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Beyond the 'Scholarship Boy' paradigm: Autosociobiography and social mobility

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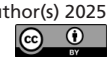

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Sam Friedman[1], Mike Savage[1] and Carlos Spoerhase[2]

Abstract

This article reflects on the potential of the rapidly emerging literary genre of autosociobiography to extend analyses of the personal experience and feelings associated with social mobility. We reflect on the congruence of its themes regarding the dislocating and isolating effects of upward social mobility with important recent research in qualitative sociology, which have exposed the weakness of quantitative social scientific studies for understanding the 'social mobility malaise'. We argue that the theme of dislocation, sometimes encapsulated in the phrase that the upwardly mobile are 'fish out of water', can be rooted back to a paradigm of the 'scholarship boy', originating in the 1950s. We discuss how autosociobiography is a vital genre because it radicalises this framing and provides more critical and provocative perspectives which are more attuned to the period of intensifying economic inequalities in the early 21st century. Drawing on Jaquet's arguments regarding 'transclasses', and reflecting on numerous autosociobiographical accounts, and recent sociological contributions, our article demonstrates the interdisciplinary reach of this genre.

Keywords

Autosociobiography, *habitus*, inequality, literary genres, social mobility, transclasses

[1]London School of Economics and Political Science, UK
[2]Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany

Corresponding author:
Mike Savage, International Inequalities Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton St, London WC2A 2AE, UK.
Email: m.a.savage@lse.ac.uk

Introduction

With remarkable speed, in less than a decade, the genre of *autosociobiography* has emerged as one of the most exciting and provocative currents within literary studies. This work, which has emerged most prominently in France, Germany and the United Kingdom (see Abiven and Véron, 2025; Blome, 2020; Blome et al., 2022; Bundschuh-van Duikeren et al., 2025; Cadieu, 2024; Spoerhase, 2017, 2024; Twellmann and Lammers, 2023), explores from literary works, mostly autobiographical, how social advancement is an empty promise to many, and the great rat race for success can have detrimental effects on people's well-being. In only a very short period since being identified as a distinct genre, it has become highly consecrated and intensely popular. The Nobel Prize was awarded to one of the founding figures, Annie Ernaux, in 2022. Writers working in this vein have has also generated huge public interest, as with the writings of Didier Eribon, Édouard Louis, Elena Ferrante, Natasha Brown, Darren McGarvey, José Bortoluci and even JD Vance.

Like all literary genres, the definitional contours of autosociobiography are hard to pin down (Bundschuh-van Duikuren et al, 2025). The term was first coined by Ernaux when trying to distinguish her work from 'autofiction' (Ernaux and Jeannet, 2003: 23), but it is possible to trace the roots of the genre much further back, to writers such as Jules Valles in the 19th century, Richard Hoggart in the 1950s and Richard Rodriguez in the 1970s, among many others. Indeed, a vast array of writing might be considered autosociobiographical in the sense that it melds both autobiographical narrative and social–scientific analysis. This is, for example, a central component of the academic methodology of autoethnography, and there is a wide variety of autobiographical texts that are interlaced with elements of social critique.

Our aim in this special issue is to reflect on the wider stakes that autosociobiography poses to critical inquiry, ranging across the social sciences and humanities. We therefore stand back from making any strong definitional claims about this emerging genre, and do not intend to police what texts should, or should not, be considered as autosociobiography. Instead, our focus in this article, which links to others in this special issue, is to emphasise and draw out the broader potential that this current of writing conveys. We will show how, although autosociobiographical writing takes its initial point of departure from the complex and often ambivalent experience of upward social mobility, it raises a host of fundamental issues around subjectivity, identity and inequality that allow important resources for sociological theory to elucidate and contextualise the wider significance of these vivid personal accounts.

Our contribution is to raise the stakes of this powerful current of autosociobiography. As we suggest in the first section, this genre chimes with qualitative sociologists who point to the dislocating effects of upward mobility. We argue that this reflects the power of the 'scholarship boy' paradigm. In Spoerhase's words, an anthropomorphic figure equipped with certain typical traits: 'a young working-class male who achieves social mobility by virtue of his academic achievements, but who in the process becomes alienated from the working class without ever fully feeling at home in the middle class' (Spoerhase forthcoming; on the gendered dimension of this paradigm, see Steedman, 1997). We reflect on the resonance of this motif, and its associations with Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus clivé*, before, in the second section, drawing on Jacquet's

innovative concept of transclasses, we reflect how autosociobiography also seeks to push beyond orthodox sociological framing, with its rather static invocation of a unitary 'origin' and 'destination'. Finally, we consider how the genre of autosociobiography can offer an important way of foregrounding concerns with inequality that have not hitherto sufficiently informed literary studies (So, 2021). These reflections also allow us to more precisely reflect on how autosociobiography compares with other literary currents, including a schematic periodisation of its rise to prominence in recent decades.

