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THE FRENCH SOCIOLOGY OF WORK BETWEEN CRISIS AND RENEWAL

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One of the characteristics of French sociology is the importance that it has attached since the 1950s to questions of work, production and the social movements brought about by the relations of production. In that context, the sociology of work, understood in its generic sense, has early on assumed the rank of a subdiscipline, with its own reference works (the celebrated *Traité de sociologie du travail* published under the editorship of George Friedmann and Pierre Naville) (Friedmann, Naville, 1961–62), its collections and reviews (starting with the review *Sociologie du travail*, now in existence for more than 30 years) and its specialized research teams. The *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* (National Centre of Scientific Research) (CNRS) has played a role in this movement of emancipation by consistently sponsoring the creation of a structure of a genuine scholarly environment around a number of leading figures of the second generation: Alain Touraine with the *Groupe de sociologie du travail* and the *Centre d'étude des mouvements sociaux*; Michel Crozier with the *Centre de sociologie des organisations*; Jean-Daniel Reynaud and the *Laboratoire de sociologie du travail et des relations professionnelles* at the *Conservatoire national des arts et métiers*. The “social demand” has proceeded in a similar fashion: very early on, the social sciences of work have benefited from relatively abundant public programmes and have also begun to receive requests from trade union organizations and even enterprises.

Yet the sociology of work in France is currently at a turning point. At a time when a new generation is coming to the fore, institutions are being renewed and systems of references are losing their clarity. It is not uncommon to hear it said that the subdiscipline is in a crisis or that it is even about to lose its traditional autonomy. To assess the situation, it is useful to go back to the beginnings. The founding movement arose in historical and intellectual circumstances that were so particular that one could say that it exposed its creation to the ravages of time from the very start. The question today is whether after 30 years of evolution around its initial foundations, the subdiscipline has not reached a “normalization” stage of sorts that makes it receptive to a return to the sources of sociology or a critical stance towards industrial demand. Admittedly, these are extreme hypotheses and we would propose not to take them up prematurely.

1. Georges Friedmann and the strength of a tradition

Recently, there has been a revival of interest in the profoundly original currents of research initiated in Paris by George Friedmann after the Second World War (Chapoulie et al., 1991). Although Friedmann was at the time familiar with American studies on organizations and human relations, the school of the sociology of work that he founded at the *Centre d'études sociologiques* was not based on any pre-existing model. It must be said that the economic and political context was not conducive to conformism: the country had had to absorb successively the shock of a massive and late industrialization, a Taylorist rationalization of work and the events of 1936, the Second World War and national reconstruction. At a time in which industry was becoming a great national cause, the political climate was not receptive to discussing management. In the seminars of the newly founded *Centre d'études sociologiques*, the debate focused on the "social question" and on the major public issues of the future, such as whether mechanization was a positive or a harmful development, what prospects were open to the working class, whether the fragmentation of industrial tasks was inevitable and what impact human action and intervention could have upon the course of such developments.

A committed intellectual trained in critical philosophy, Friedmann was one of those who tackled these questions head on.¹ But he chose to do so on a sound scientific foundation, working with a team in the field and following the methodological principles that he had learned from the American school throughout an already long experience in comparative studies in French, American and Soviet enterprises. Thus was born the French school of the sociology of work which featured a very distinctive posture that many scholars have since embraced and which has become a key to understanding the long period of growth and social transformation between the Liberation and the end of the 1970s.

In retrospect, the distinctive traits of this neo-Friedmannist approach appear more clearly and can essentially be summarized in four points. Firstly, the identity of the sociology of work was centred around the postulate that the question of work was not on a par with other issues. While not necessarily claiming hegemony, the specialized research teams have long found in this argument the objective reason for their growth and their independence. Under the more or less explicit influence of categories of Marxist analysis, the relations of production were regarded as being a more important determining factor than

¹ See, among his best-known works: Friedmann, 1946; 1950; 1956.

all others; a person's place as a wage-earner in the production system was used to deduce his class position and all that came with it: his individual consciousness and a propensity to join in movements of collective action.

It is in this intellectual framework that the prime importance attached to problems of industrial rationalization is to be understood. The second feature of the Friedmannist tradition: the task of sociologists was to observe the course of technical evolution and the changes in forms of industrial organization, and to set out the conditions for finding a solution to the burning problem of the dehumanization of industrial work. There was to be a full workload: the "Taylorization" movement, which had become gradually more aggressive after the Second World War, was increasingly showing its limits. In addition to the prospects open here and there by the first experiences in recomposing fragmented work (Friedmann himself gave considerable attention to the attempts begun in the 1940s in the United States to "broaden tasks"), it soon became necessary to reckon with the beginnings of the automation of procedures, which some saw as the dawn of a new industrial revolution. In these circumstances, the sociology of work began to focus on the historical forms of professional qualification. Following Pierre Naville, Alain Touraine was among those who helped define the terms of this debate by speaking of a stage of post-Taylorist development – the "technical system of work" – in which the qualification of work found a new future, but had to be redefined, its focus shifting away from the individual to the "role" associated with the post actually occupied in the workshop (Touraine, 1955).

