
Out of gay, and into class closet

On politics of identity and reflexive sociology in Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis

Conversation between Kate Korycki and Anna Zawadzka

Abstract: The conversation starts with an in-depth analysis of two autobiographical works, *Returning to Reims* by Didier Eribon (2013) and *The end of Eddy* by Édouard Louis (2017). The discussion concerns, among other things, the double exclusion due to non-heteronormativity and class origin. Does gay emancipation occur exclusively within dominating social classes? What is the price of emancipation for individuals from dominated classes? Is it possible to come to terms with the stigma of being both gay and of working class origin? Why has the problematization of heteronormativity been abundantly represented in literature and arts, whereas that of classism continues to be a taboo as a subject of both autobiographies and academic studies?

Keywords: Didier Eribon; Édouard Louis; Pierre Bourdieu; class; gayness; social advancement

Warsaw–Toronto–Warsaw
October 2017 – May 2018

Anna Zawadzka: In his book *Returning to Reims*, Didier Eribon applies the tools of reflexive sociology to his own biographic experiences (Eribon, 2013). He describes them through the academic apparatus. Are you tempted to write in the same manner?

Kate Korycki: Such books are rare. Luisa Passerini wrote a similar one (*Autobiography of a generation*). She was involved in the student communist movement in Italy, the most radical one in Europe in the 1960s; she took part in strikes and riots. Ten years later, she returned to the topic as a scholar. She applied a new toolkit, in her case a psychoanalytical one, to her generation. Perfectly mirroring Eribon, who subversively applied the sociological toolkit to himself, she used psychoanalysis to study a group. I want to write so as to be understood outside academia. Nevertheless, I am a product of the academic “meat grinder,” a grinder that made me into a specific kind of a “sausage.” In order to write for a wider audience, I would have to become a different “sausage.” This isn’t easy. You, by the way, can and do do this, Anna... I am planning a book about confronting my identities (in the plural) in the process of writing my doctoral dissertation. This personal aspect is absent from the dissertation itself, but it is the leitmotif of the entire work. I still have no idea how to do it. For now, I have a pile of notes, ideas...

A. Z.: This type of writing gives me the basic stimulus to practice sociology. That’s why I wanted to start by talking about three passages from *Returning to Reims*, where I made a note “It’s about me!” on the margin.

Passage one: Eribon writes about the stigma of insult. He says that such offensive words as “faggot” contain the past as well as implicate the future: they contain the knockout power of old confrontations, and they mark one forever. Then he describes his horror whenever he witnessed anybody else being called a “faggot.” Reading this fragment, I recalled my father’s sexist comments. They were not addressed directly at me; on the contrary, repeating the comments after him allowed me to demonstrate that I was different, not anything like those insult-worthy others. In this manner, my father invited me into a misogynistic alliance with him. Yet, since I was a woman, this was also an alliance against me.

K. K.: Yes!

A. Z.: Passage two: Pierre Bourdieu urges Didier Eribon to take up a job offer at *Le Nouvel Observateur*. I had an identical experience when, backed up by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, I applied for an internship with *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Eribon writes about his sense of alienation in the editorial team. Being in *Wyborcza*, I too feared being exposed at any moment: revealing that I didn’t share the ideological bent of the editors or that I deemed the content to be strongly neoliberal. Finally, Eribon writes about how repulsive it was for him to find that French academic circles used *Le Nouvel Observateur* as a private platform to universalize their class position and worldview. I could not think of a better way to describe *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

Passage three: Eribon writes that when people move up the social ladder, they frequently mistake their advancement to be greater than it is. But original class allocation doesn’t go away, which only gets revealed with delay. It is a kind of a cognitive error, a misrecognition. You believe you have liberated yourself from the limitations of your class but the advancement you are experiencing remains strongly constricted. Eribon describes this phenomenon using the example of how students chose foreign language classes in the first years at middle school. Bourgeois children chose German, knowing it to be the right investment in their academic careers. Eribon chose Spanish because he liked the sound of the language. He was convinced that picking up Spanish, he was making an informed decision; nevertheless, his choice was constrained by how he had been – or rather had not been – taught to think, by his (lack of) knowledge of what one needs to pursue a career. When I compared my own situation to that of my parents, I believed that having obtained a doctoral degree and working as an assistant professor for a public institution, I experienced an exceptional social advancement. Recently, however, I’ve had this epiphany that I keep being cast in secretarial roles. I used to be a secretary to the editorial board of a periodical, then I became a secretary to an academic board, and now I am a secretary to a doctoral committee. I am surrounded by people occupying expert positions, while I remain a secretary. That is how the power of class assignment manifests itself.

K. K.: You see it as class rather than gender?

A. Z.: Both. I work with women who, on account of their habitus,¹ are never cast as secretaries, not even occasionally. In other words, asking them to perform secretarial-like

¹ I employ the term habitus as per Pierre Bourdieu – it refers to the external and hierarchical social structures which have been internalized by individuals and subsequently expressed in the form of individual practices, beliefs and perception categories. For more, see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992.

functions carries more risk for those asking than for the one being asked. I don't pose such a risk. I probably send inadvertent signals that I fear losing my job and that I will therefore be strictly dutiful. As a consequence, I continue to be an "Anna, my dear." If my posture, dressing style, the tone of voice and gestures communicated self-confidence, I would no longer be treated like a student rewarded for a nice performance at a school recital.

