

Bouquin S. (2014), « Resistance to work and at the workplace : a Blind Spot for French Sociology of Work », in Rawlinson M., (ed.), *Labor and global justice. Essays on the ethics of Labor Practices under Globalization*, ed. Lexington Books, pp. 165-178.

## **Resistance towards work and at the workplace, a blind spot for french sociology of work ?\***

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### **Summary**

French sociology of work dealt with workers resistance during the years of crisis of taylorist organisations. At this time, namely during the seventies, a high turn-over, sabotage, slow down actions as well as strikes expressed the workers rejection of taylorism. In de the eighties, most of the sociologists expected a lot from the post-taylorist schemes. Moreover, they defended an interpretation that welcomed these changes as an element, together with post-fordism, to resolve the crisis of work as well as the crisis of profitability. In the nineties, the drive towards casualisation, the flexibilisation, the growth of internal and external flexibility confronted mainstream sociologists with the limits of their views. A new critical stream developed a vision of the workplace where workers resistance is not existing anymore neither possible. In the place of this, management dominated without contest nor conflict and workers were subjugated and volunteers of submission. A weak trade-unionism at the level of the shop-floor as well as the theoretical approaches and conceptual frameworks gave more credibility to fieldwork depicting workers as isolated, in competition, without solidarity, suffering. As author of several studies in the car manufactories (published as *La valse des écrous*, 2006) as well as in other areas (editor of the *Résistances au travail*, 2008), I was personally always sceptical towards these approaches. This paper has the purpose to explain where this scepticism originated from and on which ground a different approach could be developed in order to take into account part of an apparent invisible reality. After a historical overview of the topic we will present empirical data that demonstrates the existence of resistances as well as types of misbehaviour and we will explain why resistance was so less used by French sociology of work, although it has always been influenced by Marxist conceptual frameworks.

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The question of ‘resistance’ has a long standing record in Anglo-Saxon sociology. History, sociology and labour process theory acknowledge the existence, or at least the possibility, of informal oppositional conduct at the workplace. From ‘workers resistance’ to ‘organisational misbehaviour’, the issue was (and is) a subject of controversy but was not denied as such (Brown, 1977; Edwards, 1979; Thompson, 1983; Whiston 1997; Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999).

Some may consider this behaviour as linked with the structural characteristics of wage labour, i.e. being coercive and exploitative; others may consider it as the very truth of the Homo Faber

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\* Paper presented at the International Labour Process Conference  
6-8<sup>th</sup> of April 2009, Edinburgh.

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since living labour will never be completely mastered and objectivated. In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, people at work are rarely seen as willing slaves, passive or dominated in such a way they completely act according to management will. Of course, some will argue that autonomous action in work situations is necessary to organisations in order to work well. And indeed, behaviour such as workplace games (Burawoy, 1979), coping attitudes or re-adjustments of job design are functional. In these cases, human behaviour stays within the boundaries of what is needed or expected to be efficient. But can we still consider them as part of ‘resistance to work’? I don’t think so and we will return later to this aspect of definition.

In French sociology, the issue of ‘resistance’ is far from having the same presence in (academic) literature. As editor of a book (Bouquin, 2008) about this subject, I started to analyse this relative absence as part of conceptual and theoretical differences between French and Anglo-Saxon sociology of work.

In this paper, I will present in a first section the history of this research item in relation to the broader social-political background. In a second section I will confront empirical evidence with how French authors deal with domination and (or not) with resistance. In a last section I will present some elements of explanation of the relative absence of ‘resistance’ in sociological literature.

