

The Social Odyssey of Trans

by Céline Bessière

The interpretive framework applied to the transitioning of trans people by sociologist Emmanuel Beaubatie produces a wealth of knowledge. Male domination and heteronormativity are shown in a new light.

On: Emmanuel Beaubatie, *Transfuges de sexe: Passer les frontières du genre*, La Découverte, 2021. 192 pages, €19.

Transfuges de sexe (Gender Defectors) is a rigorous social scientific study in which we learn a great deal, of course, about trans people, “those people who do not recognise themselves in the sex assigned to them at birth and who undertake to change it” (p. 7), but also about the social order in general and the gender order in particular.

The book starts with a series of simple definitions, which are also questions of vocabulary and of “grammatical gender trouble”, and ends with a short glossary. Setting himself apart from the dominant literature, both scientific (medical and psychological) and activist (notably queer studies), which share a focus on questions of trans-identity, Emmanuel Beaubatie is convinced that the methodological and conceptual tools of general sociology have something to teach us about individual processes of transition, but also that these individual processes of transition have something to teach us about male domination.

It is not the first time that a sociologist has taken up the trans issue from such a general sociological perspective. In the 1960s, Harold Garfinkel studied the “Agnes” case, which became emblematic of ethnomethodology, a form of sociology which tries

to capture the construction of social facts at the level of the ordinary practices of individuals¹. By studying the extreme attention which Agnes paid to “being a woman” in every aspect of her existence, Garfinkel shed light on what is usually taken for granted, i.e. the production of gender in everyday interactions and practices, thus anticipating the interactionist² and performative³ conceptualisations of gender that would arise in North America in the late 1980s. It was already clear, back then, that studying minority transgender practices allowed sociologists to question the naturalised gender order. But it is the first time that a study of this kind has been undertaken in France using the theoretical tools not of ethnomethodology or interactionism, but rather of the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu.

Gendering social mobility

Conceptually, the book can be summed up as follows: individual processes of transition constitute changes in social position and they can be studied using the tools of a type of sociology which is attentive to the subjective and objective dimensions of social mobility. Emmanuel Beaubatie is less interested in a static consideration of (trans)identity than in the dynamics and the (highly specific) material aspects of transitioning. Changing sex, refusing to identify at some point in one’s life as a man or a woman, is a form of social mobility, whose meaning has to be examined in terms of the different dimensions of life – family, school, work, friendships, sex... – as well as in the different social scenes of everyday life (in the street, at work, vis-à-vis different institutions: doctors, judges, police...). Hence, the concepts of Bourdieu’s sociology – trajectory, defector, social boundary, social space – enable us to think these forms of mobility.

Emmanuel Beaubatie has opted for a broad framing, based on a comparison between individual experiences of transitioning. He studies people “who identify as trans whatever their situation in terms of their body and official sex” (p. 18) and wherever they are along the process of transition, which they do not all conceive of in

¹ Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1967, chapter V.

² Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing gender”, *Gender and Society*, vol. 1, 1987, pp. 125-151.

³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, New York, 1990

the same way, moreover. He uses the same analytical tools to study people who were assigned the male sex at birth and who are recognised socially as female (known as *Male-to-Female* individuals, who are the most numerous and visible, notably because they undergo more medical interventions), as for *Female-to-Male* people (who have gained visibility in activist movements, while keeping their distance from organised medicine), and, to a lesser extent, *non-binary* people, who do not recognise themselves in either of the established gender categories. This contrasts with more militant books, focusing on a single type of experience.

Transfuges de sexe is a book based on the analysis of solid empirical material, which has been gathered using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Emmanuel Beaubatie conducted lengthy “life-story” type interviews with thirty or so people who view themselves as having transitioned. These people were recruited in trans social venues, the study having been publicised by associations and online forums. The corpus is diverse as much in terms of sex assigned at birth as social milieu and race.

This qualitative material is compared against a statistical analysis of the “Trans and sexual health” survey conducted in 2010 by the French National Institute for Health and Medical Research (INSERM), which looks at social characteristics, medical and legal transition, health and sexuality. Women represent two-thirds of the respondents in this sample (n = 381), probably because they were closer to the health system which helped to distribute the questionnaire.

The first chapter sets the scene by putting the making of trans people in the 20th century into historical perspective. It turns out to be a co-construction, sometimes harmonious and sometimes conflictual, of medical-scientific institutions and political mobilisations.

The administrative challenge

The second chapter focuses on the administrative challenges making up the medical and legal process of transition, which vary greatly depending on sex, class and race. Trans people have to provide evidence to judges and doctors of their social integration as well as their integration into the target gender without being able to benefit yet from bodily modifications and identity documents.

