Enabling Violations: Social Class and Sexual Identity in Didier Eribon's "Returning to Reims"

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Abstract

In this paper we explore what we can learn from Didier Eribon's "Returning to Reims" regarding childhood vulnerability. We argue that the book offers a stimulating perspective on discrimination, humiliation, and injury. Although Eribon is twofold vulnerable due to his class and his sexual identity, his pain and shame does not make him defenceless. It makes him the subject he is: the wound caused by a violent heteronormative order. Therefore, becoming object of violations should not necessarily be conceptualised as the opposite to gaining agency but under certain circumstances can provoke resistance and rebellion. These interpretations are framed by theories of vulnerability mainly drawing on Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as well as some thoughts about the new genre of "autosociobiographies" to which "Returning to Reims" belongs.

Keywords Childhood · Vulnerability · Shame · Subjectivation · Sexual identity · (social) class

"Returning to Reims": Public Discussions and Academic Reflections

Didier Eribon's "Returning to Reims" (2013, henceforth RT) is an extraordinary phenomenon. The book of personal reflections on his own social background is not only a big seller that was recently published in its 18th edition in Germany. It also shaped intellectual debates more than any other in recent years. When the German translation of the book was published in 2016, it was discussed in all major newspapers – from left-wing and liberal to conservative – which all without exception considered Eribon a timely voice of social criticism.

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His book delivers answers to a multitude of recent questions vigorously discussed throughout Europe. Eribon therefore entered the public stage less as a sociologist and representative of Queer Studies and more as a public intellectual capable of answering some of today's most pressing questions. Considering the topics he addresses, it is clear why "Returning to Reims" generated such an overwhelming media response.¹ Eribon was not only recognized as capable of explaining the success of the French *Front National*, but also the success of the German right-wing populists *Alternative für Deutschland*. It seems that he can help to explain the decline of the left and provide insights into the impoverished, homophobic milieu, which he grew up in. Finally, his experience as a *Bildungsaufsteiger* (a climber of the social and educational ladder) enables him to impart a brutally honest view on our educational institutions (Jaquet 2018; Rieger-Ladich/Grabau 2018; Grabau 2020).

It therefore comes as no surprise that hardly anyone is more interesting to the German-language feuilleton than *Didier Eribon* at present. Since the publication of his book, which was also adapted as a play for the theatre, he received an enormous number of interview requests; he regularly participates in panel discussions debating the possibilities of social criticism, for example in the summer of 2018 in Berlin alongside Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser. By using all these opportunities to comment on politics, Eribon attempts to influence and even intervene.

The only thing he does *not* comment on is the topic of childhood vulnerability. Or so it seems. In this paper, we turn to Eribon because we consider his personal reflections on growing up and coming out an important contribution to the discussion about the effects of violence and suffering on children and adolescents. Recounting his childhood and youth while visiting the places of his upbringing, Eribon takes us to the very core of this issue.

In this paper, we argue that "Returning to Reims" is a both emotionally moving and scientifically stimulating account of discrimination, humiliation, and injury. Eribon grew up in a homophobic environment and describes in detail what it means to be a gay adolescent in proletarian, rural France. Again and again, he is painfully confronted with the fact that he does not fit the norm – *that he is different, that he deviates*. Additionally, his sexual shame overlaps with his social shame: Eribon is at least as ashamed of his working-class parents as he is of his sexual desires. However, although these two feelings of shame dominate his youth, they do not lead to complete paralysis: instead, they produce a strong will to build a life less dominated by violence, suffering, and pain.

These "enabling violations" are the reason why we consider "Returning to Reims" as valuable resource for academic debates about childhood vulnerability. Although Eribon from an early age on was repeatedly reminded of his physical and psychological vulnerability this did not make him a defenceless victim.

We will elaborate on this as follows: First, we will frame our reading by a short summary of theories of vulnerability in current social philosophy and gender studies. Since "Returning to Reims" belongs to the very new genre of "autosociobiographies", we will secondly present some considerations about its form and style. After these two framings, we turn to our reading of "Returning to Reims" in which we trace two sources of vulnerability: social class and sexual identity. Finally, we state the theoretical takeaways from our reading by answering the question of what we can learn from Didier Eribon about the complex relations between childhood and vulnerability.