The importance attached to the technical evolution and its effects on the qualification of work has often led to a tendency to assimilate the Friedmann tradition to a current of thought dominated by the idea of "technical determinism". On that matter, however, and that is the third point, it is essential to differentiate carefully. Initially, the French school of the sociology of work was in reality more humanist than determinist. With the benefit of hindsight, what perhaps is most remarkable about the *Traité de sociologie du travail* is the unexpected refusal of the authors to submit to a fatalist view of history: their most common and constant concern was to show how the action of management, but also of the "social actors" in general, was likely to loosen the supposed grip of "capitalist rationalization". The thesis of Alain Touraine, supported on this point by Michel Crozier with regard to the analysis of the bureaucracy (Crozier, 1963), even asserted that the distinctive feature of industrial society was "to enhance man's power over himself", i. e. to restore manoeuvrability to the social actors. A close examination reveals that this view of the industrial question was of seminal influence: it stimulated the critical debate on the division of work, considered to be a political and social "construct", and it gradually gave

respectability to research conducted on the worker movement and on industrial relations (trade unionism, social conflicts and collective bargaining), considered to be one of the determining focal points of social change.

The recognition of the “manoeuvrability” open to the actors also had the effect of consecrating the last of the main features of the Friedmann tradition: the importance attached to field studies and, indeed, the absolute priority given to empirical work over theoretical speculation. The French school of the sociology of work has often been called a sociology “confined to the workshop”. Such a description is clearly a simplification and too easily takes on a pejorative sense. One of the strengths of this “sociology of the workshop” has been to show that it is wrong to trust in a sense of history defined in disregard of the real actors of change. In this matter, humanism has in a way forged an alliance with methodology: abandoning preconceived models, the sociology of work has shown its concern for the validation of hypotheses through long and close observation. In addition to schemes of research and the resulting quantitative analysis, “participant observation” has often been undertaken and the resources of comparative analysis explored.² While not really abandoning the idea of being a “science of action” (because of the economic, social and political implications of the research conducted), the Friedmann school of sociology has nevertheless constantly tried to keep in touch with the field, empirical work being regarded as a real test of the truth.

2. Numerous reorientations

The strength of these founding references and the link that holds them together explain how the French sociology of work has been able to perpetuate itself as a true scientific tradition. Strictly speaking, however, a “school” was never created. On the contrary, reorientations and divergent currents were to develop very early on. The cumulative effects of the segmentation of the teams, ideological effervescence and social transformation made the Friedmann legacy particularly fluid and led to today’s elusive situation. *A priori*, the notion of crisis is unsuited for describing the history of these numerous and heterogenous reorientations: at most, one could attempt to point to several characteristic movements which, each in its own way, have contributed to widening the gap between the initial approach and contemporary research practices.

2 Area in which the *Laboratoire d'économie et de sociologie du travail* (LEST, Aix-en-Provence) has distinguished itself. Cf. Maurice, Sellier, Silvestre, 1982.

We must pass over the fact that throughout the 30 years of growth, one of the major disturbance factors has been the importance attached to political matters in the debate on work and the evolution of industry. Thus, it has not sufficed that the tradition begun around Georges Friedmann was critical and anti-Taylorist for it to get along well with the radical ideologies that stimulated the public debate in the 1960s. In fact, the “ordinary Marxism” and activism of that period were often an objective obstacle to the practice of research in that many analyses postulated a sort of intangibility of collective antagonisms, thereby reducing the space left for the assessment of facts and the empirical analysis of change. By definition, and regardless of how pertinent it was, the discussion on the “reproduction *ad infinitum* of the effects of domination” tended to devalue empirical work and rather to emphasize the function of social critique of research; in that respect, the precarious balance of the beginnings was put to a severe test on more than one occasion.

