certain fascination for French culture determines the selection of the autobiographical works. The most provocative document is undoubtedly Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘sociological self-experiment’ (2002), a kind of ‘participatory objectification’<sup>1</sup> not of his own experiences but of the ‘social possibility conditions’ of these experiences (Bourdieu, 2010). The autobiographical ‘memory book’ *The Years* by Annie Ernaux (2008/2019) is similar to this format – precisely because it deliberately breaks with the conventional rules of autobiographical writing. Finally, Didier Eribon’s highly successful autobiographical-political essays, *Return to Reims* (2016) and *Society as Judgment* (2017), also belong in this context. What the selected examples have in common is the fact that they tell of complicated ascents from lower social classes, which include not only extraordinary successes but also damages. In the following three sections, essential aspects of the selected autobiographical documents are worked out – and compared and appreciated in a concluding, more essayistic consideration.

### **The ‘anti-autobiography’: Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological self-experiment**

Bourdieu’s ‘self-experiment’ is perhaps so irritating because it does not only elude any aesthetic stylisation, but also at times overextends the gesture of observing the author himself while observing his own history – what he calls ‘participatory objectification’ – in such a way that an access to the person ‘Bourdieu’ is simply possible in a few passages and here only indirectly.

The first sentence of the self-experiment is a kind of ‘preamble’: ‘I do not intend here to pay homage to a type of writing that I have said often enough how pleasing and at the same time deceptive it is: the autobiography.’ (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 9; translation

by the author) Consistently this announcement is not followed by chronological references to his life story, but rather brief reflections on his ‘work history’ (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 10-11) and then excessive descriptions of the so-called ‘Khâgne’, the two-year preparatory class (‘classe préparatoire’) to the École Normale Supérieure, and of studying at the ENS itself, specifically: the encounter with the ‘normalien philosophy’ of the 1950s. This extravagant section (Bourdieu, 2002, pp. 11-45), which focuses on the contrast between Jean Paul Sartre, the French intellectual per se, and Georges Canguilhem, the political critic of science, is not introduced with memories but with a programme of reflection: ‘Understanding means first of all understanding the field with which and against which one develops.’ (Bourdieu, p. 11; translation by the author)

There is no question that Bourdieu hated the format of autobiography. The polemical reference in his essay *L’illusion biographique* to the ‘complicity’ between autobiographers who are interested in an ‘orderly story’ and researchers who see themselves as ‘meaning seekers’ (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 76-77) proves this convincingly. The fact that he gave in to the wish of friends to present his last lecture in the series *La science de la science* at the Collège de France as a ‘sociological self-experiment’ is a concession and certainly not an act of persuasion. His plan to publish the resulting text, which was compiled with the aforementioned speech on the awarding of the Huxley Medal, first in Germany and only later in France also speaks for this (cf. Schultheis, 2002).

Just in a few places does the reconstruction of that field of the ‘normaliens’, i.e. the undisputed and privileged cultural élite of France, give the impression of a personal relationship. Much clearer is the emphasis on foreignness and distance. Notes on Fernand Braudel, the famous historian and member of the ‘Annales School’, who, as Bourdieu puts it, ‘even when he criticised my early work on Algeria because he found too little history in it, he commented my research [...] always very friendly and trusting’ (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 40; translation by the author), testify to a certain warmth and respectful approach. But that is – apart from the careful appreciation of the influence of Georges Canguilhem – the exception. On the other hand, he uses the mention of Raymond Aron (to whom he – ironically – ‘owes an eternal debt of gratitude’ (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 40), for having offered him an assistant position at the Sorbonne in 1960, shortly before the military coup in Algeria) to criticise the subtle effectiveness of the social networks of the established ‘normaliens’ (Bourdieu, 2002, pp. 40-42). Particularly Aron’s rejection of his Algerian research work as a dissertation with the remark: ‘That would be unworthy of you’ (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 42; translation by the author), Bourdieu regards as an indication of ‘a perfect form of symbolic violence, because one succumbs to it during the process of practicing it’ (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 42; translation by the author).