K. K.: Because I come from middle class background, I "feel" class differently: I come from the center of the universe, feel that the world is my oyster, and I therefore have no class. This is not only a matter of psychologically given self-confidence, but of social positioning too. This is why I was deeply moved by a passage in which Eribon turns against Raymond Aron, saying that Aron's so-called sociology is simply a way of universalizing his own class position. Just as I was reading this, I was negotiating my present job contract. I found myself in a classical Marxian situation: on the one side were the owners of the means of production, and on the other, the world supplying them with resources and labor – namely me. I found that my position did not give me a right to speak. I could not even ask about the conditions of my employment. I was to accept them blindly, to sign the contract, and be grateful for getting a job. I had two so-called options: I could accept unspecified terms without questions, or not get the job. So the options and the choice were a pure illusion. What is key of course is that the personal characteristics of the job-givers were unimportant. They could have been nice and charming liberals. Yet the fact that they had (and claimed) the right to not specify the terms of my employment created a perfect class antagonism between us. I became conscious of class the moment I lost my "middle class center of the universe" position. And I did feel anger and the injustice of it. I am not sure if I would feel the injustice so strongly if I hadn't been reading Eribon at that time, especially Eribon's attack on Aron. I've had worse jobs before, but I didn't have the appropriate language to diagnose and name them (which is actually hilarious, seeing as I grew in the so-called communist Poland).

A. Z.: The book by Eribon deals with two emancipations. One is sexual. It is an emancipation *to* being gay. The author admits that he has written about this topic for a long time while carefully avoiding the theme of another emancipation – class emancipation, the one he faces up to in *Returning to Reims*. Here, we have an emancipation *from*: from his class origins. But, having staked out the project, he doesn't, unfortunately, write about the thresholds that he had to cross in order to enter his present position, the price he had to pay for *passing*. Thus, on the one hand, Eribon analyzes – superbly – his way out of a dominated class. He takes a critical, Marxian view and doesn't idealize or glorify the working classes. He writes about them with sympathy, but no illusions. On the other hand, he does not deconstruct the class he aspires to and ultimately enters. This is unfortunate, since his social advancement is painful and difficult not only because he had to shed something, leave something behind, but also because he continued to be a stranger in his new milieu. Admittedly, Eribon mentions pretending to be someone else and being ashamed of his parents but, when doing so, he writes about himself and

not about the requirements imposed on him by his new class. Eventually, everything is attributed to his individual shyness. Why is that? Does the emancipation to homosexuality by means of social advancement make Eribon protect the class he entered because it has liberated him from heteronormativity?

K. K.: I agree with your description of the book's themes and shortcomings, but I would describe them in slightly different terms. In my mind, Eribon doesn't show us how his class origin remains "in the closet." He uses Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick's notion of the closet, but doesn't examine the policing performed by the class he enters, even though it is precisely this new class that forces him to conceal his origin and habitus. In other words, Eribon does not describe how his class shame is produced after he actually begins the process of departing from the working classes. The habitus which he has to hide or rework is one thing, but the *pressure* to hide and reshape it is another. The sociological analysis of class emancipation would require such a two-fold approach. After all, his social advancement is real: his origins do become irrelevant at some point in his career. Yet he continues to feel shame. Is it inside him only, or is it also reinforced by the outside world? And if so, how does it work? I agree that being gay – his emancipation *to* – saved him *from* his class (although, as you suggest above, we need to unpack this). But that's not enough. The word "threshold" suggests that once you cross it, you are in; the word "closet" denotes an enduring process of being hidden through shame. It remains to be examined how this enduring class shame is produced and maintained.

I think much hinges on how Eribon defines and thinks about class. When did his class origin stop being important to him? Has it ever? What does it mean to *return* to Reims? What is this *returning* about? Sometimes you genuinely cut things off and there is no returning. You can come to Reims, talk to people, you can even understand their "language" but you know you are no longer from there. Nothing links you with this place anymore.

A. Z.: And yet something does. When Eribon analyzes why he never dealt with the issue of class, it turns out that this was his way to maintain his cutoff. And cutoff doesn't mean indifference. It is hard, constant work of remaining separated, departing, and guarding the border. Going to Reims to see his mother after his father died is a gesture of stopping and turning back to take a look at the monster that has chased him. I agree that Eribon does not examine how class stigma continues to be produced, but he is aware of being stigmatized by class. He openly writes: "It turned out to be much easier for me to write about shame linked to sexuality than about shame linked to class" (Eribon, 2013, p. 25). Why is that? Is it because the shame linked to non-heteronormative sexuality has long been a subject of academic and cultural inquiry, whereas the shame linked to class has not invited as numerous representations and is acknowledged rarely? Interestingly, the shame of class mobility was a subject discussed in communist Poland in both books and films. What I have in mind is the 1976 TV series *Daleko od szosy* [Away from the paved road] and a much earlier book by Julian Kawalec, *Tańczący jastrząb* [The dancing wawk] (Kawalec, 1964). Both these texts discuss class distinctions in a society that was supposed to be devoid of social classes. Both find the *status quo* to be ambivalent; it is true that socialism

facilitates social advancement but old class structures remain. Consequently, individual advancement entails effort, struggle, humiliation, stress and loneliness.