But the truly significant changes arose in a different way. To put it in a very general way, the sociology of work really began to renew itself when sociologists felt the need to leave the framework given them by the initial discussion on the rationalization of work. This is what Michel Crozier did par excellence by working to develop a “sociology of organizations”: a “clinical” sociology free from all normative claims and according to which an enterprise tends towards a sort of anthropological equilibrium much more than a higher stage of development. Hence the prominence given, along the lines of R. K. Merton, to the human face of bureaucracy and the importation in France of the thesis rightly called “limited rationality”, borrowed from the American Herbert Simon (March and Simon, 1958). Taking that lead, an entire current of empirical research subsequently began to assert itself by showing that, regardless of the reference model, industrial functioning actually eluded the “prescribed rules”, relying instead on the ability of “autonomous regulation” of the operatives.³ Instead of asking “where human work was going” the emphasis was placed in a sense on “real work”, the hidden side of the systems of production that is more or less inimical to change.

On quite different bases, and embracing, on the contrary, the historical debate, Alain Touraine also expressed his conviction that it was necessary to leave the beaten path. Seeking to understand the “facts that bear the seed of the future”, he increasingly cast doubt upon the foundations of a sociology confined to problems of industrial development, turning his attention instead to the

3 In keeping with the phrase recently used by Jean-Daniel Reynaud (Reynaud, 1988).

post-industrial society that was developing. His finding was that the sphere of work could no longer be regarded as the central stage of society, nor could labour conflicts be considered to be the natural incarnation of the social movement. In his view, inasmuch as the dichotomy between the productive and the non-productive spheres no longer made any sense, it had to be acknowledged that social domination tended to go beyond a given sector and to apply to all areas in which control was exercised or decisions taken (Touraine, 1975). Thus, Touraine in the end chose to leave the field of the sociology of work, broadening his interest to include all fields in which the “historical actors” could be identified: not only the worker movement, but also student movements, the women’s movement, the Provençal French movement, the anti-nuclear movement and the like.⁴

This is not to say, however, that the most decisive break was brought about by these centrifugal tendencies, which were characteristic of the 1970s. More recently, and within the subdiscipline as such, the crucial debate has clearly been one that has gradually challenged the question of work by advancing the question of employment. It is understandable that the increase in unemployment in the 1980s cast in a different light the usual discussions on the evolution of the system of production and the future of professional qualifications. The social exclusion brought about by unemployment has shown that the modalities of access to the labour market could be elements of social status allowing for greater differentiation than the situation of wage-earners. This change of perspective was all the more marked in that it coincided with the period in which many had begun to think that “Taylor was dead” and that the way was open for organizations that show greater respect for individuals and are more attentive to the mobilization of skills.

Moreover, it appeared that the matter of unemployment was only the obvious dimension of a problem that in reality is extremely complex and runs through the entire social fabric. The phenomenon of social exclusion made it clear that contemporary economies give rise to fragmentation in a variety of ways, and in view of that it became illusory to claim to speak of *the* labour market or, a fortiori, of *the* wage-earners or even of *the* working class. The growth of precarious employment, as opposed to the situation of wage-earners in secure positions or unemployed persons receiving allowances, has led researchers to consider each situation as part of a continuum that cannot simply be labelled either employment or unemployment. The basic problem now concerns the conditions

4 In keeping with the programme established in 1978 (Touraine, 1978).

under which individuals or social groups are assigned to a given segment of the labour market. This again poses the question of social inequalities: the supply of part-time work and the practice of fixed-term contracts have proved to be the setting for considerable discrimination between the sexes, ethnic groups and age categories.⁵

The importance of the currents of analysis raised by these problems is obvious. Having called into doubt the centrality of the question of work in the strict sense of the term, these currents have even contributed to a gradual reassessment of the framework within which sociologists apprehend the world of work. Faced with a tradition that combined frequent workshop observation and the postulate that there existed at the macro-sociological level sources of cohesion associated with a homogenous class situation, the new focus on the problem of employment has had the effect of enhancing the importance of research activities at the intermediate level: the *meso-sociology of employment*, whether addressing occupational groups and branches of activity or age groups, the comparison of the situation of men and women on the labour market or the separate fate of each “employment area”, is about to become the major component of the former sociology of work. Needless to say, the social problem of unemployment, considered by some to be a recent socio-political “invention” (Salais, Baverez, Reynaud, 1986), is of real significance in that context. Thus, there is a tendency today to regard the population of the long-term unemployed as a specific component of society, meriting major research.⁶

Another important effect of this shift in perspective is the interest devoted to the topic of *action* in the sociology of work. First of all, the favour of the meso-sociology of employment, associated with the image of a wage-earning population beset by an intense process of fragmentation, clearly finds its expression in changes in the studies on class consciousness and collective action at work. Can the “working class” still be considered to be a pertinent unit of analysis in sociology? The question has in fact become less and less controversial, and experts agree that the answer varies depending on whether “worker culture” or the objective situation of workers is being examined. The debate on *culture* leads to the conclusion that in France today there is in fact a “worker society” whose anthropological cohesion cannot be underestimated.⁷

5 See the series of articles that appeared in 1989 in the *Revue française de sociologie* under the title “*Emploi et destins sociaux*” (Schnapper, 1989; Maruani, 1989).