The experience of social mobility and the potential of autosociobiography

Autosociobiography takes its cue from the limits of studies devoted to demonstrating the endurance of structural barriers to social mobility (e.g. Breen, 2004; Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2018). It therefore has close affinities to the resurgence of cultural, usually qualitative, analyses of social mobility which pinpoint the continued advantages of individuals from privileged backgrounds (notably Friedman and Laurison, 2020), and recognise the intersectional barriers faced by women and ethnic minorities from working-class backgrounds (Mahony and Zmroczek, 1997; Meghji, 2017; Reay, 2013; Reyes, 2022; Skeggs, 1997; Walkerdine, 2003), not only in structural terms, but also through the subjective responses and feelings of discomfort that the upwardly mobile express (e.g. Born, 2024; Fercovic, 2025; Friedman, 2016).

These currents are all part of a striking widening of conceptual and methodological interest in the critical analysis of social mobility which has taken place over the past decade. From the 1970s until the early 2000s, social scientific interests in this topic were nearly entirely quantitative in nature, and largely used nationally representative surveys to dissect the extent of mobility by different criteria (such as occupational class or income level), and the determinants influencing mobility prospects. There is no need to summarise this sophisticated literature here, other than to note that the prime interest within this tradition of research has been the mediating role of education. This concern centres on the 'Origin-Education-Destination triangle', which considered how far educational attainment mediated the relationship between origin position (generally defined as the social class position of parents) and that of respondents (see, for example, the helpful reviews by Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2018, and Heath and Li, 2023).

This work has certainly exposed ongoing structural limits to social mobility, the limited ways that educational expansion breaks down these barriers, and the extent to which social mobility parameters operate in relatively similar ways across most nations, though with some variation (see the impressive recent overview by Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2022). A major theme has considered trends in social mobility over time, using rigorous representative data, to adjudicate whether the familiar public lament that social mobility may be declining is empirically borne out. Here, there is a revealing important tension between the work of economists such as Raj Chetty et al. (2014) in the United States, and Jo Blanden and her colleagues in the United Kingdom (e.g. Blanden et al., 2021), who argue that upward social mobility is becoming harder, compared with sociologists, notably the group around John Goldthorpe (e.g. Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2018, 2022), who

emphasise stability over time. While undoubtedly important, this debate largely defaults to a 'technical fix', in which conclusions rest on the specific criteria used in defining and measuring mobility, notably about whether absolute or relative measures are to be preferred. Nonetheless, there is an emerging consensus that the prospects of upward mobility are declining in rich countries, reflecting fewer 'jobs at the top' to be filled by those moving up from below, but that in relative terms (comparing the prospects of children from different social groups against each other), there is little change, and what change there is has actually been towards greater equalisation (see, for example, Heath and Li, 2023).

Analytically important though this sociological research is, its default to a 'technical fix' inevitably does not resonate with the burgeoning public interest in social mobility. It is for these reasons that qualitative and cultural inquiry has gathered pace in recent years. This renewal has taken several forms. At an abstract level, they notably include philosophical, historical and theoretical musings on the premises of 'meritocracy', such as in the work of Jo Littler (2018), Michael Sandel (2020), Peter Mandler (2020) and Daniel Markowitz (2019). These studies return to the ethos of Michael Young's (1958) celebrated dystopian lament regarding the perils that fully meritocratic societies would entail by creating an entitled and arrogant meritocratic elite. Alongside these theoretical critiques, there is increasing historical interest in how the invocation of meritocracy is not only very recent, but also rests on a highly questionable set of foundations, including those drawing from eugenics (Renwick, 2016). Young's own work has been dissected in order to demonstrate how this critique of meritocracy is based in a form of patrician social analysis (Butler, 2020; Mijs and Savage, 2020).

This critique chimes with a second important current, which uses qualitative (and mixed methods) strategies to provide a much fuller rendering of the experiences of the mobile themselves. A major theme is the hidden injuries and scars articulated by those who have been upwardly mobile. This research has generated considerable public and political interest, notably in the British case around the claim that there is a 'class ceiling' that has elements in common with gender and racial barriers which limit the mobility prospects of women and non-white people (Born, 2024; Friedman, 2016; Friedman and Laurison, 2020; Laurison and Friedman, 2016; Lawler, 1999). This work therefore unpacks the cultural framings of concepts such as 'social mobility' (Ingram and Gamsu, 2022; Savage and Flemmen, 2019), 'talent' and 'hard work' (Friedman et al., 2023), and in understandings of inheritance (Kuusela, 2018; Sherman, 2017). This introduces a welcome theoretical concern to challenge benign cultural frames, and highlights concerns about social inequality, particularly how inequalities in cultural production can produce damaging 'epistemological effects' (Saha, 2016) in their problematic representations of ethnicity, class, gender and regional identity.

This renewed interest in the experience of mobility returns to an older tradition. A key strand of thought in sociology and social psychology in the 1950s to 1970s argued strongly that upward mobility had a largely 'dissociative' effect on the individual (Hopper, 1981; Sorokin, 1956). The theoretical reasoning that lay behind this claim was that in societies with relatively durable class cultures, such as Britain, moving through the class structure was likely to disrupt attachment to a particular class identity, and generate a range of 'hidden injuries' (Lawler, 1999; Sennett and Cobb, 1977). It is also worth

noting, however, that several quantitative studies have disputed this dissociative thesis, finding little evidence that upward mobility is associated with lower levels of wellbeing, mental health or life satisfaction (Chan, 2018; Prag and Richards, 2019).