Basically, for Bourdieu, the Algerian experience is a real ‘process of change’<sup>2</sup> in several respects. His refusal to become an officer actually leads him to Algeria as a simple soldier and confronts him with a culture on the way to modernity, in which the image of his own – French – culture, and in particular the academic variant of this culture, is reflexively broken. ‘This attitude,’ he describes his critical position, ‘displeased me for a long time, and the rejection of the world view suggested by university philosophy of philosophy certainly helped to introduce me to the social sciences’ (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 50; translation by the author). But it is not just an ethnologically enlightened form of sociology that Bourdieu develops for the first time in his *Sociologie d’Algérie*. There is also a conscious turning away from what he calls the ‘ahistorical’ ethnology of the *Sad Tropes*<sup>3</sup>, as embodied by Lévi-Strauss, which – just

like the philosophy of philosophy – celebrates an aestheticising distance from the social world (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 50).

For the ‘process of change’ discussed here, Bourdieu chooses the metaphors of ‘initiation’ and ‘conversion’ (Bourdieu, 2002, pp. 68), which are reminiscent of religious developments – precisely because he now uses the results of his ethnological research in Kabylia that he achieved through targeted objectification, and transmits it on an amazing phenomenon of his native region, the Béarn.<sup>4</sup> To ‘alienate’ the familiar, to ‘reverse’ one’s gaze, so to speak, to no longer tacitly assume what is given, but to observe it with sensitive interest, is a new stage in Bourdieu’s scientific maturation process, which surprisingly releases personal feelings:

But, as if to prove that this heuristic path also has something of an initiation process, through the total immersion in this environment and the happiness of the reunion that accompanies it, a reconciliation with things and people is fulfilled, from whom I had imperceptibly distanced myself and which an ethnographic attitude naturally obliges us to respect: the friends of our youth, the parents, their behaviour, their habits, their pronunciation. A whole part of myself is restored to me, the one that made me like them and at the same time alienated them because I could only deny it by denying them, under the ban of the shame I felt for them and myself—the return to the origins is accompanied by a still controlled return of what has been suppressed. (Bourdieu, 2002, pp. 70-71; translation by the author)

It seems interesting that in Bourdieu’s ‘self-experiment’ after this astonishing ‘initiation process’ and immediately before remembering his own family – as it were: the ‘most personal’ passages of the ‘anti-autobiography’ – the relationship to Michel Foucault is addressed (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 89), for Bourdieu obviously also a figure associated with ‘closeness’. Unlike the intellectuals of the field mentioned so far, ‘almost all essential peculiarities’ are presented as similar to his own (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 90): Foucault, like him, is ‘normalien’, only a few years older, interested in comparable philosophical traditions, impressed by Canguilhem like himself; both are critical of the ‘normalien mainstream philosophy’ and remain – despite their remarkable international reputation – rather ‘outsiders’ in France. Two striking differences, however, cannot be denied: Foucault comes from a ‘bourgeois family’ and he is homosexual. Another difference seems worth mentioning to Bourdieu, but at the same time it is by no means surprising. While he himself ‘converts’ to ethnology and then to sociology and further develops his working methods in research teams, Foucault remains true to philosophy in a very universal understanding and thus also to the expectations of the intellectual field, which prefers the gesture of the classical scholar to cooperative research practice. Here Foucault’s habitus of origin could be the hidden cause.

Bourdieu’s milieu of origin is that of the ‘little people’. The father, son of a sharecropper, first a postman, later post office manager in a small village in the Béarn region, is resistant and politically left-leaning. At the same time, however, he strives for his respectability, which Bourdieu connects with the touching image of his attempt to turn the old farmhouse in which the family lives into a representative domicile. The mother, daughter of a respected peasant family, who, from the perspective of the relatives, married ‘highly inappropriate’ (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 98), shares this need for recognition and tries – unsuccessfully – to transfer it to him as well.