6 See the synthesis of Emmanuèle Reynaud on the subject (Reynaud E., 1993).

7 The *Laboratoire d'études et de recherche sur la classe ouvrière* (LERSCO, Nantes) has contributed greatly to giving prominence to this phenomenon. See also Schwartz, 1990.

But such cohesion no longer applies to the *objective situation* of wage-earners, whose employment situations can be very different.

Studies conducted on the worker movement have felt the impact of these tendencies. At a time when trade union organizations are going through a particularly acute crisis (there is general agreement that, conservatively speaking, the French trade unions have lost half their members in the past 15 years, the average level of trade union membership now being less than 10 per cent), sociologists hardly ever study "social movements" in general. Their interest focuses either on the functioning of the trade union system itself (the organizations and their role in various economic and social regulatory agencies) or on intermediate level movements (for example, the nurses' movement, the dockers' movement or localized actions to defend employment).

But there are also other reasons, perhaps more fundamental, that explain why the sociology of employment has been transforming the issues related to action that used to be dominant in the sociology of work. It would appear that such questions are being diverted more and more in directions that no longer have a direct connection with the social movement or with actions to back demands: increasingly, the question concerns integration strategies and the changing economic agents in the world of work and production. To the extent that these strategies are related to groups, particularly occupational groups, they can of course continue to rely upon representative organizations and movements of organized action. But that is far from always being the case.

If we were to take the lead of many specialists of professional socialization, we would be questioning the very framework of the meso-sociology of employment. For them, fragmentation has given way to a defragmentation of the space in which economic agents move, in the sense that the trajectories of these agents on the market tend to be built upon individual bases, independent of any strong collective determinants. For example, even if sexual discrimination continues, studies have suggested that the careers of women on the labour market are becoming more and more independent of their social and familial situation and more closely correlated with their individual strategies. It is also argued that the category "youth" no longer really exists with regard to employment: this category, greatly enlarged by the extension and generalization of the period of transition between school and professional life, is regarded as increasingly composite, less and less "socially determined" and exhibiting a wide variety of behaviours in respect of prospects for occupational integration.⁸

⁸ I have borrowed considerably on this subject from the synthesis report presented by Didier Demazière at the interdisciplinary colloquium *Travail: recherche et prospective*, held by the CNRS in November 1992 (Demazière, 1992).

These observations go far: the tendency is to describe *real actors*, truly free, taking *in situ* their destiny into their own hands. In that view, the mechanisms of occupational integration, freed of their initial inertia, become mechanisms of adjustment between objectives and resources. Job allocation and the circulation of wage-earners in the systems of professional training is no longer tied to a pre-defined framework: in a similar context of innovation, a person must choose his career (refusal, acceptance, defence of occupational autonomy, withdrawal) as a function of the gains expected and the long-term opportunities open to him. Emphasis is no longer on the collective foundations of action; the basic elements become that of decision-making (perhaps as opposed to social integration) and processes (as opposed to structures): individuals and groups are assumed to be in a constant state of interaction within complex, shifting systems. The themes of research are redefined along those lines: the aim is to open the “black box” that, until recently, constituted the question of the real conditions under which the social actors negotiate their role in professional life; study programmes and doctoral dissertations set out to analyse exactly how youths are hired by enterprises, how workers find access to training programmes, how innovative industrial projects and individual development projects can be reconciled, etc.

3. Which crisis?

Is there any reason to lament these repeated departures from the original assumptions of the sociology of work in France? Nostalgia is out of place, because the proliferation of research discussed here testifies above all to an obvious vitality. After all, the least that could be expected of the social sciences is to open horizons and to constantly raise new questions about society in transformation.

More precisely, and to the extent that the sociology of organizations, the sociology of social movements and the sociology of employment are gradually converging towards an “implosion” of sorts of the social system, there is no reason why the sociology of work of today should not be seen as an open field in which the formerly central questions of qualifications, trade unionism, industrial relations and work itself become, in a way, trivial in comparison with the wide variety of topics and hypotheses. As to the particular scope of professional socialization and the new theoretical propositions to which it gives rise, it is worth recalling the objective link between them and the Friedmann tradition: it was observed that quite early on, the hypothesis had been advanced that the changing system of production would be conducive to cutting through de-

terminism, that is to say, to the opening up of a spectrum within which the initiative of the actors takes shape. Up to a certain point, the breaking up of the sociology of work and the attention given to theories of action constituted, from this point of view, predictable events.

