



UMR 1041 INRA – AGROSUP

CESAER



Centre d'Economie et Sociologie
appliquées à l'Agriculture et aux Espaces Ruraux

Eigen-Sinn Within and Outside the Factory.
**The Unequal Resources of the Working-class
with regard to Personal Domination**

Nicolas Renahy

Working Paper

2011/2

*Government from Below / Herrschaft als soziale Praxis / Domination au quotidien.
Translating Theories of Power and Domination*

Guest of Honour: Alf Lüdtke

LaSSP, IEP Toulouse, 17-18th March 2011

Eigen-Sinn Within and Outside the Factory
The Unequal Resources of the Working-class with regard to Personal
Domination

Nicolas Renahy, INRA (renahy@dijon.inra.fr)

Introduction: The Quest for a Translation

As Alexandra Oeser points out in the conference's presentation paper, the notion of *Eigen-Sinn* has been translated in several different ways in French ("sens de soi", "sens propre", "quant-à-soi", "domaine reserve", etc.), (sense of self, aloofness, reserve, stubbornness, exclusive domain, etc.), indicating the wide resonance and fecundity of Alf Lüdtke's work in French social sciences, and the different reappropriations made in specific contexts. The aim of this paper is not to retrace the history of these translations, but to illustrate how I made use of the notion in a field survey of workers in a small ironworks in a village in Burgundy. I therefore make a very particular use of the notion since it is adapted to the observations made during the survey, but the use is, nevertheless, not peculiar to my work since it echoes the way in which *Eigen-Sinn* has been understood and reinterpreted by the ethnographic sociology of the working-class which emerged in the 1990s around the works of Michel Pialoux, Stéphane Beaud and Florence Weber. Weber is, to my knowledge, the first social scientist systematically to translate *Eigen-Sinn* as "quant-à-soi"¹ (stubbornness) in reference to an article Lüdtke published in *Mouvement social*² in 1984. In this article, *Eigen-Sinn* is not translated by Peter Schöttler and Gérard Gayot in the text ("sens propre" - *personal self-interest* - appears in the conclusion, p. 52), but "domaine reserve" (*exclusive domain*) is used in the title and "quant-à-soi" (*stubbornness*) appears alternately with the author's name at the top of each page in the phrase "des ouvriers sur leur quant-à-soi" (*workers and their stubbornness*). It is not surprising that Weber chooses this term (which, after long discussions with a German friend who teaches in France, she considers as the "least inadequate" translation of the concept of *Eigen-Sinn*); In France, *quant-à-soi* is widely understood as "attitude

¹ Florence Weber, "Nouvelles lectures du monde ouvrier : de la classe aux personnes", *Genèses*, n° 6, 1991, pp. 179-189.

² Alf Lüdtke, "Le domaine réservé : affirmation de l'autonomie ouvrière et politique chez les ouvriers d'usine en Allemagne à la fin du XIXe siècle", *Le Mouvement social*, n° 126, 1984, pp. 29-52.

de réserve empreinte de fierté”³, (an aloof attitude imbued with pride), a direct echo of the debates following the publication of Pierre Bourdieu’s *La Distinction*⁴. With regard to Bourdieu’s misgivings of a dispossessed working-class exclusively driven by a “taste for necessity” (*goût du nécessaire*) and a feeling of cultural illegitimacy, adopting an attitude of political delegation and “*remise de soi*” (abandonment of the self), Claude Grignon and Jean-Claude Passeron warn against miserabilist or populist tendencies which share the trait of analysing the working classes idealistically from above⁵. At the same time, the ethnological approach Weber imports from ethnology to sociology allows her to bring the indigenous perspective to the forefront in her analysis of working-class leisure time. On studying “what workers do when they are not at the factory” she discovered the importance of vegetable gardens in workers’ interactions amongst themselves in a small, industrial town⁶. This activity, which, along with DIY jobs and *affouages* (the right to gather firewood) they call “*travail à-côté*” (work on the side), is not only a “compensatory benefit” for relatively poor households, and a “counter-handicap”⁷ to domination (although it is work for oneself) - it is also, at the same time, an “assertion of oneself” and the construction of an “us” alongside the factory. This attention to indigenous practices and terms as well as the attention given to “groups of interpersonal acquaintance” (“*groupes d’interconnaissance*” - a notion she borrows from the ethnologist Marcel Maget) enables Weber to take into account “activities and aspirations through which people, either individually or in groups, endeavour to escape the demands and orders ‘from above’ or ‘from outside’”⁸.

With these considerations in mind, I have attempted to analyse workers’ behaviours with regard to the employers’ practices of personal domination at play in a mono-industrial village in Burgundy with a population of 600. From the mid 19th century until the early 1970s, over five generations, a regional bourgeoisie passed down the ownership and management of an ironworks which became a stove factory in the interwar years⁹. This specialisation was accompanied by the establishment of an industrial paternalism, a policy to sedentarise the workforce which mainly evolved in France in the 1920s but borrowed from 19th century patronage¹⁰. Although it declined in the postwar years, the policy nevertheless continued until the 1970s with the municipality and the construction of the Social State, to which employers progressively delegated the management of workers’ housing (policies to encourage access to home ownership from the 1950s onwards

³ The Le Petit Robert Dictionary definition is more precise: “Réserve un peu fière de celui qui garde pour soi ses sentiments, tient à son indépendance et à son droit d’être lui-même” (*The somewhat proud reserve of one who keeps one’s feelings to oneself and values one’s independence and right to be oneself*)

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*, Paris, Minuit, collection “Le sens commun”, 1979.