The distance from the family milieu comes gradually. The difficult time at boarding school, during which he – similar to the ‘scholarship boy’ – experienced the dilemma of alienating himself from his family on the one hand and remaining a stranger in the world of boarding school on the other, gave him a feeling that he later called ‘split habitus’ (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 116): belonging to the ‘intellectual world’ and

abhorring its ‘inveterate conformism’ (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 120), reluctantly accepting the consecration of a professorship in sociology at the Collège de France, and in the inaugural lecture to explicitly distance himself from this consecration:

To describe the ritual in fulfillment of the ritual was to commit an unprecedented act of social barbarism, which consists in suspending, for the time being, or worse, in jeopardising the belief in a moment and in a place where it was about celebrating and consolidating it. During this process, I had to recognise that what for me was the psychological resolution of an inner contradiction meant a tremendous challenge to the symbolic order, a violation of the dignity of the institution, which demands silence about the arbitrariness of its rites in the course of their performance . (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 123; translation by the author).

There is no doubt that the ‘split in habitus’ that Bourdieu speaks of represents a kind of belonging deficit in two respects: the painful loss of his identity of origin and the enduring distance from the ‘intellectual world’. But the compulsion to reflect that arises from this, the ‘participatory objectification’ is at the same time a motive for healing. With the ‘ethnological attitude’ towards the region of origin and its culture, the social shame of the young intellectual can be shed and a ‘reconciliation’ can take place.

### **‘I-less remembering’: Annie Ernaux’s impersonal autobiography *The Years***

Annie Ernaux also comes socially from ‘humble beginnings’. Her parents started out as workers, later running a small grocery store with a café in the Normandy town of Yvetot. Despite a remarkable educational career and international success as a writer, she does not construct herself as the sovereign ‘manager’ of an ego that is aware of its importance, rather as a highly sensitive and always self-critical ‘passerby between the social worlds’. For her autobiographical memoir, she almost completely avoids the use of this ‘I’ and replaces it with ‘one’ or ‘she’, more rarely with ‘we’:

She has begun a novel in which images of the past, the present, night dreams and visions of the future alternate in a self that is a double of herself.

She is certain that she has no ‘personality’ (Ernaux, 2008/2019, p. 91; translation by the author)

Between the two sentences, ‘All images will disappear’ (Ernaux, 2019, p. 9) and ‘To save something from the time in which one will never be again’ (Ernaux, 2019, p. 256), Ernaux unfolds her ‘impersonal autobiography’ (Ernaux, 2019, p. 253). As an ‘ethnologist of herself’ (Ernaux, 2019, p. 2), she does not present herself as the protagonist and rarely as an actor of the events, but rather as their ‘recorder’, who is extremely frugal with explanations and causal connections. Introductions to new sequences of events are often linked to private photographs and video recordings, which initially only emphasise what is immediately obvious and merely secondarily the social contextualisation. This creates an idiosyncratic dynamic that draws outsiders into the progression of events:

A flow that is constantly interrupted by photos and video sequences documenting the successive bodily forms and social positions of her being – they are stills of memory while showing the course of her life, what makes she unique, not through the externals (social path, job) or inner elements (thoughts and longings, the need to write) of her life,

but through their individual combination. The woman who is ‘always someone else’ in the photos is reflected in the ‘she’ of the story. (Ernaux, 2019, p. 253; translation by the author)

Ernaux seems to choose a kind of ‘biographical micro-perspective’ into which major social events ‘break in’ from the outside as it were: the aftermath of World War II, the memory of the German occupation, National Socialism, the Resistance and liberation by the Allies, which the collective Family narratives still dominate in the late 1940s and the 1950s; also the Algerian war, Beauvoir’s feminism, May ‘68, the ‘consumer society’ of the 70s, which replaced ‘the ideals of 1968’ (Ernaux, 2019, p. 122), Mitterrand’s election victory in 1981, the false hopes associated with it, and as an overarching theme, the deeply felt experience of her own emancipation as a woman (Ernaux, 2019, pp. 212-220):