K. K.: Eribon shows French society, where the myth of social mobility is absent. In Poland, in turn, practically the entire society has experienced social advancement from the misery, poverty, illiteracy and famine of the interwar period. As Andrzej Leder claims, this was a revolutionary shift, but it has not been recognized as such (Leder, 2014). Nevertheless, communism inscribed egalitarianism into the Polish habitus. If you ask Poles whether people have a right to accommodation, or if a 30-year mortgage is excessive, a majority would say “yes.” In North America the majority would say “no” to the first question and laugh in incomprehension at the second. In France, as presented by Eribon, both the myth and the advancement are absent. Or let me put it in a different way: advancement is about increased incomes, but not about passing class thresholds. In the US, the myth of class mobility is fundamental to the American self-identification, and we should remember that for a long while it was real, although mainly for the whites. Today, even this advancement is gone. If it still exists, it applies mainly to the second generation of immigrants: newcomers’ children often work in different professions than their parents, they experience a class shift. My own experience confirms this principle. I come from Poland, from a society where everybody “has shifted,” and I live in a country where I shifted again. I started in Canada as a nanny (obviously a nanny with a middle-class habitus from communist Poland) and now I am seeking a job as a scholar. Reading Eribon made me understand why I disliked Europe, with its stability and rigidity.

A. Z.: I have never thought about Poles as having egalitarianism in their habitus, but you are right about this. The fifty years of advancement channels had to transform this habitus quite a bit. But it’s been thirty years since the transition now. People who have been breathing the neoliberal ideology from their birth are adults today. Alongside neoliberalism, they have also been fed anti-communism, which on the topic of advancement boils down to whining about stupid people being allowed to get prominent positions. Poles keep repeating the legend of the good – that means old – intelligentsia being destroyed first by the War, and then by the communists, precisely through the system of class advancement. It may be that anti-communism blocks the pride of this collective advancement as a Polish achievement. It is impossible to generate either collective or individual positive identity on such foundations. Instead, you rush to buy a portrait of your aristocratic “ancestor,” like the characters in the popular TV series *Czterdziestolatek* [Forty-something]. You have to pretend and keep proving you come from nobility.

With reference to neoliberalism that was not preceded by communism, I have to mention my shock when reading about poverty described by Édouard Louis (Louis, 2017). Louis was born in 1992. The conditions he describes in his book dedicated to Eribon, *The end of Eddy* – wearing the clothes of his older brothers, living on the brink of hunger, eating potatoes for two weeks straight, wearing a single pair of shoes all year round – are all drastically at odds with the image of Western Europe. Everyday lives of the con-

temporary inhabitants of small, working-class towns in the west of Europe are entirely unrepresented in culture. All we get is the myth of affluence.

K. K.: Yes, the past poverty described by Eribon and the present poverty described by Louis are shocking. But they had an interlude: the welfare state project, which slowed down and then stopped in the 1970s, offered a chance of improvement (if not in terms of class, then at least of income). Eribon's family experienced this advancement, whereas Louis lives through its reversal. The Eribons got an apartment with a TV set and heating, where water did not drip from the ceiling. Twenty years later, in the same places we see manufacturing plants being closed down, unemployment rate at 40% and children who brush their teeth once a week.

A. Z.: And here we come back to the matter of the tools academia provides. Eribon writes that the tools "permit you to neutralize the emotional charge that might otherwise be too strong if you had to confront the 'real' without the help of an intervening screen" (Eribon, 2013, p. 243). There is a passage in Eribon's book about reading Sartre and Trotsky until four o'clock in the morning. At this very hour his mother, aching from working on an assembly line, would get up to go to work. It requires considerable courage to describe oneself so unsparingly. Being a Marxist paradoxically enabled Eribon to distance himself from his own class origin. Afterwards, when he acquired a sociological toolkit, he experienced the ambivalence of these tools. On the one hand, they allowed him to understand and analyze his own biographic experience. Eribon describes how he felt reading sociological texts, and I feel the same reading his text. On the other hand, this toolkit increased his distance from everything that is represented by Reims in his book, namely the working class, its everyday realities and lifestyle. Eribon is clearly set on keeping this distance, which is not to mean that it's painless. For instance, he writes that he attends demonstrations against the National Front and he would never shake hands with anybody voting for the extreme right wing, yet his own mother and brothers vote for them. The distance does not alleviate the pain of this situation.

K. K.: Yes, I agree. If advancement is genuine, it involves pain.

Let us return to the link between gayness and academia. You said that the big city and the academic milieu liberated Eribon to gayness. It seems to me that both of these aspects are of crucial importance. On the one hand, going to Paris – a large city where you can anonymously pursue your desires – is an emancipatory experience in itself. On the other hand, Eribon describes academia, where he compares Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault. The latter was gay and entered academia smoothly. Bourdieu, who was of working class descent and who was accused by Eribon of being unconsciously homophobic, had a much harder time entering the French academe. Firstly, Eribon links class, sexuality and the ease of academic adaptation. Secondly, and more importantly, he implies that the reason why Bourdieu failed to recognize his own homophobia was connected to his failure to analyze it as his class "tail." I agree with Eribon about the original link – which I'm going to elaborate on in a moment – but his attack on Bourdieu is slightly below the

belt. Eribon accuses Bourdieu of failing to recognize that his perception of masculinity, which had been formed by an intersection with class, informed his homophobia and was responsible for his difficulty with academia. At the same time, Eribon also failed to analyze how class and gender are mutually constitutive in his own family. He described it, but he didn't analyze it.

To begin with, I think we should work this out sequentially. The acceptance of and interest in gayness are new. Eribon is 64 years old. This must have changed over his lifetime. When and how did being gay come to be accepted in academia? If it has always been accepted, which I doubt, why has it become so acceptable, and on what terms? Once again, the picture is going to look different in France than in the US, and different still in Poland, where academia and the acceptance of homosexuality are unlinked, so far.