## **I. The ebbs and flows of workers resistance**

### ***1). The years of struggle (1965-1982)***

In a country like France, with a weak system of industrial relations (outside the public sector) and a divided trade union landscape, one would expect a strong presence of informal ways of opposition. But this is not the case. Wage labour expanded after the Second World War and the industrialisation of rural areas integrated new layers into the working class, mainly women and former peasants. Production on a mass scale with taylorist-fordist methods grew as fast as small scale artisanal and familial capitalism reduced its share of economic output. The expansion of taylorist methods led to a growth of the unskilled workforce, named ‘ouvriers spécialisés’ i.e. task specialised workers. The skilled workers, ‘ouvriers professionnels’ were the main battalions of the trade unions, specially the CGT. The industrial and technological innovations led to the extension of an unskilled and above all less paid workforce. Skilled workers faced a growing presence of this segment and feared to be degraded in their professional status. In 1968, the first, the hardest and longest strikes were those among the new unskilled layers of the working class, outside Paris and its industrial belt. This was a concrete refutation Serge Mallet’s thesis about a ‘new working class’ made of engineers, technicians and skilled operators. The general strike was not a strike against taylorist work systems as such. The sources of discontent were also material (low wages in a wealthy France, the pay gap between Paris and province) and linked to the authoritarian management structures. The agreements of Grenelle increased the minimum wage (SMIG) with 30% and recognised trade unions in firms (‘section syndicale’). Later on, in the early seventies, a wave of strikes in the car manufacturing sector expressed the aim of avoiding any segregation by job classification systems. Unskilled workers also wanted to have the opportunity to become professional (skilled) worker. This, with a high turnover were the main symptoms of a crisis of work relations. This crisis was interpreted by sociologists as a rejection of taylorist works systems, which it was for sure. According to Claude Durand (1978), fellow researcher of Alain Touraine, the second phase of technological development of industry could

only lead to dissatisfaction, frustration and rejection of the strong division of labour, monotonous work tasks, chain work, standardised piece work, etc. Others, like Pierre Dubois (1976, 1980), as close readers of Harry Braverman, understood the crisis of work as part of a wider revolt against work degradation, with a large range of behaviour going from attempts to win back control over the work situation ('freinage' or slowing down, output restriction or even sabotage) to ways of escaping out of these jobs.

According to sociologists, in order to solve the 'crisis of work', Taylorism had to be replaced by new forms of work organisation, recognition of tacit skills, job enlargement and job enrichment. But the employers refused to do so during the whole of the 1970's. Some experiences such as self-managed teams on a 'carousel' were set up but only on a small scale. An internal document of the employers' association of 1972 (Sudreau, 1975; CNPF, 1973) offers us an explanation of why these experiences remained so rare: according to them, introducing new forms of work organisation in the post-68 context with low unemployment and a balance of power in favour of unions and workers would result in an increase of production costs (including the wages as such because of the recognition of 'tacit' skills) and a shift of power to the shop floor. Therefore, any large scale introduction of 'sociotechnic' reforms such as in Sweden, the UK or Germany had to be avoided. As a result, the employers' association advocated a further hiring of foreign workers from (northern) African countries as the best answer to the revolt against Taylorism. And indeed, until 1975, direct hiring of foreign workers continued on a high level. When these workers expressed their rejection of their unskilled condition, they did so with the aim of having access to skilled professional status. In 1973-1974, almost 40 strikes occurred in Renault around this issue, most of them were 'wildcat strikes', more often recognised and supported by the CFDT than by the CGT. As a response to this protest, management created a new intermediate section of 'quasi professionals'. In a lot of cases, this was experienced as a threat to the status of 'real' professional and skilled workers. These cleavages inside the 'collective worker' often corresponded with differences in nationality or ethnic background. Trade unions also negotiated in 1974 an agreement in the metal working industry recognising competencies acquired through work experience. This agreement aimed to end discrimination of workers who did not had the opportunity of a technical education through vocational education or recognition of 'on the job' acquired skills.

In the late seventies and early eighties, economic crisis hit France very hard. Industry, i.e. garment, car manufactory and steel mills restructured deeply and unemployment was growing rapidly. In 1981, the new government of the united left faced a recession as well as the threat of an outflow of capital by the economic elites. The government made an attempt to democratise the economy through nationalisations and fostering collective bargaining (on the company level) as well as forms of workers participation. During that period, sociological analysis ceased to deal with 'resistance' and expressed the hope that new work schemes would develop in the aftermath.

