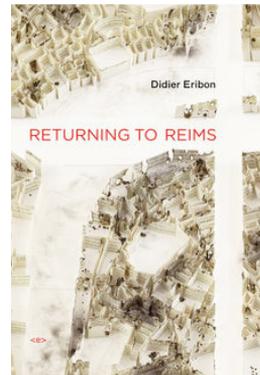


## Eribon, Didier (2013). *Returning to Reims*. Los Angeles: MIT Press, 256 pp. ISBN 978-1-58435-123-8.

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Eribon's work *Returning to Reims* is an attempt at social self-analysis, that is, an analysis of one's own biographical trajectory in relation to the social factors that have influenced it. The work follows Bourdieu's steps in his own social self-analysis in *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* (2008), although Eribon takes a more direct step towards an analysis of his own experiences of his life trajectory. Whereas Bourdieu (ibid.) limits himself to a somehow depersonalised account of his trajectory, more or less strictly addressing the position-takings, objective structures and rules of the specific field games that have shaped this trajectory, thus remaining – paradoxically – somehow “absent” from his own self-analysis, Eribon takes into account the experiential and affective side of rupturing one's habitus by wilfully distancing oneself from the primary social environment and its di-visions of the social world, thus entering a process of resubjectivation, as also elaborated in Eribon's earlier work (2004). As such, *Returning to Reims* represents an important elaboration of Bourdieu's self-analysis, as it steers it in a more phenomenological direction with its focus on the level of micro-experiences in local life-worlds that are themselves shaped, but not determined, by objective structures. In this sense, it also represents a work that can serve as a response to criticisms levelled at Bourdieu regarding his presumed determinism. Eribon's self-analysis, his life trajectory, shows how it is possible to escape from one's social destiny, from the fate, the social verdict one is given based on one's social location: “Verdicts have been handed down before it's even possible to be aware of it” (2008, p. 53).

In his self-analysis, Eribon mainly focuses on social categorisation of class: his working class membership and his attempts to escape it, to re-shape himself by re-shaping his schemes of classification, including taste, as well as the bodily hexis that orient him, that direct him towards certain social practices and accomplishments that are constitutive of one's own space of possibilities, of



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that which seems reachable, probable and at the same time desirable, and that which is limited by being seemingly unrealisable, out of one's reach, that which presents itself as a more improbable object of one's desires and aspirations.

Eribon's analysis of such breakage, of the transformation of that which was inscribed into his body through his specific working class membership, shaping his primary habitus, also points to another important element; namely, how such transformations, escaping from one's primary habitus, can be "triggered", influenced, or at least "experienced" at the level of feeling, by a non-rational, affective, bodily dimension that itself cannot (completely) escape the hold of the social, although it also cannot be reduced to a body as a pure medium of social structures. This dimension can then be a first "sign" of one's disaffection with socially inscribed affective investments, one's disillusion with social *illusio*, felt as the bodily discomfort of not being able to take a doxic attitude towards the world, taking one's path, given by a social verdict, as taken-for-granted: "The surrounding culture offers us those rules both as the only way life can be lived and as an ideal we must strive for" (ibid., 72). As he elaborates, his breakage with the primary social environment was motivated by a specific intersection of class order and sexual order: two orders that, in their interplay, looked almost un-survivable or un-liveable. Eribon felt his gay sexual identity, which already marked his breakage from a doxic heterosexualised trajectory, as being threatened by the incorporated objective structures present in the working class environment, invested in aggressive and homophobic masculinity, thereby uncomfortably motivating his alternative – affective and cognitive – investments that would enable him to escape such an aggressive, at times even hostile, social environment.

Such distancing from one's primary habitus is not inherent in one's disorientation from the socially expected heterosexualised trajectory, nor in its specific intersection with a working class background. As Eribon himself emphasises, the possibility of his re-working and re-shaping was also enabled by the possibility of his alternative re-grounding in and through alternative resources present in the existing heterogeneity of intersubjectivities in his school environment, presenting itself as a condensed plurality of various local life-worlds in one system that otherwise dominantly works to reproduce existing power relations by unequally distributing cultural capital and the possibilities and opportunities for its accumulation: "A war is going on against the underdogs and schools are one of the battlefields" (ibid., 121). But this environment can, by condensed heterogeneity, also and at times function as the possibility of alternative re-subjectivations, if the principle of homophily is successfully transcended, as it was – momentarily but nonetheless crucially – in Eribon's

friendship with one of his schoolmates from the upper class:

*“He not only taught me about all these things, he also taught me to want to know about all of them. He fascinated me, and since I wanted to be like him, I too began talking about Godard, having never seen anything of his, and about Beckett, having never read a word”* (ibid., pp. 170–171).

