

The
Weight OF
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Social Suffering in Contemporary Society

Pierre Bourdieu et al.

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Pierre Bourdieu

and

Alain Accardo, Gabrielle Balazs, Stéphane Beaud, François Bonvin,
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Patrick Champagne, Rosine Christin, Jean-Pierre Faguer,
Sandrine Garcia, Remi Lenoir, Françoise Œuvrard, Michel Pialoux,
Louis Pinto, Denis Podalydès, Abdelmalek Sayad, Charles Soulié,
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Translator's Preface

Any translation must negotiate between the known and the unknown, between the familiar and the strange. Every translator must decide just how much of the foreign "flavor" should be kept and how much of an effort should be made to "naturalize" the text being "carried over," as the etymology of the term tells us, from one language, from one culture, to another. Given the nature of *The Weight of the World*, its exploration of a decidedly French social setting even as it claims a significance that transcends any particular setting, I decided to favor the Frenchness of the text. This decision meant, among others, retaining the many acronyms, adding explanations in brackets after the first use in a given interview and, for the most frequently recurring terms, amplifications in the Glossary. This decision meant as well such things as keeping sums of money in francs, even in the old francs that the French continue to use for large sums (as in real estate transactions): for a rough equivalency, readers should divide the amount in francs by five for a US dollar sum, by nine for British pounds sterling.

A quick word about the most important, and least translatable, term of all, *la misère*. The entire book, called in the original *La Misère du monde*, plays upon the multiple meanings and resonances of this term, which suggests both *poverty* in economic but also in spiritual and indeed moral terms, and also *misery*, that is, the suffering, unhappiness, and misfortunes of the collectivity as well as the individual. There are echoes of Pascal's reflexions on the misery of man without God¹ as there are of Marx's *La Misère de la philosophie* (*The Poverty of Philosophy*), itself a reply to Proudhon's *La Philosophie de la misère*, and Victor Hugo's novel, *Les Misérables*. There is a further crucial distinction that opposes even as it connects *la grande misère*, which can be thought of as *poverty* (always retaining the spiritual as well as material implications of *impoverishment*), and *la petite misère*, relative misery, poverty, and suffering, often in the plural, which has usually been rendered as *ordinary suffering*. This book weaves its larger text with both of these strands.

Other complexities of translation derive from the dual thrust of the text as narrative and as analysis. As Pierre Bourdieu acknowledges in "To the Reader," many readers will read these interviews as short stories – windows on contemporary society opened by narratives of how that society is experienced by individuals from many walks of life and social situations. And indeed, these narratives

¹ See Pierre Bourdieu's recent *Méditations pascaliennes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997), trans. *Pascalian Meditations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999).

are quite wonderful. (They have worked well for me in my courses in sociology.) The translator's goal with the interview as story must be to render the quality of these diverse lives, the pungency, the pathos, as the case may be, and the specificity of their social and work settings (the automobile plant, the school system, the political landscape, and so on).²

However, as Bourdieu eloquently insists, *The Weight of the World* is first and foremost a sociological enterprise. Thus, the vital importance of the brief introductions and articles that situate the interviews in time and place and also within an interpretive framework. The sociological framework and its conceptual terms will be familiar to those acquainted with Bourdieu's writings from the late 1950s to the present. But more manifestly than in almost any other of his works, *The Weight of the World* presents a sociology that constructs the emblematic from the idiosyncratic. Indeed, the texts in this work are less interviews than short ethnographies where the personal leads to the sociological and where, by design, the interviewer-ethnographer enters openly into the sociological equation. And so Rosine Christin makes a point of mentioning the sympathy that ties women of the same age ("A Double Life") and notes how family connections enable her to participate, however momentarily, in the life of a postal worker ("Working Nights"). Michel Pialoux spent considerable time in the automobile plant that is the setting for a number of the studies. He knew, as an outsider could not, the men he interviewed and especially the contexts that made those interviews emblematic of a certain working-class dejection.

Of course, mere acquaintance, even familiarity is not enough. The sociologist must learn how to listen to discern the sociological relevance in conversations that are resolutely individual and personal. As he readily admits, even though he had known the farmers he interviewed for a long time ("A Life Lost"), Pierre Bourdieu did not really hear what these men were saying until a number of years later, after he had transcribed the conversation and listened to it carefully, repeatedly, and, especially, differently. In these and in many other instances *The Weight of the World* is the product not only of a particular sociological practice, but also of a constant reflexion on and continual modification of that practice. It is appropriate, then, to see this ambitious work as itself something of a translation, a specifically sociological transformation that "carries over" the everyday lives of ordinary people into an understanding of the social world in which they, and we, live. The effort, throughout, has been to maintain these delicate balances in such a way as to keep both the purposes and the spirit of the authors aloft in another language.

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² Of the 69 articles or interviews in *La Misère du monde*, 54 appear in this edition in addition to the methodological discussion of "Understanding." Articles were omitted for reasons of redundancy for a non-French audience or where the interviewees occupied very distinctively French positions (in the political party apparatus for example). Readers should consult the glossary on p. 63 for explanations of the French institutions referred to in the interviews.

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Pierre Bourdieu

To the Reader

We are offering here the accounts that men and women have confided to us about their lives and the difficulties they have in living those lives, and we have done so in the hope that the reader will adopt the *comprehensive* view that the scientific method both requires of and grants to us. This is why we hope that the reader will follow our order of presentation – even if we can understand that some will consider the different “case studies” as so many short stories and will read at random, passing over the methodological discussions and theoretical analyses that we consider absolutely essential to a full understanding of the interviews.¹

How can we not feel anxious about making *private* words *public*, revealing confidential statements made in the context of a relationship based on a trust that can only be established between two individuals? True, everyone we talked to agreed to let us use their statements as we saw fit. But no contract carries as many unspoken conditions as one based on trust. In the first place, we had to protect the people who confided in us, in particular, by changing the names of places and individuals to prevent identification. Above all, we had to protect them from the dangers of misinterpretation.

“Do not deplore, do not laugh, do not hate – understand.” There is no point in sociologists adopting Spinoza’s precept if they are unable to put it into practice. But how can we offer readers the means of understanding – which means taking people as they are – except by providing the theoretical instruments that let us see these lives as *necessary* through a systematic search for the causes and reasons they have for being what they are? How can we give explanations without pinpointing individuals? How can we avoid making the interview and its analytic prologue look like a clinical case preceded by a diagnosis? The analyst’s intrusion is as difficult as it is necessary. It must proclaim itself openly and yet strive to go unnoticed. These considerations led us to present the cases so that the reading connects individuals whose completely different points of view might very well be at odds, even clash, in real life. This order also allows us to highlight the representative nature of each case, whether it is a teacher or shopkeeper or whoever, by grouping it with other “cases” that are, so to speak, variants of it. Transcription already transforms the oral discussion decisively. To point the

¹ For a detailed presentation of the epistemological presuppositions of the survey, see “Understanding,” pp. 607–26.

reader toward factors easily overlooked in a distracted, cursory reading, we have added titles, headings (always taken from the interview), and, especially, prefatory remarks. These benchmarks and observations recall the social conditions and conditionings of the men and women talking, along with their careers, education, and work experiences – everything that is at once hidden and disclosed, not only in the transcribed discussion but also in the pronunciation and intonation, everything transcription eradicates, from body language, gestures, demeanor, mimicry and looks, to silences, innuendoes, and slips of the tongue.

But the analyst will be able to make the most unavoidable intrusions acceptable only through a *rewriting* that reconciles two doubly contradictory goals. On the one hand, the discussion must provide all the elements necessary to analyze the interviewees' positions objectively and to understand their points of view, and it must accomplish this without setting up the objectivizing distance that reduces the individual to a specimen in a display case. On the other hand, it must adopt a perspective as close as possible to the individual's own without identifying with the *alter ego* (which always remains an object, whether one wants it or not) and turning into the subject of this worldview. And the analyst will never succeed in this enterprise of participant objectification so well as by managing to make self-evident and natural, even given, constructions that are wholly inhabited by critical reflection.

Pierre Bourdieu

The Space of Points of View

To understand what happens in places like “projects” or “housing developments” as well as in certain kinds of schools, places which bring together people who have nothing in common and force them to live together, either in mutual ignorance and incomprehension or else in latent or open conflict – with all the suffering this entails – it is not enough to explain each point of view separately. All of them must be brought together as they are in reality, not to relativize them in an infinite number of cross-cutting images, but, quite to the contrary, through simple juxtaposition, to bring out everything that results when different or antagonistic visions of the world confront each other – that is, in certain cases, the *tragic consequences* of making incompatible points of view confront each other, where no concession or compromise is possible because each one of them is equally founded in social reason.

Although these interviews were conceived and constructed as self-sufficient wholes, and can be read separately (and in any order), the reading has been set up to bring together individuals in social categories that might well be found together (such as the superintendents or custodians in low income housing projects and the residents, adults or adolescents, workers, craftsmen or shopkeepers). We hope that this structure will have two effects. It should become clear that so-called “difficult” spots (“housing projects” or schools today) are, first of all, *difficult to describe and think about*, and that simplistic and one-sided images (notably those found in the press) must be replaced by a complex and multi-layered representation capable of articulating the same realities but in terms that are different and, sometimes, irreconcilable. Secondly, following the lead of novelists such as Faulkner, Joyce or Woolf, we must relinquish the single, central, dominant, in a word, quasi-divine, point of view that is all too easily adopted by observers – and by readers too, at least to the extent they do not feel personally involved. We must work instead with the multiple perspectives that correspond to the multiplicity of coexisting, and sometimes directly competing, points of view.¹

¹ *Don Quixote* is also relevant. By giving different names (with divers etymological justifications) to the same characters, or by playing on different stylistic levels, this novel restores the “polyvalence that words possess for different minds” and by the same token, the plurality of perspectives that make up the complexity and ambiguity of human experience. Leo Spitzer, “Linguistic Perspectivism in *Don Quixote*,” in *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Linguistics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948).

This perspectivism has nothing to do with a subjectivist relativism which might lead to cynicism or nihilism. It is instead based in the very reality of the social world, and it helps explain a good deal of what happens in society today, in particular, much of the distress caused by clashing interests, orientations, and lifestyles. Bringing together individuals who otherwise have nothing in common, especially where they live or work, only exacerbates the conflict. It is within each of these permanent groups (neighbors or coworkers), which set the lived boundary for all their experiences, that the oppositions (especially salient where lifestyle is concerned) separating classes, ethnic groups or generations, are perceived and experienced – with all the misperceptions this entails. It is true that one sometimes encounters individuals whose social trajectory, quite as much as their position, inclines them to a vision divided against itself. I am thinking here of the woman selling sporting goods in a “difficult” housing project who vigorously defends herself against the aggressive behavior of the young people in the project even as she expresses sympathy for their position. But, more often than not, the direct confrontation of differences encourages the partiality and semi-lucidity of polemics. Such is the case, for example, of the Spanish immigrant woman who points out the differences between European families, which combine a low birthrate and strong discipline, and the very prolific North African families, which are frequently doomed to anomie by the crisis in paternal authority. Essentially an exile in a foreign country, the immigrant father tends to adapt poorly to his new condition, and sometimes even ends up dependent on his own children.

Even the experience of the position occupied in the social macrocosm is determined, or at least modified, by the directly experienced effects of social interaction within these social microcosms (office, workshop, business, neighborhood, in the extended family). Patrick Süskind’s play *The Double Bass* presents an especially striking image of how painfully the social world may be experienced by people who, like the bass player in the orchestra, occupy an inferior, obscure position in a prestigious and privileged universe. The experience is no doubt all the more painful when the universe in which they participate just enough to feel their relatively low standing is higher in social space overall. This *positional suffering*, experienced from inside the microcosm, will appear, as the saying goes, “entirely relative,” meaning completely unreal, if we take the point of view of the macrocosm and compare it to the “real” suffering of material poverty (*la grande misère*). This is invariably the point of reference for criticism (“You really don’t have anything to complain about”), as for consolation (“You could be worse off, you know”). But using material poverty as the sole measure of all suffering keeps us from *seeing* and understanding a whole side of the suffering characteristic of a social order which, although it has undoubtedly reduced poverty overall (though less than often claimed) has also multiplied the social spaces (specialized fields and subfields) and set up the conditions for an unprecedented development of all kinds of ordinary suffering (*la petite misère*). And we would not be faithfully representing a world that, like the world at large, has the

distinction of producing innumerable representations of itself, if we did not make a place within the space of points of view for social categories that are particularly exposed to this ordinary suffering, that is, all the professions whose mission is to deal with poverty or to talk about it, without forgetting all the distortions that necessarily result from the particular character of their own point of view.

Pierre Bourdieu

Jonquil Street

This collection of heterogeneous dwellings, at first designated by bureaucratic initials, ZUP (zone for priority urbanization), then rebaptized “Val Saint Martin” – one of those euphemisms by which the people in charge of the “operations” of the DSQ (social development districts) aim to “change the image” of renovated districts – is, like the groups that live there, the visible sediment left by successive industrial policies on the old farm lands that extend to the foot of Mount Saint Martin and its Romanesque church. Since the 14-story highrise was torn down in the early 1990s, today there remains only a row of small townhouses, with “options to buy,” occupied by families of skilled workers, shift managers, or foremen in the metallurgical industry. Often of foreign origin, from Algeria in particular, almost half of these workers are unemployed or have taken early retirement subsequent to the different “restructurings” of the steel industry.

Monsieur Leblond and Monsieur Amezziane live across from each other in Jonquil Street, a large treeless avenue lined by small houses with tiny gardens (four square meters) enclosed by a small wall and often strewn with paper refuse, broken toys, and abandoned utensils. Each dwelling consists of a three-room apartment above a garage on the ground floor with the laundry-room and bathroom, which one enters by a very steep rough concrete staircase. At M. Amezziane’s house, the staircase has been left as it is, with only a few floor-cloths by way of a doormat.

Except when school lets out and it is transformed into a playground, and perhaps because it includes nothing that ordinarily enlivens city space – butchers, bakers, grocery shops, cafés, news-stands or tobacconists – Jonquil Street is almost always empty. The word that springs to mind is “desert” – the term that local people often use to designate what has been done to their area since the factories were closed and the buildings demolished. This has left an immense void, and not just in the landscape.

The inhabitants of Jonquil Street are not unlike the survivors of an immense collective disaster, and they know it. Their reason for existence has disappeared along with their factories: they started work quite naturally, often very early, at the age of 14, after a primary school certificate, following in their parents’ footsteps, and they quite naturally assumed their children would follow them. It is also their past that went, and a whole universe of work relationships that they try to perpetuate as much as possible by jumping at any occasion to get together, in a

café or supermarket (even though these places are separated from their homes by expressways) where they spend whole mornings talking. But it was above all their future they lost, the continuation and justification of their past, that of their sons and daughters, who are now inevitably headed for an extended time in a secondary school that works just well enough to keep them out of the factory, but most of the time can only offer them diplomas worth less and less – which, in this region in crisis, often means unemployment.

M. and Mme Leblond agreed to see us on the recommendation of a distant relative. M. Leblond is not working this morning. The girls are at school. They heard the car, and he has the front door open before we get out of the car. Mme Leblond stayed upstairs, but she quickly appears at the top of the stairs. They had dressed with care: he put on a checked shirt, and she a flowered dress, and she had fixed her hair. As if it is a test they have to take together, they receive us as a couple: they thus show more of themselves, but each of them no doubt is reassured by the presence of the other. They are a little intimidated, not really knowing what is expected of them (at the end they ask: “But what are you going to do with all this?”); like us, they take refuge in the polite greetings usual in such circumstances. She virtually clings to his side and never leaves him except to go to the kitchen to get the coffee (it was already made, and she gets the good china cups from the sideboard). She resists our attempts to have two separate discussions. With a glance, he brings her into the conversation. When she speaks, she looks for his approval; gravely, he nods, but does not intervene, as if out of respect.

We sit down facing each other on either side of a large table that takes up almost the whole dining room. This is the center of family life, where the girls do their homework while their mother sews or knits (an unfinished sweater is spread over the shelf as well as papers, the girls’ notebooks, jeans to be hemmed). This warm little world, closed in on itself and perfectly self-sufficient, with its lovingly polished sideboard decorated with photographs of the girls and knick-knacks surrounding the older girl’s vocational diploma; the bookcase covered with more knick-knacks and photos, with its three shelves of encyclopedia volumes, “how to” books; the sofa covered with cushions embroidered in bright colors facing the television; the house plants and the tiny pampered dog – all this fits the image of M. and Mme Leblond, their pleasant and smiling faces, trusting and yet showing uncertainty (if not fear) when certain problems in the neighborhood are mentioned in roundabout ways. They are one of the last families of French origin to live in Jonquil Street, as Mme Leblond points out at the end of the conversation: “You know, here in this area, if you count them up, oh! there are seven of us French, seven French families, because even across the street, over there, already in the little houses, there . . .” – and then quickly adding “Well, you know, I don’t go out much.”

This is merely one of the signs, and undoubtedly the most painful, of the individual decline that has accompanied the collective decline of the industrial firms in the area. And M. Leblond, who has somewhat miraculously escaped the

great waves of layoffs (another taboo word: the people in charge of “restructuring the steel industry” talk about “eliminating employment within a social plan”) and who has managed to keep his job as quality controller (of finished metal), describes the cumulative signs of the deterioration of his work situation: a salary lower by 30 to 40 percent (since he no longer works on continuous smeltings and therefore no longer works weekends); work teams cut back, sometimes by half, as his was, going from nine to four people, even though they take on an ever greater number of deskilled workers (old-timers who have to be relocated until they reach retirement) or people superficially redeployed – all this with constant or even increased production. Then there are the constraints and controls to cut down on absences, even for sickness (“you aren’t supposed to get sick, there’s no one to replace you”; “now you have to get permission to be sick...”; “the guy who breaks his foot or his arm at the plant, a factory car comes to pick him up at home and bring him back every day”); weakened trade unions, especially because of the difficulty of mobilizing workers who are disenchanting and end up feeling lucky to have a job at all (“They tell us that over and over; saying ‘you’ve got a job, count yourself lucky’... Well, that’s just it, ‘Count yourself lucky, you’ve got a job.’ I haven’t had a day off sick for seven years: I stopped in September, I had stomach flu, I stayed at home for nine days; when I went back to work, my supervisor called me in, and the engineer told me I had been pushing it. And only afterward did he ask me what I’d had”); the failure to take on young workers, which shows that the cycle of the firm has been broken, and with it, that of the families tied to it. “Are there any young people coming in?” “Right now, no. That’s what we’d like, but... Especially with the age pyramid, at Longwy, the pyramid’s too old, that’s why the unions are fighting to get people to leave at age 50–55, to let the young people in.”

This crisis in reproduction, which is linked in large part to the effects of school, is no doubt one of the major preoccupations. The conversation always comes back to this subject, irrespective of whether it concerns the factory situation or the education of the two girls, the older one who wants to be a nurse and who “loves children” (“you give her a bunch of kids to look after, she’ll do it, she loves it”) or the younger one, who is in junior high, a “transitional class,” and who is finally happy at school ever since she started peeling vegetables and making cakes or crêpes for children in nursery school. And among the reasons brought up to explain the disaffection of young people with factory work (“back then, we were probably less picky than young people today”) the first thing people mention is school and the overly specific and overly compartmentalized aspirations that it produces: “Young people are taught too much in school, too much is put in their heads, well, if you do an apprenticeship for a job you’ll get the job; when the kid gets out of school, with his CAP,¹ if he finds a job which is maybe more or less the same, he won’t take it because it isn’t quite his specialty, and that, I think, is the schools’ fault.” But at the same time he points out that many parents “pray the

¹ Vocational certificate, see also the glossary for this and similar terms. [Tr.]

Good Lord that the kids stay in school as long as possible.” In this way they accept as their own the wishes of their children who do not want to have anything to do with the factory. Along with the son of one of his colleagues, whom he talks about with a sort of fascination (with a CAP in cooking, he is studying for a technical baccalauréat [terminal high school qualification] and would then like to do a degree to become a wine steward), all the children could say, “As long as I’m in school, I’m not unemployed.” “It’s too bad to say so,” adds M. Leblond, “but that’s how things are”; and he thinks it is only natural that his daughter who wants to be a nurse “will be in school for seven years.”

However, he states very clearly everything that separates his generation (he is now a little over 40), for whom school has not played a very important role, from the following generation: after a last, desultory year of elementary school (after a quarrel with his father, his schoolmaster left him at the back of the class) and a certificat d’études [primary school certificate] he just squeaked through the exam (he laughs now at his 52 spelling mistakes), at age 14 he headed quite naturally toward the apprenticeship center of the factory where his father worked. After two years, he entered the same line of work as his father, but in a different factory. Here, bit by bit, notably through “visits” to the shopfloors and worksites arranged for this purpose, he discovered the true world of the factory, a world which up until then he had seen through his father’s stories and where he knew a lot of people: “So anyway we went to visit the worksites. Well, there you saw that there are places where the guys weren’t . . . We went to the high furnaces, to the steelworks, those weren’t places . . . That’s where you got the shock, where you saw the mixers, the coking plant, you know, the guy who spends eight hours inside that, it is still . . .” As in the account Mme Leblond will give of her years of factory work, it is only certain intonations, certain looks that reveal a terrible, incommunicable experience, and especially certain silences (the three sentences quoted above remained unfinished, as if suspended in front of the unsayable) that convey the extent and the violence of the shock represented by the first contact with the world of the factory, despite preexisting preparation and resignation.

Training is done “on the spot” by an apprenticeship that gives no certificate: “I haven’t got any diploma to my name, I don’t have anything; anyway, a CAP as controller in metallography isn’t good for anything.” In fact they asked him to prepare for the CAP the year he got married, that is, 13 years after he entered the factory, but he who “never got beyond fractions” dropped out when they got to algebra. And, looking back, he does not see what a purely theoretical training, even in physics or chemistry, would have brought him that he did not get from practice, “just doing it, just doing it . . .”: “There, you know very well, now, that if you have a steel with so much carbon and so much manganese, you will get one thing, and if you have so much sulphur, you will have a different structure, that’s all. Let’s just say that it comes from practical experience.” And it is a little his own portrait he paints, without thinking about it, and so without the least trace of vanity, when he contrasts workers trained in the old style with the ones who went through school: “Well, they have their diplomas, they have the technique, but

they don't have the practice, and that's what's missing right now in the factory; what is really lacking is guys who have the practice, guys who know the setup; as I always say, in those days you had an old guy who was there, well, he knew the setup; they told him there was a fault in the metal, he came to see, he looked at it, he went away, he went up and down the steel-line twice, he came back: "that's where it comes from, right over there," and the guy was right. He was right, whereas now when you have a defect, there's a problem, we look all over the place and we find what's wrong, but nobody knows where it came from because nobody is there to tell you." And he can express in a sentence, through self-correction, the ambiguity of privilege represented by such a continuity, the perfect internal adjustment to the job held, which goes along with a form of pride, implying, too, a profound submission to necessity: "That's where the problem is for us with the apprenticeship center, for us there was still the good fortune or the misfortune, let's say, of knowing the factory."

It is undoubtedly this profound integration into the industrial order, and consequently, into the social order, that – no doubt more than religious traditions or even lifestyle – separates him from M. Amezziane, a worker of Algerian origin pushed into unemployment by the massive layoffs of the 1980s, who lives a little higher up on the other side of the street. (M. Leblond mentions in passing some indications of this integration: when his neighbor was about to move, thanks to his supervisor he got from the *Familiale*, an HLM housing group, the right to have that apartment in exchange for the one he had been allocated when he got married through the president of his basketball club. Being basketball referee gives him a certain authority over the young people in the area and even in the region; belonging to the school parents' association means he knows everyone a bit; he takes part in trade union life, and even though he has never taken any activist position since then, he had no reservations about participating in the struggles of the 1970s against the dismemberment of the steel industry.) Between M. Leblond and M. Amezziane, and between their families and also their apartments (M. Amezziane's seems cold and barren with its cushionless leatherette sofa, its inexpensive rug that shows a mosque, its wrought iron coffee table), there is all the distance that separates the proletarian – even fallen or on the way down, with his reduced but regular salary, his accounts in order, his future relatively assured, in spite of everything – from the former worker whom the drop in employment dumps into the subproletariat, without any protection or guarantee impoverished, disorganized, worried about surviving from day to day, caught up with unpaid rent and unpayable debts.

When he got to France in 1960, M. Amezziane worked first in several firms, six months in one, two weeks in another ("the boss was too tough, I took off"), a month and a half in a third, and so on, forced each time to take the hardest and worst paid jobs in construction. In December 1962 he was taken on by a Longwy firm where he stayed for 22 years, except for a break of two years (four months of vacation in Algeria, after which he returned to work in Marseilles for two months, then in Chambéry, before coming back into his Longwy firm, a sub-

subsidiary of Usinor, manufacturer of construction materials made from the by-products of steel-making, which kept open his job as forklift operator, thanks to a cousin who worked there too). Sacked in 1984 without a pension (he was under the retirement age of 50), he found a job in Haute-Savoie, again via a cousin. But, badly paid and exploited (he earned 3,600 francs a month for a nine-hour day), he returned to Longwy after three months; in 1989 he took a course where he learned painting and decorating, tiling, and also to read and write (he is still semiliterate and speaks French very poorly, which he is the first to deplore). Then he fell back into unemployment until, as part of a job subsidy program, he obtained a half-time job in a school that gives him 3,900 francs per month, to which are added 700 francs in unemployment benefits. More than half of his income goes to cover fixed expenses, around 1,400 francs in rent (2,400 a month less 1,000 from rent subsidies), and 500 francs for local taxes, plus electricity, gas, water, etc.

So we can estimate that he has at most 1,500 francs a month to feed a family of six people, including four children (his wife joined him in France in 1981, with their two children, and two others have been born since), without counting his debts, both very varied and very large, and the lawsuits for the gas, for the rent (although a friend at the interview claims it's a joke, M. Amezziane believes he owes 20,000 francs to the Familiale), for the SNCF national train network ("they have been after my wife since last year for 2,000 francs, she lost her train ticket, it was going up to 2,200 francs, now I have to pay up"), for the hospital ("there again, between 2,000 and 3,000"), etc. So his financial acrobatics never end, and since he is unable to pay all his debts at once ("After all that, how does everyone else manage to eat? How do they eat?") which he estimates at 1 to 1.2 million (old) francs; he tries to "pay slowly," with 150 francs here, to "calm them down a little," and 200 there. And still he had to fight, and give all the details of his finances, to get into the Restaurants du Cœur free cafeterias for the poor.

His contract ends on July 5. After that, he does not know what he will do: "Oh! I don't know, I just don't know what I'm going to do. I'm fed up. I'm leaving. If I'm fed up, I'm out! That's it. It's the truth. Because why do it? I earn two bits, I've lost four, so . . ." But can he really go back to Algeria as he wants to do, as does his wife? In fact, even though he asserts the contrary several times, even though he insists repeatedly that "he is not afraid," that he has a house and land that could be cultivated ("my wife picks up the spade, she'll dig the garden, and I'll plant behind"), he knows that he is "pinned in" on all sides: it is too late to find work over there and he would lose the meager income that he gets in France from unemployment. The neighbor who listens in on the interview, Algerian like him, sums up the situation in this way: "We are like the *pieds noirs*² now: you go over there, you aren't Algerian, you stay here, you aren't French."

Asked about his neighbors (by which he means the French) and his relationships with them, he responds in almost the same terms as Mme Leblond: no doubt

² French citizens of European, mostly French, origin in Algeria, who returned to France when Algeria became independent in 1962. [Tr.]

because for various reasons he cannot say either that they are good or they are bad, he describes them as nonexistent, or neutral, meaning reduced to the “hello-good-bye” that for the workers or employees I interviewed in the 1960s in Algeria served to sum up, or to symbolize, the inhumanity of relationships at work. And his extreme sensitivity to any mention of his Algerian origins or the possibility of his return to Algeria, shows just how sensitive he is to all the attacks that reproach Algerians for taking work away from the French and push them to go back home.

This is probably not the case for M. Leblond who, as he says, and we may believe him, respects Algerians and expects to be respected by them in return. But there are the expressions and the faces his wife makes, her mouth a little pinched and eyes raised to the ceiling, which let it be known that she cannot say everything there is to say as far as relations with neighbors are concerned; about the difficulties of life in that neighborhood; her rush to say that she never goes out and that she keeps her relations with the neighbors to a bare minimum. There is the stress that M. Leblond himself puts on the very high proportion of immigrant children in the school population (he puts it at around 80 percent, in contrast to 1988, when there were “only” 224 Algerians and 144 Moroccans out of 651 pupils in the elementary schools, and 260 foreigners out of 463 in the junior high), on the difficulties encountered by the teachers in the area schools which he knows from the parent school councils, his reservations about his Algerian colleagues (“I had one of them who was great, you have to admit, for an Arab he was great”) or his criticisms of the preferential treatment they get for Ramadan. Everything tends to show that the internationalist and antiracist traditions and convictions they acquired through their education and political involvements (until her first daughter was born Mme Leblond also worked for five years in a factory), and which are reinforced by the official denunciation of discrimination and racial prejudice, are put to the test on a daily basis by the confrontation with the real difficulties of living together. (This can be confirmed by other accounts, gathered when people felt more relaxed, able to say everything without dissimulation or suspicion, such as that of the old militant socialist woman who, especially in summer and holiday periods, cannot bear the noise and smells in the building she feels chained to; or that of the old communist campaigner couple who had to move for the same reasons, their hearts heavy with guilt, feeling they were not living up to any of their convictions.)

It would doubtless be entirely false to see a concession to appearances imposed by the interview situation and by the connection to the supposed bearers of official values in the obvious efforts made by M. Leblond to put into practice the values of tolerance, or better (and more simply) of understanding (“I put myself in their place,” he says several times). But we should also hear him when he says how “awful” the Ramadan period is for him: “Oh boy, oh boy... well, it’s awful because, I was going to say it’s awful, well, it’s true that they sleep during the day, the adults are quiet, but the kids... the kids are in the street. The kids yell. You have to hear them bellyache. And then they begin to live at ten at night, just when you’re going to bed, well then, then you’ll really hear some noise”; or

when he distinguishes among the immigrants according to their ability to adapt to French life, an adaptation he measures by the degree to which “the children act like the French” (he singles out “the Algerians and the Moroccans,” but immediately recalls that “we have the same problems with the Portuguese or the Italians” and acknowledges that many of the difficulties in the area can be imputed to a single family of French origin).

And in fact, the effects of cohabitation that are the most difficult to tolerate – noise, brawls, vandalism or general deterioration – are imputable to the children and adolescents who are reduced to deprivation and poverty, and also especially – for which nothing has prepared them – to failure and humiliation (240 of the 651 pupils in elementary schools, and 274 out of 463 in the junior high school, are a year or more behind). These children escape family control, sometimes completely, like M. Amezziane’s two older sons. The situation could be foreseen at a glance when one of them appeared at the door of the apartment, just at the moment his mother made a brief appearance to serve tea: he looked ironic and aggressive, perhaps the son who had hit one of the women schoolteachers with a ball and cost his father a fine of 2,000 francs. Or especially while listening to the tone, apparently indifferent or even a little indignant, but in fact profoundly despairing, with which this man who tenderly held his youngest daughter in his arms throughout the interview, spoke about his two sons: “Ah! I don’t care about the others...” – [he speaks of them as if they were strangers] – “Why should I care? [...] They don’t listen to me. They don’t listen to me... So...” And the neighbor corrects him, “He cares a lot, but they don’t want to listen...” In some sense transferring his disenchantment onto the youngest ones, whom for the moment he does not reproach for anything (“Oh! now it’s OK, up until they are 12, 15 – and after, I don’t know, because it will be all the same things”), he foresees the time when they too will escape his control, when they discover (as did his older sons, whose words he doubtless recalls) that in the end, on leaving school, whether they have worked hard or not, the result is the same (“At the end you find nothing, zero! Then, it’s all the same things, if they work hard or if they don’t...”). If he gives grounds to M. Leblond when the latter imputes the major difficulties of cohabitation to the crisis in domestic authority in North African families, he tries to find an explanation, if not a justification, for the revolt among immigrant children, citing the disappointments provoked by the school or, more precisely, by failure in school or by the reverses met by individuals with academic degrees on the job market. We should leave him the last word: it is that fate, resulting from the underemployment doubly suffered by the prime victims of academic failure and discrimination, which must be conjured away if the streets of “Val Saint Martin” are ever going to merit the names of the flowers that they were given, a little imprudently, by some technocrat in charge of “urban social development.”

with two working-class families

— interview by Pierre Bourdieu and Rosine Christin

“We live together...”

[The conversation starts on the subject of the two girls whose photographs are displayed on the sideboard.]

— The older, a nurse... and the younger...

M. Leblond She doesn't know what she wants to do.

— At 14...

M. Leblond You ask her, “want to play with a doll?” or you ask her “you want to be a doctor?” and she says yes. A real problem, in fact.

— But all her schooling has been here?

Mme Leblond Yes, yes, she's always been at that lycée.

M. Leblond At the CES here.

— And what class is she in?

M. Leblond In a transitional class, let's say it's to send them afterwards to a technical fourth year or toward a fourth-year vocational certificate, a little to see how they can be oriented toward...

— And she knows a little about what she wants? Or not too much?

M. Leblond Well, she works at the nursery school, she peels (...), she likes all that. There she bakes some cakes, some... at school, well she likes it...

Mme Leblond Yes, she gets along all right.

M. Leblond It's OK. Let's say that this year she is going to school willingly.

— She didn't like it at first?

Mme Leblond No.

M. Leblond Before, she didn't really understand certain subjects, so she'd just leave... she went to school, but let's say that's all she did... even the teachers find her better this year than... it wasn't good. She didn't feel right, you know, she didn't.

— She didn't understand or she didn't like it?

Mme Leblond There were things she didn't understand, but she didn't dare ask the teacher, so she stayed like that: she didn't understand, she didn't understand. And we would say to her: “ask the teacher” ... [..]

— And now she likes it, what she does?

Mme Leblond Right, she likes it, she peels vegetables. Today they are doing crêpes for the kids in nursery school. She likes it, sure, sure.

— She could go for a CAP or something?

Mme Leblond Yes, as a cook or something like that.

M. Leblond Yes, what is that called? Oh, I don't remember...

— There are positions here, well, you don't know yet...

M. Leblond Oh! Positions! [laugh] there's a lot of them at the unemployment office, but not a lot of real ones. Jobs, jobs, there was a time when there were jobs, but now. But it's the same with everything you see, lots of firms start up but lots of firms shut down as fast as they start up, so that makes jobs; yes, it's true, if you take the evaluation they did at the town hall in Longwy, there they did a job evaluation; some jobs were created. But they didn't really create anything, it just changed name, yes, one company did get set up, sure, because it's a name change, but there are lots of small companies that got set up, but lots of them shut down. Unfortunately. [..]

— Yes, and then the young people, since they have gone to school, don't much want to go into the factory anymore, there's the problem.

M. Leblond The problem is that with the apprenticeship center we still had the good fortune, or rather the misfortune, let's say, of knowing the factory, because you went, you got access, you went on visits...

— *It was a transition, that's it...*

M. Leblond ...you went to see, like, the guys who were taking a CAP in your specialty, you went to work and did training in the section where you were likely to go, so people still saw what their work was going to be, while these days the young people, they get out of school, you tell them the same thing... but...

— *Yes, they stay until age 16 and then...*

M. Leblond And afterwards, they go to other schools, well, they go to other schools and when they arrive on the job... Let's say that now people who are going to come, the young who might come, maybe they'd be more qualified in technical things, in theory, but as for practice, they have everything left to learn.

— *And, right now, what outlets do they have? And with your coworkers you must talk about this?*

M. Leblond Well, they pray the Good Lord that the kids go to school as long as possible; it's too bad to say so, but it's like that. I have a friend at work, he has a kid, his son, who has done the CAP in cooking, he's been studying for a technical bac, and now he wants to go back, because this year he is going to get his professional bac, his technical bac, and now he would like to go to a wine-steward school, because he hasn't found anything...

— *That has nothing to do with what he learned?*

M. Leblond No, but he will be lucky, just think of it, not to be unemployed!

— *That's no matter what, yes, that's it...*

— *And he doesn't want to go into the factory?*

M. Leblond Oh certainly not, him and the factory, you mustn't mention the factory, in any case he has studied something else than the factory, but let's say he had the opportunity to do the training here and there, to see how things are, and then if he finds a wine-steward school, well fine, afterwards maybe he'll go and study some more, so long as he's at school, as he says, "as long

as I stay in school, I am not unemployed"; someone who goes into the hotel trade or has the means to have his own business, his own restaurant, but he doesn't have the money...

— *Yes, that's it, you have to have money to invest...*

M. Leblond ...he has no money to invest and his parents have no money to buy him something and he says "I'll just train here and there"...

— *But how, it's expensive a kid like that, how does he manage...? Small jobs...?*

M. Leblond They do, let's say those who are in the hotel trade, like him, his son works practically every weekend; well, they have good weekends, they work either in a hotel or in a restaurant, or well, anyway, since he can make a meal, well, so he makes meals...

— *That's it, he gets by, but there are some who...*

M. Leblond Some just can't...

— *I don't know, when they do a CAP in accounting for example, like that...*

M. Leblond Those, I don't know how they can manage, well, there you are, it's true that they have stints at holiday camps; stints like that, but you have to have a BAFA [course for working at camps and cultural centers] and a BAFA these days costs 1,800 francs.

Mme Leblond 1,800... We want to do it for our older one, well yes, she wants...

M. Leblond What does she want to do?

Mme Leblond During the vacation to work at a camp, but she would have to do the BAFA and it's not until you are 17 so...

M. Leblond And then, let's say she is good with children...

Mme Leblond She loves kids, so fine, you know if you give her a bunch of kids to look after, she looks after them, she loves it, so... But it's the same, you have to be 17, if she passes, fine, but if she fails, well, that's money down...

M. Leblond And then, that's the first exam, after... if she wants to go on, there are two others to take, that's what...

— *She wants to be a nurse, is that it?*

Mme Leblond Yes, yes. It's going fine, she's learning pretty well, she manages pretty well.

— *Is there a competitive exam, I forget how it works...?*

Mme Leblond Afterwards they have entrance exams, yes. Well, she would be in for, I don't know, seven years of school I think she will still have...

M. Leblond At least seven years. Oh yes, with the options she chose...

[...]

— *If you were laid off now, could you immediately go and find a job?*

M. Leblond No! These days I'd say no because the same thing always happens; they're asking for young people with experience.

— *There you are, that's it, as if that were possible!*

M. Leblond Everywhere you look: young, with experience. Well me, I'm saying, I'm going to make it perhaps, I've got the experience, but after 40... [...]

— *They want to have everything and pay for nothing, as they say...*

M. Leblond So sometimes you laugh at what you see: offers for 20 to 25-year-olds with five years' work behind them, I'd sure like to find young workers with five years on the job, at 25, but they're thin on the ground! So the problem is that once you reach 40, well, anywhere you'd want to go... It's not that you want more, but let's just say...

At age 50, they tell him "you're on your way"

— *Yes, or else there are all those who left on early retirement... It seems that for some it's really difficult, that's it, some take it hard...*

M. Leblond Yes, some took it hard and then you have to put yourself in their place, it's true that the guy who from one day to the next... So they take it hard, like leaving at 50, some find themselves kicked out at 50, it's true that the guy who came into the factory at age 14, maybe even younger, because there were those... well,

he gets to 50 and they tell him "you're on your way, we don't need you anymore," because there are people like that, they had to tell them they weren't needed any more, they practically had to throw them out because...

— *Even with a good pension...*

M. Leblond Yes, even with... because they didn't leave with empty hands, the first few weren't unhappy, but the ones who left last, they have much less money, but they aren't unhappy really, you mustn't...

— *So then what is it, is it the job?*

M. Leblond It was their work, the guy who spent, I was going to say his life in the factory, in the same trade, in the same sector, who had his...

— *His pals...*

M. Leblond That's it, and then from one day to the next, especially in the beginning, they say to a guy "you take retirement at 50, or rather pre-retirement, we're going to hire young workers..."

— *Yes, and then that's not true...*

M. Leblond The guy who has kids at home, maybe he still leaves willingly, but at the end of a year he sees that the kid is still at home, that he has not been hired, those next in line don't want to leave anymore; here it was only the Moroccans that were working it, they were glad to leave, they were in Morocco, they came back, they'd suddenly got five, six years older, and then they left again, but...

— *The others, no...*

M. Leblond I said the Moroccans, I don't want to make them all sound the same, because there are some — it is the same thing — who had to be thrown out, but lots of them took advantage of the situation, and especially these last few years, when they knew the end was in sight, there are some who left in June, still had four years to go, they came back during the vacation in July or August, and that was it: they were 50. They had papers from Morocco saying they were 50 years old. What can you do about that...? They're born in the bush down there...

— *Of course the registry is a little....*

M. Leblond They are born in such and such a month, such... and there was just the day and the month, and nobody knew the year... Oh, well! Good for them! Too bad for those who stay, but let's say that afterwards the guys... It's true, leaving, it's fine to leave, but... And then there are also some, they leave: they are unhappy around the house, because there are some who can't keep busy, nothing happens...

Mme Leblond Yes, there's that, they hang around...

M. Leblond And then some of them had activities outside and then they stopped everything.

— *They gave up?*...

M. Leblond While at the factory, and then the day they come home, let's say that maybe they could have taken more advantage of their connections, they burned their bridges, they stopped.

— *Yes and then it seems that this led to family fights and things like that, and it doesn't work out, right?*

Mme Leblond In a couple, yes, it's true...

— *And have you always lived here? It's nice, it's pleasant here...*

M. Leblond Let's say, when we were married we had an apartment in a high-rise block, we were at the end, there in a block and then, for me, the block...

— *You were renting?*

M. Leblond Yes, like here. For me, blocks, I never got used to blocks of apartments, and in any case I didn't like it, I don't like blocks, and so I did all I could... there were only four floors, I mean, we were okay in the block, we weren't... the housing was fine, we were peaceful, but me, I did all I could to have a separate house, or what they call separate. So after lots of setbacks, after lots of things, I brought the president of my basketball club, I play at E., into things, I told him "either you find me a single house, or else I'm quitting the basketball club," and well, you have to put the squeeze on sometimes... so finally, I managed to get a house.

— *And you've got the garage underneath...*

M. Leblond I have the garage underneath: garage, kitchen, living room; and three bedrooms upstairs. Three bedrooms upstairs and the bathroom.

— *And you rent... And you pay how much? If it's not indiscreet...*

M. Leblond No, now the rent is 1,900 francs (...); but I have the APL [rent subsidy], that leaves 1,600 out of my own pocket.

— *You have the APL... Yes, that's good, your housing is sorted out...*

M. Leblond Yes, but that's the problem, you manage to shut out everything. It's true that there are fewer kids. We're in a priority education zone. In the CES here there's 80 percent foreigners in the total school strength.

— *How many?*

M. Leblond 80 percent foreigners.

— *Really, I did not know that here...*

— *What are they? Italians...*

M. Leblond Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians, Portuguese, we have a huge population here of...

— *But where do they work?*

M. Leblond ...immigrants. Well, they are all at the factory. That is, they were all at the factory before because now, unfortunately, there are a lot of them either retired or lots of young people unemployed, well on unemployment... who call themselves unemployed. Because there too it's one shady deal after another, but we're not here to...

Mme Leblond You know, here in this area, if you count them up, oh! there are seven of us French, seven French families, because even across the street... over there, already in the little houses, there... (...)

— *And things are okay...*

Mme Leblond Well, you know, I don't go out much.

M. Leblond It's quiet here, well let's say so, but it's true that it is really much better than it once was...

Mme Leblond Yes, it was noisier. But I don't go out except... I stay at home, or else hello-good-bye, but that's all, no more than that, I don't like, I mean I'm not uncivilized... but I don't like...

M. Leblond No, where it's a little difficult, even though last year it was pretty calm, is around Ramadan.

— *Oh, yes, how was it...?*

M. Leblond Oh boy, oh boy, there it's... well, it's awful because, I was going to say it's awful, well, it's true that they sleep during the day, the adults are quiet, but the kids... the kids are in the street. The kids yell. You have to hear them bellyache. And then they begin to live at ten at night, just when you're going to bed, well then, then you'll really hear some noise.

Mme Leblond When the weather is good the kids are outdoors.

M. Leblond The kids are outdoors, it's terrible in school because the kid goes to school during the day, when he goes, and I mean when he goes, but sometimes the kids go just to go to sleep because at night... a kid's still outside at 11 p.m., midnight, it doesn't bother them. So then the kid is tired, but they don't want to put him to bed 'cause the adults are eating, they have the right to celebrate...

Mme Leblond With the window open.

M. Leblond See, the kid is outside. Well, there is the kid who yells during the day because he is hungry but they don't want to give him something to eat, even though the kids don't keep Ramadan, but they don't want to give them anything to eat, especially at the end of the Ramadan period, that's clear. At the beginning, less, because in the beginning, well it's true that, but at the end of the period, it also must be hard for them to not... so I put myself in their place, make a snack for a kid, because it's only a bit of bread, give some bread to a kid and then not have the right to eat, well, the right, I was going to say the same, it's a right because they really want it to be...

— *But in fact most of them don't keep Ramadan?*

M. Leblond It's going out, it's going... there are only, let's say, the old ones who do it.

— *The old ones, that's it.*

M. Leblond With the young, it's going out because, well, you know, fasting...

Mme Leblond They go to school, see...

M. Leblond Oh well! fasting, they do many things... I found out all that from a guy who played basketball with us, he kept Ramadan at home and when he came for a basketball game with us, when we ate, he was with us, he lived... and then there wasn't any problem... in any case... So I say: you have to know, what I couldn't stand is that at the factory they let those guys keep Ramadan. That, for me, that always ticked me off, I've got to say it, because I get 20 minutes to eat on my shift, if I take a half-hour it's barely allowed, but I have a right to 20 minutes. And those guys at Ramadan have the right to two 20-minute breaks because they had the right to eat at the beginning of the night shift at 10 p.m. and then the right to eat again at the end of the shift before the sun rises, so they're allowed to eat 20 minutes twice. And I say, the poor French, or the poor French or Italian guys or whoever doesn't keep Ramadan; they don't care if he has a hard job, if it's tiring or whatever, you have the right to 20 minutes to eat, you keep quiet, you say nothing. So when you're not forced to, I say, you're not forced, they keep Ramadan, and I don't even understand why the work doctors have tolerated those kinds of things. Because the guy who doesn't eat, at night, that's no problem, but I've seen some not even drink a glass of water and work eight hours in the heat during the day...

— *It's dangerous in fact.*

M. Leblond I think that work doctors should have said no.

— *Of course.*

M. Leblond Because the guy can take it and the guy, the time comes when... The day the guy falls into a converter, they're not going to pick up his pieces. If he falls down, it's not serious, but if he falls into the converter, well, there were even guys at the steelworks, there were guys at the rolling mill and the guy who is going to fall into a cylinder, he goes through the cylinder, how does he get out?

— *And in your team there are Algerians, right?*

M. Leblond There aren't any anymore. Not anymore. I had one who was great, you have to admit, for an Arab, he was great. When he was alone. Ah yes, we had several incidents in the canteen. Because . . . We live together . . . [laugh]. It's normal, these people are outside of their own situation, their own place, well so they find each other. I can see how if I was going to work abroad, if I found a Frenchman, I'd be happy to speak and work with someone who was French.

— *Yes, but out of politeness, when there are French around, they ought to speak . . . and these young people are very often unemployed . . . ? These young Algerians . . .*

M. Leblond Let's say that there are two categories, there is . . . I was going to say the North African, the foreigner, but especially the Algerian, the Moroccan, who me I count as Arab, well, those who are over here, they are happy to be here, and then they start whining, they're given help and they settle down, and then there is the one next door, who accepts French life, has adapted well and who makes his children act like the French, that's the problem. Because for sports, I have quite a lot of young Arabs, well, yeah, they're not any worse [*mauvais*, masculine], I mean not any worse [*mauvaise*, feminine], because they're all girls, they're not any worse than the others. There are some families . . .

— *Yes, there are some everywhere . . .*

M. Leblond At school it's just the same, in the school there are problems with certain families, it's always the same anyway. You can't get worked up about it, we've had the problem since nursery school, but it's not just foreigners, it's not just Moroccans or Algerians, we have the same problems with the Portuguese or with the Italians.

— *But the Italians, it's been a long time since they . . . right?*

M. Leblond Oh yes, those who are here . . . basically, for the Algerians here it's been a long time too, well, what happens is that at a given moment, but there are fewer

and fewer now, but at a certain time many went to get married in Algeria and brought their wife back and we also had a contingent of Turks who came at one point, who weren't, who weren't all that great either when they arrived and then now, you don't hear about the Turks any more. But really, what I reproach the local authorities for, I mean in the ZUP because before it was called the ZUP, is that nothing was done for those people either, because all they did . . . I mean, they parked those people all together, used to be a high rise here, in the high rise there were four entrances . . .

Mme Leblond No, five.

M. Leblond Five entrances, and two of them you would not want to set foot inside . . .

The Familiale put all those people together

— *Is that so?*

M. Leblond Oh! you would not go inside! You'd get your throat cut, anything could happen. But why? Because they put those people together, there were some who raised sheep on the balconies, rabbits in the bathrooms, so systematically, well, so what did the Familiale do? The Familiale put all those people together, and that's not what the Familiale should have done, or the *commune* either, those people should have been spread around a bit, get them used to life, they aren't in their bush any longer, I put myself in their place, this guy gets here, he thinks he's still in the bush, he does what he wants, he gets here, well . . . but it doesn't make sense. You've got to get those people living in the community.

— *And this high rise doesn't exist anymore?*

Mme Leblond No, it was torn down.

M. Leblond They tore it down, not because there were too many repairs for the Familiale, it became too dangerous in any case; lots of people [were put on it] to take it over, to do things and then . . . with the situation here, well, yeah, there were some who . . .

Mme Leblond There, in place of the high rise, they are going to build us a new...

M Leblond A social center; well, the fence is set up; as soon as the weather is better the work will...

— *And the neighborhood, isn't it dangerous for the girls?*

Mme Leblond No, no, it's fine!

M. Leblond Oh, it's no more dangerous than...

Mme Leblond No, it's fine... They have always been...

— *No, its mostly the noise, things like that...*

Mme Leblond My girls, it doesn't stop them, how long ago, how long ago was it...? We've been here on the street 14 years, I was pregnant with C. when I came, well, they sleep in the front and it's true that in the summer there are always kids outside and then there's shouting, and well, that didn't stop them from sleeping, even with the noise...

M. Leblond Oh well! if they're like me, it doesn't bother my sleeping...

— *And aren't there small thefts, things like that?*

Mme Leblond No, no, no.

— *No, it's the noise that bothers you.*

Mme Leblond That's it.

M. Leblond In any case, it's no worse than anywhere else. Well, people who've been hassled, there are some who have been hassled, but you have to see if it's true, I mean, see if it's true...

Mme Leblond Yes, because you still have to see...

— *What do they say?*

M. Leblond Oh well! Some have had their laundry stolen, their tires punctured, that's it... Well OK, but I've never seen the police at their house, so if they have insurance cover and then something it covers, a stolen car radio, stolen whatever...

— *Yes, but that kind of thing is everywhere.*

Mme Leblond There are houses a little farther down, they are French, they're

always complaining that something was stolen, that their tires were punctured and then you never see the gendarmes come and so it's that someone has it in for them and so, well, that's life.

M. Leblond No, but it's true, you have to admit, they have the clothes dryer in front of the door, they leave laundry there at night, you know...

— *It's tempting the devil?*

Mme Leblond Yes, that's right, here it's closed at the back and I don't leave laundry outside at night.

M. Leblond I leave the car outside, it's a shame to say it, but since some French arrived two houses down, I lock up the car, otherwise the car has never been locked; it was outside all day, never locked. I had papers in the car, I had everything in the car, nothing was ever taken. I park the car at the sports center, but at the sports center, and I kick kids out every week, I've never had anything done to the car. It's also perhaps the way...

— *Yes, the way you are as a person*

M. Leblond ...of seeing how you do things; you can't let those people see you're afraid; if you let them see you're afraid, they feel strong. From the little kid who is just three to the big guy, because they're all going to try... — touch wood — since I've been here, it's close to six years, seven years that I've been playing sports at M.

— *Yes, that's it, you know them from sports and so they respect you.*

M. Leblond I respect them, so there's no reason for them not to respect me.

— *Yes, that's it, that's it.*

M. Leblond You mustn't... As far as I'm concerned, they're in the sports center, as long as they keep quiet they're fine; when they raise a ruckus, as they say, I throw them out, and when I throw them out I say to them "my car is there; and if you go after my car, I will know who it is," because there are too many people here who say "it's that guy, it's that guy, it's that guy, but we're not going to the cops, we're afraid." But I know that the day I throw one of them out of the sports center and they do

something to the car, the gendarmes will come. And I'll know who it was. It perhaps won't be him, but they will go to his home. I'll go with them, and if it isn't him, he'd better say who it was. And unfortunately, the gendarmes here don't do anything either. The gendarmes and the police are ... two years ago we had some problems, it's true, with the teachers, we almost had to solve the problem on our own rather than to go to the gendarmerie or to the police. The gendarmerie isn't concerned because it's for the police, and the police, well, you know...

— *You have resolved this with the schoolparents, with the association?*

M. Leblond Between the teachers and the parents.

— *What was it about?*

M. Leblond Oh well, at school the teachers' tires were punctured, the windshields broken, sugar in the gas tank, ah! it got really... Until the day when it turned out bad, because a teacher came out and grabbed a kid. And then he did something that you aren't supposed to do: he punched him in the nose [*laugh*]. So the parents know the law and all, so they came up against the teacher, but tough luck, it wasn't on the school grounds, so from the viewpoint of the Ministry of Education it doesn't concern anyone. So the parents turned around like that and went straight to the Ministry of Education to have his right to teach taken away... on that, they were badly informed.

— *And here, the high school teachers are from the area? Or the elementary school teachers, you know them?*

M. Leblond From the area, yes, some are from the area and that's OK, when a young teacher, or a young primary teacher who comes and arrives here...

— *It's hard in the beginning...?*

M. Leblond They look twice, if they're not from the area, they think of one thing mostly: to get out.

— *You know them, they're local people, from the region?*

M. Leblond A lot are young... well, they were born in the area. They stayed here. Or else older teachers who got their training here, who started their career here.

— *And do you know many sons of steelworkers who stayed in the area like that, as a primary or secondary teacher?*

M. Leblond There aren't lots of them, no.

— *Who did well at school...*

M. Leblond Let's say that there are many, many youngsters here, former steelworkers who went into the police, the gendarmerie, the CRS [state security force] or things like that, they benefited – really they profited – in '68, '69 when the CRS, the police, recruited quite a lot of youngsters, so it's all youngsters, well, not all – but many of the youngsters who were not doing too well here and then they...

— *And then it's after a generation who went a lot to school, isn't it? Because that began, when, around '70, when they...*

M. Leblond When there were guys who took the forklifts out and went off with the forklifts, they had to be motivated, because otherwise the guy would go off, break everything that was in front of him. I saw some who came with us to the demonstrations with guns, carbines, sure. Well, it's not something you do. We weren't at that stage. The guy, you'd see him, you swiped his weapons, stashed them at someone else's and it was over. But guys came anyway with them, but you know, the law enforcement on the opposite side wasn't exactly sweet either.

— *No, it must be said that was an incredible shock, it was so brutal.*

M. Leblond Ah! there were some good fights, in the good sense of the term and then there were also some good fights not in the good sense of the term, but in the end... it was done, it was done. My only regret now is not to have kept the press clippings, things like that...

— *And the youngsters today, what do they think of all that? They don't give a damn, do they?*

M. Leblond The youngsters don't give a damn because in any case they didn't

know, the kid who knows today's desert... And that's why I say it's a shame not to have kept the clippings to show, let's say, I am going to say to my daughters: there was a factory there, there was such-and-such there, well, they remember a little... when we go to my parents in E., I lived across from the factory, well, yeah, there was something there.

— *They are very depoliticized, they don't give a damn.*

M. Leblond Yes, and then now the kids, they can be manipulated any way you want, in any case, a right-winger comes along, going to promise them the moon,

well, yeah, the kids who are going to be able to vote, they're going to vote for that person and if there is someone else who comes from the other side, it'll be the same, it'll go on like that and then afterwards the kids will be disappointed and then what will they do? That's the problem. It's that we say a little too often now to kids, well, sure, you will have – it's what I was saying just now about the schools – the young girl who becomes an apprentice hairdresser, then she'll be a ladies' hairdresser, she could do the men too, but: no, I didn't take up this job to be a barber, I will be a ladies' hairdresser, I won't do men...

February 1992

Abdelmalek Sayad

A Displaced Family

It is a working-class district in the immediate outskirts of Paris. Against the typical setup in the suburbs (high rises, long slabs of building), one area stood out: a zone relatively set apart, filled with old single-dwelling two-story houses that are usually called “stacked bungalows.” The municipality acquired a certain number of these houses when they came up for sale and took them over for immigrant families, often with an emergency authorization and even before any renovation had been carried out. This allocation contrary to the regulations that ordinarily govern the assignment of subsidized public housing (the HLM) to the most deprived families produced a new kind of neighborhood conflict: for the immigrants, these are conflicts that lead them to ponder the nuisances they are accused of creating, what “noise” or “smells” really means, what form social relations (in frequency, intensity, duration, etc.) would have to take to be compatible with the conventions of communal housing. For the French population in the neighborhood, these conflicts are no longer, as they usually are, totally within the boundaries of individual and interpersonal (or purely subjective) relations. Rather (as the French neighbor of the immigrant family puts it very well) they collectively concern everyone involved. All of these people invest their entire social being in these conflicts, the idea that they have of themselves, or – to use the language in vogue these days – their social identity (which, in this case, is simultaneously a national identity and, consequently, eminently collective). These conflicts are all the more significant because they have almost no objective basis. They must therefore be understood as the last manifestations of resistance put up by this fraction of the population – which has acquired only very late in life the longed-for single family house as well as the (geographical and social) space associated with it, that is, the space on which it has projected all its aspirations and hopes for social promotion, in which it has invested and in which it is invested – to contest the process of decline, devaluation and disqualification in which it fears being caught.

