

READING NARRATIVES OF *TRANSFUGES DE CLASSE*

*Reception and Identification Among
Individuals Experiencing Upward
Social Mobility*

Lucas Pontzeele

In recent years, autobiographical accounts by *transfuges de classe* have seen a considerable surge in popularity in France and abroad. Part of their publishing success is probably due to the way authors describe the psychosocial violence generated by their experiences of upward social mobility. Indeed, the narrative structure relies in particular on the unveiling of their private lives, which facilitates readers' compassion and even identification with these narratives (Florimond-Clerc & Gabrysiak, 2025). Nevertheless, when examining the best-known works, namely those of Annie Ernaux, Édouard Louis, and Didier Eribon, a relatively homogeneous representation of the experience of upward social mobility emerges. This experience is often presented as a painful process, associated with "uprooting." This reading

remains fairly faithful to that proposed by Richard Hoggart in his book *The Uses of Literacy*, in which he portrays "anxious" and "uprooted" individuals (1957, p. 238). This uprooting is said to stem from a "divide" caused by the acquisition of a scholarly culture transmitted through school, which is foreign to the family environment. However, as Olivier Schwartz and Paul Pasquali (2016) point out, the "Hoggartian" model should be handled with caution, as it can prove reductive in understanding social mobility, which is in reality highly diverse.

Given the variety of paths to social mobility, it is worth asking how people in the process of social ascension receive these narratives, which highlight only one facet of this social phenomenon. From this perspective, this article examines how individuals undergoing upward social mobility internalize (or don't) these narratives: do they subscribe to the authors' perspectives? How does their reception reveal the diversity of trajectories and ways of understanding them? To answer these questions, this text draws on a study of the reception of narratives of *transfuges de classe* by individuals aged 22 to 30 from modest backgrounds who are graduates of prestigious French universities and *grandes écoles*. This data was collected as part of a doctoral dissertation on the role of cultural practices in contemporary upward social mobility; the dissertation is based on approximately fifty

biographical interviews. As not all respondents were familiar with the works of the three authors cited, the article focuses primarily on those who have read them. Nevertheless, the focus on non-readers helps to situate the practice socially: the majority of readers had studied social sciences (notably at the *École normale supérieure* and *Sciences Po*), whereas non-readers tend to come from economic and technical field (business, engineering, and medicine).

Family breakdown as a factor of identification

One of the study's first findings shows that the more readers are detached or even estranged from their background, the more profoundly they connect with the narratives of *transfuges de classe*. This observation is hardly surprising, given that the authors themselves describe a progressive, and sometimes painful, distancing from their family sphere over the course of their careers. Thus, we observe that the more the respondents' experiences resemble those of the writers, the more they identify with them (Lévy, 2015). Like the writers, they are devoted to the school system, which appears as a space for empowerment, legitimization, and, ultimately, emancipation from their original social milieu. This finding aligns

with that of Isabelle Charpentier (2009), who, in her analysis of letters addressed to Annie Ernaux, shows that nearly all of the senders are in fact “upwardly mobile [...] holders of cultural capital acquired through schooling”¹ (p. 23). Overinvestment in academic and mainstream culture during childhood and adolescence appears to be a way of justifying and compensating for the transgression of the norms of one's social background. Annie Ernaux perfectly describes how school and reading helped her envision a future beyond the roles assigned to women of her social class, while still meeting her parents' expectations through academic success. In parallel, Édouard Louis and Didier Eribon describe how their homosexuality and femininity were largely punished by their family environments (Lucca, 2022). Integrating into the cultural domain of the upper classes was for them a way to escape the constant reminder of gender norms.

It is therefore unsurprising to find that agreement with the narratives is particularly strong in the gay men of the sample. This is particularly true of Sacha – a graduate of the *École normale supérieure de Lyon*, an *agrégé* in history, and a high school instructor – whose expression of his femininity and homosexuality was restricted by his father, who was hostile to any trans-

¹ Primarily civil servants and professors.

gression of gender norms. The rupture with his family only deepened after he discovered his parents had voted for the far right. Reading social science books and narratives by *transfuges de classe* helped him contemplate his own path: “At that point, I started to read for myself, without forcing myself. I found readings that resonated with me, that helped me to reflect. I was going through something powerful; it stirred up a lot of emotions.” These readings also served as a way for him to justify distancing himself from his family: “I’ve always liked the writings of people who criticize their families because, exactly, it makes me feel like we have the right to do so!” He ventures, however, some reservations about Édouard Louis, considering his account “sometimes a bit exaggerated” compared to Annie Ernaux’s, more authentic in his eyes.

Narratives as tools for appeasing family ties

While these stories can contribute to the weakening of family bonds, they can also help to appease them (Charpentier, 2009). This is particularly true in the case of Arthur – a graduate of the *École normale supérieure de Lyon* and a doctoral student in sociology – who encouraged his mother to read Didier Eribon’s *Retour à Reims* [Returning to Reims]: “She didn’t understand everything, but that’s how she became

interested in sociology. So when I abandoned the idea of becoming a diplomat, she ended up telling me that being a sociologist was just fine!” By sharing this reading, far removed from his mother’s cultural habits, Arthur sought to bridge the cultural capital gap that now separates them: “After that, I had her read Annie Ernaux, and she started little by little, reading more and more!” This sharing allows Arthur to indirectly convey his feelings regarding the “social and affective costs” (Lagrave, 2019, p. 691) caused by social mobility. In other cases, it is the parents who use these narratives to (re)establish a connection with their children. This is notably the case for Aurélien’s mother – a graduate of the *École Polytechnique* and a civil engineer – who sought to engage in a discussion about Édouard Louis after hearing him on the radio, to reopen a dialogue about her son’s homosexuality, which remains a taboo within the family: “I was very surprised when she told me about this book [The End of Eddy]. It is, after all, at the intersection of a number of things. If I’d been brave, I would have drawn a parallel with myself, but well... I didn’t really feel like coming out that day, so I let it slide...” Whether the prescription goes one way or the other, sharing a book can induce “a recognition of the other and of oneself as the foundation of all ethics,” to quote Viviane Albenga (2017).

