

From One Class to the Next

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How should we analyse individual upward social mobility? How should we understand the move from one social class to another? Chantal Jaquet has created concepts that open up a new way for us to study the issue of social reproduction.

Reviewed: Chantal Jaquet, *Les Transclasses, ou la non-reproduction*, Paris, Puf, 2014, 238 p., €19.

Les Transclasses, a book by philosopher Chantal Jaquet which arose out of a seminar organised at the Université Paris-1 (Panthéon-Sorbonne University) sets out to explore individual upward social trajectories¹. More generally, this work seeks to understand exceptions, in order to complement rather than disqualify the theory of social reproduction – in a dialogue with Pierre Bourdieu that is summed up by the following phrase: “analysing distinction within distinction” (p. 5).

In order to achieve this, Chantal Jaquet undertakes to develop a theory of social non-reproduction, by establishing the concepts of transclass and complexion, and by criticising those of identity and causality.

This is an ambitious project. In limpid prose, the book takes an original approach to classic questions and sets the social sciences a triple challenge: one that is at once theoretical, practical and political. In this respect, the fact that the book’s critical apparatus is fragmentary does not diminish the wealth of the numerous lines of enquiry it opens up. These could very usefully be explored in more depth in future works.

A Theoretical Challenge for the Social Sciences

On the theoretical level, Chantal Jaquet’s book raises the issue of how far a concept, which is necessarily general, can help us to understand something that is singular. In fact, Chantal Jaquet’s analysis is anchored in her proposal of two new concepts. The first one – that of “transclass” – attempts to define the experience of individuals from lower class backgrounds who, over the course of their lives, experience an upward social trajectory, in a truly extra-ordinary sense. The author prefers the concept of transclass to that of “*transfuge de classe*” (“class defector”), which does indeed express that a transfer has taken place, but also implies betrayal. Coined according to the model of the term “transsexual”, the concept of transclass refers to the transition from one class to another, without making any value judgement about this multiform transfer, which has geographical, economic, political and cultural dimensions all at once, and the causes and consequences of which should be identified as much within social contexts as within individual characteristics.

According to the author, the phenomenon of transclass individuals can only be correctly analysed by taking into account the always composite, ambivalent and singular interplay between

¹ The author justifies this by noting that her analysis mainly concerns “the passage from the dominated world to the dominant world, which seems more of an enigma than the reverse scenario” (p. 21).

the set of conditions that have led to a transclass' particular trajectory. This point prompts Chantal Jaquet to develop a second concept – that of “complexion”, which is borrowed from Spinoza's idea of the *ingenium* (sometimes translated into English as “nature” or “temperament”). Derived from the Latin *con* (with) and *plectere* (to weave), complexion aims to sum up the complex interlacing of physical and mental characteristics that constitute the originality of a singular life. An individual's complexion thus represents the incorporation of a whole set of characteristics that have been shaped by his/her history. In the case of transclass individuals in particular, complexion allows us to take into account the absence of unity, the change to or even the ripping apart of a personality that is living between two incompatible worlds, oscillating between shame of and loyalty towards his/her original environment, and fascination for and anger towards his/her new one – something that Pierre Bourdieu had referred to as the “*habitus clivé*” (“cleft habitus”)². Chantal Jaquet thus rejects the false explanations of fate and personality in accounting for the trajectories of transclass individuals, in order to categorise this phenomenon as falling “under the regime of necessity” (p. 24).

The concept of complexion thus puts forward a “combinatorial mode of analysis” (p. 97) to understand the forms that action takes, at the confluence of individual and collective conditions, meaning at the crossroads between singularity and generality. As a tool for the analysis of the singular interconnections of multiple conditions, complexion allows us to convey the multidimensional nature of causality, since no condition is efficient on its own. The concept of complexion thus convincingly includes that of habitus, which is more homogenous because it is above all connected to the social position of the relevant individual. In studying an individual trajectory, complexion includes – in addition to the individual's social position – gender, race, sexual orientation, his/her position within a set of siblings, parental aspirations, his/her emotional life etc. Chantal Jaquet pays attention to what is singular and therefore intimate, and thus highlights the heterogeneity and mutability of each individual complexion, showing that “*any human existence could be defined by a practice of the differential gap*” (p. 221, my emphasis). Chantal Jaquet is in accordance here with Bernard Lahire's thoughts on the “plural singular” that attempts to create a “sociology on an individual scale”³.