### ***- The years of crisis and restructuring (1983-1994)***

Capital answered falling profitability, first with massive restructuring (lay-offs) and then, from 1986, with a wave of technological innovations. Some of these were presented as an opportunity to change the division of labour and the nature of work. The fact that automation and new technologies were introduced at the same time as Japanese inspired work schemes was seen as a single solution to a double problem, i.e. restoring profitability and solving the crisis of work (dissatisfaction and rejection of Taylorism). Work would change and cease to be a waste of energy

and time; creativity would be used well by organisations and workers would make the best of their capabilities.

Most of French critical sociologists and economists (Coriat, 1979 ; Zarifian, 1993) adopted an analytical framework inspired by the 'regulation school' (Boyer). To them, a new regime of accumulation was 'waiting round the corner': it combined the production of diversified goods for varying needs through a new productive model with higher skill requirements and therefore a different work organisation with less division of labour. Some German authors (Kern & Schumann, 1987) developed similar arguments. Generally, mainstream analysis expressed a strong dose of optimism that was very welcome in such dark times.

Unfortunately, organisational innovations were closely inspired by the human relations approach developed by the Tavistock Institute only developed for a short period. The introduction 'quality circles' was limited to the steel and chemical industry and other forms of participation had to fit with tight time management. At the end of the 1980's, most of these degenerated so that monthly meetings became less and less regular. Other institutional changes like 'groupes d'expression directe' (groups of direct expression) saw their agendas limited to immediate aspects and productivity issues. On the job rotation or job enrichment became a source of intensification and densification of labour. In 1987, the introduction of teamwork was limited to Renault under the name of 'unités élémentaires de travail' (UET) and teamleaders were designed by the hierarchy. The other car manufacturer, Peugeot-Citroen kept producing in a traditional way with larger teams and a tight hierarchical chain of control (Durand & Hatzfeld, 1998). In the early nineties, it became clear that things did not change as expected. More and more it became clear that toyotism was mainly concerned with a higher return of invested capital through the reduction of production costs (lean manufacturing), externalisation and just-in-time. From the viewpoint of workers, the new organisations of production looked more and more as neo-taylorism since the use of the conveyor expanded, the amount of MTM devoted to tasks shortened and the prescription of how to work also reached subjective dimensions, i.e. the relation to one's job (TQM, Kan Ban, zero defaults) (Bouquin, 2006).

Of course, during the eighties, the crisis of work faded away and was replaced by the 'crisis of employment'. The issue of informal workers resistance disappeared from the literature. Some thought this was normal and unavoidable since the origins (taylorism) had disappeared as well. Later on, when taylorism was acknowledged as a work system that was still in place, sociological attention focussed upon the atomisation of the collective worker and the willing submission to coercion.

### ***- The years without fairy tales (1995-2008)***

Half way in the nineties, some authors started to reflect critically on the idea of a 'new model of production' (Coutrot, 1998). On a macro-level of labour market and society, the growing presence of precarious workers did not fit with the regulation school's expectations of a virtuous circle of growth based upon new work with higher skills and increased productivity. Phenomena as externalisation or subcontracting, temporary workers (contractual flexibility) created a periphery of impoverished and vulnerable workers around the core segment of stable workers. As an effect of this, thinking about a 'productive model' as a 'one best way' had no sense and models had to pluralized. Most analysts of GERPISA (M. Freyssenet, R. Boyer) took this road with distinctive profit strategies and industrial or productive models (Freyssenet, 2000). Others

(Durand e.a., 1998) developed a typology of the wage-relationship ('relation salariale') according to how collective bargaining, how unionism and how HR policies interact with the industrial strategies of the firms. Such an approach tried to combine internal and external dimensions in the same analytical framework which was a way to grasp all kinds of variations that did not fit in the model of lean production designed by the International Motor Vehicle Program of Boston MIT nor in the naïve idea of early eighties of a new regime of accumulation.