¹ For academic discussions see Linck 2016; Birke 2017; Korycki/Zawadzka 2018; Prager 2018.

Vulnerability in Social Theory and Gender Studies

Vulnerability is often framed as primarily concerning children – despite all the important voices in philosophy pointing out that the human form of life *as such* is highly precarious: We humans are very poorly equipped physically and must compensate for these deficiencies. In comparison to most animals, our sight, hearing and sense of smell are rather lousy. Our physical strength and our ability to adjust to weather conditions are also very modest. We must therefore protect ourselves; we must arrange appropriate precautions. To this end, we invented a world full of things that enable us to survive – including houses and other forms of shelter, but also radiators and thermostats; including hats, scarves and winter coats, but also sunglasses and sun cream. We rely on an established buffer zone between ourselves and the world; according to German philosopher Hans Blumenberg (2006), we are the beings who live *nevertheless*. We are poorly equipped, we are vulnerable – and we are highly inventive in compensating for this fundamental deficiency.

One could even say: We are so successful at compensating for our high vulnerability that we often lose sight of the fact that we depend on someone's care and attention from the very first minute of our lives. We would not have acquired the ability of thinking at all if someone had not cared for our most basic needs at that stage – obtaining a blanket, regulating temperature, providing nutrition, making sure we get enough sleep. We owe our lives to these gestures of a counterpart; we live our lives only because there is *someone else* who takes care of us at first.² And yet this seems to be an unpleasant truth: We suppress this insight and often deny it (Reemtsma 2008). It seems to be an *affront to our self-esteem*; it apparently is painful to realise that we do not owe ourselves to ourselves.³

One of the most important voices in the social theoretical discourse on vulnerability is Judith Butler. In recent years, Butler wrote several important pieces on this topic. Her writing often contains two warnings: against understanding vulnerability as a plain biological fact and against inferring a victim status from vulnerability (also see Sultan and Andresen 2019).

Butler shows no interest in denying the vulnerability of human beings. As physical-bodily beings, we are prone to injury. One can inflict physical pain on us, and one can expose us to mental cruelty. This Butler admits. However, she points out that the multiple relationships of dependence in our lives are not *naturally given* (Butler 1993). Because we are dependent on the attention and recognition of others, we are in a certain sense vulnerable to extortion. It is precisely our openness to the world that makes us vulnerable. In an interview with German sociologists Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa (2011), Butler explains this brilliantly:

“I understand [...] that there is a suspicion that if we refer to something like vulnerability as a somatic dimension of life, we are normalizing or naturalizing a condition that is

² Usually, this necessary counterpart is provided within the family which forms both the biological and social reproduction of society (Müller 2013). This intimate connection of the individual to the family makes Eribon's break with his family, to which we will turn later, even more drastic and parlous.

³ This fundamental dependency on the mercy of others applies to all human beings. Yet women are often seen as more closely connected to vulnerability than men as are children in comparison to adults. Research on men shows why we find it difficult to accept this fundamental vulnerability: Male identity is often linked to independence, sovereignty, and control over one's own body. This male identity is usually acquired in the mode of competition; a “real man”, according to (formerly) Robert (now after transition: Raewyn) Connell (2005), has to prove himself before the eyes of others; he wins in competitions, shows no weakness, and acts as if he is not vulnerable at all. This dominant account of masculinity is important for Eribon but even more so for Édouard Louis to which we will briefly turn later.

historically produced, and that must be challenged through political means. [...] My response is [...] that this debate is mired in a dichotomy that must be rethought. If we understand the body as vulnerable, we understand it always as vulnerable to something [...]. If the body from the start is given over to social norms and modes of power, then we cannot understand the body without understanding its fundamental openness to, and dependence on, social and political modes of existence.” (Butler in Hark and Villa 2011, 203, transl. MRL & KW)

In this quote, Butler employs a relational mode of thought by considering the dependencies in which we live our lives. Furthermore, Butler adds that these dependencies are not a temporary stage, which one can overcome at some point in his or her life. We usually gladly concede dependencies for childhood, but according to Butler we should recognize that they never end. *Dependencies are part of us*; we live our lives not *despite* this fact but *because* of it.

