Review of the Books:

Eribon, Didier. 2013. Returning to Reims, Los Angeles/CA, Semiotext(e).
Louis, Édouard. 2017. The End of Eddy. London, Harvill Secker.

Eribon, Didier. 2009. Retour à Reims. Une théorie du sujet, Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard.
Louis, Édouard. 2014. En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule, Paris, Éditions du Seuil.

Eribon, Didier. 2016. Rückkehr nach Reims. Berlin, Suhrkamp Verlag.
Louis, Édouard. 2016. Das Ende von Eddy, Frankfurt am Main, S. Fischer Verlag.

The two novels "Returning to Reims" by Didier Eribon and "The End of Eddy" by Édouard Louis have contributed to the creation of a new literary genre. As both books are autobiographical novels, they tell of the authors' personal stories about their teenage years spent in two provincial communes in France and their coming-of-age experiences as gay men in relatively poor, working-class households. As children, they are exposed to violence at home and at school – a fact which the authors thoroughly describe and then explain in terms of a general theory on the social and political behaviour of the working-class in contemporary France. While Louis' book leans towards narration, only occasionally reflecting the events in a more general fashion, Eribon tells his story with more direct reference to sociological theory. Being a professor of sociology at the *Université de Picardie Jules Verne* in *Amiens*, and having gained experience as a journalist and author, particularly known for a biography on Michel Foucault and his book "Insult and the Making of the Gay Self", Eribon is arguably more successful in connecting his personal story to theoretical debates on class behaviour and class distinctions. Nevertheless, both novels deal with generalized prejudice and its causes by following Bourdieu's theory on *La Distinction*. With this theory, Bourdieu develops the idea that personal ambition for educational advancement as well as numerous other customs and tastes, be it in music, clothing or design, are determined by the preferences of the social class in which children are brought up. Illustrating this, Louis says: "At my

parents' house we didn't have dinner; we ate…the verb we used was *bouffer, chow down*…" (Louis, p. 88).

Both books thus begin with an introspection of family life as a representation of class related prejudice and negligence. These attitudes lead to painful experiences of humiliation for the two boys, which is the reason why they do not view their homosexuality as a meaningful part of their own identity, but primarily as a category of difference. After unavailing attempts to adapt to the norms of their milieu and to fit in ("I thought it would be better if I seemed like a happy kid", Louis, p. 25), they find themselves in a process of alienation from the world in which they grow up. The way they are treated by others is a representation of a more general prejudice common among many people living in the communities where they come from: racism is as widespread as homophobia and misogyny.

Both authors withdraw from the world in which they were raised. It enables them to chronicle their life circumstances, the hostile atmosphere and even the most violent events at school, with an astonishing analytical clarity, as if they were telling the story of their own life from a bird's eye perspective. This vantage point may be familiar among LGBT people generally, as many of them are forced to question the norms which helped forge their parents' relationships, this compact between husbands and wives full of implicit agreements which later on becomes a social reality for their children as well. Members of the LGBT community need to escape from this social reality of their parents to some extent, and the coming-out process by definition involves a deep-seated questioning of the normative principles gained in childhood.

Therefore, despite the personal and private perspective these books provide, they must ultimately be treated as political books revealing a double layer of discrimination. At first glance, the novels aim to put homophobic violence, to which the protagonists are frequently subjected to, in the spotlight. Throughout the unfolding

events though, it becomes apparent that those committing the violence are just as much outsiders to French society as the protagonists were during their childhood. In both novels, the authors thus relate their personal experiences to a broader political context, or as Louis puts it in an interview on "The state of the political novel" with The Paris Review (2016, May 3rd): "When I wrote it down, I understood that even our tears are political. That's why this book is both a novel and an analysis."

Eribon, in particular, vividly describes how his family and community was socially and economically marginalised during the decades in which the French economy experienced a severe process of de-industrialisation. However, while these tectonic shifts in the creation and distribution of wealth emerged, conservative and "socialist" governments alike increasingly ignored the economic consequences for the French working-class. As poverty seemed to become an inevitability, democracy became meaningless to those who were affected. The reader might be very compassionate with the victims of this dreadful development, would it not have reinforced the culture of violence both authors were confronted with. Today, this aggression has transformed into a paradoxical voting behaviour during French presidential elections in which a significant share of French working-class families wholeheartedly support the right-wing populist, anti-immigrant Front National and their party leader, Marine Le Pen. Eribon and Louis were both raised in families in which this political attitude became the norm and in communities in which working-class voters dissociated themselves from left-wing ideologies and socialist party support.

The authors could not be clearer about how much the racist, homophobic and misogynous attitudes common among the influential characters of their childhood finally made them want to live in a different world; Eribon even calls himself a "class traitor" (Eribon, p. 29), a person who denies his roots due to shame. And yet, in these books, they return to these places and navigate through the violent events of their own past, reflecting on how much their own experience is an example of a bigger picture, of the French working-class and society as a whole.