But, on the level of the firm or the network of firms (supply chain), the social balance worsened although the economic situation (profitability) evolved better in comparison with the eighties. The phenomenon of permanent 'downsizing' was seen as consequence of corporate governance with financial markets demanding a 'return of own equities' (ROE) of 15%. More fundamentally, I would say that lowering costs of production (capital and labour costs) was needed to restore profitability. This was obtained in the late eighties. In the nineties, the increases of productivity with a pace of 3-4% per year could only lead to reducing employment since there was no significant reduction of working time and the global output hit the limits of the market (mainly the renewal of goods in the OECD countries and relative small numbers of solvable consumers in the rest of the world). But, most sociological analysis tends to forget that the 'social return' of competitiveness and profitability (i.e. all anti-crisis policies on firm level) was and is dependent on the presence of trade unions and the balance of power. Moreover, trade unions can take different orientations and may, in some cases, advocate these policies because they 'are necessary to survive' under global competition.

Nevertheless, various surveys such as the equivalent of WERS in France (DARES, 1992) or the European survey on working conditions demonstrated that work did not change as much as expected (Coutrot, 1998 ; Gollac & Volkoff, 2000). Intensification as well as a loss of control upon the pace of work – through short term deadlines, an increase in the use of the conveyor belt or the mobilisation of client 'awaiting' – showed a landscape where old fashion tayloristic work systems were still very operative while new schemes of mobilisation, inspired by toyotism, put the stress on the way of engaging into work through subjective, psychological means. As a result, more and more authors (Martucelli, 2000 ; Courpasson, 2002) started to speak again about 'domination of labour' ('domination du travail') or workers in 'willing serfdom' ('servitude volontaire') (Durand, 2003).

The general situation depicted since the late nineties, specially regarding the private sector was very pessimistic. A general *ebb* of strikes expressed the 'end of collectivism' as some would say in the UK. In France, it was more seen as the end of the working class 'for itself', i.e. the end of class consciousness. Some case studies (Beaud & Pialoux, 1996) even presented workers as being ashamed of their class identity, trying to escape by any means the class they belong to. Since that period, most of critical sociologists (Linhart, Boltanski & Chiapello) have presented management as hegemonic, class domination as absolute (through symbolic violence) and the labour process as mastered and controlled by management (in France this is said as 'le travail' or the work being carried out).

Sociological reflection orientated itself to the questions of how management could be so successful and so uncontested. The answers lay in the objective situation (because of high unemployment, fear of precarity), in the subjective situation (the weakness of trade unions) and last but not least, in cultural trends with growing individualism. According to them, management had won the hearts and minds of the workers. Blue as well as white collar workers acted fierce

fully according to efficiency principles. The use of incentives (bonus schemes and variable wages) as well of the logic of competency (regular evaluations of one's engagement by direct hierarchical superior) sorted effect.

In fact, the few sociologists still talking about 'resistances' were the pro-management ones. Organisational sociology with authors like M. Crozier and D. Segrestin still stress the 'resistance to change' as a problem for management. Consultants still make money with 'organisational learning' and psychological models that focus upon avoiding or dismantling any disturbance or irregular behaviour. Can we assume that these narratives are completely false and only help selling empty air to the management boards? No, personally I assume that there must be some truth in their account and powerpoint presentations. If every five years the consultancy business can identify new 'tools' and narratives to enhance performance, the topic of 'resistance to change' obviously remains present (even as a best-seller). This invited me to think differently about work situations than most of my colleagues do.

