

## Qualified and unqualified workers : across changing times

Numa Murard, Université Paris 7

### Introduction

This category doesn't refer to a category within the welfare state but to one concerning work status and to that of class, the working class. We therefore need at least to discuss the working class, a definition of their risk, before looking at our interviewee's strategies.

### I. The Working Class and the Social Sciences

If the bourgeoisie, as quoted by R.Barthes, 'can be defined as the class that refuses to be named', the working class could be defined, as by G.Noiriel (1986) as 'the class having always been named'. It is therefore of interest to draw attention to the fact that there is no current sociology of the working class in France. It disappeared at the same time as the certainty regarding the historic destiny of the working class and the certainty of its very existence. A small number of important books have been devoted to this topic since the beginning of the 80's (among them J.Ranciere, 1981, M.Verret, 1982, G.Noiriel, 1986, M.Verret, 1988, F.Weber, 1989, J.P.Terrail, 1990, O.Schwartz, 1990, Autrement, 1992). The sociology of the working class occupies a few shelves in some universities (Nantes, Besançon, St Quentin) and in research groups (the IRES (institut de recherches economique et sociales, founded in 1936), or the MAGE-CNRS). A sociology of workers can however be found in the sociology of migrations, the sociology of poverty, the sociology of gender and the sociology of labor. The situation in social sciences indicates therefore the nature of the changes. A large number of workers are migrants. A large number of them are poor. A large number of workers are women. There are still many workers in employment. But nobody is sure there is still a working class. Most agree, in Marxist terms, that it is easy to prove the existence of a working class *in se*, although fragmented and very different from the working class of the 70's, but very difficult to argue for the existence of a working class *per se*. As quoted by Michel Verret (1992), it can be said that 'there is no longer a working class identity but only working class conditions.'

Such a statement requires explanation and further elaboration in order to make sure we know what we are talking about when studying working class biographies. The first step is historical. The "new social history", following E.P.Thomson theory of the making of the English working class, has clearly demonstrated the differences between France and Great Britain (G.Noiriel, 1986). The making of the French working class has been a very slow, gradual and still unfinished process. To change peasants into proletarians and proletarians into workers has taken more than a century and can be demonstrated to have been incomplete until the 1930s. Consequently, only two full generations of industrialized workers have had time to settle at the center of society, to incarnate the 'people' before big changes occurred in the middle of the 70's. Until then, the take off of French industry had been prevented by the political and social weight of peasants, of a people tied to the land, prepared to work in the local factory but remaining deeply

peasant. The archaism of French industry (a word of 1860) is the outcome of not only the employer's economic malthusianism (C.Levy-Leboyer, 1968), but of the peasants' powerful resistance to proletarianisation, a resistance reinforced, at the political level, by the French revolution. In 1880, one active person in two was still employed in the agricultural sector against one in four in Great Britain. The drift from the countryside was very slow too : in 1880, only 15% of the French did not live in the department where they were born. The novels of Zola and the social reports of the mid-19th are focused on heavy industry (mining) which in facts represent a very small minority of the labor force. And the authors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's political revolutions (1830, 1848, 1870) are the skilled workers and artisans of the big cities, fighting against mechanization and the destruction of craft skills (W.Sewell, 1983).

The employer's strategy in big industry - pacifying male labor with philanthropy and engaging women, children and migrants- was successful only after the crisis of the years 1890-1910. The mechanization and the scientific organization of work (Taylor) was to take place in the 20th century, changing proletarians into workers, whose most outstanding and charismatic figure is the metallurgist (adjuster, miller, founder, turner...) incarnated by the movie star Jean Gabin under the admiring gaze of Arletty. The authors of the 20th century's political revolutions (1906, 1936, 1968) are workers who have accepted mechanization. As G.Navel (1945) says, 'there is a sadness in the working class, which can only be cured by political involvement'. A second generation, born between 30 and 50, inherits from the first (having won in 1936). The peak of industrialization is reached in 1954. The class *per se* is also at its peak, expressed notably in the influence of the communist party and CGT union. The new opposition appears, distributed between qualified and unqualified workers, the qualified being machine workers, the unqualified on assembly lines. As always, women and migrants are numerous in the later category. In 1968 an elite of de-qualified workers (young workers with long hair) comes to the fore. Then the class is homogenized in the middle of the 70's. In spatial terms, social housing and industrial zoning replace the ancient suburb and slum, making more difficult both the expression of and control of working class culture.

In introducing the 1992' issue of the review *Autrement*, titled '*un continent morcelé et silencieux*' (a fragmented, silent continent) G.P.Azémar recalls that workers are still 7.3 millions in 1989 (almost a third of the total active population) and wonders why their silence and the silence about them, that yesterday would have been a scandal, has become normal. The working class has disappeared between two worlds. Michel Verret (1992) offers a strong analysis of this disappearance, linked to the changes in capitalism. The core of the class has been damaged and partly destroyed : siderurgy, metallurgy, ship building, mechanics, printing. If the working class is not any more 'the soul of the people', it is also because there is not such a difference to day between the work of the workers and the work of the employers. The disguising of the class can be analyzed through three processes :

- de-structuring, through working class aristocracy undertaking intellectualized tasks, a mass threatened with loosing its manual jobs, and a hopeless minority
- loss of solidarity between elder and younger, men and women, French and foreigners.