It is here, however, that the “crisis” of the subdiscipline crops up after all. In the sociology of work, it would appear that the victory of interactionist paradigms is currently too rapid to be mastered. By stressing the autonomy of the actors, researchers may well confuse the facts of change that are really likely to justify that point of view with what might only be the consequence of an independent scientific effort, without a necessary link to the observed reality. The danger would then be of disregarding, for the sole reason that they supposedly have become less easily interpretable than before, the social framework, material and institutional constraints and ethical references within which, after all, people’s lives continue to take place. In our opinion, caution should at least dictate that the analysis of the trajectories and professional identities automatically presupposes a give and take between factors that depend upon individuals or groups and aspects relating to “structures” (systems of employment, work and training).⁹

A sense of a clear danger emerges from recent analysis and goes well beyond this particular subject. In that regard, mention should be made of the paradoxical results that have been attained in the analysis of the research programmes currently conducted in French study centres that focus on work, employment and industrial production.¹⁰

Even the first of these results is unexpected: at a time in which the scientific community in question, deprived of its initial cohesion, is itself “breaking up”, it is surprising to find that the research programmes under way reveal, on the contrary, sources of inspiration, issues or “paradigms” that are relatively homogenous. But what follows is even more determinant: work is no longer the starting point for interpreting this relative convergence; it has been established that other themes, including organization, employment and industrial relations, play a role that is at least as important. The real source of cohesion comes

9 This is excellently accomplished in the book by Claude Dubar, which must be considered the best reference work on the subject at the present time (Dubar, 1991).

10 For the following, I have borrowed heavily from the oral report presented in June 1992 by Jean-Daniel Reynaud on the basis of an analysis of the content of work programmes set forth by the French research teams associated with the CNRS in connection with the sociology of work. The use that I make of Jean-Daniel Reynaud’s comments does not necessarily converge with his own conclusions; needless to say, I assume sole responsibility for them.

precisely from the constant use that researchers make of a whole set of concepts that are more or less linked to theories of action.

Thus, the notion of *actor* has without question become the pivotal concept of the sociology of work, directly associated with that of *strategy* and even that of *system of action*, which had been borrowed from Michel Crozier but which has long become part of the everyday vocabulary of sociology. More generally, the idea of *system* has itself become central: it describes the generic level of the reality at which action and *interactions* between actors are apprehended, the implied meaning then being most commonly that of the *complexity* of the phenomena observed. A workshop, a service, an enterprise or an occupation clearly constitute systems, but the tendency is to focus more on units of a higher level: one often speaks of *networks*, or actor-networks (Callon, 1989), of localized systems of production or employment (Saglio, 1991), to evoke independent meso-social bodies that give rise to strong interaction.

Generally speaking, the research projects defined in such terms are designed not so much to describe the system or the network themselves as to analyse the *mechanisms of regulation* of which they are the seat. It can be seen that here again, interest focuses less on the structures than on the processes that drive them. The sociologist seeks to understand how the rules are established and under what conditions actors succeed in communicating and coordinating their activities or interests. Interaction being postulated as a social exchange that cannot be reduced to the pure bargaining of classical economics, the question very often concerns, at least implicitly, the *forms of legitimacy* on the basis of which the agreement of the social partners to a compromise is obtained or the targets of any decision determined.¹¹

In France today, many of the studies pertaining in one way or another to the sociology of work make use of this type of paradigm; although applicable to a wide variety of subjects, such paradigms, by virtue of their high level of abstraction, have a powerful effect of intellectual structuring. Another of their characteristics is that they give rise to a clear overlapping of disciplines that until now have been regarded as separate: the theories of coordination between actors in complex systems are of interest to the same extent and, increasingly, perhaps in the same way, to sociologists, economists and, indeed, political scientists and even historians.

11 This is the topic, very roughly put, of the *economics of conventions*, which has created a considerable stir in the field of the sociology of work. Cf. Dupuy et al., 1989; Boltanski, Thevenot, 1991.

We have alluded to a “danger”. It remains to be determined where the danger lies. Clearly, there is nothing wrong with the development of a theoretical melting pot that cuts across disciplines, providing a general interpretation for a large number of specific problems. Quite the contrary: it goes without saying that this constitutes in many ways an exceptional opportunity that is consistent with the highest goals of the social sciences. Nor would there appear to be a danger, in the case under consideration, of the sociology of work being replaced by theories that transcend it and that clearly question its independence: the respect of disciplinary boundaries and specific fields built around them cannot be regarded as an end in itself. A sacrifice of the “chapels” is certainly not a heavy price to pay for scientific innovation. To take just one example, progress in studies on the labour market was only achieved through trespassing between disciplines and thanks to the richness of the new approaches, such as the theory of conventions. In a word, from this point of view the “crisis” of the sociology of work might very well be seen as a salutary event.