A. Z.: How to describe the relation between intellectualism and gayness, in your opinion? Becoming an intellectual enabled Eribon to be free in his homosexuality, while minimizing the threat of violence. A highly conservative conclusion could be made that coming out of the closet is conceivable only in a class that produces intellectuals. Aren't there any other classes offering lifestyles acceptable for gay people?

K. K.: This question I think gets us to the second, and to me more important, reason why Eribon accuses Bourdieu of something he is perhaps guilty of himself. Eribon writes evocatively that the way we perceive the world, and the way we reproduce it, is tightly woven with interpretative frames we hold. We should therefore consider what interpretative frames informed the people who worked to awaken the working class's consciousness, and what interpretative frames were adopted by the working class people themselves – they did not necessarily have to adopt the frames of the vanguard intellectuals. Eribon invokes Sartre, who wrote that the working class was “spontaneously homophobic and racist,” but their solidarity, created in the context of a strike, could overcome these prejudices. “Spontaneously”? That's absurd. As a political entity, the working class is founded on a specific concept of masculinity and race. It is from the way those concepts are formed, and from the way they intersect with class, that we need to tease out the origins of behaviors that Sartre attributes to spontaneity. Race as a social category is not spontaneous; it is an old trope that the old left has not analyzed. Of course it is true that people are sorted into different categories, defined by skin pigment or sex, or sexuality, but which categories become significant and a source of domination and violence is the result of a process of political and social construction. Eribon writes about France. I explore race in North America. Here, one of the accounts of race describes the moment in which first slaves arrive in the 16th century. What is incredible is that in those early days, the black slaves were not seen as non-human. Cross-racial marriages, for instance, were conceivable (and legal). Many agree that the radical change in the way black people were regarded occurred as a result of deliberate strategy to racially divide the working class. The divide worked to protect the interest of the capital threatened by joint struggle of black and white workers. From that moment on, the whole discursive apparatus of economy

and the state sought to turn black slaves into lesser humans, or even subhumans. As a result, even the most mistreated white worker had someone lower than him in the social hierarchy. The point is that the so-called spontaneous racism of the white working class had to be constructed. Indeed, the constructed wedge was so successful that the labor movement in the US has been the weakest in the West. And always divided.

A. Z.: Eribon writes about his mother's racism in a similar vein. When she remarks that she does not want to live in a district full of Arabs, because it makes her feel as if she were abroad, Eribon comments:

Still, when I think back on it, I find myself asking whether my mother's racism, and the virulent scorn that she (the daughter of an immigrant!) always showed for immigrant workers in general and "Arabs" in particular, wasn't in some way a means for her – someone who had lived her life as part of a category that was always being reminded of its inferiority – to feel superior to people even more inferior than her. Was it a way of constructing a somewhat valorized image of herself, something she accomplished through the devalorization of others; was it, in other words, simply a way of existing in her own eyes? (Eribon, 2013, p. 147).

K. K.: Yes, in this sense, the contemporary working class is constructed and constituted on racism. Is it also founded on misogynist masculinity? Édouard Louis gives an affirmative answer in *The end of Eddy*. He spells it out most clearly: certain scripts of (hetero-) masculinity are embedded in the ethos and consciousness of the working class. In the meantime, Marxist avant-garde (including Eribon to some extent) has either forgotten to deconstruct the racism and misogyny of the working class or, worse, has formed this class with reference to such conceptions of race and gender. Sartre's "spontaneity" does not explain anything. Let's take the scene when Eribon's father comes home drunk and smashes bottles against the wall. Firstly, I don't believe that a four-year-old boy (Eribon's age at that time) could understand that this was his father's way of expressing class pain, which for him consisted in losing masculine privileges. Secondly, Eribon does not unpack the "masculinity" of this scene. He recognizes its gender-related nature (he says that his mother would never be allowed to express anger in just the same way), but he doesn't examine it. That is why I agree with your view that this book is written from a Marxist standpoint, but it is way too lenient toward contemporary Marxists. Eribon allows certain categories of perception, and their behavioral scripts, to remain arbitrary. I, on the other hand, think that we should examine the scripts of the white, male, communist intellectual who allows such "arbitrariness" to stand. The left-wing project will not revive as long as it does not face and transcend this.

A. Z.: That depends on where you situate agency. Rosa Luxemburg would respond that the left-wing intellectual elite are not supposed to be the avant-garde of the working class but that they should follow. Secondly, there is a whole tradition of thinking about practice rather than discourse of power as the factor that shapes reality. I am mentioning it for the sake of precision, but I also lean towards cultural arbitrariness.

Eribon does not ignore racism. On the contrary, it is the racism of the working class that prompts his reflection on the reasons for which workers have shifted their support from the Communist Party to the National Front. In his opinion, the left is to blame for adopting individualism, shunning the issues of oppression and exploitation, and thereby depriving working class of their identity and dignity. This void has been filled by the nationalistic narrative founded on racism. This narrative restores the dignity of the working class but replaces “workers” with “nation” in the process. However, Eribon remarks that when the working class voted for communists, it was largely racist, but its racism was not legitimized back then.

K. K.: I agree with his analysis of the present, but racism was legitimized earlier as well. Not in the same way as the National Front legitimizes it, but it was possible, it was conceivable. It wasn't clearly renounced. It is not enough to have Sartre call out “let's go on strike together, that's how we will build solidarity.”