With her book, she wants to save everything that has ever surrounded her, wants to preserve the circumstances. And isn’t this feeling also dependent on history, on the changes in the lives of women and men? – Perhaps she can only feel it because as a fifty-eight year old woman she can lie next to a twenty-nine-year-old man without being ashamed, but also without being particularly proud of it. (Ernaux, 2019, p. 215; translation by the author)

As an ‘ethnologist of herself’, she finds a convincing balance between the ‘outer’ and ‘inner elements’ of her memory, discovering her own way of seeing society from the perspective of the subject and observing it at the same time and often with ironic distance. This literary format is the basis of a fascinating reconstruction of the ‘social time’ she is confronted with:

The form of her book, then, can only emerge as she delves into her own memory images and looks at the characteristics of the epoch or year they roughly come from – as she gradually brings them together with other images, remembering what people said, how they commented on events and things, when she picks her words out of the mass of communications, out of the background noise that constantly formulates how we should be, what we think, believe, fear, what we should hope. She wants to reconstruct a social time from the imprint that the world left on her and her contemporaries, a time that began a long time ago and continues to this day – she wants to find in an individual memory the remembrance of the collective memory and thus to fill history with life. (Ernaux, 2019, p. 252; translation by the author)

Annie Ernaux’s entire literary work is autobiographically tinged. As Franz Schultheis plausibly describes, the courageous, unpretentious and unsparing confrontation with herself and her time has a different format and yet similar effects to Bourdieu’s epoch-making major work *The Distinction*:

In France, almost four decades ago, parallel to Bourdieu’s *Distinction*, Ernaux had developed an electively related and in many respects complementary literary view of the French class society. (Schultheis 2020, p. 13<sup>5</sup>; translation by the author)

The basis of Ernaux’s lasting impact is the coincidence of the influence of two female figures who could not have been more different: her mother and Simone de Beauvoir. She says about her mother: ‘More than receiving, she loved to give to everyone’, and about the Beauvoir: ‘Isn’t writing also a way of giving?’ (Ernaux, 2007, pp. 110-111) Her mother made it possible for her to study through her ambitions. And Simone de Beauvoir opened her ‘eyes’ with her main work *The Second Sex*:

All the things I had experienced in the years before in darkness, suffering and malaise suddenly brightened up. This experience gave me the certainty that awareness – even if it does not solve anything in itself – is the first step towards liberation and action. (Ernaux, 2003, as cited in Eribon, 2017, p. 110; translation by the author)

The paradox of this Janus-faced generosity of two women is the fact that the maternal commitment enables Ernaux to undergo an educational process that brings her intellectually close to the Beauvoir and, inevitably, distant from her mother. This process in turn is associated with a double shame, a deep guilt towards the family of origin – and especially the mother – and a social shame at entering the ‘intellectual world’. In no other of her books has Ernaux analysed this experience – triggered by a memory of her father’s attempted murder of her mother – more mercilessly than in the work *Shame* (Ernaux, 2000/2020). It begins with the sentence: ‘In the early afternoon of a Sunday in June, my father wanted to kill my mother.’

Between this sentence, which recalls the repressed feelings of the eleven-year-old girl at the time, and the final sentence from *The Years*, ‘To save something from the time in which one will never be again’ (Ernaux, 2019, p. 256), lies an amazing woman’s life. The problem of social shame and the cultural, social and religious limitations of the milieu of origin have been revealed. The relationship with the mother is dealt with in the small volume *Faces of a Woman* (1987/2007). Ernaux’s ‘self-ethnology’ may not be a method that leads to ‘reconciliation’, but it does lead to a critical and realistic appreciation of the things and processes of her own life.