Of course, inside the academic sphere, debate (when it occurs) has some strange aspects: some are making a very dreadful portrait of the labour market and work situations while others are arguing workers still have plenty of choices and could still develop a way of conduct that lift them out of precarious social situations. These are positions that can hardly make a dialogue... If labour is an activity in which one can come to the realisation of the self, it demands of course a strong work ethic and a strong commitment, even the ability of sacrifice leisure and family. High performance work systems imply a strong corporation culture and selected individuals. In this perspective, 'resistance to change' acts as a mechanism of stigmatising employees as 'not motivated', 'disfunctional' or unable to fit in the organisation. If this was subjected to a critical management analysis, do we have to assume that organisations are clean of discontent and that there is no room left for employees (blue collar or white collar workers) to think and to act in non conformal ways? No, and for this reason I have begun alternative fieldwork since a couple of years.

## **II – Alternative empirical evidence**

Many of my students in sociology are from working class background and most of them work to pay their undergraduate or postgraduate studies. They work in the summer or during the year on an annualized part-time scheme. Some work in industry while others work in the catering (fastfood) or in call centers. For practical reasons, they use their workplace as a field for surveys or participatory observation.

My own PhD published under the title 'La Valse des écrous' (Bouquin, 2006) contained three cases studies: Opel Antwerp, Volkswagen in Brussels and Renault Trucks in Caen (Normandy). These confronted me with situations where informal worker's resistance was still present. In some cases, slowdown actions and sabotage developed because of the passivity of trade unions and agreements signed to guarantee jobs in exchange for a productivity increase; in other cases, this informal resistance was part of a way of working, of opposing foremen or hierarchy in general. I faced situations like assembly workers had were speeding up to spare time to smoke a cigarette or to play chess near the workstation. Sometimes, 'technical' incidents occurred but expressed indirectly the polarisation and tensions on the assembly line. These facts demonstrate that work relations and wage labour are always to some extent polarised by 'structural antagonism' (Kelly, 1998). Collective action is only the emerged part of the iceberg and the fact

strikes do occur is an (important) element but sociological analysis cannot limit its account to that aspect.

When in 2002–2003 some of my students started to echo my analysis with their own accounts about how things really happened at the workplace, I tried to systematise all information and brought together different cases into a book published in 2008. I give here a summary of some empirical evidence :

- In call centres, operators know how to use specific codes in order to keep someone on line or to ask him/her to be called back later. These tactics explain and justify lower ratios of connection, selling or survey response. Operators share this knowhow via outside social networks, through university or pubs. They know they can be tracked by supervisors but they also know how to negotiate supervisors passivity or complicity.
- In electronic device stores, employees regularly steal ‘damaged’ material that was put aside because formally defect (a so called client brings it back) and reselling products can increase (low) wages by 5 or 10% per month. In supermarkets, cashiers scan only one in two articles when a colleague comes for shopping or they know how to keep goods out of electronic registration and therefore out of sight.
- In industry, cheating occurs sometimes with the consent of the employer since subcontracting produces solidarity between everybody. Here the same thing happen as when you bring your car to the garage and one problem is solved but another appears as ‘by accident’ a few weeks later. In the ICT sector and in many facility and maintenance services, contracts with suppliers try to avoid such malpractices through fixed prices covering all risks.
- Temporary workers tend to form small groups where one takes care of each other, pushing a colleague into a short mission that one self do not need nor like. As a result, a ‘moral economy’ tends to develop solidarity through interdependency in order to reduce some of the professional insecurity.
- Output restriction appeared to be a common practice among high level employees such as sales managers that work in large multinational corporate organisations and that have to cope with ‘targets’ based on their earlier results. In such situations, they withhold some orders for the next period to avoid inflation of targets. I also observed new forms of slowing down or output restriction in traditional industry or in transport sector. The motives seem to be less economic or material and more based on saving time for oneself or reducing the pressure and tiredness of intensification. Creative employees always find a good excuse...

### **‘What’s in a name?’**

Why should these practices be analysed in terms of ‘resistances’? Indeed, they are useful for organisations since they create the possibility to cope and to hold on in tense situations. For these reasons, we cannot disconnect such ways of conduct with other ones such as ‘adjustments’ or singular forms of re-appropriation of the work situation. At the same time, these forms of conduct have a group dimension and play a role in the recomposing a collective worker of an informal kind. It is therefore problematic to analyse contemporary work relations as atomised and under complete control of management as D. Linhart does (1994, 2009).