By the way, let me clarify that Rosa Luxemburg and I have different types of agency in mind. She demanded that workers be the avant-garde of their group. Fine. I am not talking about how the workers' movement ought to be organized, but about analyzing who establishes authoritative tropes under which the working class operates. Or even not so much about *who* – because I am not concerned with intentions and purposes – but *what*. I am looking to analyze the content, meanings and intersections of categories and tropes and to tease out their social productivity and functions. And the role of scripts supplied by intellectuals is key in this endeavor. It is precisely the script of “spontaneity” which creates Sartre as an enlightened intellectual vis-à-vis the racist masses. It does not describe reality; it creates it.

A. Z.: And yet I would defend the scene where the father smashes the bottles against the wall. I agree that Eribon's analysis is retrospective. Nevertheless, I believe it is crucial because he calls this scene “originary” on the one hand, and because he tears apart the Freudian-Lacanian paradigm on the other, demonstrating how this paradigm makes everything that is determined by class invisible.

I had never been able to forget it. It was a kind of an indelible trace left by a childhood trauma, linked to an “originary scene,” but not one that should be understood on psychological or psychoanalytic terms. Once you start talking about the Oedipus complex, you desocialize and depoliticize the way you look at processes of subjectivation. A family scene replaces one that is grounded in historical and geographical (urban) reality, which is to say the reality of social classes. What was going on here was not the weakening of the paternal imago, not a failure to identify with the father – real or symbolic; it corresponds to neither of these interpretative schemas, the ones that would be routinely invoked by habitual forms of Lacanian thought in order to discover the “key” to my homosexuality – a “key” they plant there ahead of time in order to be able to discover it. No, there is no fodder here that anyone can use to trot out yet again these notions that have been fabricated by psychoanalytic ideology and that its proselytizers are constantly repeating. What was going on here was rather what I would call a social mirror stage, one in which someone becomes

conscious of belonging to a milieu in which certain kinds of behaviors and practices occur; this was the scene of interpellation, but a social, not a psychic or an ideological one; it was an interpellation involving the discovery of a class-based sociological situation, one that assigns to you a place and to an identity; it teaches you to recognize who you are and who you will be by means of an image someone else presents – someone else whom you are meant to become” (Eribon, 2013, pp. 96–97).

“Originary” is used here in a sense of encompassing social destiny.

Let me return to the figure of the gay and the intellectual, as it keeps bothering me. Ste McCabe, a gay artist from Manchester, features on the cover of his record a photograph of himself in a tee-shirt reading “Too poor to be gay.” McCabe has long been emphasizing class distinctions among gays. This is what Eribon’s book lacks profoundly. What lifestyles prevail among the most visible gay community? Don’t they happen to be available only to the rich? I have just come back from the European Lesbian Conference in Vienna. I did not get an impression that the over 500 conference participants came only from the dominant classes. They reflected a wide range of social groups. Yet the theme of class was discussed for five minutes during a three-day conference. The term intersectionality was a buzz word but to no avail. Class did not serve as a tool for lesbians to analyze their experience, whether inside or outside the LGBTQ movement. That is why I appreciate Eribon’s gesture so much. Similarly to Bourdieu, Eribon elevates the lives of dominated classes to the rank of significance, the rank that demands description. That is a trivial comparison, but take a look at movies and TV productions. I compulsively watch American and British series. 98% of them talk about 3% of global population. The number of cultural products dealing with the dominated classes that clearly prevail in terms of number, is next to nothing

K. K.: I think this is the exact point of Eribon’s criticism of the left. In his opinion, the left has adopted the discourse of individual achievements and this is the only language we have now. And I agree that this is a genuine defeat. The world organized by neoliberalism leaves no room for class interpretation. Paraphrasing the famous Thatcher’s dictum there are no classes, only individuals. This is the reason why I do *not* watch TV series: I know that what they present is unreal. The first thing that I ask when I see TV characters is whether a person with this job can afford such an apartment, such a car, such clothes and cosmetics. 99% of the times the answers is “no,” so I switch the TV set off.

About your question now: the gay movement was spearheaded and dominated by white men, and it is now rooted in the neoliberal paradigm. Apart from a moment of the cross-class mobilization against the shame of and indifference to AIDS, the movement has not been a collective. This is especially obvious today. Since the 1990s, the movement has been organized by the narrative of individual emancipation. It is aligned with the language of individual human rights and has won its most significant battles through legal means (not so much political). I take advantage of these developments and I am grateful to activists for their efforts, but I am not blind to the conservatism of

the individual-emancipation narrative. The most significant theme of gay films is still the individual coming out of the closet. And *Pride*, as an emancipatory project, is not solidarity; it is celebrated collectively but understood individualistically. I see this as a great loss. The above does not apply to the queer movement but that's another conversation.

A. Z.: Yet gays are present in every class, including the working class. The question is whether emancipation can be achieved only through class advancement?

K. K.: Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis answer in the affirmative. And in my opinion, this represents a spectacular failure of the labor movement. It is a failure which resulted, among other things, from the misunderstanding and repudiation of identity politics. But I do have to add that Canada exemplifies a space of broad gay emancipation which did not necessitate class advancement. LGBTQ people, regardless of their class, have *legal* equality. Homophobia is of course present, but it is a) declining and b) it does not overlap with class but rather with age, religion, immigrant status and the urban-rural divide.

