

Gifted men, giving women

Gender-related vocations among working-class youth

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Relying on recent studies on the working-class, Dominique Memmi shows that building a talent is not just a matter of class relations, but is also related to gender-relations. While men are believed to have gifts that distinguish them, women give of themselves for others.

Reflections in the light of the research carried out by Beverly Skeggs (*Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*, Sage, 1997 ; translated as *Des femmes respectables*, Marseille, Agone, 2015), Julien Bertrand (*La fabrique des footballeurs*, Paris, La Dispute, Coll. Corps Santé Société, 2012) and Manuel Schotté (*La construction du "talent". Sociologie de la domination des coureurs marocains*, Paris, Raisons d'agir, 2012).

Constructivism and sporting talents

In their books on Moroccan runners and French football apprentices respectively, Manuel Schotté and Julien Bertrand focus on social agents who, for the most part, belong to the working-class, and they both reject all naturalist interpretations of sporting performances¹: the titles of their books – «*Making*» *footballers*, «*building "talents"*» – explicitly deconstruct the notion of nature, and following Bourdieu, Schotté strives not to «conclude to nature except in the last resort», while Bertrand claims, with Simone de Beauvoir, that one is not born, but rather becomes, a footballer². Both follow a two-step approach, in reverse order, with a view to highlighting the endogenous and exogenous social conditions fostering the vocations of these agents: Bertrand investigates the way football training centres encourage careers while Schotté studies the role played by colonial history in fostering such vocations, and both study individual career paths. Introducing (in this case, dispositional) *sociology* and (in this case, colonial) *history*, and emphasizing the role played by the *institution* itself in the making of sporting talents prove to be the best way to denaturalize this kind of talent. The authors have picked excellent examples to make their point: football, and *a fortiori*, running are both low-cost sports which rely solely on the body of the athlete and do not require any technical auxiliary. Besides, their respective researches concern dominated agents with low expectations so that when they do achieve success, the powerful social mythology of talent, which is particularly widespread in the media, is very much likely to come into play.

In that respect, Bertrand and Schotté's respective books are very effective: they reveal the three conditions for developing talent in young people: one has to be *elected* (by a coach,

¹ This paper was inspired by a presentation of the two books in the presence of their authors during the EHES-MSH seminar *Corps et sciences sociales*, «*La fabrique du sportif*», on May 29, 2015.

² I thank Kevin Violet for pointing this out and for sharing the information he drew from reading the literature on sports. Kevin Violet is a graduate student in sociology at EHES, he is currently writing a dissertation on Kenyan runners. (2015-2016).

and/or a father, especially if the father is a former athlete and has become a coach). Such an election functions in a retroactive way (the young one discovers that he was gifted from the beginning). It must then be backed up by an *unwavering asceticism and by investments that are often exclusive*, in accordance with the expectations of a sporting institution, which may not be quite total but is at least “encompassing” (Bertrand). School often appears as a competing institution while families often play an ambiguous role, depending on their attitude: some will act as an extension of the sporting institution, with brothers and fathers practicing football or running too and supporting, from the outside, the sense of belonging that characterizes sports clubs; other families tend to stand in competition with it (Schotté).

So that dominant groups keep a monopoly on culture and civilisation, dominated groups are often more or less explicitly defined by their “nature” (Blacks are lazy, women are emotional...). In so far as the authors present the talent myth as another form of this type of ideology, they skilfully debunk it: far from being tied up with the “nature” of lower-class people, talent definitely appears to result from specific socio-historical conditions.

The making of female talents

But one form of domination can hide another form of domination. For in both books, the deconstruction is involuntarily selective, indeed except for a three-page passage in Schotté, (p.116-119), neither of them addresses the issue of women. And this cannot be accounted for by the fact that sporting practices are strongly differentiated in terms of gender: during the seminar, both authors confirmed that it would have been equally easy to carry out a thorough investigation on women practising running or football. In so far as they focus on boys, the social enquiries conducted by the two authors actually mirror the ideology of the sporting institutions they were studying. Basically, these institutions, which interestingly enough are said to be “encompassing”, rather than “total”, appear to be based on rites of institution whose purpose is not so much to “institute” those who will pass from one state to another as to exclude those who do not take part in the rites: women, basically. And indeed, mothers are generally shown to side with school and to resist against the sporting institution while sisters and girls in general are simply absent.