The young become workers, not through socialization into the class culture, but through failure at school, and at the end of a period of despair named by themselves '*la galère*' (F.Dubet, 1992). Women, less numerous in a period of labor increase, are still

discriminated against and marginalized within the class (M.Marvani, 1992). Among the migrants, the later arrived are the less qualified and the most exploited, the arrival of new workers reinforcing the difficulty of reproducing a working class culture (G.Noiriel, 1992).

- through de-organizing, with the lowest rate of unionism in Europe.

The century, concludes Michel Verret, may well be concluded with the total triumph of the bourgeoisie, having defeated and destroyed the working class after having defeated and destroyed the peasants, those two 'peoples' of the nation-state. It doesn't mean that working class conditions have vanished, nor the workers themselves, whose general attitude moves from irony to skepticism, from derision to despair.

In S.Beaud and M.Pialoux's contribution (1992) one finds the lived experience of a worker on the assembly line as being that of a maintenance agent, having not only crossed a social barrier but found a changed world; the consequence of the employer's strategy of 'zero breakdown, zero defect, zero stock' with unqualified work is the production of hatred, in the minds and hands of assembly-line workers, the hate that makes you work efficiently as your employer wants you to. Training in order to quit the assembly line is being 'a betrayer'. Such a man will have to hide during a strike, even if he wants to he cannot be on strike. As a unionist, he advocates now a 'reasonable and constructive unionism' against those who only want to fight. The report shows the depression of the old unqualified workers. It shows how the new Taylorism (in the automobile sector) ruins the old working class strategy of go slow to resist the hierarchy. To slow down, to resist, is to become, for the other workers, a betrayer. Those two kinds of betraying are the core of working class ambivalence, very clearly shown, for the 19th century, by J.Ranciere (1990). One desires secretly to leave the conditions of the working class, yet solidarity remains essential as an obligation as well for survival, and to be an activist, to **advocate** worker's solidarity against the employers and the State, is a way of resolving the contradiction.

A new issue in current research is the issue of individualism among workers, following an old and forgotten debate about the *embourgeoisement* (gentrification) of the working class. For J.P.Terrail (1990) the working class subculture is still of the holistic type but there is a dramatic change in the process of individualization within the working class. Instead of *embourgeoisement*, one should talk about modernization of the class, fitting the ancient norms to the new (improved) life conditions, allowing more individuation of choice, more power to oneself, one's life, one's work. Individualism can only be found in the extreme types of the worker-technician or of the excluded. The hopes placed by workers in education have grown faster than the outcomes. You need to succeed at school in order to become a qualified worker, and you become an unqualified or unemployed worker if you don't. Patterns of upward mobility from the working class are therefore seldom difficult to characterize in quantitative terms.

The O.Schwartz's monograph on the 'private world of workers' (1990) gives a new insight into the issue of family and private life in the working class. Following M.Verret, according to whom 'the movement of familialisation, noticeable in the between-the-two-wars period, has since been confirmed', the author shows that, currently the family is no longer absorbed in kinship and community as it was before. The family, the home, competes with the community 'and therefore functions as a

private pole'. 'Privatization' is the outcome of two different and opposing processes of change : the enrichment of the 60s which brought more comfort, consumption and welfare, (allowing a family a degree of hedonism or of saving towards the social promotion of their children), and mass unemployment, which gave to the family the role of a 'crisis shock-absorber'. Therefore privatization uncovers two very different dynamics : the one is emancipatory, de-proletarianizing, opening up to welfare, free time; the second closes the world by force into the home, the 'privatism' of the poor and insularity.

The main outcome of this approach is the illustration of how these processes were lived in the different strata of the working class in the mining sector historically, the proletarian stratum of the 50s, the stratum of the possibly de-proletarianised (1960-1975), and the stratum of the precarious worker (with unemployment becoming 'normal' and the withdrawal into the home) in the more recent period. It shows the different told and lived worlds of work, community and family for the workers of these different strata.

## **II. Working class and the welfare state**

Even if working class wasn't in the 19th century what it was said to be, the idea of it was without doubt the force behind the invention of the welfare state in the face of threatened revolution (J.Donzelot, 1984, F.Ewald, 1987). The welfare state itself, as a huge insurance system, is the mechanism of change from a 'people' of small owners to a 'people' of wage earners (H.Hatzfeld, 1961), from material property (land, tools) to social property (rights) (R.Castel, 1995). It is therefore more than a coincidence if, in the middle of the 70's, in welfare as well as in the social sciences, the working class category in itself disappeared. It is, in part, the continuation of a process beginning in 1945 with the social security laws, aimed not only at giving some insurance for low wage earners, as social insurance had been before the war, but for all working people and their families, the model being part Beveridge in conception (that everybody should be covered by insurance), part Bismarck (that work is the basis of the funding and of the entitlement). And it can be argued that the working class has lost a crucial battle at this time, because, in fighting for the defense of their rights, the different categories of workers have found themselves divided and split by different welfare administrative categories and organizations (N.Murard, 1996), their power being smoothed over by 'paritarism' (B.Pollet and D.Renard, 1997). But the disappearance of the working class as a target of welfare, is mainly the outcome of the 'new', 'neo', liberal thought, in the state as well as in the employer's discourse and practice. The dominant discourse in the state becomes, in the middle of the 70s, a discourse about poverty, then exclusion, the concern for inequalities disappearing (B.Jobert, 1981). Therefore 'the social issue' is not any more 'the working class issue', it is the 'exclusion issue' or the 'urban issue' or the 'migration issue'. And it is not any more a political issue, because the working class is not any more a threat to the regime. There has been of course a lot of welfare policies aimed at being palliative against the consequences of economic changes, almost the whole welfare action has been aimed at that, but it has not been spoken of and categorized as an action aimed particularly at workers or the working class.