⁵ Claude Grignon & Jean-Claude Passeron, *Le Savant et le populaire, miserabilisme et populisme en sociologie et en littérature*, Paris, Seuil - Gallimard, 1989.

⁶ Florence Weber, *Le travail à côté. Etude d’ethnographie ouvrière*, Paris, INRA/EHESS, 1989.

⁷ Claude Grignon & Christiane Grignon, “Styles d’alimentation et goûts populaires”, *Revue française de sociologie*, vol. 21, n° 4, 1980, pp. 531-569.

⁸ Alf Lüdtke, “La domination au quotidien. “Sens de soi” et individualité des travailleurs en Allemagne avant et après 1933”, *Politix*, n° 13, 1991, p. 73.

⁹ Nicolas Renahy. “Une lignée patronale à la mairie. Genèse et vieillissement d’une domination personnalisée (1850-1970)”, *Politix*, n° 83, 2008, pp. 73-102.

¹⁰ Gérard Noiriel, “Du “patronage” au “paternalisme” : la restructuration des formes de domination de la main-d’œuvre ouvrière dans l’industrie métallurgique française”, *Le Mouvement social*, n° 144, 1988, pp. 17-35.

and the construction of housing to rent between 1965 and 1975). Personal domination subsided during the nine years the factory belonged to a national industrial group, which shut down the site in 1981, laying off the remaining 220 employees. Two years later a former sales manager took over the company, recruiting several dozen formerly unemployed workers. At the time I conducted my participant observations on the shop floor as an unskilled seasonal worker in the summers of 1995 and 1996, business had stabilised, focusing on the manufacture of industrial stoves and gourmet range cookers, and the factory employed around one hundred people. I observed renewed personal domination, with the boss nicknamed “Papa”, hiring through recommendations or filiation¹¹, and through which, eventually, the link between rural kinship and the industrial environment was renewed, albeit diminished by the years of economic crisis¹². As was the case for the young temporary workers sharing a “sub-culture in the housing-estate environment”¹³ and that of the metalworkers cultivating their vegetable gardens, participant observation in the village’s football club led me to examine not only the factory working conditions but also to observe this working-class milieu in its residential environment. Today, I would like to render an account of this continual switching between the productive and reproductive environments since it is from this, and within a local framework that I believe this “stubbornness” stems¹⁴ - working-class pride and dignity are born and fuelled in the everyday interactions which shape individual and family reputations. In a system of personalised employment, however, which takes care to maintain a familiar relationship between the employer and the employees and in which groups of interpersonal acquaintance bridge the factory and village environments, the resources promoting stubbornness are unequally distributed.

1. “Paternalism” and “Rurality” – A Dual Domination?

Des hommes, des femmes, des jeunes et des sans âge... Le hasard et la volonté d’une famille d’industriels les ont fixés dans une situation ambiguë : ils vivent à la campagne mais ils sont ouvriers. De leur origine paysanne, ils ont gardé la démarche pesante, le visage rougeaud et le sens de l’obéissance qu’on doit au patron. (*Men and women, both young and ageless... chance and the will of a family of industrialists have immobilised them in an ambiguous situation – they live in the countryside despite being factory workers. From their peasant origins they have retained their ungainly gait, ruddy complexion and the sense of obedience one owes one’s boss.*)

Le Progrès de Lyon, February 1972.

This extract (from a newspaper article written by a journalist from Lyon reporting from Foulange in Burgundy in February 1972 when the family-run business manufacturing stoves was

¹¹ Véronique Moulinié, “Tonton et Tatit : notes sur la parenté et la famille au sein de l’entreprise”, *Journal des Anthropologues*, n° 66-67, 1996, pp. 71-84.

¹² Nicolas Renahy, “Génération ouvrière et territoire industriel. La transmission d’un ordre ouvrier localisé dans un contexte de précarisation de l’emploi”, *Genèses*, n° 42, 2001, pp. 47-71.

¹³ Michel Pialoux, “Jeunesse sans avenir et travail intérimaire”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, n° 26-27, 1979, pp. 19-47.

¹⁴ Cf. Alf Lüdtke, “Le domaine réservé...”, *art. cit.*, p. 31 : “Cette reconstruction du *mode de vie* ouvrier au travers de l’analyse de la “production et de la reproduction du quotidien” exige pour être tentée que l’on se cantonne au cadre régional, voire au cadre local”. (“*When attempted, this reconstruction of the working-class lifestyle through the analysis of the ‘production and reproduction on a daily basis’ requires one to confine oneself to a regional or even local setting.*”)

bought up by the Fonderies et Ateliers du Rhône group) is a remarkable illustration of the inherent difficulties in studying populations about which not much is understood and whose social image is produced only by default. These people are the inhabitants of a village with a population of 950, who are not farmers - a large majority are employed in a metalwork company with 400 employees. With regard to the industrial group from Lyon which has come to “save” them (temporarily) from widespread redundancy, they are perceived as marginal workers, isolated not only geographically but also culturally from the source of industrial activity which is inevitably urban. Although they are not farmers, they represent in some ways the vestiges of a prewar peasantry living from hand to mouth and left behind by the agricultural modernisation in full swing as the *Trente Glorieuses* drew to a close. Moreover, this atypical rural population – neither a farming community nor typical factory workers - had, until then, mostly been employed by the family-run business owned by an industrial bourgeoisie which had passed the business down from father to son since the mid 19th century. This durability and the grandeur associated with the personal domination by the Coste family (three large townhouses in the village, an imposing mausoleum in the cemetery, the celebration of the Saint Eloi always involving a procession from the factory to the church, etc.) reinforced the comparison between the employer’s family and “seigneurs”¹⁵.