In order to draw all the relevant conclusions from this observation, one only has to refer to a book that was recently translated (2015) and deals with the social positions available to women from the popular classes: *Formations of Class and Gender : Becoming Respectable* (Sage, 1997) by Beverly Skeggs. One immediately realizes that the three conditions of the construction of a talent are also present in the case of women but that they lead them towards careers that are a far cry from boys’ since girls are encouraged to specialize in the giving of caring. The counterpoint to the unfailing asceticism and the exclusive investment in sports is the exclusive investment in the caring of others, both in the private sphere (looking after siblings, aging parents, children as well as husbands, who are often jobless and depressive) and in the public sphere through the “choice” of careers in the caring occupational sector. Just as boys go on from the enjoyment of running or playing football to an investment in sport, girls’ early caring experiences (looking after numerous (half)-sisters and brothers as well as elderly and mentally/physically handicapped members of the family) evolve towards occupational caring.

The objective proximity between family duties and caring employment is due to “the conflation between caring for and caring about which equate feminine duty specifically with occupational role” (Skeggs, p. 49). Offering (paid) services and helping, caring for others and

caring about others: the earliest forms of socialization typically set the sacrifice of the self as a model of private virtue that is easily convertible into a vocational aptitude.

In this case again, the fate of women appears to be supported by a kind of “election” working in a retroactive way: the teachers in charge of the caring courses will make them aware that they are predisposed to care: *“I was really worried at first I thought I’d never be able to cope. I didn’t tell anyone like, but I was shitting myself at first. But it really was easy. The warden she said I was made for it. She said I was a natural...”* (Skeggs, p. 61). Thus, the young women that have massively been pushed towards vocational caring are surprised to find that they have a “talent”, much in the way boys discover they have a talent for sport, except that in the case of girls the discovery is much less rejoicing.

A gender-differentiated access to enchantment

These young women never get to feel that they might achieve something new or see new opportunities opening up for them, what they find is only the confirmation of a legacy:

“I never thought of myself as a really caring person, it was only when I got into the second year that I realized that I knew and behaved the way caring people are supposed to, you know, looking after my gran and the house when me mam’s at work. I knew how to do all these caring things before, but it was when I was involved in them as part of this course that I realized I must be good at it”. (Sam, Skeggs, p. 61)

“Like, in a way, you think you can do this course anyway, like it’s nothing really new... we all know how to look after people and that so it’s nice getting qualifications for something you know you are good at”. (Julie, Skeggs, p. 58)

Excitement and *illusio* are all the more absent from the experience of young working-class women as they soon become aware of the potential for exploitation in an occupational environment:

“What they do is give you their jobs to do so they can nip off for a break. At first I wondered where they had all gone. But I didn’t mind. I liked going round talking to patients and sorting things out for them. The more I did, the more I got to do though. When they realize you can do things they just pile them onto you. It’s all right though (...)” (Sandy, Skeggs, p. 61)

“Sometimes though, they give you all the dirty work, like at Alsworth (EPH) I had to do it all, they must’ve thought here’s a mug”. (Andrea, Skeggs, p. 61)

Compared with this, the remarks reported by Manuel Schotté and Julien Bertrand make it clear that the romanticisation of personal narratives is an exclusively male privilege, even in a subdued mode:

“If I’m here today, I owe it to him (...). He was the one who told me I had the capacities for it and all, when he saw that some clubs took an interest in me, he came to me right away and told me, made me work for it, so I’d make it”. (Bertrand, p. 45)

“He (the coach at the junior local club) felt I had potential. I was already taller than anybody else for my age. So, he was following my progress, and he was the one who took me to the football club to take the tests, he really wanted me to succeed”. (Bertrand, p. 46).