In line with other works, the concept of complexion leads us to criticise the concept of identity⁴. The assignment of individuals to constant characteristics of class, race, gender, sex etc. pushes identity towards being a uniform and immutable essence, and encourages us to represent our ego as a substance or subject. The case of transclass individuals, however, shows that their existence is fundamentally a de-identification, a process of wrenching themselves away from their original environments. This criticism of the concept of identity also extends to the concept of the “struggle for acknowledgement”, which presupposes the negation of a pre-existing identity that is abstract and fixed, be it individual or collective, and which supposedly must have its dignity restored within the public space. The identity of individuals, thus conceived as plurality, ambiguity, instability and precarity, should ultimately rather be understood according to the flexible concept of “transidentity” (p. 136). This term, which is effective within the framework of the economy of the book, is however only mentioned once, and would require a more refined conceptualisation in order for us to better summarise its heuristic impact.

A Practical Challenge for the Social Sciences

These theoretical positions raise practical questions. The book first argues in favour of

2 Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*, Paris, Raisons d'agir, 2004, p. 127 (Bourdieu also uses the expression of “double distance” in *ibid.*, p. 135).

3 See Bernard Lahire, *Dans les plis singuliers du social. Individus, institutions, socialisations*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013, not. p. 11-21. See also Bernard Lahire, *L'homme pluriel. Les ressorts de l'action*, Paris, Nathan, 1998; Bernard Lahire, *Portraits sociologiques. Dispositions et variations individuelles*, Paris, Nathan, 2002; Bernard Lahire, *Monde pluriel. Penser l'unité des sciences sociales*, Paris, Seuil, 2012, not. p. 125-141.

4 On this point, see for example Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *L'invention de soi. Une théorie de l'identité*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2004.

taking into account the crucial role played by affects in the constitution of the self⁵. However, the author is not attempting here to use affects to rehabilitate the subjectivism of an autonomous and sovereign self, but rather to remind us that “affective complexion” (p. 222) is not just, nor primarily, a concretion of psychic facts, but rather of social facts, meaning that it incorporates a social history.

The heart of the analysis thus draws inspiration from Spinozist philosophy in order to reveal the interplay of conditions that allow a power to act to accomplish non-reproduction. The motives of an action should thus be understood through the combination of affects, be they happy ones (love, admiration, enthusiasm, pleasure) or sad ones (shame, resentment, anger, hatred), and the greater or lesser strength of which modifies the body and mind of the individual, directs his/her power to act and determines whether he/she will stay in his/her class or leave it. Affective complexion thus constitutes a tool that is at once subtle and solid in enabling us to understand the logic of discontinuity in any individual trajectory, and offers a complement to what Pierre Bourdieu was observing when he criticised “biographical illusion”⁶. The fact that any process of reproduction is never perfect, but is always, irreducibly, characterised by a “differential gap” from the norm indicates the possibility of non-reproduction. Studying the complexion of a transclass individual must therefore allow us to understand the resilience of the strength that has turned this gap into a remarkable exception. The book thus attempts to resolve the following challenge: how can we grasp the singularity of certain cases of exception to the rule when any singular case is, albeit to different degrees, an exception to the rule? What, then, are the criteria – philosophical, anthropological, sociological, historical – that allow us to evaluate such a remarkable exception?

Paying attention to the multiplicity and complexity of affects in order to understand individuals therefore requires a combinatorial mode of thinking which leads the book to present itself as a stirring appeal in favour of inter- or even trans-disciplinarity in the social sciences (p. 15-16). Untangling the strands of complexion forces us to create a mode of thinking about complexity that draws on necessarily diverse theoretical and practical tools, which may be inspired by a wide range of scientific traditions. In particular, affective complexion conceptualises a mode of thinking at the micro level, of which the attention paid to singularity underlines the relevance and complementarity of studies in microhistory, microsociology, and microethnology. For example, Chantal Jaquet relies on the example of Norbert Elias’ study of Mozart (an interdisciplinary study drawing on sociology, history and psychology) to illustrate the limits of statistical enquiry when one’s aim is to provide an account of exception (p. 16-18)⁷. Thanks to the concept of complexion, the author thus attempts to solve this second difficulty: to understand the singularity of exceptional cases using a general theoretical model that does not presuppose any analogy between them. How, then, should we consider the *a posteriori* comparison between singular cases of non-reproduction?