This important qualitative work suggests that the 'dissonant upward mobility' narrative has become something of a cultural trope. Indeed, as Friedman et al. (2021) show, it is also used by people who are not obviously upwardly socially mobile, a strategy which they see as a means of 'deflecting privilege'. Reflecting on the construction of this very cultural repertoire, and the way that various groups deploy it, becomes an object of interest. There is a danger that respondent accounts are read at face value, without enough scrutiny of the performative power that telling a 'fraught upward mobility story' may entail. This can be associated with Jerolmack and Khan's (2014) celebrated jibe against qualitative interview methods that 'talk is cheap', and may not map neatly onto actual practices. There is a danger of relying too much on Bourdieu's own invocation of the *habitus clivé*, in which the upwardly mobile are caught between the habitus of their origin and destination, thus being 'fish out of water'. One of the appeals of autosociobiography is to recognise the cultural power of these motifs, but to provide much richer and more nuanced, first-person reflections on the mobility journey. The promise is to provide a fuller understanding of subjectivity and identity in forms without the 'prop' of Bourdieu's sociology to hold the apparatus up.

Rethinking personhood: widening the stakes of social mobility

A major potential of autosociobiographical thinking is to go beyond the 'fish out of water' perspective, which has become somewhat of a doxa in the cultural sociology of social mobility. To be sure, this trope is an important anchor point. The 'transclass' protagonist who takes centre stage in recent autosociobiographical writing was already present in the figure of the post–Second World War British 'scholarship boy', as developed by Richard Hoggart (Hoggart and Williams, 1960). The figure of the scholarship boy was equipped with certain easily recognisable traits: he was a young, white, working-class male who achieved social mobility by virtue of his academic achievements, but who became alienated from the working class without ever fully feeling at home in the middle class. In Hoggart's influential account, the scholarship boy succeeds in breaking loose from the class of his origin, but not in establishing himself as a member of another. His distinctive trait therefore consists in his social displacement; in 'a sense of no longer really belonging to any group'. Even as a boy, he finds himself torn between two discrete environments; indeed, 'between two worlds of school and home'. There is no mediating instance between the father's domestic authority and that wielded at school by his teacher, who often assumes a paternal role in his own right. Between these forces, Hoggart concludes, the boy is profoundly 'divided' (Hoggart 2009[1957]: 263, 267, 272, 274).

This influential Hoggartian framing was also taken up in Germany and France. As Ralf Dahrendorf later explained in a German context, the scholarship boy 'by virtue of his achievement worked his way up from working-class boy to academic'. To achieve

this goal, he had had to leave his native region, his family and his religious community, in all of which he had felt 'at home like a fish in water'. Yet, for all his academic success he found himself unable to grasp 'the meaningless niceties of an elevated social existence', a failure which left him 'a sad and inwardly torn figure' (Dahrendorf, 1965: 131–132). The figure of the scholarship boy was also of considerable impact in French sociology, where *The Uses of Literacy* was translated into French as *La culture du pauvre* in the circle around Pierre Bourdieu (Hoggart, 1970; on Hoggart's reception in France, see Passeron, 1999). Without a doubt, the Bourdieusian *habitus clivé* is indebted to its British predecessor for certain impulses.

The 'fish out of water' trope has now become something of an established cultural repertoire, to the extent that it acts as a straitjacket for more innovative thinking. Here, autosociobiography offers a valuable corrective. The French philosopher Chantal Jaquet, who may be taken to represent something of a French 'scholarship girl', is a figure of particular note (on the 'scholarship girl', see Steedman, 1997). In *Les transclasses ou la non-reproduction*, recently translated into English, Jaquet (2023) seeks to render the 'class transitioner' or 'transclass person' (*transclasse*) as a blind spot in Bourdieu's sociology (Jaquet, 2014; Jaquet and Bras, 2018). Rather than treating class straddlers as social anomalies, she sees them as highly significant in offering an alternative theory of subjectivity. In order to frame this overarching theory, Jaquet's philosophical essay keeps returning to such autosociobiographical texts as Jack London's *Martin Eden*, John Edgar Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers*, Annie Ernaux's *A Man's Place* or Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims*.

Jaquet approaches the phenomenon of class transitioners or class straddlers in two steps. First, she analyses the objective conditions that facilitate the transition from one social 'class' to another. This involves fairly familiar sociological themes, in which family members (parents, siblings, grandparents) serve as role models and offer encouragement, as well as role models and mentors at school (teachers, fellow pupils and their parents); she also discusses the institutional arrangements that encourage social mobility, for example, in the form of scholarships or other government-sponsored programmes.