It is very easy to demonstrate that workers are the main victims of unemployment (even if the trend in the media is to show cases of middle and upper class excluded individuals that obviously exist), the inequalities in unemployment reflecting the inequalities within

the class: women are more often unemployed than men, younger than older, foreigners or migrants than French. Consequently, the actuarial risk corresponds to the actual risk of unemployment. But what is the risk faced by the employed (as is the case of all our interviewees)? There has existed, during the whole period 1975-1998 the risk of being unemployed, and therefore the interviews allow us to understand how they have been facing this risk. But moreover, they have been facing and still face a risk of a different nature, that emerges on the basis of the history and sociology of the class in the past 25 years: it is the risk of changing class, of crossing the social barrier (with the guilt of the 'betrayed' as mentioned before); or the risk of depression because they have to accept the ruin of their prospects in order to remain employed; the suffering at work because of colleagues having been dismissed (C.Dejours, 1998). In other terms, the risk could then be defined as the cost experienced through economic change of the objective splitting of working class, of the class *in se*, and of the subjective vanishing of the class *per se*. This risk is experienced at work and also in private life. 'Negative individualism' (R.Castel, 1995) is obviously linked to the world of exclusion, while 'positive individualism' appears to characterize the world of the worker-technician. We shall therefore see now how our interviewees have faced the risk of unemployment and how they experience the splitting of the class *in se* and the vanishing of the class *per se*.

### **III. Strategies of our interviewees**

#### **1. Main case: Bernard: the strategy of ruse.**

Aged 40, Bernard was born in 1958 in a popular, working class area of Paris where he still lives now. He has one sister, born in 1948. His father died when Bernard was 2. His mother worked in the same factory as other women of the neighborhood. From his early childhood, Bernard recalls the industrial injuries suffered by women his mother told him about; he also recalls being locked up in a room by mother, in order not to be in the street with other children, and looking at magazines and comics, forcing himself to learn how to read; he recalls being cared for by his grand mother, an alcoholic woman, who used to give him water mixed with red wine; he recalls the police taking away his mother's new partner, alcoholic, and the shame of going to the police station with his mother in order to get from him the keys of the house; he remembers hating the cops more than his mother's partner, although he was severely punished by him when he wet the bed, and although, as he learned later, this man had abused his sister.

Aged 5, Bernard is put in a catholic boarding school where he becomes a rebel, suffering severe corporal punishment. He becomes filled with hate toward priests and religion. He starts learning his future craft as an adjuster and also learning to file, learning as well to distrust teachers who behave like employers and learning to work as little as possible.

Aged 13, Bernard is back home. His sister is already divorced. They live outside of Paris, in a social housing neighborhood, because his mother has re-married to a man with six children, 4 of them (the youngest) becoming then Bernard's siblings. The man is an alcoholic and he beats the children, including Bernard. The family is poor. Bernard belongs to a group of boys from the neighborhood and starts smoking and drinking. He has frequent arguments with his mother and her partner. For the moment he is not strong enough to threaten them, but he rebels. He attends a professional school, is the

leader of the rebellion, realizing afterwards that the professional school's system is like a factory's system.

Aged 16 (the end of compulsory education) Bernard is excluded from school and starts working, through unemployment and interim agencies. He goes from one casual job to the next, being fired when he rebels, because of injustice, racism, discrimination by the employer, other colleagues or even by the unionists, or quitting by himself when the work conditions are unbearable. Bernard brings his wage home, gives it to his mother's partner, who gives some pocket money back. Bernard thinks it is not enough. The following month, he keeps the wage, gives some money for his pension to his mother's partner. They fight, but Bernard is stronger than he is now. He is physically the strongest in the house. He shelters his brothers and sisters from his father's violence and mother's injustice. Aged 19, he quits his parent's house, lives with a friend, then alone. His brothers and sisters marry, raise children and divorce, but Bernard remains single.

From 1975 to 1995, Bernard is to have only casual jobs though he never remains unemployed. He tries being a painter, an adjuster, trimmer, turner, miller, crimper, warehouse man, maintenance agent; he also works on the assembly line, and he does industrial cleaning. Initially Bernard was not qualified but he knew how to work manually and he was not afraid of work, although he hated it. Among the jobs he had had as a young man was working as a trimmer, in a printing house, he had begun doing different tasks and he could have stayed there but he had an argument with the unionists because of their racism and his temporary contract was not extended. He had learned to be distrustful toward unionists too, though is to become a unionist himself the following year. He belongs to the CGT and is close to the communist party but doesn't belong to it. He tried then to qualify through a training course, but the training isn't an official qualification. The interim's agency knows he is a good professional, and he is offered casual contracts in bigger firms, *BSN, Air Liquide, Citroën, Bendix, Dassault, Renault, Chausson*. He is very interested in remaining in *Air Liquide*, a firm with a strong tradition of unionism, with a 'class consciousness above the average.' But he won't agree to working on Saturday as overtime. He is the first in the strike, and the first fired. His employer tells him he is very happy to have him as interim, because he is competent, but will never give him a stable job.