Our two studies were conceived to deliver the totally divergent points of view, which, coming from distinct if not antithetical social positions, could be held of the same social reality. Their confrontation gives rise to three types of narrative. First, for the immigrant family, the father’s narrative retraces the family’s housing history throughout its immigration, a historical discourse in Arabic, the only narrative that concerns him totally and exclusively, the only one that comes directly from him. Then, the children’s collective narrative concerns the current

situation and the state of their present housing. Finally, from the surrounding people and the immediate environment of the immigrant family, the narrative of the nearest French neighbor, a woman, which is divided between, on the one hand, the protection of specific (meaning exclusive) material and symbolic interests of a particular category of the population, both a defence and an illustration of the qualities that give a right to special housing; and on the other hand, indignation and protest against having to endure a cohabitation perceived as degrading and humiliating alongside a population that is itself degraded, despised and scorned.

The Ben Miloud family comes from the Biskra region of southern Algeria. They arrived in France in 1960 or, more precisely, that is when Mme Ben Miloud joined her husband in France. All their children were born in France. M. Ben Miloud, now 64, came to France for the first time in 1949, at the age of 21. Today he is retired after a long period of paid sick leave. Seriously ill, he requires constant care and frequent hospitalizations. Independently of his serious illness, he seems to have been worn out by work.

By tacit agreement between parents and children, based on the interests and competencies of the one and the other, he talks about the past more readily than the present, which it falls more to the children to recount, especially the girls. By contrast he is concerned to remind everyone (and specifically his children, who are particularly attentive) of what the family's immigration experience was like in the past: "I came [to France] in 1949, in the flower of my youth. (...) In the first years, I worked like everybody else, that's what you did then: you worked for a time in France, then you went home; you left as if you'd never be back, but a few months later you were back. You came back 'new.' In the end, you spent more time in France than at home. Now when I count the years, the months, the days, I've spent more than half my life – oh, much more! – in France (...). In the beginning, it was factory work, not even in Paris, it was in the East. But after 1960, that's more than 30 years ago, it was construction work. Continuously, not even a day off. Because there was my family; my family was born here in France, the children came along. All that required money, you had to work hard (...). Once the family was in France, it wasn't worth going back and forth [between France and Algeria], we were all together. We sometimes went on vacation to Algeria as a family, but it was too expensive. And now the children are grown, we go less and less. They are all grown up, they decide for themselves what they want. We [parents] are no longer healthy enough to travel, to take trips. So, we are here and we wait."

His wife's arrival in France to be with him – the couple had no children yet – coincided with his move into public works construction and his setting up for good in this sector (until he was discharged for sickness and then retirement). It was thanks to his first employer in the building trade that M. Ben Miloud got the housing that allowed him to bring his wife over. The family has warm memories of this first home. It is not difficult to understand the reasons for the retrospective

charm: it was a family house situated on its own almost in the country, away from the urban center. True, it was pretty dilapidated. Uninhabited for quite a while, it seemed wonderfully suited to a family from the country for whom this was their first experience of and apprenticeship to urban life. It was a roomy three-story single family house with no immediate neighbors and set on a large piece of land (part of which they turned into a vegetable garden) – features that could give this once rural family the illusion of reviving the customs followed in their traditional dwelling. Could they have hoped for a better transition to facilitate adaptation to the urban lifestyle? Moreover, this abandoned dwelling had been offered by the firm for free (by the “boss”). A fringe benefit added to the salary, it allowed a real saving, especially important during a period that was so particularly critical partly on account of the great shortage of housing available to workers and hence the high rents, and partly because of the numerous needs of all sorts felt by any immigrant family arriving in France without a thing, not even the most basic equipment absolutely necessary for daily life – all the things that made settling the family very expensive.

Slated for demolition to make way for a highway, the uninhabited house had been assigned to the Ben Miloud family as provisional housing. The deadline finally came and its “unofficial” occupants found themselves out on the street. And there, in the same way and at the same time as many other comrades in misfortune, most often unskilled workers on construction sites, whether compatriots or not, they had to fall back on “housing of despair and last resort” – as they call the shanty town [*bidonville*], “tenement hell.” Probably one of the last families to have joined the old shantytown of Nanterre at a time when it had already begun to be erased from the map through various urban renewal operations, the Ben Miloud family, because there were already four young children, was given priority in the assignment of housing reserved for emergency cases. They started out in Gennevilliers where, as they said, they had their first taste of living on the same floor as other families. M. Ben Miloud likes to recall this experience for what it taught him about the isolation and the moral misery of certain French families and their irritation at North African families with a lot of children and a lot of visits from relatives and friends. Pursuing every channel with the help of several social workers (the district social services office, the social services of his company), the family managed to be relocated in Paris, but things were too tight in their new apartment. To have more space the family reapplied for relocation, which led them to the house they occupy today.

with the inhabitants of a working-class district

— *interview by Abdelmalek Sayad*

“We no longer have neighbors, we don’t talk anymore”

Daughter Here, we have our complaints, we’re not satisfied. And with reason. But we’ll never leave. No question of it. My parents are used to it, they are old now, they’re sick. My father, who needs constant care, is often hospitalized not far away. My mother, who almost never goes out, who doesn’t even know how to take public transport, has to call a taxi to come right to the door and take her to the hospital, and the same thing coming back. How much does it come to? A hundred francs round trip. That’s fine. But if they send us miles away . . . for that reason alone, we wouldn’t take it.

Son And then, that’s not all. No question of going back to the big blocks. I was a kid but I remember, not Nanterre and shantytown, but the buildings, the projects, as we say now. Might as well go to La Courneuve or to Val Fourré [housing projects that were the sites of rioting in the 1980s]. Everybody knows about it now; it was in the news.

Daughter All the more so since we aren’t used to that. On the contrary, I wish we would always . . . We were never housed in big blocks like that. So, we’re not going to get out of here for her, to please her, or on account of her. That’s all she wants. It would make her so happy. That’s all she wants. And we’ll fight . . . the HLM, the mairie [town hall], the prefecture, especially the company supposedly in charge of refurbishing this whole place. What’s going to happen to us meanwhile? When? How? We don’t know anything about it. And that’s not all.

— *I don’t understand. Who are you talking about?*

Father It’s our neighbor – right next door. Only this wall and a few centimeters separate us from her.

Daughter [*in a rush to explain and interrupting her father*] She is in her home and we are in ours. But she doesn’t miss an opportunity to bug us [*stern look from the father*].

Father No, be polite. Monsieur does not need to hear that. Say what you have to say and tell the truth. There is no need to be rude or be insulting behind other people’s backs. All the more so since you have never insulted her, I hope, and she has never insulted you.

Daughter That’s what you say. If you only knew the kind of insults that come with “Madame . . . would you please . . .” and “Madame . . .” The words say nothing, but the look in her eyes, it’s something else, it’s fire and poison.

— *And why all this?*

Daughter Yes, it’s what I wanted to say. To give an example: you see those stairs that go up to the second floor, Madame thinks we make too much noise when we go up or down. Can you imagine? Wooden stairs and you can hear from one house to the next! You have to be crazy to say such things. Even if she is neurotic, it’s not that what’s stopping her from sleeping, as she complains. I have three cats . . . What can I say, I think they are great! She’s complained about them everywhere, to the neighbors, in the street, to the police, to the town hall, fortunately no one takes her seriously. She wrote all kinds of letters, she tried to get a petition signed to have us thrown out on the pretext of “disturbing the public order and neighborhood peace.” That’s where we’ve got to (. . .). So for the cats, the best she could come up with, completely barmy, was that the cats make noise. Have you ever seen a cat make noise? It doesn’t bark. She has a dog, but I wouldn’t say her dog keeps

me awake. The latest one is that my cats make too much noise running down the stairs, they disturb her and keep her from sleeping (...).

That's what they called noise, all these ... evening gatherings

Son She's like that, that's all. It's true, she has something against us, it's true, she can't stand us being neighbors, Arabs being in this area that she sees as chic and select, but you just have to look around. All you have to do is look around at all the dumps. But everyone has a will and a way. I don't spare her either. The cops told me. She was just the same with those who lived here before us ... some time ago, not long. But they weren't Arabs (...) I know this because I've got contacts in the police. I told them all about it. They told me that she lodged several complaints against us ... Now, they just file them. Of course. I play soccer with the police in their club. So between us, among friends, we say things. There's no reason for me to spare her. That's her tough luck. And then, it's just to counter what she does, to defend ourselves against her, that's all. No, we don't make complaints about her.

Daughter That's not all. Really, the big fight is over the public garden. Madame thinks it belongs to her, that it's her private property. She told me so. She also lied. (...) As far as the noise ... the cats ... I don't care; I let it pass ... let her say whatever she wants. So the garden, the public space, and why not the street, the sidewalks, while she's at it!? On this, I won't budge. She is jealous, she can't stand it that on Saturdays and Sundays, or weekdays when we have his kids [*she points to her brother who is divorced and has custody of his two children on holidays and during vacations and who puts them in his parents' care*], I take them to play in the garden. Of course, she can't complain officially about that, but she still has the cats. She went to tell the town hall that the cats, mine and no one else's, scratched the sandlots and did their business and that was going to contaminate the

kids and ... of course, her dog to top it off! I was called to the sanitation department. I went, with my cats' health certificates, vaccinations and all, with their names, birthdates, their tags, tattooed numbers, etc. Everything in order! That's where we've got to.

Son It's always the same story. When they can't say that living next to the Arabs is bad because they are dirty, because they smell, because they make too much noise, that there are always too many people at their place, even when they can't say all that, they invent something else, you can always find something ...

Daughter And we could say just as much about them. In the end I think, I'm even sure, that they are dirtier than we are. Underneath the makeup ... It's gilding the face, that's all. I think that makeup is just for that.

Father You know what they say: "Prettied up on the outside, what are you on the inside?" [*Arab proverb*]

Son What they call noise, all the guys say so, isn't really noise, decibels, but it's the Arab songs they don't like, don't understand, that bother them ... Maybe *raï*, since it's now in fashion, will do something to change that. That's what makes the noise. In fact, if you compare, rock songs are much louder on the ear than Arab songs.

Daughter It's the same with the smells. I read it in the papers when there was ... that business (...) of smells and *merguez* [spicy sausage]. The papers got it right, "the French like to eat couscous and *merguez*. But when it's not for them, they can't stand the smell of Arab cooking!"

Father I even have a story to tell you. The children know it already. It goes back to when we lived in the HLM buildings. As neighbors on our floor we had two old people in a tiny apartment, a man and his wife. We never saw their children. We only knew of their existence after we had a falling out with them and we began to find out who they really were. There, too, these neighbors, elderly it's true, whom we had

helped a lot, we ran some errands for them, we often gave them couscous – that’s what reminded me of this story – these neighbors complained that we made too much noise. And, in talking to them, I understood why noise, what they called noise. In reality, these two old people who saw nobody and nobody came to see, not even their children – I believe that the two of them, a girl and a boy, turned out badly – they lived by themselves, they watched everything, they listened to everything. I truly pity them; especially at the time, I was younger, I would not like to have had my parents in that situation, I was not thinking yet of myself and that I was going to get old, I felt very sorry for them. And deep down, they are unhappy, their life is gone, they live waiting to die. They told me all that several times when I happened to see them on the landing and I tried to chat with them, to get their news (...). And one day, during a conversation, I did not want to reproach them violently for everything they said about us, if it was someone of my own age at the time I would have punched him out. I brought the conversation around to the noise. I was surprised by what they said. The noise was in reality all the visitors we had. It is true, that’s how things are at our place, according to our customs: Saturdays and Sundays there was a parade of relatives, cousins, friends, all single men, since at that time there were not yet many families in France, all these men lived alone and when they came to the house they found a family atmosphere. And of course, each time they came it was presents: fruit, whole legs of lamb, not flower bouquets [*laughs*], the kinds of things we give when we make a visit. And that was what they called noise, it was all the comings and goings, the evening gatherings... There was some jealousy there, that’s for sure! (...)

Daughter When we moved into this place, we were really pleased; it was clean, everything had been redone, at least we thought so: in fact, they had done a “quick clean” before giving us the keys. It took us time to realize that it was just a “cosmetic job.”

Whose fault is it? We don’t know. Did the town hall give orders? The HLM office? Who? Were they themselves fooled because they didn’t want to keep track of the work, check on the spot? Or was it done on purpose, with everybody in agreement? We still ask ourselves (...) So, we did our best. We continued to fix up the place, to make it more comfortable, we changed the windows that didn’t seem to fit, we were the ones who put (...) the wallpaper up. Since then, we have given the place a new coat of paint. But what do we do now? What for?

Father What certainty do we have to take on more expenses? All of us [*the father and his sons*] are more or less in the trade; we can do it all ourselves and much better than the workpeople, than the professional firms. And guessing approximately, it would take us some 3 million (old) francs [30,000 francs] in supplies alone, not counting the labor that we don’t count, to bring things back to specs.

Daughter We don’t know, ever since we’ve lived here, who decides what. We don’t even know what all the services around are. We don’t even know who we pay the rent to; is that what you’re asking me? We pay the rent, that’s for sure, because it comes out of our pocket and because nobody comes around saying we haven’t paid it, so it’s going to the right place. It’s not a freebee (...). Then the people who are doing the repairs come. We don’t know who they are. Who do they work for? Themselves, the HLM office, the local council, the prefecture? They are very nice, they come around often to check, but things don’t move. We don’t know what they do; they’re responsible for what? And they don’t tell us anything. Let them tell us that it’s in one year, ten years or never!... That’s all we ask. We’d like to know how things stand. It depends on whom? On what? Why are we waiting like this?... It could last even longer! If they think they’re going to wear us down or drive us off... if that’s what they want, they’re mistaken. We will never leave here. We are here, we stay. They have no reason to throw us out (...).

[General approval. Everybody supports the girl's last words about the different parties that intervene in housing and their intentions; everyone also shares her suspicion that she formulates as to the sincerity of these same parties. There is unanimity again when it comes to proclaiming the family's will to stay put, whatever the outcome of the renovation project and whether there is restoration or not. On this, one of the sons goes beyond his sister's statement and asserts in a categorical tone that the restoration project is just a ruse to force the occupants to vacate the premises.]

Son The work will only begin the day they are sure that they can throw everyone out and only have to lodge the families that suit them. In any case, we have known for a long time, that if they do something, we don't benefit, it's not for us. Or else they're going to raise the rent so high that we can't stay any longer. So then we will be the ones to leave or they're going to relocate us in those horrible high-rises on the pretext we have too many unpaid bills. It's a well-known technique. For sure, that's what they want, nothing less. For a long time I've understood that... I have not stopped saying it over and over to my family. They don't care about us, that's all. We won't get anything, there's no point waiting for it. It's not for us that they're working. *They're playing with us* [an Arab expression, it is the only sentence spoken in Arabic by the young people during the whole interview, whereas the parents use only Arabic].

It's not the cats they're complaining about, it's us

Daughter Three cats who are really "house cats." They're part of the family. It's over that there is a conflict, they complain about them. It's not the cats they're complaining about, it's us. The cats' owners. And that's why the cats, my cats, make noise!... And how...? By running down the stairs, believe it or not! Like I told you... They hear the cats running! That's the best they could find... And then they say they love animals. Which ones? All of them, no

doubt, as long as they don't belong to the Arab neighbors! This same woman also has a dog. She finds it okay to unleash her dog in the garden; she doesn't even keep it on the leash, but she feels she has the right to be at home in the garden. The garden is hers, she says. How and why it could be hers I don't know... It's her way of telling me: France is mine, it's her France; we are not from this France, it doesn't belong to us, we don't belong to it either. She's convinced of it. She told me once that it was thanks to her that we have a public garden across from the house, she was the one who asked for it from the mayor and got it, although it's been there for a hundred years. She threatens to have us barred from the garden, in other words, from public property (...).

Son Not to mention the running water... the taps... the toilets. All that supposedly makes a thunderous noise, an unbearable nuisance, she says. She reported us on the grounds that there's too many of us in the house. That the house is overoccupied as she puts it... or as she was told to say. Since, just between you and me, I don't think she's either intelligent or educated enough to write that. What this means is that we, the children, don't have a place here... Of course, the place is in our parents' name, we were raised here, grew up here, it's our house too. They have no business telling us that we have no right to live here...

Daughter Whether we live here or not is our business; it only concerns us... it's nobody else's business, especially not the neighbors'. Their business is just what happens in their homes...

Son In fact, we all have somewhere to live; it's not because we don't have a place to be that we're here. It's not true. We can prove it anytime, rent receipts in hand, to anyone who wants to know. You only have to look: my older sister lives at her place and, of course, she comes by here every day, you always see her, she comes to see her parents, what do you expect! To make sure that everything's fine, she sometimes sleeps

here with us. We all have a room or a bed here. But she still has her place... That's how things are around here: we don't stop seeing our parents or simply see them once in a blue moon (...).

Daughter My two brothers also have homes: one has a studio apartment not far from here. He too comes and goes between our [parents'] house and his studio; the other one, until he gets married again, also has an apartment. Let them stop telling us that we are all living off our parents (...). Of course, each of us can always be put up, each of us has a bed here, each of us has a place at the table, but the house belongs to our parents. It's their home. And anyway, who do they think they are! You are in your home, we are in ours, and someone comes to tell us whether we can have visitors and to nose around to count how many people are in the house, or how many are at table. They're not the ones who feed us (...). It's pure jealousy. That's it. That's all (...). They can come and check... Fortunately, for the time being it's just rumors, the neighbors' envy: there's too many of you, that's why you make noise or the HLM or the housing office isn't there to house all these people! It's pure jealousy. They'd like to put our parents in a little hole, nothing at all, where there wouldn't be room for anybody.

Son If there's any sense to be made out of all this, it's simply that they don't want us to be here. Or if we are here, we shouldn't be seen, or go out. No cat, no dog, no street, no garden, no children. And all that. But we are in our home; it's as if they're not just telling us that it's not our place to be alongside our parents... (...). That's it, in the end, that's what it's all about: it's not just about our place in the house and in the district or the city... but in the whole society. And yet all of us, boys and girls, we all have French citizenship. But try to tell them that. In any case, that's one thing I will never tell them. Just in case that's what they want to hear.

Daughter I'm not so sure... They might still say: even French citizenship was given

to them. The most precious thing given them.

Son I don't give a damn... In any case for me, it can't be something to defend myself with. I'm not going to tell them "why are you being racist, I am French." Since that would mean that they could be racist with my father... I ask you: if they are racist with my father, then they are with me too... despite my French citizenship... It's a matter of pride.

Father [*by way of summing up*] None of that matters much. There is one thing you should know, it's that we will never leave here! [*A long silence all around, the father having spoken for once with solemnity, attracting everyone's attention, especially mine.*] Because, at our age, we have nowhere to go... [*Undoubtedly the hardest thing to admit for an immigrant, meaning someone who has struggled their whole life to believe that they have a country and a "home" to return to.*]

They have to be made accountable.

Not to me... but to France...

[*Even though the subterfuge necessary to justify the enquiry forbade any questions about the person's social characteristics, we were able to learn in passing that this childless family moved in 1975, coming from Paris where they had lived in a cramped space, in a one-room apartment. The couple had acquired their present house with the inheritance that the wife received on the death of her parents. The husband works at the RATP (urban transport system in Paris) and the wife, obviously older than he, has never worked.*]

— *I am going round the neighborhood. I would like to talk with some people, see everyone a little, all the inhabitants of this neighborhood where there are only single-family houses: to see what they think of their surroundings, how they see the future of this neighborhood, what changes have taken place around them and in the area since their arrival here; did these changes move in the direction of a general improve-*

ment in housing and living conditions, or on the contrary, toward deterioration? (...) I don't have very specific questions to ask you, I'd just like to chat with you and get your opinion, your impressions...

Mme Meunier That's for sure! In other words, now they really have to admit what they are up to. Because they can't hide it any longer. They've understood that the game is up, we are on top of everything. They're waking up... because they thought we were blind, that we understood nothing of their funny business.

— *What are you talking about? What funny business? What can't they hide any longer? What are they doing and admitting doing at the same time?*

Mme Meunier Because you don't know? You're not asking me to believe that? When everybody knows it, everybody sees it...

— *What are they seeing?*

Mme Meunier Soon the whole neighborhood will change population. People are leaving. Everything is for sale around here. If I showed you around the neighborhood, I'd show you that one house in two is up for sale. The real estate agents are happy enough... And they don't give a damn... As long as they make money. Whoever offers them the most or the first who comes and makes an offer... They don't give a damn, they don't live here...; they only care about the money they rake in.

— *Why are the owners selling their houses here? Is it here more than elsewhere or is it the same everywhere in all the neighborhoods like this one?*

Mme Meunier I don't know. I know this neighborhood, I don't know the others. But certainly it must be the same elsewhere, if it's like here... We really killed ourselves to get this, to have our own place; we paid an arm and a leg, we made sacrifices, and we haven't finished paying for it and it's already ruined.

— *Why is it ruined, as you say?*

Mme Meunier If my husband were here, he would tell you better than me. The older

population of this neighborhood, that is... of how many streets? (...) Well... a neighborhood like this when we came here, there were old people, the owners were all retired, elderly persons. And since then, it's emptied out: some have left, others are in retirement homes or nursing homes. And it's not the children who can go on living here. We don't know where they are... So the houses are rented to foreigners, to people from outside the neighborhood, not always to immigrants. And even the tenants don't stay long.

— *And who buys?*

Mme Meunier Always foreigners. And they come from everywhere. And even people who arrive as new owners, they don't stay, they don't stay long. Very often after three years, five years, they sell...

— *Why?*

Mme Meunier Because it's not or no longer in their interest, they are disappointed in the neighborhood. All the individual houses are generally small, not comfortable... always repairs to be done. That's our situation: things to fix, the heating, the plumbing, the roofing, and all that is very expensive. So they buy and a few years later they sell and leave here. The population is always changing... and not always for the better.

— *What do you call "not always for the better"?*

Mme Meunier It's the whole neighborhood that shows it. We've been here... for almost 15 years, we're aware of all these changes. I don't want to attack anyone, I don't want to accuse, what I am going to say is not racist. (That is what is disagreeable: as soon as you complain, as soon as you say that the neighborhood has a tendency to be going downhill, to have a bad reputation, you're accused of racism.) It's not out of racism that I say that here there are more and more immigrant families, Arab families. I don't know what they are, Algerian, Moroccan; North African families. And that doesn't help make the neighborhood any better. So everything goes downhill at the same time.

— *Where do these immigrant families come from, those "Arabs" as you say? Here there are houses, these aren't HLM, housing projects like elsewhere. Not everyone can afford to live here, to buy a house.*

Mme Meunier Oh, no! It's not what you think, there are more and more of them, they turn up almost every day. For example, almost all the shops here are run by Arabs, all the grocery stores are in their hands. But that's not all; that's not the worst: the worst is that this has a tendency to become an HLM, a project as they say. You see these things happening fast, very fast, fast with a capital F! It's no longer a residential neighborhood like it was, like we thought it was when we bought and at the price we paid. We were tricked! We were robbed and they keep on robbing us. We got deep into debt and we paid them back stupidly at high interest. We realize now that we were fooled, we were tricked.

— *How come? For example, if you had to sell your house, you're not going to tell me that you're going to lose on the price? It's not possible.*

Mme Meunier Not at all... For sure, we will lose money. It's all going downhill. It's getting spoilt on all sides. We'll never get our money back. For example, if we sold here and wanted to buy elsewhere, in another place, another town that was safer, that wasn't going down the tubes like here, we could never do it. It wouldn't be enough. Unless we went very far away, to the ends of the earth... and nowhere close enough, for example, to go to work every day in Paris.

— *I don't understand very well. What do you mean by "it's all ruined," "it's spoilt"? Yet you can't really see that. Here, it's clean; it's calm; it's neat.*

Mme Meunier No. Those are appearances; it fools you. It's true, someone who doesn't know the neighborhood and especially who did not know it before, you'd be right. But we have been here for 15 years, and we see how it has collapsed. Everything has collapsed.

— *Where does this collapse come from? What is it? Is it the support services, the buildings, is it the inhabitants?*

Mme Meunier Yes... that's it. That's it exactly. Just as you say. From the moment when the neighborhood loses its population, its true population, all the former owners of these houses, most often they built them themselves; when it's no longer them, the neighborhood is no longer maintained, everything is abandoned, people don't do repairs any more, it looks crummy. Look, you can tell: have you seen a single flower, a single plant in a window on this street? I'm the only one, only my house. There are times when I say to myself, what good is it, why do this? It's throwing pearls before swine. But I do it anyway. Too bad if it's a provocation. And why not? That's what happens when a house is abandoned. We've been here since 1977, I don't know anyone in the neighborhood anymore. I can go out the whole day, walk around or spend hours and hours in the public garden there across from the house, nobody says hello to me and I don't see anyone to say hello to, though there are plenty of people around. There is nobody anymore, nothing is left of the old... the former inhabitants of this neighborhood. We don't talk anymore, we no longer have neighbors, we can't count on anyone, nobody gives a hand. And that's what's falling apart. There is no longer any neighborhood life. So after that, you see things change, and not in the right direction.

— *What, for example?*

Mme Meunier For example, the mail. That alone, gone is the regularity: the postmen, before it was always the same ones, you knew them and they knew everybody; before, it was always at the same time, give or take a few minutes, it was like having a watch, you could tell the time by them, now it's always changing, you can't be sure anymore and it's at any time at all, it could be nine o'clock and it could be one o'clock. And it's the same with everything else – with the gas, electricity,

water, garbage collection – with all the services it's the same thing. You sense the "don't-give-a-damn" attitude everywhere and you can't say anything. You sense the city has given up on this neighborhood, it isn't interested, it's looking elsewhere, to other places that are more interesting.

— *Why? What are their reasons?*

Mme Meunier You tell me . . . Go ask them. You'll see what they tell you . . . If they dare to tell you something, to tell you the truth! I'd really like to know, too. But anyway, that's what I notice.

— *You haven't tried among yourselves to protest, to go to the local council to demand better services?*

Mme Meunier But to do that you have to be several people together, a lot of you; and all in agreement, with the same opinion. And what did I just say: we don't know each other, we don't talk anymore. I'm not about to ask my neighbors to come with me to complain, to get together, to know what should be done, to protest, write a petition or just a letter. And everything is like that.

— *Who are your neighbors?*

Mme Meunier What, you haven't seen them? You saw them before coming to my place . . . And in any case, you will go to see them since you're seeing everybody. So it's best that I tell you everything. That way you won't miss them. Even if you weren't thinking of seeing them, after what I'm going to tell you about them you're going to rush right over there . . . And also so as to tell them what I'm going to tell you. It's a good thing, they have to be told what I think of them . . . as if they didn't know. But they know. They should know. We never miss an opportunity. Not so much with the parents, the parents are quiet. You don't see them much, you don't hear them. It's the children, their children and especially their daughter. I don't know who she thinks she is, that one. She looks down her nose! I always catch her if I get the chance. Maybe I'm wrong, but I admit it.

*They show us we don't count
for anything*

— *Who are they?*

Mme Meunier But you know already. If the mayor's office or the HLM, or whoever, sent you here, it's for them, it's not for me. I don't count, they don't care; nobody gives a damn about me; me, I don't count . . . We don't count for anything here now. They show us we don't count, that we don't count for anything, that we are of no importance here. They're the only ones who matter.

— *Who is "they"? I am interested in all the inhabitants around here; I make no distinction between some people and the others, I am not the one who decides who is interesting, as you say, and who is not. I am ready to listen to you carefully and remember everything you have to tell me. That is why I take notes and record what you tell me, if that's okay with you. Your point of view merits as much consideration as that of all your neighbors and each of the inhabitants of this neighborhood. So who are these neighbors? Who is "they"?*

Mme Meunier "They" . . . is an Arab family. North Africans. I'm not sure, but I think it's an Algerian family.

— *And so what's wrong?*

Mme Meunier Well, nothing is right. Nothing can be right. We can't get along. We don't have the same tastes, the same habits. We don't live the same. We don't see the same things in the same ways. So we can't agree, we don't agree . . . on anything.

— *They bought? They are owners? How did they come here?*

Mme Meunier I'll tell you. Just now I told you that everything has changed here. Well that's what I wanted to tell you: I didn't want to start with that, because you would have called me a racist. You would have said, or you will say to yourself, how racist that woman is! But now you are going to understand. It's my next door neighbors; between us there is just a shared wall, one wall that separates us. We were

here before them, we were here when they arrived, when the mayor's office placed them there . . . Because it's the mayor's office that brought them.

— *How did the mayor's office bring them?*

Mme Meunier What, didn't they tell you at the mayor's office? I thought they had given you the names of all the families here. The house they live in belongs to the local authority. (...) [*She tells the story of this house which, left unoccupied after the death of its owners, was acquired by "the commune or the HLM office" and assigned to a family.*] It always begins like that: one family, two families, at first; one brings the other and there's no end to it. Soon here it will become like a housing project, like the Minguettes, Courneuve or the Val Fourré. There's so much talk about it . . . that everyone wants that at their place! Because that, it's the *commune* that wants it. It will become an HLM like the others. We've spent all we had to have a home . . . we thought we had a home.

— *But by what, by what misdemeanors do they make their presence felt? Living near them, in what way does it bother you? These houses are independent, separated from each other. It's not like in a building where the apartments are next to each other and you can be bothered by the noise, the comings and goings, the smells, etc.*

Mme Meunier Don't talk to me about that! You know how they are. With them, you never know how many there are. Who is part of the family, who isn't. People come and go and it doesn't stop. It's always full of kids. They are everywhere, in the street, in the public garden; there's yelling and crying. When you have that in the street, at your door, in the garden, it's not right, it must be said. It is really a shame. Even the cars, when they go by, it's dangerous; it's dangerous for everyone, for the kids themselves and for the cars. And this in a residential neighborhood, where it's quiet, where it should be quiet, right on your doorstep! . . . But when you tell them that,

they don't like it. They are not happy, they scream that it's racism, that it is because of racism that you tell them that, because you don't want them. And even if you don't want them, they ought to ask themselves why, they ought to look inside themselves, wonder a little about themselves. Perhaps then they would understand why? (...) Between you and me, it is not the parents who are the worst. The parents, you don't see them, you don't hear them: the father is ill I think, he doesn't go out; the mother, you never see her, even when her husband is at the hospital. It's the children, their children. They do anything they want: whatever comes into their heads, and insult you as well if you say anything or even if you say nothing; that's all they have in their mouths, they are rude, they are hateful, they give you nasty looks, they always stare at you sideways. You have the impression they are always wanting to hit you . . . they scare the hell out of me.

— *Let's come back to our problems of neighboring. You made a distinction, in their behavior, between the parents who seem to be good souls, nice people, and their children . . .*

Mme Meunier That's for sure! The children are pretentious . . . touchy. (...) Even before you say a word they accuse you of racism; whoever doesn't agree with them is a racist as far as they are concerned. Really they are the racists.

— *But do you have examples? Have there been quarrels between you and other people, other neighbors? What are the most frequent causes of these quarrels? If you could give me some examples, I'd understand better.*

Mme Meunier Well, there . . . The quarrels, if I wanted to . . . if I wanted quarrels, I think it would be all the time. It wouldn't stop. Which means that there aren't always violent quarrels, with a lot of noise, and it's because I turn a deaf ear, I look away, I don't want to see . . . Which means that there are always repressed quarrels, we avoid . . . Quarrels . . . how to

describe them? Silent quarrels. It's no use talking! You only have to look at each other, that's all. The youngest of them, the baby... there are two of them, their grandchildren... well, these two little tots, as soon as they see me they have to make a face... they stick out their tongue. And I didn't do anything to them, yet that's how it is. In other words, it's the family taught them that. And since that's how it is... for me now, well, I don't miss a chance. Even if I have to be talked of as crazy, a shrew, a grown woman who takes it out on little kids. I don't care. I still do it, because it is not them, in fact, it's their parents. These poor kids haven't done anything to me. So just something like that, in the end it's one more reason for a squabble.

— *But how does it happen? You go to see the parents to complain and there it is, the opportunity to squabble... Do you scold these kids and the parents intervene? What happens?*

Mme Meunier Oh! Not even that. I would never dare to go and complain, knock on their door. Because what would I hear then? It would be a provocation on my part, and they would make me pay dearly for it. My real problem is with their daughter, one of their daughters, the one who lives with them and works at the hospital... I don't know as what. We don't get along at all. So it's woman to woman; it's between women, as my husband says. (...) That what it is. I am alone on my side. If I have words with that girl... — because that's all it is, just words, I mustn't exaggerate, we don't tear each other's hair out; we trade words, that's all, it involves only me on my side. But at bottom, I am defending the interests of everybody and even the interests of the district, of the whole community. These are quarrels... mine and mine alone. Even my husband doesn't take part in these quarrels. I don't even want him beside me... I don't tell him anything. As long as it's between women, as I say, it should stay that way. But as for her, I'm sure that she speaks for everyone, that she has her whole family against me, her father, her mother, her

brothers and sisters, her nephews and all her other cousins, her whole world. So for them it is not only between us... I have the feeling of fighting one against ten, so I jump right in, I don't let things slide. Too bad! Even if the little kids have to pay. It's not their fault, but it's not my fault either. There is no truce. I go for it.

— *But with the others, with the boys for example, with the men, there is no quarrel.*

Mme Meunier I told you. With her, that's enough. She fights for all the others. They all agree. She is their attacker, their warrior. So they can stay in the rear, look on. They pretend to be neutral. They rely on her. You see... excuse me, the shitty situation in which I am. And I'm the bad one! They're the good guys... and it's me the French-woman who is the nasty one, the racist. There's the trap, roles have been reversed.

— *But the men, the boys...?*

Mme Meunier I have no contact with them... Because I think that if ever I had a word with them, it would be my husband who would get in on the action. And that would be bad, there would be a fight, there would be blood. I have the impression that everybody knows that; my husband, beneath the calm exterior, I think he's just waiting for that...; they must suspect that, they must know that if ever they go beyond the limits it could be very serious for them.

— *And these quarrels between women, in this case, are over what?*

Mme Meunier To tell the real truth, you couldn't say that there is actually something important...; that it's about something serious. It's about everything and nothing... about trivial things. But that's how it is.

Trivial nonsense

— *The last time there was trouble, even slight, between you, where was it, and how, and over what?*

Mme Meunier It's always the same thing. Over trivial nonsense: the cats... the dog... the kids.

— *How's that?*

Mme Meunier Yes, the cats. Let's start with the cats. Their daughter, that one...

always the one who is here with her parents... I don't know how old she is... she must be at least thirty, but she is always there like a kid who lives with her parents. So... she has a herd of cats...: three, four, five. I have nothing against that. I love animals too! I have my little dog. It seems she is a real cat lover. Everyone has a passion... whatever passion is for them. For her it's cats. These cats... and they're not even mine... I feel sorry for them! In the morning, as soon as the door opens, I see them running across the street... rushing into the garden. Can you imagine? At the time when there's the most traffic. One day they're going to have to be scraped up... run over by a car. It breaks my heart, I cannot imagine a woman who loves cats, her own cats, and she doesn't even realize that! And obviously when they are in the garden, what do you expect them to do. They use the beds... the flower beds, the kids' sandlots, like cat litter boxes... to do their business. Can you picture this? It's not very neat and moreover not very hygienic. But that's how it is. You have to deal with it. Should I go tell them so? I can just hear what they'll tell me, what they're going to shout at me: "we're not in your home; the garden doesn't belong to you; mind your own dog, that's enough for you. We didn't ask you to justify the things you do! etc., etc.!" But if they only knew... "We're not in your home!" But they are in my home, they are in France, it's not me who's in their home. You mustn't switch the roles... "We didn't ask you to justify the things you do" - while that's exactly what it is: you have to be made accountable for your actions... they have to be accountable. Not to me... but to France. I don't say that I'm France. But just that they have to realize, to get it into their heads, especially the young ones (...). It's always over things like that... trivialities maybe, but it says a lot. (...) Yes, where we clash, where we don't understand each other, it's always

over external things. Of course. I'm not concerned with what happens at their place. It's none of my business. Even the noise they make, I don't give a damn! It bothers me a little... but it's not serious. What happens at their place, I don't meddle, even if I hear things.

— *For example...*

Mme Meunier I have even heard it said - but I have never been inside their place, I don't meddle in what doesn't concern me - that they have transformed their bathroom into a *hammam* as they do in their country.

— *How does it work?*

Mme Meunier It seems, on a gas burner they heat their water in a big cauldron and so they have their steam and they take steam baths like in their *hammam*. But in the end, if you keep doing that you can imagine what the result is... I only tell you this. And soon we've got damage... in the paintwork, in the plumbing, in the wooden doors, the windows. I can already see it... In any case, that's what people say. And so on. (...) You can't put up with it indefinitely. You have to say something about that, it should be made known... (...) Even if outside I don't let them get away with anything. Not even the kids when they come with their aunt into the garden. They dirty everything, they break things, they disrupt everything. It is forbidden to play with a ball in the garden. That's what they do. When they are down there I don't let my dog... I don't take my dog out (...). He is quite capable... of course, by unnerving and frightening him, he is capable of biting them and then I'd be the one who'd pay: I'd have all the trouble, and they're going to hand it to me big. And that's the way they are the ones who are going to end up running things here. As soon as there are two or three other families of this type you won't be able to go out anymore. All this will be theirs! That's why I tell myself that you have to do something before it's too late.

Rosine Christin

Everyone in a Place of their Own

I met Françoise's mother in 1962: she was a concierge in the thirteenth arrondissement of Paris and her husband a skilled worker at the Renault car factory. Over the years, despite several moves, we had maintained friendly though distant relations, but connections were especially kept up with her elder daughter, Françoise.

In 1987 the family is in turmoil: on several occasions Françoise tells me about her problems with the owner of the semidetached house adjoining hers and the legal steps she has taken to put an end to a situation she considers intolerable. As I understood it at the time in all its ordinariness, her story sounded to me like a run-of-the-mill human interest story. What I knew of her and her kin should have allowed me to give some meaning to this story. But I knew the family too well to observe it. The happy outcome of the conflict (since the whole family now lives "in a residence for managers working in the SNCF [national railroad company]") gave me the excuse for an interview along the lines of a study of residence: Françoise could describe the successive places she had lived in, focusing on the reasons for and the effects of the different moves.

On March 27th, 1991, the day after the "Sartrouville demonstration" provoked by the murder of a young Beur ([Djemel], killed by the security guards at the Euromarché hypermarket), Françoise arrived at my place at the agreed time. She has very classic tastes and was wearing an off-white, British-style gabardine coat, khakhi mid-length straight skirt, a flowered blouse whose collar emerged from a black cardigan, and black patent leather loafers. Her hair was short in a blunt cut and she wore no trace of makeup. As usual she is calm and impeccably dressed, but her uneasy look and hesitant voice in search of approval gave her away. She quickly grasped the relevance for explaining this "crisis" of linking family events and a chronology of residences.

Her parents were married in 1948 in Achères. For several months they lived in a small garden lean-to belonging to her grandmother. Then... she is not really sure she should tell... "They were squatters in a mansion in Achères. Then there were lovely houses in good repair and unoccupied, and so with another couple... at the time it was accepted, it was not what it would be now"... "That's how they began." Her father worked at Fibrociment, near Poissy.

In 1950, she was two when her mother found a place as a concierge in a building owned by the City of Paris with a redbrick facade, quite near the sugar refinery that spread its nauseating fumes all over the thirteenth arrondissement. There was a living room, a bedroom and a kitchen, "it was nice, a little like a small apartment." After a brief period of unemployment, during which Françoise's mother had to get milk coupons from the city to feed her, her father went to work at Renault, where he stayed until his death. Sometimes it was a little hard there for him because he never joined a trade union, "he was against all that," "he always wanted to go to work": she remembers that during the strikes of '68 the unionized workers received extra benefits from the mairie where they lived, but that her father got nothing since he wasn't in a union. He could not afford to go on strike. He was a skilled worker and "never rose any higher" so did not have a big salary; her parents "cut back on everything to get by" – no vacations, no evenings out. In 1957 her mother became seriously ill, and they had to leave the concierge's place since the chores were too heavy for a convalescent. Talking about this period Françoise admits to me: "sometimes my mother and I say to ourselves, when you think where we came from and where we ended up, it's scary."

The family then settled in a two-room-plus-kitchen on the second floor of the same building, just above the concierge's residence. Patricia, the second daughter, was born prematurely "and so, it was even harder, with the rent to pay and another child..." Her mother did cleaning in buildings nearby. For three months the baby was in an incubator at the hospital, and "when they gave her back there were social workers who came to see if we were able to raise her, in what conditions..." Thus to the material difficulties was added the affront made to her qualifications as a mother and housekeeper, though these were well known and appreciated in the neighborhood. They speak of this too, sometimes, but not very often, because there are things that one prefers to forget. In 1965 new apartment buildings were built opposite the Say sugar refinery, and her mother made a housing request: "since our place was falling apart and there were two children..." They did not even see or smell the black smoke: "That was the pinnacle... it was really nice and we were the first renters, Patricia was so happy that she wanted to sleep in the bathtub, because we'd never had a bathroom with a bath; it began to be the good period, we began to see things clearly, although... the problems increased since we had a higher rent, but we had a housing subsidy and that allowed us to live pretty well."

"They breathed more easily." In 1968, Françoise's mother inherited a share of her father's house at Pornichet, 30,000 francs that she immediately reinvested by buying a small apartment in this same town "for vacations," a rare privilege. After her accounting diploma, Françoise began work and then in 1972 married Thierry, a mechanic's assistant on the railroad, whom she had known for a long time. Thierry's father was a railway worker: at age four, the young boy decided to "work on trains," at 14 he was an apprentice on the railways, stayed there three years, passed a CAP in electromechanics and little by little climbed the ladder,

assistant mechanic, mechanic, then after six years of study in evening courses, chief driver. Thierry has kept his childhood passion for trains: he did not want to rise too high in the professional hierarchy because then he would be “in the office” and no longer “on the machine,” which is what he loves. Françoise is a little bothered by this overly exclusive interest, but she is used to it, since, on the other hand, she runs the family as she wants to, decides on the children’s education, manages the budget, and Thierry always goes along. She speaks little of him, as if their marriage was in the order of things, inevitable and honest.

In 1976, at the age of 52, her father died of cancer: “That was the breaking point, life stopped at that moment and we made a second life . . . it was worse than anything . . . a catastrophe.” Her mother had “no right to anything” for two years because she was only 48 and she had to wait until she was 50 to get a pension, and then at the end of a year no more social security benefit. We said: “It’s a disaster, we’ll never get back on our feet.” This death came at a moment when Françoise had begun to build a life more to her liking. She no longer worked (“it’s not interesting to spend your day shuffling papers”), was raising her daughter Carole, dividing her time between housekeeping and long afternoons of knitting and disenchanted conversations with her mother; Thierry’s future at the railroad seemed promising, but he still had a very small salary, her sister Patricia, 19, had not found work, and along with her mother, now without income, she thought that “everything was going to crumble.” She felt threatened, along with her whole family. She decided to take on the role of “head of the family,” undertook laborious inquiries and learned that her mother could benefit from a bonus equal to five years of her husband’s salary: “if we had not made a claim . . . it already did not feel good to beg, but we had to live.”

But this bonus was a small sum since her mother was only entitled to a half pension, with no social security benefit . . . Therefore they had to find a solution and “the solution was the house” in the suburbs. The death benefit would be the initial down payment, her mother would live with them, Françoise would resume work to pay the bills, and Thierry would relocate from his post at the Saint-Lazare station.

They had imagined a house that was modern but in the “Île-de-France” suburban style somewhere near Mantes [northwest of Paris, on the Seine], in a beautiful housing development. There should have been trees, greenery, a big bright kitchen, a bedroom for each person and at least two bathrooms. But the house they bought is “old style,” has had repairs, and is situated in a small ordinary street of Sartrouville. The kitchen is narrow, and the whole place is a little too small for the five of them, but its biggest flaw is that it abuts a neighboring house. Despite everything, Françoise is happy; she has just set up the furniture that an elderly aunt left her, a complete dining room suite in the Henri II style [of the sixteenth century, in dark wood] which the room just about holds, and an “antique” bed of which she is very proud. “For the rest, we managed with what we had and with what came from my parents, not much.”

For two years life went along smoothly. In the evenings, Thierry prepared for his exams, and his salary rose; after the birth of a second child, Jean-Baptiste, Françoise could once again quit her job with no regrets: since the day when, in her first job, she discovered forgery and embezzlement of funds by her immediate boss, she has considered professional life with disgust and distrust. The world is full of cheats, you have to give everything to your family, to preserve it: this is one of the great certainties that Françoise shares with her mother.

The relations with the adjacent property owners, civilized until then – “hello, good-bye, no more” – were suddenly strained the day when the neighbor, a Portuguese builder, without any warning began to raise his house by one floor. He also decided to let the light in by making a window “with a balcony” overlooking the roof of the Ménager family. The Ménagers could not bear this intrusion into their garden and, certain of their rights, wrote to the planning authorities. A study was made, the neighbor thought he had been insulted, it was the seed of conflicts. Françoise and Thierry are not the strongest at the game: the Portuguese family has no fear of noise and lives to the sound of Radio Lisbon, a third child has just been born, the house has to be enlarged; major work was necessary for that and is going to continue for several years, at a pace that varies with the seasons and the professional occupations of the head of the family. A little disorder does not bother this nuisance neighbor: to general disapproval, their little garden is soon transformed into a chicken coop and a pigpen; he does not hesitate to throw garbage out of the window in question, or to steal the tomatoes Thierry has carefully planted.

Françoise and her husband are at a loss, they know they have the law on their side, but cannot get justice done. The planning authorities supported their claim, but for the time being the neighbors merely boarded up half of the offending window, leading to more legal actions; they go to see the communist mayor of S. who receives them very politely on several occasions, but these visits have no effect whatsoever. They try to organize the neighborhood, to circulate petitions, and to write to the state procurator, since the usual administrative and regulatory avenues do not seem to work. They run up against a wall of polite indifference, if not suspicion, on the part of overworked administrators. Françoise is bothered the most, she who never disturbs anyone. She tries to act with dignity, respectful of morality and customs, and according to the laws of her country. Once again she experiences a feeling of insecurity. She sees threats approaching that she had thought had been pushed out of their lives forever, the crudeness of the mob, from which the purchase of the semidetached house, symbol of well-being, of property, of being “at home,” seemed to have liberated them for a while. There is only one outcome of “this” (as she will call this unnamable danger throughout the interview): death, hers or the other’s.

After the sale of the house, the welcome she received from the tenants in the “residence,” all from SNCF management, was the culmination of her aspirations and the affirmation of her new hopes: she found there an environment both warm and respectable. In the first months, Thierry and Françoise were a little intimid-

ated by these established white-collar workers and sometimes out of discretion declined to participate in certain celebrations, while accepting the invitation to come the next day "and eat the leftovers." Generally, these relationships conformed to the code of good conduct that in her naiveté she had turned into a moral rule.

Now, in 1991, things have changed, and the SNCF rents to anyone at all, and not always to white-collar workers, so it's not the same anymore. The older tenants have aged; they no longer have the heart to go out, and the new ones aren't interested. The ambiance is different.

Françoise says of herself that she thinks a lot, and this contributes to her isolation. Moreover, her children are like her, they are different from the other children and this is perhaps not a good thing, they don't have many friends. She "still thinks of what would happen to her family, of disasters that she tries to predict"; but she did not foresee either her father's death or all the indeterminate dangers, the diffuse aggravations, the indignities, all "this," as she says. She is always afraid now, especially for her children. Not far from her house, just on the other side of the avenue, there are the housing projects of Achères, Chantelouples-Vignes and Sartrouville, inhabited "by North Africans, young people, unemployed people." Out of there come the rival gangs who on certain days invade the central areas, seeking pointless violence or the settling of unknown accounts. The neighborhood of the Rue Nationale, where she spent her childhood, was largely Algerian even then, but "things were fine"; she even played with Algerian children. But now "it's not the same anymore," she no longer understands. The young "North Africans" are more and more numerous in the area's schools whose "standard is very low," and she has had to place her children in a church school that is fairly far away; so she has had to learn to drive. She admits that, from "having put them in that school, there are also implications"; thus she thinks of the many religious holidays and ceremonies and the mixing with school friends who are "too spoiled in terms of pocket money"; but she has no choice and wants to give her children every chance.

Françoise is very attached to her home; her mother says jokingly that she can't tear her out of it, and that you have to spend a good half-hour in preparation for each trip, even for a quick errand: checking the gas is off, that each window is closed and certain curtains, along with much key-turning. "It's not from me that she gets all these manias," adds Mme Roger, who, before camping out each night on the sofa of her daughter's well-ordered living room, had always lived in easygoing disorder and with the carelessness of those who have nothing much to hide: she thinks no doubt, as I do, of the dining room table in her two-room apartment in the thirteenth arrondissement of Paris on which the girls' notebooks lay alongside the social security forms to be filled out or the first rows of some knitting; nobody back then thought of clearing the table since meals were most often eaten in the kitchen. Which explains why, some days, the old woman simply cannot understand how anyone can worry so much about all the things that come with owning – at long last – a "place of one's own."

with the owner of a small house in the suburbs

— interview by Rosine Christin

“We lived through hell”

[...]

Françoise It began with the noise but afterwards there were personal attacks, death threats, etc., that's how far! One day... that's why I was totally depressed, one day there was a hammer... I think I was so overwrought that I banged on the common wall, he came out and I also came out and there was just the two of us because Thierry was in the garden. Nobody was aware of anything and we found ourselves face to face like that and he said to me “I'm going to get you,” threatening me with a tool, and I think that since then it has been terrible for me because... And then, it haunted me if you like, outside the house. It was in the street... at school... it had personal repercussions... it affected people. (...)

That's how far it went

The children were going to school together; they had three children. There was one of them who was little, who had just been born, but there were two children who were older than Carole. But then, the children were just like the parents unfortunately, and they went to school, they threatened Carole at school. And when I was driving her to school they had a car, and I don't know how many times, they tried to run me down on the sidewalk. That's how far it went! When I went to X's place and when I went to the mailbox, there was a café on the corner from my place, one day I had mailed a letter in the box, they drove by, they came round the corner in their car, they came that close to me. They would have run me over like a dog. Even in the street I wasn't safe because I always had this apprehension. It reached a point of never going out, and most of the time

Thierry took the children to school. I had to go see the headmistress to explain things to her because they were bothering Carole, they hit her, they threatened her. That's how far it went. It was really impossible to live like that. It didn't stop with the noise, it also involved other things. The noise was one thing, it was unbearable but there would have been no threats like that, maybe it would have calmed down because the construction work couldn't have gone on forever, maybe... I still hope...

— *Do you think this is something that often happens in the suburbs?*

Françoise I have heard people talk about noise because after that I came into contact with others who were obliged to move out on account of the noise, but as for threats like that... no. I have never heard of such a thing, it's the first time. They drank, they were certainly unhinged. And on top of that we aren't the first this has happened to. Because when we made official complaints and all that, after all that, we found out that all the people who lived in this house or even in the houses on the other side had had to leave as well, on account of that, for physical threats too.

— *Was it – taken as a whole, it was a pleasant neighborhood?*

Françoise Yes, exactly. That is, in the beginning, when we came... the suburbs, I think they are a bit claustrophobic, people weren't very sociable. It took us at least... until Jean-Baptiste was born, three years that is... for three years, we lived at home, we came home, we went out, nobody said hello to us. There was just one person, the day we moved, who came to see us, who introduced himself, just the day of the move, they were very nice; they said to us “if you need anything...” and then it ended

there, it was over. Afterwards we didn't see them, we didn't meet them because they didn't keep the same hours as we did. And nobody else spoke to us. Even the people next door didn't speak to us. It took Jean-Baptiste's being born for people to start to... a little out of curiosity and then a little bit... but for three years you could say we lived without knowing anybody. When we left after six years there were people living on the street, across the street, that we didn't know.

You couldn't touch those people

So it was already a suburb where people were not very sociable. But in the end, when all these things happened to us, people were nevertheless on our side and supported us. I must admit that we were even astonished because people who didn't talk to us, who didn't even say hello to us, when the police came, the day we called the police because we had had enough, there were people who came the next day to ask us what happened, who tried to understand and to give us moral support. After that we wrote petitions, everybody went to the mayor's office, all that... on that, I can't deny it. Thierry and I, we had been to see the mayor several times when he had his office hours. We started by going to see him and explaining to him what happened, all that but... But you know there were always reasons... you couldn't touch those people. And then in the end, when people saw the state we were in because the farther it went, obviously the more depressed we were, the whole family was at the point... at that very point, people decided to draw up a petition and to go ask people who lived around that house to sign, all the houses around those people. People signed, most of them signed, we collected (...) from people we didn't know. We went around knocking on doors and explained to them what was happening; and they were annoyed, too, because they had a garden adjoining that house, so everybody was annoyed in one way or another. People were pretty sympathetic,

they supported us. As a result of all that, we sent a petition to the mayor, we were called to see him, and we came back. We spent hours and hours discussing it to no avail. And then when we saw that, there was another person who said "well, we'll write to the public prosecutor." At the police station that's what they advised us. [She talks faster, isn't clear and becomes very emotional.] We wrote to the public prosecutor; they even told us that if we weren't happy (...) that's why (...) came back there. We lived like that for a year. It affected our health. And the children... of course, a child reacts better than an adult because they don't see the details, but I was really depressed, and so of course they became aware of it. It affected Carole's schooling... all that. Jean-Baptiste was little so he didn't realize what was happening. And even now he talks about it: when he sees Portuguese people, to him they are the "Portos." And we never talk about it, we no longer talk about it now, it's over, it's finished. It preoccupied us totally, really threw us. I lost 32 pounds. Mama was sick too. But I had to go away several times because I couldn't stay any longer, it wasn't possible anymore. The doctor told me "you have to leave, you can't stay." I wasn't eating, I wasn't sleeping, it was psychological, there was nothing to be done about it, all I had in my head was that noise, and then when he threatened me, since that day I was truly afraid. I lived in fear. Also, these were people who were violent, it was known too that he didn't just have an ordinary past.

*The only thing I wanted to do was
to kill him*

That's roughly how it happened. What's important too is that among ourselves, at home, from the fact that we couldn't communicate with those people, between us we couldn't stand each other any longer. It was dramatic for the whole family because we couldn't stand each other anymore. We blamed each other. We couldn't do anything about it, we weren't responsible, but we couldn't beat the neighbor. And one thing

too that is important is that I had never had ideas like that, or Thierry either because he's not like that, but at one point the only thing I wanted to do was to kill him. And for me to reach that point! There are people who are brawlers but me, frankly when I saw him, even when I heard him, just heard him, if I'd had something in my hands, frankly I think I would have done it. I was so worked up I could easily have killed him. I still managed anyhow to tell myself that in any case that wouldn't do any good, and it would get me into trouble, but let's say that I often thought about it, and Thierry too. I think that it's important because to reach that point, it's quite dramatic. You can understand how people in the housing projects get worked up by the noise, and they blow up. Now I understand because in the beginning I didn't understand, I told myself "it's not possible to have ideas like that"; but now that I have lived through it, I tell myself, well yes indeed! So worked up you'd do anything. You would surely regret it afterwards, but on the spot you would be capable of doing it.

One day I wanted so much to do it that Thierry was forced to take me to the doctor, I remember that it was in Saint-Denis, we had gone out, we came back, we had been to see the TGV [high-speed train]... this is a little anecdote... it's not very interesting... we had been to visit the TGV because obviously we went out as often as possible in order not to hear the noise, we even went to the neighbors not to hear the noise. Which means we had gone out, so that was the day that he threatened me and said he was going to get me. Thierry was forced to take me to the hospital because really I was no longer myself, I don't know what I would have done... anything... I even think that I would have done away with myself because I was at such a point of exhaustion, and yet I'd spent a nice afternoon, I was happy, everything was fine, all he had to do was say that to me... What is important, too, is that neighbors often put us up on Saturdays and Sundays. People invited us so that we wouldn't have to stay

at home. It was kind. Luckily we had support because it has to be recognized! If we had not been supported I don't think we would have been able to stay so long. (...)

What has to be said also is that we had a small garden which was really very small, we didn't use it, we never went into it because everyone could see into it. From the garden you could also see the inside of other houses and so when our next-door neighbor raised his house, his bedrooms looked out over our garden, which did not help matters because, well, the threats being already what they were, we had all the garbage coming into our garden. No question of using it. And also they raised animals who were alongside our wall, it oozed regularly, the smells! There was really everything to make it pleasant. And with that we had the same problems. We called in the department of health, it was his wall, he had the right to do what he wanted. He raised rabbits, pigs, anything. They had even raised a pig they killed when they baptized the baby. A pig in the suburbs, that is really the limit! In the country, fine! And on top of all that, our garden was surrounded with nothing but breeze-blocks. So there was this little square of garden, but round it all there was breeze-blocks and you would have thought you were in a tiny prison because the concrete blocks were getting to us. It wasn't very pleasant because we had a patch of lawn and we had made a tiny vegetable garden, if you can call it that, of tomatoes and all that, that the neighbor came to take from us in the night, but apart from that, this garden, we could never take advantage of it, never, never. The smells of the rabbits and all that, it wasn't... (...). We put the house up for sale because we'd had enough, in a fit rather.

— *And here, what is it called?*

Françoise It is a residence for managers working in the SNCF. Only people in the same profession. (...)

— *You feel comfortable here?*

Françoise Yes, because I think, it's perhaps not very nice to say... but I think that it's

people who are intelligent, who know how to see things as they are, who think, who can have a conversation. When something isn't right, we tell each other, we explain why and how, and then it's over. It doesn't happen often. There are only a few of us, just six couples . . . only a few in fact, which means that we manage to understand each other, there are always one or two who stick to themselves, but it's not a problem. I think that everybody tries to mind their own business, but we help each other too. If there is something, people can count on each other, but we keep our independence. We invite each other from time to time. We cook meals for each other from time to time: this time we decided to go to the Club Méditerranée, to go out, so that it's not always the women who cook the meals. This time we decided to put aside money in common, each puts a little something into the pool each month; in November, we're going to the Club Méditerranée, have a meal out, and have fun. That will be a change. So that the women won't have work to do. Last year we had Christmas

dinner. We prepared it a long time in advance, we made a menu and then each woman had something to make, the appetizer, the entrée, the dessert. Each woman contributed, we did the shopping together. At first we put the money in common, we did the shopping together and then each bought a little something in addition. For example, I did chocolate truffles, others did candied fruits and all that was not part of the common stock, everyone brought a little something extra. And then, since there were leftovers, the next day we started over because there were leftovers. And then there was a costume party we didn't go to because we weren't there, we'd gone away for the day. So, for the costume party, it happened just the same way. It lasted three days because there was so much to eat. And since we hadn't been able to go to the costume party, they invited us the next day anyway because we couldn't have gone to it, it wasn't that we didn't want to, so we were invited two days in a row. They came to get us because we were here.