The way these events are told – how microscopic descriptions of schoolyard violence or shaming for being effeminate (Louis) are combined with macroscopic reflections and theoretical distancing from these events à la Bourdieu, turn these novels into texts of exceptional significance for social science. Both books can also be treated as excellent case studies on a milieu that has long been forgotten by French academics and political elites alike. However, no field researcher being unacquainted with working-class life in provincial towns could ever depict such events with this much authenticity, thorough understanding and wild determination to uncover a meaningful explanation.

Louis was raised in Hallencourt situated in the northern Hauts-de-France region while Eribon grew up in Reims, a town in the north-east of France. The similarity of their stories is striking, especially when their age difference is taken into account. While Eribon is sixty-four, Louis turned twenty-five in 2017, writing his book at the age of eighteen. His experience of schoolyard bullying took place at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, a fact that is specifically mentioned at the beginning of the novel so as to make it abundantly clear that these events certainly do not date back to a time when homosexuality was still a criminal offence or the general public in Western Europe considered it a mental illness at best. In fact, his experience is very recent; the narration begins with a naturalistic description of how someone at school spits at him and how he freezes while being humiliated for his appearance ("You are the faggot, right?" [Louis, p. 5]). Yet this scene doesn't stop there. He gets beaten up:

> "The kicks to my stomach knocked the wind out of me and I couldn't catch my breath…They laughed when my face began to turn purple from lack of oxygen…They didn't understand that it was because I was suffocating that I had tears in my eyes; they thought I was crying. It annoyed them…Insults came one after the other with the blows, and unfailingly I kept silent" (Louis, pp. 7-8).

This story blends into a description of Louis' father's and grandparents' life. The grandfather was a factory worker; a heavy drinker who, when drunk, turned on his wife and beat her up. When he abandoned the family, the grandmother was happy to be freed from his tyranny, even if this meant raising six children on her own. Interestingly, the characterization of Louis' own father starts with a depiction of events which took place when the father was still a child himself, thus emphasizing the mechanism of social reproduction going on in the family. Louis' father had to watch the violent behaviour of his own father and "…stored up his hate in silence" (Louis, p. 11). Much like Louis learned to stay silent in the school hallway, his father likewise kept silent when he himself became a victim of family violence. I'm sure I'm not alone in being reminded here of one of the LGBT Act Up Group's most popular political posters in the 1980s to raise awareness of the terrible consequences of the AIDS epidemic, which simply read: "Silence = Death". An extra line was added upon this poster's inclusion in an exhibition at the Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York City, namely: "Be Vigilant. Refuse. Resist". Although at the time, the meaning of the campaign motto was that silence meant physical death, it certainly also alluded to the social death which came along with the disease.

In a similar way to AIDS, which largely determined the afflicted person's social status at the time, the social norms among the communities of the authors' childhoods, especially those promoting an image of toxic masculinity, seem to have determined the social status of those growing up in the world portrayed by Louis and Eribon. It comes as no surprise then that Louis places the topic of his father at the forefront of his book, in chapter two ("My father"). An understanding of the widespread norms underlying society's image of masculinity and

male culture are key to grasping the workings of the intolerance and violence in the two biographies: the idea that "real men" are tough, drop out of school as early as they can, look for a job to provide for the family and gain status in the village by winning as many fights as possible with other youngsters. Likewise, women drop out of school to work and to care for their children, their husband and their parents. Again, Louis demonstrates the continuity of this behaviour with a reference to family history:

> "He [his father] had indeed given up on his vocational diploma at the lycée in order to start working in the factory in the village that made articles out of brass, as had his father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather before him" (Louis, p. 13).

Although everything in this milieu appears static, (the social events like the fun fair in the village every September, the choices regarding school and work, the poverty), there are signs of change – even if unorthodox in their nature: for instance, when Louis describes how his father "only" punches the walls of their house, "because it was a point of honour for him never to lift a finger against anyone in his family so as not to be like his own father" (Louis, p. 34). While there seems to be a generally agreed desire for change, no successful strategy is proposed by which it could be achieved. When the father discovers the violent behaviour of Louis' older brother against his sister, and threats against other family members, he finds himself helpless and without the necessary resources to discipline his son. It is as if society's social structure would reproduce violence to such an extent that the parental violence can be rationalized as a necessary tool for the family to establish a minimal discipline among the family members and to protect them from the outside world. This starts with the names the children are given. They are supposed to be cool and reflect the kind of tough behaviour which is expected of them. Édouard Louis' real name is Eddy Bellegueule, hence the book's title – "The End of Eddy" – is a metaphor for a new beginning beyond the norms of the old world of Louis' childhood.

This world has also been torn apart by another fundamental change for which there seems to be no successful coping strategy: unemployment. After many years of work in the factory and carrying heavy weights, the father returns home with back pain due to ruptured discs. He stops working and doesn't return to the work at the factory. The family suffers from economic hardship as attempts to find a new job are in vain and the father increasingly retreats to alcohol. Louis finally escapes from this world by advancing his education; he is admitted to a boarding school, a *lycée* in *Amiens* where his schoolmates have a much more relaxed attitude to him and his homosexuality. The book ends with an epilogue depicting his departure to *Amiens* and a light-hearted line by a schoolmate: "Hey Eddy, as gay as ever?" (Louis, p. 192).