### ‘Return’ as turning away? Didier Eribon’s radical ‘*socioanalysis*’

*Retour à Reims*, Eribon’s autobiographic-political essay, seems to hit a ‘nerve of the time’ and, unlike Bourdieu’s ‘sociological self-experiment’, it becomes a bestseller in France and Germany. In addition to the literary-journalistic elegance of the text, two motives are probably particularly decisive: a morally and politically convincing variant of ‘Farewell to the Proletariat’<sup>6</sup>, which – at least regarding the time of the German and English translation (Eribon, 2016) – coincides with the disturbing right-wing populist Trump election in the USA, and the open discussion of his homosexuality, which fits perfectly into the contemporary LGBT\*IQ discourse.

For Eribon, his working-class background is a terrain of great social shame. It touches him more deeply than the sexual shame he associates with his homosexuality. Basically, the homophobia of his father and the entire milieu he represents (Eribon, 2016, pp. 22-23) is the easily morally justifiable pretext for leaving his past behind. And yet an ambivalent bond remains. This becomes clear to him using the example of a character in a novel by Paul Nizan: ‘Derogatory judgments about the working class, expressed by people from a new social environment that has become his own, hit him as if they were directed not only against his former milieu but also against himself.’ (Eribon, 2016, p. 24; translation by the author) At the same time, he could no longer bear direct encounters with people from this milieu, including his parents or grandmother, and it overcame him

a feeling of shame that is difficult to describe in the face of behaviour and ways of speaking that differed massively from those of his new social environment, of worries and needs that were a world away from his own ones, of statements that unite in every single conversation a primary, compulsive and actually unfounded racism. (Eribon, 2016, p. 25; translation by the author).



But instead of interpenetrating this sense of shame and understanding the ‘class distance’ behind it, he – at least initially – hid behind the new gay identity and constructed himself as a ‘gay child’, as a ‘gay adolescent’, not as a ‘working class kid’. His desire to distance himself from the world of his family becomes comprehensible in the impressive autobiographical passages that he devotes to his relationship with the older brother. He is the type of proletarian macho who is bored by school, who is interested in football and who spends his free time drinking with friends and ‘picking up’ girls. ‘By providing me with a counter-example, my brother was my benchmark. I wanted to be the exact opposite of him in everything.’ (Eribon, 2016, pp. 103-104; translation by the author) And the distance becomes reality: ‘For thirty-five years I have not seen this brother with whom I spent my childhood and part of my adolescence.’ (Eribon, 2016, p. 103; translation by the author)

However, how deep the break with the milieu of origin actually is becomes clear only in Eribon’s analysis of the change in the political orientation of the French working class. Using the example of his parents and brothers, he realises that the traditional ‘communist’ orientation and the ‘natural’ ‘leftism’ in the milieu only had a limited connection with enduring convictions. The actual motive was to ‘reject in a very pragmatic way what one suffered from in everyday life. It was about protest, not a political project inspired by global perspectives’ (Eribon, 2016, p. 38; translation by the author). If, in the 1960s or 1970s, the positions represented in everyday life in this ‘left’ working-class milieu, especially towards the Maghreb migrants, had been raised to a political programme, the difference to the right-wing extremism of the Front National would probably have been extremely small (cf. Eribon, 2016, pp. 133-135).

But Eribon doesn’t care about the polemical discrediting of the *classe populaire*, the French popular class. He blames the French left for this development:

The socialist left underwent a radical transformation that became more evident every year, engaging with questionable enthusiasm with neoconservative intellectuals who, under the guise of intellectual renewal, set out to empty the very essence of the left. There was a veritable metamorphosis of ethos and intellectual coordinates. The talk was no longer of exploitation and resistance, but of ‘necessary reforms’ and a ‘restructuring’ of society. (Eribon, 2016, p. 120; translation by the author)