Obviously, the remarks about these “ageless” workers referring to their as “ungainly gait”, their “ruddy complexions” and their “sense of obedience” are taken from a certain context; they are the work of a journalist from Lyon reporting about a company from his city after it has bought up a small organisation. They also, however, reflect a far broader intellectual and media-based context, in which the economic crisis experienced by such family-run businesses highlights a mode of employee management known as “paternalism”¹⁶. Although for Marxism, a social rapport such as this constitutes an “unthought”, an “aberration, an unnatural relationship between two, antagonistic classes”¹⁷, a certain number of academics have conceptualised it, inspired by Bentham’s panopticism which was taken up by Michel Foucault. Furthermore, André

¹⁵ Cf. Nicolas Renahy, “Une lignée patronale...”, *art. cit.*

¹⁶ The media coverage of the local drama was an opportunity to describe the small industrial site. A certain unanimity soon became apparent, and a furious press release from the Force Ouvrière trade union (despite its very low membership in Foulange) portrayed the image that opinion makers have of Foulange and its workers. “This is an example of paternalism and its retrograde dimension has been portrayed correctly by certain journalists. Nothing has been exaggerated. On seeing it for themselves, FO unionists were compelled to say ‘It’s incredible – they’re fifty years behind the times!’ These days, when every management authority is harping on about participation, it is lamentable to see the extent to which it is actually applied.” (*Les Dépêches*, 24/01/1972). The word “paternalism” stigmatises a mode of managing the workforce which is judged retrograde, an industry “which was not capable of acquiring the sufficient size” (*ibid.*), but above all, workers considered as ill-adapted to the recent industrial revolution. Although the comments of local papers somewhat softened the portrait, mentioning “a very considerable human capital” and a “valorous, hard-working crew”, this was not the case for articles targeting a wider audience than that of Foulange and its immediate surroundings. When, at the end of a two-month period granted by the administrative tribunal, a buyer was found with the FAR, the *Hebdo-Dijon* described a Foulange which was “no longer abandoned in its limited small-town *morvandiau*” (8/07/1972, “Foulange : tout le monde il est beau, tout le monde il est gentil”), while the *Progrès de Lyon* rejoiced in the fact that, thanks to the FAR, “five hundred low-income families are saved from the dole queue” (“Foulange : la fin...”, *op. cit.*).

¹⁷ Michel Pinçon, *Désarrois ouvriers. Familles de métallurgistes dans les mutations industrielles et sociales*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1987, p. 58.

Gueslin implicitly refers to the “disciplinary society”¹⁸ in his article in the form of a report when he defines industrial paternalism as a “system governing the *totality* of the relations between the employer and the company’s employees”¹⁹. We are, therefore, confronted with a “system” which subjects employees to the factory’s command, and directs it towards its own reproduction which “controls” in a manner that is “total” the worker and his family since it is developed outside the shop floor in order to complete the factory’s disciplinary approach²⁰. Housing plays a central role here, and while employers’ construction of housing estates for their workers is economically profitable (it avoids having to increase wages on a regular basis²¹), it also constitutes a “means to control the level of wellbeing that workers are authorised to reach”²² since if a system such as this prevails to the point of being mobilised in the factory-town system (*ville-usine*)²³, this is because it is based on “the transfer of rural cultural connections in urban contexts” on to a “type of social interaction through which adult men (...) attempt to justify their authority by the fact that they ‘take care’ of their dependents in return for loyalty, obedience and services rendered”²⁴. This touches upon the crux of countless discussions and analyses concerning “paternalism”. As well as the system of industrial paternalism which was widely established in France in the interwar years to promote the loyalty of the workforce, there exists the particular social relations between the dominant and the dominated, considered as an extension of the former relationships in force in domestic units of agricultural or proto-industrial production where the father/master ran the household (including spouse, children, servants, apprentices, etc.), hence the reference to a “secular domestic order”²⁵ suggesting a filiation with the seigneurial era and a certain conception of rurality. In a village with fewer than one thousand inhabitants and where the boss is also the lord of the manor, not only is the worker controlled in the factory and by means of his accommodation, but also regional interpersonal knowledge (*l’interconnaissance territoriale*) personalises this submission, adding to the “total” nature of the power wielded.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. “Bibliothèque des Histoires”, 1975. The idea of the “total control” of employers by the employee does not, of course, come from Foucault, but from some of his readers who transpose the analysis of the prison environment to the industrial environment. Cf. in particular Lion Murard and Patrick Zylberman, *Le petit travailleur infatigable ou le prolétaire régénéré*, Fontenay-sous-Bois, Recherches, 1980 [1976]; François Ewald, *L’État providence*, Paris, Grasset, 1986; Jean-Pierre Frey, *Le rôle social du patronat. Du paternalisme à l’urbanisme*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1995.

¹⁹ André Gueslin, “Le paternalisme revisité en Europe occidentale (seconde moitié du XIXe, début XXe siècle)”, *Genèses*, n° 7, 1992, p. 201 (the italics are the author’s).