Jaquet's second move is more subject-oriented, in examining the affective reality of class straddlers or transitioners. This is characterised by more than just positive feelings like respect for role models or affection for mentors. Following themes similar to Friedman (2016), Jaquet emphasises how the experience of social mobility is largely painful for the class transitioners themselves, who face a twofold loss, having given up their previous ties without ever gaining full membership of the class to which they aspire to belong. The sense of being forever caught between two stools is felt as permanent inner tension, and sometimes as nothing short of an existential strain. The picture Jaquet draws here of the class transitioner is not that of a happy hybrid who finds contradictions to be enriching and invigorating, but rather the image of a torn person who is doomed to fail at the task of reconciling what is, in fact, incompatible, leading to a perpetual source of shame. At first glance, this might appear as a variation of the Hoggartian or Bourdieusian model.

Yet, there is a key additional angle here that is of particular interest to us. From Jaquet's perspective, it also appears that, by virtue of being torn, *class straddlers gain a privileged insight into the de facto hybridity of any kind of individuality*. The 'class

transitioner' or *transclasse* is embedded in a social philosophy that is inspired by a theory of social action indebted not only to Bourdieu but also by a Spinozist social theory of a kind intensely pursued in France (e.g. Lordon, 2013). The latter centres on the concept of *complexion*. Derived from Spinoza's *ingenium*, it is intended as an alternative to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus. Habitus* – in the sense of an incorporated disposition to think, talk, judge, feel and move in a particular way – is one key category in Bourdieu's sociological model, its purpose being to explain how the individual reproduces social structures. In Jaquet's view, however, *habitus* implies too uniform, monolithic and impermeable a conception of the subject, its rigidity leaving it unable to grasp the 'non-reproduction' of social structures adequately. This is a theme that sociologists have also taken up, though in a different theoretical register, for instance, through Lahire's focus on dissonance (see also Savage and Silva, 2013).

In contrast, Jaquet puts forward *complexion* as a concept better able to grasp the subject's constant changeability, plurality and instability. This insists on an individual's multi-dimensionality – its intersecting determination by class, education, religion, parents, siblings, sexual orientation, political commitments and so on – as well as a general claim that holds the individual to be nothing but this diversity of connections with the world.

As Jaquet uses it, then, the concept of *complexion* implies a critique of the social–philosophical concept of personhood. Its aim is thus to de-essentialise the person. Understood as *complexion*, Jaquet argues, a person is no more or less than a set of complex arrangements and constant rearrangements of an immeasurable multitude of heterogeneous social relations. Jaquet's concept of *complexion* seeks less to contribute to a politics of fixed *habituses* than to encourage thinking in malleable social singularities.

At the centre of Jaquet's essay stands the transclass person as social singularity. In contrast to the panorama of individual despair that Bourdieu unfolds in his *Pascalian Meditations*, Jaquet's *Les transclasses* paints a less gloomy picture of the social subject and its capacity for individual agency. Jaquet is prepared to admit that the present social situation indeed allows for individuals to uncouple themselves from the mechanisms of social reproduction. The point, however, is that this process of uncoupling is not a purely strategic action on the part of a subject planning its social advancement in a rational manner. What is decisive, according to Jaquet, is instead the complex affective relationship in which class transitioners exist in relation to their social environment. Anybody leaving their social origins behind must first have felt a desire for social movement. For Jaquet, the social mobilisation of individuals presupposes a profound and convoluted affective mobilisation which takes on a singular character in each class transitioner. And it is these affective dimensions that are usually portrayed most convincingly by autosociobiographical texts.

On the conceptual level, most of the autosociobiographical reflections in the French context – not only of Chantal Jaquet, but also of Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon, Édouard Louis and many others – can all be situated quite specifically as being in dialogue with the social theory devised by Bourdieu (e.g. Louis, 2013). But they are not straightforward camp followers. They also push this paradigm through questioning the value of *habitus* itself. In *Les transclasses*, Jaquet leaves no doubt that she considers *habitus* to be Bourdieu's central category. Eribon, too, stresses that as far as he is concerned, *habitus*

must stand at the centre of any theoretical approach taking its cue from Bourdieu. It is worth noting, then, that from the conceptual repertoire of Bourdieusian theory, which is as rich in variety as it is in systematic interconnections, more recent exercises in autosociobiography have seized upon one particular term and elevated it, so to speak, without systematic recourse to such other guiding concepts of Bourdieu's as *field*. This emphatic privileging of *habitus*, which seems to lend itself so readily to autobiography, suggests the observation of individuals and their life-worlds.

But does a reconstruction of the kind that largely limits itself to *habitus* not court the risk of falling prey to a 'biographical illusion'? Bourdieu himself hit upon a vivid image to describe this danger: 'Trying to understand a life as a unique and self-sufficient series of successive events (sufficient unto itself), and without ties other than the association to a 'subject', whose constancy is probably just that of a proper name, and is nearly as absurd as trying to make sense out of a subway route without taking into account the network structure, that is, the matrix of objective relations between the different stations (Bourdieu, 2007: 215, see also Bourdieu, 1986). If Bourdieu's *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* seems stuck at a surprisingly impersonal level, this deliberate autobiographical asceticism is due not only to his reconstruction being limited to the social career of his own epistemological stance, but also to the effort to avoid the 'biographical illusion'. From Bourdieu's perspective, the decisive factor in an individual's advancement is not the subject, but rather the structure of the social fields in which this subject is able to perform its social ascent.