It is quite understandable that the radical right could then use the irritated political consciousness of the popular classes and cause a dramatic shift to the right with racist prejudices against migrants, with nationalist slogans and with hatred of the ‘élites’. Eribon does not become a political renegade by turning away from his milieu of origin. He remains an intellectual leftist, movingly combining his educational advancement with reading Bourdieu’s major work *The Distinction* (1979):

I felt that this book shed light on my present and my past, but more importantly on the connection between the two. [...] Yes, this book spoke of me and gave me the keys to understand. (Eribon, 2017, p. 63; translation by the author)

The second reminiscence of a Bourdieu reading is linked to the beginning of his writing on his *Retour à Reims*. He reads the ‘sociological self-experiment’ for the second time and comes across the coincidence of the birth years of Bourdieu (1930) and his father (1929). The years of death (2002 and 2005) are also close together. The statement that ‘My father and Bourdieu were contemporaries’ (Eribon, 2017, p. 102) suggests, with reference to himself, the hasty conclusion: ‘Of course I know that the simplest reading in Bourdieu must see the father figure that my father didn’t represented to me.’ (Eribon, 2017, p. 103) But he defends himself against this psychoanalytic reflex of attributing all

conceivable social forms of reference to the family structure and, taking a literary detour via Richard Hoggart, Georges Dumézil and Mathieu Lindon, brings Foucault into play. He was just as formative for him as Bourdieu, but from the outset represented a different form of reference, namely friendship, which he then also claimed for Bourdieu – as a ‘iological friend’ (Eribon, 2017, p. 105) – because through his origins he had similar ‘habitual reflexes’ and similar insecurities like himself. Comparable with Foucault in overcoming his sexual shame, Bourdieu was central to understanding his social shame.

One can read *Madness and Society* and *The Distinction* as two magnificent attempts at self-analysis, indeed at theoretical and political self-reappropriation. [...] Through their work of thinking about themselves and about the mechanisms of domination to which both were subjected, they formed a theoretical analysis that became a message for all (or at least a message addressed to all those who have to pass similar exams and go through similar difficulties). (Eribon, 2017, pp. 106-107; translation by the author)

Here Eribon names the theoretical foundations of his reflexively broken return to his milieu of origin. However, the ‘remembrance walk to Reims’ is not a ‘reconciliation’ – as with Bourdieu. The break with the father and probably also with the brothers is definitive. And the mother’s visit after his father’s death also makes the ambivalence and fragility of the relationship perceptible. Eribon finds in Annie Ernaux the dialectical ‘solution’ to his feelings when writing ‘Return’ (Eribon, 2017, p. 95): ‘The thin line of writing: to rehabilitate a way of life that was considered inferior while at the same time denouncing the alienation it brings with it.’ (Ernaux, 1988, p. 40; translation by the author)

## Variants of the compulsion to self-reflexivity

But did both, Ernaux and Eribon, really ‘rehabilitate’ the way of life of their milieus of origin? Did they at least accept that ‘ethnological attitude’ that Bourdieu could bring to his native region? – Ernaux calls herself an ‘ethnologist of herself’, but the razor-sharp analysis (*L’Écriture comme un couteau*) with which she ‘dissects’ herself and her culture of origin, for example in *The Shame*, does not give the impression of an ‘obligation to respect’, which Bourdieu adopts in his Béarn study (2002, p. 71). Eribon’s brusque demarcation from his older brother (‘I wanted to be the exact opposite of him in everything.’; Eribon, 2016, pp. 103-104) and the purposeful maintenance of this aggressive distance over decades are even more in contrast to that ‘ethnological attitude’. That leaves three variants of this self-reflexivity, which is apparently unavoidable for climbers.