March 1991

Patrick Champagne

The View from the Media

Social malaises only have a visible existence when the media talk about them, that is to say when they are recognized as such by journalists. But they are not reducible to just the malaises constituted by the media, nor especially to the image that the media give of them when they do perceive them. Undoubtedly, journalists do not make up the problems they talk about out of whole cloth. They may even think, not unreasonably, that they contribute to making them known and getting them, as they say, into “public debate.” It remains true that it would be naive to stop at this statement. All malaises are not all equally made for the media, and those that are inevitably suffer a number of distortions as soon as the media get a hold of them. Far from just recording them, the journalistic field subjects these malaises to a real work of construction that depends very largely on the interests specific to this sector of activity.

One could almost say that counting the “malaises” that turn up in the press results more than anything in a list of what can be called “malaises made for journalists,” meaning those whose public representation has been explicitly fabricated to interest journalists or else those that attract journalists by their very nature because they are “out of the ordinary” or dramatic or moving and thereby commercially viable, and hence fit the social definition of an event worthy of making headlines. The manner in which the media choose and treat these malaises says at least as much about the journalistic milieu and its way of working as it does about the social groups in question.¹

The fabrication of the “event”

It would be necessary to analyze (but that is not the object here) the diversity of journalistic points of view on events, which is tied to the diversity of the forms of journalism. It remains true that whatever the medium in which they work, journalists read each other, listen to each other and look at each other’s work a lot. For them the “press review” is a professional necessity: it suggests the subjects to treat because “the others” are talking about them, it may give them ideas for

¹ These malaises dramatized in and for the media can sometimes give a rather fantastic image of reality, as shown for example by the recent televised retrospective that condensed the history of youth over the last 20 years into a succession of a new kind of stereotypical image, throwing together sequences of hippies, Bob Dylan concerts, the musical *Hair*, squatters, hard rock, concerts for SOS-Racisme [French anti-racist organization of the 1980s], youth from the *banlieues* [problem suburbs] burning cars, skinheads and others of that ilk, rappers, graffiti types and, to end with the most recent current events, youths striking up their cigarette lighters during a concert by the singer Patrick Bruel.

stories or at least allow them to situate themselves and to define a perspective that will distinguish them from their competitors. Reading over again everything written or shown about events such as the “Gulf War,” “the lycée movement” [demonstrations by high school students] of November 1990 or the “Vaulx-en-Velin riots,” for example, one turns up every now and again a particularly pertinent article or report. But this exhaustive and *a posteriori* reading overlooks the fact that such articles often pass unnoticed by the great majority of readers and are drowned in a mass whose tone is generally very different.² But the media act on the spur of the moment and collectively fabricate a social representation that, even when it is rather distant from reality, persists despite subsequent denials or later corrections because, quite often, it merely reinforces spontaneous interpretations and hence mobilizes prejudices and thereby magnifies them. Moreover, you have to take into account the fact that television exercises a very strong domination effect inside the journalistic field itself because its huge diffusion – especially with the evening news – gives it a particularly strong influence in the constitution of the dominant representation of events. In addition, news “put into images” produces a dramatizing effect that aims very directly at collective emotions. Finally, images exercise a very powerful evidentiary effect: undoubtedly more than speech, they seem to designate an indisputable reality even though they are just as much the product of a more or less explicit work of selection and construction. Even if television draws in large part from the written press or from the same sources as the printed press (basically new agency dispatches), it has a logic of work and specific constraints that have a strong influence on the fabrication of events. It acts on ordinary television viewers but also on the other media; print journalists today can no longer ignore yesterday’s lead story on the TV evening news.

When the newscasts decided, for example, to cover the first high school demonstrations in October 1990 – originally it was a simple movement, confined to a few schools in the northern suburbs of Paris and a few hundred students protesting against the lack of teachers and attacks on certain students – a number of specialists in education in Parisian print journalism considered such media coverage irresponsible because of the possible copycat effect (“They’ve flipped!” “They’re nuts to open the evening news with that!” “You had the impression that the whole lycée population was in the street whereas it was 3,000 tops,” and so on).³ Nevertheless, it is no doubt in wholly good faith that the television journalists decided to have a segment on these movements on primetime news. They had a subject and very telegenic images (“Television journalists,” explained a reporter from the Parisian written press, “never know how to illustrate problems in the education system and often ask us for ideas for illustration”). In addition, they probably had in mind the demonstrations by high school and university students

² Picking out the “relevant” articles requires knowing the issue at hand. At any particular moment and on subjects one knows little – or nothing at all – about, one can only rely on those who have something to say about them.

³ These notes owe much to interviews with journalists made by Dominique Marchetti in the course of a study I directed on the *lycéen* movement.

in November 1986, which had also begun about the same time in the school year with a strike in a single establishment. The precedent, very present in the minds of most of the journalists, the concern not to fall behind in covering a revolution and the sincere conviction that they were witnessing once more the beginnings of a vast protest movement probably suffice to explain the privileged treatment they granted localized protests from the start. In fact, as the high school strikes multiplied under the impact, in large part, of their television media coverage – “television was almost the barometer of the movement; since people spoke about it on the TV news, everybody had to join in,” says a Parisian journalist who covered the movement – so the editors of Parisian dailies put increasing pressure on their “writers” in charge of the education pages, pushing them to write “in-depth papers” on the subject. If a certain number of specialized journalists on education problems then showed some reticence in writing about these events, it is not only because their professional experience scarcely predisposes them to be easily surprised;⁴ it is also because this movement, largely fabricated by television, was elusive: they couldn’t understand it or identify either those responsible for it or its objectives. Nevertheless, forced to speak about it, they contributed, quite involuntarily, to giving importance to what had become in media terms a true societal problem, “the malaise of high school students” and, more generally, “youth.” The student heads of the high school coordinating committees who had come out of the movement and who were advised on media strategies by adults more experienced than they (from the Communist Party, SOS-Racisme, the Socialist Party, etc.) could not help but take themselves very seriously, speaking in the “Lycée General Assembly” [strike committees] like politicians in the Assemblée Nationale on live television. According to a reporter from a major Parisian daily who stayed close to them during the events: “The heads of the coordinating committee took themselves for stars. People took them too seriously. They spoke only to the TV cameras. There was an excessive star system. They thought they were allowed to do anything. They had been to the Elysée [residence of the President], they had had breakfast with Jospin [Minister of Education] . . .” By the same token one understands why, as products in large part of the media, these movements often disappear very quickly when the latter cease to talk about them. And it is not enough to do what is generally done, look into what interests the press. It is also important to investigate the process that gradually leads all journalists to lose interest in the events they had previously contributed to producing. Somewhat humorously, a young reporter well acquainted with the editorial offices of the major private radio stations relates: “At the editorial meeting of a radio station there is always an editor who is going to say ‘Now that’s enough, it’s boring people. The crummy suburbs are starting to piss us off, we’re sick of it. Let’s go on to something else.’ And there is always something in

⁴ The editor of a Parisian daily explained to me that, knowing their field well, specialists are generally disinclined to see the extraordinary: occupying modestly the inside pages of the papers, they have instead a tendency to play everything down and are difficult to surprise. Often it is the editors-in-chief, particularly sensitive to the situation created by the TV news, who must push them to take a position.

current events that is going to take over. *Le Monde* [center-right daily] is going to go for calm. *Libé* [center-left daily] is going to search for interpretations, analyze, go back over everything. Those who do the news report, the sensational, are perhaps going to go at it again, but no one will follow.”

A false object

What is called an “event” is never in the end anything but the result of the spontaneous or provoked mobilization of the media around something that they agree, for a certain time, to consider as such. When marginal or disadvantaged groups attract journalistic attention, the effects of mediatization are far from being what these social groups could expect since the journalists in this case have a particularly significant power of construction so that the production of the event is almost totally out of the control of the people concerned.

It was at the beginning of the 1980s, after incidents in the Minguettes district – a district of Venissieux in the suburbs of Lyon with a high proportion of immigrants – that the press developed a new discourse about the “problem suburbs.” These quite spectacular incidents (burning cars, setting up barricades, throwing projectiles and Molotov cocktails against the police, etc.) were largely covered by the whole of the press, thus brutally focusing attention on a new population category of young people from immigrant families (the Beurs) who were failing at school and had no qualifications and no work. Also revealed were the dilapidated state of certain suburbs and the deteriorated buildings, vandalized and left abandoned by HLM committees. These incidents, which had broken out barely two months after the Socialists came to power in 1981, were considered a veritable political challenge thrown at the government. Various measures were taken to rehabilitate the new kind of slum that had gradually grown up in certain housing projects. In addition, structures were set up to support the young unemployed who had failed at school in order to foster their vocational training and their integration into the labor market. All these measures were coordinated within the framework of the DSQ (social development districts). In 1990, around 400 areas received this kind of help.

But the problem of the suburbs was posed once more by the media with regard to incidents in October 1990 at Vaulx-en-Velin, another town on the outskirts of Lyon and classified DSQ in 1987. At the end of September 1990 there was a party in Mas-du-Taureau, a recently renovated district in the town, in front of the new shopping center which had been open for a year in the middle of a development zone. In the presence of top political figures a rock climbing wall was inaugurated and there was a celebration of the successful rehabilitation operations. A week later, during a police check, a motorcycle was overturned and the passenger on the back, a young man of 18 of Italian origin, a polio victim, was killed in the fall. A hundred young people from the housing project then gathered and hurled insults at the police whom they held responsible for the incident. They suspected the police of trying to portray what they thought was “police

overreaction” as a simple accident. The situation was strained: the same evening, stones were thrown and three vehicles were set on fire (which, in this district, is not an unusual practice). The local press, which permanently listens in on police conversations via high frequency receivers, quickly spread the news and broadcast the official version of the incident the same evening on the national media. The following morning, young people aged 14 to 20 once again threw stones at the precinct headquarters of Vaulx-en-Velin (to bring out the police, shut up inside); then, around midday, a stolen car was smashed into the supermarket of Mas-du-Taureau which was set on fire, along with a certain number of shops in the area. The police, firemen and journalists were driven back by the youths, while numerous inhabitants of the neighborhood and elsewhere sought, in a festive atmosphere, to take advantage of the situation and make off with diverse merchandise, which in any case would have been destroyed in the fire. One of the few journalists from the local press who was at the scene relates that he saw kids leaving the shops with arms full of candy, packs of cigarettes and sneakers. An elderly woman held the supermarket door open to facilitate the exit of overloaded shopping carts that were hastily pushed toward car trunks. In short, if there was undeniably some looting of the shopping center, probably premeditated,⁵ it remains true that it is excessive at the least to speak of a “riot” as did journalists from the Parisian press and especially from television.

The dominated are the least capable of controlling their own representation. For journalists the spectacle of their daily life can only be flat and uninteresting. Because they are culturally deprived, they are (apart from anything else) incapable of expressing themselves in the forms required by the mass media. As a politician declared, citing the opinion of television professionals “in a program, one should not come to commiserate or give one’s opinion; you have to learn to express yourself clearly.” A few days before the events, a Lyon press agency specializing in urban affairs had proposed investigating the situation in the suburbs and got nowhere (“that’s not interesting, nothing is happening . . .” was the reply they got). The logic of competition pushes journalists to work “live” and to go “where things are happening.” The dramatic incidents of Vaulx-en-Velin had the effect of very quickly provoking a flood of reports that all tried to explain what was wrong in this suburb. Even if the close observation of everyday life in these suburbs, with its ordinary problems, is more enlightening, the majority of journalists tend to focus on the most spectacular, and therefore exceptional, violence.⁶ The media thus produce for the general public, which is not directly

⁵ Some inhabitants of Vaulx-en-Velin told us that, well before the drama that no doubt served as a pretext or detonator, they had heard of youths who had such an operation in mind. Similarly, a journalist present shortly before the looting of the commercial center told us that some youths had advised him to stay there because things were going to happen . . .

⁶ Thus, for example, on the day after the fire in the commercial center a television channel asked a video production company in Lyon for a story on the “tough guys and dealers of Vaulx, even masked.” Those charged with this enquiry, who were themselves of Algerian origin, turned it around and decided to try to make the life of the youth of these huge projects understandable rather than yield to a spectacle that was more or less fabricated. To this day their story dealing with three young Beurs

concerned, a presentation and a representation of problems that emphasize the extraordinary. The public tends to retain only the violent actions, the clashes with the police, the vandalism, the burning of a supermarket or cars, and to offer pell-mell, as causes of these troubles, explanations gathered by the press, such as police brutality, the idleness of the young people, delinquency, "the mood of depression" in these suburbs, the housing conditions, the bleak surroundings, the absence of sport and leisure facilities, the overconcentration of immigrant populations, and so forth.

A vicious circle

If this representation leaves little space for the discourse of the dominated, it is because their voices are particularly difficult to hear. They are spoken of more than they speak, and when they speak to the dominant group, they tend to use a borrowed discourse, the very one the dominant offer about them. This is particularly true when they speak on television; repeating what they have heard the day before on the news or in current affairs specials on the malaise of the suburbs, sometimes speaking of themselves in the third person ("young people want a club to meet in," says one of them, for example). More precisely, journalists tend without knowing it to gather in their own discourse on the suburbs and always find people, hanging around the projects and on the look-out for the media, who are ready to tell them ("to get on TV") what they want to hear.

The journalistic type of "investigation," and this holds for the big Parisian journalist as well as for the small-time news writer for the provincial press, is generally closer to a police investigation than to what one calls an "investigation" in the social sciences. More than the sociologist, the investigative journalist is the model, the one who sometimes manages to "scoop" the police over a story. In addition, the concern (commercially inspired), especially in the major national media (television but also the press agencies), to not take sides and not shock listeners who are socially very heterogeneous leads to an artificial and neutralizing presentation of all points of view. The journalistic investigation is related to the judicial investigation: as in a trial, objectivity consists in giving the floor to all parties concerned, with journalists trying explicitly to have representatives for the prosecution and the defense, the "for" and the "against," the official version of an incident and the witnesses' version. The groundwork properly speaking is necessarily limited to a few days, if not a few hours, spent on the spot "to give a little local color" to news stories, generally with a script written beforehand in editorial meetings, which needs to be illustrated.⁷

who were "neither tough guys nor dealers, but just unemployed and involved in the youth center" has not been broadcast.

⁷ Is it necessary to recall that these remarks do not constitute a "critique" (in the ordinary and journalistic sense of the word) of the profession of journalism? We know that the job is not without physical risks and that many have paid with their lives. We want simply to recall here the various constraints on journalistic work and their intellectual effects.

The journalists themselves sometimes prejudice an event made to order for the media. A journalist with Agence-France-Presse (AFP) in Lyon reported for example that after the dramatic days in Vaulx-en-Velin, the whole press was watching the town in the expectation of new incidents and that this presence of journalists on the spot was itself liable to unleash the anticipated incidents.⁸ Even when nothing is happening the journalistic machine has a tendency to go on running in a vacuum. Thus a television reporter sent into a suburb to cover incidents was ordered by his editor-in-chief in Paris to do a two-minute live spot on the evening news even though nothing was happening just to pay for the expensive technical material sent to the area. Even though a number of journalists try to go beyond the event (“the headlines reveal real problems, you have to dig but you don’t have the time and then one event pushes out the other,” says a journalist for the Lyon regional press), everything brings them back to it. Squeezed by competition, they must go where their colleagues are.

“If there’s a hot report on another channel,” recounts a television journalist, “the top editor tells you ‘what the hell are you doing, you should be there.’” “We focused on Vaulx-en-Velin,” reports still another reporter with AFP in Lyon. “As soon as something happened in Vaulx, people talked about it, not because it was important but because it was Vaulx. But they didn’t know that worse things were happening in the suburbs of Marseille. The Paris office kept pushing us. The pressure of competition leads to exaggeration, to error. It is hard to resist because you have demanding clients and they want ‘something like Vaulx-en-Velin.’ Sometimes we wondered if it was really necessary to do a dispatch for two burned cars. (...) We did a big article a month later but once the event is over, nobody is interested, it is less read and the refinements you could bring at that time have less impact.”

If the Vaulx-en-Velin riots gave rise to an intense media coverage, it is also because they echoed a number of social problems constituted in and by the media, such as unemployment, dreary suburbs, immigration, insecurity, drugs, gangs, youths, Le Pen [leader of the Front National, the extreme right party], religious extremism, etc. But far from making things understandable, this “media coverage” was above all the occasion for a resurgence of the stereotypes about the suburbs and the large housing projects from the last thirty years which had been produced around previous news items and were superimposed on Vaulx-en-Velin – even though these models were manifestly inappropriate for what was happening there. Some journalists denounced the problem of “dormitory projects,” whereas in fact businesses created in the area were on the increase; others went on about the sickness of the suburbs devoid of soul or coherence, the grayness and dehumanization of the cities, whereas just three years before, this municipality had undertaken a major refurbishment of the social environment and had

⁸ We know that more and more frequently television journalists pay for “reconstructions” that are not labeled as such (youths setting fire to cars, spraying walls with graffiti, engaging in attacks, etc.) on the pretext that these practices exist in any case and hence they are not really playing tricks with the news. They do not see that the most relevant news is elsewhere.

reopened a very active commercial center. Far from being troubled by these contradictions, on the contrary the media spoke of the “great shipwreck of accepted ideas” that consisted of believing that one could “give back life to the housing projects by throwing millions at them, by repainting stairways and by planting pockets of greenery.” Most echoed those who questioned urban planning and denounced the architects who had built these cities of negativity and despair, where no one talked to anyone else. Finally, since they had to account for what had caused these events – specifically, the police check that went off badly – almost all of them referred to the supposed chasm that had opened up between youth and the police, so that the solution to these problems would come from reestablishing a dialogue and trust.

The various newspapers quite obviously developed these themes according to their own specific ideologies. *Libération* emphasized police overreaction, and recalled the long list of victims of police checks (10 over 10 years) which, in its view, had fed the anger of the young rioters against the police. Taking the side of the young rebels, it evoked the feeling of having “had it with the ZUPs” [priority urbanization zones] which had been built within a generation and today pose the problem of how to integrate them, hoping that “the state would offer something more than tear gas grenades to these kids who burn everything.” A week after the “riots,” Serge July, the editor of this daily, in an editorial loaded with wild analogies just made to awaken collective fantasies, recast Vaulx-en-Velin within a journalistic history of the whole world. “Everything is exemplary in this story. (...) We are brought back to square one: the apartheid marked out in black by a dislocated urban landscape. (...) The veritable metropolis of a social margin without identity (...), Vaulx-en-Velin is the desperate expression of irremediable social disintegration. The specter of Third World-ization looms over these suburbs: the riots and the looting of these last few days takes as much from the Palestinian Intifada as from the food uprising in Caracas.” In a contrasting vision, but one which makes a pair with the preceding one, *Le Figaro* [daily on the right] saw nothing but the action of a handful of professional agitators who, through violence, are seeking to foster an (Islamic) revolution, and it was complacent in its descriptions of the scenes of looting and the aggressiveness of the young demonstrators. It reminded readers of the high level of day-to-day delinquency in this area and considered the revolt to be largely out of proportion, denouncing the gap that exists in its view between what it calls “the verbiage of the initiated” (that is to say, the discourse on the left and a certain number of social workers who spoke of the “chronic unhappiness” in the suburbs) and the discourse of the inhabitants who had not raised the problem of living conditions in their district. The regional dailies (*Lyon Matin* and *Le Progrès de Lyon*) remained closer to the facts and denounced in passing certain approximations by the Parisian reporters, noting, for example, that conventional words such as “ghettos, dormitory projects, bullied immigrants, illegal police actions, suburban violence, etc.” hide a more banal reality: “an accident, an emotion, and its exploitation by a small, organized truant group in an area exemplary for its efforts (renovation, sport, associations, etc.).”

The gap between the representation of reality and the reality that more patient investigations could present is even greater in the TV treatment of the incidents.⁹ Reporters' attention is focused on the confrontations more than on the objective situation that provokes them. The confrontations become the symptoms of a more general social crisis that tends to be treated independently of concrete situations.¹⁰ Paradoxically, in their local investigations, reporters pay little attention to local conditions. Which is why the media event as they fabricate it can function as a sort of projective test for the various social actors questioned, and everyone can see in it the confirmation of what he or she has thought for a long time already.

Stigmatization

Even though most journalists reject and condemn the most doubtful practices of their profession and willingly acknowledge the inevitable existence of bias, even in a treatment of news that claims to be straightforward, they think that whatever the difficulties and distortions, nothing is worse than silence. Even if, as they say, the media have not approached the problem of the suburbs as they ought, even if they admit having selected out certain marginal or minor aspects because they are spectacular, to the detriment of ordinary and mundane reality, they still believe they have been useful by the simple fact of having at least contributed to posing these problems publicly. Such optimism seems at the very least excessive since it does not take into account the symbolic effects which are particularly powerful when exercised over populations that are culturally deprived. The Vaulx-en-Velin mayor's office concedes that the events created an emergency situation that allowed them to free up a little faster the funds for the renovation and social action programs. But that is undoubtedly the only positive by-product (and even then, one would have to see who principally benefits from these measures). On the other hand, this temporary material advantage is paid for very dearly on the symbolic level. That the residents of these districts were not fooled can be seen by the increasingly negative reception some of them give to journalists since the events, an expression of the powerless revolt of those who feel betrayed. Reporters are, of course, rejected by delinquent youth who do not

⁹ Thus the burning shopping center would be shot from all angles, giving the impression that the whole area was ablaze. Shortly afterward a program on FR3 [television station with regional coverage] dramatically entitled "Why so much hatred?" was devoted to the events; in a special feature barely two days after the "riots" the TF1 station organized a debate around the "ringleaders" (or supposedly such) who, with masked faces, offered that stereotyped discourse of the marginal individual largely provoked by television in the first place. Certain residents of Vaulx-en-Velin later told us that the television program had upset their relatives living elsewhere.

¹⁰ In such a context, all the various events tend to be read – by the reporters seeing in them a guiding thread or a good angle to exploit – in terms of models of racism and of the bad situation in the suburbs. A police chief from northern France told me, for example, about an ordinary affair of private vengeance that had become, in a press "that sees Vaulx-en-Velin everywhere," a "racist crime" expressing "suburban maladjustment" – only because the protagonists were Yugoslavs and the events took place in a social welfare area.

want to be recognized and registered by the police. But they are also rejected by the population of these housing projects who see the fabrication in televised reports and newspaper articles of a particularly negative image of the suburbs. Far from helping the residents of these suburbs, the media paradoxically contribute to their stigmatization.

These districts are presented as insalubrious and sinister, their residents as delinquents. Young people looking for work no longer dare say they live in these housing projects, which now have a bad reputation everywhere because they have made the headlines. A television journalist reports that the district of Chamards, near Dreux, is visited by teams of reporters coming from around the world because Dreux has become the symbol of the rise of the National Front [Dreux elected a mayor from the National Front in 1983]. This stigmatization, which is no doubt not consciously intended and derives from the very functioning of the journalistic field, reaches well beyond the events that provoke it to mark these people even when they are outside their own districts. Thus a news agency dispatch reporting incidents in a youth hostel in the south involving young people from Vaulx-en-Verin on vacation will be picked up by the whole press. In this way, too, some youths from Val-Fourré on vacation in the Jura mountains will be subjected to various attacks and vexations during their stay from local people who have become distrustful ever since the media (especially television) gave such extensive coverage to the incidents in these districts. The very tense situation thus created is liable, in and of itself, to trigger further incidents that arise, in circular fashion, to confirm the initial media stereotypes.

This journalistic vision of the suburbs is strongly rejected by a small section of the population of these districts, generally the most politicized or the most militant, and arouses their indignation: "If the suburb where I live was really like the papers say it is, I would never want to live there." "My family doesn't want to visit me here, they think that it is a really cut-throat area and that rapes happen on every corner!" "These people who report only rubbish, I call them rags writers. Let them say what they want, but when they do, let us respond, to say if we agree or not. We won't become violent, because I am nonviolent and I know how to talk." A tenants' association was even set up to fight the stigmatizing image that the media were making of Vaulx-en-Verin and to make it publicly known that this town was not, by a long way, worse than others. Still, most of the inhabitants, notably because they are culturally deprived, take to heart the vision of themselves produced by these interested and somewhat voyeuristic spectators that journalists necessarily are ("it's a ghetto here," "we don't count for anything," etc.).

A number of Vaulx residents were the first to be surprised by the events, some being almost ashamed by what happened in their community. Shopkeepers explain that they had generally good relations with the young people; even though they experience great difficulties in the secondary schools, teachers, nevertheless find it excessive to talk about a "social explosion." More prosaically, some residents suggest that the troubles are really the actions of minorities – a handful of young people mostly known to the police – and that the looting of the shopping

center is only the exploitation of a painful incident (the police check) by adult delinquents who are in the majority from outside Vaulx. Even though local journalists are tempted to give importance to these events, they are not dupes and have a vision fairly close to that of the residents: "When you walk through Vaulx, I wouldn't call it a ghetto. I have seen worse places. You have to know what is behind the words. The suburbs have been somewhat demonized" (a reporter for the Lyon regional press); "the worst, perhaps, are the cowboy-style reporters who think they are stars, who were in the Gulf War, then afterwards get interested in the suburbs, then the lycées" (a journalist for the Parisian written press).

"Media-political" remedies

It is still true that the media now form an integral part of reality, or if you prefer, produce reality effects by creating a media-oriented vision of reality that contributes to creating the reality it claims to describe. In particular, misfortunes and social demands now have to be expressed through the media to have any hope of having a publicly recognized existence and to be, in one way or another, "taken into account" by those with political power. The logic of the relations that have been instituted between political actors, journalists and "public opinion" experts has become such that politically it is very difficult to act outside the media or, even more so, against them. This is why the press has never met with indifference from those at the center of political power, who try to control what is called "actuality" – when they do not themselves contribute, with the help of their press officers, to fabricating that actuality. Politicians do not like to be surprised, let alone overtaken, by events. They guard against having imposed on them by others, at the last minute and under pressure, the definition and treatment of social problems. In short, they try to remain masters of their agenda, and they particularly fear those events that arise unpredictably (a local incident that goes wrong) and are thrust into the foreground of political news because the written press and the TV bulletins get hold of them.¹¹ We know, for example, that certain large firms try to manage the unforeseen by practicing simulations so that, if the event arises, they can behave as they should in front of journalists (thus the EDF [nationalized electricity company] has envisaged scenarios of major nuclear incidents to prepare "good responses" to give the media). Those in power particularly fear the production (or coproduction) by the media of these types of events, sometimes fed by journalists governed solely by the laws of the journalistic field (media packaging, harrassment by journalists, dramatic reenactments, etc.), since, even very fleetingly, they can take on a considerable political dimension that risks panicking those in charge. This was precisely the case during the Vaulx-en-Velin events of October 1990 and also the high school demonstrations the next

¹¹ Think for example of the "Islamic veil" affair that burst out shortly before the Vaulx-en-Velin events, in September 1990. [When high school girls insisted on going to school wearing a head scarf, a mark of religion and hence not allowed in state schools. Tr.]

month which, as the media reported, spread without the politicians really knowing what was wanted by these young demonstrators – who, in fact didn't always know themselves.

When such events occur, does the situation benefit the most deprived on whom public attention is thus brutally brought to bear? Does it not oblige the government, for example, to deal with the problem of the suburbs and that of the high school students? Nothing is less certain. The principal struggle in fact pits the press against political power. Everything happens as if reporters wanted to prove to themselves their professional autonomy in relation to governmental power by seeking to jeopardize it, while the politicians endeavor to control the media as best they can (only indirectly these days). In other words, the struggle is principally localized on the terrain of the media and tends to remain there, with those in power inventing, with the help of specialists in communications, strategies to put a stop to media agitation and, thereby, to the agitation itself. Thus in order to try to halt the high school demonstrations of 1990 – which it was feared might degenerate and lead, as in 1986, to a “drama” – the specialists in communications at the Ministry of Education came up with an “emergency plan troubleshooter,” a woman with a reassuring manner, maternal and understanding, who was then supposed to find rapid solutions to all the problems of the high schools and secondary schools and who was made to do the tour of all the audiovisual media.

The creation of a “Cabinet post for urban affairs” some weeks after the events in Vaulx-en-Velin perhaps responds to the bureaucratic need for local coordination of the actions of various ministries concerned with these populations in difficulty. But everything leads us to believe that it was also largely inspired by a concern with controlling the press focusing on these problems by giving it an official spokesperson in charge of acting out for the media and embodying, at a level above all the anarchic and private position-takings, the public viewpoint of the state.

To try to understand, one should ask ordinary people about their daily life and take the time, for example, to reconstruct the history of Vaulx-en-Velin, this community that at the beginning of the century was a small village, reaching only 1,588 inhabitants in 1921, and that then, after a factory was set up in 1925 to make artificial fibers, saw a large increase in its population.¹² We would have to talk about the first social welfare housing, constructed between 1953 and 1959, designed for large families in difficulty; and the rapid growth the town went through in the 1960s with the creation of a Zone for Priority Urbanization (ZUP) in 1964. Above all, we have to measure the effects of the construction of more than 9,000 dwellings between 1971 and 1983 and the massive jump in the population, which in 1982 reached nearly 45,000 inhabitants. Finally, it would be

¹² The summary details we give here are taken from *Vaulx-en-Velin: un centre pour demain*, a document issued by the services of the Communauté Urbaine of Lyon in collaboration with the municipal services of Vaulx-en-Velin and those of the Agence d'Urbanisme of Courly, edited by Pierre Suchet and Jean-Pierre Charbonneau.

necessary to analyze how the situation degenerated so drastically in the ZUP after the rise in vacant dwellings in 1979, especially in the Mas-du-Taureau area where the supermarket had to be closed down in 1985. We would see that Vaulx-en-Velin shares certain structural characteristics with many other problematic housing projects: recent construction, an essentially collective pattern of living, a very young population, a high proportion of large families, a high proportion of people of foreign origin, high residential mobility, a high rate of unemployment that seriously upsets normal living, and so forth.

The first generation immigrants who came to France before the crisis are often relatively resigned to the unemployment that afflicts them today, in large part because they still feel themselves foreigners in France (among the women particularly, many cannot speak French). It is not the same with their children, who have known only France and demand to be treated like any other French citizen. It is because they feel integrated that they take their objective nonintegration so hard. They experience as unjust the unemployment that hits them more severely than other French people: underqualified because, for cultural reasons, they have failed at school, they denounce the employers who – to say the least – are far from being disposed these days to give preference to hiring young people of foreign origin. Meanwhile, by reacting like this, these young people unintentionally feed the vicious circle that marginalizes them. Feeling excluded, they are led to adopt behavior that excludes them even more, simultaneously discouraging the rare gestures of good will made toward them: the communal spaces made available to them are often wrecked, the employers who take them on must sometimes confront specific problems (thefts, violence, etc.).

The situation in these suburbs is the result of processes originating not in the housing projects themselves but in wider mechanisms such as housing policy or the economic crisis. This is why those in charge of acting on the spot – social workers and teachers especially – are obliged to expend a lot of energy for often derisory results, with the wider mechanisms ceaselessly undoing what they are trying to do. This is why, too, the creation of a cabinet post for urban affairs is no doubt a solution more media-political than real. It remains the case that the situation of these suburbs owes its particular form (high petty delinquency, vandalism, drugs, stolen cars, looting of the shopping centers, etc.) to the superimposition in the same space of all these negative mechanisms. What you see is what you get. A police chief from the north of France blamed the delinquency of the suburbs on a vertical residency (the high rise blocks) in contrast to a horizontal residency (single-family housing). But it is not the “vertical concentration” of residents that produces these problems but the vertical concentration of problems and difficulties. The functioning of the real estate market and the logic of public housing allocation procedures have had the effect, among others, of bringing together in a spatial regrouping populations in difficulty who were principally immigrant families, the spatial concentration of these populations engendering reactions with racist connotations. To this situation is added the policy of prefectural authorities and the social services to concentrate in these districts so-

called "difficult" families (meaning delinquent or, at least, on files with the police). These families, relatively limited in number (probably a few hundred in this whole working-class suburb of Lyon), who have no resources and who live on the margin of the law, have made the ZUPs their territory, all the more so as the architecture of these ensembles lends itself to this rather well: they have been intentionally located at a distance from the main streets, which has the unintended consequence of turning them into veritable islands cut off from the city center. Some of the young people in these families get their resources from a subterranean economy based principally on theft and, more recently, drugs.

Finally, there is the added fact that unemployment today has undoubtedly become more difficult to bear than it was once. Economic growth and the multiplication of distribution outlets over the last twenty years have had the effect of putting a considerable number of consumer goods within arm's reach. We know that theft in the huge discount stores is far from being just the act of young unemployed people with no income. We understand that it may, *a fortiori*, appear as an ordinary solution for these young people who consider it more and more normal to "help themselves" in the supermarkets. Stealing is even a sort of sport that gives a rhythm to the empty time of these unoccupied adolescents, when it is not an occasion to stage veritable performances that often determine the hierarchy within these groups. The gap that tends to occur among these unemployed young people between the desire for consumption and their disposable income has undoubtedly never been as great as it is today. This perhaps explains why these shopping centers are, according to the logic of two-birds-with-one-stone, one of the selected targets for violent acts by young people from the projects: they destroy and vandalize these sites, symbols of a consumer society that excludes them, and at the same time they make great forays and raids that are not without material benefits. This also explains the fact that cars are constantly stolen, vandalized or burned: in effect, for these young people the car represents the consumer good par excellence, object of numerous investments (economic, but also psychological, social, in time spent, etc.) and the indispensable instrument of transportation and leisure. The car symbolizes success and integration into the labor market, a car generally being the first purchase when they find steady work and manage to "set themselves up" (get married).

The spectacular acts of violence that make the headlines in the media hide the small acts of ordinary violence that constantly affect all the inhabitants of these districts, including the young delinquents who are *also* victims, since the violence they practice is only a response to the more invisible acts of violence they are subjected to from their early childhood, at school, in the labor market, in the sexual market, etc. But one understands too that the "poor whites" of these suburbs, who claim to be "real French" and consider themselves "at home," are particularly indignant at the permanent neighborhood troubles that are provoked by these immigrant children. How could these incessant conflicts that sometimes end up in dramas and feed the news not give rise to reactions that are so easy to exploit?

Pierre Bourdieu

The Order of Things

A dilapidated housing development like so many others in the suburbs of a small town in the north of France; inside a permanent prefab building that should have been temporary, with grills on the windows and broken doors that have been sort of fixed (it has been broken into and vandalized several times, the last time just recently), stands the “club for preventative measures: meeting house and leisure center,” a large gray room with formica tables and chairs, a sink in a corner and an old fridge, looking a bit like an unused school cafeteria, and some disillusioned and slightly ironic “social workers”; scared themselves, or to scare you, they make references to “Chicago.”

A young Beur, introduced that morning as one of the “good cases”: in the next to last high school class, almost 20, he has been waiting for the decision of the “appeals committee” that will decide in a few days whether he will be admitted into the next class: “My future is on the table there, since frankly, either I am admitted into Terminale D [leading to a baccalauréat in sciences and biology] or I am kicked out once and for all, and I will have to find another school. I don’t think I’ll be admitted into another state school.” (Already in the past, he had to find a school on his own.) Split between the feelings of a miracle (out of all his friends in the neighborhood only two have gone as far as the last year of high school) and a failure (basically he knows that his academic career is over), he has experienced (and explains quite clearly) the gap between the school and the “neighborhood” (“with the local guys, conversations tend to be about the problems we experience within the neighborhood. But all that is forgotten when you go to high school” – no better description of the gap between daily life and school). Son of an immigrant who was himself from a peasant family from around Guelma in Algeria, who makes “a pretty good living” as a technician in a chemical works, he always received encouragement in his studies but was also left on his own. His father who “reads and writes a little” and his illiterate mother spoke Arabic at home; they have “set all their hopes” on him (his much older brother is already a mechanic, another brother, one year his senior, has failed his exam for the BEP [vocational high school certificate]). They keep on encouraging him to work, yet without quite being able to say why, he feels that “there is a block,” that he does not work enough, probably since “he does not realize that school is important.” His mother is “devastated since she too would like him” to succeed and does not want to see him “struggle later in life”: “She still tells me to work, she tells me to do it for myself, and stuff like that, but I dunno, maybe it’s

because it comes from people who don't understand, who don't understand what life is all about, maybe that's why the message is not getting through. Though it's coming from my parents, because it's from my parents, I maybe should, but I dunno, maybe if it came from other people who'd tell me really, who'd tell me in a way I would understand, maybe then things would change."

And then in the afternoon, the meeting shrouded in mystery ("that guy, he is something else," "he's just out of jail," etc.) with Ali, a twenty-something young Beur, who comes flanked with his buddy François, both of them living in one of the worst buildings of a project with a bad reputation, naturally called "La Roseraie" (the rose garden). They speak roughly, glancing at each other with questioning or approving looks, and with a thick northern accent that makes some of the things they say almost unintelligible. While I am trying to explain who I am and what I do, and to disperse any doubts and fears they may have ("my job is to listen and to try to understand, and to retell it afterwards; I am neither a cop nor a judge," etc.), they listen while looking elsewhere, as if to hide their discomfort (especially after I ask their permission to address them in informal terms [use the familiar "tu" not "vous" for "you"] – they are not used to so much consideration – on the grounds that I have sons their age), and also, it seems to me, to hide their fears of not being up to it, of misunderstanding; they do not ask questions (they will ask a couple towards the end after trust has been established between us). They give me to understand that they are simply waiting for my questions.

Ali is the son of a worker who came to France with his family from a small Moroccan town, Oujda, towards the end of the 1970s. Ali was then eight. This is the starting point of his difficulties with the school system and the defiant attitude he will later adopt to overcome them: not knowing a word of French when he belatedly went to school and speaking exclusively Arabic with his family, his father illiterate and his mother barely able to write, he had a hard time learning how to read (he will admit towards the end of the interview that even today "he reads like a robot"). Everything suggests that the organizing principle behind his rejection of school and the defiant attitudes that lead him toward, and gradually trap him in, the role of the "tough" is the desire to avoid the humiliation of having to read out loud in front of the other students. By excluding himself from practice sessions and training, he sinks deeper into failure and the vicious circle of rejection that multiplies that failure – a paradoxical way to make a virtue out of necessity, that is, academic wrongdoing and soon social delinquency.

François went to school to the end of junior high; he failed his BEP (since, as he says, he did not go very often – the school was ten kilometers away and he had to take the bus "because the high school next door, it's for the good students, for the best ones"). François and Ali are inseparable and it is with great sadness that they speak of the time they will have to go their separate ways, because it is in the order of things. And the order of things, they certainly know what that is . . . They speak of it throughout the interview, in that same tone of things being obvious, slightly raising their voices at the end of sentences, yet without ever really

showing anything close to indignation or revolt. To give a true sense of it I'd like to be able to play the part of the tape when, after having spoken softly and with dignity ("take me for example") of how he had so often been denied entry into discos ("and even if we want to go to a club around here, well me, take me for example, Arabs are not allowed in") while they would readily let his friend in, Ali concludes very simply with: "It gets on your nerves after a while."

I was immediately glad of the luck (I later understood that it was as a result of their friendship) that led me to meet Ali and François *together*. How could readers of their interview fail to see that in fact they share every trait except ethnic origin, to which, by the way they never refer, and the patent absurdity of those who try to introduce into the political discourse, and into the minds of citizens, the dichotomy between immigrant and French? Ali is merely a sort of François taken to the limit: the ethnic stigmata inscribed in a permanent way on his skin or his facial features, as well as in his name, intensifies, or rather radicalizes the handicap linked to the lack of certificates or qualifications, itself linked to the lack of cultural and more specifically linguistic capital. The "immigrant" and the "native" (at other times and in other places, in "French Algeria" for example the labels would have been reversed, with identical results) have the same problems, the same difficulties, and share a vision of the world based on the same experiences, on the fights of youth, on the vicissitudes and disappointments in school, on the stigmatization that accompanies living in a "rotten" neighborhood and belonging to a family noticed by the police (they both have "older" siblings who are constantly the object of suspicions and accusations), on the fact that, whenever they see a nice jacket or pair of pants, there is no one they can ask for money and they must manage on their own, on the long stretch of times spent getting bored because they have no transportation, no buses, no mopeds (except if you "buy it hot" or steal it), no cars (and anyway, no driving licence) to get to the city, no rooms to meet in, no soccer field to play on, and above all, on the constant and relentless confrontation with a universe closed on all sides, offering no future, no possibilities as far as school or jobs are concerned – they only know people who are either unemployed or in difficulties, and when asked about their parents from whom they could expect help and guidance, the only people they mention are unemployed workers or invalids.

Their absolute solidarity is confirmed at every moment, in their use of "we" and "one" that includes them both, in the perfect understanding the "native" has of the specific problems experienced by the "immigrant": it is demonstrated without statements, without antiracist declarations, when at the door of the clubs he leaves after his buddy has been denied entrance, when he explains for him, since it probably would be too painful for the other, that it's exactly the same when there are girls with him ("when it's with girls [that they are denied entry] they can say things, the girls can say 'see, that's my guy, he's with me and all that.' But it doesn't work"), when he answers some questions in his friend's place, as if to save him the embarrassment and also to testify on his behalf as a neutral observer. Thus when Ali evokes what the results have been of his problems with

the police and the court system and what he calls his “stupid stuff” – a sort of euphemism that minimizes the fault while taking as his own the official point of view of the authorities – it is François who, identifying with him, brings up attenuating circumstances: “Well, it’s when *we* need some bread. When *we* need big bucks, see, *we* see a great jacket or a good pair of pants, and all that.” And as if to mark that his difference (“that was before . . . for me it’s over, I’m not hanging out with them; before, I used to”) has not been caused by any specific factor, he raises the fact that, as he says, “he’s got a girlfriend”; and Ali, as if to draw a lesson from his friend’s beneficial experience will conclude with: “What we need is a girl – Why a girl? – To stop doing stupid stuff.”

If François’s solidarity with Ali is expressed in such obvious and complete terms, it is because it is self-evident, and not merely an effect of friendship as it is conceived of within his universe: they are, so to speak, both in the same boat, equally stigmatized, equally “targeted” within the project by the inhabitants who are the most hostile to young people, by the superintendents, by the police and mostly by rumors, which automatically blame them for any offence that occurs, forcing them to be defiant and compounding their despair. I do not want to counter these anonymous rumors that paint a black picture of them with any kind of denial or rehabilitation, and they did not ask for that. But simply the phrase, used very naturally by one of my two “terrorizers of suburbia” in describing how his parents worry about him when he stays out late at night, because of everything they say on television and radio . . .

While not being false, the image they give of themselves in this interview obviously owes a lot to the singular and extraordinary social relation set up by the interview situation: feeling understood and accepted, they can confide one of their possible truths and probably the one that is most effectively disguised, usually through peer censorship (with what they call “showing-off”), and also through the collective constraints created by the escalation of violence. (Ali and François bring up processes quite similar to those observed during revolutionary wars or certain symbolic revolutions, allowing an active minority to progressively propel a whole group – held by fear reinforced by isolation and the solidarity imposed by repression – into the spiral of violence.) It would therefore be naive to insist that it is the truth that they put forward, in all sincerity and without any intention to deceive (we are not dealing here, as people have so often emphasized, with “little angels,” but the fact that they turned up together, probably to avoid “being had,” is also a guarantee of the veracity of their testimony); but it would be far more naive to reject this possible truth, undoubtedly destined to appear less and less plausible the more that situations that could discourage or inhibit it multiply, notably when they are confronted with racial prejudice or ranking evaluations, with their frequently stigmatizing effects made by school, police or justice personnel – people who, because of the *destiny effect* they exercise, play a powerful role in the production of the stated and anticipated destinies. Are they good? Are they bad? The question and the moralizing answer it calls for are meaningless. Are they really the way they describe themselves in the following

interview? This apparently more legitimate question is just as fictitious. The format of the interview has created an exceptional situation that has allowed them to reveal what they would be more often and more fully if the world treated them differently...

As I was listening to these two young men describe, in the most natural way, despite some hesitations and silences linked to the fear of revealing too much or being too shocking, what makes their lives, the life of their project and even the “stupid stuff” or the violence practiced by some, or just by one individual (such as the one who made a slave of a “kid”), everything also became natural to me, so present in their words and their actions was the “inert violence” in the order of things, the violence inscribed in the implacable wheels of the job market, the school market, racism (also present within the “police forces” that are, in principle, supposed to repress it), etc. I did not have to force myself to share in the feeling, inscribed in every word, every sentence, and more especially in the tone of their voices, their facial expressions or body language, of the *obviousness* of this form of collective bad luck that attaches itself, like a fate, to all those that have been put together in those sites of *social relegation*, where the personal suffering of each is augmented by all the suffering that comes from coexisting and living with so many suffering people together – and, perhaps more importantly, of the destiny effect from belonging to a stigmatized group. Ali notes that when he was sent at age 14 into a class of kids from the project, his school career floundered; he says that the night clubs nearby are not interesting since there are only people from the project; and to explain why girls from the project are of no interest or value, it is enough for him to say that it is because they go out with him or people like him. A perfect illustration of Groucho Marx’s quip “I would not belong to a club that would have me as a member,” which, if one goes beyond the comical negation, well expresses not self-hatred but *self-despair*.

with two young men from the north of France

— *interview by Pierre Bourdieu*

“It gets on your nerves after a while”

— *You were telling me that it wasn’t much fun around here, why? What is it, your job, your leisure time?*

François Yeah, both work and leisure. Even in this neighborhood there is nothing much.

Ali There’s no leisure activities.

François We have this leisure center but the neighbors complain.

Ali They’re not very nice, that’s true.

— *Why do they complain, because they ...*

François Because we hang around the public garden, and in the evening there is nothing in our project, we have to go in the hallways when it’s too cold outside. And when there’s too much noise and stuff, they call the cops. And on top of it, there is this place for us.

— *That you cannot get access to?*
François Right, they don't give us the keys.

— *And why not, since it's not used?*
François Right, it's not used.

— *And you said, "the neighbors complain," who are they?*

François The people in the neighboring apartments. When we talk too loud in the entryways, they come down, they complain and all that.

— *Since you have no other place to go to...*

Ali No, we don't know where to go to.
— *And that place, what is it like? You said, "there is this place"...*

François It's a large room. Before, when it was open, there was a ping-pong table and we played.

— *I see, and why is it closed? You raised the roof or what?*

François No, it was broken into.
Ali No, no, that's not it. There were also the guys from the other projects that came down to bug us and then (...).

— *And you couldn't manage to control them, it's tough...*

François Now it's fine, it's cool, we get along much better between the projects.

— *And there are no sports facilities...*
François Yes, there is a handball court but people from outside use it.

— *Yes, I see. There is only one for both projects. That's really bad. Are there any rivalries between the projects, just a little?*

François Yes, a lot.
— *But who are they, gangs?*

François Yes, several gangs.
— *And these gangs, how are they organized? Around the schools and stuff like that, or just people who know each other, or by projects?*

François You know, there are several gangs (...); guys who work, guys who play sports and all that. Guys who... who just party.

— *And you are part of this one?*
François No!

— *Why are you laughing?*
Ali He makes me laugh.

— *You are not telling me the whole story...*

Ali We are always getting assaulted in our project; just yesterday we got some tear gas thrown at us, really, by a guy in an apartment. A bodybuilder. A pumper.

— *Why, what were you doing, bugging him?*

François No, when we are in the entryway he lives just above, when we are in the hall we talk, sometimes we shout.

— *But that took place during the daytime, at night?*

François No, just in the evening.
— *Late?*

François Late, around 10, 11 o'clock.
— *Well you know, he's got the right to snooze. The tear gas is a bit much but if you got on his nerves all night, you can see where he's coming from, right?*

Ali Yeah, but he could just come down and say...

— *Yes, sure, he could come down and nicely say "go somewhere else"...*

Ali Instead of tear gas.
— *That's right, he doesn't need to do this. And where does he bring out the tear gas from?*

Ali Out his window. Tear gas in the building; we get accused, the kids. Well, the older ones.

François Yes, because they go and see the people upstairs, they go and see the superintendent and then they say...because that's how it happened before. They say "it's always the same kids."

— *And who is the superintendent?*
François I dunno. He's never around, this superintendent. He doesn't live here. I think he works in several projects.

— *And there are a lot of problems like this? It's always the same people who get accused?*

François Yes, mostly the older kids. His older brother [Ali's] and another guy.

— *But why, because they think they're responsible?*

François Yes, because they think that these two are the leaders. That must be it.

— *But when they get them, who screams at them, the tenants? They call the cops?*

Ali Either they call the cops or the next day they go and see the super and tell him.

— *And after that, they get yelled at.*

François Oh yes, they get screamed at since the neighbors go and tell their parents.

— *And the parents, they yell...*

François You know, they're used to it by now. The first time yes, but after, they keep coming and coming...

— *So, you, where did you study?*

François I went to collège [junior high], all the way through. I studied for a BEP, I took the BEP final exam, and then...

— *It did not work?*

François No, I flunked. You know, I did not attend classes very often.

— *It's because you cut classes a bit?*

François Right.

Ali Yes, because that school is pretty far from our house. It would be easier if we went to the lycée [high school] next door but we got sent miles away.

The lycée next door is for the good students

— *Ah, so they sent you really far?*

François Yes, I have to go ten kilometers from home.

— *And how do you get to...*

François By bus.

— *By bus... And why don't they send you next door?*

François The lycée next door is for the good students. For the best.

Ali For those who really knuckled down and studied.

— *And in school, when you were a kid, did your parents help you with your homework?*

Ali Oh no! You know, my father, he can't read or write. My mother's the only one who can read and it's difficult for her. It was my older brothers...

— *Who helped you a little...*

Ali Well yes, but only when they were around.

— *So nobody ever asked you what your homework was for the next day?*

Ali No, I went to the study hall, because before we had an hour of study hall after

school. And my father always took me there.

— *That's not bad...*

Ali Yes, that wasn't bad (...) but it wasn't every day and after, it began...

— *What began to go wrong?*

Ali During the first year of junior high. When I ended up with all my buddies.

— *You were in a class with all the people from the neighborhood?*

Ali Right.

François Yes, because the school was next door to the project.

— *And the overall level wasn't great? You all had problems?*

Ali Yeah, all of us...

— *(...) but in the first year, it's tough because you have to learn all sorts of new things, it's tough.*

Ali Right, but we could have learned and all, we could have managed. No problems. But we preferred to have fun. [Around this period, Ali hung out with an older friend, aged 19, who had quit school; he understood too late that he should have studied.]

— *(...) and the teachers, they did not tell you...*

Ali Oh, the teachers, they don't give a shit.

— *They don't give a shit?*

Ali In our project, no one goes to school.

— *What do you mean?*

Ali The older kids.

— *Not one goes to school or to the university. Not anyone? Or to a grande école [elite institution of higher education]?*

Ali No.

— *No one, not one?*

Ali Well yes, two or three. The rest of them, they work, they are in the clink and then...

We did stupid stuff

— *That's it, in the clink, unemployed or working. Go on, you were about to say something... No? Did you think of playing some sports, since, I don't know, you are well built, I don't know, it's a way to...*

Ali We played some sport but it's boring. We don't stay with them long.

— *Why didn't you stay long? You had a lot of things to do?*

Ali We did stupid stuff.

— *But what, give me an example? You can tell me, you know: I'm not with the police.*

Ali No, we stole and all that.

François But all that only lasts for a while too.

— *Yes, but it's mostly a game.*

Ali It was a pastime. When we were bored stiff, then we'd do it.

— *But what kind? Small stuff or serious stuff?*

Ali Us? We were still young in those days.

— *How old were you?*

Ali Twelve.

— *Yes, I see, 12, 13.*

Ali Candy, cookies, perfume, all that stuff. But the older guys went for the booze. That's what destroyed a whole lot of them: alcohol and then drugs.

— *Right, and when there is nothing else to do, you can see why.*

Ali Sure, and even if we want to go to a club around here, well me, take me for example, Arabs are not allowed in. So at night when we come back, what do we do, we go crazy.

— *[speaking to François] Even when you are with him?*

Ali He doesn't go in, if I don't get in, he doesn't go in.

— *OK, but they let him go through and they stop you.*

Ali Lots of times. Even with girls. I was told to try with girls, well in front of them they say "No, you are not one of our clients, you are not one of the regulars."

— *That's really gross, they have no right to do that.*

François Yes, especially since to become one of the regulars you have to go in at least once.

Ali And they don't let you in, I don't know what's going on.

— *It makes you mad, it...*

Ali Yes, it, well, it gets on your nerves after a while.

— *And it happened to you, this, to both of you, when you go you are allowed in and they stop him?*

François Yes, lots of times, they did that to us.

— *And you get mad, you ask why and they don't answer...*

Ali Well, what could I say?

— *You're right, you can't say anything.*

François No, when it's the girls, they can say something. When it's the girls, they can say things, the girls can say "see, that's my guy, he's with me and all that." But it doesn't work.

— *Even that doesn't work?*

Ali We've already tried lots of times.

[...]

François Yes, you have to be a regular customer and he couldn't be one! That's what we kept telling them, "at least let him in, then he will become a regular."

When they don't have the cash to buy them, they trash everything

[...]

Ali Well, even the cops, several times they came to the project, and one time, remember, they threw some tear gas at us.

— *And why?*

Ali See, we were in the hallway and this guy wanted to kill himself or something. And then they came after that, the cops. On their way down, one of our guys shouted "death to the pigs." They came back up and they tried and tried to get us. And then us, we kept quiet. Then after that they called us "a bunch of cowards" and then they left. All the guys inside whistled, so they came back, dropped the tear gas and left. We ran. François Yes, and then they also kicked someone.

Ali Jean-Marie?

François Right, Jean-Marie. They know that we can't fight back, so they try to make us mad.

— *And when there is solidarity, just like this, between French and Beur kids, are the cops bothered by it? I don't know if you're the one who says "it's disgusting," they don't give a shit...*

Ali Exactly, they don't give a shit. There was that one time when an Arab from the project was beaten by the fuzz in the middle of the project. Well, a French guy came to his rescue; he told them "You have no right to do this, this ain't right," so they picked him up too and took him to the police station, this guy, they beat him up too and released him the next morning.

— *And that guy, who was he?*

Ali That was a friend from our project, Gilles. So now there is going to be this street fair and like every year there is going to be trouble and we are going to be accused. We are not going to be around on Saturday, we are going to go somewhere...

François Saturday and Sunday.

— *I see, you are always the ones who end up paying for it...*

François Yes, because guys from other projects, not ours, but guys from other projects, they bring [silence]...

— *Come on, say it...*

François They bring stuff, they...

Ali Come on, tell him...

François OK, they bring drugs. When they don't have the cash to buy them, they trash everything. [silence] (...)

Ali Oh, we manage. We're over 18, we manage. Not too long ago, we were in court. For a counselor.

— *What do you mean, counselor?*

Ali A camp counselor.

— *And what was it about? why?*

Ali A petty argument. Well, he put it on us, the judge, because I was giggling when we were sentenced, he hit me with eight days suspended and a 1,200, a fine of 1,200 francs, I think.

— *Because you giggled when you were read the sentence...*

Ali Yes, since I had brought some friends with me; I didn't know you weren't allowed to bring in your friends and they came and made me laugh.

— *For guys your age there are no jobs in the area?*

Ali No, or they are in apprenticeships.

— *Yes, bogus apprenticeships.*

Ali Yes, it's not worth anything; you make 1,200 francs so it's not worth it. I know guys who make that much in an hour. (...)

— *And at the same time, it doesn't seem to be the right solution. And you don't have... I don't know... If a guy for example gets a job and sorts himself out to bring in some of the others and the like...*

Ali Yes, the older ones do that.

François But they move to Paris. See, all the older guys in our project are in Rouen where there is a Peugeot factory. They all work there.

— *But how did they find it? One of them got it and then he got the rest of them in? That's it?*

Ali Military service keeps me here, otherwise I'd have gone too.

— *Right, no job, no dough. So now what do you live on, your parents help you out a little?*

Ali Yes, from time to time. (...)

[...]

— *And what combat sport did you learn? Karate or...?*

François A little of everything, street fighting. But it was worthless.

— *Worthless? Where did you practice?*

François In the street where the police station is.

— *Right, next to the apartment block?*

François Yes, it's worthless.

— *It was not professional enough?*

François Everything they taught us, we knew already. It wasn't worth our while.

— *And did you think of boxing?*

François Once I thought about it but it's too far. I couldn't get there.

— *You don't own a moped or anything like that?*

François I own nothing.

— *How much does a moped cost these days?*

François 2,000 francs.

Ali In a store? 3,000.

François You're nuts! In a store it's at least 4,000, 5,000. You have to buy it hot. You have to buy it from a guy, that's the only way.

— *What do you mean exactly, buy it hot?*

Ali Buy it hot, it's a shortcut.

[...]

Ali There was some trouble with police inspectors in our project. An inspector got beaten in the project.

— *I see. And why?*

Ali Because he did not show his ID. He was beating other kids, some kids from the other project; and then one of our buddies came to defend him, and usually the cop shows his ID and he did not show it.

— *So he got beaten up?*

Ali He got his piece out after and my buddy, he ran, and then he got caught afterwards.

— *But he was in...*

François For a week. Now he is on pretrial release.

— *And you, the judge didn't... you weren't kept in, that time...*

Ali It's my first run-in as an adult. I have not been an adult for long, seven months I think.

— *You had problems before?*

Ali When I was a minor (...)

— *Problems with stealing, stuff like that?*

Ali In Belgium, yes, small problems, small stupid stuff.

— *Yes, but afterwards it follows you, every time you budge the police know about it.*

Ali It's stuff you shouldn't do.