²⁰ “C’est hors de l’usine, par le chantage aux logements et aux ‘œuvres diverses’, que le patronat peut espérer former son personnel dans le sens où il l’entend” (*It is outside the factory, using accommodation as blackmail that employers can hope to mould their staff as they see fit*) Gérard Noiriel, “Du ‘patronage’ au ‘paternalisme’...”, *art. cit.*, p. 33.

²¹ Peter N. Stearns, *Paths to Authority. The Middle Class and the Industrial Labor Force in France, 1820-1848*, Urbana, London, University of Illinois Press, 1978.

²² Michel Pigenet, “L’usine et le village : Rosières (1969-1914)”, *Industrialisation et sociétés d’Europe occidentale, 1880-1970*, Paris, Editions de l’Atelier, pp. 5-32. Cf. also Guy Groux and Catherine Lévy, *La possession ouvrière. Du taudis à la propriété (XIX^e-XX^e siècles)*, Paris, Editions de l’Atelier, 1993.

²³ François Ewald, *L’État providence*, *op. cit.*

²⁴ Judy Lown, “‘Père plutôt que maître...’: le paternalisme à l’usine dans l’industrie de la soie à Halstead au XIX^e siècle”, *Le Mouvement social*, n° 144, 1988, pp. 52-53.

²⁵ Alain Morice, *Recherches sur le paternalisme et le clientélisme contemporains : méthodes et interprétations*, mémoire d’HDR de l’EHESS (post-doctoral degree thesis), 2000, p. 101.

It was with a certain scepticism about this miserabilist perception of “paternalism” that I approached the ethnographic study of Foulange’s working-class population in the mid 1990s. Having stayed in the village after the industrial crisis of the 1980s, some families had seen some of their members employed in the two SMEs which had been re-established. The employment crisis had left a considerable mark (high unemployment, a demographic drop – by this time the village’s population had fallen to 600 inhabitants – and the misery of a large fraction of the local working-class youth²⁶), but nevertheless, when I joined the stove factory which had taken over and specialised production, it was easy to imagine that nothing had changed in spite of all this. Working-class in status, profession and accommodation (in housing estates or rented council housing) and assimilated in a peasantry both by the rural environment and the mode of domination surrounding it - this community nevertheless possessed its own specific *Eigen-Sinn*. Its situation was somewhat reminiscent of the Silesian peasants at the end of the 18th century who were dependent upon their lords and who inspired Alf Lüdtkke²⁷. Their “sense of obedience” was offset by a sort of “stiffness”, “deafness” and “defensiveness” when confronted by authority, which in 1790 the “popular philosopher” Christian Garve attributed to “perfidy” when he observed the behaviour of the peasants with regard to their lords. However, although the notion as Lüdtkke uses it (in other words, taking into consideration the legitimacy of the dominated people) has proved its heuristic nature beyond history - notably in sociology - its usage should not necessarily be taken as an anachronism.

Faced this kind of reality, it would be easy to fall into the trap of two related temptations – that of evolutionism, presenting contemporary personal domination as an archaic vestige of 18th and 19th century rural societies – and that of excessive singularisation (Foulange as an timeless industrial “village community”²⁸). However, while it is well-understood that personal domination²⁹ was more significant in preindustrial societies than it was in the 20th century, there is, nevertheless, no reason for it to disappear while logics of domination such as the personalisation of social relations continue to exist in every society.

²⁶ Nicolas Renahy, *Les gars du coin. Enquête sur une jeunesse rurale*, Paris, La Découverte, 2005.

²⁷ Alf Lüdtkke, “Le domaine réservé...”, *art. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

²⁸ Hence the decision to reserve the expression “industrial paternalism” for the historical period during which were maintained registers of domination inherited from patronage despite the Taylorisation of production modes by means of workers’ housing aiming to sedentarise an unstable workforce (G. Noiriel, “Du ‘patronage’ au ‘paternalisme...’”, *art. cit.*). We are not, therefore, convinced by the approach which consists of presenting paternalism as a generic form of employment relations, as formulated for example, by Alain Morice, for whom the epithet “paternalist” designates “la qualité d’une relation qui se règle sur une base personnelle et non contractuelle entre inégaux” (*the quality of relations organised on a personal rather than contractual basis between people who are not equal*) (A. Morice, *Recherches sur le paternalisme et le clientélisme contemporains : méthodes et interprétations*, PhD thesis EHESS, 2000, p. 103). This is close to how it is commonly understood but the accepted sense cannot help but lead to spatial and temporal generalisations. We prefer to use more precise terms such as “personal dependence” (*dépendance personnalisée*) (A. Garcia, *Libres et assujettis. Marché du travail et modes de domination au Nordeste*, Paris, Ed. MSH, 1989) or “personal domination” (*domination personnalisée*) (Lygia Sigaud, “Le courage, la peur, la honte. Morale et économie dans les plantations sucrières du Nordeste brésilien”, *Genèses*, n° 25, 1996, pp. 72-90) inspired by the work of Weber, which may be adapted to different contexts without reducing them to ideal types.