These important reservation being made, there is still, however, a danger, and this can be understood in two ways. Firstly, as already pointed out, the success of the interactionist paradigm might lead us to neglect the structures, values and forms of constraints which shape action and give it a meaning. Most worrisome of all is that one would then imperceptibly replace what initially was simply a heuristic device by a realistic representation of society in which neither history, institutions nor culture can any longer be considered to be external to action or to provide it with a setting.¹²

Moreover, and to put it more simply, the trends discussed here, if care is not taken, might eventually produce a sort of “indifferentiation” of topics for the sociologist. The risk then is that of a kind of formalism that would expand in all directions and affect all problems of regulation faced by organized systems. This appears to be corroborated by the abstraction and timelessness of certain research programmes which reflect some confusion about the role of the sociologist in society. In France recently, among the efforts aimed at widening the scope of scholarly debate, various conferences have been organized on themes such as “innovation” or “the codification of the social sphere”. To

12 As an illustration, the reference work of Jean-Daniel Reynaud (Reynaud, 1989) can be read as a very controlled version of the ambient interactionism, in the sense that it never loses sight of the question of constraint and values. On a completely different register, see the debate on the reference to national culture in the comparison of industrial management models (D'Iribarne, 1989). Lastly, the notion of the setting of the action might be seen in connection with the idea of *embeddedness* presented by Mark Granovetter and currently the subject of discussion in France (Granovetter, 1985).

serve what collective purpose? Since the classical analyses of the French sociology of work were closely associated with a commitment to action and change, one of their major virtues was to identify the critical questions facing society. Isn't that worth preserving?

4. End of the subdiscipline; renewal of topics

Not all problems are of equal importance; all regulatory processes do not require the same attention. Under these conditions, perhaps the most important achievement would be for the recognized specialists in the field of the sociology of work to focus on clear scientific problems likely to be relevant for the critical issues of the day.

At the same time, and given the impact of the jolts that have gradually shaken the system, the time may have come to admit openly that the sociology of work, taken in the sense of the tradition of the 1950s and the 1960s, no longer has an assured future. Under these conditions, and as no one would think to deny that the key questions concerning work, employment and production deserve to remain on the agenda of the social sciences, it is now necessary to ensure that these questions are given greater attention in the central debates of sociology itself and in interdisciplinary confrontation. It is on these bases, and with a view to identifying the focal points of innovation are today, that we are putting forward a number of hypotheses that might serve as a framework for recasting the field.

1. As questions of employment and occupational socialization have now acquired respectability, perhaps the time has come to re-examine the question of work. A number of sociologists are already doing so, pointing to the limits that affect the current movement of modernization in enterprises. In this intense movement, brought about by the demands of international economic competition, it is not at all apparent that priority is given to an improvement of working conditions, despite the impressive body of thought and experience that has accumulated on that subject over the past generation.

As for example Danièle Linhart (Linhart, 1991) explains, the change concerns first of all management itself, that is to say giving coherence to the various components of the production system: Taylorism is outmoded in the sense that the units of research and development must communicate with production and marketing; the workshop, formerly confined to "direct work", is again in charge of a substantial part of work that used to be called "indirect" (functions of organization and maintenance, but also quality control and design of methods).

The change also affects techniques for the enrolment of operatives, who must get involved in information and regulatory systems that have become interactive. On the other hand, and allowing for exceptions, the change is definitely less important if one looks at the “analysis of real work”. Ultimately, the demarcation line between conceptual tasks and implementation is still very clear.

Researchers who argue that these approaches to work should not be overlooked are, in their own fashion, disciples of Friedmann and his *Travail en miettes*. Others are inclined to stress instead the new dimensions of the question and draw upon other references. One of the noticeable effects of technical evolution is for example the redistribution of the skills of men and the capabilities of machines: thus, “expert systems” have developed that compete with human intelligence in diagnostic tasks at the workplace. This has given rise to completely new discussions on the relevance of various types of knowledge and on their possible involvement in shaping new representations of the production system (Hatchuel, Weil, 1992; Terssac, 1992). The discussion is of interest to the management sciences, cognitive psychology and ergonomics and may also have an impact in various sociological circles, from those concerned with scientific and technical innovation to specialists in training.