— *But you do that as much because you are getting bored...*

François Well, it's when we need some bread. When we need big bucks, see, we see a great jacket or a good pair of pants, and all that. So we need the money. That was before, a long time ago.

— *Why are you laughing?*

François He's just laughing.

— *Are you telling me everything?*

François No, for me it's over, I'm not hanging out with them; before, I used to.

Ali He's got a girlfriend.

— *Now you are set? But what do you think of it?*

François No, I saw the stuff they did, so I left. (...)

Ali What we need is a girl.

François Why a girl?

Ali To stop doing stupid stuff.

[...]

*They had the slide projector
but no slides*

Ali Yes, if we don't have wheels, no dough, how are we supposed to get around?

— *There's no buses? Nothing that goes to D.?*

Ali Yes, there are some buses...

— *But not a lot...*

Ali Towards D. only. But if you are doing temporary jobs you have to go all over. To go to Lens, to Lille, you need a car but...

— *And you don't have wheels. None of your friends either?*

Ali No, well my sister has a car, but my sister has no job, no nothing. But now in our project they are all taking their driving test these days. After that maybe things will move again.

— *Yes, I see, Saturdays, you're stuck here...*

François Oh, things are going to move. We are waiting for this guy who went abroad. And after that, well, it will be OK. At least this guy will have a driver's license, I think.

— *Yes, since most of you don't have your license... How could you learn, with no driving school or anything like that?*

Ali Once at the youth club they wanted to do it, the organizer wanted to do it.

— *That was a good idea?*

Ali Yes, but you also needed the slides.

— *Oh right, I see.*

Ali One of the guys needed to borrow them from the place where he goes to driving school. (...) He has the thing, the machine for the slides, but we didn't get the slides for the code, you see, the slides to learn and all that. Driving, a lot of guys can do it, but the rules. And then I have friends who took the exam twice and failed twice.

— *Because of the written exam?*

François Yes, the written exam. And there is this other guy who drives without a

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license, he goes to Paris, he works. He made out OK.

— *And what sort of a job does he have?*

François He works at... I can't remember what he does.

Ali He told me that he works in Paris and he earns 10,000 francs and then some. (...)
[...]

— *Yes, you're the one who told me that, that during military service a lot of the guys went AWOL because it didn't work out.*

Ali Yes because it was, it pissed you off.

— *When you say a lot, you don't mean a whole lot, right?*

Ali No, five or six.

— *That many? They were from...*

François From our projects and those next door.

— *About your age?*

Ali There was even one who did not go at all, he was already fed up. He took some pills before he went.

— *What do you mean pills?*

Ali Some... what do you call them?

François Sleeping pills.

— *To commit suicide or what?*

Ali Yes, a suicide attempt, but fake.

— *I see, just to be exempted?*

Ali Yeah.

— *And it worked?*

Ali It worked. He got exempted.

François Yes, he was rejected but as a mental case.

Ali Yes, but P4 status [psychological category 4], it's not worth it, not worth it.

— *P4 status, what's that? They send you...*

François P4 is when you are not quite right upstairs, but afterwards it's really hard to find a job. It's easier to go into the army.

— *So you were telling me that one guy went into the paratroopers and then he took off?*

Ali Yes, because they jailed him in another...

— *What did he do?*

Ali He had a fight. He was always fighting. Then they sent him to a disciplinary squadron, I think. He couldn't take it, he took off, he got himself out of there.

— *And there's a lot of them, I had never heard about that? Are there a lot of guys who can't take the discipline? They're fed up?*

Ali They're not used to taking orders.

— *Yes, I see, and with work, isn't it the same problem? There are no jobs standing in for people, temporary jobs, nothing like that, odd jobs, there is not even that?*

François Some guys who work, take Jean-Luc for example, he worked six months without receiving any paycheck.

— *After six months he had not been paid?*

François Yes, and he is still not signed on a regular work contract.

— *And he keeps going?*

François Yes, he does but only from time to time since he was only making 2,030 francs, no wait, 2,300 francs.

— *And for a lot of hours?*

François He did 260 hours of overtime, he told me. He is on a special contract, an internship.

— *Right, it does not motivate you to look for a job.*

François No, it's a pain in the ass.

And you like to play the... the tough guys

— *You were mentioning earlier that in the combat sports you didn't learn anything. So how did you learn, were there a lot of fights?*

Ali Oh, being young, when we were little we fought a lot with...

— *Yes, in school, against the guys of the other projects.*

Ali Between ourselves sometimes. Everyone wanted to be the boss.

François But five minutes later we made up, those were fake fights.

— *And then, you like to play...*

Ali ... the tough guys.

— *So that's it. But you don't look mean, really, either of you, it's strange...*

Ali No, we are (...)

— *And do you discuss politics with each other? Or not a lot?*

Ali No.

— *You don't care, well, it's not that you don't give a shit but you don't know what to make of it?*

Ali About politics, not a lot.

— *[Break for photo session]*

— *[Interviewer leaves for a moment after having suggested to François and Ali that they keep interviewing themselves with the tape recorder one after the other.] So, you are still asking him questions?*

Ali No, he's doing it. That's what he said.

— *Oh, it's him. Fine, go on, let's see if you can do it well.*

François Do I ask the same questions he asked me?

— *No, you get him to say things that he did not want to say (...). What sort of a fine did the judge give you that time? 1,200 francs?*

Ali And eight days suspended sentence.

— *And had you been sentenced before?*

Ali No, I was under age.

— *And does that follow you once you've done something wrong as a minor?*

Ali Yes, if ever I do something stupid again and I get caught, well, the days that... I'd have to do them. (...)

— *Did that lead to problems, what did you...*

Ali It was for a stolen moped, I think. They took pictures, and fingerprints. For nothing at all.

— *How old were you when you had that?*

Ali When that happened I was in the third year of junior high. I was 16, 15 maybe.

— *They caught you?*

Ali No, I was cornered, I couldn't find a way to run.

— *Caught red-handed then? So they arrested you, they took you and then...*

Ali The pictures and all that.

— *But they did not keep you then?*

Ali They called my parents, I was under age. That day they really let me have it. They wanted to keep me but my father came to pick me up.

— *What did they tell your father?*

Ali They told him the whole story.

— *Did he yell at you?*

Ali Yes, he wanted to let me have it. That's fine, you know. I can understand it.

— *Yes, he must have been really pissed off.*

*It's always the same people
who get accused*

Ali Yes, and it's all for the best. Thanks to him I did not get in trouble again. I ask him a question [*of François*], shall I?

— *Sure. He hasn't answered yet?*

Ali No, I wanted to ask him if he wanted to move, if he would like to or not.

François If I'd move? Yes, I'll move, maybe when I'm older.

Ali But now?

François Now...

— *You'd miss the project then?*

François No, because I've been living here for 19 years.

— *So you know everyone?*

François I know everyone, I have all my buddies there (...) but maybe if I moved, it could be to leave with...

— *To get married?*

François Yes, to get married, to get on with my life.

— *And if you could, would you move?*

Ali Move? I'd like that. But I'll regret things too. Because it's difficult to move, we're not used to it and it all depends on where you end up.

— *Yes, but a lot of your problems come from living in this project. That's the trouble.*

Ali Yes, you're right. There are people, it's better to move, some (...)

— (...) *What's needed maybe is for things to get better, that... the buildings... they are pretty ugly, don't you think?*

François The buildings, if you are referring to the deteriorations and all that. Every time something gets broken, the young people get accused.

— *But what is it all about, soccer balls breaking the windows, things like that?*

Ali No, it's the main doors, the windows, the mail boxes. The main doors.

— *But who did it, the kids sometimes, right?*

Ali Right, the kids sometimes.

François Sure, but not always, but it's always the same people who get accused. You do nothing and you get accused.

— *That's what you were mentioning earlier, the kids who have been noticed a little, they get caught, that's what you mean? And you are a little bit like this, noticed, since you were a kid?*

Ali Yes then but now, no. I hang out with older guys than me, with his older brother and another older guy, but they always get accused... and on top of that, they are the ones who tell us not to do it.

François That's hard on them.

— *Why, people say that they are gang leaders or what...*

Ali Well, they say that they are the ones who drag the others along. They give us ideas.

— *Yes, but earlier you said that there were fights between the projects, that there were gangs.*

Ali Yes, there are several gangs, others come from the outside, they break everything and then we get accused.

— *But why, because there are fights?*

Ali Because in some projects they want too much to be tough guys. They want to show who's boss, who's the toughest and all that. But now, here, things are better, we get along better. There's a disco that opened and Arabs can go in and that's the only place we can go.

— *So because of that, things are better...*

Ali Yes, but to tell the truth, it's a pain since we know everyone. In a disco, that makes it not worth it (...)

— *You'd have to go far away where nobody knows you, to see different people.*

Ali But how? Before, that's what we did, we busted ourselves to get out. But now, it's over, no one will loan kids bikes.

— *Why, because it's too expensive, because...*

Ali We used to all have bikes and we would go a long way, go to (...) and places like that, but now it's over.

— *Why, it's too exhausting?*

François Because we were in school, we took trains. And a lot of us moved away from...

— *From your group, from the circle of friends.*

[...]

*Everything they say on television,
they believe*

— *I see. And what about you. Do you think that after your military service you would, what did you say?*

Ali I am absolutely certain that it'll be Paris if... either Paris or in the south of France. I was planning on doing it with [François] but now that he is set up and all that, it's better for him if he stays. But we were supposed to do it, a long time ago, move to the south.

— *And you, what qualifications will you have?*

François Well, my diplomas... A CAP.

— *Then maybe you could find a job in the same place he does...*

François Yes but as I said before, we are not going to spend the rest of our lives together. At some point we will have to split.

— *Yes, I know, but since you are friends, why don't you try to...*

François Yes, but if we find something, we will find it for everyone. If one of the guys works, he checks for the others. And then (...) it's better.

— *That's why I was asking if you had some relatives, some... That's the way sometimes one can...*

Ali Sometimes, our parents don't trust us. They think we'll get lost or... Take me for example, I was supposed to go to Morocco this year, on my own, but then my mother, she said no. She treated me like a kid. That's what happened with Morocco.

— *Yes, especially since with relatives, it's not...*

Ali Well, we didn't go out at night, before, we went out in the evenings but not late, not what you'd call late; so they were afraid; everything they say on television, they believe.

— *I see, they believe the project is dangerous, that... that's what you mean? Yes, one of the kids told me that his father was always scared, whenever he gets mail or something like that, since he can't read, he gets scared. You can see why because for them it's no fun. If you can't read or write, it's really tough.*

François In our project too, there are some guys who have trouble reading and writing.

— *Really? People your age?*

François Yes, and some older people too.

Ali Yes, there are even some of the older people who, yes, they know how to read but they have a tough time with it, when you read like a robot...or you really read...

— *Really? A lot of them?*

Ali There's a lot of them. At least 80 percent.

— *You are telling me 80 percent. That can't be true - 80 percent. Do you realize? Eight out of 10!*

Ali Yes, but out of us, in our group.

— *In your group...*

Ali There's at least 20, 30 of us. How many of them can read? I'm talking read well. There's about 10. The rest of them read poorly.

— *When you speak of a group, you mean those who just get together all the time...*

Ali Those who get together, those who play soccer. But as far as reading, everyone knows how to read but those guys read poorly.

— *With difficulty, that's it? You mean that they hesitate on words, they don't understand well?*

Ali Yes, and then they read like robots, word by word. Some of them get stuck on the words.

*Even me, I read like a robot,
I can read, but robot style*

— *You know, I would never have believed that.*

Ali Even me, I read like a robot. I can read, but robot style.

— *Why do you read like a robot?*

Ali Because me, at home, when I went to X., I never read, in school I never read.

— *They did not have you read out loud?*

Ali Yes, but we'd refuse.

François We wanted to play god knows what game.

— *Why, to impress your buddies, to play tough?*

Ali No, we just did not like it. We did not like reading. And then reading, it's pretty simple. But we have a tough time reading.

— *You went through junior high, you must have been able to read...*

Ali Yes, I can read, I can read.

— *But not easily, right?*

Ali Yes, it's tough.

— *And do you read newspapers, stuff like that? No, never? You should, huh.*

Ali Sure. Otherwise reading, writing, math, and all that, everyone knows how to do it. Everybody knows.

[*There is some kind of intermission in the absence of PB during which François asks Ali questions about the project at La Roseraie - "it's dirty" - on the youth club - "always closed" - etc.]*

Ali Yes, when I come home to my building, there the woman on the third floor, her sister comes down and yells at us.

— *But her sister does not live there...*

Ali No, she does not live there, she lives in a house.

— *And who are they, those women, local Frenchwomen?*

Ali You know, Frenchwomen who don't like North Africans...

François Two sisters, two racists from the project.

— *But are there others like these?*

Ali It's these two and...

François (...) No, just the one.

— *And the superintendents? What are they like, are they OK?*

Ali They're here in the afternoons from 1.00 to 1.30.

François And in the mornings too, but they don't live here. The superintendents are supposed to live in the neighborhood.

Ali Yes, but one of the guys, he came to live here. He's 28 and he is really cool. Thanks

to him, we went out and all that. He's been very helpful.

— *And who is he?*

Ali Karim. He's a great guy, well even him, now he works in Paris, we don't see him much. Because before, in the evenings he would talk to us and teach us some lessons.

— *And what sort of a job has he got, this guy?*

Ali He's a *jocker*, he drives cars.

— *He went to school, that guy?*

Ali He lived in Algeria, he did five years in the army in Algeria, he had signed up and then he stopped. He came here, he got some qualifications, and from there he took off, he works; he works on temporary jobs, stuff like that.

François And he helps us out too.

— *And this Karim, he was nice to you?*

Ali He did everything with us, played soccer and... helped us out, sort of. He took us where we wanted, we just asked him and he would take us.

— *So basically, if there were a few more cool guys, things would be a lot better...*

Ali He was not the only one to understand us.

— *And how old was he, 28?*

Ali 28, 29.

— *And now, he is gone?*

François No, he still lives in X. but he works outside. He is here Saturdays and Sundays.

— *And this guy, could he try to explain to these women...*

François No one listens. Things are OK now, they've calmed down, but there was a time, they just would not listen. There was a group of guys, not from our group, a gang of older guys, five of them. Now they are all in jail. But when they come out... Only two of them are out right now. There are still three or four.

— *And why were they arrested? Stuff to do with drugs?*

François Yes, and car theft, and a holdup. And when they go out together at night, they drink, they smoke dope and all and then...

— *They raise hell...*

Ali Totally.

— *And they live in the projects?*

Ali No, I think only two of them live in the project.

— *So they come from somewhere else?*

Ali Exactly, not to be noticed. And one of them is the boss.

François Yes, three of them were let out.

Ali Right, and another was let out as well.
François But they don't get it. I don't know, but if I happened to... I don't want to, but if I came back one night, I would just quit. But they don't get it. They are just going back and forth [*between jail and home*].

— *And they've got guns, right?*

François They have got guns, they've got drugs, they've got everything.

— *So they terrorize everyone a bit, right.*

François As far as that is concerned, they're real... One of them. Just the one, he's more (...). The rest of them, no, you can, you can... That's real bad.

— *Yes, and when they are let out everyone is a bit scared, right?*

François Sure we're scared: and then there's several family feuds, even within the project, don't you think (...)? Family feuds. That's kind of dangerous.

— *What do you mean, family feuds?*

Ali There's two families fighting and everyone is going at it.

— *But over what?*

Ali Over nothing. Things having to do with... really stupid stuff.

— *Like weddings and things like that?*

Ali No, just over a shitty radio.

— *A radio?*

Ali There was this guy Eric who had a radio, this other guy wanted to take it and a friend of his came to help him. They had a fight, his brother came down and then he called his brother.

— *I see, so the whole family got involved after that. These are large families?*

Ali Right, large families.

— *There's a lot of them? Where are they from? Algeria?*

Ali Algeria.

[...]

When you talk to the chicks and you tell them "I live at La Roseraie"...

Ali Yes, but it's over. It's calmer now. La Roseraie, nothing happens here much. Just a little bit of reputation that's going away. A bad reputation. And then it's funny when you talk to let's say girls in a nicer project and you tell them "I live at La Roseraie"...

— *Automatically, they don't trust you.*

Ali No, they take off. Just for that, it's not good. You have to really work to win them over.

— *I see, and the same is true for you?*

Ali When you talk to the chicks and you tell them "I live at La Roseraie"...

François Wait a minute, I'm talking (...), they think that we are juvenile delinquents. (...)

— *Your girlfriend is also from the project?*

François Yes, she is.

— *You live with her?*

François What do you mean live?

— *I mean you live with her? You are not married yet.*

François No, I am not married yet. No, I'm not with her yet.

— *You will get married after your military service, then?*

François No, she has to get a job first. And me too obviously.

— *And what about you, do you have a girlfriend?*

Ali Well for me, it's easy come, easy go. No, for me it's easy come [he laughs]. Me, I don't like it when she... She must really be great. Because the girls we know are not serious. It's better to go out with girls that are good and serious, but they are difficult to find.

— *Yes, and those that hang around with you, they're not...*

Ali No, they are not serious. As soon as you turn your back, that's it, you won't see her anymore, she's with someone else.

— *You told me earlier that there was just one of them from the project that went out with you.*

Ali Yes, but she is the sister of a friend. We think of her as a friend. One of the guys, so to speak, a buddy; she's nice.

— *And the other girls, how do you get to meet them? In the discos, things like that?*

Ali When we go out, or in school, or the older sisters of other friends.

[*They discuss a woman from the project, a Frenchwoman who "speaks nicely to us and all that." "When people talk about us, she comes to warn us." Then they resume on the roots of violence.*]

François Even the young kids in our projects, they started to do stupid stuff.

— *Who?*

François Little ones. From the project. Nine or 10 year olds.

Ali They mess around, they go in people's gardens, they steal cherries.

— *Yes, you also did that kind of thing...*

Ali Oh, we all did it but...

François They do everything, the bikes...

— *I see, but you think it's worse, things are getting much worse.*

Ali Yes, but we did not start like this, we did not start with the bikes. Now all the young kids from the project smoke. The kids between 13 and 14.

— *What? Hashish or...*

Ali No, cigarettes.

— *Cigarettes, I get it.*

Ali The young kids, at 14, they start with cigarettes, at 15, they move on to...

— *But where do they get the dough?*

Ali They sell stuff or they find it some other way.

— *But you think that in reality it's getting worse, they are going deeper...*

Ali Yes, cigarettes, where does it lead to afterwards, to a habit. After, they'll want to feel good. They'll start getting high. There is a guy in the project, how old is he? He must be 15 and he has done everything: pills, hash, booze. He's not from our project, he's from (...). It's another project. He stopped going to school and everything. A dropout. But I don't envy him because he could have done better with himself, he is

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well-built, he's bigger than we are and he is 15. But he flipped. Too bad.

— *What a waste.*

Ali And that guy, he doesn't realize that he doesn't steal for himself but for others.

— *Why does he steal? What stuff?*

Ali For his boss.

— *He steals for his gang.*

François If he wasn't addicted, maybe...

Ali You know, it'll dawn on him later. Because him, he doesn't make anything out of it, so what is he doing going on with it? He steals but he never has anything, it's for the others.

— *I see, he's got a gang leader who collects?*

Ali It's not even the boss. It's a guy who's always hanging out with him. He takes everything. He comes and tells him "go and take this," he goes, picks it up, brings it back.

— *So he is a slave...*

Ali He's been had. That's too bad.

— *But that happens often, guys like that?*

Ali No, they are the only ones who do this, just the two of them.

François Well, but...

Ali No, there's just the two of them, because he's got him in the palm of his hand.

François The 15-year-old, he's scared.

— *I see, so that's it.*

François "If you don't do this, I'll break your face."

— *And how did he manage to get that hold on him; the kid isn't able to protect himself...*

Ali There's nothing a kid can do.

— *He's scared, but doesn't he have brothers, or someone? He's alone?*

Ali There's his little sister and his mother. The dad is gone.

— *Oh, what a shame. Poor kid. And you know him?*

Ali Oh, we know him, of course, he hangs around with us and all that.

— *And what does he say to you?*

Ali What can he say? He says nothing. Some days he is embarrassed, he's ashamed, but he can't say anything, he tells us he can't talk about it, etc.

— *He's afraid. And couldn't you help him? But I know it is a pain to meddle.*

Ali Oh yes, it's their business. It's their problem.

May 1991

Patrick Champagne

An Integrated Family

Maria D. lives in Villeneuve, a project built two decades ago on the outskirts of a large urban center. Forced to leave the city center where she had lived for ten years because of renovation, she was rehoused in this ZUP in the early 1970s, when they were just starting to put up the first buildings. She had been introduced to me by the head of the ZUP project, classed as a DSQ since 1987, no doubt because this woman from Spain is a “local figure” who knows how to talk well and could therefore be considered as an effective spokesperson for the “good” people of the project. Active in the Communist Party, she is in fact also very active in the tenants’ association that has been recently set up for the renovation process. Petite, feisty, she does not let things go unquestioned and does not, as they say, let “the cat get her tongue”: she speaks often with humor, rapidly, sometimes on the verge of incomprehensibility. She speaks loud and strong, with the pronounced accent and approximate but not hesitant mastery of the language that Spanish immigrants often have when they speak French.

She receives me at home, dressed soberly in flowered blouse, a vest and a dark skirt. The apartment, which is situated in a part of the ZUP that has already been renovated, is absolutely neat: nothing is lying about, not a speck of dust. During the conversation around a table in the dining room her hand automatically flicks away invisible breadcrumbs. Everything about this fifty-ish woman, well groomed but not to excess, points to a very willful character, with no trace of self-indulgence or frivolity: “Look, I’m not someone who wastes time spending the afternoon with women, not me. I’d rather go to meetings, things like that. But to talk women’s nonsense, things about nails, hairstyles, no. Not me.”

The child of a peasant family with ten children, she came to France at the beginning of the 1960s when she was only 18 because there was no work for her in her village, whereas “in France, in 1959–60, there was plenty of work.” French employers recruited this docile and cheap manpower through a Catholic mission: “We were from the country and we were also young, we didn’t have too many . . . [needs, ambitions] . . . we didn’t have a clear picture of the possibility of going elsewhere. (. . .) They sent us a contract, they pushed us a little, if you will. And they offered to pay for our trip and gave us a little money.” She was taken on in a factory for recycling rags. Several of her brothers and sisters joined her later and also settled in the region (they continue today to see each other very often). In France she met her husband, also Spanish, who had left the country in

more or less the same conditions as she had: after having had some training as a metalworker and welder in a Spanish military school, he was recruited at age 23 by a French factory in the automobile sector. A few years ago he set up on his own in a car body shop, while his wife, who stopped working for a while to raise their two children (two boys aged 24 and 16, at the time of the conversation), has resumed part-time work and today does housekeeping for very affluent individuals.

With regret, she describes the first years in Villeneuve: better housed than in the city center, she found the buildings surrounded with greenery charming and pleasant. She relates how, in a few years, the new buildings multiplied, the population gradually changed, and "problems" appeared, notably with the rise in unemployment among the young. In the beginning, Maria remembers, the milkman could still leave his bottles on the landing and the tenants the money under the doormat. Rather quickly, thefts began to increase (bicycles, then cars) and, added to this small daily delinquency that gradually took hold, the deterioration of the buildings prompted the departure of the families in a position to leave. Then she describes the increasing problems between the population of European origin and the increasingly numerous population of Arab origin from living at such close quarters: "People started to complain... they put a lot of Arabs in... lots of people complained about certain Arabs because of the fast. Now I think it's better because so many people complained (...) because there were years when really, at the time of the fast, they partied outside... You could have sworn you were in Algeria." But for her, daily life in the housing project mainly became "hellish" with the arrival at the beginning of the 1980s of "problem families" having "a very bad reputation" who were rehoused in the increasingly vacant dwellings of the ZUP: "Everyone was thieving. Or rather, I don't know if they were stealing elsewhere but then really, everyone got it. Either over vacations, or at night, or during holidays, but everyone went through it."

Everything ought to have led this immigrant family that was successfully integrating itself without even being aware of it and, besides, was far from threatened by unemployment, to leave the housing project as a number of other families had. If Maria D. has nevertheless stayed in the ZUP despite the mounting difficulties that this has gradually presented her and her family (stolen car, emptied storage cellar, burgled apartment), it is not only because she has not wanted to abandon this project to which she has grown attached and which she has in a sense adopted. It is also because, as with many immigrant families, she has long lived with the illusion of "returning to the old country" (Maria and her husband have kept their Spanish nationality, for example), living in France in a provisional way that becomes eternal and prevents plans of any importance: "In the beginning, we didn't know if we were going to stay here or go back to Spain, so we could not make up our minds to buy. We waited, waited, waited until the children had grown and we bought the garage. Afterwards we said, as soon as we have the cash we're leaving [the housing project]."

But by remaining in the project, Maria D. knows that she is exposing her children to the kind of spiral that draws the young into delinquency or marginalization, and that she must redouble her care and efforts so that they escape – in her case it will be a close call – the “bad company,” the street, its shortcuts, and its false seductions: “Here, if you have children you’ve got to watch them too much, you have to take them out of the [local] school, the kids, if you want them to get ahead. So the young [couples], they see these problems and then they leave.”

But if, in contrast to a number of Algerian families in the project, she manages to maintain herself and especially to hold on to her children, it is because she has certain objective characteristics that distinguish her in a systematic way from most of the North African immigrants. Unlike most of the women born in North Africa who leave their village to join their husbands, she decided to emigrate to find work while she was still young and unmarried. The female immigrant of North African origin remains tightly subject to the family and to male domination, whereas the European immigrant woman obeys more directly the logic of the labor market and social mobility (when she emigrated, Maria D. was taken in charge not by a family network but by a Catholic mission, which found her a job and housing). “I am not French but I am European, it’s exactly the same,” she says. And in fact the cultural and social distance that separates her from the host country is much less than that observed among most of the Algerian women, who are still strongly integrated into their society of origin. A number of them, for example, since they seldom go outside the home never learn to speak French. Maria is indignant to see that among the Algerians only the men come to meetings: “The men came by themselves, the women stayed home!”

Moreover, European immigration is socially a little more selective than North African immigration, with the migrants often endowed with characteristics (education especially) that make a certain social mobility easier in the host country. Maria D. and her husband can have the feeling of having managed to make it. This is not the case with the majority of North African families where the men, when they are not unemployed, remain unskilled factory workers their whole lives. This situation is not without its effects on their children’s professional aspirations. Maria D.’s older son, who works in his father’s garage, can envisage following his father’s example and preparing to take over the small family business, whereas most of the children coming from North African immigration not only reject rather tough working-class conditions, but often despise their parents for having accepted without protest what they perceive as “exploitation.” Maria D. is so well integrated that she speaks today of her country of origin like a foreigner: “This year,” she explains, “I paid 11,000 francs for a house in Spain [*for a vacation rental*], it’s not cheap! When they told me the price, I said, it can’t be true! The Spaniards are thieves!”

The number of children constitutes another major difference. Even though she comes from a very large family, Maria D. has voluntarily limited how many children she has had. She has only two and has kept track of their education, rescuing the younger boy at the last minute when, led astray by a band of pals, he

was failing at the Villeneuve junior high school where she had kept him because of her political beliefs (to prove that someone could succeed in the project); and when the older boy was unemployed she prodded him to go look for work, before offering him the alternative solution of work in his father's garage. It is not by chance that it is the large families in these projects – particularly frequent in populations of North African origin – that pose the major problems. Indeed, the size of these families makes it almost always impossible in these urban areas for the parents to exert a strict and effective control over all the children – or for the larger group of the community to do so – as was the case in rural villages. Housed by the social services based upon vacancies and resources, and not as a function of family relations or communities of origin, families are isolated, left to themselves and can count only on themselves. The father is reduced to disciplining severely, but ineffectively, the boys who are going to the bad, before the latter leave the home and follow “the big brother's bad example.” Moreover, these reproductive strategies are ill suited to the requirements of reproduction or social advancement in developed societies, where the education of the young implies an important long-term investment (educational, material, and affective), which is practically impossible in working-class families with a large number of children.

“I am not a racist, but . . .” One has to take seriously this denial that comes up a hundred times in conversations, by which residents in these projects defend themselves against the accusation leveled against them, especially in the media, whenever tragic events occur, an accusation the rise in the National Front vote in these areas tends to support. Like many non-North African residents of these projects, Maria D. regards these populations in difficulty with both understanding and exasperation. She is too close to these immigrants not to know what happens in the families and not to understand the difficulties that beset them. She understands all the better the parents' powerlessness (“the father beats them almost to death but that's not helping them walk a straight line”) since she almost found herself in an identical situation. She too could have said what was said in another conversation by the superintendent of the Villeneuve project, who, however, votes quite differently from Maria D.: “We have the same problem with our children. As soon as they are 13 or 14. While they are small it's fine, you do with them what you want, but as soon as they reach 14 or 15, I don't know, suddenly it happens, it's the people they mix with, at school, in junior high . . . they become more aggressive. After 15 or 16 you can't do anything more with them. They have changed. They talk to you, but you sense they don't want to have anything to do with you . . . They slip away . . . They take themselves for . . . for grown-ups! The parents say ‘that's it, well, he is 14 or 15, so that's it. We won't be able to do a damn thing with him.’” Maria D. might also have described, with the same compassion that is not entirely a function of the interview situation, those young people who regularly end up in jail and the despair that they arouse in their parents. “I know some kids, but they've already been in prison three, four times, for stealing cars. They get out of prison, the old guys half beat them to

death, well, that doesn't stop them from starting up again. It's in here [*he points to his head*]. You know, there's nothing to be done about that. And yet the parents – the poor buggers – ah! I pity them, you see! And they're Algerians, ah! the poor old guy, when I see him, it's true, he makes me feel sorry. That's what I feel when I see him. Neither he nor his wife could ever have imagined this. They don't deserve kids like that, that's all.”

But at the same time Maria D. cannot be unexasperated by these families – on the one hand, because she experiences various routine acts of aggression committed by certain youths, which make daily life difficult; and on the other hand, and above all, because she has succeeded in getting out of this at the cost of efforts and privations that these young people do not seem to want to take on in their turn. Even though she knows that the living conditions are no longer the same (“how can you deprive them in this day and age?”), she cannot accept that the young people won't go through what she has been through: “I've said to my children, we were workers and more honest than this young generation. They are shiftless, they are always tired, they've had everything, so what's their problem...” In fact, political and community activism, in Maria D.'s case, goes along with the relative success of her project of social mobility, where political activism is just one component of a more general social activism that it reinforces through the connections and information that come with it. It is also a way of reasserting moral principles, precisely those that make possible a slow but sure social advancement: “I see that when you work, even if the pay is small, work is everything, Monsieur. Work is everything, work is freedom.” Far from resignation and fatalism, or inversely, the totally unreal projects that often characterize the lowest fractions of the working class, Maria D. adopts an attitude of reasonable demands: you have to seek, through struggle, to better yourself but without wanting the impossible. You have to spend what you've got, but no more; you must only want what you can have. In short, you have to set limits for yourself: “We had meetings to see what the kids wanted, they asked all the young people. It irritated me because when I was young I had nothing and I was happy, and I was content and they aren't... so you mustn't ask for so much.” After the conversation, before leaving, with the tape recorder off, she told me that in the superb apartment of the lady she cleans for you frequently heard the spiked heels of the upstairs neighbor (“they go clack, clack, clack”) and that she had told her: “You may have a grand and beautiful apartment downtown, but it's noisy and I am better off and it's quieter in my little apartment in Villeneuve!”

with a tenant in an HLM housing project

— interview by Patrick Champagne

“You mustn’t say we are racists”

— *You have two children. Were they able to have a regular education in Villeneuve?*

Maria D. I took both of them out of Villeneuve, the first in the *sixième* [first year of collège or junior high, aged about 11] and the second from the *cinquième* [second year, about age 12] (...) The older one [now aged 24], you know, he finished junior high and then did a BEP in electronics. We wanted him to continue, but Monsieur, he didn’t want to. The younger one was in the first year of junior high not far from where I work; he’s in high school now. And yet for the younger one, since I fight for the [Communist] Party and all, I said “I’m leaving my kid in Villeneuve because he works hard and to show others that he could succeed in Villeneuve too.” Well, he worked very hard in school, so I put him into the first year at the [local] Louis Aragon junior high; I tell you, this kid worked so wonderfully [in primary school] they even congratulated him he worked so hard.

I’ll chop off your head, Frédéric, if they ever throw you out of school!

Maria D. He changed in junior high and the first year, wow! he barely got through. You know, you go there and you change. He barely passed and I was called in two, three times because he’d stopped obeying the teachers and all that. I said “What’s all this?” and gave him a talking-to and I thought things were going to get better; he barely passed the first year, but he passed. Then in the second year he didn’t pass anymore, he had to take the year over and I went to see the principal and then the staff and all, and I saw that he had missed 17 days at school in the year and I knew nothing

about it. And do you know how I found out about these days? Because I wanted to send him to England and I started to arrange it (...) I went to see the social worker at the school and I explained things to her and all, and I asked her, just like that, if there were drug problems, if there were stories and all, just because I was interested. She says “no, no, why? Because you have problems with your sons?” I said, “no, no, no!” I say to her like that, and then she says to me, “what is your son’s name?” I say to her, “Frédéric D.” She says to me, “but I think that it is Frédéric D., he missed 17 days (...) and we had to let the school board know.” I said, “no, it’s not true, no, it’s not him, ah no! you’re mistaken.”

[...]

But it really was him, I had said it couldn’t be true. I went to see the principal and then the person who checks them into school, I said “what! My son skips school and I don’t know about it?” They had telephoned me once, once because he’d done something, I don’t know what, they had said to me “oh! but look here madame, surely we sent you a note”; I said “no, I’m sorry.” To the woman who checks them coming in I said “but listen madame, if you had sent me a note and I didn’t reply, why didn’t you telephone me? Really, 17 days is too much!” And well, what did she reply to me, this woman? ‘Oh, see here Madame, we have 500 students in this school, if we had to make a call for each one, it would never end.’ There! I said, “that’s it.” When I found out he didn’t obey the teachers any longer, I said, we can’t leave him there. Because if I leave him, it’s already children starting to go to the bad who don’t obey the teachers any more. I asked for his file. And yet with

the second one, I had been strong, I had said "I won't take him away from you, I'll leave him with you [I'll leave him at the Louis Aragon junior high in Ville-neuve]." But I said "listen, I will continue to fight for the school but if I leave my son here, he's finished, and you've only got one life."

— *And did you have it all out with your son afterwards?*

Maria D. Of course. Yes, yes, but mostly, since I get on well with him, he told me everything, and when I say to him "what were you doing outside?" he says to me, "uh, you know, we were walking around"; sometimes he would get to the school entrance, he had pals who'd say to him "let's go to the supermarket and buy something," so they wasted time, they wasted the morning, they didn't go to school anymore, you see. Sometimes it was the afternoons, I said "what were you doing?" "Uh, I was walking around." I said "but that won't do!" and I said "weren't there people who sometimes saw you and all?" and he says to me, "sure, two, three times I had to hide because there were people I knew because they were going to say, Frédéric what are you doing outside?" He said "two, three times I was forced to run to hide under the garages." But I said "it's not possible!" Even he said that he had to leave [that school] because he couldn't say no to his friends anymore, and they sometimes started acting up a little in class and then, him too, he followed them! He is as guilty as the others, you mustn't... But when he got there [at another junior high located downtown] oh, wow, he got discipline and the first year I got two, three notes because he was used to Villeneuve, so I said "I'll chop off your head, Frédéric, if they ever throw you out of school..." So no, he had notes in the beginning and then after, he was fine. Fine, fine, even last year, I said "what about that, Frédéric, I haven't received anything, nothing! Nothing the whole year." And even he said "that's right, so you see, people change."

[...]

The area was dead! Nobody wanted to live here

— *The urban renewal goes back two, three years?*

Maria D. Yes, because really, the area was dead! Nobody wanted to live here. When renewal started there were I don't know how many empty apartments, nobody wanted to come here, everything was falling apart, everywhere. Everywhere when you went out was in a shambles. And then, you know, the problem is that they put lots of foreigners in. And lots of North Africans. Sometimes it made me feel sorry for them because there are good people; I have lived in this area, there are people I like a lot and all; there are people who want to work and it's true that by preference they are always shunted off to the side, so you have to be fair. [People say] they're nasty, they're thieves. They have made their reputation. But on the other hand, they aren't getting any breaks. (...) It's not worth it to go looking for work, there's none to be had. So what do you expect, they steal and steal some more and... but sometimes, boys who were petty thieves, when someone finds work for them, you know, they become serious, they make their way, they look after themselves, so to speak. They mess around until they're 18, 20 or 24 or 25, because many of them don't work and then you get used to not working, too, you don't worry about it anymore. Because sometimes, when someone offers them work, they have nothing and they still say no! So it wasn't like that in our day, I've said so to my children, we were workers and we were more honest than this young generation. They are shiftless, they are always tired, they have had everything, so what's their problem and then...

— *On top of that, aren't there drug problems here?*

Maria D. Oh my goodness... This year, it's quiet. Oh! there're lots, lots. Last year, you'd come home at any hour of the day, there were always seven, eight young people, who were sitting on the stairs, it was a meet-

ing point. They came in, they went out, they arranged to meet and all, the drug traffic, and right in front of us! And us tenants, sometimes when we went down they were on the stairs, we said, "at least let us come down," and well! you mustn't talk to them like that and they were turning the light on all the time [*it was on a timer*], and sometimes I said, out! I said "I'm sorry, but here I'm the one who pays for the light and I don't want to!" They were in their late teens and I have a tendency to shout "I'm sick and tired of seeing you here," and sometimes they'd say "keep quiet, we're nice to you" – "But I don't want to see you here, why do you stay in the alley? And what are you doing here?" – "We aren't doing you any harm" – "But I don't want to see you here." But once or twice, when they were a bit, I don't know, drugged or drunk, there was one big one, like I said, he had frizzy hair, ah, I swear to you, he frightened me, "look here, lady, if you shout, I'll kill you." Oh my goodness, so I said "fine, I'm going upstairs." And we said so in the meetings with the mayor. And I don't know where they went, but in any case it's quieted down there. But the drugs, oh la, my God!

As for me, I think in any case we're not badly off

— *When they did the renovation, they put in reinforced doors?*

Maria D. Yes, it was then.

— *They had already forced in your door?*

Maria D. Yes, yes. When they robbed the apartment they made a hole in the door, it was those doors that are... [nonresistant], they made a hole in the door and they got in. And then it was vacation time, we weren't there. So they had plenty of time. They took the TV set, the VCR, a hi-fi the boys had, cassettes, bottles. And my husband had some collector's coins and he loved those things and he had quite a bit of money, everything went.

— *It was a collection of what?*

Maria D. French coins. But over the past four years, the ZUP has become better. The

whole exterior is much cleaner and they have renovated everything. (...) As for me, I think, even if it didn't make it a luxury area, but if the tenants would take more care – as for me, I think that in any case we're not badly off, we are just as well off here as downtown. (...) I think that even if they are projects, we have good heating, hot water and an elevator, a rubbish chute, we get good service. They do the apartments up not badly. It's just the people... who should pay... attention to themselves. (...)

— *You are looking to buy a house, but is it simply to buy or to leave Villeneuve?*

Maria D. Ah, no, no, you know, I don't want to leave Villeneuve. It's possible we'll buy a house (...) I don't want to leave Villeneuve, I know so many people in Villeneuve, and some very fine people. And I don't want to leave Villeneuve. If there are people who are nasty, and you know, thieves, it's not just in Villeneuve because my sister she lives in T [*a nearby district*] and the other day they stole her car, so... what she says is that maybe it is people from Villeneuve, we don't know if it is people from Villeneuve. There are the same problems elsewhere.

[*She explains that the rent has doubled since the renovations: she now pays 2,410 francs per month for a four-room (plus kitchen and bath) apartment with garage, service charges and heat included. She also explains that when the tenants exceed a certain income threshold, the amount of the rent is doubled, which contributes to making better-off families leave, since they prefer to leave Villeneuve and buy elsewhere.*]

When I was young I had nothing and I was happy

— *You participate in associations, in the area committees?*

Maria D. Yes, this year I slacked off a bit because I was losing too many afternoons, sometimes it bothered me too to see how people behaved. (...) Two, three times I had a fight with the Arabs, not a fight but... they wanted this, they wanted that.

We had meetings to see what the kids wanted, they asked all the young people. It irritated me because when I was young I had nothing and I was happy, and I was content and they aren't... so you mustn't ask for so much. They wanted a recreation hall, they wanted this, they wanted that. So I said to Monsieur X "it's better for me to stay at home because I feel I'm going to argue with the Arabs and then..." We worked with a social center, we had a dinner with a cultural theme, we did various things. I am not French but I am European, it's exactly the same. And I don't know, these people, they are different. It's the religion. They asked if there was any pork, if someone hadn't put on pork on purpose because they knew they were going to come! People had brought liqueurs, so you can imagine, they didn't drink the liqueurs. No, no, no it's forbidden. Monsieur Ahmed, he says "Ah, no, no, no, God does not wish it," I say to him "look here, God is sleeping," it was the evening, "God is sleeping, leave God alone." (...) And it's the same with the Algerians – there was an association of blacks who were Muslim too, they came with the women. But the Algerian association, just the men came, the women stayed home! So after, I said "I'm not having any more parties with them!" And we don't have any more. They aren't like us, you know, and that too you have to... We aren't racist but sometimes when you see things like that, well, once, twice, three times, you get to the point where you sometimes say... well (...) It's true, for myself I find that I like everybody, but what I say is, if I do my part, why don't you? Just try! Leave religion out of it, I was raised Catholic in Spain, we had to go to mass, but I came here, that was it, I no longer set foot in a church for mass. And even if I was still going, I would go, but I wouldn't make that the reason why I wouldn't go to parties with Arabs or Chinese or anyone else. And that, I understand. Sometimes they look inside the door and when they see a lot of Europeans, they don't come in. They have to be the majority, the Arabs. That's typical of them, you mustn't say we are racists, they are the

most racist. And with the Communist Party... sometimes when there are movements and things like that, I go, but it also has the tendency to always take their part, so that if they don't work, if they don't earn enough, that's because people are racist with them, and because this and because that. And when sometimes you say to them, listen, they're the ones as well, they are racist too, you mustn't... That's why, this year, I tell you, I have dropped out a little of the associations.

[*She describes the tenants who mess up the corridors and "toss garbage out the window, banana skins, yoghurt containers, or milk cartons, diapers, just because they feel like it."* Then, she tackles the difficulties encountered by "people who want to work and don't have work."]

— *There is a problem of unemployment for young people?*

Maria D. That's it. A lot.

— *And for your children?*

Maria D. Ah, no, no. You see, no, I don't have that problem. Many of the problems in Villeneuve, I don't have those problems. (...) You see, not everybody has the same problems. There are families who live fine in the ZUP, you mustn't think that everybody lives badly in the ZUP, no that's something that's not true. There are families who work, two or three people in a household, two, three cars. (...) There are many things that have improved the outside a little, they repaired things a little, but the problem indoors, I think that the people who had them before have still got them, the same ones. They are the same ones, unemployment.

— *Which are the families who have problems?*

Maria D. Large families, especially. Whatever nationality they are, large families, always; it's rare to find in a family with over five or six – that's not the cause in itself, I wouldn't want to say that none of these families, maybe there are families – but when there are more than five or six children, whatever nationality they are, they pose problems. (...) There is a

Spanish family, the parents are divorced, the father is one who is always drunk, the mother is one who fights with everybody because of the children. There is an Italian family over there that has had problems, too; to tell you the truth, the large families, they pose problems. Except when there are strict parents who... But most of them are Arabs. It's in these largest families, it's rare that in all these families they don't have one or two or three, depending on the size of the family, who hang around for years, years without working, who have not been inside [jail], I don't know if there is one family left in Villeneuve, out of all the families I know, they all have one or two who have been inside [jail]. They hang around unemployed for years, years, someone gives them two or three months, sometimes six months when they work, they have a right again to unemployment benefits and it goes on and on and on. And there are boys who are almost 30, you could say that they haven't started to work. That, I swear that with me, ah no! Oh my goodness! a boy like that, in my home? (...) If he wasn't capable of looking for work himself, me, I would find it. And if it's not a good job he only has to try harder at school. That's what I tell the Arabs.

— *And what do they say to you?*

Maria D. I do a lot of talking and then sometimes they say "oh, sure." But I say "but why don't you work harder in school? Then you say that you can't find a job, that the job you find is not good work and all. You have to struggle! You have to struggle! From school on" — "right, but it's tough" — "but work isn't so hard?" — "yes, yes, you are right, Madame D., oh! she is nice, Madame D., she gives us good advice." But oh! I said to them a thousand times, oh yes I said to them, "you've seen it on TV, there are some Arab reporters, there are some from everywhere, you are not discriminated against; if you work well in school, but you have to work!" They laugh, they all know me. All of them, I know all of them. All the young people here, I have seen them either little, or born.

I tell you, 20 years I've been here. (...) Me, when I think back, there were ten of us, it was different in those days, my father worked, in those days everyone went without many things. But even if we lacked things, we were happy. But now they aren't like that. You know, there are six, seven children, five, four, it depends; and there are many homes where the father doesn't work, or he is the only one who works but they have low wages.

*As long as your mother's around,
there'll be no unemployment for you*

— *There are problems here finding work?*

Maria D. The work problem is the main one, because the way I see it, when you work, even if the pay is small, work is everything, Monsieur. Work is everything, work is freedom, work is everything. But when you have no work, well you know in that situation you start to just muddle through all round. Ah!, work, that's the key. Because the young people, once you find them work they settle down. Except for the young guys who hang around like I said to you just now, there are kids who hang around, but really it's just a minority. (...) You know, you can't fix everything a hundred percent. You take advantage of people, of a situation. There are men who take advantage of unemployment, because my one, before working with his father, before going into the army, he worked a year. To be specific, they gave him a contract in electronics, he put in security systems, telephones in cars, things like that, fine. They gave him a six-month contract. And he knew that after six months he could collect unemployment, he wanted to stop, but I told him "listen, kid! I'm still right here!," so he said he was taking a vacation; we went on vacation in August, but come September I said "you're going to look for a job," he didn't want to, or rather it's not that he didn't want to but he was hanging around, and me, I saw that he was hanging around, oh my goodness! My husband went to work, I got up, I let him sleep until

nine, and at nine I opened the shutters and I pulled off the covers, I mean he was already all grown up, he was 18, he had finished school, he was already grown, I said "you're going to the ANPE [national unemployment agency], you're going to look for a job" – "okay, okay, but I was there yesterday" – "but you're going again today." A grown-up! When I was finally getting on his nerves, then he would get dressed, he would leave. I said "go on, at least you're not lying around in bed." He hung around the month of September, if you knew what kind of September we spent, both of us! We fought every day. I said to him, if you don't want to continue school that's your problem, we were paying for a private school and all. But, Monsieur, he said no. I told him "as long as your mother's around, there'll be no unemployment for you." I swear to you, if you are in good health, my view is you should not collect the unemployment. We spent a month, we fought every day, every day I did that to him! Every day, until then he went to an agency for temporary work and worked a few months. And after that, since my husband had taken the body shop, that fixed things. But one month he stayed home, every day of the month, Monsieur, every day we fought. I said "I'm sorry, but no, no, no." And young people, I know there is not work for everybody, but if they're with me, they work. That tells you what kind of mindset my son had. That's what I wanted to explain to you in the beginning. There are kids who can claim unemployment, and as long as it is paid they don't break their necks. And when they aren't paid anymore they work for three months or six months and it goes on like that, see? It's a minority but still, there are some like that. There are others, when you give them a good job, fine, once they start to work, they work. (...) I swear that with me, they work, both of them. The young one, fine for the moment, he works at school. But... oh no! I'm the first one up everyday at seven or six-thirty to work and

I'm supposed to leave the kid asleep, or loafing about? When my husband and I are working like dogs! Ah no! But I also know that everybody is not like me.

[...]

Maria D. You see, we all worked, all of us. And the children of the other generation too, you push them to work. My brother has a married son who works, both he and his wife, and he has two daughters who both study, and he has a fourth one, a boy who works. For us and for the Spanish, everybody works in more or less modest places, but even if they are modest they are earning a living, fine. They are not families who either hang around or bug other people. If you earn 5,000, you earn 5,000. At the social center I know everybody, everybody manages with what they have, either pensions, benefits sometimes, but finally... The family that earns 5,000 lives at the level of 5,000, the one that earns 10,000... Yes, I always say to the children, they always have to keep in mind, as they say, the spirit of the winner, of working and not letting yourself go, or hanging about. With work, you can get anywhere, but if you start to drag about left and right, and you mustn't be discouraged either, or give up. There are times when you are demoralized, but you have to keep going, you have to keep going anyway... I think that when one has parents, you are there to help them not to get demoralized. I tell them too, if you earn that much and you can't afford that much, I have never done anything shady in my whole life. Never! I never went out to any bad place, I never got my clothes on the side, not a thing. I stick to the amount I can afford and if it looks like I can manage... That's right, I said to my children, you mustn't have any more illusions than you can afford. For living or for... I have lived here 20 years, it was fine, it's not worth living in a fine area and paying 4,000 francs rent... I am staying here, I am honest, I'm staying here, too bad. Here I can pay, could I there? I don't know.

March 1991

Gabrielle Balazs

A Bad Investment

Mme Tellier is the president of the defense committee for her town's shopkeepers association: the sporting goods store that she had been "getting established" a year before was looted, then burned. Only a charred shell remains.

Only about 20 small retail shops selling basic goods were set up in this area of high rises and huge apartment blocks. Setting up shops in these zones of working-class residences presents obvious risks, of theft in particular. If the hypermarkets or malls have to take these risks despite strong reservations because of regulations, the small retail shops, not having the same resources for surveillance and insurance, prefer to avoid these areas. During the incidents that led to the looting of the small commercial center, the first targets, before the brasserie, the optician or the shoe repair shop, were the sporting goods, which are very prized by the children and teenagers in the project, and relatively inaccessible to them.

Mme Tellier's store appears particularly "out of place" on this site. Unlike a number of small shopkeepers, she did not inherit her store; she opened a store rather late in life, at age 50, after doing other jobs with no connection to retailing (office work). The failure that the destruction of her store represents for her, stemming in part from her inexperience, is all the more painful because this failure is also that of a patiently constructed plan for social advancement.

However it seemed, the creation of this store was not the product of chance, even if it did not have all the guarantees that usually shore up individuals with experience in this domain (notably an evaluation of the economic viability of the business). Mme Tellier was strongly attracted by sports: she says she was "brought up on playing fields." Her father was a coach, her mother a basketball player, and her brother a physical education teacher. But she could not make sports her trade: at the time, girls and boys of her background did not receive the same encouragement to pursue their studies ("Mama told me, listen, you'll get married, your husband will provide..."). After professional training as a secretarial accountant, "a job that no longer exists now that everything is computerized," she encouraged her children, her daughter as well as her son, to become sports professionals (her son, a gymnastics teacher, does competitive sports and is taking the "training option," while her daughter, who is studying to teach physical education, has already been a champion in France in her field). So when the time came to change careers, she thought of using her knowledge of and taste for sport in this commercial activity.

At first employed in a small lingerie firm, she was laid off for economic reasons when the firm declared bankruptcy and had to change careers once more. Before it finally shut down for good, the firm had been taken over by its personnel for two years. Mme Tellier had played an important role in the movement and had been in close contact with the municipalities that supported the firm's employees. Her combativeness led her to "find myself on a list" as a candidate in the municipal elections. During this period, she says she "did not know how to strike a balance between professional life and family life," had little time to devote to her children, who "did their homework at the factory," or above all to her husband, an elementary school teacher from whom she separated shortly thereafter. But once elected to the town council, she was put in charge of town sports. In setting up a sporting goods store she thought she could at last profit from a combination of her experience and her inclinations, and "capitalize" on so many years of "struggle."

Faced with the destruction of her store, she has a strong sense of injustice. When she was on the town council she devoted all her energy not only to sports activities but also to the defense of the housing project residents, knowing their "hidden suffering" and, for example, opposing property seizures or alerting public authorities. Despite the painful situation she has to confront, she does not fail to recall during the interview that the population of the housing project is "very poor," that "as long as the young people do not have more of a future (...) they cannot get involved, marry, they don't know if they will have a job..." that the community service allocation or the welfare benefit "doesn't even pay the rent..." But at the same time she admits that she "can't sleep anymore," all her efforts to make a go of it having been reduced to nothing at the same time as it has meant that she has had to work twice as hard. The contradiction between what happened to her and her political convictions makes the "goods stolen right from under her nose (...) and the insults" unbearable, as it makes unbearable the fact that the kids who looted and burned the store were quickly released: "You saw the kid again the next day... they let him go. That really upsets you. It wears you down (...) it was even dangerous since they came to be cheeky even at the shop window. They could even have... [hesitation] let's say, how to put it... taken revenge since they had been arrested on account of me. (...) You feel powerless."

Despite everything, she does not give in to hatred or resentment and continues to act in line with her convictions. Since she was not able to pay an employee in her store the first year, she had ended up employing a trainee "because really they came to beg me," but she is "against that kind of method: it is cheap labor." The different names given to the training internships made her "smile" because "bla bla bla, the new plan, the new plans... in the end, they are still talking about bogus jobs." She never felt worse about it than in her relationship with the trainee whom she accepted: "I didn't even dare ask her to do anything... since I am opposed to it, with my background... it made me sick."

She continues to think that violence ("when they concentrate all the social cases in the same community, and what's more, to resolve a housing crisis!") can be

imputed to social causes, or even political ones, and not to people, and still less to their nature. Refusing to make people responsible for their unhappiness, she seeks, in the militant analysis of schooling and the labor market, for the means to understand, if not bear, what is happening to her.

with a shopkeeper

— *interview by Gabrielle Balazs*

“The store . . . there was nothing left of it”

— *You had never had a store before?*

Mme Tellier Never. Never. So on top of that, I set up this business by myself, so you can imagine . . . being in a real trouble spot, the difficulties I had. There’s a lot I could tell you. And yet there was a year and a half of business because I opened in May ’89, and in October ’90, the store . . . there was nothing left of it . . . It was one of the stores that were looted and then burned down. They started with my shop.

— *It’s a sports symbol, is that it? It was a symbol of desired things . . .*

Mme Tellier . . . Yes, these are products that are, which young people seek, well, it’s . . . and it’s true that I always had kids who wanted to take goods without paying for them; but still it’s true that those things are highly desirable. What’s more, in the area you see an enormous number of young guys dressed in sports gear. These days formal dress, if I may say so, no longer exists; now it’s jeans or sweats and sneakers. That’s the look sought after by the . . . And then, what’s more, it’s true that these things cost a lot and aren’t at all within their means, so . . .

— *There was a gap between what was on display . . . and their own possibilities, so your store looked like a . . .*

Mme Tellier Right, it was taken as a provocation, not being able to own these items, they . . . it’s true that I had three . . . two break-ins and . . . once they came in through the roof and the second time through a

wall, the third time they stopped . . . It was before the . . . But I’ve had Molotov cocktails . . . something that had never happened . . .

— *But still, in one year?*

Mme Tellier That’s right, in a year. For a year and a half, Molotov cocktails, that had never happened before, we hadn’t had that here. On account of a stolen credit card, the guy was arrested, and there were reprisals afterwards. It was a very, very hard year. So, since I am not at all someone to let myself be taken advantage of or to throw my hands up in despair, well . . . I resisted, but also I had very good support, still, in spite of everything there was a clientele who were, there weren’t just bad types fortunately, a clientele that was very, very nice and then in addition, I must say that I had known them since the time I came to this town. But perhaps it is also one of the consequences of that . . . Sometimes I was a little bit on the edge despite everything, all the same to go through all that, too much is too much.

We ought to have reacted earlier

— *That’s right, meaning that sales conditions were particularly difficult; but when you decided, you knew . . . you knew the area well . . .*

Mme Tellier Yes, I knew, but I didn’t think it had reached that point. And so I never thought at all that it was . . . so tough. And then, before the riots, there was still an

element that was . . . that was new, which is that there was an enormous number of drug addicts who came around and I had alerted the police, I had also alerted the elected officials, everybody knew about it and yet nothing had been done; I had also warned that something was going to happen there, because really shops are like sounding boards, you learn a lot of things. And what's more, despite the fact I had young people who were . . . who came around to chat, see me and still I got hit . . . there were connections that had started to be established, in the first place because I had known them, myself, on the playing fields. So it's true that it was still easier to talk, to . . . And I knew that there were stones, well, paving stones going up into the buildings, they were preparing . . . barricades (. . .). It's true that we ought anyway, I don't know, to have reacted earlier. It was predictable. On that score, I had this discussion with the Prefect, but supposedly we had to prove . . . If you don't do something about these young people, I say you are going to have a war. And it's not . . . though I am in favor of renovating the area, of course . . . it's not a fresh coat of paint . . . on the buildings, etc., that's going to solve the problem. It's not true. The problems remain. And the area was beginning to be, it's true, was becoming pleasant and all, and then look at what happened. I never would have thought that it was going to be on such a scale.

[. . .]

— *All the shopkeepers were affected, where . . .*

Mme Tellier Ah yes . . . But well, it's true that they were affected because there was a fire . . . But really the shops especially targeted were the brasserie — that was where they got bottles in the first place to make Molotov cocktails, well, bottles of alcohol — my sporting goods shop, of course. There was the optician, he had an enormous number of thefts of glasses, and then the tobacconist. There were shoes, too; and then, well, a hypermarket was looted . . . But still all the shops, before burning, they were

all . . . looted, vandalized. As for me, I can say that I was a social worker in a way, I dressed them from head to toe for free. You had to see that, it was hawked out for sale all round the streets afterwards, they knew it, it's crazy. And what's more, there was provocation, I heard some in the area, because I always keep office hours in the area . . . some premises have been put at the disposal of shopkeepers; and so I often stop by the area and the kids are there . . . to provoke . . .

— *And so for you, you were able to obtain premises again?*

Mme Tellier Temporary premises were no good to me, for the simple reason that, well, it's a little seasonal, meaning that to order sports goods you have to do it six months in advance. The summer order, you see, now, it's done now. So it wasn't possible to take off like that from one day to the next.

[. . .]