“We understand dependency when we speak about infancy, but I want to suggest that dependency is precisely that we never outgrow, it defines us as social beings, that is, beings whose persistence and survival depends upon social structures - including norm, interpellations, institutional requirements, economic structures [...].” (Butler in Hark and Villa 2011, 203-4, transl. MRL & KW)

In sum, Butler strongly advocates that we should no longer deny or taboo our vulnerability. She argues against regarding vulnerability as an ontological fact, as a fateful doom. Instead, we should see vulnerability as a *political fact*. Although vulnerability is part of the *human condition*, the way in which it is structured and organized is the result of social and political struggles. Speaking about vulnerability therefore always means also speaking about economic resources, political influence, social norms, the struggle for recognition, and the regulation of normality.⁴

This brings us to Butler’s second concern. She not only warns against viewing vulnerability as a pre-political issue, but also challenges our tendencies to infer a victim status from vulnerability. Instead, she proposes a change of perspectives, i.e. that vulnerability does not mark the end of the ability to act or resist, but *the opposite*. It is precisely our vulnerability that makes us sensitive to injustice and discrimination. Knowing that we live our lives in many forms of dependency leads to increased attention to others and willingness to engage in political struggles. Butler explains this as follows:

“The question that becomes important, though, is how we think about modes of agency, resistance, and transformation based on this primary receptivity or vulnerability to a social world we never made. Here, I want to suggest that receptivity and vulnerability are actually *the presuppositions of agency and resistance* and not their opposite. In fact, it is only when we are sufficiently impressed by the injustice of some situation in the world that we are moved to change it.” (Butler in Hark and Villa 2011, 198, transl. MRL & KW)

Thus, Butler argues that vulnerability should no longer be denied; vulnerability does not set children and women apart from adults and men – it affects all people. But this does not make it

⁴ This distinction mirrors the distinction between conceptualising childhood as ontologically different from adulthood – and therefore implying a structural necessity of pedagogy – on the one hand and seeing childhood and pedagogy as socio-political achievement on the other hand (Neumann and Sandermann 2008; Honig 2019). Following Lee’s (2001) and James’ (2009) rejection of the distinction between adults as “human beings” and children as “human becoming” we would argue that there is no difference between the “becoming” – and therefore political – character of human adults and children alike.

a pre-discursive affair. We must therefore examine different *forms* of vulnerability; we must expect vulnerability to be *unequally distributed*: between men and women, between adults and children, between cisgender heterosexuals and LGBTQs as well as between the people living in the Global North and those in the Global South. Therefore, we must expect overlapping political-economic regulations of vulnerability. Accordingly, we need to combine and take into account different forms of vulnerability to get a feeling for the diverse conditions under which people live their vulnerability.

Judith Butler developed this position in her book “Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly” (2015). Here, she argues that the analysis of the regulation of vulnerability can become the point of departure for a critique of power:

“This approach takes vulnerability and invulnerability as political effects, unequally distributed effects of a field of power that acts on and through bodies, these swift inversions shows that vulnerability and invulnerability are not essential features of men or women, but, rather, processes of gender formation, the effects of modes of power that have as one of their aims the productions of gender differences along lines of inequality.” (Butler 2015, 145)

We consider this an important contribution to the recent debate about victims of social power relations. Just a quick reminder: Some representatives of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory – such as Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse – thought of *themselves* as mostly free from the oppressive power structures which were object of their critique. First and foremost, they concerned themselves with the question of how to enlighten *others*: those who had become victims of ideology (Rieger-Ladich 2018). There was a huge gap between the masterminds and those affected: the theorists on the one hand were critical, enlightened and wrote heavy books, the people on the other hand were blinded, manipulated – and hardly able to stand in for their own interests. The assumption was that those poor people did not even know they were being fooled.