A. Z.: But isn't it also a failure of the gay movement?

K. K.: It certainly is, but if I am right that the gay movement is organized by the narrative of individual emancipation, its inattention to solidarity and collective mobilization is perhaps understandable. The absence of solidaristic imaginaries is our collective loss, wherever the absence originates. If I were to advocate a project, I would like to see a formation of pan-categorical solidarity of the excluded, but a solidarity that is attentive to particular social positions. The way it looks today, the gay movement will not save us, it's not a model to emulate in other struggles. And if the left desires to regain its potential, it needs to address not only the issue of people and work (although this matters in the world of departing jobs and growing market power of employers), but also of race and gender. In other words, the left project needs to examine its own attitude to masculinity, sexuality and race, and it has to incorporate a sociological and reflexive analysis into its language. Class gives us the language and foundation for solidarity, but this solidarity will be experienced differently by gays, women, people in wheelchairs, or blacks. Put differently, race domination will not be solved by class and it cannot be reduced to class. Both have to be understood in their unique productivity and intersection.

A. Z.: I look at that from another angle: reducing gays to being gay is definitely not enough because every gay person is also placed in class...

K. K.: ...reducing gays to being gay is the essence of the neoliberal project...

A. Z.: Whether an individual admits his or her gay identity or joins the gay movement will either be facilitated or obstructed by his or her financial status, family situation, whether or not he or she lives in a city and so on. The theme of class differences among gays is addressed by an American TV series, *Looking*. It tells a story of a group of gay friends, precarians living in San Francisco. One of the themes involves racial and class matters. One of the main characters has an affair with a Mexican man, a hairdresser with lower cultural capital. It is clear that the hairdresser doesn't fit in: he doesn't understand the

cultural codes that the main characters refer to. He tells different jokes, he wears different clothes. Over time, he becomes an object of ridicule and sneer, seemingly innocent yet still cruel. This is precisely the space of class cruelty. Eribon describes this when he recalls his schoolmate, a teacher's son he fell in love with. He writes: "Everything I tried merely revealed my inferiority. He was cruel and hurtful without meaning to be, without even knowing it" (Eribon, 2013, p. 172). Is the cultural code which the gay world values most inseparable from the upper classes?

K. K.: We would have to explore how and where this code is formed. Note that this mirrors the question of masculinity in class code. This is what Louis analyzes. His novel *The end of Eddy* reads differently than *Returning to Reims* because Louis does not emphasize his academic toolkit (even though it is clearly present). But it seems to me that he has thought through the issue of masculinity and class more profoundly than Eribon did. Louis is aware that homophobia is the outcome of a certain concept of masculinity which dominates in and is inscribed into the working class (and is formed differently in every class). The culminating moment of the story is the boys' sex scene. The boys have sex not because they are gay but because this is the only sex available to them. Yet for those living in the world of the strictly controlled binary gender, such sex is a source of shame, which has to be redeemed by cruel homophobia. Homophobia, in such a world, exorcises the guilt of boys having sex with each other. Louis implies that this behavior could become a normalized sexual activity among young people if it weren't for the necessity to deny, ridicule and renounce it, as dictated by the misogynous masculinity pattern.

A. Z.: Neither of these books – *Returning to Reims* or *The end of Eddy* – spares family. Family is not sacrosanct for their authors at all. Eribon starts his tale by saying that he never loved his father. He did not want to attend his funeral. He didn't feel like meeting his brothers after all these years. The fact that he was not in touch with his family was a source of sheer relief.

K. K.: In this respect, both authors follow Bourdieu, who wrote about family as being a series of strategies. Nevertheless, I believe that Eribon exaggerates when he compares his path to that of James Baldwin. Baldwin left America for Paris when he was 24. Five years later, he published *Go tell it on the mountain* (Baldwin, 1981), in which he worked through his relationship with his father, the black ghetto and America, and in which he forgave his father by analyzing the operation of race. Thus, Baldwin never sought the distance Eribon sought, and he never "left" his Reims the way Eribon did. He left America and spent the following five years writing about it.

The second crucial difference between Baldwin and Eribon concerns the strategy of hate that both experienced (practiced?), although in different ways. Baldwin identified his hatred for his father and dealt with it in terms of psychology and sociology. This is what Eribon quotes from Baldwin: "I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be

forced to deal with pain” (Eribon, 2013, p. 34). Reading Eribon, I’m not sure if he knows what pain we escape by stubbornly clinging to hate. If he does, he doesn’t address it directly. Baldwin, in turn, names this pain, and attributes it to what most of us understand as being *unworthy* of love. The construction goes like this: “I hate my father because if I didn’t, I would have to face the fact that he didn’t love me; and if he didn’t love me – he, the person who was supposed to love me; he for whom this should be the most natural thing in the world – then it can only mean that I am unlovable.” The strategy of father-hate, Baldwin explained, protects the father from the charge of bad parenting; it displaces the blame, “I, the son, take the blame for what was the parent’s problem.” Consequently, the renunciation of hate as a strategy involves learning to love the self, learning self-worth, self-value, or *amour-de-soi*, to use Rousseau’s term. Note that for Baldwin, this was a familial issue, but a family was simply a microcosm of the race issue. The issue of lack of self-worth internalized by people that are formed as irredeemable others of the social structure. Thus, having identified the personal pain, Baldwin goes on to examine it in his profound, genuinely revolutionary, analysis of race and self-creation. Without renouncing race (how would he do that in the context of America?) he comes to understand how American hierarchy formed his father, how it made him become a violent (and horrified) parent because he could not have been otherwise, and how the same hierarchy formed his son. I don’t have to point out that Baldwin doesn’t blame whites for his father’s cruelty. On the contrary, he is the first one to write about what only later Bourdieu named habitus – we’ve referred to it in a number of contexts already – namely the internalized external structures reproduced by means of dispositions and reproduced differently in different positions in the social structure.