2. A renewed interest in the subject of work might also take place through an updating of ideas about employer-employee relations. There is no reason to believe that this matter, which constituted one of the central questions of sociology, law and political philosophy in the context of the development of capitalism, will only survive on the strength of its historical importance. Thus, economists and sociologists today are reconsidering labour markets as one type of “coordination among actors”¹³. A specialist on Japanese enterprises sees in this a system of relations based on cooperation, where the themes of hierarchy and contract have always prevailed (Aoki, 1988). These simple facts would suffice to justify a reappraisal of employer-employee relations on a new theoretical basis that go beyond the framework of the sociology of work.

3. Against the background of these considerations, another debate has also clearly begun on the emergence of new productive models to replace the bureaucratic and Taylorist models that have haunted the outgoing century. A serious discussion has started, and there is reason to believe that it holds great possibilities for sociological study in the coming decade. Whatever one might

13 See for example the debate between Olivier Favereau, economist, and Erhard Friedberg, sociologist, in a text by the latter (Friedberg, 1992).

say about the survival of Taylorism, it is generally agreed that the “principles of scientific organization” which have developed in Taylor’s wake have now been objectively disqualified. Unable to face the current conditions of industrial operations, they will have to give way for economic reasons (the limits reached in the standardization of procedures), for technical reasons (the built-in flexibility of today’s machines) and for social reasons (among other things, the better training of operators).

There again, for those who wish to examine the meaning of change, the path embarked upon by George Friedmann is still accessible, and some have not hesitated to follow in his footsteps, for example by inquiring whether it is possible at present to imagine alternatives to Taylorism that are not predefined by technical change or at least by the perpetual temptation to give priority to the “technical solution” (Freyssenet, 1992).¹⁴ However, the intellectual effervescence that can be observed today in that connection suggests a certain degree of confusion, which might be partly due to the fact that the time of major changes has indeed arrived, so much so that it would be increasingly difficult to separate theoretical efforts and management advice or practice, as seen in the fascination that the “Japanese model” continues to exert more or less everywhere, including in scholarly circles (see Coriat, 1991).

But what exactly is meant by the idea that a new model of industrial rationalization, so-called non-Taylorist, is replacing the old? In addition to the fact that it might appear to be reviving outmoded determinist patterns, the model-based approach is suspected of having embraced the dichotomous way of thinking that was precisely that of F. W. Taylor himself when he contrasted the old system of management with the principles of the scientific organization of enterprises. More precisely, the risk might be to embark upon a sort of retrospective validation of Taylorism, the highly problematical assertion being made that Taylor’s claims to rationalization and the Taylorist system as it actually functioned in history are one and the same. In a word, and in spite of the unquestionable quality of the many discussions on the subject¹⁵, the time has come in our view to clarify the epistemological foundations of the discussion on *models* and to assess the particular contribution of sociology in this matter, especially *vis-à-vis* that of management or economics.

14 See also the report presented in November 1992 by Pierre Dubois at the above-mentioned interdisciplinary colloquium *Travail: recherche et prospective* (Dubois, 1992). See in particular part 3: “*Techniques et systèmes productifs*”.

15 See in particular Terssac, Dubois, eds., 1992, as well as the dossier on the question in *Sociologie du travail*, 1–1993 (in particular Veltz, Zarifian, 1993).

One of the striking aspects of the problem has to do with the fact that in reality, most analyses superimpose three conceptions of the model. The first is based on the inductive approach, in which the laws are traced back to the facts, as has long been suggested in the organizational theories of contingency that are often used in the management sciences: enterprises with different performance levels are compared, the idea being to work one's way back to the factors that help to explain the greater efficiency. The second conception relies on the deductive approach. Built upon an endogenous mode of reasoning, such models seek to link problems, sets of constraints and solutions: Taylor, among others, used that approach. The third category of model is, *a priori*, of greater concern to the sociologist: in these models, the system of production is understood as one of the components of a system of regulation of a more general scope, which call for a characterization on the basis of a number of fundamental variables from which generalizations about the others can be drawn. That is what is at issue, for example, when forms of coordination or conventions between actors are mentioned. This is not to say that it is always necessary to choose between these three approaches, but they should not be confused.

4. The question of industrial organization models raises another subject, at first glance less exciting but perhaps at least as rich: the conditions of industrial innovation. It is one thing to examine where the transformation of the systems of production is taking us, and another to study how these transformations are operated, whether from the point of view of economic, organizational or technical decision-making. But unless we identify processes clearly and only focus upon Crozier's "system of concrete action" and "limited rationality", which tend a bit too easily to become all-purpose tools, one cannot but conclude that in France, very few sociologists studying industry have ventured into the field of management decision-making theories. The question is crucial, however, if only because the crux of the matter in the transformations under way is precisely to improve the mastery of the information on the basis of which decisions are made, as can be seen for example by the spreading of project-oriented methods, which have gradually become commonplace for designing new equipment and products.