After having been ejected from *Air liquide*, Bernard undertakes another training session and eventually becomes officially qualified as an adjuster. He is on the assembly line in Citroën as interim, unqualified worker. When spies from the Citroën's paternal union try to find out about Bernard's opinions on politics and unionism, at the moment of the professional elections in the firm, Bernard says nothing. He doesn't rebel either when requested to work over-time or to work on Saturday. A few months later, he is taken on with a stable job. His qualification is not acknowledged, and he is paid as a worker on the assembly line (that means 6.500 FF, net, per month), but he is not on the assembly line any more. He is a maintenance agent, in charge of the robots. At the time he's taken on he's been in the union CGT and in fact he is the union delegate in the firm. As before he uses his knowledge of the work in order to give as little as possible to the employer. Because he knows exactly how the robots work, he can in fact do his due time in two hours. And because he is paid as unqualified he refuses to accept the employer's strategy to categorize agents like him as 'responsible'. As before, he is 'the only one' (out of 5000) in the firm going everyday to work with a smile on his face, because he doesn't

come for the money ('he'd rather be a thief'), but in order to raise hell with the employer.

Bernard's narrative (two hours long, almost without questions from the interviewer) belongs to the type of narrative whose aim is to witness for the benefit of others the life of workers and the injustice they suffer from almost everybody :-the priests, the cops, the employers, the owners, the middle and upper class, the chiefs, the teachers, the State, the politicians( even leftist; the racist unionists, the scab workers, the racist workers, the obedient workers, the work-addicted workers, etc.) Therefore, Bernard doesn't purvey the myth of a unified, always solid working class figure, fighting as a whole against evil employers. He is very conscious of conflicts between qualified and unqualified, young and old, French and foreigner, male and female, etc. The style of the narrative is not self-pitying but rather contains, a lot a humor (and slang) and allows him to speak out against violence, injustice, in the family, in the neighborhood, in the firm, in society. The narrative is historical, linking school and jobs to family events and to political events. It operates through anecdotes, self-assessments and digressions, all having the aim of witnessing the hardness of working class life, and analyzing class-conflict and employer's and worker's strategies. Bernard presents himself as having been incarcerated in a religious boarding school, then oppressed by teachers, then by employers. He presents himself as a rebel and as a shooter, violent, unbearable to others, but also able to think, interested in books, intelligent, virile but not misogynous, no dare-devil, protective of the weak, boozier, but equipped with professional skills and consciousness.

Several facts and contradictions in both Bernard's lived as well as recounted life can help us in understanding his life strategy. Although there is a lot of violence in his family, Bernard never blames members of the family but instead always attributes the guilt to others. Instead of blaming his mother for having abandoned him in a boarding school, he blames the priests and teachers. Instead of blaming his mother's partner, he blames the cops. Violence within the working class group is described as 'normal'. Violence and divorce in the family created by brothers and sisters are also narrated with fatalism, as the outcome of difficult life and work conditions. What is unbearable is the violence of employers and of society as a whole, the system, this system being in some way the receptacle of all the lived violence in life and work. To justify his rebellion against his mother's partner over money, Bernard explains this as his 'father' acting as an employer, i.e. an exploiter.

Bernard's strategy could therefore be analyzed as a strategy of ruse, at the level of reflexivity as well as at the lived level. To be single, for instance, is described as a choice congruent with the duty of a unionist leader and it indeed is. But it is also a way of avoiding the experience lived by his grand mother, mother and brothers and sisters. Bernard describes himself as a trickster, he devotes a large part of the interview to describing his tricks, the playing of 'cat and mouse', but all of them are tricks on institutions: how to become a rebel in a catholic school; how to fight in a professional school; how to use crafty methods against the employers : how to work less, how to obtain more. But these tricks are justified by the exploitation and oppression, and they always remain compatible with class solidarity. Therefore it could be said that Bernard's anger against employers and the system are the outcome and expression of an anger against a more private violence. But we shall see that this interpretation is far from

being complete.

There is another important fact in both Bernard's lived and recounted life - it is his taste for books, and not only books but cinema, travels, music, going out to the restaurant (he tells us is the only reason why he regrets earning so little, and the precariousness of that job where he was often working so hard, but also earning more than he does now in his stable job). Bernard's working class milieu, described by him as lumpen-proletariat, has in fact given rise to aspirations and outcomes which are quite different. Bernard's elder sister became a nurse. As young as 16, Bernard was already arguing with the firm with the labor code in one hand, and not going to work on Monday morning (an old working class tradition, the 'holy Monday'), because 'the motorcycle was 'turning the wrong side', where was Bernard going? To the Quartier Latin, a place he loved. More than an aspiration born within the milieu, it is a sign of a rupture with the past. The same rupture is visible in the fact that instead of drinking wine or Pastis, Bernard likes beer, Whisky, Cognac and Armagnac. And more visible is the fact that Bernard, having assessed himself as on the verge of being an alcoholic like his mother's partner, stops drinking. Bernard has friends outside of the working class, among teachers and the middle and upper class people he mocks, though he's conscious that these persons have the opportunity to give their children a good education, far better than the one the workers will get.