Additionally, Baldwin realized that coming to understand his father and himself in relation to violence-related structure was the first, rather than the last, step. Interviewed by Studs Terkel he said:

Well, that winter in Switzerland [...] I was ashamed of where I came from and where I had been. I was ashamed of the life in the Negro church, ashamed of my father, ashamed of the Blues, ashamed of Jazz, and, of course, ashamed of the watermelon:² all these stereotypes that the country inflicts on Negroes [...]. When I say I was trying to *dig back* to the way I myself must have spoken when I was little, I realized [...] I really buried myself beneath a whole fantastic image of myself which wasn’t mine, but white people’s image of me (Baldwin & Terkel, 2014, p. 4).

And he continues: “you have to *decide* who you are, and force the world to deal with you, not with its *idea* of you” (Baldwin & Terkel, 2014, p. 7, emphasis his).³ Baldwin is not a sociologist but a writer; he is not restricted by academic discipline. He examines sociological issues in personal, private and moral terms.

2 The watermelon as a racist trope existed in Europe and later in America. Poor dark Arab or Italian vendors, and later African Americans, were said to like watermelon more than other fruit. In time, the watermelon became a racist symbol denoting their supposed infantilism, dirtiness (it is hard to eat watermelon cleanly) and laziness (it is easy to cultivate the fruit). For a fuller explanation, see Black, 2014.

3 James Baldwin and Studs Terkel, *Almanac*, WTFM, Chicago, 29 December, 1961 (Baldwin & Terkel, 2014).

I'd like to add that Eribon exaggerates when he attributes the essence of Baldwin's identity to his alleged escape and return. Baldwin did not run away from race. On the contrary, he fought racial battles all his life. He fled everyday America only for some time, to be able to write about it without fearing he would be beaten up, or worse, by the police when he stepped out to get cigarettes. Being gay was a private affair to him. It is a subject of his two novels, but he never tackled it in his essays. In one of the last interviews, which he gave to Richard Goldstein, a gay activist, Baldwin responded to a question about being gay by saying:

The sexual question comes after the question of color; it's simply one more aspect of the danger in which all black people live. I think gay white people feel cheated because they were born, in principle, into a society in which they were supposed to be safe. [...] Their reaction seems to me in direct proportion to the sense of feeling cheated of the advantages which accrue to white people in a white society. There's an element, it has always seemed to me, of bewilderment and complaint. Now that may sound very harsh, but the gay world as such is no more prepared to accept black people than anywhere else in society. It's a very hermetically sealed world with very unattractive features, including racism (Baldwin & Goldstein, 2014, p. 67).⁴

He goes on:

James Baldwin: But "homosexual" is not a noun. At least not in my book.

Richard Goldstein: What part of speech would it be?

James Baldwin: Perhaps a verb. You see, I can only talk about my life. I loved a few people and they loved me. It had nothing to do with these labels. Of course, the world has all kinds of words for us. But that's the world's problem (Baldwin & Goldstein, 2014, p. 71).

The genius of Baldwin is visible, among other things, in renouncing and analyzing the racial shame imposed by America while managing to avoid applying the emancipation strategy of *pride*, which cuts you off, isolates you in your own group.

Concluding, I find Eribon's analysis of class as class too shallow. I agree with your assessment of its merits, but I miss the analysis of how class habitus is formed in the intersection of race and gender. I believe that if Eribon truly understood how race and gender operated within class, he would be able to understand and forgive his father, and himself. This would enable him to use a different strategy. This is criticism on my part, although I do realize how difficult such an analysis is. In other words, I criticize but understand as well.

A. Z.: Yet there is one sentence about the relations with the father in the book which is spot on, in my opinion: "I regretted the fact that I had allowed the violence of the social world to triumph over me, as it triumphed over him" (Eribon, 2013, p. 244). With this one sentence Eribon reflects the power of the social world which determines family rela-

⁴ James Baldwin and Richard Goldstein. "Go the Way your Blood Beats." *The Village Voice*, 26 June, 1984 (Baldwin & Goldstein, 2014).

tions, in clear repudiation of the romantic myth of the love for your kin that overcomes every obstacle.

K. K.: Yes, you're right! I got carried away in my criticism. I mean, I stick to my opinion that Eribon exaggerates his comparison to Baldwin and that his analysis of class could be deeper, but this sentence acknowledges the power of social conditioning which forms our relations, including those most intimate ones.

My interpretation of *Returning to Reims* is highly personal, as was yours. First, it evokes the idea of the split habitus – existing in two worlds simultaneously while not fully existing in either of them. This liminal space makes one illegible, unrecognized. I interpret the title of Eribon's book against his intentions to some extent. I take it to mean that return is impossible and that there is nothing wrong with it. Leaving does not have to mean fleeing, but choosing freedom. Eribon explains his past to himself, but this does not constitute a return. I read this book through my own experience of emigration and its dramatic departure from one place and arrival in another, new place – an exit and entrance that have made me into a different person, a person who is illegible to many with whom I live now, or those whom I left behind. On the positive side, this enables me to understand Poland from the inside and outside. I am happy about it, even though it makes my life more difficult. I don't want to "return," even if it were possible in the first place.