[*She explains the many steps that had to be taken with the insurance companies to obtain compensation, and the series of experts and counterexperts required to establish responsibility. Only reestablishment in the same area warrants compensation.*]

Anonymous calls

[*The telephone rings. Mme Tellier explains that she had an answering machine put in to protect herself from anonymous calls.*]

— *There's an impact, in the end, even on private life.*

Mme Tellier Oh, there was after those events, since, well of course, being president of the shopkeepers' association in the defense committee, well I was brought in to speak on TV etc. And I let it be understood that something had to be done with the young people, but notice that I did it a little bit on my own because it's true that at a given moment, too, you have to take a firm stand, things had been a little too lax, and if we had . . . because things, they didn't stop, they continued: stolen cars, provocations in the neighborhood, people who have got guns and it continues still, the problems

(...). When I discuss things in my neighborhood it's very rare that someone doesn't bring up guns... Well yes, there is tension.

— *And who is it? Is it young people, residents?*

Mme Tellier Oh, there is a bit of everything.

— *It's the shopkeepers?*

Mme Tellier It comes from all levels, yes, from shopkeepers, from neighborhood residents. And more recently still there were shots because someone was stealing a car. But it will end up badly... It's chronic. And then city property was burgled. So I don't know, what's more, well, I have occasion to discuss things with the security patrol guys who are now a little old, it's true they are... they don't know any more how they are supposed to do their work; it's guys who are going to get insulted, they have orders not to intervene, not to... for the sake of not provoking, they can't do anything! So how far are you going to let it go without doing anything. There's the problem. But now people insult the police just like that, there's no more reaction, no more...

They can't acquire all the lovely things they are shown

Mme Tellier That's why I was telling you that I was alone with this shop and in a difficult area... you had to face them, keep an eye on them, well and it's a clientele, teenagers who came, they were looking to steal... plus bad words, plus insults. Aggressive, very very aggressive. Even when it wasn't an insult it was really a... a tone that was asking for... They're owed everything. That's what's difficult for these kids... they can't, in this consumer society, they can't acquire all the lovely things they are shown; but even right under my nose, just recently, before the events, someone came to steal from me, whereas before they did it on the quiet, they tried, well I caught some of them. They took shoes that were on display, there was only one shoe, so I didn't notice, because what an idea to leave with one shoe and not the pair! They

left, they came back again and they were going through the boxes. They were looking in the boxes for the matching shoe that was on display and which was near the shop window. That time too there were words, "but you have no right to look in there," just quickly, etc. And then at the moment of leaving he left with the shoe, I was in front of the door, he pushed me, and when he left I saw the display, I understood why he was looking for a pair; on the display, the shoe was no longer there, so it was very... and then truly always on the lookout, always... you always asked yourself...

— *That's not easy?*

Mme Tellier No. No, no. And not to mention the nights, I wasn't sleeping anymore. Twice when they came into the shop, it was two in the morning and it was quite weird when the security company calls you "to go straight to your store, they are breaking everything."

— *There is a security company common to...*

Mme Tellier Yes, I had a line. I had a line that was directly linked to the police station; so when I got there, the police were already there; and the kids...

— *That's a little disturbing...*

Mme Tellier Yes, I had no rest anymore; I was thinking constantly of the store, and what's more you can't really say it was great; business was rather slow... so finally I spent this past year...

— *Harder than a move, if you had gone elsewhere?*

Mme Tellier Oh yes, certainly.

It's a hidden poverty

Mme Tellier In '67, when we arrived, the area was not built up, it was just vacant lots, vacant lots far from the city... It was almost swamps, you could hear... I remember, when I came back from training, I heard frogs, it was really the country. But it's still a vegetable growing place, there are still lots of farmers, we still have a zone... there are 150 hectares of vegetable fields (...). There were problems, all the

things that can come with a ZUP. To do with buying power, unemployment, etc., the economic crisis didn't help. You don't see the poverty, you have to go into the buildings, into the apartments, you have to see how people live. And as an elected official, let's say I had the opportunity...

— *To go into all sorts of people's homes?*
Mme Tellier Yes, and I had opposed reappropriations, etc., you should have seen what there was inside; there was barely a table and a mattress on the floor. It's no longer the slums that we knew before, it's really hidden, it is a poverty that is hidden. I saw, I had the opportunity to see, well, there was a table that had a broken leg, rickety chairs, and then a burner. With some cans on the table... No, it's true that it's not visible, we knew about the slums, but there are some buildings...

— *And then certainly many people who live either with very low wages, that's the majority, but also with the RMI [subsistence income for reentry into work] things like that.*

Mme Tellier Do you realize, the kids were offered the TUC [community service job] at 1,900 francs a month, the RMI, it must be 2,000 francs now; what can you do with that? It doesn't even pay the rent. No, that's why we really need studies and really need to renovate, it's true that... But if you don't attack it, if you don't attack evil at the root, you are barely touching the surface. You solve nothing, you solve absolutely nothing. As long as people have such pathetic purchasing power, as long as the young people don't have any future anymore, and that is dramatic... for the young people, do you realize? They can't get involved, marry, they don't know if they'll have a job, not that... I was told that it was utopian, when I asked for, well, that people could... the right to work, the right to housing, etc., well, they didn't want to hear. They continue to shut the companies down, you saw that, you turned on the radio, there are still I don't know how many firings at Air France or wherever, they go on shutting

down the companies, how can you expect families to live decently, so when there are money problems, obviously everything breaks down, everything falls apart. And then, well, in school, there too, is what gets taught, the education curricula, adapted to what young people can expect now, is... Well in my case, I have my youngest, she says to me "Mama, you put pressure on me to study, but well I'll have to register at the unemployment office..."... She says to me, "I'm going to try to get my DEUG [generalist university degree] and then I'll see," well she doesn't want to spend four years knowing perfectly well that she won't have a career... I remember when I was an elected official, it made me sick... The numbers of young people who came in, to see me all the time, selling themselves at any price, ready to sweep the stadium, asking me for a job, a city job really, to guard the stadium or sweep the gymnasium, with degrees, it's crazy. That's all that had been offered to those young people; and then I couldn't even take them on because I can't tell you the application forms...

[...]

[*She describes her municipal experience, a sort of training on the job – "There is no school, naturally, to be elected" – and the awkward position she is in from her "political life": "It would be difficult for me to find a job again, I am marked with red ink."*]

I am really in a fog

— *And after the opening, when things are straightened out, are you intending to set up shop elsewhere?*

Mme Tellier No, I will not stay in business. [...]

— *Your future in fact you see... it's cloudy?*

Mme Tellier Oh my goodness! more than cloudy. More than cloudy, I am really in a fog.

— *Except that you have decided not to start up again, even so, even if you were starting up again since you have to for the*

indemnities; in fact, you now have an idea that business isn't, that it isn't the solution for you? It is a less enriching experience than being an elected official for example...

Mme Tellier Oh yes! But it is always the same, which tells me, well, for the time being I am in that framework, meaning business, there is no going back; but if I don't find something else... Automatically

I will be stuck, I will not have the choice. I find myself in a period when I can no longer choose, you see... (...) when you don't have the university baggage either, it's meant you had to work twice as hard, you see... I had no education...

— *Yes, in fact you had, if I understand it, to fight a little on all fronts?*

Mme Tellier That's it, totally.

March 1991

Gabrielle Balazs

Rehabilitation

M Hocine is one of the longest term tenants in this housing project. The building he lives in, near the shops that burned, had to be evacuated. It has since been repainted. He came to the area in the 1970s. A skilled worker on the Tunisian railways and the son of a railway worker, he was a conductor for ten years before emigrating to France and accepting a job as a skilled worker on the assembly line in a firm manufacturing trucks. Since he didn't obtain the qualification he could expect with a vocational certificate as a motor mechanic and a year of industrial design, he left this firm and, with the help of a Tunisian friend, found a job as machine foreman in an industrial chemicals firm. At this point he left the hostel for immigrants where he was living and moved to the housing project.

At the time, obtaining a place to live in this housing project seemed miraculous. It was thanks to a connection – the honorary president of the football club where he does training – that he was able to obtain the apartment that changed his life: he was going to be able to marry and bring his wife over, a Tunisian elementary school teacher (with three children, he subsequently obtained a slightly larger place).

During the 1980s the housing project deteriorated. The recent tenants were relatively unstable and often unemployed; they were “problem families” that introduced drugs in the area and at the same time introduced violence and police surveillance... Mme Hocine keeps her children at home to save them from the violence in the area; she would like to move to a “quieter” place but her husband is against it. To betray solidarity would be to betray oneself, and so he gets involved in the transformation of the place. M. Hocine then undertook a patient defense of the tenants. He checks the maintenance and the charges from the HLM [public housing] office (during the interview he brings out the detailed files, overcharged bills for light replacement, water) and lends assistance to tenants in all their administrative dealings (in the course of the interview he will explain to an aged neighbor who is at her wit's end and comes to consult him on how to solve a problem with the HLM office). Above all he tries to defend the good image of the housing project against that of the ghetto which tends to prevail. During the interview he will show us the press clippings he has kept since the incidents. He made a careful analysis of them and has carefully kept his correspondence with a television station in which he protests against the way in which the residents of the housing project were talked about. He lets us read the letter he

wrote to a reporter responsible for a television program, and the latter's response. Whether it concerns paying a simple bill, renovating the housing project, the fate of each of its tenants, relations with the Communist city government – which he supports – or relations with the media, he makes himself the spokesman of a threatened working-class identity. Beyond the maintenance of the housing project and its smooth running, it is evident that for him this also involves fighting for a lost sense of civic duty. His seniority in the housing project, his working-class qualifications, his disinterested attitude (the project office had tried to “buy” him by offering to relocate him to better housing elsewhere) make him an activist with irrefutable credentials.

In fighting on all fronts, in the housing project to rehabilitate the area's image, in his work to defend his dignity (he quit his job suddenly after a fight with a colleague who turned out to be racist), in his private life by sacrificing himself for his family, where mutual understanding and a strict education reign (his wife is there for part of the conversation, his children come into the room for a moment, showing a respectful and attentive silence while their father talks), it is always an image of himself that he is wishing to maintain or restore.

At stake in this voluntarist enterprise to reeducate the residents of the housing project is a reconnection with the image of a working-class group displaying more solidarity, like the one he knew at the end of the 1960s in a big industrial center, and thereby a rehabilitation of the image of the immigrants in France who, according to him, owe it to themselves to be above reproach, even exemplary.

with an HLM tenant

— *interview by Gabrielle Balazs*

“We're not the ones who made this a ghetto”

— *You were the first to come here, that's why, you know each other better...*

M. Hocine Yes, the first. There was a good atmosphere (...) “you have a problem, I'm here for you,” you see?

— *Everybody helped each other too?*

M. Hocine That's it. Everybody helped each other. And then afterwards I don't know what happened really; the French, they began to leave, they put in Arabs, that is, of my race... my race... and wait, we'll come back to that, about the ghettos, because it wasn't us the ghettos, we're not the ones who made the ghettos. It's the

government in the first place, the prefecture, the HLM office that houses us, and the mayor's office, I have discussed it with the [Communist] mayor, and it isn't him, it doesn't come from him, it comes from the HLM office.

— *The French began to leave later?*

M. Hocine To leave, yes, to leave. There are some immigrants, Arabs who preferred to buy and I don't know, frankly if I had known... because listen, you can't predict the future, if I predict the future, that tomorrow I'm going to die, what good does it do to struggle or to work or do this or... no.

No, I said "I'll spend another five years here, and then I'm going home." Otherwise, I should have bought like the others.

— *They bought? Those who left, it was to buy houses, apartments...*

M. Hocine To buy detached houses. Individual houses. And they started to leave and leave, pouf! They are replaced with more Arabs, then Asians, then Vietnamese. It starts already to...to rot. It's no longer the same, it's no longer the same...

— *There was no longer the same spirit among you, the same solidarity?*

M. Hocine The same spirit among us and each retreated into the home, that is, even when I hear something, no I prefer...not to meddle in their business.

[*Arrival of an elderly neighbor who comes to ask advice from the tenants' representative.*]

The former tenants have left

— *You said that the tenant population has changed...*

M. Hocine It has clearly changed, the old ones have left, there are new ones. You can't instantly, quickly, strike up a friendship with them, you have to get to know them and all (...). When they came, we tried. But there were people who didn't want to speak to anyone. And before the renovation work we realized that there was too much dirt; that they throw sacks of garbage from the ninth floor, from the eighth, from the seventh floor; we intervened but we did it gently: "please, listen, we live in a livable and clean area where you have a garbage chute right on the landing where you are...where you could throw your rubbish," but...they didn't want to understand; and that's when the renovations began. The neighbor said to me "we're setting up a committee"; I said yes.

— *Ah, I see, that's how it started, the tenants' committee...*

M. Hocine Yes, because they really manipulated us. In the families classified as large families they pay the surplus for hot and cold water in the area of 4,000 or 5,000 francs.

— *The rents at that time, they were how much? Reasonable?*

M. Hocine It was reasonable, yes well, with the subsidies and all, before, before the renovations we paid 570 francs in rent...And the upkeep charges a little more, it is 4,000 and some. They totally had us, trying once to justify what they had put onto our charges, on the three alleyways, they used 500 bulbs, can you imagine? They charged us for 500 bulbs a year. There are 94 people living here (...). When that happened I said "the only way is to set up a tenants' committee," I can assure you that before I didn't want to have those problems, I said "set up the committee, I'm with you, I'll lend you a hand." We invited the tenants, we invited the CNL [national renters' association], and a fair number showed up. And I wasn't expecting that, at that point, I assure you. What did they do? I went out, I don't know, there was a woman for whom I wanted to open the door, what did they do, they got together, well, pouf! "We'll put Monsieur Hocine on [the committee]." When I arrived they told me, "it's done, Monsieur Hocine, we set up the committee, you are...", but I say "no, I don't agree"; I say "listen to me, firstly I am not in this field and in the second place I don't have enough time to do the work; you want a hand, here I am, I'll lend you a hand, but I cannot...I don't want you to offer me this job, I can't, I can't do it!" They insisted, even the renters' association, they insisted, they told me that "you're the only one to do this work."

Mme Hocine But as for the HLM office's expenses, it's normal because there are breakages, there are things burned by the children...there are children who play who...who play with things and break the lightbulbs and who (...). There are also expenses. You shouldn't say that, in any case.

M. Hocine Yes, there are expenses, but they're always the ones that gain...

— *And have rents risen since this period?*

M. Hocine They raised us before the housing subsidy came into effect and before the

work was finished. (...) We drew up a petition, given that the committee had been set up and everything, as I explained to you, we have the committee, there is the president, the vice-president, the secretary, the assistant secretary, the treasurer, and so forth; there were eight, now there are two of us. But even so, we do our work.

— *And the others who were with you got discouraged...*

M. Hocine Yes, it's too much work, it's too much of a job, and more than that, there is bad blood among the tenants and all, so well, I say right away, if you want to work, then work, if you don't, look... but I can't...

— *And the bad blood among the tenants came about...?*

M. Hocine Since the new tenants arrived and since they had this raise in the rent. Well, at that time they were doing the renovation work, they came to see me, because there are people who deserved to have their apartment redone, so I intervened. They redid everything. They came to see me: "Monsieur Hocine, listen, we're going to do something for you, we're going to do your way in and all," "No, I don't deserve it, do it for the ones who need it, me I am fine at home here," despite the fact that there are little holes and all; because when I came in it was quite disgusting and all, I did everything, wallpaper and paint. They wanted to do it for me, I said "don't do it for me, just do what's needed as you have done for the others; well, the doors are these ones, with nice windows, you take up the floor covering you replace it with a... by other tiles, do it. For everybody. Those who deserve it, do their apartments, because there are some apartments that are clearly rotting; the partitions have fallen right down. You ought to do that, not for me. I am fine here." And I keep watch. They did the doors: an agreement between the government and the project companies; they charged us 4,000 instead of 2,375 francs for the cost of the "no worry" doors...

— *What sort of doors?*

M. Hocine Reinforced doors (...). I intervened, I fought and took it quite far. In the end, they came back... (...) After I realized that there is an agreement between the HLM office and the DDE [renovation agency]. I spoke to the mayor and to the renters' association, I said "look, I shouldn't have to worry about things like this, I've had enough," and that's why the mayor said to me "No, go for it, Hocine, if there is a problem I'm backing you up," it was he who encouraged me again. And when the others arrived the French had already started to leave, take this woman [who came by] she's going to leave soon...

— *That's it, yes, an example, but she's been here a long time, since '82...*

M. Hocine If I ask one of the grannies to come up, an old lady who is 87, I think, she's been here since the creation of the... so I can vouch for it, if you want, I'll ask her, and she'll tell you. As for me, as I explained to you, I feel sympathy, because you only live once on this earth, you always have to (...), it's not because it's a Frenchwoman, even if it was an Arab woman, even if it was a Jewish woman, I'd do the same. She fell ill, she has her daughters and her kids, nobody comes to see her. I'm the one, in the morning before leaving for work, who goes up to see her because she gave me her keys; I go see her, she was sick, I make her breakfast, I give it to her in bed, I give her her pills, her medication and I take the key, I lock up, I take the key and give it back to my wife who goes up at eight in the morning to check. And she is there, she can come up to tell you, Madame, she is there and until now...

— *This is a lady... who's been living alone since the start of the HLM, here!...*

M. Hocine Yes, before, before the poor thing, she lived... but she lost her husband; she found herself quite alone. That's why I want to say, because look, today we are here, tomorrow it could be that... we aren't here any longer. But she can tell you, there was a good atmosphere, the older ones, but the new ones, no (...).

It's no longer like before

— *And among the people who leave, you are saying it's the French who left like the woman who came just now, she found housing elsewhere... People are trying to leave?*

M. Hocine Yes, they try to leave because it's no longer like before. I tell you that now, everyone is... drawn in on themselves, because you see so much nastiness, you see, that is to say, people see someone breaking in or trashing, they don't dare intervene (...). Since a family came here, it is not just one family... there are one, two, three families who have messed it up for all 94 tenants. We intervened, I even went to see them myself, I came home and I taught them a lesson in morals: "we saw you, and your parents too, we saw you when you were born, why are you doing these things? You want to do them? I won't keep you. Do them far away, far away." At one o'clock in the morning, at two in the morning, you hear the toot, toot, toot, of their horns everywhere, and it's a drug meeting here.

— *Does it bother everyone?*

M. Hocine Of course, it bothers everyone, of course it bothers everyone! Look, you are at home here... but you have to understand that one day when a friend comes to see you, he goes back and what do they say? They say that it's filled only with Arabs, what do they say? They go back, they come up with - I'm sorry - crap like "look how the Arabs behave!"

— *It discredits everyone?*

M. Hocine That's right, yes, because he doesn't see (...) he's going to tell everyone, he's going to say "they're all alike," you see? And we've tried everything, you see, we've tried everything... And that time I said that in the end... I have to yell a little. I got involved. I went to see the parents. I went to tell them that it's their problem, I said "listen, do something, if you... you, the parents, don't react, who is going to react?" It's not right. I know that I have three kids, if I'm brought something expen-

sive I say "where did you get that?" I say to the parents who say nothing at all, who don't even react, "well, do something, you have kids, you have to educate them, not let them run around like that, keep an eye on them, bring them up right"... One parent said to me "listen, but nowadays, listen, you know, the new generation..." I said "no, it's not the new generation..." I said "I don't blame the kids, I never blame the children, I blame you, you. You are the only ones responsible, because if you had been stricter with your kids from the beginning, then as they were growing up you could be less strict, could be a little less strict, right, if in the beginning you had been stricter with your kids, they would know how to lead their lives." There are parents, fine, who showed they understood and other people who said to me "listen, it's none of your business, it's..." You see, look at the problem already. I want to say that because... I want to say, we're not the ones, the Arabs, who made this ghetto. We're not the ones who made the ghetto, it's society, and I don't want to blame the prefecture because they have a certain percentage of apartments here, and the mayor's office has so many percent. The HLM office, what does it want? The main thing is that money comes in. When I was home in Tunisia, before housing someone you got information about them, you couldn't bring them in like this, you have to get information, as I explained countless times at meetings, I said "listen, when you are going to house someone, I am not against it, I don't say you don't house them, on the contrary I am in a situation like them, I am part of the working class, but at least get some information, we already have enough problems." (...) All the French people who leave in the main, who do you put in, you put in Arabs; and you are the ones who have created this ghetto. And afterwards you say "the housing project is a ghetto." It's not a ghetto, you're the ones who created it with your own hands. You mustn't blame the Arabs because the Arabs can live together, they'll be able to get along. But you are the

ones who have created it; and each incident that happens, "it's the Arabs." I say "even a little thing like that will be written up in the newspaper as 'a North African'! But when it's a Frenchman who does it or a European, no!" And yet France, France is a country... it's a democratic country, you can speak, speak openly, that is. And yet I assure you I've already almost had problems with a... even with the press and all. Because of my frankness, they didn't want, they didn't want, that is to say...

— *They didn't want to hear?*

M. Hocine That's it, they didn't want to hear. And despite that we are still here, we defend the tenants, we defend them against people who put, that is, against people who lay a problem on the immigrants, because the immigrants, listen, the immigrants are not the Spanish, they're not the Portuguese, they're not the Turks, they're not... The immigrants are the North Africans, the Tunisians, the Algerians, the Moroccans! Because once, recently, in a meeting of the area council there is a guy from the UDF [center-right party], the UDF there, he said, "you know, the immigrants..." I said to him, "Monsieur, the immigrants, but before using this word 'immigrants'... really, who are the immigrants? Who are you aiming at, tell me, who are you aiming at?" (...) We almost came to blows in front of the mayor and all. In the end I told him "listen, I'm telling you, the next time when we're in a meeting, be careful with your words, you should no longer use the term 'immigrants.'" After, when we left the table, he came up, "Monsieur Hocine, excuse me..." I said "there are no excuses for this, no excuses. We were discussing at a round table; where did this come from since you don't even know me." There are many times where I really took them on.

When I hear "immigrants"... I can't control myself

— *Yes, many times when you fought with the...*

M. Hocine Yes, but in the same way, listen, I assure you because it concerns me! The

Algerian, Tunisian or Moroccan, he is only an Arab, he is just an immigrant like me; before why did you need them, you brought them from their home and now that they have built your France, now you don't need them anymore? You have to be logical. And I'm sorry, Madame, if I... it's not that I want to shock you, but it's my frankness; that's how I am. That's how I am. I don't dare, in the meetings sometimes, when I hear "immigrants," that's all I need, I can't control myself. What do I have more than you, or you, you have more than me? We are all human beings. You have to help each other in this life in the state we're in, with a crisis that is in any case very severe, you see, the well-off can help the poor, the not-so well-off can help the poor, and so on.

[*He comments on the situation in the Third World and the Gulf War.*]

— *You were saying when there was that woman about her housing, you were saying that the housing office here had suggested you leave, had given you other housing and that you didn't want to leave?*

M. Hocine I didn't want to leave, I didn't want to leave; because first I've been here since '72, because my kids were born here and it's going to be... like in a foreign country again.

— *Yes that's it, you would have to start again from scratch elsewhere.*

Mme Hocine Personally, I want to move.

M. Hocine She wanted to move, but I...

— *You wanted to go where?*

Mme Hocine Some place quiet. That's what I was looking for. I'm looking for some place that is quiet, truly...

— *Here you are disturbed?*

Mme Hocine It's not that we are disturbed, but it is mixed now, I am not a racist but it's too much, too much... it's not like before. All the neighbors from before, they have... they moved and all, so we no longer feel at ease, like this year when we went to Tunisia, they tried to climb up the walls (...).

— *You don't feel at ease?*

Mme Hocine No, and my children they never go out, they are at home all the time, they never go out...

M. Hocine It's true because even I don't want them to socialize round here.

— *But they don't do activities outside, on the outside?*

M. Hocine Yes, there are activities... I don't know... they can go, fine, they went once on a skiing trip one Wednesday. But when we let them go, automatically they are obliged to see their friends.

— *Yes, I see and you don't want that?*

M. Hocine I try, it's not that I don't want, I try because education is necessary; first and foremost you need education, you have to say to the kids "that and that, you can't do that, even if he does that to you, you must not... you mustn't say back to him, you must..." So you make the kids understand; but from letting them go out, it's everyday during these vacations, from letting them go out and visit, in the end what happens? In your opinion, what happens? They are influenced. And sometimes I tell them to go out. They're the ones who tell me no. They're the ones who tell me no because, listen, they lack nothing. They have everything.

Mme Hocine Recently [*indicating one of the sons*] he wanted a computer, we bought it for him.

M. Hocine Yes, he has everything.

Mme Hocine [*Smiles*] The little ones have their toys.

My only success is our children's studies

— *What school are they in?*

Mme Hocine Two of them are in junior high school and the youngest one is in the first year and the big one in the third. And the baby, he goes across the street. When he goes out I watch him from the balcony until he goes inside, until he is in school, I watch him and when he comes home (...).

— *And you know what they are going to do after collège, after the final year?*

Mme Hocine Well, he is going to continue, the big one wants to be a pilot, I don't know if he's going to make it, and the second one, he still has no idea, he studies...

— *After collège he wants to go to the lycée?*

Mme Hocine To the lycée, yes. Of course.

M. Hocine To the lycée. And yet we have fellow Tunisians who are fine; we have a family opposite, there, the daughter she has gone on to...

Mme Hocine At the university, and what's more it's even her second year...

M. Hocine Her second year. I have another fellow countryman at (...), it's his third year of faculty.

— *Yes, they are studying well?...*

M. Hocine Yes, they're doing fine, fine.

Mme Hocine Yes, they are good people these... They are peaceful, yes, there are six or seven Tunisian families...

M. Hocine There's not a lot of us here; there are six of us here, six Tunisian families, we get along very nicely, you see. There are still Algerians, well, there is a good understanding but there is always a distrust, you see?

Mme Hocine We don't have the same character. It's not racism... It's not racism but we don't have the same... I don't know... [*silence*].

M. Hocine If my kid does something and you see it, I want you to come tell me so. But if I see someone whose kid does a stupid thing, I'm going to tell him and he tells me "no, my son is a saint!" So I don't want to get into these problems, I want my sons to be with me, to be... fine, I know who they are playing with and I really want (...) I say "listen, your friends, I don't care, outside the house I don't care; but be on your guard, be careful, the boyfriends and girlfriends, as soon as you step into the house, no boyfriend or girlfriend, I don't know anyone... Outside choose your pals, you are old enough, you don't have too many aces up your sleeve, choose your pals and then you can select the ones you want."

[...]

I am working, I do without, she does without. They do not do without. I say to him "all in all, my only success, as far as I'm concerned, is your success in your studies,

that's all; I don't want anything from you; I don't want anything from you because when you grow up, you are going to... no, no, I don't want anything. No, manage on your own when you are grown up, when you have your future, you are going to set up a home like I did and so forth, but I want nothing from you, the only thing... is that you do well at school." I say, "because for myself I don't care now, with my little pension, I can live, but you" – I say – "your future, you are still young, you have your life ahead of you, you have to try to... because it's no longer the 1940s, '50s, it's no longer the same, no longer the same."

[...]

The problem when the incident occurred around here, it wasn't the young people from around here. It's kids who wanted to sabotage the mayor (...). Later we learned the National Front was there and all, you see, the extreme right and they wanted to sabotage him, the poor fellow. And I caught three Europeans with a movie camera, and the camera was right around the corner from here at the time of the riot, I surprised three of them who had influenced the youths to go burn the supermarket. I was three yards away...

Mme Hocine Some journalists, what do they want? They want scandals and stuff, fine, when it's not part of their job.

M. Hocine So, it was staged, it was staged. [Interruption due to the visit of a neighbor and a brief discussion about the children's vacation and education.]

— *Once they started going to school, you didn't think anymore about going to work in Tunisia or things like that?*

M. Hocine No.

— *Now you're thinking of staying here.*

M. Hocine Staying here, because listen, I am now 50 years old, to start my life over back there, it's... you see... I've had kids; before, I was single, I didn't care, but now, given that I have a responsibility, I have to see it through. Meaning make sacrifices. For who? Not for me (...) for them. Because I am the only one responsible. Because the government's not responsible

for them, it's me, in the first place it's me (...) it's me. So I am sacrificing everything for them. And when they are adults, when that moment comes, they'll do the same, but sometimes at the table we talk, I say "listen now, don't do what I do now, because you see, I have to obey orders; you see, when I get up in the morning, when I come home at night, well I wouldn't want you to be bossed around like me; you should be successful; do everything necessary because you have the time;" they at least know that "you don't lack anything at all, but it could be that I lacked a little, but right now you lack nothing at all, you have everything in your grasp; try not to be ordered around by others."

— *You don't want them to find the same kind of work you got where you receive...*

M. Hocine ... that's right, orders.

[*M. Hocine recounts the racist incident at the factory which led him to leave the worker's position he had held for ten years to work in temporary jobs which allowed him to avoid the constant face-to-face with his fellow workers. The agency for temporary work has offered M. Hocine a job in another town.*]

— *You prefer to stay?*

M. Hocine Stay here. I am very used to it here. But, Madame, those who are racists say that France is for the French. But what are we? Before, what were we then? We lived with the French, we lived in the same place as the French and went to school with the French, we were neighbors. And as for myself, personally I never left, I never renounced France. France is my second country. You see, I am grateful to it. One day I would like with all my heart, I would really like it if we would sit like this and discuss things. Because their level of education is higher than mine, but I can take them on, I can tell them what I think; I can tell them. But to get there, it's very difficult.

[*M. Hocine denounces the lack of faith among television journalists with regard to their promises to the residents of the housing project: not content with doing their reports by excluding the residents of the*

area who were nevertheless ready to participate, they ended up cutting down to seven minutes a program promised for an hour and assigning it a more modest place at the end of another program on high schools.]

[...]

Everything they say about the suburbs

M. Hocine Usually you think about young people, that's normal. But you have to think of the whole city, of this whole place. The young people still have time. But given that he went to some trouble, that he came, he's the one who suggested to us... sometimes there are people who have other things to do with their time, so they gave up what they were doing to come to see him. And in the end, just look... And I said to him, I grabbed him, I told him like you and me, I let him have it. I told him "you inform people, France, the whole of France, almost the whole world, they listen to you; and you dare to say it's a dormitory town, I said, what's a dormitory town? A dormitory town ghetto?"

— *What's that?*

M. Hocine What's that, exactly, I said to him "what's that?" But he told me "Monsieur, I heard it from other colleagues." I said "but no, listen, I saw you, I heard you, you were the first to say it." I said "because at the time of the incidents it hadn't been said yet. You were the one who used this word, a dormitory town ghetto."

— *And that gives a bad image of the town...*

M. Hocine A bad image, and yet I say to him "you (...) have lived here, you ought not to have a bad image." He told me "no, Monsieur Hocine, I assure you that I heard..." I said to him "listen, Monsieur, with all due respect, it is a lie you are telling in the news, you and your colleagues, and you're hiding the truth. But I know that to fill up the copy, you have to put in a little more to complicate the image, to complicate the affair. I don't hold it against you, I hold it against those who direct you, from that day on." And yet I have sympathy for

him, I assure you, but from the day he said that...

— *But you think that TV programs have played a harmful role?*

M. Hocine Ah, yes, yes; listen, it's disinformation...

— *The residents didn't recognize themselves in the programs?*

M. Hocine No, they didn't recognize themselves in the programs. Because everything they say about the suburbs, everything that happened you know, I assure you, listen, I don't know, it could be that I'm not the right person, but there are others who are better placed than I am; everything they say about the suburbs is wrong.

(...) During the incidents there were young people from around here, but the majority came from outside. To see what was going on and on top of that when they saw the stores, bingo! They went in, they had everything... But that day if you had seen — I was there — if you had seen... but you cannot imagine... you might have thought they were starving, they were throwing themselves on everything; they threw themselves on everything, they were like...

— *...as if they have been deprived of everything and...*

M. Hocine Right, the supermarket was burning, and while it burned they came back with full trolleys and took... tobacco stuff, whiskey, cigarettes, but you can't imagine, you had to see it. After the fire had spread and I was forced to make all the kids leave the... and all the buildings...

— *They didn't realize the danger, the kids, then?*

M. Hocine But there were even adults, as I explained, families who heard the news: "so, look what's happening." Bingo! They all came, people with their cars, they put stuff in the cars, and with the fire spreading everywhere I was forced to evacuate aisle 7 and aisle 8 because at that moment the fire, the wind in that direction... I evacuated everybody. All evacuated, all; all evacuated, all the families, not one stayed behind, not one! I myself went up to see them and at that moment the elevator was out, every-

thing was out. And to top it all, tear gas; the CRS riot police were on the other side, that is to say, people were there; they threw tear gas bombs. You see, it was an awful afternoon we lived through. Even in the evening you heard things exploding everywhere, everywhere... I'm not afraid myself when there are things like that, I forge ahead... All the same... There was no doctor, there was nothing, but there was a hose at least to disperse people with a stream of water there, a water cannon, but listen, it was staged, they wanted to sabotage the mayor whatever the cost. Because he had... he had done a lot. He had done a lot (...).

— *And since then, the events benefited the National Front or not?*

M. Hocine Ah no, on the contrary... because I insisted, I saw the second day... the tobacconist, they burned it again, and well, who maintained order? It was our young people here. Our young people, I saw them, they all set up barricades so that cars couldn't get in, they helped the firemen and even the police, they maintained order. They weren't in on it. You see the press, why wasn't it written, because I have it all, everything! [*he shows papers*]. I have it all here...

— *You have a press file?*

M. Hocine Yes, yes, they don't put in the truth. See, they don't put in the truth, it's not here, look.

March 1991

Open letter from the residents of the housing project to a television journalist

For the preparation of the program devoted to the housing project on 6 November. During this meeting you explained to us your program's aim and its rules, and reminded us that it would only be made if all the conditions were present; in this agreed-upon framework, we were ready to participate since it allowed for expression by residents of the area and could help build a more positive image of the town. We shared our opinions with you, our observations, and you took note of them. One week later, some of us were contacted again outside of the rules that had been laid down, the organization of a meal and a discussion held in your presence at the home of one family; such an attitude, like the proposition you made, is totally unacceptable. We were then informed that the program had been canceled. We understand that certain conditions might have required that and we are not blaming you. But imagine our surprise on learning that a program devoted to the high school movement would leave little

room for our housing project, what dishonesty after the richness of our debate, how could you think that seven minutes and the absence of residents and representatives of the town would suffice to speak seriously about our housing project? In addition, not one of us, not even the young people who had made an effort to meet you one Saturday night and talk to you, was contacted again for this program. And none of our suggestions was taken up; this is a total lack of respect. From this experience, we will retain the feeling of having been duped and we can no longer have any trust in you; nevertheless an honest program about our housing project remains to be made. We heartily wish for it, but we will make it without you.

— The representatives of the area council and the tenants committee

The journalist's response

Journalist in charge of the news magazine. I am very touched by the letter that you

have sent to me and I insist on thanking you for the very particular interest you have shown in the preparation of our program. Unfortunately, through no fault of our own, the debate could not take place. In fact, as you may have learned in the printed press, Monsieur Jack Lang, Minister of Culture and Communication, who was to have met the residents of your housing project, withdrew the very day of our

second location scouting. As the unfolding of news events dictated, we chose to orient the subject of our program to the problem of the high school students, leaving room, however, for the events in your housing project; I would also like to point out that three representatives of your housing project were present in our studio and that a report was done on your town and its residents. With all my regrets. (...)

Patrick Champagne

The Last Difference

Building superintendents are extremely well placed to supply, in probably its most pointed form, the experience of occupants in the “problem” projects. Indeed they are the first to experience the incidents or the dramas that put their mark on life in these neighborhoods (residents or shopkeepers pushed over the edge by repeated break-ins who shoot some kid, police “excesses,” looting, etc.). In charge of the upkeep of the buildings, they ceaselessly clean up and repair the vandalism, when they don’t have to suffer physical assaults or reprisal attacks on their cars or their apartments. Unlike other social agents who work in these neighborhoods (such as educators, teachers, policemen, social workers, etc.) they do not have the opportunity of cutting themselves off from this often wearing situation, even briefly – one of the superintendents interviewed talks about “stress” – since they live at their job site and can be called upon by the residents at any time, day or night. Even more than the residents they are stuck in these rousing zones, their only and often disappointed hope being to receive a transfer out to a quieter project.

Married, in his fifties, worn out by work, Raymond T., who has been a superintendent for seven years now, received me very casually, dressed in the blue overalls that he wears to work; with him is his wife, also dressed in the gray blouse she usually wears (she works for the office as well), and she joins in from time to time either to confirm or to correct a detail in her husband’s explanations. The large but rather gloomy apartment where they live is located on the second floor of a building in a large suburban project, like so many that were built in the 1970s, which we’ll call Villeneuve [‘Newtown’]. The living room is crowded with simple furniture, a table, chairs, a tall sideboard whose shelves, behind glass doors, are crowded with knick-knacks and dolls displayed for the most part in the boxes they came in. A plastic stag’s head hangs on the wall. You can hear the song of the many birds that live in a large cage located in a corner of the kitchen, next to the small balcony full of plants and flowers.

If Raymond T., dispassionately and almost with the cold detachment of the informant is able to find the words to describe what happens in this project day to day, it is because he lives here a little like a stranger. Indeed, he ended up here through the vicissitudes of life, this huge project representing for him nothing more than a place of work. On weekends and during vacations, what he wants more than anything is to leave for the countryside with the trailer hitched to the back of his car in order to, as he says, get back to “nature” and “the songs of the

birds," something, as he says, that brings back his rural roots. He is in fact from a small town not far from Dijon. His mother was a nurse, and his father "had not gone to school like they do these days" but had nevertheless acquired on his own "a phenomenal education" and became a supervisor in a sawmill. Raymond quit school at the age of 13 "without any training," since, as he himself says, he was not "very keen on school," and started to work very young as a docker. (He has one sister who stayed in the area; married to a carpenter, she no longer works, but for a time she was supervisor in a cleaning firm.) Raymond's wife comes from the same region as he does and also left school very early. She comes from a very humble family background: her parents were woodcutters and she has two brothers; one is a house painter and the other is in charge of the upkeep of a chateau.

Raymond was 25 when, finding his job too physically demanding and not well enough paid, he decided to leave his region for a large regional metropolis. He worked there for nine years as a carpenter but had to change jobs after a very serious accident (he fell several yards to the ground when the scaffolding collapsed). Fifty percent handicapped, he then looked for a less "strenuous" position. A door-to-door salesman of farm products who "knew everyone" in the neighborhood found him the superintendent position that he has today. He is in charge of the upkeep of the buildings (repairing the garages, welding the pipes, touching up the paint) while his wife, who never had to work before, cleans the common areas (stairs and landings). They are housed by the project office for free and receive a monthly salary of about 10,000 francs.

Raymond T.'s life has been difficult and he counts himself lucky to have landed this job. He considers the kids with a certain indulgence and comprehension, sharing something of their misfortune. The other two superintendents in Ville-neuve, whose interviews follow, are far less "understanding," largely because they work in the neighborhood where they were born. This shows up in the less detached way they speak, which brings out their very strong exasperation; they feel at home and defend "their" project against invading "foreigners." The interview took place in the apartment of Thierry C., who has been a caretaker in this extremely dilapidated part of the ZUP for only a few months. Nevertheless, he has always lived in a similar project located nearby and therefore has a good sense of the life in this neighborhood that is also a little his own. Contacted by the project head to answer our questions, he asked Christian T., another superintendent who has worked in the area for longer than he has, to participate in the discussion. Sylvie, Thierry's wife, who is temporarily working for the HLM office to help the residents, mostly from the Maghreb and Africa, to fill in the forms for the current renovations, spontaneously joins in the discussion. The group situation thus created progressively transformed the interview into a frank and often animated conversation, where Sylvie's point of view was quite different from that of her husband.

Thierry and Christian share a similar view of things and often react in rather the same way. Both of working-class origin, they belong to those large families

marked by misfortune and difficulties (the early death of his mother for one and the serious work-related accident of his father for the other). Each in his own way became a superintendent by necessity, but they love their project and these suburbs they have never left and where they grew up. They both find their job interesting, for the one because it is not too restricting, for the other because it allows him to meet people: "it's a job I like, you can talk with people, you're always outside (. . .) and then sometimes, you can manage to strike up a friendship." In view of their resources, the apartment that goes with the job constitutes a crucial advantage. They would be "comfy" if only the projects had not become unlivable. In short, they take very badly to the constant deterioration of these areas to which they are attached (in both senses) by their past and by their present.

Yet some minor differences separate them, mainly based on the fact that since they do not belong to the same segments of the working class their social trajectories have not been the same. Short, with a round face and long disheveled hair, slightly overweight, 35 years old at the time of the interview, Christian knows what poverty is. Of course he condemns them but he also understands a little these young people who are as resourceless and lost as he was at their age. He is, by the way, dressed up as a reformed tough guy, in black leather jacket and black tracksuit pants that are worn and a little dirty. He comes from a family of five children where life was not easy. His mother worked as "cleaning personnel" in a school for handicapped children. His father, now 70, was a ditch-digger but he has not worked for the past 20 years following an accident caused by a stolen car. Family life was profoundly affected by this drama. Along with his brothers and sisters, Christian was put in the care of a foster family (farmers from the area) by the public care organization (Assistance Publique) for some time, since their mother could no longer take care of them and most of the furniture had been repossessed. He quit school without a qualification at the age of 16 and worked as a packer for two years before doing odd construction jobs for about ten years. He then followed an apprenticeship and received his license to drive heavy vehicles. He found a job but a year later found himself unemployed, his company having had to shut down for economic reasons. Since he could no longer pay his rent, the project office offered him a position as superintendent. Still single, he has very bad relations with all the members of his family, each one being more a source of trouble than profit for the others: he is now looking after his aged and invalid parents, he has quarreled with two of his brothers, and maintains only sporadic relations with another brother who is an unemployed decorator and a sister who runs a "hotel-restaurant" in the Ardèche (a "good position," he says).

Thierry, who is 38, is a lot more repressive, almost temperamental and little inclined to commiserate with the young people whom he holds primarily responsible for their own troubles. The eldest of eight children, he is from a working-class milieu. The family was very upset by his mother's early death. He has avoided downward social mobility only thanks to a form of moral rigor he owes to his father's teachings and that shows up even in the way he dresses. Thin, with short,

neatly combed hair and a well-groomed mustache, he is dressed sportily in neat jeans and a sweatshirt. He tells us that his father, a truck driver, upon becoming a widower, tried his best to “do right by his little tribe.” After having gotten their CAP certificates as seamstresses, the three girls more or less made it, in great part thanks to their marriages: one runs a restaurant in Béziers, the other a clothing department at the Galeries Lafayette department store, and the third is a technician in a pharmaceutical lab. The boys’ careers are more chaotic: after having been placed very young as apprentices with nearby shopkeepers (baker, butcher), his four brothers quit these jobs after their military service because they did not like them much and became truck drivers like their father or warehouse stockkeepers. Thierry quit school very early, at 15, to become a packer in the company where his father worked. He quickly left this job that he found too exhausting and did odd jobs until he himself became a truck driver for about ten years. At 35 he gave up because he was “fed up with the hours” and found a position as superintendent at a stadium. When he was looking for a larger apartment the project office offered him, along with the apartment that he currently occupies, a position as superintendent in this difficult area. Married now for ten years, he has two children in school. His wife Sylvie, whom he met at a dance, comes from a slightly higher social background. One of her brothers is a primary school teacher and the other, like her father, is a rugby coach. With a qualification in accounting, she got a computing diploma through evening classes but could not find a job in this sector. She now does odd jobs and “takes what’s there,” meaning cleaning jobs in high schools.

Probably because Thierry managed to make it only through conducting himself in a strictly moral way, his sole protection against slipping down the social scale, he tends to react strongly to the behavior of the young people in the project and, due to an understandable resentment, to become repressive in his turn. How could he excuse these gangs of kids, North African for the most part, who impose their law in “his” project? Why not use a tough method (patrols by the riot police) since when he was a child he himself experienced such a thing during similar troubles, and since it worked? As a mother, Sylvie tends to be more indulgent toward children; she has also received a less strict education than her husband. Although she willingly admits that it is not easy, she leans towards dialogue and debate with the kids and thinks that persuasion works better than repression, provided that you make the effort to put yourself in their place. “Try to put yourself in the place of these kids,” she says to her husband. “They know that whatever happens there will be nothing . . . their only escape is violence, but not violence to hurt people. It is more a cry for help that says ‘pay attention, we are here, we exist.’” This attitude owes a lot to Sylvie’s social characteristics (notably the relative weight of her cultural capital), which are rather close of those of social workers, but also to her militant past “on the left” (in the past she belonged to the “Christian Working Youth,” then for a time to the “Communist Youth”). Still, a certain confusion stirs in her like an undercurrent. Her activism has lost its dogma and its certainties. The economic crisis, which keeps her from finding a

professional position matching her qualifications and her hopes, leads her, partly due to the collapse of Communism as a reality and a hope, to reject politics. Disoriented, she too retreats behind morality; all political parties disgust her since they want to “teach moral lessons to others” while they themselves “are corrupt to the core.”

Right down to their internal contradictions, these superintendents are quite typical examples. Like most of the inhabitants in these projects, they are not here by choice but necessity, either economic or administrative: they can't or won't go somewhere else and must stay in these areas where everything leads to conflict, social decay and welfare. Their social trajectory scarcely predisposes them to understand, or even to accept, the violent and sometimes devastating forms that youthful revolt can take. From the lower classes themselves, they owe not having fallen further to a strict, even brutal upbringing, to an often drastic reduction in their ambitions and their needs – in short, to the effort they had to exert to survive or to succeed. They can judge these young people only from a basically moralistic point of view: “there is not enough discipline,” “what you need is to put back into line those who do not want to follow a straight path, that's all,” etc. They think that unemployment is simply another poor excuse for laziness: “all the jobs are too tiring for them but [they are not too tired] to steal...”; “you have to admit that the guy who really wants to can find a job,” etc. The thefts are nothing more than the flip side of a life as parasites: “they don't work, they just live by... by small thefts, you know.” The consumerist aspirations of the young people appear out of proportion compared with the ones they had in their own recent past, and those that they still have to confine themselves to today: “they don't know what moderation is,” “they want everything and they are never happy when they get it,” “for them, it's ‘we want, want, want.’” And as for “vandalism” and drugs, they are nothing more than the direct result of the parents' failure: “The kids around here, they do anything they want, their parents let them.”

Still, since they also had to put up with the same things, they are not unaware of the true causes of this situation: they know that unemployment weighs on these kids in a way that is probably much heavier than in their own cases and they are willing to recognize that deviant behavior owes a lot to the anomic situation created by immigration – especially the regrouping into the projects – that led to a collapse of parental authority. They also know that television, the pervasive presence of advertising, and, even more, the presence of shopping centers legally required to locate right in the heart of these underprivileged neighborhoods, have all modified the young people's hopes. But everything takes place as if they did not really want to know, maybe fearing that understanding too much might lead to excusing this behavior that they judge morally unacceptable. Thus, while describing the visit of athletes from the Eastern bloc countries, one of the superintendents regretted that they had been shown the city's shopping center because of the unsatisfied needs this would create, without realizing that the thefts or even the looting of these shopping centers located within their project largely followed the same logic.

The rejection of these young people by the “poor whites” – a rejection that it would be too simplistic to assimilate to “racism” – is extremely strong, as the interview makes clear, despite the prudence displayed by the interviewees. The superintendents frequently leave a sentence unfinished in order not to have to say words that are too marked, which might shock the interviewer: “They cannot be integrated here, you see, because they are just...”; “there a lot who are... they live off...”; “the government, doesn’t do enough...”; and so on. Unlike members of more affluent social classes who can leave when the situation becomes unbearable, these “poor whites” react all the more violently since they are doomed to stay. They feel almost insulted by these segments of the population who generally came after them, and they cannot keep silent about their aggressive attitude and trafficking of all sorts. They see, with muted rage, “the best” of their tenants move out (“the real French, well, they left”). Despite real efforts they have all made at some stage to help these young people, they cannot understand the feeling of injustice that is at the core of their deviant behavior. How could they understand that, paradoxically, these kids feel more French than native French people do? Unlike the immigrants who arrived in France 30 years before and who, despite a life of poverty, stayed put without ever complaining, having always felt grateful and thankful to the country that welcomed them, their children, who have always lived in France, want to be treated as French (“when you give them something, they are not even grateful,” says one of the superintendents with astonishment) and they are correspondingly resentful of their marginalization.

This is undoubtedly one of the foundations for the powerful seductiveness – visible even in the denials (“I am not for a dictatorship, but that would show them”) – exercised today upon workers and small shopkeepers (who are also very vulnerable to this petty pilfering) by all the political campaigns that press for hard-line methods and the expulsion of these “foreigners” who don’t know how to stay in their place, and worse, who think that they are at home everywhere.

with HLM caretakers

— *interview by Patrick Champagne*

“I’ll vote for Le Pen, that’ll scare them shitless”

— *You’ve lived here since...*

Christian I was born in Villeneuve. I was born in ’56, I have always lived in Villeneuve. Well, of course, I am not saying that I never left...

— *And when was it built?*

Christian Well, some of the buildings are over 20 years old, this one I think was

begun in ’64. That was when the *pieds noirs* were coming back from Algeria. It worked out for them, because the *pieds noirs* all lived in tents when they first came in the area. And at that time there were no apartments and they were building the project here, the HLM. I remember that we were kids, since the first ones that went

up were these, all of these here. And they were building them with train rails. You know, slabs [prefab walls]. As the floors were going up, they would put in the rails and slide the slabs in, it would go fast, you see. So then, back in those days, I'm telling you, there were only *pieds noirs* and we got along fine. And then after that it... (...) Because people got fed up and then they left. How can you live in them? People are crowded in the apartments. There, just above me, the same apartment as mine, they have three rooms, and they have... they have nine kids, there are 11 of them, above them there are 12 and the kids here do as they please, just as they please. The parents let them. Scooters are coming and going, down in the basement, it never stops, it absolutely never stops. So they muck around until two in the morning, they hang out in the walkways, they change the oil, they leave the oil in the walkways, so it's really shitty. And sometimes they stay out until 10 or 11 in the evening. (...) In the beginning, things were nice here. There were not all these buildings, there was not all the stuff there, there were fewer kids, there was less... I don't know how to say it... it was not quite so much of a mishmash... And then, you have to admit that things change. At some point they decided to rent out the apartments again and they put in who they wanted. (...) Some Algerian families moved in at the same time as some *pieds noir* families, you see? But they never moved out of their apartments, they always stayed. It is not these families that give the others a hard time. Some of the apartments belong to the prefecture, some of them belong to the local authority and they are... well, something has to be said, everything that belongs to the prefecture, they put anybody they want in it, so it brings us people, people who were in a different project before, where nobody wanted them, they were kicked out and then shoved in here.

Thierry All those undesirable families, like he says, it's true that, who had to... who had to deal with them? It's Villeneuve! (...)

At the services [*of the project office*] they noticed that things were falling apart and stuff like that, apartments were empty and so they said to themselves, the project also needs to make money; so they said, we'll bring more people into Villeneuve, they brought in more people, and now the kids, they grew up and they're all pains in the ass.

— *Those people, what sort of background do they have? Do they work?*

Thierry For the most part, the parents, yes... For the most part you have the father who, well in most cases he arrived in '53, in '54, he has always worked; now he is retired. The wife never worked; so now the kids, the older ones, are unemployed, they can't find jobs. So what do they do? They steal cars, break into stores, stuff like that, and drugs. And I must say something else now, it's that the kids all know each other, in all the neighborhoods, so if they all want to gather together in a certain place there is no way to stop them.

— *It got worse around what time?*

Christian So! Well, it started here around '81. It was unbearable here, we couldn't sleep, a car was stolen every five minutes. You could hear guns, garage doors were rammed with stolen cars, joyriding everywhere, on the avenues. When you see kids who were 13 years old driving BMWs, you could hardly see them in them, just the tops of their heads, and then they behaved like idiots; so at the time the cops were fed up, they would no longer come, everyone did as they pleased and then it was a complete rot.

People who are more or less OK are leaving

Thierry There is not enough discipline in Villeneuve, because I lived for three years in M. [*neighboring project*] when they had the same stuff; I was there in M.; they called in the riot police, who stayed there quite a few months; they stayed six months, machines guns, fatigues, ranger combat boots, radios on their back, day and night, day and night, it was nonstop and things got calmed down, see... In Villeneuve, they do as they please, as they please... especially now

that there is a general tension [*the Gulf War*]. They are even saying that it is going to start all over again, that it will be much worse.

Christian They're the only ones who do that. As for me, I don't want to get personal, I don't want to be racist with them, but as for me, I say...

Thierry [*with an ironic tone*] It's the "Beur generation"!

Christian That's it! But they are not alone, there's even some French, some French kids who are with them and they are happy, really happy to... When you are called at two in the morning to go into one of the alleys, you find yourself in the middle of 40 kids in an alley, and they're all drunk, and then you get insulted, I went myself twice, now I say no, that's it.

— *How old are they?*

Thierry Between 18 and 20...

Christian There are even some who are older than that... There's one thing, it's my own opinion, what I don't understand is the parents, how can they leave kids who are... on the average 14, 15 years old, all night long. So then you see them come out of one of the alleys at night, they take their scooters, they go downtown, a bunch of them, and they come back with stolen scooters, it doesn't bother the parents. And when you call the cops — it's sad to say it but that's the way it is, you call them, the cops in Villeneuve, and they say "well now, we don't want to come up anymore." They no longer want to come because now they're scared. They're scared, that's all (...)

Thierry Well yes, what do you expect, everything's got into a terrible state. It's the deterioration...

Christian We have some painters, we send a young guy, so he repainted all the entryways, a real good job, it looked real nice, see. It was really good with new mailboxes, everything, nice boxes and all that. They totaled everything! They smashed the lot! They broke the works! They like it when it's all spoiled, broken down. You work, you change everything, you call up some com-

panies again and the next day, well, you find it completely torn up all over again. You put in some electric locks, electric bolts on the doors, you put them in on Monday morning, by Tuesday evening there's nothing left, it's all broken.

Thierry I think we must find a solution for people like these. Because it is all very nice when you hear Monsieur C. [*Villeneuve's mayor*] saying "we will build social housing for difficult families." And where is he going to put all these social housing units? He'll build high rises in the middle of a field and put them in there? I say it's not worth it. You have to find a property far from Villeneuve and then offer it to these undesirable families, send them to these apartments and leave them to themselves. It's bad to talk like this, but I think it is the best solution. Because it's true, you have some families who have lived here for the past 18 or 20 years, who are clients of the project office, well, when you hear them talk, they say "we're fed up with this, it's all dilapidated, they put in new mailboxes, they're all broken." They can even do it now with steel doors, they open the steel doors, they will take everything from your home; if there is a balcony, they go inside even if the owner is sleeping, they steal the TV set. And what did we find out, well, that it's always the same characters (...). What can you expect from people like these! And then there is the business with the cars... So for the people who live in Villeneuve you need to have a steel door, put bars on your windows, drive an old car... But that's not acceptable!

Christian You drive your car in, you go upstairs for two minutes, you come back down, your door window is broken and your radio is gone. We can't live like this any longer. This is what I don't understand, like, I don't know... [*imitating in a slightly ridiculous and effeminate tone*] "leave them alone, let these poor kids live, let them be," but that's no longer possible! After that, you wonder why we cannot keep any tenants other than the North Africans. Why? Those guys, until three in the

morning, they are down in the alleys talking, drinking, and smoking, rolling joints. And afterwards they are completely stoned when they smoke and drink at the same time. We go out, we start telling them something and we get every insult in the book; and then the next day, when you want to drive your car to work, the tires have been slashed, the windshield is smashed, everything is broken, see. (...) You cannot tell them anything. Just let them be. So we... we, the caretakers, it's true we talked among ourselves and we said, "now they can smash up everything, we don't want to repair anymore, there's no point."

[...]

There's not enough discipline

— *What sort of contacts do you have with the kids, how does it happen?*

Christian With the kids nothing, it's not worth it. For them, we are stool pigeons, we are rotten, we are this, we are that, we are anything they want, it is pointless to talk to them. I have good talks with them, but what you hear with the kids, what they say is, "what I want is a rec. room, we want a rec. facility, there will be no more vandalism, this will stop, that will stop." (...) When we do the building renovations, we should take some kids from some of the neighborhoods and put them to work with the painting and electrical companies. There are a lot of kids there who say "if we are the ones who work with the painting and electrical companies, we would do the work and we'd keep the others from coming back to this neighborhood," because, as they tell me all the time, "if we were the ones who had repainted the stairs, and done some of the work, we'd see to it that there would be no more vandalism."

Thierry No, I don't agree.

Christian But that is what they tell me.

Thierry Because you just said it, "the others, we'd keep the others from coming back." What are they going to do to the others? The others, you want me to tell you what they will do? The others, I tell

you, I will use this language, they will come to give us shit in their place, because they'll say "nothing is done for us." Because this project office may want to do something, but the others do nothing. Everyone must do something. Everyone, everyone. There are two sides to this story. [*He then tells how a room that had been allocated to the youths in the project was ransacked and then closed.*] When they say "we can't find jobs, no one gives us a job," what sort of a job do you want to give them when you see they can't even keep a thing like this. They steal everything, they couldn't keep the room for a lousy week. They broke everything, absolutely everything. They painted over the windows the painter had just finished doing over. It broke my heart when I would see him freezing out there with his paintbrushes, painting for nothing. A week later it's totaled, totally trashed! Are we going to build them a concert hall behind each of the buildings! Don't push it. I too lived in a project for 25 years next to the highway, there, these huge things: I went there when I was six years old, I stayed there for 16 years, for 16 years. The worst thing we did sometimes was break a window – because there were some large bay windows like these – when we played soccer on the green; sometimes a ball would go off, a bad shot, and boom, a window; but don't you worry, that window, we'd pay for it, I remember that. For a big window like that we paid 50 francs. But we never trashed the building because we wanted this or that, and so on and so forth. Don't... There's not enough discipline in Villeneuve, not enough discipline and that's that. You've got some kids who will never work in their entire life, and you know why? The only thing they like are their deals! So they steal cars, take them apart, it's easier to steal than to work, they do armed robberies, these guys spend two months or a year in jail, they get out, they will be quiet for two weeks and then it will start all over again, they'll see their buddies. And it starts all over again and they break everything.

