

# Eribon, Didier (2013) *Returning to Reims*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, CA.

## Review by John Lennon and Magnus Nilsson

In a 1982 interview with Rex Martin, Michael Foucault stated, ‘I don’t feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning.’ While Foucault was speaking about the ability to grow as an intellectual, Didier Eribon’s fascinating philosophical-sociological memoir *Returning to Reims* shows the possible cost of becoming one, especially if one starts out from a different social position than Foucault’s. Whereas Foucault grew up in a wealthy family and went to elite schools, Eribon comes from a family of poor, working-class men and women: maids, factory workers, coal miners, and window washers. Most children from such families stop school at 14 and take on crushing jobs; they, in turn, have their own kids early and often, experiencing a cyclical poverty that settles within their bodies. Many drink too much and suffer from anxiety and depression; they are also often violent and homophobic. This is the world from which Eribon escapes, running to Paris to, as he states, ‘invent’ himself as a gay intellectual while disidentifying from his family and class origins.

In his writings, intellectual study, and lifestyle, Eribon certainly does become a different person; by returning to his hometown Reims – this Cathedral city and center for Champagne production in Northern France, which is also a place where deindustrialization and neoliberal politics is taking its toll on large parts of the population – he confronts a part of himself that he has disowned. While spending a good part of his professional life scrutinizing one aspect of his identity, his homosexuality, he has hitherto avoided analyzing his working-class origins. But, in *Returning to Reims* he asks himself what it means to be working-class. As a philosopher and sociologist who was a zealous Jean-Paul Sartre acolyte before studying (and becoming friends with) Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, his reminiscences are centrally about issues of power, connecting his personal story to a larger milieu of a decades-long French working-class political shift from left-wing identification to association with racist right-wing politics. While growing up, Eribon’s family – like many other class-conscious workers – voted solidly Communist in the elections, but now they vote mostly for far-right candidates. This memoir deals with Eribon’s initial suppression of his family’s roots, uncovering them to see where he has come from and where his country is heading.

Eribon returns to the area of his childhood shortly after the death of his father, a man whom he hated through his whole life (just like Foucault) and severed all communication with after leaving for Paris. When he returns, he is unable to recognize in a photo the ‘tyrant’ who worked in a factory (when employed) from age 14 to 56 and only sees a ‘pathetic figure’ who has been beaten down from age and a system that ‘exploited him shamelessly.’ While his hatred ended with his father’s death, he certainly has no forgiveness for the man. He is more sympathetic towards his mother, and he traces backward, telling the story of his maternal grandmother who abandoned all of her children in an orphanage. Eribon’s mother was therefore unable to finish school (a lifelong regret) and instead married a man whom she did not love, existing within a life of physical and emotional

violence. She, too, worked in a factory when money was tight and her husband faced unemployment. Eribon's three brothers were loutish and violent, and when he was young, he rejected his family's brutishness by desiring a life of the mind, physically and socially apart from the local rural bars and the physical punishment of a factory life. After leaving Reims, Eribon became a journalist who moved easily within the intellectual circles of France before becoming a professor of Sociology and author of a respected biography of Michael Foucault and a groundbreaking sociological tract about 'the gay question,' translated into English as *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*.

In one way, then, *Returning to Reims* is a memoir that underlines the cost of social mobility, which often manifests as individual movement. For Eribon to live the life of the intellectual, he needed to leave his family behind, and, as he states bluntly, 'I was selfish.' However, this insight is a new one; it comes to him only when he revisits his hometown and he begins to question why he had never written specifically about the working class:

Why, when I have written so much about processes of domination, have I never written about forms of domination based on class? . . . Why, when I have had such an intense experience of forms of shame related to class, shame in relation to the milieu in which I grew up, why, when once I had arrived in Paris and started meeting people of such different class backgrounds I would often find myself lying to them about my class origins, or feeling embarrassed when admitting my background in front of them, why had it never occurred to me to take up this problem in a book or article?

The intellectual world is not the only social space in which Eribon has been troubled by his class background. At a young age, he joined a radical Trotskyite organization. However, his relationship to the working class – and especially to his own class background – was marked by a high degree of ambivalence: 'politically, I was on the side of the workers, yet I detested to be part of their world.' Thus, even *within the communist left*, he felt ashamed of his belonging to the working class, which may appear a bit puzzling to those of us who come from countries where communist activists usually wear their (not always *bonâ fide*) proletarian credentials on their sleeves.

By returning and connecting to his own past, Eribon works through his loathing and pinpoints large structural injustices that have led to the working class embracing far-right discourses. He argues that the Left political establishment has abandoned the working class. During the 1980s and 90s, Left politicians argued for individual rights and responsibilities instead of class solidarity, clearing a path for Macron's neo-liberal austerity measures and the National Rally's (formerly National Front) racist rhetoric of blame. By searching through his family's history, Eribon argues that the working class was never a global proletariat whose ties were ideologically fashioned; instead, by voting communist, workers were primarily rejecting their daily lives of suffering. When the Left started blaming them for their own poverty, they began seeking another culprit.

Nevertheless, Eribon also emphasizes the importance of ideology for class formation. When the French Left stopped interpellating (to use Althusser's term) workers as members of the working class, they stopped self-identifying with this class and instead found a new way of organizing and of expressing their world view in the political far right. Eribon's highlighting of this connection between ideological interpellation and class formation means that he is critical of those who think

that class consciousness is a product of class position. On the contrary, he argues that the oppressed possess no ‘spontaneous knowing’ and that the ‘position that any individual occupies within the social world and within the field of labor is not sufficient to determine that person’s ‘class interest’ or their perception of that interest.’ Because he does not believe in ‘spontaneous knowing,’ Eribon discards ‘any sociology or any philosophy focusing on the ‘point of view of the actors’ and the ‘meaning they give to their actions.’ It risks, he argues, ‘simply reproducing a shorthand version of the mystified relation that social agents maintain their own practices and desires, and consequently does nothing more than serve to perpetuate the world as it currently stands—an ideology of justification (for the established order).’