This simplistic pattern of thinking can hardly be found today. After sharp critiques – such as those by Luc Boltanski (2011), Jacques Rancière (2012), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) – the debate about the victims of social power structures has changed. Today, we assume that critical intellectuals are equally involved in the power structures; they, too, are “victims” of the social conditions they analyse. Moreover, we believe that subjects have a voice of their own; if the circumstances allow, they can certainly speak for themselves. The subalterns whom Spivak refers to are not inherently silent and speechless; they are so only when the distribution of attention and recognition leads to them not being heard.⁵

Ever since the critical interventions by Boltanski, Rancière, Spivak, and others, the discourse about victims has become much more complex. Today, we – as researchers and intellectuals – are faced with the challenge to avoid using our work to perpetuate the very disempowerment we are criticising. However, even though we know about the dangers of paternalism, this does not protect us from repeating it. It is therefore necessary to develop a critical research practice that considers the victims of social inequalities as knowing what is done to them. They can articulate their own concerns if they are given the opportunity – and if we give them our attention.

⁵ In addition to Spivak’s highly influential essay “Can the Subaltern speak?” (1988), we want to draw attention to her paper “Righting Wrongs”, which appeared in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* in 2004. We took the phrase “enabling violation” from this essay.

Now the context of our reading of Eribon is outlined. All in all, we are not too interested in vulnerability as a feature of the *Conditio Humana*, but instead focus on the *political and social regulation of vulnerability*. Attention to the regulation of vulnerability can require the analysis of power; it can sharpen awareness of *how recognition is regulated, how belonging is created, and how normality is produced*. And this does not just begin in the adult world. What is regarded as “good” and “right” and “reasonable” is already of utmost importance for children. The regulation of discourse, which was at the heart of Michel Foucault’s work (1995), begins early on in life; even the new-born encounters a world that is already organised and regulated in many ways. The gestures of care of which we spoke earlier are indeed vital, but they are never free or innocent. A person is always addressed and brought to life *as* someone.

A New Genre Emerges: Autosociobiographies

Before we turn to Eribon’s “Returning to Reims”, we will briefly outline the context of this book. Although it has sparked an intense debate and it has even been staged as a play recently in New York, the book is not as exceptional as it may appear at first glance. Instead, “Returning to Reims” is the most famous example of a genre that has been emerging in recent years. Didier Eribon is not the only *Bildungsaufsteiger* (educational climber) who remembers and analyses his childhood in a brutally honest fashion. And he is not the only one whose attendance at school entailed experiences of humiliation and shame. Again and again, those who come from families suffering poverty and deprivation and sometimes violence, alcoholism and drug use, are told that they are out of place in secondary schools. They are given to understand that they are not entitled to certain ambitions.

Carlos Spoerhase, a literature theorist, called this new genre “Autosociobiographies” (2017). This term was coined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu when he traced his own social biography in his valedictory lecture at the *Collège de France* in Paris (2008). He turned back to his own childhood and youth to find the roots of his social identity and professional career in the experiences he had had at that time. Sociologically trained and historically informed, he looked back on his family. He tried to understand himself – his insults and injuries, his sensitivities, and his feelings of shame. This interest can be seen in all texts of to this new genre.

There are, however, a variety of ways and styles in which this common interest is expressed. Bourdieu’s lecture was public and in the context of an elite university. Also Eribon’s essay, although mostly written in a personal style, makes use of academic jargon. However, we in turn want to point at four autosociobiographies choosing a different path: two more personal reflections and two novels.

An example of less academic style is J.D. Vance’s “Hillbilly Elegy” (2016), in which he recounts growing up in the American “Rust Belt”. Because his drug-addicted mother was overburdened with his upbringing, his resolute grandmother was the one looking after him. He owes a great deal to her – and yet he never asks her to pick him up from school, because she would be immediately recognized as a typical Hillbilly. The conditions under which Scottish rapper Darren McGarvey grew up in one of Glasgow’s poorest districts are different – yet comparable. He tellingly titled his book about them “Poverty Safari” (2018).

Two books, labelled as novels, are even more literarily elaborated: Annie Emaux recounts her youth in the 1950s and 1960s in “The Years” (2017). There, she describes her experiences at school, recalls the emergence of consumer goods and the triumph of portable radios. She

tells her personal experiences as mostly collective ones: without using the first person singular even once (Rieger-Ladich 2020). Édouard Louis – a close friend of Eribon – tells a more particular story. Like Eribon, he is gay, grew up in the countryside, and in a homophobic, violent environment. His novel “The End of Eddy” (2017) therefore complements “Returning to Reims”.