The perspective of Jaquet or Eribon, in contrast, places subjects and the transformations undergone by their *habitus* front and centre. It is not by coincidence that the French title of Jaquet's book focuses attention on the *transclasses* as the main subjects of social mobility. The titular category of *transclasses* or 'transclass persons' is a terminological innovation of Jaquet's devising. She explains that she chose this neologism in order to distance her examination of processes of social advancement through education from a meritocratic ideology, and to banish value judgements from her analytic vocabulary (Jaquet, 2014: 10–14). The category of *transclasse* is intended to replace that of the *transfuge (de classe)* or '(class) defector', which Jaquet finds often implies a negative valuation (on the concept of 'transfuge', see Sinthon, 2020). Whereas *transclasse* is no more than a neutral description of somebody who switches or straddles social classes, *transfuge* tends to denominate a negative social figure, that of a 'class fugitive' or 'defector' – or, worse still, a deserter, turncoat or traitor to one's class of origin (see also Samoyault, 2013). In a sense, these conceptual issues hark back to a fundamental question already to be found discussed in 19th-century working-class literature: whether growing out of a working-class life must be considered a 'betrayal' of one's class of origin. Whether social mobility, for instance, by means of education, necessarily implies a rejection of solidarity with the circumstances from which a person emerged is certainly one of the most interesting political questions in thinking, both scholarly and literary, about *transclasses*.

Didier Eribon, for example, has objected to replacing the concept of *transfuge* with the descriptive category of *transclasse*, arguing that the latter failed to do justice to the desperate desire to get away on the part of those seeking to change class. For most 'class transitioners', Eribon contends, leaving the underprivileged spaces of their origins does

indeed constitute a flight of sorts (Eribon, 2016: 107–108). This observation of Eribon's makes an important point, though it is one that Jaquet in fact confirms: namely, that a change of class often tends to be motivated less by a desire to 'get ahead', to achieve social success of a particular kind, than by a desire for change, looking to escape from given social relations of subordination. An argument against describing 'class changers' as 'fugitives' might, however, be found in the dramatisation it implies, framing the change of class as a rapid, abrupt and more or less violent change rather than a slow, gradual and indeed somewhat incidental process. As autosociobiographical writings of recent decades show, incremental forms of changing class are significant, too. Jaquet's neologism (and the corresponding terms in other languages) may thus be useful in sharpening our gaze not only on the dramatic instances of class change, but also on the less obvious forms of movement that traverse social space step by tiny step – and the complex affective dynamics related to it.

In summary, it can be stated that the perspectives shaped by images of a 'fish out of water', or by the model of a deeply split *habitus clivé*, proved particularly influential in debates marked by Bourdieu's work. In more recent theoretical texts that reference autosociobiographical works, or that themselves experiment with autosociobiographical forms, however, attempts to move beyond this *habitus* framework are becoming increasingly apparent. One can clearly observe here that the engagement of theoretical approaches with newer autosociobiographical production leads to the breaking open of more or less ossified Bourdieusian models. Undoubtedly, this process remains incomplete, but is currently developing further through the exchange of sociological perspectives with the evolving landscape of literary and artistic autosociobiographies. Our special issue aims to contribute to this ongoing conversation.

Autosociobiography and the return of inequality

In the previous section we sketched out how autosociobiography moved beyond the figure of the 'scholarship boy', whose trauma was how to navigate between their working-class background and middle-class destination. In this last section, we turn to reflect on how this genre can be contextualised in terms of drawing out the stakes of mobility in the contemporary era of intensifying economic inequality.

In his very important book *Redlining Culture*, Richard So (So, 2021) reports a comprehensive computational analysis of the authors of American literary texts between 1950 and 2000, to demonstrate the continued exclusion of Black writers in the United States, an exclusion which is entirely evaded by the ubiquitous references to the rise of literary multiculturalism'. So goes on to argue:

> despite the force of recent social events, such as Occupy Wall Street and #blacklivesmatter, which have installed 'inequality' as major keyword, literary scholars are only negligibly using this term more than they did in 1950. . .. Compared to their colleagues in the social sciences (such as economics or sociology), scholars in literary studies use it far less frequently. (So, 2021: 15)

Given this neglect, our final point is that the genre of autosociobiography allows a far more elaborated reflection on how inequality is bound up with literary form than has been current in more conventional literary studies. Here, we return to our starting point that autosociobiography has become prominent in recent decades when economic inequality has been on the rise, and which by some metrics has returned to levels last seen at the end of the 19th century (see Piketty, 2014; Piketty, 2020; Savage, 2021). This is a far cry from the 1950s, the era in which the 'scholarship boy' discourse of Hoggart and Williams emerged into the limelight, when most European nations saw inequality at a relatively low level, and when prospects of male upward mobility were reaching new heights. This relatively subdued economic inequality in the 1950s and 1960s coincided with the proliferation of different kinds of 'arrival stories' which surfaced in influential literary models during this period. Anglophone examples might include the writings of Doris Lessing, VS Naipaul, John Updike or Alan Sillitoe. These arrivals were fraught, turbulent and insecure – and in this respect they utterly partook of the 'fish out of water' framing – but they nonetheless insisted on the *facticity* of arrival itself – that is, those who 'arrived' were staking out the legitimacy of their voices and their right to express themselves, albeit on uneven terms compared with those from established elite positions.