A. Z.: I agree with you that there is no return, but in my opinion, the title *Returning to Reims* is ironic. There is a distance between Eribon and his former world, a distance produced by the descriptive sociological toolkit, among other things. This distance is both good and bad: it saves and separates him at the same time. Eribon still hates his father but he analyzes this hatred at the same time. This simultaneousness of being both here and there, of descending from the working class but no longer being its member, is an ambivalence that is essential to the entire book. Eribon has already reached "there," but he will never be "there" to the same extent as those who were born "there." He will never be more than someone who advanced himself in society.

K. K.: There is this incredible scene towards the end of *The end of Eddy*: the family of the main character buy him a new jacket because he is going to a boarding school. Soon after arriving, he throws this jacket away because it makes him look "lame." Eddy knows that his parents had been saving for a long time to buy the jacket, and he's cold without it, but that's better than wearing something that marks him. Patti Smith describes a similar situation (Smith, 2010). When she leaves for New York, her mum gives her a waitress uniform. On arrival, after she tries waitressing for one day, even though she is homeless and starving, she packs it up in a nice bag and leaves it at a restroom. I remember my Polish wool jacket. I brought it to Canada, thinking that it would make everybody's jaw drop. I discarded it two days later because it looked coarse. It shouted that I was from "elsewhere." Throwing the clothes away was like shedding a skin. And yet, it is a process that has to be repeated and it continues to hurt, as you and Eribon have rightly noted.

A. Z.: The theme of getting rid of clothes is also present in *Tańczący jastrzęb*. The main character, who lives in a dorm, sneaks out to the rubbish container before dawn to throw away a bundle of his village clothes. He finds quite a few of similar bundles already in the container. I dream of an exhibition showing all these discarded clothes.

Translated by Kate Korycki and Katarzyna Matschi

References

- Baldwin, J.** (1981). *Go tell it on a mountain*. New York, NY: Dell Publishing.
- Baldwin, J., & Goldstein, R.** (2014). Go the way your blood beats: An interview with James Baldwin. In J. Baldwin, *The last interview and other conversations* (pp. 55–74). Brooklyn, NY: Melville House.
- Baldwin, J., & Terkel, S.** (2014). An interview with James Baldwin. In J. Baldwin, *The last interview and other conversations* (pp. 3–34). Brooklyn, NY: Melville House.
- Black, W. R.** (2014, December 8). How watermelons became a racist trope. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved October 12, 2018, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/how-watermelons-became-a-racist-trope/383529/>
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D.** (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Eribon, D.** (2013). *Returning to Reims* (M. Lucey, Trans.). Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).
- Kawalec, J.** (1964). *Tańczący jastrzęb*. Warszawa: PIW.
- Leder, A.** (2014). *Prześliona rewolucja: Ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.
- Louis, É.** (2017). *The end of Eddy* (M. Lucey & H. Secker, Trans.). London: Vintage.
- Smith, P.** (2010). *Just kids*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Smith, P.** (2012). *Poniedziałkowe dzieci* (R. Sudół, Tłum.). Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne.

**Wyjście z „szafy” homoseksualnej, wejście do „szafy” klasowej.
O polityce tożsamości i socjologii refleksyjnej Didiera Eribona i Éduarda Louisa.
Rozmawiają Kate Korycki i Anna Zawadzka**

Abstrakt: Punktem wyjścia rozmowy jest pogłębiona analiza dwóch autobiograficznych książek: *Returning to Reims* Didiera Eribona (2013) oraz *The end of Eddy* Éduarda Louisa (2017). Dyskusja dotyczy m.in. krzyżowego wykluczenia: ze względu na nieheteronormatywność i ze względu na pochodzenie klasowe. Czy emancypacja gejowska istnieje tylko w obrębie klas dominujących? Jaką cenę za tę emancypację płać jednostki, których korzenie tkwią w klasach zdominowanych? Czy możliwe jest jednoczesne przepracowanie stygmatu gejowskości i stygmatu klasy robotniczej? Dlaczego problematyka heteronormatywności doczekała się bogatej reprezentacji w literaturze i sztuce, tymczasem problematyka klasizmu wydaje się wciąż tematem tabu, zarówno w twórczości autobiograficznej, jak i akademickiej?

Słowa kluczowe: Didier Eribon; Éduard Louis; Pierre Bourdieu; klasa; gejowskość; awans społeczny



Article No. 1746

DOI: 10.11649/slh.1746

Citation: Korycki, K., & Zawadzka, A. (2018). Out of gay, and into class closet: On politics of identity and reflexive sociology in Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis: Conversation between Kate Korycki and Anna Zawadzka. *Studia Litteraria et Historica*, 2018(7). <https://doi.org/10.11649/slh.1746>

This is the translation of the original article entitled *Wyjście z „szafy” homoseksualnej, wejście do „szafy” klasowej. O polityce tożsamości i socjologii refleksyjnej Didiera Eribona i Éduarda Louisa. Rozmawiają Kate Korycki i Anna Zawadzka*, which was published in *Studia Litteraria et Historica*, 2018(7).

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 PL License, which permits redistribution, commercial and non-commercial, provided that the article is properly cited. www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/pl

© The Author(s) 2018

© To English translation Kate Korycki & Katarzyna Matschi 2018

Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw.

Authors: Kate Korycki, Queen's University, Kingston (Ontario), Canada, & Anna Zawadzka, Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw.

Correspondence: k.korycki@queensu.ca, anna.zawadzka@poczta.fm

The work has been prepared at the authors' own expense.

Both authors participated equally in the concept of the study and drafting of the manuscript.

Competing interests: Both authors have declared they have no competing interests.