“Yeah, well, at first, I was the only one [selected player in the team] and then there was three of us. The first time, I was the only one and it er... it’s kind of cool. It sets you dreaming... like about the *Equipe de France*, yeah [...]” (Bertrand, p. 49)

Or in a more inspired mode:

“I used to go to Ali’s before training, and after I’d stay on at his place and we’d talk and talk about it, about the training, performances, champions. I thought about it all the time. Before I went to sleep, I’d imagine I was a champion, winning lots of races. I couldn’t give a damn about anything else... athletics, only athletics!” (Schotté, p. 81)

“When he came to me (The coach who picked him out) on the day of the race with Ali, I was real proud... He said to me: “You have the capacities for being a good athlete, you must come to training.” – So what did I do? I went – right away! (he laughs and mimics someone running)...(Serious again) I owe it to him, yes, he made me understand that was the right stuff”. (Schotté, p. 78)

And:

“See, this is the place (we are standing in front of a shoe-repairer’s workshop). I used to come here everyday to talk about running with my friend (the shopkeeper). I remember that every time I came by and saw Boudaïeb (actually, the picture of the champion hanging on the wall), my heart would start beating *haaard* (he places his hand on his chest and mimics strong contractions)”. (Schotté, p. 79)

Thus, right from a very early age, working-class men and women have to embrace ascetic attitudes and engage almost exclusively in a career that will be theirs for the rest of their lives in order not to sink into unemployment like so many of their peers. If only in a marginal way, women too get elected, which contributes to sealing their fate. The main difference between men and women is that, probably on account of its being exclusively oriented towards others, women’s fate leaves no room for any kind of narcissist play with talent, and consequently, much less room for enchantment.

A constraining female “resource”

Even if Skeggs does not carry out a thorough analysis of the differences between working-class men and women, her book helps us understand that these differences mainly stem from the tight constraints weighing on girls, *but also* from the fact that they *nevertheless have a resource* at their disposal (an early training in the caring of other people) which they can cash in on the market of home-help while male physical strength tends to lose its value on the labour market. However, this resource is the only one they can rely on: the author explains that femininity and appearance are barely tradable except on a restricted marriage market and only in interpersonal terms. Like in France³, working-class women massively turn towards the caring sector, but this career choice is a *default* option: “It was this or being jobless”, “I did not want to be unemployed”, “Well, I took up the job because there was nothing else I could do”, “I could not find a job, that’s as simple as that, and being without any qualifications, I did not really have a choice”(p. 112-113). This is a far cry from the kind of *positive*,

³ Cf. Christelle Avril, 2014, *Les Aides à domicile : un autre monde populaire*, Paris, La Dispute, 2014, et Florence Weber, Loïc Trabut, Solène Billaud (dir.), *Le Salaire de la confiance. L’aide à domicile aujourd’hui*, Paris, Éditions rue d’Ulm, 2014.

enchanted career choice made by the young men who eventually fall under the illusion of sport. Indeed, girls simply and literally have to “make the best of a bad job” by converting the caring capital they acquired at such high cost in their youth into an economic resource in the caring sector.

The descriptions in Skeggs’s book are harrowing because they make us realize that although that kind of resource makes it possible for women not to fall, contrary to quite a few among their partners, and even to hold a respectable position (just above those – the elderly – who badly need their help), the price they have to pay is very high indeed as it means almost completely sacrificing the narcissistic *illusio*. This is the price they are ready to pay in order to satisfy a desperate longing for personal and social respectability.

With strong social constraints being imposed on them, with only one resource at their disposal and with gaining a respectable social position as their main preoccupation, working-class women, who desperately want to *become respectable* as indicated in the title of the book, and who deeply despise those who “fall” physically, have no hope to find an escape in play through talent, which on the contrary seems to remain available to young sportsmen. Although the investments of these young men are actually socially constrained – as highlighted by the constructivist method of the two books on sporting talent – they do have a small degree of freedom of action, allowing them to engage in games involving narcissistic *illusio* and risks. Thus, while male talents are considered as signs of election, female gifts actually consist of the gift of self.

To be honest, those sexually-differentiated behaviours do not seem to be thoroughly analysed in any of the books reviewed here, which points to the limits of a comparison between three very different books. Indeed, while boys have comparatively *fewer* resources (which, in the absence of any serious comparison between boys and girls of the same group *in any of the three books*, can be doubted) but “run” the risk, girls, who seem to have *more* resources, opt for reasonable investments and rely on the open possibility of the gift of self. Comparing the situation of boys and girls would require an analysis, in terms of psychic efficiency, of the types of investment models: 1) One may wonder if investments in boys might be inadequate to help them succeed but sufficient to encourage them to take bets and run risks, and if 2) the ideology of the gift of self, which girls are steeped in from a very early age, may adequately account for the fact that their own investments are extremely reasonable and self-limiting.