²⁹ Cf. Max Weber, *Économie et société*, Vol.1, Paris, Pocket, 1995 [1956], and Lygia Sigaud, “Le courage...”, *art. cit.*

2. In the Factory – What do we mean by “Stubbornness”?

2.1. The appeal of everyday resistance during factory hours

Around sixty people worked on the shop floor of the small factory where I was employed as an unskilled sheet-metal worker in July 1995 and July 1996. It was a relatively small, friendly environment, with collections taken for weddings and christenings and where kinship ties were numerous, as were relationships outside the workplace³⁰. Colleagues were greeted with a handshake, a greeting also used by the shop foremen as well as the shop floor manager (who supervised the three foremen and made his rounds of the entire factory every morning at 8 o'clock). The CEO, the company's founder and a former sales manager with the earlier company, was regularly nicknamed “Papa”. He was capable of making a remark to his employees if they wore an earring or their hair was a little too long³¹, and tales of his temper or “empty” promises were passed on to new workers. He suppressed the vague attempts to create a branch of the CGT trade union by intimidating a young union member (by ridiculing him during a meeting, having an engineer time him). Despite the fact that senior levels and shop floor workers addressed each other using the informal ‘*tu*’ form, a hierarchy nonetheless existed. However, there was no apparent control of output, at least not in the press workshop where I was employed. We merely made sure not we did not catch the shop foreman Dirk's eye when chatting for too long.

Fifteen years later, rereading my field notebook recounting my experience as a seasonal unskilled worker in Foulange's stove factory, I was surprised by the recurrence of remarks concerning the education in worker stubbornness, especially with regard to the relative control of the pace of work³². This education concerned every newly-hired worker, such as Samir, who told me in an interview about his first days on trial in the machine shop, “I was really pleased to have a job, and the parts really rolled out, I can tell you! I had no idea how it really worked...”³³ He needed the guidance of an experienced worker to learn how to manage his efforts and take the time to chat with his shop floor neighbours and to acquire the taste for work well done (handling delicate machinery) without, however, “overdoing it” by taking sides too overtly with the factory hierarchy and not acknowledging the working-class milieu and its relative power with regard to organising one's working time. Although only a temporary worker, I received the same education when, for example, two employees ridiculed the ardour with which I cleaned my machine at the end of the week; “That'll do – it's not your girlfriend!” This education was given by remarks such

³⁰ I managed to establish that in 1995, of the twenty-two “young” men (under thirty) employed, eleven had a parent employed in the village factories, twelve a relation (grandparent, uncle or aunt), seven played football for the village club and three were members of the local volunteer fire brigade. Cf. Nicolas Renahy, “Génération ouvrières... *art. cit.*”

³¹ Thierry (25 years' old) “This morning, he said to me ‘It's getting longer’ – he was joking when he said it, but still...he doesn't like it”. Ten days later, Thierry went to the barber. “Never mind, it'll grow back!” he said.

³² Visibly a question of time which was an issue in July 1995 – workers were asked to do overtime in order to build up stocks of stoves ahead of closing-time in August, but the planned seven hours a week proved to be too many, and staff did not have enough work. Discussions on the shop floor were, therefore, critical about how the work was organised.

³³ N. Renahy, *Les gars du coin...*, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

as this, and also by insistent glances and, above all, through mimicry – novices rapidly picked up the necessary “social skills” as illustrated in these extracts from my field journal relating my second and third days working in the factory:

This time I am in a corner of the workshop, fairly isolated with my machine. The batches of 200 to 400 parts are long and the movements repetitive. Visiting the WC or stopping for a snack makes a welcome break, as does taking finished parts and fetching other parts. When I pass Thierry [*the 25 year old worker who is responsible for me as I work at the presses*] and joke that “that makes quite a few trips”, he replies with a knowing “Oh, it doesn’t matter...”

Thierry makes the most of being on “cloakroom duty” (cleaning basins, WCs and locker-rooms at the beginning of the afternoon) to linger on the way back to the presses and chat at length with Philippe in trimming. Dirk [*shop foreman in the sheet metal workshop*] has put me on a bending machine during cleaning time. He comes to see me at the end of my batch. “Ah, good, I was hoping to see you,” he said, “The guys have been doing quite a lot of overtime recently, so they’re lagging behind a bit now. If you could try and speed up the pace a little and set an example...” Dirk is then concerned about the prolonged absence of his employee on “cloakroom duty” today (“Hasn’t Thierry finished yet?”) and sets off to look for him. He finds him on the way, where Philippe is working – a small group has gathered around them...

Seeing the way in which a shop foreman “chases up” his workers and asks a temporary worker to “set an example” for the pace of the work, to understand after only a few days in the factory the importance of a working-class domain which was becoming slightly more autonomous from the hierarchy led me to be seduced by the working-class milieu capable of dictating to a certain extent its own laws with regard to its superiors, and symmetrically to denigrate a remote industrial universe and the mode of personnel management from “a different era”. However, my initial fascination was moderated as I learned more about the reality of the work and “the exacting presence of the machinery to which we are assigned, the attention required by the rudimentary and repetitive tasks (...), the fragmentation of sociability at work and the plurality of everyone’s lives”³⁴ ...

2.2. “Time to go for it” - A Demonstration of Stubbornness

Confronted with this working-class plurality, I sought out the collective in the individual bearing and trajectories of the workers I spent the most time with in the shop floor. I soon realised that being under Thierry’s supervision constituted a great opportunity for my survey. Thierry was one of the very few young men on the shop floor to possess professional legitimacy through his training. Unlike the majority of the members of his generation who did not occupy an appropriate position with regard to their academic qualifications (without qualifications, holders of a CAP [French National Vocational Qualification] in construction or with a *Baccalauréat* but having dropped out of university), Thierry had a CAP in metalwork. He had been brought up in Foulange where his maternal grandfather had moved to find work during the interwar years. Thierry had been working for five years in the factory which also employed his father, and he was hoping, in a few years’ time, to replace the fitter in charge of the presses³⁵.