Bernard's rebellion could be said to be aristocratic, when castigating obedient workers, but in fact it is a solution to the gap between aspirations and means, and also between aspirations and solidarity. Bernard is attracted by the printing job, the aristocrat of working class jobs. He is then attracted by Air Liquide, a firm similarly aristocratic because of its strong unionism. And eventually finds jobs in the automobile sector, Renault, Citroen, Chausson, a sector whose glory is the glory of having been heroic places in the history of working class movement. Because he was committed to the CGT, Bernard found himself at ease in Renault, the 'working class fortress' that became 'the empty fortress' of the working class itself. But because the opportunity of a stable job was in Citroen, Bernard talks up the working class movement in Citroen, fighting the scabs of the patronal unions, and mocking the Renault's workers, who earn more, thanks to the union, but at the price of being more obedient, and 'letting down their trousers'. In Citroen, the workers are less well paid and it is harder to be a unionist, but 'the trousers are well fastened to the belt' His own professional career is in question, because he is not on the assembly line any more, he is a maintenance agent. And he does as do the other stable workers, when the foreman asks them to go for a while on the assembly line, he doesn't say no, as he did before, he suggests to the foreman to request temporary workers. 'It is a trick', he says, 'never say no and sometimes say yes, if you are forced to, but don't do it, you say you had too much to do, it was not possible'. Bernard is very conscious of the working class split between qualified and unqualified, between the one almost changed into a technician, a white collar or a foreman, and the one still forced into slavery. He compares the two, and foresees what will become of the children of the one and of the children of the other. This is why being single and being a union leader are part of the same strategy. But it is more than an individual strategy. Bernard analyzes perfectly the employers' strategies in the automobile sector and more widely in industry, commerce, etc. The trick is a way of realizing aspirations in the world of industrial work at the same time as remaining in the working class, between the one world and the other, patiently waiting for the next



conflict to awaken whole class solidarity. Neither a hero, neither a failure, Bernard is an astute guy as so many oppressed have been for centuries. This is also why, unlike many young people who started working in the middle 70s, Bernard has not been excluded from the labor market, has been able to go through the whole period, so destructive for the working class, without losing life, dignity or class belonging.

## **2. Other cases**

### **François : the strategy of departure**

François, aged 40, was born in 1958, the second child and only boy in a family of 4. Mother, a woman with 'a strong personality', born in 1933 was born on a farm, in a large family, where she continued to help when she married. Father 'not with the same personality', was born in 1931 in a family of 2, grand father being an accountant and grand mother not working but 'bourgeoise'. Father, having not worked at school, became a miner at the age of 14, remained 30 years at the bottom of the mine, then was forced into early-retirement at the age of 43 and, after a period of difficulty, coped with it. He was offered once the opportunity to become a foreman, but refused, though regretted it.

On entering the 6th class (at the age of 12 or so), François met the psychologist in the school. He was said to be too shy, too nice, too honest. Mother decided he should stay for a few months in cousins' house, 15 kms away. François was not unhappy, he thought it was normal, banal. The cousins were very lively and they had lots of fun. By the following year François was not shy anymore but absolutely and excessively outgoing. He failed at school, had to repeat the third class three times. He doesn't know what to do, he wants to join the army decides against it at the last minute and enters the steel factory, as an unqualified worker, at the age of 18 : 'it was natural, normal, the factory, for the whole region, it was a common fate'.

In the factory, François, having started at the lowest level, climbed slowly, after four years becoming a foreman. He is in the union FO. Once, having been drinking with a friend, he goes dancing and meets his future wife, she belongs to an Italian family, and works as an employee in a factory's canteen. They settle together unmarried and François stops drinking alcohol. They get married in 1981 at the moment of the factory's closing. Two children will be born, a girl in 1982 and a boy in 1987.

At the time of the factory closure François is offered another job, thanks to the worker's rebellion and demonstrations in Paris, and in the same area, but he chooses to train in mechanics and computing, obtains a degree in computing and, two years later, is offered a job at the head office in Paris. He sells the house and goes to live in Longey : 'I wanted to see something else that's all'. François criticizes colleagues who do not want to change, who are not ready to leave the region. François' family is not happy with his departure, 'for them it's something like an abandonment'. Arriving in Paris is not so easy. The young three years old child goes round the flat and says : 'let's go back daddy'. It will take time for the family to settle down. The wife finds a job two years later as a school-canteen agent. François has arrived 'from a working class place into a more closed milieu. It was like day and night'. But several of his colleagues are from Longey. They go out together. François takes off his tie and jacket. He feels at ease. He

works in the commercial branch. In 1991 he is offered a job back in Longey but refuses. A strategic choice, he says, because the business in Lorraine, in any case, could not last more than 15 years.

In the first years, François' family returns to Longey every week end, but little by little they go less often. 'You cannot be fully integrated, 100%,' he explains, 'in this very dense family and community life if you are not daily working and living with the people.' They do not understand each other any more. But they often go for holidays. François and family have settled in the Paris region, François creates a basket club, as his father had done. The children play in the club too. Subsequently François goes to work in a new section of the group. They intend to sell the flat and buy a house nearer to François' job. François is not in the union any more, but responsible for the security board and the works committee. He is not against the unionists, but criticizes the unions, who are too far from the real problems of the wage earners, as well as the wage earners who don't commit themselves to the long-term interests of the firm.

Assessing the differences between François' told and lived life, and also between self presentation and biographical fact, it appears that François' departure to Paris and leaving Longey is not only a relevant strategy to avoid the outcomes of the steel industry's crisis in Lorraine, but also a way of escaping the working class condition. Many friends of François have remained in Lorraine and remained manual workers in their milieu. Why did François take another path ?

The answer lies into the biographical facts. It was not 'natural, normal' for François to become an unqualified steel worker, any more than it was it for his father to become a miner. Father was the son of a well-off family and his job as an unqualified miner was the outcome of failure at school. A failure with which he decided to remain, refusing to become a foreman. And he was dominated by a wife 'with a strong personality', herself not working class but peasant. A shy boy, François was 'idle' at school as his father had been.. In the meantime his sisters succeed : the eldest is a nurse, the second a sales manager, the third a hairdresser. No one in the family is to remain working class. The education given by their mother is open minded, 'modern'. The girls are taught contraceptive methods by their mother (not common at the end of the 60's) and appear as very 'modern' in the neighborhood. The family participates in the social life of the region, in the popular culture, parents going to parties, going dancing, playing bowls, but the status of father is the only concrete link with the working class. François' career and strategy allows a break in this link, not deeply rooted in family history. The strategy of departure is therefore a strategy for leaving the working class condition. The historical context is congruent. The modernization of industry is to be the vanishing of the working class.