However, the examples are not chosen arbitrarily. The comparison presupposes targeted contrasts. Bourdieu, Ernaux and Eribon belong to distinct birth cohorts. Bourdieu (\*1930) is a representative of those young European intellectuals who were shaped by the Second World War and National Socialism, including Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida in France, Jürgen Habermas in Germany and Zygmunt Baumann in Poland (resp. England). Annie Ernaux (\*1940) is a member of the generation cohort that later produces the protagonists of the ‘68 movement. And Didier Eribon (\*1953) belongs to the ‘vanguard’ of that innovative social class that the German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz identified in his current diagnosis of the times *The Society of Singularities* (2017) as the new rising middle class, which works in the so-called ‘creative industries’ (architecture, advertising, design, fashion, music, film, mass media,

publishing, science, etc.) and represents the avant-garde of left-liberal identity politics, but also of a new ‘cultural capitalism’ and its protagonists.

However, what distinguishes Bourdieu from the intellectual contemporaries of his cultural prominence is in fact his social background. The vast majority of the personalities to be named beyond those mentioned as examples come from the upper class or the upper middle class in their countries and are – unsurprisingly – male. Bourdieu’s educational path up to his exposed position at the Collège de France does not only require habitus transformations, but – as he says himself – the experience of a ‘split’ in habitus. At the same time, he ventures the transition from an ‘archaic world’ of rural Béarn to an ‘intellectual world’ of 1950s Paris, which is comparatively conservative in its own way, and above all to that ‘Khâgne’, that represents probably one of the sharpest academic distinction procedures in the world. In terms of biographical theory, one could pointedly speak of a ‘splitting of the ego’ - or more precisely: that cognitively accessible part of the ‘self’ identified by Mead (1973), i.e. a ‘splitting of the Me’. Bourdieu, although he abhors the structural conformism of the ‘intellectual world’, will establish himself in this field like his bourgeois contemporaries. He is a harsh critic, but he stays in the field. Paradoxically, he can even ‘reconcile’ himself with his culture of origin using instruments from this field (the ‘ethnological attitude’).

As is typical for her generational context, Annie Ernaux has it easier at first glance. She belongs to the age cohort that is already benefiting from the educational reforms that began to be implemented in most Western European countries in the 1960s. The social space seems to open up. An intelligent daughter from a modest background has a chance – e.g. if the mother is committed to her daughter’s studies. This is the case. But the daughter remains a ‘daughter’. She cannot completely escape her mother’s expectations and feels deep social shame at the ever-increasing distance. The identification with Beauvoir’s feminism, with the political May ‘68, the conscious giving up of marriage, the commitment as a socialist and the beginning of an autonomous existence as a university teacher and writer gives her the chance to get involved in the flow of events – even more: a letting go of ‘I’ into which she is forced by the conventions of her culture of origin and the omnipresent expectations of her gender role. She becomes an ‘ethnologist of herself’, is able to remember ‘I-less’. The exhilarating image of the fifty-eight-year-old who can lie next to the twenty-nine-year-old without shame, but also without pride (Ernaux, 2019, p. 215) is a metonymy for the freedom gained. And at the same time it is a symptom of the aesthetically ever-present self-reflexivity that makes it possible to ‘immerse’ in *The Years*.<sup>7</sup>

It almost seems like Eribon found it easiest to overcome sexual and social shame. The major works of two great theorists, Foucault and Bourdieu, become ‘enlightenment books’ of his early intellectual development. However, his own presence in the ‘intellectual field’ does not only have academic connotations – as with Bourdieu. He also works as a journalist and writer. Above all, his social position is not determined solely by professional success. It has to do with his homosexual identity, with the conscious belonging to a group that has traditionally been marginalised and discredited, but which takes on a central symbolic function in the emergence of a new social class and political style. But this new status also means a definitive departure from the homophobia of his milieu of origin. The Return to Reims is actually a farewell to the proletariat in the classic sense – not an ideologically ironic ‘Adieux’, but the real turning away from the past of origin and the way to a kind of ‘new self’.