From the 1950s, the power of arrival stories was extended beyond the conventional white male 'scholarship boy' perspective, also being taken up within feminist and postcolonial literatures which insisted on the power of new, previously unheard from, voices and championed new kinds of literary subjects to take a central place in the canon. In these terms, So (2021) draws out the singular role of Toni Morrison in briefly shifting American literary circuits towards Black writing. This was also the period that writers from the Global South gained a certain degree of prominence, though in ways that were ultimately circumscribed by the powers of metropolitan consecration that Pascale Casanova (2004) famously highlighted.

However, if autosociobiography has its genesis in the 1950s figure of the scholarship boy, with mobility prospects enabled by the distinctive economic conditions of the time, it has come to the fore during the past 20 years of intensifying economic inequality. Following our reading of Jaquet above, autosociobiography marks a radicalisation of the literary mode of rendering mobility itself. It does this by calling 'the point of arrival' into radical question, and by rendering the personal origins as 'lost' and unredeemable.

On the first point, we can easily point to popular examples of work that use personal testimony to criticise the values, operational logic and desirability of institutions at the apex of the contemporary economic reward system itself. For example, Natasha Brown (in *Assembly*) and Gary Stevenson (in *The Trading Game*) have offered powerful autosociobiographical accounts not simply of their fraught upward mobility stories (told from the perspective of a Black working-class woman and a white working-class man, respectively) but of the bloated and oppressive dynamics of the upper reaches of the British financial economy itself, including the way that they have folded racist and classist practices into the heart of their operation. These are far more than laments about feeling like 'fish out of a water' – they become extended critiques of the 'reward system' itself, including exposing its apparently meritocratic elements, such as its reliance on recruitment from elite universities.

Part of this destabilisation of the 'scholarship boy' discourse thus involves a deeper critique of the desired 'end state' of mobility – the idea that there are secure positions of professional and managerial authority to arrive at. Rather, the object of 'mobility success' recedes to higher and higher positions in the order of economic privilege. This is germane to the sociological argument that whereas mobility within the middle levels of the occupational structure remains common, and indeed may possibly be increasing in relative terms (see, for instance, Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2022), it is the most privileged jobs and positions which become demarcated by the hold of exclusive practices (e.g. Friedman and Laurison 2020; Rivera, 2016). The journey of the upwardly mobile is thus rendered as a chasing of rainbows, in which one never arrives at a secure position. The upwardly mobile are always chasing their next promotion, which when it comes, does not live up to its apparent promise.

We can trace the significance of this destabilisation of origin and destination by reflecting on Eribon's (2013) *Returning to Reims*, which we have already emphasised to be the central text which sparked interest in autosociobiography. As the very title of Eribon's book cues, it is not so much the difficult mobility journey that he singles out, but rather the impossibility of *return*. It is this reflection on how his own origin class has changed, so that he cannot return to it, rather than the difficulties of his mobility journey into the Parisian intellectual classes which occupy a central feature of his reflections.

Interestingly, Eribon downplays the difficulties of his mobility journey (indeed, as he narrates, he was rapidly accepted into the Parisian left-intellectual scene once he had been taken up by the journal *Liberation*), but instead focuses on his inability to return. This complex is multiple, covering geographic, political, psychological and social elements. But most importantly, it is the academic apparatus itself – what might be seen as the 'social mobility machine' – which lies at the heart of the problem. Eribon (2013) narrates how his mobility journey through his success in educational attainment and aptitude to pursue a credentialised route systematically also involves the denigration of his working-class background. Educational success requires the erasure of his social roots. This is marked not only by his visceral hostility to his father and brother, but also by his inability to acknowledge the support of his mother, who had assisted with his scholarly ambitions (even while misunderstanding them).

Thus, although Eribon's account might superficially appear to draw on the 'scholarship boy' lament of Richard Hoggart or Raymond Williams, in fact he presents a more challenging perspective. While both Hoggart and Williams narrate the stresses of leaving behind the industrial working-class communities in which they were raised, there is a certain romantic and nostalgic glow to them. Hoggart thus draws out the collective and affective elements of working-class life, which he champions to resist the blandishments of commercial culture and thus the sweeping Americanisation of British society. As Eribon relates, Williams' *Border Country* is a central reference point for himself: 'on the final page of the book, the main character understands that "going back" isn't really possible' (Eribon, 2013: 130 ebook). And yet, Williams' project still evokes the possibility of return through the transcendent embrace of a collectivist, socialist politics which attempts a political resolution to the tensions that Williams identifies.