As much as these books differ in form – being sociological reflections, academic essays, personal reflections, and moving novels – they share a focus on experiences of injury and shame. Their recollections are brutal and painful as they touch on the wounds inflicted by a society dominated by injustice and inequality, by social conflicts and distribution struggles.

The autosociobiography is therefore in some respects the precise antithesis to the traditional autobiography. The autobiography celebrates the individual and suggests that their hero owes himself only to himself. From childhood on, they often suggest, their protagonists felt that they were capable of great accomplishments; early on, they showed an extraordinary talent and did everything in their power to flourish. The autosociobiography does *not* tell *heroic stories*; it reminds us of the web of discourses and constructs, of organizations and institutions within which we grow up; it exposes the *dependencies* in which we live – and it reminds us of our vulnerabilities. We in turn will explore the exemplary potential of one autosociobiography for investigating childhood vulnerability.

Reading Didier Eribon’s “Returning to Reims”

We now turn to Eribon and his book “Returning to Reims” by bringing out first its five narrative strands and second two sources of vulnerability.

Narrative Strands

“Returning to Reims” is not ordered chronologically but consists of several overlapping narrative strands. In a first narrative strand, Eribon describes his childhood and youth: he grew up in the structurally weak North-East of France, on the outskirts of Reims. In his working-class environment, male identity was acquired through physical violence. The school, which his parents only went to for a short period of time, is perceived as an institution that should be left as early as possible. Far away from the classroom, it is important to stand one’s ground in physical confrontations, which are far more important for the village community than academic achievements. Therefore, the extension of compulsory schooling until the age of 16 was experienced as an unwelcome imposition in his family, as interference by the state: “extended studies are for other kinds of people, for ‘people of means,’ and it just happens that those people turn out to be the ones who like going to school” (RT: 51).

These recollections of his childhood and youth are interwoven with memories of school attendance in the second narrative strand. Early on, Eribon experienced the institutions of the educational system as contradicting with his family background. He first meets children who have mastered the bourgeois manners cultivated by the teachers at grammar school. And it is there that he soon feels that he has to decide – between school and his family. These two worlds lay too far apart; they were impossible to reconcile: “There was really no possibility of holding the two worlds together, of belonging in any easy way to both of them” (RT: 166). The result was a split habitus, an ongoing inner conflict. He therefore experienced the educational institutions as highly ambivalent: although he assumed (rightly) that they could

enable him to escape his working-class background and the provincial narrow-mindedness, he paid a high price for it. Education promised a way out of a life full of suppression, coercion, and violence, but it *also* stood for painful experiences of degradation. As a *Bildungsaufsteiger*, he repeatedly felt that he did not belong; he suffered due to the gap between the school culture and the working-class habitus of his parents.

The alienation from his family comprises the third narrative strand. It began during his time at school. Eribon's decision to pursue secondary education was a de facto rejection of his parents, his brothers, his relatives, and his village community. This was a brutal break, which becomes clear on the first pages of the book when Eribon states that he last saw his parents thirty years ago (RT: 23). Only when his father, whom he describes as aggressive, violent, and openly homophobic, dies, does he return to visit his mother. To his horror, he soon finds out that she has become a *Front National* voter – just as his brothers and other relatives. This leads him to reflect on the experience of declassification, the identity of the working class and the nationwide success of the *Front National*. These reflections make up the fourth narrative strand.

Yet some of the most moving passages of the book form the fifth narrative strand. Here, Eribon gives insights into the hardships of a young man discovering that he is attracted to men; in an environment in which “real masculinity” is demonstrated by open contempt for gay men. Eribon describes his fears of being identified as gay; he describes how he approached the gay scene – always in fear of being recognized by colleagues or acquaintances, always on guard against groups of young people hunting for gays in public parks. More than once, he was a victim of physical violence.