In addition to this close analysis, one should also conduct a wider analysis that takes into account the power of the social environment for, when one considers the matter, the difference between men and women actually lies in the way their retroactively constructed talents are respectively *received by society*: while women have to trade their female talent for giving on a most prosaic *market*, men may enter a *charismatic community* in which their male sporting talent will be recognized and celebrated (there is no equivalent for women of the “encompassing” institution that trains apprentice footballers). This double analysis sheds light on the reason why women are “in the process of continually halting losses rather than trading-up and accruing extra value” (Skeggs, p. 161). This is not due to the fact that women “made the most of what they had but it rarely offered good trading potential” (*ibid.*). This is not so much due either to 1) the *weakness of their resource* as to 2) the *social constraint* that *compels them to use it* (they are socially constructed as caring) and also to 3) the *objective opportunity that is offered to them to put this resource into practice*, an interpretation that is far more complex and much less generous towards women and echoes the title of

Skeggs' book, *Becoming respectable*: like most dominated people, women become trapped not so much on account of weak resources as because of the strength of the expectations that have been set for them and the relative ease with which they can fulfil these expectations. What might be crucial here is not so much the fact that "There are limitations on how they can *be*" (p. 162), but the fact that "Within these constraints they deploy many constructive and creative strategies to generate a sense of themselves *with value*" (ibid., my emphasis); to achieve this, "They make a gift of caring for others; a gift, Diprose (1994) argues, is about the *dispersal of their identity to others*" (p. 163, my emphasis).

Identity for the self and identity for others

Now in order to engage in a game with the *illusio* – however dangerous it may be – of talent, one needs to be able to rely on an *identity for the self*, the kind of identity that is typically associated with men, especially dominant males, even if occasionally it appears as a self-evident moral duty that stands in perfect opposition to women's duty: "Foucault argues: 'One must not have the care for others to precede the care for self. The care for self takes a moral precedence in the measure that the relationship to self takes ontological precedence' (1988: 7). Not so for the women of the study" (Skeggs, p. 64). Indeed, women "do not have access to the egocentric preoccupation (...)" (p. 163). "Their selves [are] full of duty and obligation generated through their relationships to others" (p. 164) and "Their subjectivity is not part of a discourse of individualism" (ibid.): a type of discourse that is so much present in the discourse of performance, competition and sporting talents.

B. Skeggs's book sheds light on social determinations pervading the lives of the working class as a whole, but *in so far as it is concerned with women*, it appears as a totally disenchanted version of the narratives of the self presented in the work of Schotté and Bertrand :

"It was impossible to romanticize or heroize their experiences and responses (even if I had wanted to) in the same way as has been done by White male working-class academics working with White working-class men. First there are wider discourses that authorize the supposed authentic masculinity of working-class men. Second, there is very little that is heroic about caring and femininity". (Skeggs, p. 36)

One might therefore reinterpret the recent literature on caring practices in the light of this observation: one might indeed see it as an attempt on the part of women – obviously belonging to dominant groups – to restore dignity to caring practices and even associate them with talent (and rehabilitate femininity in the process). But this construct (in addition to exemplifying, albeit in an original way, the relative ease with which expected female dispositions can be acted out and embodied) merely results from the fact that a very small fraction of women have managed to develop historical and sociological capacities on which they rely in order to heroize a certain type of fate – which those for whom caring work was the *only* option could never have achieved by themselves.

Talent and social morality

Any other way out of this appalling confinement of women to caring work – which nipped so many potential careers for women in the bud – seem to be quite unlikely today. Films showing women achieving improbable sporting performances provide a very good illustration of this difficulty. In *Billy Elliot*, or in *Whiplash*, the future athletes have to endure physical pain, tears of blood and sacrifices but they eventually achieve glory, as exemplified by the closing scene of *Billy Elliot* showing the dancer, performing as a swan, jump towards

the light or by the ray of light falling on the drummer in the final solo when he finally surpasses his master in *Whiplash*. Conversely, the wounds, the tears and the sacrifices endured by the very few and improbable female would-be champions inexorably lead them to death: in *Black Swann*, the dancer eventually jumps to her death while in *Million Dollar Baby*, the heroine, who is paralyzed and bed-bound, asks the coach who brought her to her present condition to end her life. If novels and films can be said to provide a moral in action, narratives of talent applied to female characters are not only very rare and highly improbable but also terribly frightening.

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