Yet, it is precisely this political response that Eribon sees as impossible in his own return to Reims 50 years later. The very working-class community which used to embrace

Communist and left-wing causes has now moved to the political right and is no longer 'there' to be returned to through embracing a socialist politics which can somehow unite the prodigal returning son with his working-class past in a transcendent political embrace. Drawing on Bourdieu as well as the writings of Annie Ernaux, Eribon brings out how the very identities and categories associated with academic attainment are themselves complicit in the denigration and stigmatisation of the French working class, and thus contribute to making this 'return' impossible. Thus, it is not only that the upwardly mobile bear scars and insecurities, it is also *that the operations of the upwardly mobile themselves damage the very class from which they originated*. The institutional cultural capital (to deploy Bourdieu's (2002) own vocabulary) enshrined in the academic apparatus operates as a form of symbolic violence which operates to further stigmatise and marginalise. For Eribon: 'My youthful Marxism was thus a vector for a kind of social disidentification. I glorified the "working class" in order to put more distance between myself and actual workers' (Eribon, 2013: 46, ebook). The politics of the intellectual left ends up by projecting 'frames of reference that . . .. apply both to the present and the past. Theoretical and political schemas both precede and have an effect on the way we think about ourselves' (Eribon, 2013: 127 ebook).

With this move, Eribon distances himself from the call to 'sociology' that Bourdieu staked out, and which we have also seen Jaquet contest. Eribon reads Bourdieu's *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* as limited by an unconvincing self-censorship to 'material "pertinent from the point of view of sociology"' (Eribon, 2013: 85 ebook), which thus refuses to follow fully through on the critique of celebratory autobiography that it announces. Eribon instead pushes a more fully reflexive account which allows space to embrace creative, literary and cultural methods that challenge the very hold of academic categorisations themselves. Through this means, he is extending the analysis of social mobility away from social scientific strategies, however critical, towards embracing more creative interventions, including those rooted in literary discourse outside academia. In short, autosociobiography recognises the complicity of the academic apparatus itself in the wider reproduction of inequality, and therefore the impossibility of return even among those who have managed to chart a tortuous route to 'success' within its terms.

These observations also lead us to understand the distinctiveness of autosociobiography vis-à-vis other literary forms more clearly. As our account of Jaquet highlights, autosociobiography articulates the kind of reflexivity and self-consciousness that has generally been seen as a defining feature of the novel itself (famously, Watt, 2001). In this regard, we do not claim any watertight boundaries between autosociobiography and much more established literary forms, such as the *bildungsroman* and literary modernist currents. However, there are some telling parallels and differences to tease out.

First, it is intriguing that autosociobiography has gained traction in a period of 'peak inequality' which parallels the levels of inequality last found in the early 20th century. This was also the period when literary modernism became prominent. Following the lead of Franco Moretti's (2006, 2013) discussions of the bourgeois underpinnings of Victorian writing, there are ample grounds for seeing the narrative focus of much 19th-century writing as tied up with the rendering of the drama of property, inheritance and dynastic entanglements as they gained increasing traction during a period which consolidated

'propertarian' regimes of entrenched and inherited elites (Piketty, 2020). This argument recognises that European economic progress was built on authoritarian and exploitative global regimes, of which the role of slavery was the most visible, but far from being the only, instance, amid the welter of colonial and imperial instruments that defined the world economy (e.g. Bhambra, 2023; Osterhammel, 2014). As Piketty himself writes,

> the novels of Jane Austen and Honoré de Balzac [. . .] illustrate the plasticity of property to perfection. It mattered little whether a fortune consisted of a landed estate, foreign assets, or government bonds, provided that it was solid enough and yielded the expected income and social life that went with it. (2020: 431)

Thus, rather than seeing the rise of literary modernism in the early 20th century as shattering these more conservative forms of fiction, they also share this emphasis on the dramas of property. In 1913, when Proust published *Swann's Way*, 'property had again changed its identity but remained just as indestructible, regardless of whether it took the form of a portfolio of property assets or the Grand Hotel of Cabourg where the novelist liked to spend his summers' (Piketty, 2020: 431). Modernist fiction thus gained traction, during the early 20th century, when enduring challenges to inheritance strategies were becoming more marked as the hold of private property became increasingly put under pressure. Virginia Woolf famously railed against the gendered exclusions of property that prevented women from enjoying 'a room of their own' (Jones, 2015). Thomas Mann's invocations on intergenerational inheritance dynamics has even coined a concept – the Buddenbrooks syndrome – that has been studied by economic historians (Bull, 2002; Lorandini, 2015).