What can be done to refine the analysis of the procedures at play in innovation? One way, both ambitious and controversial from the theoretical point of view, is mapped out by Michel Callon and Bruno Latour of the *Centre de sociologie de l'innovation* of the *École des Mines* in Paris (Callon, 1986; 1989). It begins by postulating that innovation is not a linear, but rather an iterative process involving a confrontation between various very different actors. It then suggests that there is no reason to separate the technical and social dimensions of change, both being nothing more than the two sides of an emerging reality that

only takes shape through their encounter. Hence the proposal to consider innovation as a process of confrontation between human and non-human actors equally engaged in a translation process in which each side attempts to impose on the other the use of its own language.

A second way, which can be understood as a concrete application of the first, consists in choosing innovation-oriented arrangements as a topic of study, and more generally in observing the complex mechanisms of collective adjustment that may be concealed behind a particular management tool taken as rational by decision-makers. One of the particularities of such research is that it renounces the idea of confining the realm of interest of the sociologist to the “soft” dimensions of industrial change; rather, it examines and, where necessary, evaluates the socio-technical dynamics through which industrial decisions as such are reached, without neglecting any relevant element of the environment, be it materials, technology, available know-how, research and development potential, the networks created with suppliers and clients, etc.

Another important characteristic of this approach of industrial sociology consists in its objective proximity to the concerns of the decision-makers and, even more, to the people in the field. The underlying prospect is not only a cross-breeding of social sciences applied to management, but ultimately a direct contact between the social sciences and the engineering sciences, with the hope of a mutual enrichment to liberate the former from the atrophied field of human resource management in organizations and to raise the latter above the simplified views of technical rationality that have long characterized them.

5. In recent years, a debate has developed in France about whether there is a place for a sociology that explicitly makes the enterprise its centre of attention, alongside of the sociology devoted to organizations, in the generic sense that this term has long acquired in the social sciences. The discussion began under circumstances that were quite understandable: the problems of employment having become more and more critical, there was a clear tendency to “rehabilitate” the enterprise, freeing it from its state of alien enclave within civil society and giving it a central position instead. At the same time, the alleged management models, the declining influence of the trade unions and the collapse of the socialist alternative have contributed to a growing reconciliation between the values conveyed by the enterprise and by society. The hypothesis of sociologists that have embarked upon this terrain has been that the enterprise no longer confines itself to borrowing from the surrounding society: increasingly, it has presented itself as a model for society upon which it imparts its own values (Sainsaulieu, 1987; 1990).

Misunderstandings remain in connection with this recognition of the enterprise as a pertinent category in sociology and, in particular, as a new focus for the sociology of work. For some authors, the sociologist's point of reference must continue to be employer-employee relations and everything evolving out of them: the life of working collectives and their confrontation with the authority of the employer. It should not be the institutional location of productive activity, which would be a mere receptacle lacking any autonomy. For others, the arrival of a sociology of the enterprise is one of the effects of the dominant discourse on "rehabilitation", not unlike the fashion of the often ill-defined concepts of "culture" or "identity" of the enterprise.

Agreement is, however, gradually emerging that the development of a sociology of the enterprise implies a more significant trend, devoid of any ideological subordination. The basic question remains the place of the enterprise in society and the changes currently observed in that regard. Here we are back, albeit in a different way, to the diagnosis on the end of Taylorism: "Confusedly, the century of Taylor has believed, if not in the factory without men, at least in a system of production separate from the social system and free of the need to justify itself before society. Today, that fiction can no longer be sustained (...). Industrial management has again become conscious of the need to make enterprises full-fledged social institutions. That is why the enterprise has no choice but to change for real" (Segrestin, 1992, p. 198).

By its composition, the research to be conducted in this field presupposes a detour through history, political science and law. The point is to understand how, at any particular moment in the history of industrial society, the enterprise manages its historical "quarrel" with pre-industrial memory and how it succeeds in achieving its political legitimacy. The theory of organizations is not likely to be instructive on that question, and it is therefore necessary to open another front, which incidentally should be accompanied by a revival – so difficult at present – of studies on the forms of worker representation and the future of the system of industrial relations.

As can be seen, even if the French tradition of the sociology of work was to exhaust itself for good, work and everything that it influences in society still would remain an enormous challenge for the sociologist.

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