### **Jacques : the strategy of retirement**

Jacques, aged 49, was not raised by his parents but by a great aunt, a concierge in Paris, and her husband, an adjuster in the automobile industry (Simca). Jacques is a rebel at school, is several times excluded from school but obtains the CAP (the lowest level of qualification) for a miller. He goes out to concerts, plays music in a group, registers in the communist youth group, follows evening courses. He enters the Simca factory at the age of 16, as an unqualified worker on a machine, continues with evening courses and

meets his first wife. Seen by employers as a conscientious worker, he is then offered the chance to become a maintenance agent through a training service, at a level equivalent to a baccalaureat in electro-technics. He remains 5 years as a maintenance agent, then becomes responsible for tool purchasing. He divorces and marries again, five years later, with a woman who already has two children. She is a proof-reader. She wanted a child but he felt he was too old. Having been a victim of an attack during one week end, he is unable to work for 9 months and is employed subsequently as an agent, he's been responsible for measuring instruments, working on a computer. He's been in the same factory since he was 16, even if the firm has changed its name from Simca to Chrysler, then to Talbot and recently to Peugeot.

In professional terms, Jacques can be said to have followed the correct path for modernization, from a manual qualified status to a status of a technician. In doing so, he has avoided being one of the thousands of workers eliminated by the modernization of the automobile sector. But Jacques is not happy. He is completely de-motivated at work, and his only aspiration is to be pensioned off while he is only 49. There are objective reasons for being de-motivated : his wage has not been raised in 15 years. But Jacques's fatalism, de-motivation and disenchantment go far deeper, linked to the whole biography and past aspirations. In ideological terms it is the loss of hope for changing the world. Jacques blames the young who do not involve themselves in politics. He also blames politicians and civil servants and locates himself on the side of those working hard, the workers on the assembly line. The protest about a world going wrong is expressed in the wish that a new war will come to clean out the bad developments in recent history.

In biographical terms Jacques' dissatisfaction can be linked to several turning points : his childhood with his great aunt, his decision to cut the relationship with his father and mother, and the attack on him. Jacques' mother belongs to a very rich, catholic family. She had a clandestine love affair with a rich man, himself the son of a working class woman (daughter of a railway worker who had married a very rich man). Jacques is the 'undesired' outcome of this love affair (' if contraceptive methods had existed, I would not have been born'). In other terms, the 'family novel' locates Jacques in an indeterminate place, working class on the side of his adoptive parents ('mother' and 'father in the narrative and in daily life), very rich, with a castle, holidays on the French Riviera on the side of the biological parents, but still, in the case of father, of a working class origin. While being brought up in Paris Jacques is often sent for week ends and holidays to a house in the country where he meets his parents. But he gets bored there, has no friends, prefers being in the streets of Paris with his friends. He is officially informed at the age of 10, although without surprise to him, who his biological parents are. They have been obliged to tell him because they wanted him to take communion and his adoptive parents are not catholic. At the age of 18 he decides not to see his biological parents any more. 20 years later he's to meet them again (they have married in the meanwhile) and they've met sometimes since then. He regrets it now his hopes for revolution are over. Jacques' dissatisfaction can be seen therefore as the outcome of an aspiration without target. He didn't really have an ambition to become rich but he couldn't be satisfied with the career of a qualified worker. Jacques is proud of having taken evening courses, of trying to improve, of having gained access to more intellectual and 'creative' duties, but cannot be satisfied with his status. Therefore being a rebel is a solution but unsatisfying if the revolution is not to be, because by accepting

the world as it is, the world of competition, he could have done better, gained higher status and taken revenge differently.

Jacques' depressed mood is reinforced by the attack on him, which happened as follows: it is his daughter's birthday, the family is out in the country side for a picnic. Another family is on the same spot and very noisy and 'vulgar'. Jacques asks for less noise. He is severely beaten up. Jacques enters into a law suit against the aggressors but doesn't receive a satisfactory outcome. In the new job he is forced to take because of his injuries, he earns 2.500 FF less than before (because unlike manual workers he's not able to work at night, and therefore is not entitled to any bonus). The feeling of doing something non-useful in this new job is understandable. But far more than the money loss is the feeling of being powerless, of not being able to obtain justice because the main aggressor is a powerful man, (he is a security agent of Jacques Chirac). Jacques doesn't trust the justice system any more, he enters into this fatalist discourse and populist way of thinking. Consequently de-motivation, and the strategy of retirement are the answers to a situation of powerlessness toward the past as well as toward the current reality.

### **Mary : how to balance family and work**

Aged 48, Mary was born in a small working class city : it was 'a working class life and a working class mentality'. Father, having been a farm-boy, becomes a road-man, and will retire as a foreman. He is 'an easy going person'. Her mother is older, sad, often sick, in bed and at the hospital after each birth. The three boys and two girls together with the parents share the only bedroom of a small house. Family life has been continuously 'topsy turvy': separations, returns, boarding with grand parents, boarding school, for one or the other. But the parents wanted the children to do well at school and somehow they succeeded. One brother is an engineer, the second one studied for two years after baccalaureat, the third one obtained the CAP for carpentry and, his firm having closed, works now as a cash-clerk on the motorway.

