

THE SOCIAL USES OF *TRANSFUGES (DE CLASSE)* AND *TRANSCASSES*

Research Notes

Matthias Fringant

The French terms *transfuges* (defectors), *transfuges de classe* (class defectors), and also *transclasses* (transclasses) are often used to designate subjects in a situation of social mobility at the center of narratives of self-socioanalysis. “Narratives of *transfuges*” and “narratives of *transclasses*” are thus often used to describe what can be understood as a publishing phenomenon. Commonly adopted indiscriminately by factions of the publishing, journalistic, and social sciences fields, these terms actually span different, sometimes antagonistic, conceptualizations. Discussing recent works, some of them including firsthand information gathered through written correspondence and interviews with the writer Annie Ernaux and the philosopher Chantal Jaquet, central actors in the circulation of these terms, this text seeks to outline a social history of the uses of these terms, taking note to the

continued process of their translation into English, with the aim of lexical and conceptual clarification.

“Transfuges,” “*transfuges de classe*,” “*transclasses*”: the ambiguities underneath an apparent unity

As Karine Abiven and Laélia Véron explain (2024 ; 2025), if *transfuge* initially carried a military dimension, referring to a defector joining the enemy camp, it was only in the latter half of the 20th century that the word was connected to the theme of social mobility. It was the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre who used the term in his preface to *Aden Arabie* (1960 [1931]) to describe the character of Antoine Bloyé as well as the book’s author, Paul Nizan. The word circulated in the following decades with this meaning. It is thus unsurprising to find it on occasion in writings by Pierre Bourdieu. The sociologist sometimes used the word to designate individuals experiencing upward social mobility through schooling. However, several terms, such as *miraculé* (a person miraculously saved or redeemed) are used interchangeably and sporadically, such that *transfuge* doesn’t play a major role in Bourdieu’s conceptual system. In support of this argument, it can be noted that the word doesn’t appear in the index of *Distinction* (1979), and that it is used only once within the work itself.

More recently, the lexical field of social class has been appended to the noun.

After infrequent use in the decades following the Second World War, it was the writer Annie Ernaux who popularized the expression *transfuge de classe* in the 1980s (Fringant, 2026). Annie Ernaux read *Distinction* in the context of a writing project on her father's life, faithfully accounting for an experience of heartbreak without complicity with a bourgeois readership. This project led to the publication of *La Place* [A Man's Place] (1983). In correspondence, she explained to me that in 1985 – having subscribed the prior year to *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* – she met a researcher at the National Institute of Agricultural Research (INRA) named Pierre Saunier in a cafe in a swanky neighborhood of Paris. During the conversation, or in a letter soon after, he called her a *transfuge* or a *transfuge de classe*. Whatever the precise vocabulary he used, Annie Ernaux herself used the expression *transfuge de classe* for the first time in an interview published in the social science journal *Politix* in 1991, referring to herself. Unlike these earlier, infrequent uses, the expression was taken up in the 1990s by French sociologists such as Isabelle Charpentier and Bernard Lahire. The second used it sociologically in his studies on the processes of social mobility, inaugurating a larger set of uses within the discipline. If it was rapidly adopted by sociologists, it was only later that the media seized upon the expression, following in Ernaux's footsteps. It was in

2001, when the French newspaper *Le Monde* dedicated an article to her latest book, that the expression was first used. This kind of use would only develop in the press as the writer's reputation grew. Annie Ernaux was awarded the Marguerite Yourcenar prize in 2017, followed by the prestigious Nobel Prize in Literature in 2022. Her acceptance speech, organized around the phrase "I will write to avenge my people," includes a mention of *transfuge de classe sociale* to designate, within a broader reflection on her writing choices, those who "think and express themselves with other words" than those of their parents.

It's in the framework of this expression that alternatives such as *migrant de classe* (class migrant) or *transclasse* developed, meant to resolve the problem of the strong negative axiological charge associated with *transfuge de classe*. The project of the philosopher Chantal Jaquet, conducted in *Les transclasses ou la non-reproduction* [Transclasses. A Theory of Social Non-Reproduction] (2014), is to neutralize the pejorative connotations of *transfuge de classe*. She seeks to study, without prejudice as to its value, any movement of transition between two classes, principally through literary narratives. Jaquet's analysis focuses first on the causes of non-reproduction. Her speculation brings to light the need for combinatorial thinking – which, according to the author, the Spinozist concept of complexion pre-

sented in the second part of the work comes closer to approaching than does the concept of habitus. The term has a very different circulation than the expression it opposes. *Transfuge de classe*, by importing the language of social class into literature and the press, has been adopted by sociologists. *Transclasse*, in neutralizing this language, has received a lukewarm reception in sociology but a much wider one in the cultural press. The reception *Les transclasses ou la non-reproduction* is quite subdued among sociologists and more unanimously positive in the media. This gap continues to widen, notably with the publication of the collective book *La fabrique des transclasses* [The Making of Transclasses] (2018) and the broadcast two years later on a French public television channel of the documentary “Le défi des transclasses” [The challenge of the Transclasses]. From the 2020s, the majority of the uses of the notion reside within self-presentations inextricably tied to media and literature by members of different factions of the dominant class, all while empirical uses of the research initially proposed by Chantal Jaquet in 2014 remain relatively few.