In this respect, we can see parallels with autosociobiography, which has also come to the fore in a period of revived, 'neo-propertarian' inequality (see in general, Savage, 2014; 2021). Autosociobiography is engaged in critical reflections on social mobility, inheritance and reproduction in ways that have uncanny parallels to the late 19th- and early 20th-century fiction. But there is also a fundamental difference. Autosociobiography is distinctive compared to literary modernism because it dwells on a second circuit of inheritance – that of cultural as well as economic capital. In the early 21st century, alongside the accentuation of economic capital, there has also been the accumulation of stocks of institutionalised and embodied cultural capital which did not exist in the earlier 20th centuy. These are all bound up with the machinery of meritocracy, which has grown so fast both within and beyond the realm of higher education in the decades since 1950. Autosociobiography therefore reflects not only the return of economic inequality, but also how the meritocratic apparatus has itself come to reproduce inequalities of its own, to the extent that it makes 'return' impossible, both in structural and experiential terms. Thus, the appeal to the 'aesthetic', and 'art for art's sake' which was present in the early 20th century no longer seems viable. Therefore, tracing the logic of autosociobiography in a period of intensifying inequality demonstrates that futility of facile calls to somehow encourage more social mobility. We need instead to recognise the fundamental contradictions of meritocracy itself.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that autosociobiography is not simply the name for a specific literary genre, but raises bigger and more urgent questions about the relationship between literature and the social sciences in a period of intensifying inequality. Compared with the appeal of autosociobiography, conventional social science scholarship attesting purely to the structural constraints surrounding social mobility, and the very real limits to the prospects for social mobility, seem relatively powerless. In contrast, autosociobiography can identify, locate and mobilise lived experiences in all their rawness, and yet also as they are interpreted, dissected and understood through self-reflection, to enrich a wider sociological context of class, gender, race and inequality. In these terms, autosociobiography speaks of the distinctive malaise of rich and unequal nations.

In conclusion, four major contributions that autosociobiography offers in extending and elaborating the diagnosis of the 'social mobility malaise' can be identified.

First, we have shown that autosociobiography valuably intersects with the emerging current of qualitative sociological studies of social mobility, which have enjoyed a considerable renaissance in the past decade. However, we have also argued that autosociobiography pushes beyond the trope of the *habitus clivé* which has dominated this sociological research. Especially in Jaquet's work, it does this by providing a more nuanced perspective on the subjectivity and identities of the socially mobile, through the concept of the *complexion*.

Second, and relatedly, this theme pushes beyond the 'scholarship boy' trope that still underpins contemporary renderings of the upward mobility story, such as through deploying the concept of the *habitus clivé*. Whereas this influential framing draws attention to the stresses and tensions of the upwardly mobile, torn between their working-class roots and middle-class destination, the tools of autosociobiography provide a fuller, more reflexive perspective attuned both to the insecurities of destination positions, and the historical fragility of working-class origins. This moves analysis away from the romanticist rendering of working-class roots, and also the transcendental appeal to socialist politics as a way of reconciling the mobile with their origin community. It thus proffers a more realistic perspective on the politics of social mobility.

Third, we have also argued that autosociobiography offers literary insights into the experiential stakes of intensified 21st century inequality. The theme of the 'scholarship boy' emerged at a time when economic inequality had reached unprecedented low levels, and the chances of working-class boys becoming upwardly mobile reached unusually high levels. While owing its genesis to this moment, autosociobiography has matured in an era when there has been a systematic increase in socio-economic inequality that has been experienced to a greater or lesser extent across all rich nations over the past three decades. It thus draws out the contradictions inherent in the routine exhortation to support and endorse meritocratic social mobility, at the very time that inequality has returned to early 20th-century levels. It illuminates how the academic, 'meritocratic' infrastructure itself is implicated in the reproduction of hardened inequalities. A key aspect – as the term 'autosociobiography' draws out – is how the terms and categories of the social sciences themselves enter into the very telling of life stories – and often in troubling and disturbing ways that point to the limits of these frames themselves. This double

movement recognises that 'objectivist' academic social science research, even avowedly critical perspectives, may itself be part of the very problem of intensifying inequalities. In this situation, it is literary and cultural voices – whose relationship to academic institutions is fraught in various ways – that have come to the fore.

Finally, methodologically, we have tried to show in this essay how autosociobiography permits the barrier between literary studies and social science to be breached. Rather than the standard perspective, in which social scientists 'objectively' adjudicate on the patterns and trends of social mobility, compared with literary writers who reflect 'subjectively' on how these are narrated and understood by various human agents, we have argued that autosociobiography challenges breach this divide. It thus offers the gleam of reconciliation, in which the human experience of life and mobility can be more fully and effectively accounted for. These are important stakes indeed.

ORCID iD

Mike Savage https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4563-9564

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Author biographies

Sam Friedman is a Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Co-Editor of the British Journal of Sociology. He is the co-author of *Born to Rule: The Making and Remaking of the British Elite* and *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged* and is author of *Comedy and Distinction: The Cultural Currency of a 'Good' Sense of Humour.*

Mike Savage is a Professorial Research Fellow at the LSE's International Inequalities Institute where he leads a convenes a reseach programme on 'wealth, elites and tax justice'. He has written extensively on the relationship between culture, the aesthetic, and socio-economic inequality. He is one of the authors of a collective book 'Colonial Pasts and Inequality Today: the Racial Wealth Divide in South Africa and the UK' which will be published by LSE Press in 2026.

Carlos Spoerhase is a literary theorist and professor of German at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (LMU). He was a fellow at the Wissenshaftskolleg zu Berlin and has held various visiting professorships, including at the University of Pennsylvania, Princeton University, and Ecole des Hautes Etudies in Sciences Sociale (EHESS).