Mary went to a vocational boarding school at the age of 12 and obtained her CAP for needlework at the age of 14. The teachers were fantastic. The school was very strict and Mary could have continued to study and her parents wanted her to even if the fees were a heavy financial commitment, but Mary preferred to quit, she wanted to be with her boyfriend, an unqualified worker in a foundry. Her boyfriend is an easy going fellow, playing football in the club funded by the firm. Aged 14 she enters a textile factory as a ladder-mender, then works as a cutter, then as an over-caster. It is a family firm, only 5 people to start with but growing to 150 employees. In 1994 the factory files a petition for bankruptcy. 26 of the 150, Mary among them, decide to buy the factory and continue the work as a cooperative. They succeed. The factory produces high quality clothes. Mary works as a controller.

Mary's career is therefore the career of an autonomous and courageous woman, remaining in the factory after her children are born, able to change duty and to fit her new situation to the textile sector, happy to be in this situation, to meet clients and suppliers, to attend the show organized every year of the high quality clothes they produce. A lot of difficulties have occurred, however, that Mary prefers not to recall but does so because of interviewer's questions. She presents herself as somebody having

done poorly at school and lacking knowledge as well as the ability to express herself. : 'I do not know how to express things'. As somebody afraid to change or to move Mary had to force herself to get her driving license which she did for the sake of the children. But she still is afraid of driving, would not like to be obliged to move, has refused training opportunities because they entailed moving. She therefore de-values herself, blaming herself for be always seeking to be accommodating.

Later on in the narrative, however, we shall learn the main reason for her difficulties. The second brother was also working in the factory and married the employer's daughter. Mary was seen by colleagues as the daughter in law of the employer. Every time she changed duty, it was seen as a favor. She had to show by working hard that she was entitled to the new job. And she would not undertake training for fear of being seen again as favored. The barrier between herself and colleagues is also a barrier between herself and brother's new family. Her brother doesn't accept Mary's husband. 'When the firm closes it is due to his own failure', says Mary – he predicts that the cooperative will not survive and quits with wife, not giving to Mary his new address. They have not met since.

Her husband is of the traditional type and he doesn't help with the domestic tasks. Mary is very tired particularly after every birth. The doctor tells her she should stop working. But she doesn't resign. We can only guess what is suggested with great modesty by Mary : jealousy, gossip, the small nastinesses of every day life, together with caring for the children. As Mary says, in daily troubles, the only solution is to stick to one's own work and to do it as well as possible. Her husband becomes unemployed and has to move to a smaller firm and can now understand why Mary is so much involved in her new job, in the cooperative, working for herself and not for an employer. He also now accepts domestic tasks, in fact he is the one who does everything in the house, before Mary comes back from work. For Mary therefore, remaining in the factory, becoming what she is, is more than a normal path in life, it is a painful but effective victory. As she says, when problems occur at work, it is good to rely on family, and when problems occur in family (parents divorced, as soon as the children had grown up), it is good to rely on work. But one might always collapse if both encounter crises at the same moment.

### **Jean : a peasant into a worker**

Aged 54 (born in 1944), Jean is the only child of a woman who'd migrated from Brittany to Paris as a domestic. His father had been an alcoholic, in conflict with her mother, and Jean never met him. He died a few years after Jean's birth. His mother's family had been a large family of peasants (farmers, not owners). Two single brothers of his mother ran the farm, the grand mother and grand father being still alive but unable to work. The grand mother died soon after and the grand father was paralyzed. Jean was raised on the farm, his mother being unable or unwilling to lead a stable life in Paris. She used to come sometimes, to take him with her for a while, then bring him back to the farm. Jean went to school, and did well, thanks to his teacher, he says, in his certificate of primary school (assessment of numeracy, reading and writing), but, like many children from the country side at that time, he worked a lot on the farm; he was 'the woman of the farm', cooking for his uncles and grand father, milking and caring for the cows and other animals. His feeling about this period is ambivalent: it was not a

happy childhood, he says, because of his mother' instability, and the shame that resulted from this instability. Neighbors and schoolmates, were always asking questions; it was also a lonely life, because of the distance; at week-ends he'd stay minding the farm while his uncles went bowling or playing cards. But he also has good memories and nostalgia for harvest time, recalling the spirit of solidarity among the peasants, going from farm to farm to help each other and having a feast after harvesting. He regrets not having become a peasant, which could have been possible because, after the death of one uncle, the other decided to sell the animals and the tools and become a worker, a road-man too. This spirit of solidarity is what Jean will come to miss later at the factory, blaming the worker mentality which he finds too aggressive, and the employer's too hypocritical.

Aged 14, having finished compulsory school, Jean is again taken away by his mother, in order, he says, to earn money for her by working, and he attends a professional school to learn the craft of tile-layer. They live in a shanty-town in Brest. He doesn't finish the first year and runs away back to the farm but is taken by his mother to Paris where she settles as a concierge in order to have a home. Jean starts working in the building trade as an unqualified worker. One day, coming back home, he finds the concierge's lodge empty and decides to leave. He is 18. He settles in a hostel for young single wage earners and starts working at *Les Halles* (the big food market in the center of Paris) as a laborer. It's hard work but good wages. In his leisure time, he goes dancing with young friends of the hostel, and meets his future wife, working in a factory outside of Paris, as a fish-hook fitter. They marry when she is pregnant. Jean is 25. He changes job to work nearer home. Now he works as a warehouse agent in a supermarket. This time it's hard work and low wage. He remains seven years nevertheless. Three daughters are born ('I wanted a boy'), having had a house built they have to pay for it. His wife works at home caring for children from the neighborhood, then for children put into care by the State.