Similar to Louis' novel, Eribon's story begins with a scrutiny of his relationship with his father. His mother tells him on the phone that his father died an hour ago. He comments: "I didn't love him. I never had… The gap that had begun to separate us when I was a teenager had only grown wider with the passage of time, to the point where we were basically strangers" (Eribon, p. 19). Despite this perceived dissociation from his father, his death leads to emotional distress and a consideration of how his father influenced the development of his own life. Eribon concludes that his father had been enormously important, however, he believes only as a "negative social model" basically serving as "…a reference point against which I had performed all the work I undertook as I struggled to create myself" (Eribon, p. 21). Very similar to Louis' depiction of his father he represents a kind of male culture that Eribon wanted to escape from. Thus, he refuses to attend his father's funeral, but visits his mother a day later, finally returning to Reims, the place where he grew up. This gives him the opportunity to remember his childhood family life and to reflect on his decision to leave his hometown.

Eribon moves to Paris at the age of twenty where he encounters a strange dialectic in terms of how he builds his own identity. While he stops being silent about his homosexuality and starts to live as an openly gay man, he begins being silent about his class related origins. As he is used to hiding his true feelings and adapting himself to the expectations of others, his behaviour doesn't really change, he simply starts obeying a different social norm. In both cases the root cause is shame: while he is able to free himself from the shame of being gay, he begins to feel ashamed about the way he was brought up and the social milieu he comes from. One might think that there is something particularly French about this story, after all, there are few places in the world where class related social norms have such a significant impact on the way people behave as in Paris. Despite the French revolutionary tradition, social stratification is upheld by a rigidly closed education system promoting an elite culture which is not much challenged even among the younger generations. Therefore, although it may well be easier to come out of the "class closet" in Madrid than in Paris, this does not narrow the relevance of Eribon's story for social science as it opens an understanding of how social exclusion works in many societies today, especially in contemporary France.

Like Louis' father, Eribon's father was a school drop-out who left school at fourteen and considered it nothing short of a scandal when education was made mandatory until age sixteen. Eribon insightfully observes that the French education system does not stratify by tangible barriers and explicit means of exclusion, but rather by a process of "self-elimination" (Eribon, p.53). People are not actually hindered in getting an education, but they assume that education isn't accessible for them. Therefore, it is difficult from an outside perspective to understand why some people feel trapped in a society which seems to offer so much opportunity. These considerations lay the groundwork for solving the primary puzzle

in this book, namely why it is that French voters coming from a milieu in which it was once common to follow a communist tradition have now turned to support right-wing populism. This is a phenomenon which has spread all over Europe and recently affected Germany, when the right-wing populist *Alternative für Deutschland* gained 12.6 percent of the votes in the 2017 federal election. While many social scientists struggle to make sense of this by analysing voting behaviour, labour markets or education policies, Eribon offers unique insights into the microcosm of families in which the feeling of being excluded from society has been slowly gaining momentum since the 1980s onwards, in his case since François Mitterrand was elected president.

On a theoretical level, he argues that the notion of social class has been eliminated as a basic concept to explain what Habermas termed the latent conflict in late capitalism. By promoting the idea of individual rights and equal opportunity, all sense of class-determined privyleges and disadvantages was lost. Instead, the new paradigm of the socialist party and the conservative party alike became that of the self-empowered individual which is, at least theoretically, free from all class boundaries. Eribon's novel tells us that this idea is flawed. However, the fact that even the left parties support it in modern democracies shows how a gap in political representation has emerged. Those who are still confronting supposedly non-existent class-based disadvantages – those trying to survive on low wage jobs and reduced welfare benefits – no longer have a voice in the public sphere. While such people would previously have found solidarity in working-class movements and left party organizations, today there is no effective form of collective action which would improve societal fairness. As a result, poor people feel ashamed for what they are and how they are judged. Therefore, Eribon explains:

> "Unlike voting communist, a way of voting for the extreme right seems to have been something that needed to be kept secret, even denied in the face of some 'outside' instances of judgement…the former way of voting was a proud affirmation of one's class identity…The latter kind of vote was a silent act in defence of whatever was left of such an identity…" (Eribon, p. 131-132).

These two novels identify the fact that, when silence enters the public sphere, shame is often the most likely cause. Thus, shaming people for being racist, homophobic or misogynous is unlikely to be an effective strategy to deal with their anger as many of the people targeted are already overwhelmed by shame. This cannot be read as an excuse for racism or any other form of violence, but it can be read as a sociological microfoundation for a theory of justice that takes the causes of discrimination as much into account as its consequences. Politically, the ignoring of poverty must be stopped as much as the ignoring of racism and other forms of violence. However, this requires insights into the living conditions of those who discriminate. These novels help us to understand such conditions, which is why they should be read in particular by social scientists and

educators in the field of social science. In fact, the books had such an impact on public debate on prejudice in Germany that the Federal Agency for Civic Education, a public organization promoting civic education for instance by distributing copies at subsidized prices, reprinted Returning to Reims. The copies were sold out in a very short space of time.

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