³⁴ Nicolas Hatzfeld, “De l’action à la recherche, l’usine en reconnaissances”, *Genèses*, n° 77, 2009, p. 154.

³⁵ This was the case. He then, through horizontal mobility, succeeded in being appointed to a much sought-after post in the factory, that of employee in charge of making prototypes.

Despite an in-house “on the job” training system which, in this factory, favoured the symbolic power of the older workers, at 25 years old, Thierry possessed a professional legitimacy coupled with the foundation obtained through the fact that he represented a line of local workers (we shall come back to this). In addition, he was also a delegate at the works council. Nevertheless, these resources did not make him a worker above the factory regime – in July 1995 Thierry confided to me that he had just received a warning from the management (three warnings lead to dismissal) for having cut 500 parts too short, having incorrectly adjusted a press. He took far more care when adjusting machinery when I worked with him.

An interaction with the boss gave me the opportunity to better understand the workers’ attitude represented by Thierry. One day as both of us were working together on a large batch (we had to turn large sheets of metal pressed several times in several places by the same press), I noticed that Thierry was gradually drawing me into a kind of game. Faced with the pile of hundreds of sheets of metal to be pressed, he accelerated the pace once he was sure that I had learnt the necessary movements. For a long while we put our dexterity to the test. It was then that I understood through experience the exhilaration that manual labour can produce when the body “dominates” the machine in this way, using it at full speed, and that the pile of sheet metal which at times appeared so huge began to shrink without our noticing, for at that moment in time, it was no longer important. By chance, it was during this episode that the boss came to our part of the workshop to see Raymond (the worker in charge of the presses) and observed us. That night I recorded in my journal:

He watches us when our eyes are busy on our work, and lowers his eyes as soon as we try and make eye-contact to say ‘Hello’. He then comes to shake hands with Raymond who is just behind me adjusting a press – they discuss technical matters. For the five minutes that this lasts, Thierry has a sullen look. Later we talk about it, and Thierry explains his disgust: “He didn’t even shake hands with us! I really can’t understand that. I know he’s annoyed, but still! But when he wants to ask you something, it’s all a pat on the back, “how are you?” blah, blah, blah...”

Particular moments thus exist when the worker can appropriate the machine and reaffirm for himself his competence. If he “does it his own way”, this is because it is “a good way”, and while it is important for carrying out the work at the factory, it is also important for himself. High points such as these are also, clearly, opportunities to demonstrate one’s skill to others. Here, the arrival of the boss was a stroke of luck for a worker who had just received an official warning, and the perfect opportunity to display his skill, which is why Thierry was so indignant, interpreting as disdainful the behaviour of the boss who, by refusing even to acknowledge him with a nod, dismissed him as a mere underling.

In addition to a sociability likely to seduce the observer, this working-class stubbornness is a principle enabling workers to assert the integrity of their working-class condition. Thierry’s error adjusting his machine called into question his competence, and he was intent on proving his worth, first and foremost for himself, in a situation in which the interaction with a temporary worker encourages the demonstration and transmission of skills. These skills are, obviously, dependent on the physical strength and virility of the working classes (as is often pointed out, to the risk of reductiveness), but, more broadly, on endurance and manual ingenuity and the

aptitude to appropriate techniques and adapt them as well as possible to old machinery³⁶. A demonstration such as this may be experienced individually or as part of a team, but whatever the case, it affects the collective core since it involves the shared working-class condition.

As we have seen, Thierry was capable of spending hours lingering, doing the minimum amount of work necessary, and then suddenly speeding up his pace – “Time to go for it”, as he said. He then sent the sheets through the press at breakneck speed, without, however, losing any precision in his work. His endurance was impressive. In fact, this time management, which may at first appear incoherent (alternating slackness with physical “over-exertion”), serves a function of demonstration. For oneself, for one’s colleagues, for the foremen and for the boss, it is a question of demonstrating one’s personal honour in a single gesture and a very ostentatious way.

3. Outside the factory: “Boquin”

This demonstrative logic in the workplace is all the easier to understand when we relate “work time” to “what is at play” outside the workshops, and which makes the working-class condition unique³⁷. Because of his family background, his personal trajectory and his position in the local youth scene, Thierry occupies a singular place both in the factory and in the village³⁸.

3.1. “Come on guys, let’s go”. The uniqueness of the working-class condition

It is on the football pitch that we were best able to observe this singularity. Everyone (coaches, team-mates, spectators, opposing team) considers Thierry to be the playmaker in the village club’s first team. Thus Hervé, the goalkeeper, says that Thierry “can win a game all on his own”. Although he is not talkative and prefers to avoid the limelight, it only takes a football to reveal his true personality: it is with his body that Thierry best expresses himself. During matches, as an attacking midfielder, he is the playmaker. His role is repeated countless times by the coach, whenever he has the ball at his feet: “Go on Thierry, make a difference!” Shoulders straight, head up, he hardly needs to look at the ball to control it: his attention is entirely focused on the game and the possible moves he could set in motion. Then his body expresses all its power and agility, and he can indeed make the whole team dangerous in an instant with that extra spurt that leaves the opposing player standing and gets the ball forward to the attack. His decisive passes, his

³⁶ The shop floor contained much old machinery inherited from the former factory, some of which had been acquired more than seventy years earlier. One day, as I was working on an old shearing machine, an older worker taught me the basics of how to use it, as Dirk claimed that he did not know. After a while, seeing me spend an inordinate amount of time readjusting it as it kept moving, a young worker gave me a tip (to turn the part over after each cut) enabling me to maintain at least some alignment. Moments such as these allowed the exchange of skills outside the constraints of the hierarchy and were a sign of specific workers’ domain.