Eribon’s social self-analysis thus serves as an important contribution to Bourdieusian theorisations by taking up new perspectives grounded in everyday life and its experiential dimension, perspectives that were neglected in Bourdieu’s theoretical framework. These include affect and embodiment, not only in the sense of their submission to objective structures as is mostly characteristic for Bourdieu, but also as a complex and intersectional mechanism of potential distancing from one’s own bodily incorporated structures, as it is evident in Eribon’s case. Thereby, Eribon’s self-analysis through his consideration of the social factors that have influenced his life trajectory, takes an important step towards reconsidering the Bourdieusian theoretical framework in terms of its potential application to addressing not only social reproduction, which was Bourdieu’s primary focus, but also potentialities for social and subjective transformations, and the price that may have to be paid along the way.

The concept of *habitus clivé* or cleft habitus, which remains undertheorised in Bourdieu’s work, is here enriched by the subjective experiential dimension, showing how breaking free from incorporated objective structures and incorporated doxa at times demands breaking free from one’s primary social environment, and even if a social agent manages to distance herself, the primary schemes of classifications, although reconfigured, still remain present in her embodiment: “Whatever you have uprooted yourself from or been uprooted from still endures as an integral part of who or what you are” (ibid., p. 18), creating tensions and discomfort, derived from not being recognised as a legitimate member of either the primary or secondary social environment or class: tensions derived from being a fish *out* of water, from being a class and sexual traitor, a defector. The position of a defector is one in which a social actor needs to re-shape, to re-train, their bodily hexis and re-configure their schemes of (self-)classification that are no longer in harmony with the dominant rules in a specific field. The agent, being a defector, has managed or – better said – is *still* trying to (almost miraculously) escape the hold of a verdict passed by the court of the social world and its doxic, unquestioned hegemonic norms, working through shaping one’s aspirations and desires, motivating individuals to be (affectively) invested in a verdict that is not recognised as such; the verdict is lost in the background of doxa, what remains is a path that is felt and perceived

as available and at the same time desirable, a path that is so clear only because many people have already walked in the same direction. This very “same direction” closes down the view of the extended space of possibilities that are almost unthinkable, or are unthinkable, although still present in one’s absence. Such presence – as evident in Eribon’s work – may be revealed through the specific interplay of the conditions that enable or even force one to question the seemingly unquestionable.

Although Eribon’s self-analysis is primarily an analysis of transcending objective conditions, loosely translated into subjective conditions, which are supposed to keep the agent in her assigned social place, his successful story of entering an academic field that, despite the meritocratic myth that masks itself as an already-realised idea, is strongly resistant towards such processes of deserting one’s social class, is clearly not set as a lived example of an individual miracle of subjective capacities and skills. Rather, it is a sociological analysis that uncovers objective structures functioning to reproduce relations of position-takings and fields, that is, functioning to preserve existing asymmetrical power relations and the unequal distribution of opportunities and resources, as well as the unequal distribution of possibilities for various modes of living, whereas certain modes of living (e.g., being gay in a working class background) appear to be less possible, less desirable and thus more punishable. Thereby, straying from the unquestionable or doxic, from that which is assumed and expected based on one’s social location, comes at its price: Eribon’s work *Returning to Reims* gives an intimate and precise insight into how *personal* is always already *structural*.

As such, it serves as an important work in numerous perspectives. It enables us a sociologically important insight into how relationality between objective structures and everyday life on a subjective level is played out not through a relation of causal determination, but through a dynamic in which there is a space for creative innovation that, at the same time, requires creative destruction of the unquestionable. Through intimate descriptions of affective and experiential dimensions, it enables a re-working and re-configuring of Bourdieu’s theoretical framework, opening it up in a new possible direction of thinking social transformations and the importance of recognising the heterogeneity of intersubjectivities not only through their conformist character, but also through their potential functioning as supportive systems in the processes of building alternative di-visions that become more tangible, more in-reach when one recognises the plurality of local life-worlds, their intermeshing character, and the potentialities of various modes of living beyond the Bourdieusian principle of homophily.

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