Only an intersectional approach makes it possible to realise the price to be paid vis-à-vis the institutions responsible for carrying out the transitions. The transition is easier for someone who has stable employment, which is more often the case for MtFs, who benefit from more favourable positions at the start of the transition process because they were assigned the male sex at birth. In reading further, we understand that the MtFs almost always experience a break with their families unlike the FtMs who benefit more from family support during the transition.

In all cases, coming from a well-off social background makes it possible to benefit from the resources and wealth of the parents. The chosen medical pathway depends on the individual's economic resources and sex: MtFs are more likely to have recourse to an entirely private pathway or to go abroad, which is more expensive but faster (2.2 years on average from the start of the transition to the first surgery on the genitals versus 3.4 years in the public health system and 4.5 years in mixed pathways).

It is also possible to appreciate the strategies employed in confronting official agencies, which depend on the social resources of individuals, but also on the more or less favourable way in which they are perceived. Mickaël, a black FtM who looks male and only has female identity documents, is regularly treated like an undocumented alien scammer rather than someone who is transitioning. Social relations of gender, class and race are always intertwined in the experience of discrimination and violence.

Chapter 3 takes a systematic look at the significance of gendered social mobility. Whereas MtFs, from the first signs of feminisation, are strongly stigmatised in their entourage, FtMs are relatively spared, at least at first. In the same way that it is easier for parents to accept a "tomboy" than an effeminate son, a child's gender *promotion* is better accepted than his or her *relegation*. This social significance of gender mobility leads to notable differences in biographical chronologies. Fearing and expecting stigmatisation, MtFs transition later, on average, many of them after an initial period in a heterosexual couple, whereas FtMs often transition in their twenties, without having children and with more support from friends and family. However, if trans women are exposed to more social and material difficulties, they are less likely than trans men to have a bad conscience about changing sex. Trans men find it difficult to come to terms with becoming a man in a society where male domination is the rule.

Gender and sexuality

Chapter 4 introduces the question of sexuality into the analysis of the transition process – which is something which does not go without saying. Up until now, sociological studies on trans people have generally tried to dissociate gender and sexuality, in order to take their distance from medical and sexological approaches. Sexuality has thus become a blind spot in reflections on trans biographies, despite the fact that sex changes are indissociable from certain sexual changes, that sexuality plays an essential role in processes of transition, and that, as Isabelle Clair has rightly pointed out, sexuality is a “production site for gender” which sociology would be well-advised to devote greater attention to⁴.

Before transitioning, half of MtFs were heterosexual men, the other half were gay, and many of them became heterosexual women during the transition process. On the other hand, almost all the FtMs were lesbians before transitioning, homosexuality helping them to distance themselves from their assigned sex as women, and many of them subsequently became gay.

Here again, these diverse but non-symmetrical experiences of transitioning say a lot about gender: femininity is linked to heterosexuality, whether you want to leave it (via homosexuality for trans men) or join it (heterosexuality becoming an attribute of femininity for trans women). These individual processes of transition also vary according to social class. The statistical data in this chapter provides an excellent complement to the life stories. They allow the author to add nuance to the analyses, by showing, for example, that the sexual attractions from the pre-transition period persist to some extent (p. 120) and that practices are sometimes more stable than the aspirations for change.

A three-dimensional space

Chapter 5 on “The social space of gender” draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s contribution to the theory of social classes in *Distinction*⁵. In Bourdieu’s model, the

⁴ Isabelle Clair, “Pourquoi penser la sexualité pour penser le genre en sociologie? Retour sur quarante ans de réticences”, *Cahiers du genre*, 54, 1, 2013, pp. 93-120.

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Subject of Taste*, Trans. Richard Nice, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1984 (1979).

social space comprises a multiplicity of classes and class fractions (as opposed to the binary Marxist model). According to Beaubatie, it is also possible to think of gender in terms of a variety of positions and groups. The point is considering gender neither as a bi-categorical relationship nor as a spectrum ranging from feminine to masculine, but rather as a multi-dimensional space. All the results of the book are re-read through this analytical prism. In order to do this, Emmanuel Beaubatie carries out a multiple correspondence analysis based on the data from the INSERM survey on trans people, in order to distinguish between groups that occupy different gender positions. Three groups stand out: the “conformists”, the “strategists” and the “non-binary”.

The “conformists” identify with the categories of female or male, turn to reassignment surgery and change their official sex, and do not go to associative or activist spaces. Statistical analysis enables the author to show that these are above all people born male who aspire to invisibility and to be integrated into society not as trans, but as women.