English translations of these concepts: several landmarks

Transfuges, *transfuges de classe*, and *transclasses*, which thus attest to three very different histories, were nevertheless all coined within the context of

French literature and philosophy. Having quickly delineated the contexts of their production and circulation in French, we can now examine the circulation of these terms in English via their translation to see if any sociologically pertinent constants emerge.

Insofar as the term *transfuge* belongs to everyday language, it is impossible to satisfactorily trace its successive uses across time. If we consider the occurrence found in *Distinction*, we see that Richard Nice’s translation (1984) is meaningful, as *transfuge* becomes “solitary renegade.” We see that the semantic field of betrayal is thus accentuated, the adjective “solitary” fortifying this negative connotation. Around the same time that Annie Ernaux’s *La Place* [A Man’s Place] was published, in a context of the disappearance of the language of social class in favor of representing a society without divisions, Richard Nice responded to the demand for lexicon linking social groups and conflict.

The procedure seems to be the same for Annie Ernaux, who thus imported at the same moment the language of class into literature with the expression *transfuge de classe*. As she herself explains, if sociology gives her the language and the means to conceptualize her literary project, it cannot replace it. Sociological concepts are seldom used in Ernaux’s literary writings. Rather, they appear in the discourses that accompany them, such as interviews with researchers and

journalists, or in commentaries. It therefore seems unnecessary to examine the English translations of her books, beginning in the 1980s, to concretize the dissemination of the expression in English. One can however hypothesize that Alison L. Strayer's translation of Ernaux's Nobel Prize acceptance speech (2023) and the rendering of the phrase *transfuge de classe* as "class defector" contributed to a renewal of the process of translating the expression into English (Hugueny-Léger, 2025). Another research hypothesis: it's useful to include English translations of successful narratives that extended the literary approach initiated by Annie Ernaux, such as Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims* [Returning to Reims] (2013) and Édouard Louis' *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* [The End of Eddy] (2017) – both translated by Michael Lucey – to understand the dissemination of the expression in the anglophone world. One should note that works by these three authors have been adapted for the stage and screen (Edy, 2025), having perhaps played an important role in the circulation of the expression *transfuge de classe* in the anglophone world.

Finally, as regards *transclasses*, as the term appears in the title of Chantal Jaquet's book, we can here examine its English translation. *Les transclasses ou la non-reproduction* was translated by Gregory Elliott as *Transclasses. A Theory of Social Non-Reproduction* (2023). The

emphasis here was placed on the theoretical dimension of the work and of the concept. The book's description on the publisher's website, paradoxically, reads "how people become class traitors." The phrase thus invokes the central concept against which *trans-classe* was originally coined. The theoretical value emphasized by the English translation seems to have generated a feedback effect on the philosopher's work, having recently published the essay *Révolutions transclasses. Une nouvelle théorie de l'émancipation* [Transclass revolutions: a new theory of emancipation] (2026) in French.

The demarcation of the uses of the French terms *transfuges*, *transfuges de classe*, *transclasses*, and their translations into English reveals two principal elements.

First, all these words, now often used interchangeably, were coined in different contexts and have different values from a sociological perspective. *Transfuge* has never been the subject of a precise sociological conceptualization. It's certainly *transfuge de classe* which (paradoxically as the expression circulated from literature towards sociology) has been the subject of the most controlled sociological uses, at the same moment when prophecies heralding the end of antagonistic relations between social groups were circulating within the discipline. As for *transclasses*, coined in

reaction to *transfuge de classe*, until today it has principally been used in the media without having been applied to empirical research.

Secondly, each of these expressions has been primarily coined within a national, or even a Parisian, context. Initial outlines of an inquiry into their translation into English reveals that this process is very recent and still unfixed, as demonstrated by the continued use of quotation marks and variations between the English terms “class defector” and “class traitor,” not to mention *transfuge de classe* which sometimes remains in French.

This attentive, preliminary study of these terms relative to social mobility and the narratives accompanying it will, hopefully, contribute to further sociological reflections on our collective uses of words and concepts.

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