Sources of Vulnerability: Social Class and Sexual Identity

We therefore identify *two sources of vulnerability* in Didier Eribon's biography: his class background on the one hand, making him an outsider in the predominately bourgeois school, and his sexual desire on the other hand, making him an outsider in the homophobic environment he lives in. Eribon is thus *foreign in two ways*: in his milieu of origin, he is regarded as an alien body, as a “faggot” because of his sexuality. Meanwhile, his working-class background makes him an outsider at school. Even though the disdain of his bourgeois peers might be conveyed less blatantly than that of his homophobic family, he is still subtly made aware that he does not belong. This *double strangeness* means Eribon endured *two sources of shame* and *two sources of vulnerability*. We will now explain these two sources of vulnerability in more detail.

Eribon's first source of vulnerability, *social shame* is caused by the institutions of the educational system; and by those who belong to the bourgeoisie, the so-called “better circles”. He wants to leave behind the proletarian milieu, which is full of poverty, suffering, and violence. Yet his teachers and classmates painfully remind him that he belongs to the very social class he wishes to escape. According to Eribon, a worker's child feels the class affiliation from head to toe: “The stigmatized identity precedes you, and you step into it, you embody it, you have to deal with it in one way or another” (RT: 198). The class affiliation is a stigma. It becomes a source of continued shame for him at school because he has not yet mastered the bourgeois codes – because he does not know the canon, because he does not have the appropriate manners. Even when he had successfully finished school, when he had left Reims and gone to Paris to continue his studies, his past caught up with him: Eribon tried to wipe out everything that reminded him of his social background and could expose him as

Bildungsaufsteiger: from clothing and eating habits to gestures and language. The language in France still is brutally telling and locates the speaker precisely within the class structure.

"It was also necessary to relearn how to talk, to eliminate incorrect pronunciations and turns of phrase along with regional usages [...], to correct both my North-Eastern accent and my working class accent, to learn a more sophisticated vocabulary, to make use of more suitable grammatical constructions, in short, to keep both my language and my delivery of it under constant surveillance." (RT: 106)

Eribon constantly monitors himself – always in fear of violating fine etiquette, always in fear of betraying himself as a social climber and of being regarded as an “intruder” at university as he was at school.

This inner turmoil is the destiny of many *Bildungsaufsteiger*. Social advancement and acceptance into the bourgeoisie requires the complete rejection of the habits and values of the working class – and thus the betrayal of one’s own family. Eribon suffers from this dilemma and sees no possibility of resolving it:

“But at the same time part of me would be cursing my family for being what it was: ‘What bad luck to have been born into those circumstances,’ I kept repeating myself. I would alternate back and forth between these two positions, first blaming myself, then blaming them. (But whose fault was it really? And what was their fault?) I was torn, ill at ease with myself. My political convictions didn’t mesh with my attempt to fit in to the bourgeois world [...]. Politically, I was on the side of the workers, yet I detested being tied to their world.” (RT: 74)

He desperately strives to be accepted into the “better circles” – and yet feels that he will never achieve the casualness and sovereignty of those whose families have already belonged to the upper middle and higher classes for generations. He adores the bourgeois circles, he does everything he can to be accepted there – yet at the same time he hates their arrogance:

“On so many occasions throughout the rest of my life as a ‘cultured’ individual, I’ve had the chance to observe, while visiting an exhibition or attending a concert or an opera performance, to what an extent people who take part in ‘high’ cultural practices seem to gain a sense of self-satisfaction from their participation in these activities, a feeling of superiority that can be read in the discreet smile that never leaves their lips. [...] I was always intimidated by all of this, yet I went on trying to resemble these people, to act as if I was born into the same world they were, to appear as relaxed as they were in aesthetic situations.” (RT: 237)

What Eribon describes here so vividly is symbolic violence: the striving to belonging to a social milieu whose members have had completely different prerequisites makes him vulnerable. He enters a competition he cannot win. And this further increases his vulnerability: he strives for recognition from those who have grown up in a world of education and culture. He does not possess their intimate familiarity with art, music, and literature, nor their refined manners. And that makes him sensitive to even the smallest gestures of contempt and condescension. After a radical break with his milieu of origin and his family, he seeks access to a symbolic universe organized by rules that are never explicitly stated. In the bourgeoisie, much goes without saying – but with tact, discretion, and understatement. On this parquet floor, one slips very easily precisely because much remains unspoken. Social climbers slip – and therefore can be

recognized at first glance by those who have internalised the tacit rules for generations. All this is exactly what Eribon experiences.