Les Transclasses is a philosophical work inspired by sociology and ethnology but also by literature, and in addition to this it is written in a language inspired by the art of the maxim of the classical moralists, from Montaigne and Pascal to La Rochefoucauld and Chamfort. Both in terms of its form and content, the book invites researchers in the social sciences to build up for themselves, as it were, a genuine scientific complexion⁸.

5 See on this point the work of Frédéric Lordon: Yves Citton and Frédéric Lordon (ed.), *Spinoza et les sciences sociales. De la puissance de la multitude à l'économie des affects*, Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2008; Frédéric Lordon, *Capitalisme, désir et servitude. Marx et Spinoza*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2010; Frédéric Lordon, *La société des affects. Pour un structuralisme des passions*, Paris, Seuil, 2013.

6 Pierre Bourdieu, “L’illusion biographique”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, vol. 62, no. 62-63, 1986, p. 69-72.

7 Norbert Elias, *Mozart, sociologie d’un génie*, Paris, Seuil, 1991.

8 On this point, see for example Guillaume Calafat, Cécile Lavergne and Éric Monnet (ed.), “Philosophie et sciences sociales”, *Tracés*, no. HS-13, 2013; Ivan Jablonka (ed.), “Les formes de la recherche”, *La Vie des idées*, <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Les-formes-de-la-recherche.html>.

A Political Challenge for the Social Sciences

Finally, the book raises major political issues. While the existence of transclass individuals does not contradict the theory of reproduction, it does somewhat call it into question. It is opposed to it because it runs counter to it, but it does not nevertheless cancel it out, since the very rarity of non-reproduction demonstrates the power of reproduction, in particular of the reproduction of inequality between social classes. Transclass individuals thus invite us to understand how and why, within the framework of given conditions, other conditions than those that might usually have been expected have been expressed and have led to an exceptional trajectory. Studying transclass individuals thus allows us to understand the mechanisms of historical change in the very absence of a violent social revolution.

Furthermore, from an individual perspective, non-reproduction points towards the possibility of inventing “a new existence within an established order” (p. 7). Understanding such an invention requires us to reject a double illusion: that of an individual who is absolutely free, and that of an individual who is absolutely predetermined. The life of Pierre Bourdieu, for example, which the author examines, shows that he was able, *starting from* the conflicts within his complexion, to reinvent himself, on the side-lines, by creating new practices of existence that neither reproduced the norms of his original environment, nor those of his new one. In addition, by charting the whole set of social conditions that have produced the individual as he/she has developed, the concept of affective complexion largely ruins the pretensions of the “subject” to “merit”. The book thus opens the way for a radical criticism of one of the conceptual foundations of contemporary political liberalism.

From a collective perspective, the book shows that each individual carries within them multiple and concurrent social injunctions. In this sense, non-reproduction is never an individual phenomenon, but rather a “transindividual” one (p. 96)⁹. The political challenge of the study of non-reproduction is therefore to connect to each other these singular experiences that seem *at first glance* to be irreducible – a point that the book leaves open. This is where the author, in line with Michel Foucault, Didier Éribon and many others, insists on the possible intersection, without there being any hierarchy, between non-reproduction struggles, be they biological, racial or gendered (p. 21, 229-230). Within the particular nature of any non-reproduction, we see offered the possibility of combating social violence, of inventing new norms and therefore of rethinking the human condition. For all of these reasons, Chantal Jaquet is right to consider her wonderful book as “a combat book”.

On this Topic

- Discussion of the book *Les Transclasses* at the Sorbonne on 15 October 2014 with Chantal Jaquet, Laurent Bove and Frédéric Lordon (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6P6geyXPrM>, 1:24:02).
- Chantal Jaquet discusses her book in the France Culture programme “Les Nouveaux chemins de la connaissance” dated 23 May 2014 (<http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-les-nouveaux-chemins-de-la-connaissance-actualite-philosophique-les-transclasses-ou-la-non->).

Published in Books&Ideas, 16 June 2014. Translated from the French by Michael Behrent, with the support of the Institut Français.

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First published in French in lavedesidees.fr, on 26 December 2014

⁹ On this concept, inspired by Spinoza, see Étienne Balibar, *La crainte des masses, Politique et philosophie avant et après Marx*, Paris, Galilée, 1997; Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza et la politique*, Paris, PUF, 2011.