

TRANSFUGE DE CLASSE AND THE PARADOXES OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

Laélia Véron and Karine Abiven,
*Trahir et venger. Paradoxes des récits de
transfuges de classe.* Paris: La
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In recent years, narratives by *transfuges de classe* (class defectors) have become one of the most visible forms of self-writing in the French public sphere. Their success, however, has often encouraged a loose and inflationary use of the category itself. One of the major merits of Laélia Véron and Karine Abiven's *Trahir et venger* is precisely to resist this inflation. Rather than simply adding one more commentary on a fashionable literary and sociological object, the book interrogates the very polysemy of the notion of *transfuge de classe*.

The book first shows that the term “*transfuge*” is never neutral. The authors provide a semantic history of the concept, showing that before its partial neutralisation in contemporary usage, it

was associated with the ideas of desertion, betrayal, and moral suspicion. This history matters because the term's current prestige often obscures the extent to which it remains normatively charged. The notion of a *transfuge de classe* is, in fact, related to certain “affects” and moral categories such as shame, merit, guilt, treason, and revenge. Véron and Abiven are thus right to insist that the category cannot be treated as a transparent sociological descriptor.

This conceptual clarification becomes especially important when the authors move from the word to the corpus. One of the book's most convincing claims is that the current sense of ubiquity surrounding class-defector narratives partly stems from the circulation of a media script rather than from the existence of a stable and clearly delimited corpus. A relatively narrow canon – Annie Ernaux, Richard Hoggart, Pierre Bourdieu, Didier Eribon, Édouard Louis, Rose-Marie Lagrave – has gradually given rise to a much broader discursive frame, now used to classify journalists, politicians, actors, social media testimonies, and even retrospective literary figures (the case of Rastignac). In that respect, the book is a salutary warning against anachronistic or overly elastic uses of the category.

Véron and Abiven clearly use Bourdieusian tools when they analyse *habitus clivé*, symbolic violence, school-based reproduction, and the domination

of legitimate language. Nevertheless, they also develop their analysis beyond a simplified Bourdieusian legacy by reintroducing what many contemporary invocations of the *transfuge* tend to forget: the social space must be grasped in its multidimensional and historically changing structure. In the spirit of *Distinction*, the book reminds us that different principles of hierarchy coexist and compete, and that their relative weight changes over time. One cannot, therefore, speak of “class defection” as though social space were homogeneous and univocal. On the contrary, much of the current discourse on class-defector narratives tends to privilege upward mobility through school and the acquisition of cultural capital. The book shows how central this configuration is in the canon of French narratives of social ascent. School appears as the decisive institution, the privileged site of rupture, shame, and transformation. Following the authors, the prevalent identification of mobility with educational ascent risks confusing one historically dominant form of mobility with mobility as such. In this way, trajectories structured by economic capital, commercial activity, professional sports, or less spectacular, reversible displacements across social space are definitely overlooked. Thus, the book restores a necessary epistemological vigilance by showing that the category's relevance depends on how one constructs the social space in which it operates.

Moreover, the book focuses on the success of the class-defector category and its stabilisation in a recognisable, quite prescriptive model in which popular origins, school as rupture, shame before legitimate culture, linguistic correction, divided habitus, and eventual reconciliation through writing constitute the recurrent *topoi*, thereby obscuring the heterogeneity of the realities it claims to name. The chapter on language is especially strong in this regard. By focusing on diglossia, linguistic shame, and the tension between dominated and dominant forms of speech, Véron and Abiven demonstrate that class mobility is also a struggle over legitimate expression. Nevertheless, they avoid any naïve celebration of an authentic “popular” idiom. What they reconstruct is rather the paradox whereby anti-literary or anti-legitimate styles themselves become new forms of literary legitimacy.

In this sense, *Trahir et venger* is best read not simply as a study of a literary trend, but as an exercise in conceptual clarification. Its central contribution is to remind us that the notion of the *transfuge de classe* remains analytically useful only if constantly re-situated within a multipolar, historically evolving social space. Véron and Abiven's book is therefore valuable not only for what it says about contemporary French literature, but also for the form of epistemological vigilance it encourages.