The second source of vulnerability is Eribon's *sexual desire*. We have already mentioned that he grew up in an environment full of contempt for all homosexual practices. This contempt knows many forms: ranging from allusions and jokes to open ridicule and threats of violence. And often it does not stop at being a *threat* of violence: gays and lesbians who come out must actually expect becoming victims of physical violence – not only in the countryside and in the suburbs, but also in bigger cities.

Perhaps the most hurtful insults are the ones of which he becomes a victim early on. Eribon has known the countless swear words for homosexuals from childhood. And as a teenager, he joins others in calling a boy a “faggot”. He participates in the bullying, even though he at this point already suspects that he will soon become a victim himself. Shortly thereafter, it happens: he becomes the target of insults and seemingly incessant humiliations. In the last part of his book, he astutely describes how much this hurts him:

“To become gay is to become a target, and to realize that you already potentially were such a target even before you had actually entirely become one, before you were ever fully aware of what this word that you had heard hundreds of times might mean, even if you had always known how powerfully insulting it was. The stigmatized identity precedes you, and you step into it, you embody it, you have to deal with it in one way or another. They may be numerous and diverse, all the different ways it is dealt with, but they are all marked by the constitutive power of the verbalized insult itself.” (RT: 198)

Eribon is thus *addressed* in a degrading way; he is insulted and bullied. And he knows that those very insults are shaping his identity: He wants to become a gay man with all his might; he wants to become exactly what the others mock him for: “it turns out that even as you are trying to persuade yourself that there is something you really should avoid becoming—a ‘faggot’—, you are at the same time, and quite intensely, trying to figure out how to become precisely that” (RT: 205). Eribon has chosen as his way of life what is considered utterly despicable by those who oppress him. He therefore cannot escape the abuse – and he must expect to become a target of mockery and ridicule at all times.

There is therefore no neutrality for him; unlike those who conform to the norm – white, male, and heterosexual – he has to accept these slurs and insults as part of his life. In a certain sense, he is even brought to life, as it were, by these cruel choirs:

„Being-in-the-world becomes actualized as a kind of being-insulted, being rendered inferior by the social gaze and by social forms of speech. The object of an inferiorizing act of naming is produced as a subject subjugated by the structure of the sexual order [...]. This subject's entire conscious mind, as well as his or her unconscious [...] finds itself marked and shaped by what has turned out to be the very process through which a sense of self and a personal identity are constructed.“ (RT: 204)

Didier Eribon therefore owes his identity to a performative act of degradation. Thus, one can also read “Returning to Reims” from the point of view of Louis Althusser. In his works on criticism of ideology, the French Marxist famously described and interpreted the following scene of interpellation that has been intensively discussed ever since: When a person crosses a street, a policeman calls out for her: “Hey, you there!” The person obviously feels addressed, turns to the policeman – and confirms by this turn that she feels addressed. She is, as it were,

recognizable. By hearing the call of the policeman and reacting accordingly, she confirms his way of addressing her.

“Returning to Reims” consists of many of such scenes of addressing. It becomes clear that Eribon’s injuries do not remain external: He is invoked *as* someone who should be scorned; as an object of hateful insults, he is constituted as subject. Submission and subjectivation overlap here, just like the Latin root of subject – sub-iectum – indicates. Eribon therefore does not have an undamaged identity that could be protected from injury. *He himself is the wound* caused by a violent heteronormative order.

The *gay subject* here resembles the *colonial subject*: for Eribon, vulnerability is not an abstract fact. The recurring threat characterizes him in an elementary way: “This curse [...] produces feelings of insecurity and vulnerability in the deepest regions of the self, and is the source of a diffuse kind of anxiety that characterizes gay subjectivity.” (RT: 218).

Of course, the violence, which affects Eribon’s constitution as subject, is not exclusively verbal; *physical violence* against the gay community is also prevalent. Physical attacks by homophobic youths and men are quite common to him. For this reason, meeting places in public are not only linked to romantic memories but also always marked by violence.