Christian And on top of it...they are proud of going to jail. (...) The older ones are leading on the younger ones and when you see that young kids are involved in...well, I say it's a shame.

Thierry If things stay the same way they are now, it will never change, never, never. It'll be a constant madhouse. Some of the stuff that happens, it doesn't even appear in print anymore. When they put a stop to it in M., people said "yes, this feels like a war zone." That's true, but me, I was also in for it...when the riot police would stop someone, you were in for it, at the time my hair was frizzy, they would insult me because they thought I was an Arab (they called me "dirty Arab") and the rest of it, spreadeagled on the hood of the car, body search and the rest. But they got results.

*As soon as you say something to them,
you must be a racist!*

Christian (...) Well I don't know, but something must be wrong higher up as well, at the HLM office, they should find a solution, and then also the mayor's office, because the mayor, this is the area he's responsible for; he should really try to do something. (...) As soon as you say something to them [*the kids*], you must be a racist. I disagree. I know some of them. I have friends who are Algerians, Tunisians...

Thierry Me too.

Christian Good buddies but, as I once said to the kids, I told them, "I'm racist with idiots and that's it." I cannot accept them destroying things for no reason. Because they are bored, they break stuff. Just get a job. They say that they are not given jobs, but as soon as they get in a company, they steal. A boss is not going to keep thieves, right? Just take the trouble they had in the industrial zone: he hires a young guy, trusts him, the guy had not been on the job two weeks, he grabs the secretary, he socks her twice in the face and pinches the cash register. The cops caught him... and to top it all he had a pellet gun, he fired at the

inspectors. Let me tell you, when they grabbed him they let him have it. The others [*the kids*] all came out chanting "die, dirty cops, dirty racists."

[...]

Christian I know some caretakers who work for a management company, they received threats.

Thierry Well, me too, I was threatened.

Christian But I have two friends who are caretakers, they just burned down their apartments.

Thierry They threatened me too. Two of them came down to see me, they told me "you'd better stop nosing around in the underground parking lot." I said "I'm not nosing around, I'm doing my job, that's all, you have no business being in the parking lot, I'm doing my job and nobody tells me what I should be doing." And after that they came to see me and they said "quit poking around in the parking lot or one of these days you'll get shot." That's what they told me! And that other one who went after my kid two years ago when I was first in that other place! He was 20 and the kid was nine. So that guy, I grabbed him and I said: "That's the first time and the last that you lay a hand [*on my son*] because just remember this - one of these days, you'll be alone, all your friends won't be backing you up, and that day, when you're alone, I'll let you have it." He couldn't get a word out, he was stuttering and looking at his shoes.

Christian Over there it's in the evening that there are a lot of them, at least 50... and they stay there all night. And I tell you, when the weather is nice like last week, they were headed for bed as we were leaving for work. And they did smart-ass stuff all night long. All night long you'd hear "Long live Saddam Hussein, and long live so and so," and then, with the bikes... Do you realize what a madhouse that was all night long. And the people: "We can't take it anymore, we're calling the cops." At two in the morning I call them at the police station, I tell them "look, you should arrest them, I'm telling you, they are going crazy" when on top of that they'd been given a

room of their own. They go outside and they start yelling their heads off until the morning, and then it's not worth falling asleep, we have to get up to work. So you see, this is no life, stuff like this. That's why I say...

I tell my tenants: "You must not leave"

Thierry And if you tell them something, they take it out on the cars.

Christian Or they slash tires.

Thierry They are always taking it out on the cars. So for people it gets to a point, they got it up to... [*whistle*]. If they find something else, they leave and that's that, they tell you "well, Monsieur, we found another place, we're leaving."

Christian This is why I tell my tenants, I tell them: "You must not leave." I tell them "you must stay, you must keep your apartment. Because if you leave, they will be only too happy, the others." And then, that's not it, I always said, I said "the good tenants we have, what's going to happen sooner or later is that they are all going to leave. They are going to see that there are all these empty apartments. What are they going to do about it? They are going to bring in even more families like that! Everyone's leaving and so that will be it. The only ones staying will be the others." Sometimes, it's not the work that's killing, it's the stress.

Thierry That's for sure! You have no idea just how stressed out we are. I worked as a truck driver, doing 13, 14 hour days. I was less tired than some days here...

Christian And then, we are always on edge.

Thierry ...because of the threats. You try to do your job right, you get threats.

It's the "Beur generation"

[...]

Thierry As for me, I can't understand it. All they have to do is send in the riot police but they are not in favor of the riot police. When they are somewhere, these guys, they have their loaded army guns in hand and they arrest anyone, they don't give a shit, they don't care, see. They are not afraid, and that lot, when they see things

are starting to hot up, they immediately get out their sticks and whack, whack, whack. That's what the kids need, it's not jail, it's a good swift kick in the pants from time to time, it would calm them down much more than going to jail, because they're thrown in the clink for a month or two and then they come back, well that's... They all take themselves for the Godfather himself. (...) It's that "Beur generation"! I don't know what they want, these kids. Really. I was talking to them, I was telling them "but why don't you try to go pick grapes, it pays well and there is a good ambiance," but [*in a mocking high-pitched voice*] "Oh, no, we tried it for two days, our backs were hurting too much so we quit." There was this guy from Morocco, six foot three, big as a house, he told me "no, after two days my back was killing me." How do you want them to get a job, they go do the harvest, they come back tired, the poor dears.

Christian [*mocking them too*] That, yes, all the jobs are too tiring, but when it comes to stealing...

Thierry And then there was so much... I was talking with a friend of my mother-in-law who owns vineyards in the Beaujolais region, and he told me "that's it, no more, we don't want them anymore, too much was stolen, too much." He prefers to hire foreigners [*other than North African*] or French citizens, because there are a lot of foreigners who do the wine harvest in Beaujolais. So I don't know what they want. As far as jobs are concerned, maybe some of them have troubles. That's for sure, for sure. Because afterwards everyone is treated in the same way.

— *And what should be done? Do you have an idea?*

Thierry Well, an idea, I don't know. But first that the police put a stop to this.

Christian I don't know what should be done.

Thierry We do our jobs. Everyone should do their jobs and that's that, see.

— *If you did not have all these troubles with the kids, this is a job you would like?*

Thierry Yes!

Christian Yes, that's true, it's an enjoyable job.

Thierry Yes, it is an interesting job, I enjoy it since I have always been used to working outside a bit, or when I was a truck driver, alone. Well here we talk with people, we are always outside, always moving around.

Christian Yes, that's what's nice, and sometimes we can even strike up a friendship. But not with families like that!

Thierry If nothing is done about it, it will remain like this, and Villeneuve will stay like this. If nothing is really done, it will become a ghetto.

— *Have you thought of asking to go somewhere else or do you want to stay?*

Thierry To be honest with you, I've not asked to move because, as I've always lived here, I know a lot of people...

Christian You shouldn't have to go either! (...) You realize that these families, after collecting their family subsidies or whatever, don't pay their rent anymore. So I say we should have kicked these families out a long time ago, see, since on top of that they bother everybody else.

Thierry Yes, kick them out, but no one wants to take them! Only Villeneuve keeps them on. And that's where there's a problem. Why always Villeneuve? Why aren't they taken somewhere else? They should be scattered a little all around instead of being concentrated here. Or then they should build them their own projects, but way outside the city. That is what he said, the mayor. They have to be relocated outside. It is a sad thing that they have to be put all together but that is the only way any progress can be made.

— *Where does the mairie stand, politically?*

Christian Villeneuve has been Communist for a long time... As for me personally, I don't want to be racist with them, but if you go to mairie, who do you find? It's all the North African families that work there. And if you go to ask for a job, anything, it's... for you, there is nothing, nothing.

Thierry Yes, but they are the people who vote for the mayor...

Christian It's all for them. You, you get sick, anything happens like that, you ask for something because you don't have a job, you want to get coverage to go the dentist, well you are told "no" so you parade around with a swollen abscess big as that. For them, the guy has a little something no bigger than this, they send him right to the hospital. In Villeneuve, if you want to get covered you have to stop working and become a thief. Then you will get entitled to everything.

Thierry That is what we say, we should get a tan, do a black face with shoe polish, we will become them and then we will get everything. It's almost like that!

This guy, he isn't a racist but he's strict

— *And in your view, do you think that politics can change things?*

Thierry As for me, I say that in Villeneuve, the day the Communists are no longer around things might change. Because a while back, well, it is kind of sad for him, he didn't get elected, it's the doctor. He is in the RPR [center right party], but this guy, he isn't a racist but he's strict. He says that there shouldn't be things just for them, there should be an equal share for the others. There is this center, this famous social center, he said "if I get elected mayor of Villeneuve, I will close the social center." It wouldn't be closed for good. He said "the center will be for the elderly and people in difficult situations." He doesn't say either that there wouldn't be anything for them, but he says that at the moment it's all going to them. For a little scratch, they are sent to the hospital and they pay nothing. That's pushing it. (...) Villeneuve's policies are not good; if things remain the way they are, there will be no one left but immigrants in Villeneuve and that's that. And you should not wait until there is no one left to wonder why. Because to get the people back in afterwards, it's tough.

[...]

— *Don't you have to face this more than simple tenants?*

Thierry Oh! we are on the front line, that's for sure!

— *Does the HLM office organize meetings for superintendents?*

Thierry Well yes. Theoretically we have a meeting with the head of the office to discuss problems.

— *And what are the problems most often talked about?*

Thierry Well, there is the damage, the broken stuff, all that, it is never resolved, it's always the same problem, you see. We spend money, money for repairs. At times we tell ourselves it is not worth it. We repair and they come right behind us to break it, we come back, they break it, we come back, they break it, we do this all year long.

Christian Nothing stands up. Even if we try the latest modern stuff...

Thierry Nothing works.

[...]

— *The solutions proposed by Le Pen [leading figure of the far right Front National], they must be tempting for some of the people, don't you think?*

Thierry Well, I don't know. I am waiting for, I want to see what is going to happen. Because they say that we are racists, that the French are racists...

Christian No, that's bullshit, that stuff is bullshit.

Thierry And then, as I say, a French racist wouldn't come to live in Villeneuve. When they tell me that I am racist, I answer "you are talking nonsense, if I were racist I would not be a superintendent in the ZUP, I'd do something else, I'd go somewhere else, back to being a trucker." They are the ones who feed the racism. So this is why I am waiting to see what will happen during the next elections. That, yes! I want to see. And there are many who are waiting because I've heard all kinds of people say "don't talk to me. Le Pen may be who he is, but I'm voting for Le Pen," you hear it, you hear it. They say "nobody does anything, The mayor doesn't do anything, the police don't do anything, no one does anything, well then, we'll vote for Le Pen since he'll do something."

Christian Just give him one year in power, just one year... [*He discusses the delinquency linked to drugs*].

Thierry I say as long as there are drugs, it will be a madhouse. Drugs are a real curse, it's a curse, see...

Christian And then they make money out of it, I tell you, they make money without having to work...

— [*The two superintendents then tell how they discovered the various hiding places used by the dealers – panels in the elevators, light fixtures, etc. – and the dealers' threats if they touched anything or called the police.*]

They're fed up, they have no future

[*Sylvie, Thierry's wife, comes in with their daughter. I quickly explain to her the purpose of this interview.*]

Sylvie I talked for over one hour with kids on the ground floor, they're fed up, they have no future, nothing has been offered to them... Nothing comes their way, some employers are racists. But it has to be said that employers are fed up too.

Thierry Yes, it must also be said...

Sylvie Well yes, I agree, but you must also recognize that it is a spiral...

Christian That is what we were just saying, the good ones are paying for the bad ones, see...

Sylvie Some are good, some are very good.

Thierry Yeah, but still, there's a lot of rotten apples.

Sylvie When you see that the kids steal right under the noses of their parents and the parents don't say a word. As kids, they are used to it as kids, I mean at the ages of four or five, they can't even conceive that you can buy something. Therefore it becomes a... a way of thinking. They cannot identify with anything. They are given recreation centers, stuff, they trash everything. There is a malaise, a malaise and it is not simply in the ZUP, because I worked in the Lycée Jean Zay, the second largest in the region, all the kids who go there are at the top level, the cream, well, there it's the same, the same language as in Villeneuve,

the same words, the same behavior toward the teachers. I was astounded. A complete lack of respect toward the teachers... dirty... so it's not only...

Thierry Because in the end they lack respect for anyone. For their teachers, they don't respect anyone.

Sylvie I have no idea how we are going to manage... it's like a cancer, I do not know how we are going to be able to remove it, because... You can't discuss it with them, they don't trust you. The other day, they told me "yes, but there's something in it for you," so I tell them "I am talking because I want to talk," I tell them "there is nothing in it for me." I might be able to get some personal satisfaction if I saw something positive.

Christian [*Doubtful*] What could you get out of it?

Sylvie They are always convinced that you are trying to cheat them, to rob them, here...

Thierry When they are the ones who cheat us! If they stopped stealing and if the building would stay clean...

Sylvie But I never stop repeating to them, moreover you are France... We have to tell ourselves that they are tomorrow's young people, they are the ones who will... it's scary, don't you think... They said that in Villeneuve the rooms that had been opened, the stuff for the youths, it was nothing but a facade, it's all a trick. The kids have no access to these rooms.

Thierry For them it's "gimme, gimme, gimme," and eventually you give it to them, it doesn't keep them from stealing.

Sylvie It's good to try to talk with them, with some... even if sometimes you feel like you are talking in a vacuum, even if... there is always a little sentence, a word, I get the impression that...

Thierry [*Very doubtful*] So you get the impression. Because I saw what happened when they were given this room, that all that furniture was brought in, the chairs, the tables, all this, when we gave them the paint. A week later we closed the room. They had trashed everything.

Sylvie [*Looking for an excuse*] There must have been a reason...

Thierry [*Quite emphatically*] Oh, there is always some reason somewhere. There is always something wrong. There is always something wrong.

— *In the families, the parents are overwhelmed?*

Sylvie That is what they told me. One of them had a problem — I can't quite remember — getting along with his stepmother and stuff like that and I said "but you have to talk it over, there are always ways to get around it," "oh, you have no idea, my father, I don't speak to him, I don't speak to him, when he speaks to me it's to beat me up."

Christian I know one guy who beats up his father because he won't give him the car.

Sylvie He tells me "but have you seen what a hellhole we live in, these slums, what do you expect us to have..." then he tells me "there's cockroaches everywhere, it's dirty inside, it's dirty outside and us, we feel dirty." I mean as well, when you go home, there where the alleys are, I would get depressed as soon as I got there. It's dirty, it's, well, you know, it doesn't inspire respect in you... Well I respect things because that's the way I am, but for the kid who roams outside, it's not going to inspire him to get a stable life. He sees his parents, sometimes there are 10, 12, 15 of them living in one room, no privacy, no place of their own, even as kids see, they don't have...

Thierry Look, don't exaggerate here...

Sylvie But it is important that a child, when it's small, should have some little space of its own.

Thierry [*Vehemently*] Oh come on, look at us, there were 10 of us in a four-room apartment, we weren't traumatized, we didn't wreck the entire neighborhood!

Sylvie You were lucky to turn out fine, to find your path, and it wasn't the same then as now. If you had a position that you liked, even odd jobs, you could quit your job at any time and the next day you'd find another one. There's no more jobs, there is nothing left. If you are Arab, there is no job.

Thierry Yes, but why?

Sylvie Well, I don't know...

Thierry And if they stopped doing drugs... [referring to what was said earlier]. And the wine harvests? the harvests?

Sylvie They [the farmers] don't want them!

Thierry They don't want them, right, I discussed it with the... then why don't they want them?

Sylvie Well, I don't know...

Thierry If they stopped stealing from them...

Sylvie But try to put yourself in the place of these kids. They know that whatever happens there will be nothing... their only recourse is violence, but not violence to hurt. It is more a cry for help, to say hey, we are here, we exist and see what we can do when there are a lot of us. (...) I say that in the end the parents... It's true, we have meetings at the school... because one of the teachers was attacked by a North African who came to beat him up because he had said something to his little brother. A teacher scolds a kid, gives him a little slap. His mother came down and broke two of his ribs. With a stick and all. The whole family came down on him, so we had a meeting. And you want to know how many people came to this meeting? The same ones we always see at the beginning of the school year; always the same - out of 300 kids in school - there were 20 parents and it's always the same ones. And in general, the parents of the kids who have no problems! It is tough for the school teachers. But they love their jobs and I admire them. They would not change neighborhood for anything (...). The teachers who work here, they manage to do great stuff; you've seen all they've done, right?

[...]

— *What do you think the solution is? Should you support the current mayor or create a shock, for example, by supporting the National Front?*

Sylvie I hear people talk, since I'm someone who likes to discuss things, I hear a lot of people talk and there will be quite a few National Front candidates that will be

elected this time... There is going to be a huge increase, see. A huge increase. As for me, I think that we have to back the mayor, and also, all the things he did, all they did, everything... is really great.

Christian [Doubtful] Well, naturally it's great... but as for me, I don't know what they want to do precisely, I don't know where they want to take it.

Sylvie I say to the young people, you only think of destroying, of tearing down, but you don't think of building! (...) But try to get together - I tell them - get all the kids together and write a project of what you really want and maybe even one of you could become truly in charge. They don't want responsibilities. They don't even trust their own worth.

Christian Not too long ago when we had that meeting. They went to see the mayor, you remember, they requested the gymnasium. So the mayor, he was nice, he gave them the key. It lasted for two weeks, quiet, and then one night he came over to see them at the gym. Well then, they were all shooting up, there were bottles of booze everywhere, they had lit a bonfire in the middle of the gym. So then the mayor said "I'm taking the key back, it's over now."

[...]

Thierry The mayor, he told me, the room we gave them for a period, you have no idea the state we found things after, a real trash heap. And after that they say "yeah, you are all racist, we want our room; you don't want to give it to us!" Always the same stories. You are unemployed, you are unemployed, so what?

Sylvie Me too, I was unemployed.

Christian But you have to admit, a guy, if he really wants to work, he can find a job.

Sylvie No, it's not that easy. These are kids who have no skills at all.

Thierry Come on. What's his name? Abdel, he found a job, he is working to get his French citizenship, he works hard. Don't you think that he is disgusted? He repainted all the walkways in the project, all that, and really applied himself: a week later they destroyed it all. Well, then he will be going

back there with his paints. And yet he is one of them, him too, he really is, so don't push it.

Sylvie Yes, there does really need to be some policing in the end... We have to be tough.

Thierry No matter what they say, they are too easy on them!

Even if you try to hide the poverty

Thierry (...) The government must...

Sylvie But why always the government? Not necessarily so.

Thierry Well, they are the ones who set up the budget for...

Sylvie Yes, but it is not a matter of money, it's a matter of mentality. It's people's mentality that we need to change...

Christian "People's mentality"... Oh! First of all, when they screw up...

Sylvie Because even if you redo everything, all nice, all clean, try to hide the poverty, the problems will still be there, underneath the repainted house fronts, see. It will not make the problems go away.

Thierry [*Furious*] Well then, you just have to send them back home! It's crazy but...

Sylvie [*Remaining calm*] No, you must talk things over, talk, you have to listen to people all the time, never let them down, see, almost like brainwashing, but that's it, you have to... talk, talk, talk, talk.

Thierry You know, you may talk to them all you want, if they want, behind your back, they think what they want, you're being had.

Sylvie Yes and so what? At first but then the ideas are planted in their heads and then that's it, see. I say that money is no solution. It won't solve anything.

Thierry Yes, but then why is it us, why do they ask the superintendents, here, even the cops tell me "talk to them, talk to them." Come on, we're caretakers of buildings...

Sylvie Yes, but you are also a father.

Thierry What do you want us to do, you know what they think of us?

Sylvie But what they think of you doesn't matter.

Thierry When I say hello to them, they don't even answer.

Sylvie Well, so they are rude... you're not here to be the police, but still...

Thierry No, but that is exactly the point, their stealing and deals, I don't give a damn. If they are working on a moped until two in the morning in the walkways, when I go and tell them "you shouldn't do that," for them you are the police! You are a racist, an asshole, everything else, so you leave them and go home. That's it. So what are we supposed to do in this case? Who's going to find a solution?

— *That's not easy, you must have a huge amount of patience.*

Sylvie It's like psychoanalysis, see, there are some analyses that last for years with some people; all of a sudden it is all unlocked and everything comes out, just like that!

Thierry We can't talk things over with people for years, either.

Sylvie No! But what I want to say is me, I seize every opportunity to debate, at all times, until the point when a dialogue has been established. They started by pulling my leg, you know how they are, so then I had a discussion with them, it lasted for over an hour. And then from time to time one of them would get irritated and shout "but what are we talking about here, what are we talking about?" and another one would hold him back. So they really wanted to talk, they like it when we talk. Even if it doesn't get us anywhere just like that, really... there are people listening to them, listening and then...

Thierry Still, it is not easy.

Sylvie In any case, there always will be some assholes...

Thierry But in Villeneuve, there's a lot of them.

Sylvie Yes, because it is concentrated, it ends up making a lot [*laughter*], that immediately makes more...

Christian ... assholes...

Sylvie In the last resort you should take care of the very young, take care of the worthwhile, the people who are worthwhile, the very young, the youngsters who

are fine and everything. Well then, the assholes are assholes, you should leave them alone and that's all. And then one day they will get caught by the cops and you know what will happen next...

[...]

Thierry One of my brothers is a racist. He never went to live in Villeneuve.

Sylvie He is a racist by nature, just like that, without knowing why...

Thierry And then, he is a racist against anyone. We went camping, the English are bad enough, the Germans... but then with the Arabs it reaches the top of the scale... So he never went to live in Villeneuve.

Sylvie No, in a sense I am happy that my kids live with, you know, all races, all the... I want to say that there is no... it's simple.

Thierry That is to say that we are not raising them to be racists, the way my brother raises his kids. Take his little one, she is five, four years old and she goes to kindergarten, he never stops telling her, "Arabs are shit."

Sylvie She will even have some problems. Because now it is kindergarten, but when she goes to the real school!

*I don't identify myself with anything,
nothing at all*

— *Do you belong to some association?*

Sylvie Well, a long time ago I was an activist in the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne, [Christian Working Youth]. I was even... I even led a small cell; and then after that it

did not fit in my... No, in fact, I don't identify myself with anything. Even politically... I am a bit...

— *Disoriented?*

Sylvie I am disoriented. Afterwards I was activist for a while with the Communist Youth. Then it was the same thing! I went to the Party school. I don't identify myself with anything, nothing at all. There is no party left that suits me. Nothing. I don't know anymore. I even surprise myself by telling myself I'll vote for Le Pen, it will scare them shitless and... Well, that's not me either... I mean as far as... but then, I mean, I don't know where to turn to, I don't know... on top of it all, they all disgust me, personally. I find that things no longer correspond to what one expects from a political party: there are dozens of scandals and they want to... teach moral lessons to others, [politicians never stop] scheming over various deals and all that. It's true, they play with billions and they don't give a damn about the rank and file. And then, the Communist Party, I have never seen a party more closed. Well now maybe, with the new ones [*the reform movement*] and that, but... but we can't say a thing, "the Party has spoken," that's all. So at meetings that's the way it goes and always I would say "that's not true, we should discuss this, what's the point then? We pay our dues and that's all you want from us." Look at the building they have in Paris... it's incredible!

March 1991

Site Effects

These days, referring to a “problem suburb” or “ghetto” almost automatically brings to mind, not “realities” – largely unknown in any case to the people who rush to talk about them – but phantasms, which feed on emotional experiences stimulated by more or less uncontrolled words and images, such as those conveyed in the tabloids and by political propaganda or rumor. But to break with accepted ideas and ordinary discourse, it is not enough, as we would sometimes like to think, to “go see” what it’s all about. In effect, the empiricist illusion is doubtless never so strong as in cases like this, where direct confrontation with reality entails some difficulty, even risk, and for that reason deserves some credit. Yet there are compelling reasons to believe that the essential principle of what is lived and seen *on the ground* – the most striking testimony and the most dramatic experiences – is elsewhere. Nothing demonstrates this better than the American ghettos, those abandoned sites that are fundamentally defined by an *absence* – basically, that of the state and of everything that comes with it, police, schools, health care institutions, associations, etc.

More than ever, then, we have to practice a *para-doxal mode of thought* [*doxa*: common sense, received ideals] that, being equally sceptical of good sense and fine sentiments, risks appearing to right-minded people on the two sides either as a position inspired by the desire to “shock the bourgeois” or else as an intolerable indifference to the suffering of the most disadvantaged people in our society. One can break with misleading appearances and with the errors inscribed in substantialist thought about *place* only through a rigorous analysis of the relations between the structures of social space and those of physical space.

Physical space and social space

As bodies (and biological individuals), and in the same way that things are, human beings are situated in a site (they are not endowed with the ubiquity that would allow them to be in several places at once), and they occupy a place. The *site* (*le lieu*) can be defined absolutely as the point in *physical space* where an agent or a thing is situated, “takes place,” exists: that is to say, either as a *localization* or, from a relational viewpoint, as a *position*, a rank in an order.

The *place* occupied may be defined as the extent, surface and volume that an individual or a thing occupies in physical space, its dimensions, or better still, its "bulk" (as is sometimes said of a vehicle or piece of furniture).

Because social agents are constituted in, and in relationship to, a *social space* (or better yet, to fields), and things too insofar as they are appropriated by agents and hence constituted as properties, they are situated in a site of social space that can be defined by its position relative to other sites (above, below, between, etc.) and by the distance separating it from them. As physical space is defined by the mutual exteriority of its parts, so social space is defined by the mutual exclusion (or distinction) of the positions that constitute it, that is, as a juxtapositional structure of social positions.

In this way and in the most diverse contexts, the structure of social space shows up as spatial oppositions, with the inhabited (or appropriated) space functioning as a sort of spontaneous symbolization of social space. There is no space in a hierarchized society that is not itself hierarchized and that does not express hierarchies and social distances, in a form that is more or less distorted and, above all, disguised by the *naturalization effect* produced by the long-term inscription of social realities in the natural world. Thus historical differences can seem to have arisen from the nature of things (we need only think of "natural frontier"). This is the case, for example, with all the spatial projections of social difference between the sexes (at church, in school, in public, and even at home).

In fact, social space translates into physical space, but the translation is always more or less *blurred*: the power over space that comes from possessing various kinds of capital takes the form in appropriated physical space of a certain relation between the spatial structure of the distribution of agents and the spatial structure of the distribution of goods and services, private or public. An agent's position in social space is expressed in the site of physical space where that agent is situated (which means, for example, that anyone said to be "without home or hearth" or "homeless" is virtually without a social existence), and by the relative position that their temporary localizations (for example, honorific places, seating regulated by protocol), and especially the permanent ones (home address and business address) occupy in relation to the localizations of other agents. It is also expressed in the place occupied (by right) in space by virtue of the properties (houses, apartments, or offices, land to cultivate, to use or build on, etc.), which are more or less bulky or, as one sometimes says, "space consuming" (greater or lesser ostentation in the consumption of space being one of the forms par excellence for displaying power). Part of the *inertia* of the structures of social space results from the fact that they are inscribed in physical space and cannot be modified except by a *work of transplantation*, a moving of things and an uprooting or deporting of people, which itself presupposes extremely difficult and costly social transformations.

In this way, reified social space (that is, physically realized or objectified) appears as the distribution in physical space of different types of goods and services and also of individual agents and of physically situated groups (as units linked to a permanent site) that are endowed with greater or lesser possibilities for

appropriating these goods and services (as a function of both their capital and the physical distance from these goods, which also depends on their capital). The value of different regions of reified social space is defined in this relation between the distribution of agents and the distribution of goods in social space.

The different fields, or, if you like, the different, physically objectified social spaces, tend to be at least roughly superimposed: the result is a concentration of the rarest goods and their owners in certain sites of physical space (Madison Avenue or Fifth Avenue in New York, the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris) which contrasts in every respect with sites that, principally and sometimes exclusively, collect the most disadvantaged groups (poor suburbs, ghettos). These sites of high concentrations of either positive or negative (stigmatizing) properties set traps for the analyst who, in accepting them as such, is bound to overlook the essential point: like Madison Avenue, the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré brings together high-end art galleries and antique dealers, haute couture salons, elegant bootmakers, painters, interior decorators, etc., that is, a whole array of businesses which have in common the fact that they occupy elevated positions (positions thus homologous to each other) in their respective fields, and which can be understood in all their individual specificity only if they are seen in relation to businesses situated in the same field, in lesser positions, but in other regions of physical space. For instance, the interior decorators of the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in central Paris stand in marked contrast to what on the working-class Rue du Faubourg Saint-Antoine are called “cabinet makers” [*ébénistes*] (the difference is marked most obviously by their aristocratic names, but also by all their attributes, the nature, quality and price of the products offered, the social status of their clientele, etc.). The same logic contrasts hair stylists with ordinary barbers, bootmakers with shoe repairers. These oppositions are asserted in a truly symbolic system of distinction: reference to the uniqueness of the “creation” and the “creator,” invocation of a long tradition, the nobility of the founder and the founder’s actions, always designated by noble epithets, often borrowed from the English.

In the same way, at least in the case of France, the capital city is – no pun intended – the site of capital, that is, the site in physical space where the positive poles of all the fields are concentrated along with most of the agents occupying these dominant positions: which means that the capital cannot be adequately analyzed except in relation to the provinces (and “provincialness”), which is nothing other than being deprived (in entirely relative terms) of the capital and capital.

The great social oppositions objectified in physical space (as with the capital versus the provinces) tend to be reproduced in thought and in language as oppositions constitutive of a principle of vision and division, as categories of perception and evaluation or of mental structures (Parisian/provincial, chic/not chic, etc.). Thus the opposition between the “Left Bank” and the “Right Bank” that shows up on maps and in statistical analyses of theater audiences or of the attributes of gallery artists is present in the minds of potential spectators, and also

in the minds of playwrights, painters and critics, as the opposition – which operates like a category of perception and appreciation – between avant-garde art (off-Broadway theater) and “bourgeois” art (Broadway shows).

More generally, the mute injunctions and silent calls to order from structures in appropriated physical space are one of the mediations by which social structures are gradually converted into mental structures and into systems of preferences. More precisely, the imperceptible incorporation of structures of the social order undoubtedly happens, in large part, through a prolonged and indefinitely repeated experience of the spatial distance that affirms social distance. More concretely, this incorporation takes place through the *displacements and body movements* organized by these social structures turned into spatial structures and thereby *naturalized*. They organize and designate as ascent or descent (“to go up to Paris”), entry (inclusion, cooptation, adoption), or exit (exclusion, expulsion, excommunication), what is in fact closeness to or distance from a central, valued site. Here I am thinking of the respectful demeanor called for by grandeur and height (of monuments, rostrums, or platforms) and the frontal placement of sculptures and paintings or, more subtly, of all the deferential and reverential conduct that is tacitly imposed by the simple social designation of space (the head of the table, the right side of the tracks, etc.) and all the practical hierarchizations of regions in space (uptown/downtown, East Side/West Side, foreground/wings, front of the store/backroom, right side/left side, etc.).

Because social space is inscribed at once in spatial structures and in the mental structures that are partly produced by the incorporation of these structures, space is one of the sites where power is asserted and exercised, and, no doubt in its subtlest form, as symbolic violence that goes unperceived as violence. Architectural spaces address mute injunctions directly to the body and, just as surely as court etiquette, obtain from it the reverence and respect born of distance, or better yet, from being far away, at a respectful distance. Their very invisibility (to analysts themselves, who, like historians since Schramm,¹ are often attached to the most visible signs of symbolic power, such as scepters and crowns) undoubtedly makes these the most important components of the symbolic order of power and the totally real effects of symbolic power.

Struggles to appropriate space

Space, or more precisely the sites and places of reified social space, along with the profits they procure, are stakes in struggles (within different fields). Spatial profits may take the form of the *profits of localization*, which can be divided into two classes: income derived from proximity to rare and desirable agents and goods (such as educational, cultural or health establishments); and the *profits of posi-*

¹ The reference is to the German historian Percy Ernst Schramm (1894–1970), author of, in particular, *A History of the English Coronation* (trans., 1937) and a three-volume opus, *Herrschaftszeichen und Staatssymbolik* (1954–1978). [Tr.]

tion or of rank (for example, assured by a prestigious address), which are a particular case of the symbolic profits of distinction tied to the monopolistic possession of a distinctive property. (Since physical distance can be measured in spatial terms, or better yet, in temporal terms, to the extent that going from one place to another takes more or less time according to the possibilities of access to public or private means of transportation, the power over space given by various different forms of capital is also, and by that same token, a power over time.) These profits may also take the form of *profits of occupation* (or alternatively, of congestion), where possession of a physical space (extensive grounds, spacious apartments, etc.) is a way of holding at a distance and excluding any kind of undesirable intrusion (as with the “lovely views” of the English manor house which, as Raymond Williams observed in *The Country and the City*, transform the countryside and its peasants into landscape for the owner’s pleasure, or again, the “unparalleled views” of real estate ads today).

The ability to dominate space, notably by appropriating (materially or symbolically) the rare goods (public or private) distributed there, depends on the capital possessed. Capital makes it possible to keep undesirable persons and things at a distance at the same time that it brings closer desirable persons and things (made desirable, among other things, by their richness in capital), thereby minimizing the necessary expense (notably in time) in appropriating them. Proximity in physical space allows the proximity in social space to deliver all its effects by facilitating or fostering the accumulation of social capital and, more precisely, by allowing uninterrupted benefits from the meetings at once fortuitous and foreseeable that come from frequenting well-frequented sites. (Moreover, possessing capital ensures the quasi-ubiquity that makes it possible to master both economic as well as symbolic means of transportation and communication – a ubiquity that is often reinforced by delegation – the power of existing and acting from a distance by proxy.)

Conversely, those who are deprived of capital are either physically or symbolically held at a distance from goods that are the rarest socially; they are forced to stick with the most undesirable and the least rare persons or goods. The lack of capital intensifies the experience of finitude: it chains one to a place.²

² By assembling the available statistical data for each of the French departments both on indices of economic, cultural or even social capital, and on the goods and services offered at the level of this administrative unit, one can demonstrate that the regional differences often imputed to geographic determinisms can in fact be ascribed to *differences in capital*, which owe their historical permanence to the circular reinforcement that was continuously exercised in the course of history (especially by virtue of the fact that, especially for residence and culture, aspirations depend in large part on the possibilities objectively available for them to be achieved). Only after having located and measured that portion of observed phenomena that seems to be a function of physical space but in fact reflects economic and social differences, can one hope to isolate the irreducible residue properly imputable to proximity and distance in purely physical space. This is the case with the *screening effect* that results from the anthropological privilege conferred on the directly perceived present and, by the same token, on the visible and sensate space of copresent objects and agents (direct neighbors). This means, for instance, that hostilities linked to proximity in physical space (as with conflicts between neighbors) may obscure the solidarities associated with the position occupied in social, national, or international space, or that

Struggles for the appropriation of space can take an *individual* form: *spatial mobility* within or between generations – as with relocations in both directions between the capital and the provinces, or successive addresses within the hierarchized space of the capital – is a good indicator of success or reverses in these struggles, and more generally, of the whole social trajectory (provided we see that just as agents differing in age and social trajectory – young upper management and older middle management, for example – can temporarily coexist in the same jobs, so too, just as temporarily, they can end up in neighboring residential sites).

Success in these struggles depends on the capital held (in its various types). Indeed, for the occupants of a given habitat the likely chances of appropriating the different material or cultural goods and services associated with that habitat come down to the specific capacities for appropriation each one has (both materially – money, private means of transportation – and culturally). A habitat can be occupied physically without really being inhabited in the full sense of the term if the occupant does not dispose of the tacitly required means of habitation, starting with a certain habitus.

If the habitat shapes the habitus, the habitus also shapes the habitat, through the more or less adequate social usages that it tends to make of it. This certainly throws doubt on the belief that bringing together in the same physical space agents who are far apart in social space might, in itself, bring them closer socially: in fact, socially distanced people find nothing more intolerable than physical proximity (experienced as promiscuity).

Among all the properties presupposed by the legitimate occupation of a site, there are some – and they are not the least determining – which are acquired only through prolonged occupation of this site and sustained association with its legitimate occupants. This is the case, obviously, with the social capital of relations, connections, or ties (and most particularly with the privileged ties of childhood or adolescent friendships) or with all the subtlest aspects of cultural and linguistic capital, such as body mannerisms and pronunciation (accents), etc. – all the many attributes that make the place of birth (and to a lesser degree, place of residence) so important.

At the risk of feeling themselves *out of place*, individuals who move into a new space must fulfill the conditions that that space tacitly requires of its occupants. This may be the possession of a certain cultural capital, the lack of which can prevent the real appropriation of supposedly public goods or even the intention of appropriating them. Museums come to mind, of course, but the same holds true for services that are usually considered more universally necessary, such as those of medical or legal institutions. One has the Paris that goes with one's economic capital, and also with one's cultural and social capital (visiting the Pompidou Museum is not enough to appropriate the Museum of Modern Art). Certain spaces, and in particular the most closed and most "select," require not only

the representations imposed by the point of view associated with the position occupied in local social space (such as the village) may prevent understanding the position occupied in national social space.

economic and cultural capital, but social capital as well. They procure social capital, and symbolic capital, by the *club effect* that comes from the long-term gathering together (in chic neighborhoods or luxury homes) of people and things which are different from the vast majority and have in common the fact that they are not common, that is, the fact that they exclude everyone who does not present all the desired attributes or who presents (at least) one undesirable attribute. The exclusion may be legal (through a type of *numerus clausus*) or de facto (the inevitable feeling of exclusion will deprive the intruder of certain profits associated with belonging).

Like a club founded on the active exclusion of undesirable people, the fashionable neighborhood symbolically consecrates its inhabitants by allowing each one to partake of the capital accumulated by the inhabitants as a whole. Likewise, the stigmatized area symbolically degrades its inhabitants, who, in return, symbolically degrade it. Since they don't have all the cards necessary to participate in the various social games, the only thing they share is their common excommunication. Bringing together on a single site a population homogeneous in its dispossession strengthens that dispossession, notably with respect to culture and cultural practices: the pressures exerted at the level of class or school or in public life by the most disadvantaged or those furthest from a "normal" existence pull everything down in a general leveling. They leave no escape other than flight toward other sites (which lack of resources usually renders impossible).

Struggles over space may also assume more collective forms, whether at the national level concerning housing policies, or at the local level, with regard to the construction and allocation of subsidized housing or the choices for public services. The ultimate stake for the most decisive of these struggles is governmental policy, which wields an immense power over space through its capacity to give value to land, housing and also, to a large extent, to work and education. So the confrontation and collusion between high state officials (divided among themselves), members of the financial institutions directly involved in construction credit operations, and representatives of local municipalities and public services have brought about a housing policy which, through taxation policy and particularly through construction subsidies, has effected a veritable *political construction of space*. To the extent that it favors the *construction of homogeneous groups on a spatial basis*, this policy is in large part responsible for what can be directly observed in run-down apartment complexes or the housing projects that have been deserted by the State.

Loïc J. D. Wacquant

America as Social Dystopia

The Politics of Urban Disintegration, or the French Uses of the “American Model”

The eighties witnessed the rise of urban inequalities, xenophobia, and protest movements of youths from the working or lower class “*banlieues*”. The term *banlieue* itself, which originally designated a peripheral urban district, has thus come to refer to a declining working-class neighborhood plagued with the social conditions whose intersection is said to define the new “urban question”: joblessness, housing degradation, violence, isolation, and immigration,¹ but also the proliferation of a new type of discourse on “ghettoization” that suggested an abrupt convergence between the dispossessed neighborhoods of the French and the American city. In only a few years, a moral panic has spread according to which the deteriorating *cités* (public housing projects) of the urban periphery are on the verge of being transformed – indeed have already been remade – into so many “ghettos,” repositories where all the ills afflicting the lower reaches of French society accumulate and brew. Arising out of nowhere and appearing everywhere at the same time, fed by stereotypes imported from across the Atlantic (Chicago, the Bronx, Harlem . . .), this trope has imposed itself as one of the clichés of contemporary public debate on the city. Accredited specialists in “societal issues,” journalists, public policy makers and administrators, media intellectuals and grass-roots activists in search of a new legitimacy, commune in its conjuring. The catch-all notions of “neighborhood,” “housing ghetto,” and “immigrant ghetto” are thus applied to districts where there is the slightest deviation from some putative national (petty bourgeois [lower middle class]) norm. In a watered-down form, the concept can be applied to dramatize any vaguely defined collectivity: thus we now speak of the “student ghetto,” the “old people’s ghetto,” the “homosexual ghetto,” and so on.²

This largely fantastical discourse, in which sociological ignorance rivals political irresponsibility, would hardly deserve much consideration were it not for its

¹ Adil Jazouli, *Les années banlieue* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992).

² Hervé Vieillard-Baron, “Le ghetto: approches conceptuelles et représentations communes,” *Annales de la Recherche Urbaine* 49 (Apr. 1991), pp. 13–22.

disastrous consequences. First, by playing up sensationalistic and exotic images “made in the USA” (as striking as they are fuzzy) and by obsessively invoking the specter of “the American syndrome” at every turn, these prophets of doom and gloom have thwarted a rigorous analysis of the causes of the decomposition of the French working class and of the profound despair gripping populations whose traditional instruments of collective reproduction and representation have been rendered obsolete by the concurrent transformations of the labor market and the political field. Second, they have fed – often in spite of their own best intentions – the spiral of stigmatization that leads to branding working-class housing projects as condemned places synonymous with social indignity and civic relegation, thereby adding to the burden of symbolic domination that the residents of these housing projects must bear *on top of* socioeconomic exclusion.³

Lastly and paradoxically, the theme of the “ghetto” has obscured the lessons that one can draw, not from an ideological confrontation between the so-called French model of “integration” and its American counterpart (such models tell us more about national mythology than about national sociology), but, rather, from a rigorous empirical examination of the contemporary reality of the US ghetto as a *borderline case*. Sociohistorical comparison reveals that, though they are both territories of social exclusion located at the bottom of their respective urban hierarchies, the American ghetto and the French *banlieue* nevertheless differ in their social makeup, institutional texture, and position in the metropolitan system. In particular, the mechanisms of segregation and aggregation from which they result are also quite distinct. To sum it up, exclusion operates mostly on a centuries-old caste basis, that is tolerated or reinforced by the state and by national ideology on the American side, and primarily on grounds of class partly mitigated by public policies on the French side. The result is that, unlike the urban Bantustans of the United States, the deteriorated *banlieues* of France are not ethnically homogeneous ensembles backed by a dualist racial division endorsed by the state, and they do not have an advanced division of labor or the measure of institutional autonomy that would support a unified cultural identity.⁴

By treating America’s dark ghetto as a sociological blueprint, in the manner of one of these *Gedankenexperimente* that Max Weber vaunted so highly, we may form a picture of the effects that could eventually result from the radicalization of certain processes of dualization now incipient in disadvantaged French

³ Loïc J. D. Wacquant, “Urban Outcasts: Stigma and Division in the Black American Ghetto and the French Urban Periphery,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 17, no. 3 (Sept. 1993), pp. 366–83; see also Colette Pétonnet, *On est tous dans le brouillard* (Paris: Galilée, 1978); Christian Bachmann and Luc Basier, *Mise en images d’une banlieue ordinaire* (Paris: Syros, 1989); and Serge Paugam, *La disqualification sociale. Essai sur la nouvelle pauvreté* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991).

⁴ For a more methodical and nuanced contrast, see Loïc J. D. Wacquant, “Pour en finir avec le mythe des ‘cités-ghettos’: les différences entre la France et les États-Unis,” *Annales de la Recherche Urbaine* 52 (Sept. 1992), pp. 20–30; and “The Comparative Structure and Experience of Urban Exclusion: ‘Race,’ Class, and Space in Paris and Chicago,” in Katherine McFate, Roger Lawson and William J. Wilson (eds), *Poverty, Inequality, and Future of Social Policy: Western States in the New World Order* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1994), pp. 543–70.

neighborhoods. Like a magnifying glass that also deforms what it shows, the American ghetto gives us a realistic vision of the kind of social relationships liable to develop when the State jettisons its essential mission to sustain the organizational infrastructure indispensable to the functioning of any complex urban society, pursues a policy of *systematic erosion of public institutions*, and gives in to market forces and to the logic of "everyone-for-themselves," that is, to relations of brute power that are most favorable to the powerful. Recent work in economic sociology shows that "the market" is a social fiction, but it is an interested fiction in which not everyone has an equal interest and whose social and economic consequences are very real for whole chunks of society, particularly those which, for want of any economic, cultural and social capital, must rely the most upon the State to accede to the effective exercise of citizenship.

Since its heyday in the fifties, the black ghetto has undergone swift and sweeping deterioration. This is readily discernible in the continual exodus of its residents, the accelerating dilapidation of its housing stock and physical infrastructure, and the astronomical rise in joblessness, violent crime, and in the litany of morbid symptoms (alcoholism, drug abuse, suicide, cardiovascular diseases and mental illness) commonly associated with entrenched poverty and with the individual and collective demoralization that such poverty invariably spawns over time. Another indicator is the escalating cost of managing a population condemned to a kind of internal exile in cities whose fiscal resources are dwindling as white families and wealthy households take refuge in the protected residential districts of the suburbs.

The recent scholarly and political debate on the causes of the continuing deterioration of the American "inner city" has focused in turn on racism, the culture of poverty and pathogenic behavior of the so-called "underclass," the presumed perverse effects of public assistance, the restructuring of the labor market under the press of deindustrialization, and the exodus of the black middle class from central city neighborhoods. However it is the policy of *deliberate urban abandonment* of these neighborhoods pursued by the American government in the wake of the riots of the sixties that best accounts for the cumulative and seemingly self-sustaining process of social dislocation visited upon the ghetto. By rolling back the public programs vital to the functioning of its institutions and by drastically curtailing the resources allocated to the support of its residents,⁵ this policy of urban and social disengagement, visible at all levels of government (federal, state, and municipal) and affecting virtually of all of its components (economic, social, educational, judicial, etc.), has triggered a *systematic destructuring* of the ghetto. This policy is the paramount force driving the disintegration of the organizational networks, the waning of the economic fabric, and the depacification of interpersonal relations that turned the ghetto into a veritable urban purgatory.

⁵ Fred Block, Richard A. Cloward, Barbara Ehrenreich and Frances Fox Piven, *The Mean Season: The Attack on the Welfare State* (New York: Pantheon, 1987); Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Random House, 1989).

The silent riots of everyday life

The media stampede after the 1992 outburst of rage in Los Angeles following the acquittal of the white policemen guilty of beating Rodney King must not divert attention away from the *silent riots of everyday life*. Though such low-grade, routine, interpersonal violence is less spectacular, it is no less destructive, and it has turned the remnants of the dark ghetto into a battlefield where one must continually fight for one's safety and survival. Whereas the feelings of insecurity that pervade many declining low-income housing projects of the French *banlieues* find their chief source in petty juvenile delinquency and in the oppressive ecology of cheaply built high rises, the climate of tension that weighs upon the American urban core has its roots in the grim reality of the homicides, rapes, and assaults that punctuate daily life and whose threat is ever present.

In 1988, the 32 judges who sit on the criminal court of Cook County, covering the 3 million residents of the city of Chicago, examined some 56,000 criminal cases, including 3,647 cases of aggravated battery, 8,419 rapes, 1,584 armed robberies, 2,569 incidents of aggravated assaults, and 2,009 combined murders and homicides. Most of these crimes were perpetrated in black ghetto areas, by their residents but also and more crucially *against* them – it is too often forgotten that the primary victims of street violence are poor urban blacks. A former gang leader of the Black Gangsters Disciples had this to say when I asked him why he always scrutinized the street left and right every time he came in or out of his apartment building: “’Cause it’s a lotta wineheads and dopefiends over there. That’s where they hang out. Because of them liquor stores. You just gotta be alert; Louie, in this neighborhood here. *You gotta be alert* – know what it is? It’s the *law of the jungle, Louie: bite or be bitten*. And I made my choice long time ago: *I’m not gonna be bitten, by no one*. Which one do you choose?”

It is on record that muggings and shootings are a common occurrence in the housing projects teeming with gangs and other street predators. So much so that mothers instruct their children, at a very young age, on how to drop to the floor to avoid stray bullets. Many prepare for the worst and draw on their meager income to make monthly payments on death insurance for their offspring. During the summer months, it is not rare to record between five and ten homicides on a single weekend, often from drive-by shootings. The truth is, handguns are easy to come by: they can be bought on the street at the semi-official rate of 300 dollars for a “clean” weapon and half that sum for a second-hand, used, “piece.” “This is like a lost territory here,” remarks a policeman from the Wentworth police station, at the heart of the city’s South Side. Indeed, the district has only one officer for every 277 violent crimes committed, six times fewer than the upper middle-class white district of the Near North Side – which contains the famous “Gold Coast” – where private security personnel are plentiful and offer additional, close-up, protection. The Wentworth police are out responding to emergency calls without pause from the moment they report to work to the end of

their shift. And still many emergency calls to the stations go unanswered because all available officers are already out responding to requests for intervention.⁶

Such endemic violence forces ghetto residents to severely restrict their outings and to plan their everyday moves to minimize time spent out on the street and to avoid as much as possible public transportation and public spaces. Not that one is safe hidden in one's abode, for, as the same Wentworth police officer notes: "If there is a fire, they cannot even get out of their apartment because they're barricaded inside with iron bars and grates, and they are too afraid to come out in the street." Even schools are unable to guarantee the physical integrity of their pupils and teachers, despite the use of metal detectors and body searches between buildings. The newspapers periodically report the deaths of school children shot or stabbed on school grounds. Yet such incidents elicit no reaction from city officials beyond a passing, ritualized expression of compassion. It is not rare for families from the ghetto to send their children off to live with relatives in the south or in nearby cities to ensure that they will at least finish school alive.

At all times, each and every individual must be prepared to defend himself or herself, and their family, on their own. Besides being feared for their brutal methods, the police are notoriously incapable of protecting victims of crime from the reprisals that gangs could exercise against them and their families. This eventuality is all the more probable since a good number of violent criminals are no sooner caught than they are let back out on the streets due to the massive overcrowding of detention facilities. Today the Cook County jail, a decrepit edifice built in 1929 to house 1,200 inmates, holds over 8,000 detainees, including a thousand who sleep nightly on mattresses thrown on the cell floor for lack of space and cots. During 1988 alone, criminal justice authorities had to release over 25,000 inmates because of jail overpopulation. Under such circumstances, it is easy to understand why ghetto residents hesitate to rely on law enforcement officers. The title of one song by the Crompton rap band Public Enemy sums it up best: "911 is a Joke."

The withering away of wage labor and the growth of the predatory economy

The endemic crime responsible for the virtual disappearance of public space in the ghetto is also closely bound up with the crumbling of the local economy. In 1968, the Kerner Commission, charged by President Johnson with diagnosing the causes of the wave of race riots that had shaken some one hundred cities throughout the country, warned that "the withdrawal of private capital is already well advanced in most of the segregated zones of our large cities."⁷ Twenty years later this process has been completed: the drying up of investment, the erosion of fiscal and administrative incentives to locate there, and the loss of tens of thousands of

⁶ "849 Homicides Place 1990 in a Sad Record Book," *Chicago Tribune*, 2 Jan. 1991.

⁷ *The Kerner Report: The 1968 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (1968; New York: Pantheon, 1989), p. 399.

manual jobs brought by industrial restructuring, have virtually emptied the ghetto of all commercial activity. Witness the metamorphosis of 63rd Street in Woodlawn, one of the most vibrant commercial thoroughfares of postwar Chicago, into a desolate stretch of abandoned buildings, garbage-strewn lots, and phantom stores whose burnt-out foundations rot away under the elevated train line. In 1950, Woodlawn boasted some 700 industrial and commercial establishments and not a single vacant building or lot. Business was so brisk that 63rd Street had earned the flattering nickname of "The Miracle Mile." Today the miracle, for the hundred-odd remaining stores and shops, consists in avoiding bankruptcy and foreclosure.

In contrast with the metropolis, whose occupational composition has grown more complex with the sectoral shift to knowledge-intensive services, the social structure of Chicago's ghetto has evolved towards greater homogeneity due to the unchecked rise of unemployment and underemployment, which translates into outright deproletarianization for substantial segments of the black working class. In 1950, over half of the adults dwelling at the core of the South Side were employed and "Bronzeville" (as it was then called) boosted a labor force participation rate only marginally lower than that of the city as a whole. By 1980, nearly three of every four adults were jobless. During this 30-year period, the number of manual workers plummeted from 35,800 to fewer than 5,000, and the number of white collar employees (counting retail and office workers as well as managers and professionals) was cut in half, from 15,300 to under 7,400, at the same time that the black middle class was growing fivefold in the Greater Chicagoland. At the heart of the Black Belt, more than six residents in ten now resort to public aid for their survival and four in ten grew up in a poor family on welfare or receiving assistance of some sort.

Caught between the collapse of the wage labor market and the stark insufficiencies of welfare support, many ghetto residents have no choice but to turn to the informal economy of the streets and in particular to its most dynamic sector, drugs. Since the three main gangs that control distribution rings in the urban core, the Vice Lords, the Disciples and the El Rukns, have joined in the retail trade of crack and its derivatives, the price of a kilo of crack cocaine in Chicago has dropped from 55,000 dollars to a mere 17,000 dollars. Today one can purchase a piece of "rock" at the very affordable price of 10 dollars: ecstasy, as well as individual and collective self-destruction, is within reach even of the destitute. By expanding to a mass customer base, drug trafficking has become a veritable industry, with an elaborate division of labor and racking up annual sales in the millions of dollars. Today the drug trade constitutes the main supply of jobs readily accessible to ghetto youths rejected by both schools and legal employers. The risks entailed in this line of business are high (and rising with each escalation in the rabid campaign of drugs repression) but one can start working in it at an early age (under 10 for runners and watchers), the skills required are minimal, the hours flexible, and pay compares quite favorably with the anemic local wage standards.

The vigorous growth of this form of "booty capitalism" (as Max Weber would call it) spearheaded by the drug trade is one of the main causes of the pandemics of violence experienced by the ghetto. On the side of consumption, theft and street crime are the most direct means that drug addicts have of procuring their daily dose. On the side of distribution, periodic recourse to physical force is a *sine qua non* in this type of commercial activity, an instrument of management and regulation of transactions that no dealer can bypass without the risk of being liquidated by rivals.⁸ At any rate, the spectacular expansion of the drug trade is but one of the surface manifestations of a broader process of "Third-Worldization" of the ghetto economy, whose other visible indicators are the proliferation of subproletarian street trades such as scavenging, collecting cans, selling newspapers by the unit, watching after parked cars or washing their windshields at stoplights, carrying grocery bags outside of supermarkets, etc.; the resurgence of sweatshops, home work and piece work; and the flowering of a whole range of shady businesses, from the sale of blood plasma and prostitution to "loan-sharking" and the traffic in food stamps and medical aid cards.

The pauperization of the public sector and social exclusion

The withdrawal of the market economy and the generalized deterioration of living conditions in the ghetto have reached proportions such that the public sector is no longer able to fulfill its minimal function as provider of collective goods such as safety, health, education, housing, and justice. Even worse: given that their clientele has been whittled down to the most marginalized strata of the nonwhite proletariat, inner-city public services can be reconverted into instruments of surveillance and policing of a surplus population that must henceforth be warehoused in the degraded enclaves where it has been relegated. Far from attenuating the inequalities that weigh upon them, public institutions thus tend to accentuate the isolation and stigmatization of their users, to the point where they effect a veritable *de facto secession of the ghetto* from the broader society. Instead of serving as a weapon in the fight against poverty, public authority turns into a war machine against the poor.

Federal and local government is hard pressed to manage those institutions with which it is entrusted in this part of its territory where it has effectively abdicated control. Consider the case of public housing: the Chicago Housing Authority, which administers the publicly built low-income housing units of the city (nearly all of them located within the ghetto), is incapable of producing a simple listing of the vacant apartments at its disposal. In addition to its 200,000 official tenants, the CHA acknowledges that it houses between 60 and 100,000 illegal occupants — despite having over 60,000 families on its waiting lists. Some projects contain more than twice their officially registered tenant population. In 1989, the new director of the CHA was forced to scrap an ambitious program aimed at getting

⁸ A. Hamid, "The Political Economy of Crack-Related Violence," *Contemporary Drug Problems* 17 (1989), pp. 31-78.

squatters and gangs out of the housing complexes of the South Side after "sweeps" planned in secrecy were divulged to the media and he received repeated death threats.

The city's social services have retreated outside of the ghetto in response to rising levels of danger and violence inside. Social workers assigned to the Wentworth district refuse to visit their "clients" at home; they call them instead to their downtown offices every six months or so depending on their caseload. Welfare checks are no longer distributed by US mail; they are handed directly to recipients through Currency Exchanges (private money-handling counters that offer cash-checking and bill payment services for a fee) in an effort to stem the wave of mailbox break-ins and thefts of public aid cards. At any rate, the organization of social services is geared less toward improving the well-being of needy families than toward *minimizing the number of recipients* in order to reduce welfare expenditures deemed intolerable by the majority white electorate. As evidence, take the Illinois public aid office, which has multiplied niggling administrative checks to verify eligibility and now allocates a portion of its budget to spying on recipients for the sole purpose of ferreting out potential "welfare cheats." Toll-free numbers for anonymous denunciation, open appeals for informants in local newspapers, the remuneration of informants for close-up surveillance, unannounced visits at the residence of recipients: all of these techniques are used, singly and in combination, with an eye toward paring down the welfare rolls. No wonder ghetto residents frequently liken the city's social services to the KGB.

However it is the school that best symbolizes the advanced pauperization of the public sector in the segregated urban core. Abandoned by whites and by the middle and upper classes as one flees a sinking ship, Chicago's school system has become an *academic reservation* where ghetto children are "parked" for lack of an alternative. Student enrollment comes almost solely from black and Latino families (86 percent) who live under the official poverty line (for 70 percent of them). Only one student in four completes secondary school on time, although there are no standardized examinations between grades; the overwhelming majority are steered onto the vocational tracks that are so many educational and occupational cul-de-sacs. Tolerance for low scholastic achievement is such that one can graduate from Martin Luther King High on the South Side without being able to write a complete sentence or compute a simple fraction. Now it is true that the Chicago school district spends only half as much per child as do other *public sector* schools in the wealthy towns of the surrounding suburbs, which explains the severe dearth of teachers, classrooms, and supplies that ghetto establishments have to contend with. None of Chicago's last five mayors ever sent his children to a *public sector* school. Neither do the current school superintendent and over half of the teachers. As an alderman once put it in a moment of candor, "You have to be crazy to send you children to public school."⁹

⁹ Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (New York: Crown Books, 1991), p. 53.