Moreover, these forms of behaviour have a group dimension like before: the group does declare itself openly nor immediately, integration of a new member passes through experience and

testing and can be analysed as a form of peer socialisation. It is the holder of semi-fragmented collectivism (to use Tilly's notion).

As we observed in the case of maintenance workshop in aircraft industry, these groups can correspond to trade union members and they may share the same shopfloor culture. In this situation the strength of a trade union is rooted in its proximity with the real existing collective worker. But given the weakness of trade unions in France, given their divided and ideological character, and given the strength of managerial corporate culture and work ethics, most of the time, these informal groups exist on a smaller scale and have to coexist with individuals and sometimes groups that tend to conform themselves to dominant culture.

The fear to fall into disgrace in the eyes of immediate superiors, the hope to obtain a better situation through promotion; the fear to be part of the next cohort of redundancies and many other reasons still give management the advantage into implementing certain ways of conduct. Some authors (Jean-Pierre Durand) call this a kind of 'servitude volontaire' (La Boétie) (willing serfdom) and the symbolic and material base of consent existing on a large scale. If this is the case, we cannot take for granted it will always be. As I demonstrated, employees act in accordance to what they understand as their interests. When there is no promotion, when management fails to deliver the promises which gave consent a rationale, things change. People do 'as if' and we can verify the existence of 'hidden transcripts' of revolt such as was identified in various situation by James C. Scott (1990) who noticed how dominated groups hide their own opinions but share these with others when those who do have power are absent or not able anymore to control subordinated ones. When the legitimacy of power is in crisis, people start to think again in a critical way, to disbelief, and cease to collaborate in an active way. Then they go over to passivity, false collaboration and active resistance.

If we evoke the notion of 'interest', what do we mean by that? It is of course a question of perspective and therefore subjective. But even in the absence of a Marxist narrative held by trade union activists, employees may consider work to be a relation in which they do not receive enough in exchange for their efforts. Even in a liberal conception of labour as an exchange relation, there is an efficiency-level of pay. Of course France has a Proudhonistic tradition that underpins strongly the ethics of work. Well done work is also something shared by the communist political culture which developed a symbiotic relation with the professional ethos of craftsmanship. But nowadays, both are in crisis specially under the younger generation and we can observe among them much more opportunism and utilitarianism regarding work and labour.

Moreover, we have to take into account that in a country such as France, where wages stagnated while productivity increased, the working poor are getting more numerous on an objective and subjective level (people consider themselves as poor in comparison to other more wealthy) and last but not least, the ideological legitimacy of income and wealth differences still relies upon the ideals of the republic and egalitarian individualism. Therefore, the feeling of injustice is something that spread among labouring people on a quite large scale. Some surveys recognize that fact (Baudelot & Gollac, 2000)

When work is too tense and stressing, when pay is seen as unfair and employees suffer outside work from their labour, things are out of balance and it becomes normal for 'misbehaviour' to occur. The morale of this behaviour is to put things back into balance through semi-informal



clandestine means, awaiting that it would happen on a formal level, eventually thanks to a better management or to a successful collective action by trade unions.