The majority of the “strategists” identify with the categories of male and female (although less than the “conformists” of course), resort to reassignment surgery and change their official sex, but they are distinguished from the “conformists” by their closeness to associations, which mostly provide them with medical and legal information. In practice, there are more FtMs who transitioned at a young age in this group, as well as people who did their transitioning in the private medical system or abroad. The interviews bear witness here to a strategic relationship to institutions: notably, an ability to submit to their expectations in order to obtain the desired documents or medical treatment.

The “non-binaries” identify with categories other than male or female (such as queer, non-binary or trans), do not necessarily resort to reassignment surgery or change their official sex, and are also more militant in demanding recognition of their difference. They find themselves in a logic of confrontation with the institutions, whose ground rules they reject. The MCA enables the author to show that this group exhibits specific social characteristics: they are younger, more often assigned the female sex at birth, and, above all, highly educated.

This *social space of gender* approach is ambitious and stimulating, and it deserves now to be refined by testing it in the analysis of groups other than trans people and other social situations.

Gender and mobility

Emmanuel Beaubatie's book is part of a contemporary movement in French sociology which both builds on the concepts forged by Pierre Bourdieu, in order to renew gender studies, and revisits Bourdieu's sociology via gender. For example, in her recent doctoral thesis, Elsa Favier uses the concept of *gender mobility* to think the specific social mobility of female graduates of France's elite school of public service, *École nationale d'administration*, which cannot be described by socio-professional mobility alone⁶. She shows that female *énarques* (alumni of this school) have less upwards socio-professional mobility compared to their parents than do male alumni, but that they nevertheless achieve a form of mobility in the space of gender positions defined by their professional position (by going towards more masculine sectors) and by their marital position (by distancing themselves from the norm of female hypergamy). To what extent is Elsa Favier's concept of *gender mobility* able to shed light on the situation of trans people? And, conversely, how do the women and men *énarques* she studies move in the social space of gender? This rapprochement would open up some interesting perspectives for future research.

Similarly, the studies which Sibylle Gollac and I are conducting revisit Bourdieu's concept of *family strategies of social reproduction*, rethinking it through the prism of gender⁷, and I cannot help but wonder what crossing gender boundaries does to these strategies. In particular, how do transitions reconfigure all one's relationships with close relatives – not just with partners and children, but also with parents and siblings? Preparing monographs on the families of trans people would certainly be a fascinating way of delving into the centrality of gender in family strategies of social reproduction.

Emmanuel Beaubatie's book shows the extent to which our society, despite the development of egalitarian norms, is still profoundly affected by male domination: "Trans people do not escape the yoke of gender. On the contrary, they clearly reveal its weight" (pp. 103-104). Fundamentally, everything is a matter of masculinity: "You can neither leave nor acquire the male sex". It is when leaving the male sex that trans women experience the greatest violence, whereas it only appears later for trans men,

⁶ Elsa Favier, *Enarques et femmes : Le genre de la haute fonction publique*, doctoral thesis, EHESS, 2020, thesis director: Laure Bereni.

⁷ Céline Bessière and Sibylle Gollac, *Le genre du capital, Comment la famille reproduit les inégalités*, La Découverte, 2020.

at the moment when they claim to be men. This highly interesting point would merit more empirical investigation by way of studies on violence committed against trans people.

We can also hope that, in the future, Emmanuel Beaubatie will be able to say more about the conditions of production of his study – in particular, on his relationship with the people surveyed and the social situation of the interviews – and that he will be able to draw useful methodological lessons for the community of professional sociologists.

The very stimulating reading of this volume ends with one regret: namely, the choice, undoubtedly required by the publisher, of a style of writing that does not use the entire palette of non-sexist writing in the French language: in particular, the contractions (*iels: ils + elles, celleux: celles + ceux...*). These represent linguistic inventions of gender studies and LGBTQI+ movements which would enable the author to provide a more accurate depiction of the experience of trans people, some of whom refuse to be assigned to a gender category. This choice will probably be off-putting for some non-binary people, who may find that their place in the volume has been diminished. Moreover, just because the book is aimed at a non-specialist readership does not mean that one should underestimate the latter's ability to deal with some required transgressions of the dominant language. In moving across the boundaries of gender, language itself cannot remain unchanged.

First published in *laviedesidees.fr*, September 2, 2021.

Translated by Tiam Goudarzi with the support of Cairn.info.

Published in *booksandideas*, September 19, 2023.