The “miserabilist” critique of narratives

If some of the respondents identify with the narratives, others address sharp criticism towards them. These are primarily readers whose social mobility is motivated by a “parental project” (Gaulejac, 1987). Consequently, they struggle to identify with the figure of the “uprooted” individual, insofar as their paths largely align with the aspirations of their community of origin. Far from breaking with their family sphere, they express a form of solidarity, and even gratitude, toward it. This stance is most evident among racialized people. This observation corroborates the results of numerous studies on migration trajectories in France. For example, Mathieu Ichou and Mathieu Ferry clearly demonstrate how “immigrant parents have a tendency to transfer their expectations of success onto their children born in the country of immigration” (2025, p. 16). This constitutes a “transfer of mobility” (Gans, 2009). Consequently, respondents from immigrant backgrounds voice a “miserabilist” (Passeron & Grignon, 1989) critique of these narratives. This critique consists, at first, of firmly opposing any denigration of their community of origin.

This is the case for Yacine – a Sciences Po graduate and an executive at a polling firm – angered by Édouard Louis’s criticism of his family: “*What he did in his*

book The End of Eddy, you don’t do that. I find it profoundly immoral to insult the people who raised him, who fed him for 18 years. The guy always had a full plate [...] And then to say it’s horrible that they watch soccer on TV, it’s shameful!” By denouncing a form of ingratitude on the part of Édouard Louis toward his family, Yacine expresses his attachment to his own. This idea is reinforced when he asserts that he has never left his community of origin, sometimes minimizing the existing social and geographical distance: “*Me, my family loves me, I love my family [...] I still speak with a strong Périgord accent, and I often go back to the Dordogne.*” Linked to his miserabilist critique, Yacine also reproaches Édouard Louis for his full assimilation into the cultural sphere of the upper classes: “*I find it incredibly arrogant to say that he can no longer talk to his parents because he’s cultured. As if, every day, you’re talking about Shakespeare and the latest translation of Tolstoy that came out from Belles Lettres. It’s absolutely delusional!*” Thus, for Yacine, reading Édouard Louis constitutes a form of “external negation” (Iser, 1978); that is to say, it provokes a moral judgment, translating a different attitude toward upward social mobility.

The “political” critique of narratives

Some respondents addressed a “political” critique at the narratives of Eribon, Ernaux, and Louis. This critique

can be divided into two main arguments. The first focuses on the meritocratic dimension of the writings: even though the authors seek to denounce social inequalities, they narrate a story of individual success. This paradox, already identified by Karine Abiven and Laélia Véron (2024), is also raised by some of the respondents. This is particularly the case for Médina – a graduate of the *École normale supérieure de Lyon* and a doctoral student in sociology: “*It’s a term that’s actually hyper-meritocratic; I’ve never thought of myself as a transfuge – I’m just moving, that’s all! [...] And actually, the framing of the narrative bothers me.*” She emphasizes here the difference between *transfuge de classe* and social mobility. In fact, the young woman, whose parents did not attend university, rejects the label of *transfuge de classe* for two reasons. First, because she did not struggle with her upward mobility, fulfilling her parents’ aspirations – like the respondents previously mentioned. Thus, the term seems once again to be associated with the idea of a painful class transition.

Moreover, she believes that the term encourages a focus on individual experiences at the expense of collective struggles: “*I’ve never really talked about my own journey because nobody cares. I was into something more political around class struggle and anti-racism. All of that took precedence over my personal journey.*” The second argument focuses

on the “white” dimension of the expression. For Médina, it’s difficult to claim it as a racialized woman: “*It’s a white concept. There are places in the social space I’ll never be able to access. So frankly, the concept of a transfuge, if you will, it... pff... it doesn’t speak to me.*” This position aligns with that of Kaoutar Harchi, who asserts that the concept “denies the social relations of race” (Harchi & Zinzius, 2023), notably because changing one’s social class does not eliminate discrimination based on skin color. Nevertheless, the recent publication of autobiographical accounts by racialized people, such as those by Nesrine Slaoui (2021) or, more recently, Marwan Mohammed (2026), has sparked discussions – particularly in the media – about the “whiteness” of the term.

Conclusion

The varied ways in which individuals on an upward social mobility trajectory receive narratives of *transfuges de classe* reflect the heterogeneity of their life trajectories and the dispositions associated with them. Thus, respondents have different relationships with these works depending on what motivated their upward mobility (escaping their original social milieu or fulfilling parental expectations), a motivation itself shaped by the logics of gender, race, and sexual orientation. A second finding concerns the limited reach of these narratives, as

they are read only by respondents belonging to the cultural fraction of the upper classes. Thus, fears² regarding the appropriation – or even the political instrumentalization – of these narratives by the economic fraction of the upper classes to promote a meritocratic discourse appear, for the moment, to be limited.

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² See for example: Véron, L., and Abiven, K. (2024, April 1).

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