Some authors do consider 'resistance' is a real issue nowadays. But when they do, as is the case of D. Courpasson (2002) e.a., they see it as acting in favour of well done work. The rebellion of the cadres, of white collar managers, is seen as a revolt against bureaucratic and authoritarian structures that are ineffective regarding motivation and efficiency. By analysing the question from this viewpoint, resistances can be seen as a symptom of badly managed and not properly organised teams. This should pave the way to a pacification of the workplace that in the end never lasts. Such an interpretation fails to explain why work situations are never 'a quiet frontline' forever and this is a reason to be sceptical to such a 'pro-work resistance'. It may happen of course, and employees may use the fact that they do not receive the means to deliver quality but it can also be an attitude. When engineers, technicians or managers refuse promotion, refuse to take responsibility, and refuse to give their best at their employer, or even towards themselves (when they are freelance) has to do with the problematic centrality of labour in life. This is something that only becomes apparent when longitudinal analysis is developed or when people look back at their career. In their forties, people will see some conduct as vain, they will no longer expect so much recognition and they will know promises only engage those that believe them. At these ages, they will engage themselves in trade unions, in leisure and social activities outside work or into 'quality time'. The fact that such attitudes now appear among lower management also reflects the fact these layers were submitted to a kind of 'proletarianization' in the recent period.

To me 'resistances' at work act against abstract labour and do not only occur at the workplace but can be directed against work as such. There is a relatively invisible but real link between 'resistances' and the structural character of the wage relationship and the rationality of a profit based organisation (driven by the accumulation of capital, in competition on a market). Even if 'resistances' are just one of the kinds of behaviour, even if it is often mixed or combined with other, it is considered as disruptive by management. It cannot be recognised as functional by management (even though it sometimes is) but has to be stigmatised as an unreasonable, unqualified and unapt way of working. Most of the time, when individuals are identified as having such behaviour, the sanction is hard and definitive.

### **III - Conclusions**

To recapitulate, the relative absence of 'resistances' in French sociology has to do with the overall social and economic evolutions of the last two decades. Wildcat strikes disappeared and workers were anxious about employment. Turnover is at very low levels and people more often express complaints than criticism. But as I demonstrated, the situation at the workplace is more ambiguous than one would expect. These facts were not expected by those with a critical (Marxist) background. And to me, this is partly the result of a problematic early-Marxist and Proudhonistic conceptualisation of work and wage labour. Early trade unionists as well as authors like Proudhon defined wage labour as a situation of alienation and subordination, of losing means of production and the control over the labour process. Which it obviously was (and is), but not solely. They forgot to see that wage labour is also a commodified (economic) relation of exchange between an effort and a pay. It is also a relation of co-dependency where the employer is never assured to succeed constantly in the surplus-extraction that has to be carried out. In United Kingdom common sense as well as sociological analysis integrated much more the fact

that wage labour contains such kind of uncertainty (Biernacki, 1995). In other words, culturally, in France, it is 'not done' to work badly when one is badly paid. Working for public services is working for common good and delivering services of a high use value. For that reasons, trade union activists evidently share a strong identification with their work tasks and their job; any kind of 'resistance' that could be seen as sabotage is therefore rejected. Trade union culture of private sector still bear the memory of rejecting Taylorism in the name of a culture of craftsmanship and professional ethos.

In France, sociologists as well as trade union activists have difficulties to understand that (young) people do act differently regarding their work tasks. One reason for that has to do with 'projection': sociologists are in the situation to develop a strong identification to their work (in fact more 'oeuvre' than 'labour') and think this should be the case for everybody. They develop the a-historical viewpoint similar to the nostalgic craftsmen and find empirical confirmation in the social isolation and distress of unemployed people. Of course, without employment, one is lost... But does this mean that one cannot resist inside the sphere of work or regarding the wage relation as such?

Common sense among sociological thinkers or in everyday life still opposes bad work to good work, bad jobs to good jobs, jobs with 'suffering' ('souffrance au travail' is a successful theme in media developed by psychologist Christophe Dejours, 1998) and jobs with pleasure and realization of the self. This common sense basically fails to question the roots of coercion that appear to exist more or less in all kinds of jobs, from skilled to unskilled, from 'manual' to 'intellectual' (emotional, knowledge) work. Since work is simply understood as an activity under constraint without taking into account the social form of labour (i.e. a commodified social relation linked to wage-relationship), mainstream analysis forget to take into account the need to rationalize and to control human effort. Yet those two aspects are objective causes for the degradation of work and therefore are nourishing renewed forms of resistances to work and at the workplace.

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