

Interview with
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This interview was carried out by AOC
in partnership with the French Institute (Paris)

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What is the book's point of departure?

I shall begin by stating what the book is not. It is neither an ego-histoire nor an autobiography nor a narrative about the self, but rather a study of the process of social migration undergone by the little girl that I once was, from a rural background, a large family, a class of people who were hard up, to the academic world. Being a class passer is not so much a qualifier as it is a process that permits passing from one class to another. To "compose" myself is to revisit my past, retracing in reverse the successive socializations that made me, with a nod to my teachers and professors who wrote in my report cards: "Strive for composure!" I was neither a student of the prestigious École normale supérieure nor an inheritor in Bourdieu's sense but rather a class passer and a woman, which gave me access to the less sacred spaces of the EHESS. This observation led me to think about the differences in the amplitude of class migration of men and women, which entail that passing, especially when one is a woman, is always lived as an act of catch-up.

How did you go about writing the book?

I tried to show how my siblings and I managed to overcome partially the iron law of social class reproduction, by means of an upward mobility that I examine closely over three generations. Such a study had never been undertaken before because researchers always take as examples the cases of families other than their own. I cross-referenced family and departmental archives with open-ended interviews with my nine siblings and my two sons. However, I did not want to constitute my family as an exception either. I, therefore, located my family within different contexts and analyzed, in particular, the archives of my primary school, of the local education authority, and of the department, so as to have elements of comparison with the academic performance of other students of the canton. I realized that the primary school certificate was the highest level available to them at the time. However, it was only available to a minority of students since the teachers only sent students who seemed likely to succeed to write the exam. So, in my case, there was no academic miracle, merely the meeting of convergent interests: for the teachers, it was a matter of sending students to high school for the first time; for my parents, it was a means of ridding themselves of mouths to feed since we were then awarded scholarships.

How is this book relevant today?

I hope my book succeeds in showing that, to overcome social barriers, it does not suffice simply to want to do so. The book counters the old adage “where there is a will, there is a way”—or as Macron might put it, “you only have to cross the street to find work.” Instead, it attests that, for one to be able to do something, there are social and cultural conditions that must first come together so that one is able to want to do it. In other words, to jump through the successive hoops, one needs a heap of resources; one has to know how to identify opportunities, those “allies of ascension” (*alliés d’ascension*) to use sociologist Paul Pasquali’s term. Who were my allies of ascension? Obviously, my teachers and the welfare state that gave me a scholarship, but also certain high school teachers, colleagues at the EHESS and my feminist commitments. These were so many supports and enablers, consolidating efficient bases that helped me overcome social barriers. A class passer is thus the result of a collective construction.