“Gay spaces are haunted by the history of this violence: every path, every park bench, every nook that is sheltered from prying eyes carries somewhere within it all of this past, and also this present, and probably even the future of such attacks, along with the physical wounds they have left, are leaving, and will continue to leave behind (not to mention all the psychological wounds). And yet these space endure: despite everything, despite all one’s own painful experiences or all the painful experiences of others that someone may have witnessed or heard tell of, despite all the fear, people keep coming back to these spaces of freedom. And so they go on existing, because, despite all the danger, people choose to keep them in existence.” (RT: 215)

These accounts are harrowing. However, Eribon’s story shows that contrary to what one might expect, these experiences of shame – social and sexual – do not lead to paralysis. Eribon considers himself to be highly vulnerable, but the experiences in his parental home, in the village community, and at school also awaken a relentless will to leave all of this behind. This becomes clear in an incident which he calls a “primal scene” in his book: when his father, who had not come home for several days, drunkenly returns, he grabs all the bottles within his reach and hurls them against the wall. Didier and his brother cling to each other, both crying and full of fear. He grabs his mother who tries to calm the raging father down. Eribon cannot leave the memory of this scene behind: it “burned me with disgust [...] against misery, a *rebellion against social destiny*” (RT: 90). Eribon’s impulse not to accept this universe of brutality and violence already grew in his childhood; he wants to rebel, yearns for a different life. He realises early on that he will never be able to live freely in the place of his upbringing. He knows very well that for this purpose he must leave his parental home, that he must leave the village community and his local circle of friends.

Conclusion and Outlook

We want to conclude by answering the question of what we can learn from Eribon’s “Returning to Reims” about the relationship between childhood and vulnerability.

Eribon impressively describes that he is twofold alienated: both in educational institutions and his family and community environment. *At school*, he becomes an outsider because he does not master the bourgeois codes and carries the stigma of his proletarian origin. In the *family* and the *village community*, he becomes an outsider when people realise that his sexual desire does not adhere to the prevalent norm. As a gay man, he for them is not a real man, he deviates – and soon becomes a victim of malice, mockery, and hatred. He is addressed in a derogatory way – and thus *subjectified as a gay man*. Vulnerability here is not an abstract *conditio humana*. Eribon cannot protect himself from injury because he owes his identity precisely to those injuries and degradations (also see Eribon 2004, 2017). He himself *is* the disgrace; *he is the wound* inflicted upon him.

This is of particular importance if one takes the periods of life into account. As child and young man, Eribon is forced to live his stigmatized identity; there are *no alternatives*; there is no way to escape his homophobic environment.⁶ Only after his childhood, when moving to Paris for his studies, he can begin exploring different ways of living a life: Here, the gay subculture becomes his salvation –in several respects: unlike in the circles of the bourgeoisie, he can hope here for *sympathy, support, and solidarity*. Not only he can, at least to a certain degree, live his life as a gay man, in the Parisian gay community he also finds a mixture of the social classes. It is here that Eribon will later make those contacts that will enable him to work as a journalist and then pursue an academic career. It is here that he meets intellectuals who introduce him to Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, whose close collaborator he later becomes.

The vulnerability of children can also be seen in the novel “The End of Eddy” mentioned above (Louis 2017). Édouard Louis, a close friend of Eribon, describes in his moving debut that he was observed sceptically by his family as well as by his classmates at a very early age. He did not move like a “real boy” should; he accompanied his speech with too distinct hand gestures; he moved his hips in a way that seemed reserved for girls. He was suspicious to his surroundings even as a child. And soon afterwards, he was identified as a gay man and defamed. His novel vividly describes the insults with which he was confronted as a child. And as with Didier Eribon, Édouard Louis had no way out as a child and teenager. Just as Eribon, he later broke with his family, left the Picardy where he grew up, and went to Paris to live a life less dominated by violence, hatred, and injury.

And yet, violence catches up with him even in the gay scene. One Christmas night, he takes an unknown man home for a one-night stand. At first, he has consensual sex with him – but then, when there is a disagreement, he is raped by him. This is the topic of his second novel, “History of Violence” (2018). This is anything but a happy ending, but we will finish at this point.

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⁶ This dependency makes it even more important to take sources of vulnerability into account in childhood studies. This is not trivial: As Trawick-Smith (2019) points out, child development research up until the 1990s was almost exclusively on white middle-class children.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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