³⁷ Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux, *Retour sur la condition ouvrière. Enquête aux usines Peugeot de Sochaux-Montbéliard*, Paris, Fayard, 1999, p. 18.

³⁸ The following analysis is partly issued from Nicolas Renahy, « Football et représentation territoriale : un club amateur dans un village ouvrier », *Ethnologie Française*, vol. 31, n° 4, 2001, pp. 707-715.

thunderous shots after crossing the pitch, his ceaseless running between defence and attack thus express all the dexterity and physical strength of someone who has long known the effectiveness of the body.

Paradoxically, although the only thing he says during matches could be summed up as “come on guys, let’s go”, he is the captain of the team. Pascal, his first cousin, who, from his position as sweeper (last defender), is constantly motivating, chiding or congratulating his teammates, would have seemed more suitable for the job. But it is Thierry who wears the captain’s armband. The first expression of the team’s game logic is thus physical; the driving force in the team is not so much he who organises the role of each player through his instructions (Pascal), but he who, through his bodily behaviour, enables each player to find their position and effectively organises the team: the playmaker. The collective sense of each player therefore stems not only from the countless pieces of advice, instructions and rebukes they receive (a player may be criticised many times for an unsuitable movement, he will only modify it when his body has understood the message³⁹), but from the positioning of each of the players in relation to a playmaker, who, by suddenly accelerating the rhythm of play, creates new spaces, disturbs the balance of the defence and allows his forwards to get free of their markers according to an ever-shifting configuration⁴⁰.

3.2. The localised working-class group: belongings and internal divisions

Although Thierry was trained within the club, he is equally the heir of a male family tradition. It is fairly safe to assume that his passion for football comes from “a desire to imitate the exploits of a father who is still remembered in local memory”⁴¹. Socialisation into the male worker/footballer world is achieved by the boy frequenting the club, not only as a young licensed player, but also as a spectator paying particular attention to his father’s behaviour on the pitch during matches, or even during senior training sessions. The learning of sporting movements by imitation, all the more precocious and unconscious because it involves a transmission from father to son, is then favoured by an environment of mutual acquaintanceship, the social pressure of the group accentuating the son’s identification with his father by means of social recognition of the son through that of his father. In this case it is all the more pregnant because Thierry’s relatives are well-established locally, both in the world of the factory and in that of football. In 1995, his father and uncle still worked in the stove manufacturing company, where they were among the first to be re-hired when it was created, and at the same time, as midfielders they both shared in the glory days of the small amateur football club in the 1970s (winning the departmental cup and being promoted to the regional championship). The transmission of nicknames is a good sign of the importance of the group in the social definition of the “social person”.⁴² Until his

³⁹ On bodily learning in collective sports, see N. Renahy, “Apprendre par corps”, *Sociétés et représentations*, n° 7, 1998, pp. 363-366.

⁴⁰ On the adaptation to sport of Elias’ configurational approach, see Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Sport et civilisation, la violence maîtrisée*, Paris, Fayard, 1994.

⁴¹ Beaud Stéphane and Noiriel Gérard, “L’immigration dans le football”, *Vingtième Siècle, Revue d’Histoire*, n° 26, p. 87.

⁴² Cf. the definition given by Bruno Karsenti (*La Société en personnes. Études durkheimiennes*, Paris, Economica, 2006, p. 6): “Contrary to how it is currently understood, the person is that which, in the individual, does not come from

adolescence, Thierry's nickname was "Gaby", like his father. It was only after his affair with the wife of one of the directors (which led to the director in question being excluded from the club) that Thierry acquired "his own" nickname: "Boquin", which means rabbit or hare in patois.⁴³

What could have been merely a little joke has become an identifier, still full of significance all these years after the event, and clearly conveys the desire to integrate Thierry into the group of adults by granting him recognition through this nickname. The term "Boquin" is highly ambiguous: it distinguishes a powerful, dominant individuality in the local working-class world, it expresses all the familiarity of this world (which draws blithely on family memories to create a "social image"⁴⁴), but at the same time it indicates the potential danger this character represents; a ladies' man who threatens the group by destabilising the local matrimonial space. Thierry/Boquin is indeed a dominant figure within this small working-class world. At the factory, I have seen him oppose the young trade-union representative, playing on his social surface to ridicule him and thus set up a local working-class order against an external legitimacy in the shape of the CGT union⁴⁵. Indigenous legitimacy versus legal-rational legitimacy: here we can see "lines of fracture" appear between workers who are "divided but not atomised"⁴⁶. Thierry's stubbornness is part of a local working-class memory, one of the main aims of which is to achieve a degree of independence from the dominant figures, adopting practices of "*conflictual disengagement* which does not come from submission to domination or overt resistance"⁴⁷. It involves creating an space of working-class power without, however, displaying direct, head-on opposition to the employers, on whom one is dependent, and with whom one has a relationship of personal subordination. Thierry's father and uncle were chosen by the new boss at the end of the 1980s, his grandfather was an immigrant worker who benefitted from the paternalist practice of sedentarisation⁴⁸: Thierry's legacy is that of "left-wing" workers (his relatives constitute one of the supports of the current mayor, allied to the socialist party), aware of the inequalities in the

himself and configures him as a being in relation [to others], enabling the actualisation of these relations in a determined form. In the strict sense, and moving back to the meaning of the word when used without the article, it is what is most anonymous about him, what, although part of what he is, nevertheless resists him. In the individual himself, it is what surpasses his own individuality."