In 1976 Jean is 32 and is offered the opportunity of a job at the factory 3M, a factory of the chemical sector belonging to an American group producing sponges. Jean is engaged as a winder assistant, at the index 175, becomes then a winder and is now, 22 years later, an agent working on the same kind of machine, with the index 190 (the index of a qualified worker at the lowest level). He will finish, in three years, he hopes, with the same index.

Jean is happy. He owns his house, has a stable job and a wage he's satisfied with. The eldest daughter works in a factory and is still at home, the second one has settled unmarried with a tiler and works as a cash clerk in a supermarket and the third one is still at home. At one time he'd been angry in the factory, because he was alone on a machine and couldn't follow the speed designed to be operated by two workers. But this moment is over. There used to be many industrial injuries in the factory, but things are better now. Engineers are listening to the advice and ideas of the workers. He belongs to a security committee giving advice that's taken into account. Jean's case illustrates very well, as does that of his uncle, the process of proletarianization of the peasants still occurring in the 70's despite the dramatic changes in industry.

### **Pierre. An artisan into a worker**

Aged 46, Pierre is the eldest son of a family of three brothers. His father was a printer (he owned the printing house). He died four years ago. Pierre loved him, more than he loved his mother who loved too much the youngest brother, eleven years younger than Pierre.

Pierre stopped school after the compulsory leaving age having been hindered by tuberculosis, and had followed his father's path in a printing house, as an apprentice then as a full worker, though unqualified. He had to quit the job because of an allergy to the lead used in printing. He went on military service and entered at the age of 21 the factory 3M (the same firm as Jean, our previous case) as a mixer. Because of an allergy to the chemicals he became a maintenance agent, then a warehouse man, then a trolley driver, then responsible for client's orders, then foreman in a morning team (the workers are due at work on 3 x 8 or 4 X 6 shifts, depending on the employer's decision). He has been at the index 205 for 15 years despite the fact that he has a responsibility that should entitle him to index 225. Nevertheless, he doesn't believe a worker's protest would help. It is an American group and they are ready to close the factory at any moment. Pierre would like to go 'a littler higher' but he is not ready to change his position in the factory or his rhythm of work.

Pierre met his wife in the factory where she came to work for an interim period but then remained. They married. She was divorced with a two years old daughter. They had one more. The first daughter is now a hair dresser, the second training to be a secretary. Currently in a section of 3M. Pierre has a good relationship with his wife's parents, and also with his younger brother who was a worker at 3M but resigned, because he didn't want to have a boss and who settled as a baker. The youngest brother has studied much longer than Pierre and has become a nursing-assistant. When speaking about his mother's special liking for the youngest, Pierre compares the situation of the brothers and mocks his mother because, in his opinion, the baker and himself have done better than the youngest. The baker is his own boss and Pierre has everything, being the owner of his house. In that sense, Pierre's family illustrates well the case of the artisan class, forced into continual mobility because of changes in industry. One brother employee, one brother worker, one brother artisan - it looks like a statistical survey. But obviously, being the worker is not a matter of indifference to Pierre, mostly because he could have become an artisan, and perhaps a printer himself.

### **General conclusion**

When studying unqualified and qualified workers' cases, one can feel the weight of the long history of the working class in industry, and of welfare in 20th century France. Individuals are acting within a framework of heavy constraints, permanently trying to avoid being destroyed. The lack of security is perceivable at every stage of the lived life, with changes occurring from the previous generations to the current one. Changes in family, work and aspirations. The stability of family life is obviously stronger in the current generation than in their parent's. But it is the more stable the more the status is, and it could even be argued that family stability is the price paid for avoiding the risks of exclusion, in the sense that stabilizing one's job doesn't allow one to have the unstable family life that became the norm for the middle and upper classes. Work, despite the labor shortage, remains for stable workers not only a question of money but

also a question of status in comparing themselves with other workers, and a question of work conditions, work rhythms, constraints, security, the assembly-line being the worst condition along with jobs in small non-unionized firms without opportunities for collective bargaining. The lack of solidarity is obvious. The price paid for a stable and 'proper' job is obedience, and a certain degree of participation is accorded according to the level in the hierarchy. Aspirations not only are centered on knowledge, for oneself and the children, but illustrate the new, privatized, open-minded hedonism. Sports, travel, the idea of leisure itself and not only, as before, gardening, fishing or tinkering, as a way of working, even if just for oneself (F.Weber, 1989). The price to pay for hedonism is the weakening of the community of the subculture.

Modernization is therefore a word uncovering very different and contrasting realities. Unlike some other categories the recounted life is, in all cases, much less complaining than one might expect from the lived life. Moderation is the rule, not the kind that dissimulates the facts, but in contrast, moderation in their assessment. Violent, traumatic facts of the family and the working life are not dissimulated but appreciated as 'normal' and rebellion has to be justified. In Bernard's case, the only political activist in the sample, complaining and rebellion against employers compensates for the moderation toward violence experienced in the family. This allows us to imagine the huge amount of violence experienced by all the subjects, in the past life of their parents and relatives, linked to the whole history of working class life, and in their own lives at work and at home. This could be the final cost of modernization and an explanation of the worker's silence commented on by so many authors : a violence that cannot be expressed and understood because it remains unconnected, in the worker's mind, with the exception of Bernard, to the history of a group to which they don't feel to belong.

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