‘Split I’, ‘I-lessness’ and a ‘new I’ are symbols for the profile of three prominent climbers, who also express interesting problems of their generation cohorts. The three

examples have in common the extraordinary success and the deep shame it causes. Each person represents something highly individual, and at the same time the general becomes visible in everyone. In the reflective complexity of the biographies discussed, the learning process of social advancement, its sacrifices and successes, its losses and gains is a plausible metaphor for educational paths in the modern age. This process is, as Bettina Dausien, Daniela Rothe and Dorothee Schwendowius summoned it up very aptly

in its concrete form individual, but it remains bound to the social contexts in which it takes place and therefore also shows social-structural patterns. As Bourdieu described for the class habitus, the attitudes towards experience of the acting individuals also carry the potential and limits of the social space in which they were formed. Concrete experiences of exclusion, having to and being able to fight one's way through, experiences of recognition and the effectiveness of one's own actions leave traces and shape the subject's attitude towards new situations. In principle they are open to change, but change takes time – a 'self-logical' biographical time. (Dausien, Rothe & Schwendowius 2016, p. 58; translation by the author)

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *L'objectivation participante* was the title of the lecture that Bourdieu gave at the Huxley Medal ceremony in London on December 6, 2000, and which already anticipated the basic sound of his 'anti-autobiography' (cf. Schultheis, 2002, p. 133).
- <sup>2</sup> In his concept of the 'cognitive figures of autobiographical impromptu narration', Fritz Schütze convincingly worked out processes of change as such a 'figure' (cf. Schütze, 1984, p. 92).
- <sup>3</sup> *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) is what Claude Lévi-Strauss calls his famous ethnological travelogue, which goes back to a research trip with his former wife Dina Dreyfus to the indigenous peoples of Brazil taking place as early as 1935-38. Lévi-Strauss uses the publication (in which he only once mentions Dina Dreyfus, who has great credit for the research results) to propagate his structuralist anthropology: 'The totality of the customs of a people is always characterised by a style. They form systems. I am convinced that the number of systems is limited and that human societies [...] never create something absolutely new, but limit themselves to selecting certain combinations from an ideal repertoire. [...] If one were to (create) the inventory of all customs [...], one would eventually get a kind of periodic table similar to that of the chemical elements, in which all real and also possible customs would be grouped into families, so that one only has to find out, which of them the individual societies actually accepted.' (Lévi-Strauss, 1978, pp. 168-169; translation by the author). Not surprisingly, Bourdieu finds this kind of structuralism 'ahistorical'.
- <sup>4</sup> It is about the surprising discovery of the frequent celibacy of male firstborns in farming families, whose symbolic value on the (national) marriage market has deteriorated dramatically in the 20th century (cf. Bourdieu, 2008).
- <sup>5</sup> In the original tone of the interview on the occasion of Bourdieu's 90th birthday with *Jungle World*, from which the text comes, Schultheis continues – with a critical view to Germany: 'It's amazing how late people discovered [Ernaux] in the German-speaking world [...] In the 1980s, when Bourdieu's and Ernaux's social analyses were part of the standard repertoire of intellectual life in France, mainstream German sociology celebrated the end of class society and the elevator to the top for all. Now, almost four decades later, in the face of growing social inequality in access to all forms of life chances, people seem to be reconsidering and rediscovering the gravity of social reproduction.' (Schultheis 2020, p. 13; translation by the author)
- <sup>6</sup> For the programme title *'Adieux au prolétariat. Au delà du socialisme'* (Paris 1980: Galilée), the unorthodox left-wing journalist André Gorz was still heavily attacked, at least by the orthodox left.
- <sup>7</sup> This becomes clear when one compares *The Years* with the great 'Copenhagen Trilogy' by the Danish writer Tove Ditlevsen (1967/2021a, 1967/2021b, 1971/2021c). She also comes from the working-class milieu, but was born in 1917 and has no academic training. The three autofictional volumes *'Childhood'*, *'Youth'* and *'Dependency'* convince with a language that is as simple as it is incredibly precise and the vividly comprehensible description of her world, but they do not show the self-reflexivity that is so characteristic of Ernaux's works.

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