The dereliction of public institutions feeds the *organizational desertification* of the ghetto because it condemns local institutions and the private concerns that depend upon them to death by a thousand cuts. Such is the case of this devastated neighborhood of the West Side, home to some 61,000 black Chicagoans, half of whom live under the federal poverty line. A resident compares it to a “black hole”: “She could more easily recite what wasn’t there than what was. There were no banks, only currency exchanges, which charged customers up to \$8.00 for every welfare check cashed. There were no public libraries, movie theaters, skating rinks, or bowling alleys to entertain the neighborhood’s children. For the infirm, there were two neighborhood clinics . . . both of which teetered on the edge of bankruptcy and would close by the end of 1989. Yet the death rate of newborn babies exceeded infant mortality rates in a number of Third World countries, including Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, and Turkey. And there was no rehabilitation center, though drug abuse was rampant.”¹⁰

The shortcomings of public services in this section of the ghetto are so glaring that after visiting it in 1982, Mother Teresa assigned two sisters from the Mission of Charity to the Henry Horner housing project, where they opened a shelter for homeless women and children, a daycare center, and a soup kitchen. All told, the policy of urban abandonment of the American state has ravaged the public institutions of the ghetto. Far from providing a springboard for integration into the broader society, they have been debased to the level of instruments of segregation (in the etymological sense of the term: *segregare* originally means “to set apart”). And what little of a state presence remains within the ghetto contributes to reinforcing the multifarious forms of exclusion of which the ghetto is the product.

Europe is not the United States. The housing projects of France’s declining urban periphery are not “ghettos” in the sense that this term assumes in the context of American society. The decomposition of the workers’ territories in France follows its own logic, which accords with their history and with the constraints and facilities of a very different institutional and political framework. Discrimination, violence, destitution, and social isolation are very far from having reached the intensity and extensiveness they have acquired in the American “inner city” – a euphemism that masks the racial basis of exclusion in the American metropolis, yet another source of continuing difference with its European counterpart.

Nevertheless, over and beyond these striking differences in form, scale, and scope, it remains that the *slope* of the evolution of urban inequality in France over the past decade tends to create conditions conducive, over the long run, to a partial transatlantic rapprochement. If, owing to their technocratic myopia and fascinated fixation on short-term financial performance, France’s ruling elites of both left and right persist with the neoconservative policy of “downsizing” the public sector and rampant commodification of social relations they have pursued

¹⁰ Alex Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 12.

since the mid-seventies, then one cannot rule out that what is still today a distant and frightful dystopia¹¹ might one day turn into an all too close and familiar reality.

¹¹ For a gripping portrait of the “negative utopia” that the polarized American megalopolis has become, read the magnificent book of Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990), with photographs by Robert Morrow.

Loïc J. D. Wacquant

Inside “The Zone”

The Social Art of the Hustler in the American Ghetto

State Street, a desolate urban corridor from where one can make out, a handful of miles off in the distance, the postmodern skyline composed by the brightly lit towers of steel and glass of the downtown Loop: the Sears Tower, for some years the world's tallest structure, the stunning bevel-edged profile of the Citibank building, the Persian-like dome of the ABC tower not far from the Stock Exchange, and other jewels of Chicago architecture. Be careful to slow down and watch out for the potholes and sinkholes (the deeper ones are flagged by orange-circled drums that can be avoided by swerving to the left) as well as for the children who dash across the street with nary a warning – all the more because the stoplights do not always work. A police car, its doors bisected by the ruddy blue letters of its falsely reassuring motto “We Serve And Protect,” zooms by, sirens wailing, and dodges off into one of the clumps of high rises that line up the street for miles.

To the left, the decrepit 10 to 15 story concrete slabs of the Robert Taylor Homes, followed by their sisters from Stateway Gardens, make up a wall of concrete virtually uninterrupted for some 20 blocks. Like gigantic tombstones, as far as the eye goes, they clog up the horizon. If you slow down a bit you will notice that the buildings, whose galleries have been “encaged” with latticework that gives them the look of bunkers, are covered with graffiti and in a sorry state of disrepair. The first-floor openings are invariably obstructed, either walled off or boarded up, for reasons of (in)security, while on the other floors sheets, cardboard, and torn blankets are used for curtains. Here and there a blackened windowframe marks out the site of a recent fire.

A good number of apartments have been virtually abandoned for lack of funds to rehabilitate them. Public housing in this part of the city is notoriously filled with rats, maggots, and roaches; many units have not seen a coat of paint for over 20 years; thousands of them are occupied although deemed unfit for human habitation. The Chicago Housing Authority cannot even reckon just how many tenants it has. What with squatters, doubled-up families, illegal sublets, and the “unattached” children and men who circulate between households, some projects

house perhaps double the population officially recorded in the agency's books. Under the broken-down entrances denuded of light or vestibule, cliques of unemployed youths kill time "shooting the breeze," arguing and pushing each other about. The sound of rap music floats in the air, its heady rhythmic, as raucous as the street, filling the sparsely occupied parking lots at the foot of the buildings.

To the right, vacant lots strewn with refuse and detritus share blocks with abandoned, half-crumbled buildings. A hollowed-out gas station and a former furniture shop, of which only the walls remain, testify to the life that once inhabited the neighborhood. A smattering of food stores sporting the sprightly logo of the lotto and a profusion of liquor outlets, many of them open 24 hours a day, compact brick cubes with narrow latticed windows decorated with colorful pennants vaunting the latest sale on six-packs of Colt 45, live catfish, and the special on Night Train (a cheap rotgut that tastes worse than bromide), dot the area. Alongside the DuSable high school – a massive Tudor-style structure built like a fortress which was named after the Haitian explorer who "founded" Chicago and more recently made famous across the country by its astronomical rate of student pregnancy – the Jackson Park train line of the "el" (elevated public transit system) stretches its rusty skeleton in the midst of this bombed-out landscape.

Not far away, a billboard stridently queries "Isn't It Time We Let Our Children Live?" in large fire-red block letters that hardly stick out amidst the lunar scenery. Another one exhorts "Be Smart: Stay in School." And a third one urges "Save a Life: Tell On Your Neighborhood Drug Dealer." An incongruous poster – probably a mishap in location by some advertising agency – displays an ivory-skin blonde little girl frowning on her hospital bed: "She Needs Blood, Don't Forget to Give Some of Yours." The Trinity Church of God on Garfield Boulevard closed down a little over two years ago. Across the street, a Head Start center barricaded behind heavy metal grates tries to brighten the block with its blue frontage. A few blocks going east, the remains of the former Michigan Theater quietly rot away. Some say it has been reconverted into a warehouse and dispatch center by local drug merchants.

The neons of the area Currency Exchanges (these banks of the poor where ghetto residents come to cash their public assistance checks or pay their bills for a fee) flicker with their inimitable yellow glare. At the stoplight, one can read small makeshift signs of cardboard hung to the lamppost and inscribed in irregular handwriting: "Let Us Video Your Wedding, True Professional Work"; "Home TV Repair, Only 8 dollars, Free Home Visit Guaranteed 24 Hours." Women, young and old, walk up through traffic coming off the nearby Dan Ryan Expressway when the lights turn red to hawk peanuts, T-shirts, plastic dolls, and cheap lithographs of city scenes or sports heroes. At the gas station on the corner of State and 55th, two urchins eight to ten years of age – the one with a hardened look in his eyes, dressed in a worn-out sweat top, the other wearing a broad smile on his chubby face and a Michael Jordan starter jacket –

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are fighting over who gets to hold the gas pump this time in return for petty change.

I met Rickey through his brother, whom I had met in the course of my research on the craft of the boxer in Chicago in a gym located in the heart of the ghetto, in the shadow of particularly dilapidated high rises. "He boxed pro too, he even makin' a comeback, you should interview 'im," suggested Ned.¹ Indeed, a few days later, Rickey appeared at the gym. After I had explained the goal of my study, he agreed to let me interview him but every time we would get close to it he would slip out on me at the last minute or vanish for days on end. Finally I was able to conduct the long-awaited interview in August 1991 following a string of unsuccessful appointments at the boxing gym, and only after I had been cleared as "trustworthy" by the appropriate authority.

I had already interviewed Rickey's brother, who drags his hulk of a frame around the gym all week long and ekes out a living from odd jobs he picks up from time to time in the vicinity. I was thus familiar with Rickey's family background. From his former trainer, I knew that his half-hearted attempt at getting back in the ring after a hiatus of some five years would be in vain, even if everyone did their level best to maintain the collective fiction that it was going to happen. And from another neighborhood informant, I had gleaned precious bits and pieces of information on Rickey's underground involvements, in particular that he was a "professional hustler," a term that covers a peculiar semantic and social space calling for closer scrutiny and provides an opportunity to delve into the practical logics of social action and structure in the contemporary dark ghetto.

Hustling as structure and strategy

The verb *to hustle* denotes a field of activities which have in common the fact that they require *mastery of a particular type of symbolic capital*, namely, the ability to manipulate others, to inveigle and deceive them, if need be by joining violence to chicanery and charm, in the pursuit of immediate pecuniary gain. These activities span a continuum² that goes from the relatively innocuous and unoffensive – the manufacturing and peddling of homemade alcohol (sold in particular in "after-hours clubs"), the sale and resale of stolen ("hot") merchandise, betting on games of chance (cards, dice, pool) in ways forbidden by the law, participating in the

¹ Minor identifying details (some names of individuals and places, dates, etc.) have been altered so as to preserve the anonymity of Rickey (an alias) and his relatives and associates.

² For selected illustrations, see Bettylou Valentine, *Hustling and Other Hard Work: Life Styles in the Ghetto* (New York: Free Press, 1978); Elliott Liebow, *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967); and Elijah Anderson, "The Hoodlums," in *A Place on the Corner* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) and "The Story of John Turner," in A. V. Harrell and G. F. Peterson (eds), *Drugs, Crime, and Social Isolation: Barriers to Urban Opportunity* (Washington DC: Urban Institute Press, 1992). From an autobiographical point of view, read the classic account by Henry Williamson *Hustler!*, ed. Charles Keiser (New York: Avon Books, 1965) as well as David Schultz (ed.), *Pimp: Champ – Big-Time, Big-Money Procurer. His Story – the Dudes, the Skin Trade, the Women He Calls His "Wives"* (New York: Lancer Books, 1973) and Donald Goines, *Whoreson: The Story of a Ghetto Pimp* (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1972).

underground lottery of the ghetto known as the policy or numbers game³ – to the felonious – petty pillage and theft, break-ins, stealing and stripping cars, scavenging bricks, pipes, and window and door frames from abandoned buildings, and all manners of swindles and scams duly recorded by the oral lore – all the way to the downright criminal: mugging, stickups, pimping, racketeering local shopkeepers (who are unkindly requested to pay up "insurance money" on threat of arson and other violent disruption), the wholesale and retail trade of drugs, and even murder on order, for which the going rates are common knowledge in some sectors of the ghetto.

If this definition lacks precision, it is because the hustler is an elusive and slippery character, difficult to grasp and pin down in a stable reality, precisely because his trade consists in many instances in unobtrusively inserting himself into social situations or in spinning about him a web of deceitful relations, just so that he may derive some more or less extorted profit from them. Moreover, if the hustler prefers the ways of seduction to those of physical coercion and threat, the art of "playing it cool" to the brute force whose repeated use would assimilate him to that other ghetto social type called the "gorilla," circumstances often require that he resort to violence, if only to maintain his honor and physical integrity. The boundaries that demarcate him from the other social predators who vie for the meager riches of the street are not that hard and fast.

The world of hustling stands in structural opposition to that of wage labor in which, at least in theory, everything is legal, recognized, regular and regulated, recorded and approved by the law, as attested by employment forms and wage slips. It is the grey world of the illicit and the illegal, which leaves no paper trail, no official trace, which is reprovved and repressed by society – including, quite often, by those who partake in it ("you have to pay for yer own action," philosophizes Rickey as he recounts an attempted auto theft gone awry during which he got shot twice in the ankle) – but a world known and tacitly tolerated by all because it is both *banal and necessary*: you have got to live and to take care of your own. And thus, owing to the chronically insufficient income received from work or from social assistance, nearly all the residents of the ghetto must, at some point or another, rely on some kind of hustle to get by.⁴

Rickey has, as they say, the looks that go with the job. Very tall, gangly, a wide torso perched on top of long thin legs, he is dressed in a green jungle outfit in imitation buckskin plastered with side pockets and adorned with brownish leather shoulder-straps that conveniently camouflages the beginnings of a

³ See Light's insightful study of the role of this parallel lottery in the ghetto economy, of which it was the single largest indigenous provider of jobs well into the sixties: Ivan Light, "Numbers Gambling among Blacks: An Alternative Financial Institution," *American Sociological Review* 42, no. 6 (June 1977), pp. 892–904.

⁴ In his autobiography, Malcolm X notes: "Everyone in Harlem needed some kind of hustle to survive, and needed to stay high in some way to forget what they had to do to survive": *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, ed. Alex Haley (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964), p. 101. This point is also discussed by Schultz, *Pimp*, pp. 78–103 and Douglas Glasgow, *The Black Underclass: Poverty, Unemployment, and Entrapment of Ghetto Youth* (New York: Vintage, 1980), esp. ch. 6.

potbelly – he has a good 30 pounds to shed before he recovers his ring shape of old. His impeccably white, brand-name sneakers accentuate his relaxed and feline demeanor. Reflecting sunglasses hide little eyes under a wide copper-skinned forehead. A filmy black mustache and a nascent goatee help give him something of a reflective air that he cultivates with discretion. His jet-black hair cut very high on the neck is carefully tucked under his maroon baseball cap, worn with the visor turned back.

I had been warned of Rickey's reputation as a "talker," a quality held in high esteem in the ghetto, whose essentially oral and kinetic culture has always granted pride of place to rhetorical prowess.⁵ Still, I was surprised by his fecundity but more so perhaps by the sense of restraint, circumspection even, with which he told me about his neighborhood, his childhood buddies, the hopes and rebuffs, wishes and misfortunes of his life, and the ever-renewed struggle to, as he put it, "make it through another day." Rickey views this discomposed universe that encloses him with an almost clinical gaze; he describes it with no fanfare or dramatizing, without trying either to embellish or blacken it. He does not claim it but neither does he disown it. It is quite simply *there*: it is his world, and that is all there is to it. His awareness of being fated to it gives him a painful lucidity that makes him realize that there is no point in self-pity.

What strikes me also as the interview unfolds, and which unfortunately gets lost in the written transcription, is the profound symbiosis between, on the one hand, Rickey's person, his physical constitution, his manner of speaking and holding his body, bent forward ever so lightly as if he had just been caught in motion and momentarily "frozen," the indolent arabesques of his long limbs accompanying the flow of his speech, and, on the other hand, his surroundings and life strategies. They mirror each other even in the irregular staccato of his delivery, at times sprightly and harmonious, at others jerky and dissonant, in the speed of his narration interspersed with long plateaus of perplexed silence, as well as in the contradictions of his projects and the discordant evaluations he makes of the most irregular business of all represented by the predatory street economy into which all of his energies and skills are channeled. It also becomes quickly apparent that this interview gives Rickey a rare opportunity to pause and look at himself from the outside, so to speak, to draw up a kind of balance sheet of his life at a junction when it appears that he himself feels the need to try and impart a new direction to the troubled course of his existence ("you *wise up* an' you ha' to count yer blessin's"). Thus it is that he repeatedly interrupts his account with a slight start of surprise ("man!") and affirms

⁵ See Roger D. Abrahams, "Rapping and Capping: Black Talk as Art," John F. Szwed (ed.), *Black America* (New York: Basic Books, 1970); Thomas Kochman (ed.), *Rappin' and Stylin' Out: Communication in Urban Black America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973); Edith A. Folb, *Runnin' Down Some Lines: The Language and Culture of Black Teenagers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); and Michael J. Bell, *The World from Brown's Lounge* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983). Rap music testifies to this centrality of "verbal act as performance" in the realm of black commercial culture, see R. Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance," *American Anthropologist* 77 (1975), pp. 290-311.

his anxious but powerless concern in the face of human dramas which, blinding in their banality, too close and too familiar, had escaped his scrutiny until he was put in a situation where he had to relate them to an outsider and thus constitute them into a *spectacle*: "It's *crucial* when you really getta think about it, man."

Making do in a closed and fuzzy world

Born in Chicago the seventh and last son of a family of 11 children, Rickey has lived all his life in a large South Side project notorious across the country as a high-risk area ("it might be that spot that you hear 'bout on the news"). His mother, who trekked north from Tennessee in 1956, just as the second Great Migration that brought tens of thousands of southern blacks to Chicago was coming to a close, her only asset a primary school education, raised him and his siblings on her own, tossed about between cleaning jobs (in various ghetto taverns and bars, after working for a time in a paper plate factory) and the public assistance rolls which barely kept the family from starving to death. Of his father, who died well before he reached his teens, Rickey has few memories: all he knows is that he always slaved at "a whole lotta jobs in factories, all 'round here," without much to show for it. As is common among lower-class urban blacks of his generation, he never met any of his grandparents.

Rickey grew up "the hard way": his neighborhood, one of the toughest on the city's South Side,⁶ was controlled by the gang of the Disciples, later renamed the El Rukns, whose headquarters (an inconspicuous three-story brick building fronting a sign heralding a "Muslim Religious Center," recently destroyed by the FBI after a large-scale military operation culminating in the seizure of large quantities of drugs and a veritable arsenal: mounds of ammunition, tens of guns, hand grenades, Uzi submachine guns and even a rocket-launcher) are located on the same street as the project where he now lives. Street fights, shootings, prostitution, drug trafficking, unceasing and ever-more-deadly confrontations between rival gangs: "You name it, you come round and you jus' about got it." One of his older brothers worked for a while for a local drug ring as an "enforcer," his task being to recover by any means necessary the late payments owed the drug network by street-level retailers. It is not by accident that the neighborhood is known in that part of the ghetto as "The Zone," a nickname to which Rickey prefers the "Killing Fields" which, in its frightful conciseness, and better than any and all mortality statistics, conveys the extreme dangerousness of this section of the ghetto.⁷

⁶ For a gallery of personal portraits of men raised in this section of the South Side, see Sylvester Monroe and Peter Goldman's *Brothers: Black and Poor - A True Story of Courage and Survival* (New York: William Morrow, 1988).

⁷ This is not an isolated case: the Henry Horner Homes on the city's West Side are called "The Graveyard" by their residents; a Chicago Housing Authority high rise near 63rd Street and King Drive in Woodlawn is known by the no less evocative name of "Murdertown."

Poverty and insecurity at the heart of Chicago's ghetto

In 1990, 849 homicides were committed in the city of Chicago (a rate of 28.3 for 100,000 residents, comparable to those of New York City and Los Angeles but well below those of Washington DC and Detroit). Among the victims, 253 were under 21 years of age (and 27 under 10 years), and 9 out of 10 were killed by gunfire. Over half of those youths killed lived in the six police precincts corresponding to the city's historic "Black Belt" and 186 (or 73.5 percent) were Afro-Americans. In the Wentworth district, a 20-square-kilometer strip that covers the core of the South Side (from 40th to 59th Street going south and from Cottage Grove Avenue to the Dan Ryan Expressway heading west), the official homicide rate – and there are numerous indicators and much evidence to suggest that a not-insignificant number of murders are never recorded – exceeded 106 per 100,000 residents in 1990, when a total of 96 homicides were recorded, 20 more than the previous year despite continued depopulation.

"We have murders on a daily basis that never make the news. No one really knows or cares," notes a despondent police officer from the Violent Crime Unit of the Wentworth district. "We're like a forgotten territory." A colleague from the special intervention brigade concurs: "Criminals are younger and more daring. And it's easier for them to get high-power weapons. There is something going on here and I'm just not sure what it is. The increase in violence is simply crazy. Kids used to have bats and knives. Now they're equipped with better guns than we have." Already in the year 1980, the Wentworth police had arrested 2,867 youths ages 10 to 17 (out of a cohort of 9,300) and over 10 percent of the residents in that age category had been referred to the criminal justice system. The first policeman adds: "There are good people in this district, and a lot of

them are stuck here for economic reasons. If there's a fire, they can't get out of their building because they're locked up behind bars and iron fences, and they're afraid to come out into the street at night."

It is difficult not to postulate a close causal relation between these astronomical rates of crime and mortality, worthy of a muted civil war – recent epidemiological research has established that young black men from Harlem, for instance, have a higher chance of dying from violence than did soldiers sent to the frontlines at the height of the Vietnam war – and the crushing poverty that pervades this urban enclave shorn of economic activities and from which the government has virtually withdrawn, save for its repressive arm.

In this all-black neighborhood of some 54,000 (according to the 1980 census, the last to produce reliable figures for the inner city), of which 37 percent are under 18 years of age, over half of all households live under the official "poverty line" (9,885 dollars for a family of three and 12,675 dollars for a family of four as of 1989), as against 37 percent a decade earlier. With a median household income of 6,900 dollars barely reaching one-third of the city-wide figure, only one family in 20 has an income above the national average. Three in four are headed by a single woman and two adults in three did not complete their high school education, even though this requires no examination.

The official unemployment rate of 24 percent cannot hide the fact that three of every four adults are without a job, which explains why 63 percent of all residents rely on public aid. It is also known from other studies that 71 percent of ghetto residents in Chicago (South Side and West Side together) must resort to food assistance in order to subsist, either in the form of government food stamps (which can be sold on the streets for half of their

nominal value when one is short on cash) or meals distributed by soup kitchens run by local churches and community organizations; and that only one-third of all households have an automobile to escape, if momentarily, the prison-like atmosphere of their neighborhood, and barely 10 percent of them have a checking account.

Despite rapid depopulation (the neighborhood lost some 30,000 souls in the 1970s and upwards of 61,000 between 1950 and 1980), nearly a quarter of the inhabitants of Grand Boulevard live in overcrowded housing. This is because the housing stock has been cut by one-fifth during the same decade, due especially to arson – Chicago holds the national record for mortality by fire – that periodically force residents to move and send them scrambling for a place to live in a rental market virtually devoid of low-income units. Thus one-third of all persons aged five and over changed address at least once between 1975 and 1980; only 6 percent of the buildings are owner-occupied and nearly half are considered in disrepair or dilapidated.

Grand Boulevard sports an unusually high density of public housing at 20 percent of the local stock (as compared with a mere 3 percent for the city as a whole),

anchored by the Robert Taylor Homes, a gigantic project composed of 28 16-story buildings lined up alongside State Street that constitute the single largest physical concentration of urban poverty in the United States – and thus in the Western industrialized world. This is the case even though it is directly flanked on its western border by a lily-white neighborhood, Bridgeport, stronghold of the city's long-time mayor Richard D. Daley who presided over the perpetuation of the rigid residential apartheid of blacks from 1955 till 1976 (and whose son Richard J. Daley inherited the city's mantle in 1989), a neighborhood which contains a grand total of... 14 public housing units and enjoys a homicide rate eight times lower for a population with only 10 percent of households under the "poverty line."

Data drawn from *The Chicago Community Fact Book* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1985); Loïc J. D. Wacquant and William Julius Wilson, "The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion in the Inner City," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 501 (Jan. 1989), pp. 8–25; and from a report by the Federal Bureau of Investigation cited in "849 Homicides Places 1990 in a Sad Record Book," *Chicago Tribune*, 2 Jan. 1991, pp. 1 and 14.

Rickey got his primary and secondary education in neighborhood schools, eventually graduating after several interruptions from the Wendell Phillips high school, a decayed establishment (the main building was erected before 1930) stuck between several rival projects; with all the charm of a barracks (reinforced steel doors, barred windows, and beat-up sports facilities), it is attended exclusively by poor African-American children in the vicinity.⁸ Toward the school system, he feels both grudge and regret. *Grudge* because what little education he did get has proved to be of absolutely no value: "What goo' did that do, you know? What good did that do? It was uh, school was a joke to me more like, *I was a joke in school*, so it didn't really – I didn't really capitalize on that. Tha' passed by me." He briefly took a few classes at a municipal junior college, but without really knowing himself too much what for. This brief campus interlude

⁸ The utter dilapidation of Chicago's public schools (due to political abandonment) is described in detail in Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (New York: Crown, 1991), ch. 2, esp. 52–72, and *The Worst Schools in America*, by staff of the *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago: Contemporary Press, 1992).

was quickly brought to a close because "it was time for me to try to get on with my life an' try ta, you know, ha' some money or somethin' . . . It wasn't like I was gonna be a doctor or lawyer or nothin' like tha', so." At the same time Rickey feels *regret* because he realizes that without proper educational credentials, he will in all likelihood never obtain a stable job but also because the school is intermingled with memories of a childhood that retrospectively appears to him as almost fortunate by comparison to his present existence. He talks about enrolling again at Kennedy King College to study "communication," which is as much an expression of a confused desire to somehow carve an escape route out of the ghetto as by a sense of ideological duty to which the academic situation of the interview recalls him.⁹

Single out of necessity rather than choice, Rickey lives on his own in a small two-room apartment on the third floor of a high rise not far from the project where he grew up. At 29, he has never held a steady job; his subsistence has always depended on hustling and mandated participation in a broad spectrum of more or less illegal activities. When I ask him if he works, Rickey first presents himself as something of an independent street peddler: "I always ha' been a hustler, yu know, I prob'y jus' sell stuff, you know. Sell socks, sell balloons, cigarettes, cologne, whatever." Later he acknowledges that he occasionally earns sizeable sums of money from gambling and lets on that he also draws pecuniary assistance from several women who "work" for him or remunerate his sexual services.¹⁰ He shies away from speaking too directly of his various street dealings and denies with an insistence that borders on denegation any involvement with the drug business – I will later get confirmation from a well-placed informant that he works from time to time as a street retailer in a local drug ring, selling Karachi, Angel dust, and cocaine. As the interview proceeds, his

⁹ Recognition of the potency of education and of the necessity to subscribe to it is nearly universal in the ghetto – a young man from neighboring Woodlawn has this striking formulation: "School is gittin' to be a demand, 'cause pretty soon you gonna need a degree in aerodynamic space technology to git a job at McDonald's." By a paradox that only seems to be one, it is those who are the most culturally dispossessed who worship educational titles the most intensely and who invariably declare (and believe) that they are on the eve of resuming an academic journey that was temporarily "interrupted" due to the practical exigencies of the day. The single mothers struggling to survive on public aid, sometimes for a decade and more, with no objective chance of changing their condition in the short run, whom I interviewed in the ghetto, all said almost ritually: "I'm gonna sign up for classes to get my GED." When? "Next September, after I find a babysitter for my kids. Then I'm gonna find me a good job and get out of this neighborhood."

¹⁰ This economic strategy is not to be confounded with pimping, even if it may encompass it (Christine Milner and Richard Milner, *Black Players: The Secret World of Black Pimps* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972). What the lingo of the street calls *broad money* is often given to the man under no physical duress as payment for real services provided (protection, affection, company, and the disciplining of children in the household). This type of arrangement concretely materializes the extreme economic marginality of black men in the ghetto and their financial dependency upon women whose sources of income are more varied and more readily accessible (downgraded factory work, home work or domestic labor, public assistance, prostitution), save for the significant burden of caring for children. In its specifically sexual dimension, it sometimes turns out to be closer to male prostitution than to the classic pattern of pimping (Iceberg Slim, *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1968); Schultz, *Pimp*), though the two are not as mutually exclusive as male accounts would indicate.

estimated income fluctuates between 600 and 1,000 dollars a month (with a sudden jolt up to 3,000), sums that correspond roughly to the various images that Rickey would like to give of himself – including to himself. In the end, though, he confesses with embarrassment after a long silence: "Nothin' really to brag abou' uh, it varies, jus' enough to pay the bills." No one finds it easy to be penniless, "hard up," in a society where the value of every individual is indexed by income, even at its lowest reaches, where everything can be bought and sold for cold cash on the barrel.

The fuzziness of Rickey's economic status also derives from the fact that his income streams are highly irregular, arising from different sources that are each affected by a specific *coefficient of uncertainty*. Rickey draws intermittently on a social assistance program for which he technically does not qualify (General Assistance, for about 180 dollars a month and a handful of food stamps); he wheedles money out of several "lady friends" who themselves subsist in part on public aid (but who receive larger sums from the welfare office) or, better, work in the Loop as secretaries and bank clerks; finally there is the income he derives from his various hustles and street scams. Rickey has no checking account, no personal assets worth mentioning at his place, apart from a telephone (and he grows suspicious of my intentions when I ask his number) and an old Plymouth Valiant that he fixes himself when it breaks down – which happens rather frequently – because physical mobility is a *sine qua non* of his occupation.¹¹ He takes pains always to pay his rent on time, if need be by calling to the rescue one of his many lady friends. That is Rickey's number one priority: "I always stayed on top of my bills, *always*. Even if I was broke for tha' month for a while, I always manage to pay my bills regar'less of what, so once I pay my bills, I feel more relaxed an' at ease, so if I do *luck up* an' get some money, tha' be money tha' be velvet." This is why he takes trouble to maintain "at all costs" these ambiguous relationships that tie him to several women who each believe that she is "the one and only," even though, when pressed about it, he concedes that "if a woman lookin' for some guy tha' she depen' on and uh, someone to raise a fam'ly with, it's not me."¹²

From a long interview (nearly three hours of a nervous, fast tempo delivery) on his childhood, his everyday wanderings and maneuverings in the street, his

¹¹ Over and beyond its use value as an instrument of appropriation of territory, the automobile is endowed with a heavy symbolic charge as an outward mark of masculinity, a personal stylistic signature, and an object of widespread envy. Along with money and clothes, it is a constant pre-occupation of young men in the ghetto, holding center stage in the "professional game" and conspicuous display of status (Folb, *Runnin' Down Some Lines*, pp. 83–6, 109–16). Thus it is not uncommon for them to consent to extreme sacrifices in order to acquire a "pair of wheels that look the deal." One of my main informants in Woodlawn proudly drove a brand new 4×4 Jeep Cherokee but, predictably, it was not long before the monthly installments had ruined the already shaky finances of his family since they came to over half of his meager household income.

¹² This diffident and exploitative pattern of gender relation has long been prevalent in the ghetto, cf. for instance Liebow, *Tally's Corner*, ch. 5, "Lovers and Exploiters"; Folb, *Runnin' Down Some Lines*, ch. 4.

The women's point of view

The fact that the street is a quintessentially masculine territory does not mean that men enjoy a monopoly over hustling. Women in the ghetto, making a virtue out of necessity, are also quite adept at it in their own sphere. Their "art of making do" is invested first of all in managing the household economy and the web of kinship and friendship relations that constitute critical resources in strategies of daily survival.¹ From this point of view, the domestic universe is the site of specific constraints and facilitations. It is nearly always women who shoulder the onerous responsibility of controlling the "just-in-time" finances of the household, provisioning the material needs of its members, especially children, and safeguarding as best as possible their health and physical security.² For this they can rely upon the support, more or less reliable, of their boyfriends and companions (including absent lovers and husbands with whom they generally keep in regular touch), or else rely on the barter of last resort, selling their body.

"It is difficult around here to find a good man. Most of them don't work. They just work the streets, you know. They just steal and deal and stuff. That kind of thing is a drag. I mean, it's very risky and though it brings in a lot of money, they're going to

lose it all and you're going down with them. My first husband worked the streets, and I know enough now to stay away from that kind."

"Like if I don't have food, I have to make some extra money by turning a few tricks. I also do hair, babysitting, clean the landlord's house, laundry... [By combining these activities] I clear close to 200 dollars a month."

"I also think a lot of people have affairs with guys who will pay some of their bills. It's like a more legitimate prostitution. There is not really an exchange of money for services. It is more of a social thing. You are sleeping with this person, and in return he is taking care of a few things for you."

Interviews with single mothers subsisting in part on public aid, from Kathryn Edin, "Surviving the Welfare System: How AFDC Recipients Make Ends Meet in Chicago," *Social Problems* 38, no. 4 (Nov. 1991), pp. 466 and 469.

¹ See Carol Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Terry Williams and William Kornblum, *Growing Up Poor* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1985).

² Alex Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

aborted attempts to gain a footing in the labor market, and his experiences in the world of professional boxing, the edited transcript that follows retains mainly what Rickey told me of his trade as a hustler and of the daily atmosphere of his neighborhood – what we may call the "social art" of negotiating one's way through the social space of the ghetto.¹³

Now, it would be a serious mistake to see Rickey as a marginal *curiosa*, an exotic character belonging to a *demi-monde* close to the criminal underworld or analyzable in term of "delinquency." For the hustler, of which Rickey offers a compact, personalized incarnation, is on the contrary a *generic figure who occupies a central position* in the social and symbolic space of the black American

¹³ The notion of "social art" is borrowed from Marcel Mauss, *Essais de sociologie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit/Point Seuil, 1968).

ghetto. Not only is he far from being statistically infrequent even in the unalloyed state in which we may observe him here but, more importantly, he also combines – as if he were a living ideal-type – an extended repertoire of practical properties and competencies highly prized in the local value system since it makes being street smart, the “grounded intelligence” of the ghetto that is the only form of capital freely given to all, the foundation of an expressive lifestyle¹⁴ which alone can make life somewhat bearable by loosening the taut and oppressive grip of the daily round in the ghetto. Rickey is neither a social anomaly nor the representative of a deviant micro-society: rather, he is the *product of the exacerbation of a logic of economic and racial exclusion* that imposes itself ever more stringently on all residents of the ghetto.¹⁵

One hustler among many

There I was back in Harlem's streets among all the rest of the hustlers. I couldn't sell reefers; the dope squad detectives were too familiar with me. I was a true hustler – uneducated, unskilled at anything honorable, and I considered myself nerry and cunning enough to live by my wits, exploiting any prey that presented itself. I would risk just about anything.

Right now, in every big city ghetto, tens of thousands of yesterday's and today's school drop-outs are keeping body and soul together by some form of hustling in the same way I did. And they inevitably move into more and more, worse and

worse, illegality and immorality. Full-time hustlers never can relax to appraise what they are doing and where they are bound. As is the case in any jungle, the hustler's every waking hour is lived with both the practical and the subconscious knowledge that if he ever relaxes, if he ever slows down, the other hungry, restless foxes, ferrets, wolves, and vultures out there with him won't hesitate to make him their prey.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X, ed. Alex Haley (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964), pp. 108–9.

¹⁴ On the importance of the expressive dimension of the black popular “lifestyle,” see Lee Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Family Life in a Federal Slum* (New York: Aldine, 1970), pp. 377–84; Monroe and Goldman, *Brothers*; Ulf Hannerz, “The Rhetoric of Soul: Identification in Negro Society,” *Race* 9, no. 4 (1968), pp. 453–65; and Harold Finestone, “Cats, Kicks, and Color,” in H. S. Becker (ed.), *The Other Side: Perspectives on Deviance* (New York: Free Press, 1964), pp. 281–97.

¹⁵ Bettylou Valentine, *Hustling and Other Hard Work*, demonstrates that a large majority of ghetto dwellers must continually combine paid labor, public assistance, and hustling in order to survive in the cramped social space to which they are relegated, the skill of meshing these different sources together being itself part and parcel of the social art of hustling. A detailed study of the budget of 50 single mothers and their children receiving public assistance in the Greater Chicago area in the late 1980s shows that *all of them without a single exception* must routinely rely on the substantial support of kin, lovers or “absent fathers,” and/or on declared labor in order to maintain minimal subsistence levels (Kathryn Edin, “Surviving the Welfare System: How AFDC Recipients Make Ends Meet in Chicago,” *Social Problems* 38, no. 4 (Nov. 1991), pp. 462–74; see also William Moore Jr, *The Vertical Ghetto: Everyday Life in an Urban Project* (New York: Random House, 1969) and Jagna Wojcicka Scharf, “The Underground Economy of a Poor Neighborhood,” in L. Mullings (ed.), *Cities of the United States: Studies in Urban Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). It is not by happenstance that the *hustler* is an ubiquitous character in Afro-American literature and autobiography (e.g. Claude Brown's 1965 classic *Manchild in the Promised Land* (New York: Signet).

The social logic of muddling through in the street economy

In order fully to elucidate the social logic that informs the quasi-carceral universe that is today's black American ghetto, the *specific necessity that inhabits it* – organizing it from within even as it finds its deepest roots as well as its extraordinary force of imposition on the outside, in the twofold shearing effects of labor market restructuring and state abandonment¹⁶ – and of which Rickey's stance, consisting of quick oscillations between disillusioned realism and fatalistic pipe-dreams, is the "subjective" expression, one must side-step two symmetrical traps. These are presented, on the one hand, by the "*miserabilistic*" interpretation, where one is moved to compassion (meaning, literally, to "suffer with" – in thought, that is) by the spectacle of human beings thus reduced to the passive state of hapless victims, and, on the other, by a *populist* reading which celebrates the virtues and inventiveness of the dominated and portrays as a heroic strategy of "resistance" what is often merely an economic tactic of self-preservation in the face of domination so total and so brutal that it is not even perceived *as such*, and thus as challengeable.¹⁷ To avoid these traps, one must accept the need to adopt a sort of *moral bracketing*, to suspend, if only temporarily, one's initial reaction of sympathy, indignation or horror, and agree to look at this world from the point of view that Rickey himself adopts, that is, the "natural attitude" of everyday life, as Alfred Schutz put it, which inclines us to take things for granted as they come.

One must also go against the dominant American tradition of research on the topic and break with the moralistic schemata and naturalistic reasoning inherited from the early Chicago school, to posit that the ghetto does not suffer from "social disorganization" but constitutes a dependent universe, finely differentiated and hierarchized, organized according to definite principles generative of a *regular form of social entropy*. The first of these regulative principles may be summed up by the Hobbesian formula of the "war of every man against every man."¹⁸ In this world of scarcity and urgency which by default more or less escapes the regulations of the dominant society, and in which normal institutions of policing (in Foucault's sense of the term) of interpersonal relations are weakened or absent owing to the twofold retrenchment of market and state, neither the police, nor social workers, nor teachers, nor religious leaders or local notables, nor even neighborhood old timers (these "old heads" who fulfilled the function of

¹⁶ Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "The New Urban Color Line: The State and Fate of the Ghetto in Postfordist America," in Craig J. Calhoun (ed.), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

¹⁷ A methodical, but ultimately flawed case for the ubiquity of "resistance" from the dominated as made by James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). For a powerful ethnographic debunking of the intellectualist romanticization of "resistance" among subproletarians, read Nancy Scheper-Hughes's dissection of the plight of the *moradores* of Northern Brazil: Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), ch. 12, esp. pp. 528–33.

¹⁸ The term "man" is quoted advisedly here: the violence and fierce competitiveness that fuel insecurity in the ghetto are mainly male-driven.

informal sages and peace judges in the postwar ghetto up until around the sixties)¹⁹ constitute efficient agencies of recourse and mediation. "I'm gonna take care of my business *on you*": the first response is, and can only be, one of taking justice into one's hands: might makes right. In such a generalized and constant state of war, when the most tested solidarities are always suspected of being driven by interest – and how could they not be in a universe where every member can, at any time, be required to choose between duping and being duped, killing or being killed? – it is clear that scepticism is the rule and that everyone must be ready to rely only upon themselves: "I always been a renegade, jus' sing alone," says Rickey laconically.²⁰

The proliferation of drugs exacerbates this logic of suspicion and reserve by pushing all of the elements of ordinary existence toward an ever deeper insecurity. Rickey compares the arrival of mass consumer drugs on the scene to an epidemic ("a plague") that destroys everything in its wake, tearing apart friendships, debasing all human interaction to unmediated and unlimited exploitation. And he cannot fully stifle the disgust and revulsion he feels at those who, caught up in this unforgiving machinery, violate the sanctity of friendship, this last bulwark against the frenetic quest for money now and at all costs, and who even sell drugs to their own mothers, in which he sees the ominous sign that everything, these days, comes down to "this fuckin' green stuff."²¹

Just as he does not complain about his youth, from which he learned in particular that there is always somebody more miserable than yourself ("there's people doin' *worser* than me" is what ghetto residents often say, even the most disadvantaged, as if to comfort themselves with a double comparative that says volumes about the finely differentiated microhierarchies at the very bottom of society), Rickey does not experience his rejection from the labor market as a major trauma. This is because holding a stable and well-paid position, a "legit job" capable of guaranteeing a modicum of security, has never really been part of his expectations: when marginalization becomes part of *the order of things*, it deprives one even of the consciousness of exclusion. Better yet, Rickey is ready to assume responsibility for it: he says that he is hyper and, all things considered, personally incapable of submitting himself to the discipline of wage labor. But how could one fail, on the one hand, to relate Rickey's "hyperness" to the environment of permanent violence and relentless material precariousness

¹⁹ The downfall of the old heads (whose importance one must be careful not to exaggerate or romanticize) is chronicled in Elijah Anderson's ethnography of South Philadelphia: Anderson, *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

²⁰ "Where income is irregular and insufficient, it is necessary to exploit friends and kin. Transience guarantees maximum security" (Abrahams, "Rapping and Capping," p. 128). This is well captured by this ghetto saying, an acrid variation on the Christian teaching "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," which goes "Do unto others *before* they do unto you" (Folb, *Runnin' Down Some Lines*, ch. 3).

²¹ Rickey's anger is also directed at the fact that they break the unstated street rule "never go after more than [you need] to live on. Any experienced hustler will tell you that getting greedy is the quickest road to prison" (*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, p. 109).

that is the only one he has experienced since childhood²² and, on the other, to see how, had he not been "hyper" to start with, the substandard marginal jobs to which he is de facto consigned are guaranteed to *make* him that way? Besides, the phrase he employs to justify his lack of work experience ("I cannot stay eight hours in one place") aptly expresses this "coresponsibility" since the impossibility it speaks of here is at once and inseparably subjective and objective. I am not employable because I am hyper but, if that had not been the case, I would not have stayed "behin' no counter for no eight hours" anyhow: had not Rickey's boss just cut his hours even though Rickey was already working only part-time at a job that he admits he liked? In any case, the only work on the horizon for Rickey and his peers is an unskilled service job, somewhere "behind a counter," "flippin' hamburgers," or "cleanin' shit," with little hope of promotion, no employment security, no paid vacation, social security or health care and for a wage which, in the best of situations, is barely enough to avoid outright starvation.²³

How could such underpaid and degrading jobs, symbolized by the stint at McDonald's, compete with the drug economy that has grown at miraculous rates over the past decade with the advent of "mass market" drugs such as crack cocaine?²⁴ What good would it be to take the "legit route" when the rewards are so meager and almost as uncertain as those offered, more immediately and palpably even if they come at high risks, by the street economy? Does the latter not offer – in addition to a public theater upon which to realize the values of masculine honor that are the bedrock of the public culture of the ghetto²⁵ – if not the reality, at least the illusion of being one's own boss, and thus the opportunity to escape the personal humiliation and petty discrimination

²² Recent research in child psychology shows that children raised in public housing projects in Chicago's ghetto suffer from posttraumatic stress disorders and related chronic psychic conditions similar to those that afflict war veterans (James Garbarino, Kathleen Kostelny and Nancy Dubrow, *No Place to be a Child* (Lexington Books, 1991), ch. 6).

²³ At the time of its slight increase from \$3.35 to \$3.75 in 1989 (after some ten years without upward adjustment in spite of inflation), the hourly minimum wage had lost over a third of its real value since 1968. In 1988, a wage-earner working full-time year-round at the minimum wage earned \$6,968, 20 percent under the official "poverty line." The growth of low-paying jobs and its impact on the economic chances of blacks are amply documented by Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Great U-Turn* (New York: Basic Books, 1988). Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward offer an excellent overview of the steep decline of the minimum wage and its devastating effects on the lower fractions of the working class more broadly: Piven and Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*, new expanded edn (New York: Pantheon, 1993), ch. 11.

²⁴ On the boom of the street-level drug economy in the inner city, see Terry Williams, *Cocaine Kids* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1989) and Bourgois, "Homeless in El Barrio," below. A piece or rock or vial of crack cocaine could be purchased for as little as \$10 on the South Side of Chicago as of the early 1990s.

²⁵ Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets*, new edn (1967; New York: Vintage, 1981); Richard Majors, "Cool Pose: The Proud Signature of Black Survival," in M. S. Kimmel and M. A. Messner (eds), *Men's Lives* (New York: Macmillan, 1989); Philippe Bourgois, "Searching for Respect: The New Service Economy and the Crack Alternative in Harlem," paper presented at the conference on "Pauvreté, immigrations et marginalités urbaines dans les sociétés avancées," Maison Suger, Paris, May, 1991.

which are the daily burden of those who accept the "slave jobs" of the new service economy: "Too many brothers ain' gonna do that."²⁶

The informal economy of hustling is nonetheless highly destructive and Rickey knows full well – the funerals he attends one after another are there to remind him – that in the end it leads nowhere. Rickey expresses the *structural frustration* generated by this predatory economy when he inveighs against the drug dealers who squander their profits in sumptuous expenditures (at the level of the ghetto, that is), in a sort of libidinal potlach of women, cars, clothes, jewelry... and drugs – the circle is completed. Much like the people who live from it, money from hustling "ain't goin' nowhere" and is consumed by and in the moment: better play today when you have no assurance of having a tomorrow.

Rickey would like to retire from the trade before it gets too late, but how could he? Hustling offers no route for reconversion²⁷ and the value of the only capital he possesses is highly indexical and impermanent: street smarts have currency only on the streets, the "art of manipulin' a lot" hardly pays off outside the ghetto, and his physical and sexual capacities will not last forever. Rickey's dream was to work for the Post Office, a federal agency that, historically, has been one of black Americans' main avenues of access to the "middle class," that is to a job one notch above insecurity which puts within financial reach the goods that symbolize this coveted status: a family, a home, a two-car garage, and kids in college. But squeezed between economic restructuring and its highly polarized tertiary labor market, on the one hand, and the crumbling of the public schools just when educational credentials have become more indispensable than ever before, on the other, Rickey and his peers see all escape hatches out of the ghetto seal up before their eyes, except for the informal (and illegal) economy of the street and its "respectable" counterpart, professional sports.²⁸

In point of fact, very few of the people in his circle of friends and acquaintances have lived the so-called American dream and escaped dire poverty and relegation. His brother Ned did "go to college," a small community college in Missouri, on a basketball scholarship, but has very little to show for it. Back in Chicago, he survives on day labor (interior decorating, painting, and small off-the-books construction jobs in private residences) and wanders around daydreaming of a pugilistic career that would turn him into a young ring multimillionaire like Mike Tyson. Of the 11 children in his family, only his sister Berenice has gotten a comparatively stable (though low-paid) job, as an assistant nurse at Cook County hospital. The only person who "made it" that Rickey knows firsthand is Mattie

²⁶ The seasoned street predator is cognizant of the fact that "only squares [keep] on believing that they [can] ever get anything by slaving" (*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, p. 139).

²⁷ Except in the rare cases of drug wholesalers who retire at the peak of their trade and discreetly manage to reinvest their profits into legitimate neighborhood businesses such as laundromats, taverns, or security firms.

²⁸ In the neighboring area of North Kenwood, the only occupation perceived by black youths interviewed by Arne Duncan as liable to offer a lift out of the ghetto is professional sports, such as basketball, baseball or football: Duncan, "The Values, Aspirations and Opportunities of the Urban Underclass," B.A. Honors thesis, Harvard University, Cambridge, 1987.

DuRoy, a former "running buddy" from a nearby project who briefly became world champion in boxing and is rumored to have bought an apartment in a nearby section of posh Hyde Park thanks to his ring earnings (the truth of the matter is that Mattie rents an apartment in a staid but modest middle-class complex and works full-time as a sheriff and athletic instructor for the Chicago Park district). Aside from sports the only remaining option for Rickey is to find a female companion who would agree to take care of him – the ultimate disgrace and sign of weakness, to become dependent upon a woman, the weak, dependent being par excellence.

The slightly envious evaluation that Rickey gives of his "buddy" who took the "legit" track reveals the confused awareness and regret he has – partly masked, for otherwise it would be too painful – of having messed up and missed out on his chances. Much as the neighborhood's drug dealers rank him, a one-time professional prize-fighter (if on the lowest rung of the game's ladder), above themselves, he puts his "square" friend above him.²⁹ And it is symptomatic that when speaking of young men from his project, he alternates between "we" and "they," as if he were unsure whether he belonged with them or not, or as if he wanted to give (himself and others) the impression that, thanks to boxing, he has or will escape this disaster-ridden universe that he otherwise assumes fully. Somewhere inside, he realizes confusedly the unreality of the hope of an athletic career suddenly brought back from oblivion and of a school career miraculously rejuvenated, both being equally unlikely and, furthermore, mutually incompatible. Under such conditions of relentless and all-pervading social and economic insecurity, where existence becomes reduced to the craft of day-to-day survival and where one must continually do as best as one can with whatever is at hand, that is, precious little; the present becomes so uncertain that it devours the future and prohibits thinking about it except as a fantasy. And the immense labor of bad faith to which Rickey must continually devote himself to make life bearable is also, in its own way, a *labor of social mourning* that does not say its name.

Only a conspiracy theory remains to account for a world so forlorn that it seems beyond salvaging, a world in which the most basic solidarities threaten to drag down anyone lucky enough to experience the beginnings of success and to annihilate any inclination to upward mobility ("you gonna en' up with the short en' of the stick, ev'ry time"), and where the ineluctable accumulation of calamities seems to promise that things can only get worse. Rickey cannot but subscribe to the idea that is held across wide segments of the urban Afro-American community,³⁰ including among members of the "proletaroid intelligentsia," internally torn by their ambiguous status as what Richard Wright called a "corps de liaison"

²⁹ Contrary to widespread views based on distant, top-down, journalistic perceptions of life in the ghetto, drug dealers are not admired but despised by those around them. They are not held up, nor do they consider themselves, as "role models" to be emulated by local residents and their apparent material success does not signal a moral collapse of the inner city (as in the mythological account found in a recent report on "race and respectability" on Chicago's South Side).

³⁰ Patricia A. Turner, *I Heard it through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

between a white society that only half-heartedly accepts them and a black society that suspects them of owing their ascent out of the depths of the urban core, however limited it might be, to a disowning of their identity. Known as *The Plan*, this "theory" holds that the dilapidation of today's ghetto is the product of a secret but deliberate policy of the federal government aimed at thwarting the forward thrust and collective demands of the black community by drowning them in a sea of drugs.

And one cannot but be struck by the fact that *whites appear nowhere in Rickey's narrative*, except in the muffled form of this evil but in the end impersonal and unseemly racial plot. In a previous state of the regime of racial domination, the oppression of blacks was overtly the product of an international action whose responsibility was clearly attributable to the white man,³¹ as testified by the proliferation of vernacular designations: *The Man*, *Charlie*, *honkies*, *paddies*, and many more. From Rickey's point of view, the dichotomous opposition between whites and blacks, which once constituted the generative matrix of all perceptions and grievances, has seemingly dissolved by itself in this ceaseless guerrilla war that must now be waged first of all *against one's own kind*, brother against brother, poor against poorer. Through a cruel reversal of history, the "invisible man" of whom Ralph Ellison wrote after the Second World War, at the apogee of the ghetto in its communal form, is no longer the black but instead the white or the rich (it makes no difference whether of European or African descent). Everything seems as if the ghetto, now operating in "closed circuit" and cannibalizing itself, had been "perfected" into an order of domination so pure and so simultaneously opaque that the only strategies of escape and resistance left are tactics of self-victimization that, as they accumulate, lead to a phenomenon that has all the trappings of a collective suicide.

"Telling it like it is": the ghetto according to Rickey

The following interview transcript, duly edited and *constructed* so as to take the reader through the main vista points that together constitute Rickey's point of view, strives to stay as close as possible to his spoken narrative so as to retain its distinctive properties. This effort is necessarily limited by two types of constraints. The first has to do with the richness and complexity of the black English street vernacular – its phonological specificities (the use of the suffix "s," the shift between is and are, the selective contraction or extension of syllables, etc.) and syntactical idiosyncrasies (especially the use of the invariant form "be," of the perfective "done" as in "he done got killed," or in multiple negations, very common in informal conversation between social equals or

³¹ See, for instance, the analyses offered by James Baldwin, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown," in *The Enduring Ghetto*, ed. D. R. Goldfield and J. B. Lane (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1973); Robert Blauner, *Racial Oppression in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); and the Kerner Commission, *The Kerner Report: The 1968 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (1968; New York: Pantheon, 1989).

acquaintances, as in the case here), not to mention continually refined lexicological innovations.³²

A second set of difficulties must also be taken into consideration, those inherent in the fact of inscribing a speech form that does not follow the structures of written language, and where we know that merely putting it on paper will inescapably produce significant distortions in its specific organization.³³ In several places parts of Rickey's speech had to be simplified or edited out in order to ensure legibility of the final text. For instance, I have only very imperfectly rendered hesitations and shortened elocutions as well as simplified unvocalized double (and triple) negations.

with a hustler in an American black ghetto

— interview by Loïc J. D. Wacquant

"We was poor, but we was always together"

— *Do you consider that you come from a poor family?*

Rickey Mm [*long pause*] uh, uh... we was poor, but we was always together, like uh, my mother, she always kep' us *clean* with the school, we prob'y ha' maybe one or two pair of pants, but she ke' 'em clean and I, you know... So, I cain't really say we were poor's far as *starvin'* and nothin' to eat, nothin' like that. I don't 'member no days like that.

— *So you always had plenty of food on the table when you were growing up?*

Rickey I ain' gonna say *plenty* of foo'. We always *ate*, you know. I keded my chil'hoo' better than I do now, ya know, I really like, ya know...

— *Why did you prefer your childhood?*

Rickey Nah, it was jus' that, uh, when I was in grammar school, it was *mellow*.

— *Did you like it in school, what were you doing?*

Rickey I'm goin' through the motions, ju' gon' through the motions. Lotta things was passin' by me, but I didn't really *see it*, ya now, I maybe see it now, but I'm not you know... back then I couldn't see it, then, an' I didn't really know the *value* of a education, really... [*very nostalgic*] It wasn't like my mother wan't pushin' me, sayin', but she didn't really break it down to me how it really, really, ya now, matter, right, ya know. She jus': "go to school," ya know. I always stayed in trouble, *always*.

— *What kind of trouble is that?*

Rickey You know, jus' goin' to the principal office, fightin', you know. [*Kitchen, a local trainer, takes a picture of us as we talk, at my request, and can't refrain from interjecting to Rickey: "Man, I know you be ready to lie your ass off now!"*]

— *Did you have a difficult childhood, was it hard growing up?*

³² For a clear and concise discussion of the practical speech rules of the Afro-American street vernacular, see the study by sociolinguist John Baugh, *Black Street Speech: Its History, Structure, Survival* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

³³ See Yvette Delsaut, "L'économie du langage populaire," *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, no. 4 (1975), pp. 33-40, for a cogent illustration of the distortions automatically introduced in translating oral popular expressions into a written format.

Rickey Uh, no, not really. It's nothin' happen to me tha' make me wake up right now, jus' wake up in a col' sweat sayin' "I remember tha' now." 'Cause I was always in a fight, or tryin' ta fight, you know. Jus' the neighborhood' tha' I was brought up in.

— *So you were raised in a rough neighborhood?*

Rickey Oh yeah, it was *definit'ly* rough, but ya know, people was jus' *so real*, ya know. People nowadays are not real as they was, back then. It was like, you can feel— [*very quickly*] usually when a person tell you somethin' back then, it usually be the truth, but it's so many thin's ha' change, the drugs, drugs come thru *like a plague*, man, an' jus' change everythin': it's all abou' material thin's now. It's really no true frien's, it's all abou' the green dollar, ya know, it's jus' the whole thin's.

— *It wasn't like that back then?*

Rickey Nah, nah, not really, ya know. I's try to get my money, but I always also wan'ed *real and true* frien's too, ya know what I'm sayin'? A lotta my frien's, ya know, wen' a whole diff'ren' way, ya know, and tha's why, ya know, I see them — we speak an' tha's abou' as far as it go. Like I say, 90 percen' of the time, I ri' by myself, ya know what I'm sayin'? Got a few lady frien's, but no one important or nothin'.

— *Tell me what was rough about your neighborhood.*

Rickey Ya know, lotta robbin', ya know, few guys I know got kil'd, you know.

— *Where was this at, around here?*

Rickey Xxx South Cottage Grove, Gran-owell Homes. Lot of thin's like tha', purse snatchin' . . . you gotta watch yourself, tha's all. Lotta thin's goin' roun', ya hear *shootin' through the night*, try to stay out — try to stay outa the path of, ya know, guys you kno're known for tha'. Lotta guys I know has been locked up for 15 years, ya know, for murder, 20 years . . . It was way back then, ya know, lotta guys I went to school with. Two guys got life. Lotta guys I went to school with, grew up with, foun' dead.

— *Were you a streetfighter, were you always fighting a lot on the street?*

Rickey Yeah, I was, but I'mma fight when I ha' to. I never really was a brute or ta pickon, but I will fight when I ha' to.

They kill ya at the drop of a dime

— *During this time, when you were growing up, did you ever witness a killing?*

Rickey Yeah, *aw man!* lotta times! Jus' matter of fact, jus' week an' a half ago, I witnessed two homicides. [*very matter of fact, slowly*] Guy got shot in the head, died, they chased the guy down, killed him ya know.

— *In the projects?*

Rickey By Ida B. Wells, yeah. Broad daylight, jus' like this here — matter fact, it was a lil' brighter, 'cause the sun was shinin'. It happens, it's jus' it happens man! Go to the fun'ral tha's it. Jus' move on. You have to change to get they money, or whatever, you know. Tha's how you know, sometimes I be aroun' certain spots like gamblin' spots an' stuff like tha' an' guys, man, *they kill ya at the drop of a dime*, they jus' kill ya an' later on the night, they go buy a six-pack [*of beer*], ya know: it's jus' tha', tha's the *mentality* tha' they have.