Even though ‘social shame’ is a central concept in his analysis of class-politics, Eribon critiques those theorists who disconnect class from capitalist exploitation and treat class injustice as a fundamentally political or cultural problem. According to Eribon, there is nothing emancipatory in a ‘philosophy of democracy’ ‘that is content simply to celebrate the primary ‘equality’ of each and every person and to rehearse the notion that each individual is endowed with the same ‘competence’ as everyone else.’ He finds fault in this philosophy because ‘it never inquires as to how the results of this ‘competence’ can change directions—for better or worse—on the individual level, or on the level of a social group, according to place and circumstance.’

Eribon’s theoretical understanding of class helps him to avoid making *Returning to Reims* a story of victimhood. Eribon does not romanticize the working class, and by laying bare the brutality that he faced while growing up, he justifies his need to leave his background behind. In this way, his book retells a story that is well-known from older working-class literature, namely how workers need to distance themselves from the milieus in which they have grown up in order to become political militants or intellectuals who can contribute to political class struggle. This story is important still today, as evidenced by the ever-widening genre of working-class memoirs that has gained recent popularity. In the U.S., the perhaps best-known example is J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*. Like *Returning to Reims*, it is frank in its discussion of the way poverty breeds violence, substance abuse, dysfunctional familial relationships and unhealthy mental states. Both works look backward at the authors’ humble rural upbringings from a middle-class professional perspective, and both do not like the view. The difference is that while Vance places the blame for working-class exploitation almost solely on the backs of the workers, Eribon connects their poverty to systems of power – rooted in capitalism – that place a ‘guilty verdict’ on the working class even before they are born.

For example, Eribon is extremely critical of the provincial schooling system that creates working-class alienation, whether it be primary schools that are mere waiting stations until students can legally leave for the factory or local universities that can ‘be nothing more—or barely anything more—than a dead end.’ He directs his angriest prose (and personal take-down) towards the conservative sociologist Raymond Aron, a ‘pompous and tedious professor’ and bourgeois ideologue partly responsible for ‘the hegemony of right-wing forms of thought on French intellectual life’ in the 1980s and 1990s. As he writes, ‘I cannot help but see the infernal machine in the school system, given the way it functions in front of our eyes.’ Unlike Vance, who uses his story as a Republican talking point for his rags-to-riches story of the need for personal responsibility, Eribon shows that if he happens to ‘make it’ and escape the poor working-class, this does not disprove the systematic violence that keeps them situated and powerless. Defending

the working class without fetishizing them, Eribon's understanding of class is both personal and political. In this way, his book reads as a memoir, an academic analysis, and a political tract, with discussions of his father's drunken fistfights interspersed with clear analysis of both Foucauldian theory and the development of French society. The toggling between related genres differs from recent working-class memoirs like Cash Carraway's *Skint Estate* or Stephanie Land's *Maid* that stay solidly within the world of the author. Eribon, instead, is always more interested in looking outward. Because of this view, he has become an inspiration for Edouard Louis, the French memoirist of *The End of Eddy* and *Who Killed My Father?* which details a similar narrative of growing up as a gay youth within a provincial working-class environment and who has stated that he is indebted to Eribon and *Returning to Reims*, which was first published in France in 2009, for giving him the freedom to tell his story.

Eribon left Reims so he could be an intellectual and live the life of the mind. When he returns to Reims, he refuses to give that up. As previously stated, Foucault argues that he writes so he can become someone else. Eribon did become someone else, but he shows that his previous self directly influenced who he became. *Returning to Reims* is not just an essential addition to the growing field of working-class memoirs but it is also important to the larger field of working-class studies because it insists upon situating the personal within a clear socio-political context. For readers of current U.S. working-class memoirs which tend to be more invested in personal stories of working-class lives without directly connecting to larger historical and political forces that shape these lives (Sarah Smarsh's *Heartland* being a primary exception), reading *Returning to Reims* shows the potential of the working-class memoir to engage the ways the personal and the political selves are fiercely interrelated. It's an important addition to this field of working-class memoirs and has the potential to shape the larger political discourse of class politics.

### Reviewer Bios

We wish to acknowledge equal work in our review and the order of names is alphabetical.

**John Lennon** is an associate professor of English and the Director of Graduate Studies at the University of South Florida. With Magnus, he co-edited the collection *Working-Class Literature(s): Historical and International Perspectives*. A second volume from Stockholm University Press will be forthcoming in 2020. His book *Boxcar Politics: The Hobo in Culture and Literature 1869-1956* (2014) explored the working-class politics of hopping trains. His current book project, *Conflict Graffiti: From Revolution to Gentrification, the Politics of Writing on Walls*, examines graffiti as an evolving language of protest that is rooted in the specific material culture of a particular area but is read, interpreted and remixed by a global audience.

**Magnus Nilsson** is professor of comparative literature and pro dean at the Faculty of Culture and Society, Malmö University (Sweden). Working-class literature across media and languages is his main research interest. His English-language publications include the monograph *Literature and Class: Aesthetical-Political Strategies in Modern Swedish Working-Class Literature* (2014), the book chapter 'No Class? Class and Class Politics in British Heavy Metal' (2009), and the journal article 'Working-Class Comics? Proletarian Self-Reflexiveness in Mats Källblad's Graphic Novel *Hundra år i samma klass*', 2018.