⁴³ Thierry explained to me that this nickname actually went further back than that: when he was fifteen he accompanied his father to the *affouage*, and one day his father affectionately called him "ch'ti boquin" (little rabbit) in front of his friends. "To begin with, it came from my father. It had nothing to do with women and all that, like some people think... Well, it does for some people." And indeed, it was after this unlawful affair that the nickname spread and became systematic. But we can note, from what Thierry said, that the success of the nickname is due to the extension of a register of familiarity (from father to friends).

⁴⁴ Martina Avanza and Gilles Laferté, "Dépasser la "construction des identités"? Identification, image sociale, appartenance", *Genèses*, n° 61, pp. 154-167.

⁴⁵ See Nicolas Renahy, "Génération ouvrières..." *art. cit.*

⁴⁶ Cédric Lomba, "Les petites mains des petites entreprises : gestion informelle et fractures ouvrières", *Sociologie du travail*, n° 52, 2010, pp. 503-520.

⁴⁷ Alf Lüdtke, "Ouvriers, *Eigensinn* et politique dans l'Allemagne du XXème siècle", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, n° 113, 1996, p. 91.

⁴⁸ Coming from the neighbouring rural world, Thierry's grandfather arrived in Foulange at the beginning of the 1920s and entered the "Coste system" as a baker in the factory cooperative (according to the nominative census lists, he was then "bricklayer", "unskilled worker", "baker" and then "press worker"). He had three sons from a first marriage to the daughter of a farm labourer in the village. His wife fell ill in the early 1930s and died in 1936. The resolutions of the town council of the time indicate that he was granted free medical assistance (AMG), attributed with "strong approval" from the mayor-factory owner.

distribution of economic and social resources⁴⁹, but retaining an attitude of loyal employees towards the dominant figures. The aim of the *Eigen-Sinn* studied here is to create a working-class space relatively independent from the hierarchy, without challenging its legitimacy.

Conclusions

1. *Eigen-Sinnig* behaviour such as Thierry's, as seen in the factory, is not the natural consequence of a situation of subordination. The form taken by stubbornness was not be the same for Thierry - capable of sneering at his hierarchy by loitering on the shop floor just as his was capable of feeding the sheet metal through the press at breakneck speed - as it was for another worker distrustful of the bosses who would hide in the shop floor toilets to smoke cannabis. These differences stem from the fact that *stubbornness appears to be the result of a social construction*.
2. In the situation analysed here, this construction was observable in the *switching between the factory and leisure pursuits*. Thierry brought his reputation on to the shop floor, since everyone (including the shop foremen) addressed him by the name of "Boquin". This reputation is both that of a member of very strong locally-established kinship as well as that of a young man who had established for himself a large social surface in the domain of leisure pursuits and on the local sexual market.
3. This results in *the unequal distribution of stubbornness*. The capacity to stand up to one's boss in silence, judging oneself to be authorised to come and go in the shop floor without a work-related motive is not equally distribute. In a factory structure such as this which recognised the legitimacy of a workers' hierarchy based on autochthony, a *Boquin* can better defend himself and assert his autonomy in hierarchical interactions than a young worker from outside the local networks, or for he whose local belonging is not built upon "capital d'autochtonie" or "autochthonous capital"⁵⁰.
4. *Situations of personal domination cannot be dismissed as submissive behaviour on the part of those dominated*. While it is true that Thierry complied when the boss asked him to cut his hair and he implicitly acknowledged the justice of the warning he received after adjusting a machine incorrectly, at the same time, he saved his pride and re-established his dominant position among those dominated by standing up for himself through his endurance of the boss' impoliteness and defying the authority of his immediate superior by managing his own working time which included long breaks which he spent maintaining his network of friendly relationships, as well

⁴⁹ During a workshop conversation, Thierry's father Gabriel told me ironically that the boss' son had just bought a flat in town for "800,000 francs, paid for out of his savings". "He makes 20 to 25,000 a month without really having done any studies. But then what do you expect? That's life, and there's nothing we can do about it..."

⁵⁰ Jean-Noël Retière, "Autour de l'autochtonie. Réflexions sur la notion de capital social populaire", *Politix*, n° 63, 2003, p. 121-143; Nicolas Renahy, "Classes populaires et capital d'autochtonie. Genèse et usages d'une notion", *Regards sociologiques*, n° 40, 2010, pp. 9-26.

as his privileged position in the domain of local relationships. To move away from the specific example of Thierry and conclude in a more general manner on the employer/workforce relations of this company, I would like briefly to return to the nickname of “Papa” given to the boss. This was more than a mere nickname in the sense that, unlike “Boquin”, it was not used as a term of address but instead to designate the boss in his absence. The reference to a domestic universe is a way to acknowledge the personal domination and the advantages gained from accepting submission. Person-to-person relationships limited collective demands but allowed individual recognition and associated “favours” such as being able to leave one’s post in the event of a domestic responsibility (e.g. a sick mother) or an extra-professional one (e.g. taking an hour per week to train the local youngsters’ football team); the hierarchy’s turning a blind eye to certain deviant conduct (alcoholism), or being hired when one possesses a sufficiently rich autochthonous capital (a parent’s or local official’s recommendation, or that of the football club’s president, etc.). This being so, collectively calling the boss “Papa” was a way of mocking both him and oneself – in this way, the entire domination relationship was gently ridiculed.