— *Where does it come from, I mean, how did they get to be like that?*

Rickey It's really true, like, the babies tha' ha' babies³⁴ back then, the ki's outgrow 'em now an' they didn't teach 'em so it's all they know. It's all they know is try to get outta here and [*very softly*] "boom," an' then another brotha try ta — it's as simple as tha': dead, then another brotha make hisself look goo', *make hisself look big*. They

³⁴ Here Rickey borrows the journalistic expression "babies having babies" which stereotypically designates (unwed) teenage mothers from the ghetto (see for instance the book by Washington Post journalist Leon Dash, *When Children Want Children: An Inside Look at the Crisis of Teenage Parenthood* (New York: Penguin, 1989). Kristin Luker offers a perspicacious analysis of the background and meaning of the moral panic that recently developed around (black) teenage pregnancy: Luker, "Dubious Conceptions: The Controversy Over Teen Pregnancy," *The American Prospect* (Spring 1991), pp. 74–83.

take care of hi' business, try to hi' the money, ya know, like I said: tha' wha's all abou' is dollars. They do anythin' to get tha' dollar man, *anythin'*. Sell drugs to they mama, *man* [chuckles]: I done saw guys do it. *Sell drugs to they mama*, man, for tha' dollar man, *for tha' dollar man*. Tha's *deep* man, ya know.

— *With all this shooting going on, have you ever been shot at yourself, or stabbed?*
Rickey I been shot. Yeah, I been shot. When I was younger, I was shot, I was shot, in my arm an' my left ankle [*he lifts his pant leg to show me a long and dirty scar along the ankle bone*].

— *The guy shot you in the ankle on purpose to warn you or something?*

Rickey Right, right. You know, as close as he was to me, it's like this, he coul' shot me in the back o' my head or somethin', but... I don't think he's tryin' to kill me, I mean, you know.

— *How did it happen? Tell me the circumstances.*

Rickey I was outa pocket, I was tryin' break in his car, I was out — like I sai', I was young, I didn't [know] nothin' 'bout, I was tryin' break in my [his] car. He caught me, there, ya know, caught me. Wha' I shoul' of did, I shouldn'a ran, but by me knowin' the dude, I ha' no choice, so he shot me in my ankles. So, I, I jus' took that in stride, 'cause I was outa pocket. Tha' was *on me*, you know what I'm sayin': you gotta pay for yer own action... Like I been, I been in some spots man where, I, I 'member me an' a partner of mine... we run into it wit' some gang bangers an' we ha' one gun lef'. We ha' one *bullet* lef' in the gun rather, we was fightin' an' we ran into some project an' lotta guys outsi', we was on the eighth floor of some project an' uh, these guys wan'ed us to come out, ya know, come out an' we on'y ha' one shot lef'. We ha' to kick through the other wall, kick through the wall to git to the other apartment to get away, ya know.

— *Why were they chasing you?*

Rickey We was fightin', we was fightin' one of 'em, an' he wen' an' got all his boys.

— *Were they from another project?*

Rickey Yeah, right. They ha' us though, we came outa there, we was lucky, we ha' to break thru another wall to get away, man — you know like I said: I been inta... I done gamble with guys man, tha' I been doin' all my life, man, beat 'em outa the money man, they pull a pistol on me man, you know and, ya know, I been through all tha'. I been in some *tough spots*. I been, guys — I been stuck up before, guy got a gun to my head, you know, takin' my jew'ry [jewelry], you know.

I always been a renegade

— *Were you a member of a gang during those years, or now?*

Rickey Nay, I never — never, I always been, *I never ha' a desire to be a follow-up under nobody*. No, I always like I sai', I always been a loner an' by me not bein' hooked up, you know, when you hooked up, you in a gang, uh, tha' make me have to be *extra tough* out here. 'Cause it ain't like I can go get 50 guys, you know, hun'ed guys, with me, but at the sametime, when, when a individual do somethin' to me, I don't look at this whole gang, I look at it individu'ly an' the firs' thin' I'm gonna do is take care of my business *on you* — an' then after that, then I'm gonna take it from there, but firs' thin' I'm gonna take care my business on you, ya know what I'm sayin'? I don't look at it like you can go get a thousan' guys, you know what I'm sayin'? Kill the source of power, or die.

— *But wasn't there pressure on you to join a gang? Didn't the gang bangers ask you to join, especially by you being a boxer?*

Rickey I'mma tell ya, the major'ty of the guys, it's like I been axed [asked], you know what I'm sayin': I never been like [*harshly*] "you gotta join up." I never, they never came to me like tha', but they like [*firm but restrained*] "we'd like to ha' you with us," 'cause I *was* a fighter, ya know. I always been a renegade, yu know, jus'... sing alone. 'Cos I don't belie' in, tha' a guy coul' come an' get me an' say "let's go over

here an' do this or do tha'," 'cause I'm not into tha'. No, I takes, I takes care of me.

— *Have you ever done time in detention, like in jail or prison, or in the pen?*

Rickey Yeah, I ha' uh, uh, a burglary at One Stop [a nearby food store]. I had a burglary at One Stop, they gave me 60 days an' after tha' I haven't been locked up, I haven't been locked up for a while — tha' was like back in 19... tha' was like in 1981; back then. I haven't been locked up, las' time I got locked up was like in '88: I got caught with a pistol, you know. They gave me five days for tha', so, I haven't been locked up since.

— *Do you normally go around carrying a pistol?*

Rickey No, not now. Sometime I ha' my jew'ry on an' I'm out, I might keep it up between my seats [of the car] or somethin', up under my seat or somethin' like tha'. Other than tha', I don't have a pistol, because ya know, anythin' can happen in the spell of the moment, but they been times when I wish tha', *I wish I woul' of ha' a pistol on me*. Like the time I got stuck up, ya know. I wish I would ha' my pistol on me then, but uh, nah [pensive], sometimes I be in certain spots, you know, guys jus' like havin' humbug on they min', ya know what I'm sayin'? I'm not out to try an' hurt nobody or try to take nothin' from nobody, but you know, I'm not gonna let nobody hurt me, or come up an' jus' take from me. It's jus' simple as tha'.

— *When you are in these spots, you have to be on guard all the time, right?*

Rickey Yeah, you have to be, you hae to be ready. I think mos' — I think las' year I carry a gun, las' year, summer 1990, I think I carried a gun quite a few times, 'cause I was gamblin' a lot then. Ya know, I was gamblin', ya know, in those spots.

— *You've never been stuck up while you were gambling?*

Rickey I been, I never got stuck up gamblin' by somebody I knew. Last time I got stuck up was like, ooh, it's way back, lil' petty money, thin's like '78, somethin' like

tha', as far as gittin' stuck up gamblin', but other than tha', naw.

*I cannot stay behin' no counter
for no eight hours*

— *Did you get little jobs on the side when you were going to high school?*

Rickey I ha' one job at one time an' I ha' drop out of high school too. I ha' this job at the health center called GNC, downtown Washin'ton, nutrition center. I use to work down there. I los' tha' job, 'cause they wasn't payin' me enough. I really lik'd the job, but they wasn't payin' me.

— *Doing what?*

Rickey Well, I'm jus' a stockboy an' stuff, take inventory an' stuff like tha', uh' an' I talk to the manager an' he's tellin' me he can't give me no more hours — matter of fact, he was gittin' ready to cut my hours again, so what I did, I broke in the store, you know what I'm sayin'? I broke in the store an' took all the cash, the cash tha' they ha' tha' day, you know. After tha', tha' was it.

— *So what happened? They found out it was you?*

Rickey Matter of fact, I got away with that one. I ha' got away with tha' an' I ha' tried it again — they didn't really catch me. [regretful] I really caught myself, 'cause I shoul' ha' known, you know, when I came in, another guy was there with me, he's waitin' for me to come back, so uh...

— *So they took you to court?*

Rickey Yeah I wen' on ahea' an' pleaded guilty on tha'. I think I did 20 days in the County [jail] or somethin' like tha'.

— *Did you have any other job after that?*

Rickey Nope.

— *But why didn't you start looking for a regular job after you finished school?*

Rickey Okay, firs' of all, I realize, I always have to face reality, you know what I'm sayin'? You always have to face reality, be real with yerself. First of all, by me bein' the kinds person I am, I'm hyper. I cannot stay eight hours in one place, I cain't, I cain't do it. Ain' no sense in me tryin' to fool myself:

I cannot stay behin' no counter for no eight hours or stay in no one place cleanin' up som'thin' for eight hours, I know I cain't do that. And then, what remains, whatchou sayin' back then, what will remain the thin's like... From what I made here, in these days, I *coulda tripled tha'* out in the street, ya know what I'm sayin'? It's jus' a matter of maintainin' tha' money, usin' tha' money to take care of yer bus'ness where you don't ha' to jus' keep doin' the samthin' over and over again, you know. It's like I was sayin' abou' my frien' who made it with the *legit job* [see below]... What it take him a year to make, a guy on the street might make in, *three months* or less. What it take him a year to make, a guy might make tha' in a *month*, but he [the legit guy] got more to show for it than the guy who made it in a month, see what I'm sayin'?

— *So the best job you've had, really, that would be your gambling?*

Rickey Right, right. Hustlin', yeah, tha's all.

— *And you still do it today?*

Rickey Yeah, some. Sometimes I do it on the side. Know of a lot of guys on the street, they be like... *penny smart but dollar foolish*, ya know what I'm sayin'? Tha's the whole thin' in a nutshell, right there.

— *But if a guy, like a guy from the projects around here, wanted a minimum wage job in Chicago right now, could he find one right away?*

Rickey They prob'y coul' fin' one. Prob'y McDonald's, Burger King, or somethin', Wendy's, ya know.

— *Then why don't the guys at Ida B. Wells, they don't go and take these jobs?*

Rickey Nope. Make much more on the street.

— *What would you consider a good job, one you would like to have?*

Rickey Tha's what I'm sayin', it's like... [pause] What kin' of job coul' I fin' tha' woul' provide me with, able to take care of fam'ly, pay my bills an' a home, ya know, two-car garage? You know? What kin' of job coul' I fin' with the education I got? They givin' them away? Ya know what I'm

sayin', *it ain' like I was goin' to college to try to be a doctor or a lawyer*, you know what I'm sayin', or somethin' like that.

— *Then it would make sense...*

Rickey Riiigh'. Then it woul' make sense. So when you can jus' sit back an' relax, an' pay yer bills off, with one of 'em tupa job. Other than tha', it's jus' gonna be *strugglin'-strugglin'-strugglin'-strugglin'*... I mean, it's har' for a brotha to sit up there an' say "Well, I'mma leave this alone an' fin' me a minimum wage job." It's *har'*. Too many brothers ain' gonna do tha'.

— *In general, what do you consider to be a good job, one you would like to have?*

Rickey I'mma say, somethin' like with the Post Office, or uh, bus driver, somethin' with *benefits*, you know. I mean, it all depen's what level you want. Them jobs ain' nothin', ya know what I'm sayin', but it's somethin' to a person tryin' to git it [snaps his fingers], ya know.

— *You think you will get one of these good jobs eventually?*

Rickey [moans] Well, I don't know. Right now, right now I'm hopin' tha' uh, my boxin' career follows thru for me. Like I say: I'm not foolin' myself, I'mma pretty goo' fighter, I got some goo' people workin' with me right now, takin' my time, ya know. An' then in the meanwhile, I'mma be in school so if tha' don't fall through, boom, I start git me a job.

— *If you found one of these good jobs, with good pay and benefits, would you give up boxing?*

Rickey [with assurance] *Naah*, mm-mm. I wouldn't, I wouldn't give it up right now. I wouldn't give it up right now.

Manipulatin' a lot

— *So really, you have to "hustle" on the side pretty much all the time to make ends meet.*

Rickey Yeah. I use to be a goo' street hustler, but I lef' tha' alone, you know, shootin' craps you know, out all night, hustlin'. You know, few women here, few women there, you know, gamblin' you know, stuff like that.

— *In your best hustling days, how much were you able to turn?*

Rickey I'd have to say, sometime man, I was like, one time, twelve thousand, uh, three thousand, *all them thousand's* man, you know what I'm sayin', all them thousand's. But you know...

— *Is that per week or month or what?*

Rickey It varies, sometimes, sometime a day. Ya know, sometime I use to win like seven hun'ed dollars a day, a thousand'. Just gamblin'. I never sol' drugs, jus' gamblin'.

— *There's that much money gambling?*

Rickey Oh man! Gamblin', man! If you lucky enough in gamblin', man...

— *Where do people go for gambling, do they have certain places they go to, or is it everywhere?*

Rickey It's ev'rywhere 'round here. Jus' sometimes you can jus' start, right, *street corner*, you can go anywhere. Jus', uh, I can go over there right now an' say "what they here for?" An' there it is, it's start a dice game, jus' like tha'. They jus' come on right in an' jus' star' gamblin'.

— *How much do they bet, the people who come to play?*

Rickey Sometime uh, it all depen's, two, three hundred, you know.

— *Really, that much?*

Rickey Oh, yeah.

— *But where do they get the money from?*

Rickey Hustlin', sellin' drugs, ya know.

— *So after selling their drugs, they try to double their take gambling?*

Rickey Yeah.

— *Why did you leave that line of work?*

Rickey You know, sometime, you know, you *wise up* an' you ha' to count yer bles-sin's. You know, lotta thin's I did, lotta things...

— *Like illegal things?*

Rickey Yeah, yeah. Just, usually when you out here hustlin', you don't ha' a job, you *will* turn to illegal thin's as far as tryin' to get your bills an' stuff like tha', you know. Aroun' the area where I live, you know, it's jus' like, Ida B. Wells — you ever heard of Ida B. Wells? It's a project complex and it's

like uh — you can always fin' someone to, mos'ly get in trouble.

— *Yeah, I heard about it. Is it as bad as the Robert Taylor Homes? Because you always hear about Robert Taylor and State-way Gardens on the news...*

Rickey I think it's worse. The Ida B. Wells, man, it's rough, man. They call it *The Zone*, you know, *The Zone*. I call it *the Killin' Fiel's*. 'Cos I saw so many guys, man [*snaps his fingers*]. Even now, ya know. I'm s'pose to go over there now, they tell me somebody got killed.

— *What is it that most guys do out there?*

Rickey Sell drugs. Sell drugs, shoot craps.

— *Can you make a good buck in that line of work?*

Rickey Oh yeah! Sometimes, I, I use to make uh [*counts in his head*] sometimes I use to make somewhere between two to three thousand dollars a day, ya know. Sometimes, on a goo' day, I shootin' craps, I prob'y win nine, ten thousand'.

— *From what?*

Rickey From bets an' stuff like tha', ya know, jus' gamblin', jus' all aroun' gamblin'. Then with the few, the few ladies you have on the side — [*defensively*] not sayin' that you're a *pimp* or anythin' like tha', you a... I never, I never sol' drugs, you know. Ba' as I wan' to get to it, it jus' wasn't *fa me*. I'm gonna put it like this: I never gain a penny outa drugs. It never, it never jus' *fa me*. Wasn't for me. I left that alone. But, you know, *I always try to keep me a female with a job* or somethin' like that, I'm able to git somethin' from her.

— *From where, where do they live, in the projects?*

Rickey From around here, yeah. Ida B. Wells.

— *Then if you have more than one then you can go from one to the next...*

Rickey Right, right.

— *How much are you able to pull in like that?*

Rickey If it's a 100 dollar here, 50 dollar here, or 200 dollars there, you know, it's jus' *somethin'* — I try to maintain that at all cost.

— *Is that easy to do, or does it take a lot of work?*

Rickey Well, ya know, it take a lot. Some, I have what a lotta guys don't have: I have, I have ability to *talk*, you know, street, street slang like, ya know, somethin' maybe to be able to, *manipulatin'* a lot, ya know. I's jus' part of me. You know, I'mma not sayin' I'm proud of tha', but maybe jus' talk, ya know, a lot. Jus' talk an' talk an' talk an' I always ha' somethin' to say, you know, once you run out of somethin' to say... I ain' never run out of somethin' to say to a person.

The few guys tha' made it, I didn't really socialize with

— *What about your buddies, the guys you grew up with and hung around with when you were 15 or 16, what have they become?*

Rickey Well, it's been very, generally the people tha' *made it* when I was comin' up at that age, are women, you know, *young ladies tha' got theyselves together*, you know an' they made it. Uh, as far as guys...

— *What did the women do to make it?*

Rickey Gon' to school an' gittin' goo' jobs an' stuff like tha'. Few ladies tha' made it, ya know. An' the guys tha', in the neighborhood tha' *did* made it, tha' was educated, didn't ha' nothin' in common, know what I'm sayin'? You know...

— *What do you mean, they were squares³⁵ or what?*

Rickey [*puzzled himself*] You can't really say, it's like uh, you can always charerize [*characterize*] somethin', but, uh, they can always charerize you. It's samethin'. It's like, you say "well, *he's a thug*," or you might say "*he's a square*," ya know it's *not simple as tha' not simple as tha' not simple as tha'* yaknow: it's who can make it now an' come out ahead. Tha's the whole thin', you know.

³⁵ The expression "square" here is synonymous with "lame," that is "a socially inexperienced person" who "has little knowledge of the streets," "commands little or no respect from others" (Folb, *Runnin' Down Some Lines*, p. 244).

— *What about the guys? Did a lot of guys make it out of here?*

Rickey No, it's like I said, no, it's a few guys, the *few* guys tha' made it, I didn't really socialize with. It's one guy uh, we goo' buddies now: we ha' tot'ly diff're' lifestyles, but we was goo' frien's. Like right now, he uh [*uttered as a litany, with respect*] he bought him a buildin', he own him a home, he work ev'ryday, never been in no trouble. Never been locked up, never been arrested, never gambled, ya know. An' he made it on the *legit side*, ya know, jus' workin' an', ya know, workin'-workin'-workin'. He always *has worked* an' I was *hustlin'* an' he was workin'. I was *hustlin'*, when we go out, it's like — we grew up together — *my* language towar' people is diff'ren' than *his* language towar' 'em, ya know, an'... Uh, it was jus' like tha'. And then ya see, that, a lotta women like slick guys tha's, ya know, sometime wear they jew'ry — it all depen's on what a woman really lookin' for. If a woman lookin' for some guy that she depen' on and uh, some-one to raise a fam'ly with, it's *not me*, you know what I'm sayin'? It be more like him. A woman ha' to distinguish the diff'rences between, fa herself.

— *Now, the guys that didn't make it, what have they become, what are they doing now?*

Rickey They still there, they, a lotta 'em, a lotta guys I grew up with man are *straight dope fiens*, man. Ya know, as matter of fact, a cab driver jus' took a frien' I went to grammar school and high school with, he jus' got killed las' week. Matter-a-fact, his fun'ral was yesterday, ya know, tryin'; to stick up a cab driver an' the cab driver shot him.

— *Where at?*

Rickey Aroun' the project. [*pensive*] 'Round the project. Lotta girls I know, man, nice lookin' girls, man, strung out on drug, two-three ki's, don't even know where they ki's at, man. 'Round there, man, they gittin' high, you know. It's, it's *crucial* when you really getta think abou' it, man [*gets really somber and reflective*].

Until ya really start to think about it... But you see, like myself, I done stack me a lil' money an' I can *fight*, so I'm sayin': ain' no sense in me continue to, to-to go out an' try to do wron' - 'cause really truly, you livin' a life of *crime everyday*, an' [*raising voice*] how long coul' you live tha' without gittin' killed or gittin' hurt, or goin' to penitentiary? A lotta guys I know in a wheelchair, ya know, like one leg down and they been paralyzed, you know, from shootin' an' stuff, ya know. There's stuff a lotta guys, young guys man, 13, 14, dropped out of school, gang bangin'... They don't never go to school.

— *What do you do when you see them, you talk to them? I mean, you said you wished you hadn't let your education pass you by, so do you advise them about it?*

Rickey It's like I say, it's not *my* duty to try ta, if they ax [ask] me, yeah [*insistent*], I give 'em my opinion, but to go up to 'em an' say to 'em and voice my opinion, *nah*. They'll see what I see now, know what I'm sayin'? They'll see what I see now.

*The drugs is like a epidemic,
it came so quick*

— *You hear a lot of people who say the ghetto has gone down the tubes since 10 or 20 years ago. Has it really gotten worse?*

Rickey Oh yeah, oh yeah! Most definit'ly, most definit'ly. The killin', man, the drugs - see the drugs is like a *epidemic*, it came so *quick*. It came so quick, it's like it was overnight, it's overnight thin': like "*pow!*" [*snap, snap*], it's flyin'! You didn't even see it comin', and it was *there*.

— *Around what year did this happen?*

Rickey I say, from the yar I remember, I woul' say from 1983 to now, tha's when the drugs, really... An' I feel like from 1980 before the drug scene really, really *hit* - don't git me wrong! Drugs was out there, but there was [*very insistent*] *nothin' near* like it was now. An' I feel man... it was like a *master plan*, ya know. We as people - ya know, black people - we couldn't do nothin' but excel and continue to move forward, ya know what I'm sayin', but when this drug

hit us, man! It was like "BOOM!": tha' set us back 50 years, ya know. It's simple as that: it's brother agains' brother. I don't care about ya's long as I git mine, an' then the guys tha' do get the money [*surprised tone*] *they don't do nothin' with it*: they jus' go buy cars, man, *cars, women*, you know, tha's all. I mean, you go through... Ya, ya star' from 29th man, an' State, an' you go all the way to 119th an' all through these neighborhood's you wouldn't fin' over 10 stores tha' a black man own in a black neighborhood'.³⁶ Tha's somethin' to think about'. Tha's somethin' to think about'.

— *But where is all that money going? I mean, somebody must be using it to do something?*

Rickey I tell you this, jus' like I jus' said: on'y thing these guys do - cars, women, I mean, I know guys got three-four cars. I mean [*slightly enervated*] how many cars coul' you drive? You know what I'm sayin'...

— *But then some of the women must have a lot of money, from the dope dealers: what do they do with it?*

Rickey I mean, some women, you know, they get money, you know. They give 'em money, ya know. Hum, they go out every night. Nothin' really... not lookin' *toward the future*, ya know what I'm sayin'? If you don't have a *goal*, like I be tellin' a lotta my frien's: you can't sell drugs for a livin'. You gotta ha' a goal, ya know - I know a guy tha' touch, a million dollars done went through his han's. From 1983 to now, this guy was sellin' drugs, he been lucky. A million dollars done wen' through this guy han', right now today he can't put his han's on three thousan' dollars. [*insistent*] And a

³⁶ Traditionally held by whites, small businesses in the ghetto are being taken over by new immigrants from Asia (Koreans, Chinese and Filipinos) and from the Middle East (Lebanese and Syrians in particular). On the causes of the weak representation of Afro-Americans in the small business sector, see Roger Waldinger, Howard Aldrich, Robin Ward et al., *Ethnic Entrepreneurs: Immigrant Business in Industrial Societies* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1990).

million dollars, *a million dollars or more done wen' through this guy han'.*

— *That he could have kept?*

Rickey That he coulda kept, income for him. Right now today I don't think he coul' put his han' on five thousan' dollars. An' five thousan' dollars, he us'd to mess tha' up in a week. It was like, once upon a time, I could ha' owned a Wendy's, now I can't even eat at one, ya know: tha's somethin' to think about', you know [*very thoughtfully*]. Tha's why I say, okay: I'm not gettin' no, I'm not gettin' no uh younger. I still got tha' ability to box, let me give it a shot, ya now. September, like I said, I done stacked me a lil' money, September, I'm goin' back to school. If this boxin' thin' don't work, hey! fin' me a lady, try to git married, try to fin' somebody gonna be abou' me, an' raise me a fam'ly and jus' live. Hey! I tried! I been blessed on the streets, I didn't git hurt, I didn't ha' to hurt nobody, nobody done hurt me...

If we can jus' git this someone tha' made it outa the projects

— *But they don't have any activities for the youth around here, like sports and stuff like that?*

Rickey Oh, wow... Not really. Once upon a time, I r'member there use to be basketball thin', a softball thin', anythin' recreational, ya know, football. We use to go out an' play touch football, but now, these guys don't do nothin' like tha'.

— *What if you started some activities now, like open up a boxing gym or something like that, would it make a difference for the neighborhood?*

Rickey I doubt it seriously. They wouldn't come. They got other thin's to do. It's all abou' money, it's all abou' money. To tell ya the truth, it'll git worse before it get better, it'll get *much worse before it get better*, you know what I'm sayin'?

— *What would have happened if Fuller Park [boxing gym] had been right in the middle of Ida B. Wells ten years ago?*

Rickey You prob'y woul' ha' a lotta champions, man, you prob'y woul' ha' a lotta

champions. But see, boxers not made, boxers are born, know wha' I'm sayin'? It's like, when I firs' got into it, a lotta guys from Madden Park came up here with me, they jus' see it wasn't nothin' to play with. When I got into it an' I got hit goo', they uh, see it wasn't nothin' to play with. They was like, "well, I see this ain' for me."

— *How do people at Ida B. Wells react to you being a boxer, do they look up to you or they don't care or what?*

Rickey When I turn pro, it was like, you know, "he comin' on." Okay, back then, they looked up to me, like "man! you can get it," but you know, like right now, it's like "man, you wastin' yer time!"

— *Like the dope fiends around here that you knew, what did they think? Did they think you had a better deal than them, even though you weren't making as much money as they were?*

Rickey They man, they like hey! I use to go an' run every mornin', they see me runnin': "This dude up every mornin' runnin'." I guess it's more of like a... if we can jus' git this *someone* tha' made it outa the projects, to *put our name on the map* an' say "where you from?" "I'm from Madden Park." You know, like I said, it's a goo' feelin' sayin' "Hey, you can't make it but you try."

— *When Mattie DuRoy [boxer from the neighborhood and gym mate] won his title fight and became world champion [won the IBF light-heavyweight title in 1982], what were people's reactions, was it a big thing around here?*

Rickey Yeah, yeah, it was a big thin' when Mattie became worl' champion. I 'member when they say [on the loudspeakers in school] "Hey, man, Mattie jus' won the title!" I say *whaaaatt?!!* I was like, man! Mattie - he, he hadden't made it back in town yet. Everybody jus' waitin' on him to come back, you know an' he was from the Robert Taylor - Robert Taylor, I knew *they* was proud of 'im. To see somebody made it.

— *Did that encourage you to go into boxing?*

Rickey Yeah: if he did it, I can do it.

— Do you feel that, through your boxing, you can be a role model for kids in your neighborhood, maybe show them they can do something better than hang out on the street?

Rickey Yeah, yeah, I think so, but man, tha's for uh... When you think abou' the role models in the *past*, man, tha's a *belluwa task*, ya know what I'm sayin'? I mean, there's guys *way greater*, way greater than myself tryin' to do tha', ya now what I'm sayin', so what gonna make me be so much diff'rent? Look at the *times* now. The main thin' tha' I can see is tha' a person tryin' to git here an' hol' his own, ya know what I'm sayin'? As far as stickin' yer neck out, if a guy comes, wanta help, yeah, I won't turn him down if I'm able, but as far as me jus' reachin' out as a whole, man, you gonna en' up with the short en' of the stick, ev'ry time.

— Let's say you're successful in your new boxing career and you win the world title: would that have an impact on the neighborhood, would it make a difference for people in the projects here?

Rickey Yeah, I think it woul' ha' an impact on the neighborhood. I come through an' visit my ol' frien's an' stuff like tha', but you know what? It wouldn't be so much as [*friendly*] "hey, we glad you done made it." It'd be more like [*aggressive*] "Hey, what you can give me now?" "What could you give me man? 'Member I gave you tha' dollar." "Man 'member?" Or "man..." — it be more, it won' be tha' can I have your autograph or can I take a picture with you. It won't be that. It'd be more like [*insistent*] "*give me twenty bucks!* Man, how can I get in your click [*clique*]?" You know, all tha' type of stuff, you know.

Philippe Bourgois

Homeless in El Barrio

I tape-recorded this interview with Ramon in the middle of the night in late August, 1989. We were across the street from the crack house-cum-botanica¹ where for the past several years I had been spending most of my nights.² It is located two doors down from the leaky, rat-filled tenement where I lived at the height of America's "crack epidemic" (1985–91) with my family in the primarily Puerto Rican community of Spanish Harlem, New York – referred to locally as El Barrio. Perched on splintered, graffiti-stained public benches at the entrance to a conglomeration of high-rise subsidized housing projects, we were celebrating the twenty-fifth birthday of Julio, the night manager of the botanic crack house. To avoid attracting police attention, we had been wrapping in a brown paper grocery bag the 40-ounce bottles of Olde English 800 malt brew that we were sharing. This did not stop Julio, or his crack house lookout, Willie, from gleefully smashing the empty bottles on the stairs leading into the projects. My companions were also periodically dipping a house key or an overgrown pinkie fingernail into a small pile of cocaine wrapped in a dollar bill that Julio cradled in his lap. They would then lift the fine white powder up to a nostril, angle their head slightly, twist the opposite nostril shut with a grimace, and sniff abruptly – all in one smooth, practiced motion, barely spilling a fleck.

The particular block I lived on was not atypical and I could get heroin, crack, powder cocaine, hypodermic needles, methadone, Valium, marijuana, PCP, and mescaline within a 200 square meter radius. Crack was the drug of choice at that time: cheaper, and more readily available than anything else. There were, for example, three actively competing crack sales points within 30 meters of my tenement building. I had my tape recorder running since both Julio and Willie are major characters in the book I was writing on street culture in the underground economy. Their lovers, 18-year-old Maria and her older sister Carmen, were also with us. Carmen's two-year-old son Yilt (fathered by a previous boyfriend) was whimpering and squirming dejectedly. He had been tightly strapped into an old bent, stained stroller following a routine beating by Willie for playing with the

¹ Botanica refers to the herbal pharmacies that sell religious items for the Afro-Caribbean practices of Santería.

² See also Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

broken shards of glass from our empty beer bottles scattered all about us. Carmen had just moved in with her young son to live with Willie in his grandmother's cramped project apartment two stories directly above us and Willie was taking his new paternal relationship with two-year-old Yilt very seriously – the only way he knew how: violently. Little Yilt was only just beginning to adopt the glassy-eyed passivity of an abused child. Tonight however he kept on resisting helplessly, which, of course, prompted more blows from Willie. Julio had finally restrained Willie, complaining that Yilt's crying was getting on his nerves: "stop hitting him so fucking much! Can't you see you're making him cry more. I hate it when you do that shit!"

After a few more uneventful, alcohol-drenched, and cocaine-spiked hours, Ramon – who was treating – interrupted Julio's complaining about his financial quandaries. Ramon's story came pouring out explosively: I was surprised at the sudden eagerness of his articulate outburst, because normally Ramon is shy and soft spoken. He usually retreats to the shadows to watch silently whenever I have my tape recorder turned on. I had previously assumed – wrongly – that he was one of those people in the street scene who did not want to deal intimately with a "white boy."

A reason for Ramon's uncharacteristic public, verbal explosion is that he was ingesting more alcohol and cocaine than usual in order to celebrate what he thought was his newly gained freedom. Earlier in the day Ramon had been found guilty of selling five vials of crack to an undercover police officer. To Ramon's surprise, however, the judge had allowed him to walk out of the courtroom unfettered. Ramon assumed he had been granted a suspended sentence. He was also excited and hopeful because his wife Iris had placed a down-payment on a subsidized apartment.³ If all went well, she would be able to leave the downtown shelter where she now lived with their son following their eviction from his mother's apartment almost a year ago. He was hoping to reestablish their nuclear household ("So now that my wife got an apartment, it's like a sign telling me to stay out of the streets . . . you don't need no more. Now you just stay and relax and go to work. Go home, and have kids!").

He was insecure in his wife's affections, and he could not decide whether to go back to dealing to supplement his inadequate income from his legal day job as a messenger for a Wall Street law firm where he had been working for the past year. His legal job was stable; in fact, Ramon was so appreciated by his Wall Street employer that he had been granted an unpaid leave of absence for the duration of his trial following his arrest for selling crack. The problem was that the Wall

³ In 1989 the waiting list for subsidized apartments in New York City was estimated at 17–18 years. There were over 88,000 families on the list. The total number of municipally subsidized apartments in all of New York City was only 178,000 and the official vacancy rate was 0.1 percent. Iris managed to obtain an apartment through Section 8 – whose waiting list hovered at 80,000 families for a total current stock of 43,421 units – only because she was stranded in a homeless shelter with a child for 10 months and New York City initiated a policy of preferential housing for homeless families with children.

Street law firm only paid him the minimum wage and a rival dealer had threatened to kill him if he tried to return to his night-time sales point in the South Bronx. This enemy seller had already shot at him once before in the past. Ramon took the threat seriously enough to be carrying his shotgun – concealed in a dirty canvas gym bag which he laid casually under our bench so as not to attract police attention.

More subtly, on a deeper emotional level, Ramon was angry at Julio for not understanding the profound, dependent love he feels for his wife Iris. For all his anger, and despite his assertion (“I don’t feel nothing no more... Life treated me this way so bad that I don’t give a fuck no more”), Ramon has one deep emotional constant in his life: he loves his wife, and cares for his son. In the streets the repeated unconditional expressions of love that Ramon makes in this interview are not considered appropriate masculine behavior. Worse yet, Ramon’s wife Iris was known to be having sex in the showers with other women in the shelter.

Despite his street-culture style homophobia, Ramon makes only an indirect reference – camouflaged in impersonal language – to his trauma of catching his wife with another woman in the shelter’s showers. (“They was a lot of gay women in there. A lot of whores in there. Sometimes I used to catch them fucking in the bathroom...”) He loves his wife so much, however, that he contextualizes her sexual promiscuity as a product of the objective conditions of homelessness in New York City. (“My wife... she’s a woman of needs. I’m a man in need myself.”) At no point does he assign her any personal responsibility or blame; in fact, the only sexual infidelities that he discusses explicitly are his own.

In contrast, Julio cannot tolerate any affronts to traditional patriarchal order. He claims Iris was “sucking dick on the sneak tip for a coupla dollars” since becoming an “undercover crackhead who sniffs Manteca too.”⁴ For the past few months Julio had been urging Ramon to stop making a fool of himself; beat his woman up; and leave her. Julio became even more adamantly hostile to Iris when some six weeks after this interview Ramon was jailed for a sentence of “one to two years.” Ramon had misunderstood the outcome of his trial. The judge had not decreed a suspended sentence, he had merely released Ramon prior to sentencing, due to overcrowding in New York City’s municipal jails. Ramon’s jailing caught all of us by surprise, but it obviously was especially traumatic to Ramon, Iris, and their two-and-a-half-year-old son. Powerless, once again, in the throes of the incomprehensible, hostile bureaucracies controlling her family’s life, Iris took refuge in the street’s drug scene. Of course, the night of this interview, Ramon knew nothing of what was about to befall him; instead he was triumphantly treating Julio and his crowd of crack house regulars to a birthday celebration of beer and cocaine. It was this generosity that probably prevented Julio from becoming offended when Ramon launched his opening rebuke.

⁴ *Manteca* is a Puerto Rican slang word for heroin, but literally means “cooking lard” in Spanish.

with a Puerto Rican dealer in Harlem

— interview by Philippe Bourgois

“I don’t want to survive; I want to live”

Ramon [Turning to Julio] You never lived through what I’ve lived through. You never found yourself on the street, you don’t know what it’s like not to have a place of your own. You’re always talking about your sacrifices. But you never sacrificed. I did. [Turning towards me and eyeing my tape-recorder discreetly] I sacrificed, because I was working downtown as a messenger on Wall Street earning 145 dollars a week – which was not enough. It was only enough for me to . . . to support my family – for food – to buy my son a pair of sneakers; but nothing for me; none for me; nothing for me and my wife.

That’s why the reason I also wanted to sell drugs. ‘Cause I wanted to buy my son something too. He’s only two years old. He likes to play with toys but he don’t got none ‘cause he’s living in a shelter now with my wife.

So you understand, I wanted to make a living. I also wanted to buy myself a new car – what I need – buy myself a little jewelry here and there, you know. And that’s what I want; that’s all I wanted.

I don’t want to survive; I want to live. I want to make a living. But this . . . [sweeping his arm at the projects, tenements, and glass-strewn concrete all around us, then dipping his fingernail into the cocaine on the dollar bill balanced on Julio’s lap, he sniffed gently and followed with a deep swig from the 40-ounce beer bottle we were sharing] this is just survival – making your ends meet [taking a second quick mouthful of beer and then passing me the beer bottle].

I don’t want to do that. I . . . I want to make enough money where I can just be able to go without hesitation and buy . . . you understand? – and . . . be happy that

I could do things with my money. Just do a couple of things like that.

I want more out of life. I won’t stand for what I have. It keeps on knocking my faith down. So that’s the reason why I turned to drugs – to selling drugs – you know. And I’m thinking about going back to selling right now.

I had to go out there and do something so I could save the rent

[Ignoring Julio’s invitation to sit Ramon approached me closely to speak more softly but clearly right into the tape recorder which I – also standing – was now holding up to his mouth.] We were living at my mother’s with my brothers and sisters, but my brothers and sisters, they are crack-heads. They will not do anything for themselves. So all of a sudden my mother left. She had to move out to do her own life; just like I got to do my own life too; and so do my brothers and sisters.

My mother left me with her apartment, but it just so happens I wasn’t making enough money at the time because I didn’t have no job. It was before I had found this job that I got now working downtown as a messenger. I had to support me, my son, and my wife; so I had to go out there and do something so I could save the rent. In other words, so I could make enough money to pay the rent.

It so happens I couldn’t do that, so I went looking for a job. I couldn’t find anything right away, so the rent was being added up, you know what I’m saying?

So that’s when I started selling crack and stuff like that. Just to try to pay that rent that my mother had left me.

First I talked to my friends about it and told them what I wanted to do: “to sell

drugs and crap like that, so I can survive.” You know... save enough money, so I can keep the apartment and... and live, you know. Man, you know, make a living; and get better... better myself; you understand?

*The winter was coming and Boom!
I landed up in a shelter room with my
family*

I was selling crack on my own, but I *had too hard a time*. It didn't work out. So I decided to sell for somebody else. But I fucked up and that same day that I was working for that new person is when I got caught for the first time. And I had just found my job as a messenger – I still got that job now.

I went to jail but they bailed me out right away and I stood with my job. But the landlord said “It is time for the eviction.” My wife tried to save the apartment, but she had only given the landlord enough for an extension and that ran out.

The winter was coming and Boom! I landed up in a shelter room with my family. So, I stood'ed in a shelter for five months; and I suffered for five months because being in a shelter is like being in jail. You're sleeping with 20 different people, that you don't know; people that you din't even seen before. You don't know what they've got: Could be AIDS or whatever. Ah... then these people don't take baths and stuff like that. The shower is dirty. My wife had to go and clean the shower every night before she takes a shower or before I take a shower. So it's being like... it's a stress. It's a stressful thing, you know.

*You have a miserable life right
there in the shelter*

The shelter was a terrible, terrible place. Sometimes I wish't I was in jail. 'Cause they didn't respect you no more in the shelter. That place is not for a person that is a nice person; that is a quiet working person. It's not for people like you and me [*including me sympathetically in the same hand*

motion that passed me the beer bottle, thereby subtly excluding Julio, Willie, and their girlfriends. Somewhat contradictorily he then reached over to Julio's lap and delicately dipped his pinkie fingernail into the cocaine].

It's for people that are from the streets; people that uses drugs. People that like hanging out and stuff like that.

Me, I like to make money; go home; and relax; and be home with my family. That shelter is nothing like that; that shelter is about arguing.

The majority in that shelter is women. There was more women than men, in that shelter. And they would fight every day. 'Cause they was big woman; a lot of gay women in there. A lot of whores in there; sluts and stuff like that. They were fucking... fucking in the bathroom.

Sometimes I used to catch them fucking in the bathroom and stuff like that, you know. It was like a place where you draw all the wildness in there, you know; a jungle in there. That place is frustrating you know [*sniffing more cocaine and shaking his head*].

And you be sleeping and all of a sudden there be fights. You wake up in the middle of the night, because right there in the next room there was a bunch of people fighting for some reason.

Or, you try to get along with someone; and you get to know that person right there next to you and then all of a sudden, they leave and you get another person next to you. And then all of a sudden, that person leaves too, because they already got them an apartment or something; or they decide to move them to a hotel.

And there you are: you're still waiting. And now you got to worry because there is going to be a new person taking that bed next to you. And you don't know what that person is all about. You don't know if that person is a killer; a murderer; if the person has AIDS or something. You don't know. So you worry about that, when you see that person. It might happen to be that person uses drugs. It's along those lines, because

one of those things has to come out next to you in the shelter.

That's exactly it! It has to be one of those murderers; or one of those rapists; or one of those gay men; or gay persons; or drug users; or stuff like that - right next to you. It has to be one of those people. So what happens is that you have a miserable life right there in the shelter, because you're living with that person who's put next to you. That's what is killing my wife and me.

I felt like killing anybody

You can't have sex with your wife because they're all there watching. They're... their bed is right there [*pointing to little Yilt in the stroller who was listening intently*], next to everybody else's.

My wife... she's a woman of needs. I'm a man in need myself, you know. I don't have no money to go to a hotel, or anything like that; so what does that turn out to be? It turned out to be that I had to go and do something about that.

So that's exactly what I did. I decided again to sell drugs. That was my... my goal to do; to sell drugs: "I'm going to sell drugs... do whatever it takes to make life better for my wife and my son. Even if it takes me to kill somebody out there, I'll do it. I'll go for contracting [*hired killing*]. I'll do anything for money so I could survive." That's what I was thinking.

But I suffered for a long time. Those ten long months with my wife and son in the shelter, they wasn't easy. It was very hard. I felt like killing anybody; anybody that was doing good selling drugs; making money; buying cars; buying jewelry. I wanted to blow their head off; just because I didn't got it like that; 'cause I felt selfish. I was a selfish person.

I felt so down and out for being in a fucking shelter. And I would look around at all these motherfuckers having jewelry; having cars; and things like that. And me, like a motherfucker; broke; with no money; and knowing that I see these people with all these things that I wanted so bad that I would kill for.

When I was feeling that selfish, I was looking for anybody to hire me who... who wants to hire me as a contractor. Anybody that... anybody that wants a person killed - I would do it for them; and I'd get paid for it, you know. As long as you pay me two or three thousand dollars, I'd do it for you, you know. Just... just to make ends meet. Just to... No! Not to just make ends meet, but to make enough money to get me the things that I want - that I always wanted.

But that didn't work out; so instead I went back to drugs; and I started selling drugs. That was... that was my goal. Once again I started to sell drugs a second time and I've been selling drugs ever since then, you know.

I love my wife, my son, but I had to leave the shelter and I never went back there

What happens is that I couldn't take it no more. I had too hard a time in that shelter. We went through five months of suffering and I started to fight with my wife. I couldn't take it no more.

I took it for five months until I said: "I ain't going to take it no more." So I left. I said, I'd rather be in the street than be in a place like this!

I had a fight with my wife outside the shelter. I had a big fight where I almost choked her. And ah... I left. I had a big fight.

I saw myself that I couldn't live there with her, because I saw that I could've killed her. I love my wife, my son, but I had to leave the shelter and I never went back there.

I stood out there on the streets for a week, until I said to myself "I'm going to sell drugs."

And that's exactly what I did. When my income tax refund came I invested my money on drugs, and I started selling them. I spent all my tax money buying drugs. I decided to stay on the streets and sell drugs.

I wasn't going to take no chance in the shelter with my income tax refund, because they're a bunch of thieves in there you know. They will steal your mail or something. Especially if they find out there's an income tax coming.

So I picked it up at the office and I had my sister cash my income tax. And then I just went up to the Bronx, and that's exactly what I did. I invested my money in drugs, 400 and something dollars. I only bought 100 dollars worth of drugs first. On 100 dollars I made about 200. And it paid good. I was selling crack. I had to cook it up and everything.

And I stood out there by myself for four months selling drugs. But I didn't get nothing good established; but at least I used to keep money in my pocket; and then when I got paid at my messenger job, everything was a little better off for me.

But it wasn't all that easy; it was a hard time. And that's when I ended up having a fight with...with these people on the block; with the guy that wants to kill me now [*picking up the gym bag with his shotgun from under the bench; hugging it to his chest; and then drinking from the bottle*].

I had to survive

— *Ramon wait, slow down! Start from the beginning. Let me get the whole story.*

Ramon [*Looking almost reproachfully at Julio*] But I had to survive. I was practically...I was practically living in the streets. I had left my wife and son in the shelter, and I was living in a coke spot - [*turning back to me*] a coke spot is where a lot of coke is sold; where the customer is served inside the apartment.

I took chances by living there, 'cause the cops could've rolled up in there and put me in jail for nothing I didn't do; for just trying to find a place to stay.

I was working with the Super of the building. I was in an apartment where they had already evicted the people that lived there before. The marshall came and he took everybody out of there - at the time my family was already at the shelter.

So that apartment was supposed to be locked. But the Super took a chance, you know; opening the door for me and letting me in - being that I was a nice guy - because I wanted a place to sleep. And I was paying him 40 dollars a week; and I stood there for two extra months.

My brother jerked me

At one point, I lost a lot of money to a woman that I had given a lot of crack to sell. But she had a big habit, like, and she smoked it up with friends. But that was my money that she was giving away to her friends.

It took me seven days to get the money back from her. She had a lot of clients. People would go there to use her place to smoke, and she could make money out of that. She was paying me slowly.

I had told her "You better get my money. If you don't get my money, something is going to happen."

If I had not been there, she would never have paid me. But because I was there; pressuring her; pressuring her every day; every day - she knew I would kick her ass - so she used to give me 10, 15 dollars every day. That way she made up for the 120 dollars that she owed.

After that I took my money; bought some material; but the material wasn't good; it gave me less count. So I stopped buying from my contact. And I went to another coke connection.

The new coke I invested in was no good. I blew 60 dollars because I had decided to buy two grams. I lost my money.

I was upset. I came and complained about it. I talked to her - my new contact - I told her that I wasn't going to buy any more drugs from her. But then she gave me two grams at 50 dollars. And I invested it into 100 dollars. And then I was back selling my material.

But I think I went back down one more time when I didn't have no money at all. I had gave some work to my brother; my brother jerked me; and then I didn't have no money for me to sell with. But I had my

jewelry – my bracelet. I took it; and pawned it for 185 dollars; and then I started back up again.

Through all of this I didn't lose my job

I started making money; but it took me about a month and a half; and then from that month and a half, everything was going prosperous.

I was doing the process of cooking up the crack by myself; I was doing my own selling; doing my own cooking; buying. The first time I had to get somebody to cook it for me, so that I could learn how to do it.

Sometimes I took my brother to sell with me. I used to tell him "Make some money for me." Sometimes he used to mess-up, but then he had to afford to pay my money back to me. So I never lost money from him. Ever since I pawned my bracelet, I never lost money.

Plus I was getting paid from my messenger job; and when I get paid, I would take half the check and invest it in coke. So I could get myself back on my feet like that selling.

Because, through all of this I didn't lose my job. I was working. Even when I used to sell drugs and used to break nights [*stay awake all night*]. I used to go from where I was selling straight to work; because I didn't want to lose my job.

That way when I'd get paid at work it'd be a little better because I had started making my little extra money on drugs – you know what I'm saying? Then I could do things with my paycheck.

But I couldn't afford to lose my job 'cause the business that I was doing with crack wasn't established yet. So I couldn't afford it. I still needed my job; so that's the reason I kept working, and after work I'd sell drugs.

It was like a back and forth thing until finally I got this guy working for me that had clientele. I was making my money. And that's when the system did this to me; it happened! I started to be on my own feet, but I was busted [*sniffs and drinks*].

I love my wife a lot; I want to keep us together

During this period I was visiting my wife every week. My wife was seeing me every week; Friday, Saturday, and Mondays, and that's it. The rest of the five days she had to go back to the shelter. I didn't see my wife for five days; and then Monday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday; then I'd see her. And my son too!

That's a pressure; you know what I'm saying? 'Cause I've been with my wife for three-and-a-half years, and I love her. We're already used to each other; and for us to be separated, it makes it real hard.

Now I can't see her, so it makes it real hard. It makes me want to do anything. It makes me even mess around with other women – which I did. And I didn't want to take it out on her. It's just . . . It felt weird. I was really hurting myself. I wasn't hurting nobody but myself.

She don't know what I've done. She's not an understanding person. She don't understand. She's too stubborn. I don't tell her nothing. I just keep it to myself. I don't let it go that far. 'Cause I love . . . I love my wife a lot; I want to keep us together.

I don't exist for welfare

I suffered. I worked a year at my job as a messenger. I still be at my messenger job every day. I don't miss a day.

Tomorrow I'm on vacation to pick up my son. My son, he's two-and a-half years old – just like Yilt [*pointing to Carmen's little boy strapped into the stroller who had stopped struggling in order to listen intently and admire the flickering lights on my tape recorder*]. He's going to school; I got to pick him up in school tomorrow in the afternoon. That's vacation without pay for me, because they don't pay no benefits at my job; just the wage.

You see my wife, she's on welfare, and she gets Medicaid. She's only paid for one child – my son. They get 144 dollars every two weeks and then in food stamps they get another 129 per month. But that's not

enough to live off of. You definitely got to be working.

That's why I'm not counted as being married to her. I don't exist for welfare; otherwise they'd take away her money and Medicaid.

But when we lost my mother's apartment; in order to get into the shelter with my wife, I had to face welfare. I had to say: "Look, I'm living with my wife now; I'm working and stuff like that." That's why they put me in a shelter with her. But then welfare started to deduct it from her. Welfare said, "You're living in a shelter and they're giving you three meals a day in the shelter, so that's gonna be a deduction from your food stamps." And "you don't pay no rent. You have a place to stay in the shelter. You get free food."

So now, instead of 144 dollars every two weeks, she gets 85 from welfare and then only 75 more dollars from food stamps, because they give her the food free at the shelter.

She's pissed off, because she can't do nothing with that money. She can't buy no clothes. She only can buy food. But now her food runs out fast because even though she gets free food in the shelter, she wants to get home food and stuff like that for the baby-like cereal.

She feels bad. Especially because the shelter where she lives now is all the way downtown in Manhattan. It's expensive down there. Sometimes she has to come uptown only to shop [sniffing and drinking].

When my wife finally got the apartment I felt like that was a message for me to get out of selling crack

— But Ramon you were telling us earlier that your wife might finally be getting an apartment. How's that?

Ramon Welfare helped her get an apartment. It's a Section 8, because she's a woman in need; yeah, a woman in need. She stood there in that shelter for nine

months with my two-year-old son. That's the reason why she got her apartment.

Section 8 pays for the apartment. Welfare only pays 50 dollars a month, you understand? It comes right out of her salary. I'm not going to have to pay nothing, man, because they don't know nothing about me no more.

So being that I'm gonna be working at my messenger job that I got, that makes my paycheck something. It's 145 a week clear. Maybe it might be a little better for us. Now there's a chance for me to save money and get the things that I need.

I think that now that my wife has the apartment, maybe things could be better. Now I can, you know, relax; decide what I want to do. Now I feel a little better. My wife noticed it. And my wife knows me; that I feel better; I'm healing. When my wife finally got the apartment I felt like that was a message for me to get out of selling crack.

Because, you know I had that incident... [pointing to his gym bag containing the shotgun at his feet] I had that fight with the other seller. The guy wants to kill me and stuff like that.

So now that my wife got an apartment, it's like a sign telling me to stay out of the streets; not to be there no more [waving his arm at the crack house across the street just as a Jeep Renegade waiting at a light blasted "Fight the Power" (the bestselling rap song of 1989 by the group Public Enemy) from a high-powered customized stereo sound system]. It's like telling me: "You already got a place where you only pay 50 dollars a month and you don't need no more. Now you just stay and relax and go to work. Go home and have kids!"

[Julio rolls his eyes at Ramon's resolution and playfully offers him the cocaine. Ramon pauses to sniff, and continues more contemplatively] I don't know, but maybe I should go back to dealing. Maybe I can sell from out of some place else that's safer. I don't know. [Finishing the dregs of our 40-ounce bottle of Olde English 800 malt brew, Ramon threw it in a wide arc

onto the street where it smashed loudly to little Yilt's glee. Almost in the same gesture he thrust two crumpled dollar bills into Julio's hand motioning him to fetch another bottle at the corner store.]

I just hope that she really does get the apartment

Because I just hope that she really does get the apartment. We got the lease and everything, but the landlord is still giving a little hard time to her about getting the apartment. She already did pay a downpayment. That was two days ago – welfare gave her the money for that. She gave a month of rent, and a month's security – welfare gave her that – and then Section 8 paid for the rest. So everything is covered.

The apartment's still gotta be fixed up, but it's livable. All my wife needs is the key. She already called for the electricity – to put in the light and stuff like that. Tomorrow they're putting on the lights; and tomorrow they come and check the apartment to see if it's okay; so tomorrow I find out if I'm gonna have the apartment, or whatever. That's gonna be tomorrow [*clenching his fist anxiously*].

If I do get it: good! If I don't: then I'm gonna have to wait another month or two to get another apartment. My problem is that I could stay where I'm at now for only so long, because I'm staying with my wife's cousin and he ain't paying rent there no more, and he's going to get thrown out. The most I could stay is for about two more weeks.

My cousin knows he's gonna be thrown out. He's working, but he's saving some money to get his own apartment somewhere else – in a better neighborhood, so he doesn't care.

And I'm just waiting to see if my wife gets this apartment, so I can just move out too: Take my things out; and go back to her apartment; and get back together again with her and my son.

They have to give it to her, 'cause she already signed the lease, she paid a month's

security – a month of rent. The apartment has to be hers. [*Clenching his fist again and then reaching back with his fingernail into the pile of cocaine which was now resting on the bench.*] The landlord okayed it and everything.

— *If the apartment doesn't work out, can't you stay with someone else in your family?*

I don't want my mother to suffer

Ramon My brother and my sister – they were also staying in a public shelter – they're living in a three-room shelter now like my wife was moved to. So they have their own private place and everything in a shelter.

My other older sister is staying with her husband now. Her husband just came out of jail. And now they're staying at a hotel.⁵

My other younger sister is in jail. My youngest brother is also in jail.

So it's just me, my older brother, and my older sister who's outside.

My mother moved to Queens. She has her own place; she's happy. I make it look like I'm doing good to her and she's happy that I'm doing good. I don't want my mother to suffer. When I visit her I dress up real nice, and I tell my mother: "Don't worry about it. I'm doing good."

A while back I almost had enough money to get an apartment

Julio [*Interrupting and passing Ramon the new bottle of beer*] Your family be living wrong, boy!

Ramon [*Cracks the seal of the bottle and reflexively pours a few drops onto the pavement in a traditional Puerto Rican gesture that commemorates departed spirits. He then drinks only a small gulp, unprepared for how cold the contents of the fresh bottle would be. Grimacing he passes it on to Julio, but without looking at him.*] It's really been like three-and-a-half years

⁵ New York City lodges homeless families in hotels when emergency shelters are full.

since I've been looking for an apartment. It's been bad luck but I didn't find nothing.

A while back I almost had enough money to get an apartment. I had a thousand dollars. I only needed another 200 dollars to get an apartment. But I didn't have it so I had to leave it.

Another time I gave this man 400 dollars who said he would get me an apartment. It just happened that I was looking in a building where it said "Apartment for Rent," and when I walked into the building to look at it, believe it or not, the guy happened to be coming out from that place.

He said, "If you give me 400 dollars I will get you this apartment right here." He showed me the rooms and everything.

I said, "It's good" – that was in Brooklyn. And all of a sudden I had the money right there in my hand, you know [*cradling an imaginary wad in his palm*]. So he said "give me the money, I will write a receipt [*scribbling on an imaginary slip of paper*], I'll write you a receipt."

I gave him 400 dollars and he gave me this receipt [*fishing a dog-eared scrap of paper from out of his wallet and holding it up*] and he signed it and I signed the bottom [*pointing to a smudged mark in the corner*]. Then I was supposed to take this receipt to some office . . . to welfare – I think . . . I forgot now. But he broke out with the money. He had a drug habit.

I went to his mother and I told her "My money better be here because I'm out here sacrificing; looking for an apartment . . . out here on the streets sacrificing for my family; and for some bastard to try to take my money! I don't lose my money for nobody. My money better appear or some shit is going to happen in this house."

And she knew that I was serious. I said "Anything happens to my money, somebody is going to pay for it. Somebody is going to have to pay for this. I don't care who it is. But I just hope it doesn't have to be you."

Can you believe that bastard actually jeopardized his own mother?

So, ah . . . [*sniffing*] it took her two or three days to get my money back. But I didn't get it back from him. I got the money back from his older brother who came in from Staten Island . . . from real far. He gave his mother the money and left again because she called him and explained the situation.

It took a few days and I was looking for him. If I seen him I probably kill him. If he doesn't have my money, I'm going to kill him; or I send him to the hospital. Either way . . . he's going to pay off for my money.

Every time that I look at it [*holding up the crumpled "receipt"*], it reminds me, you know, how he actually broke out with my 400 dollars. I never heard from him again [*drinking deeply*].

*Life treated me this way so bad
that I don't give a fuck no more*

— Yo Ramon, this is a great tape you're making for me. I think I could use it in my book, but I'm getting tired. I haven't been sniffing like you guys, and I gotta take my son to school in the morning. I'm gonna break out.

Ramon [*Unable to talk because of the mouthful of cold beer he had just gulped, he signaled for me to keep the tape recorder running. Almost with the same hand motion he dipped into the cocaine pile which was back on Julio's lap and sniffed daintily.*] I learned a lot growing up in El Barrio. I learned . . . [*sniffing again more deeply, and increasing the tempo and urgency of his diction*] I learned how to survive the danger, you know. Because, when you was a kid you see people die right in front of you [*sniffing again*]. Getting their heads blown off. Shot in the face and actually when they get shot they just fall on their face [*making the motion of stumbling forward expressionless*]. Right there [*pointing to the gutter next to little Yilt in the stroller who was watching transfixed*]. You see a dead body. You see their brains splatter on the wall [*pointing to the bricks of the high-rise project behind us*].

I seen that before [*sniffing*]. I was in school; I was in junior high school. Right there where the Club is at.⁶ Right on the wall...not inside the Club, but outside. Right on that wall; next to the fish store. I seen brains splattered right there [*spreading his arms open as if admiring an impressive vista*]. I seen people getting shot; mugged; [*speaking even faster*] mugged in front of my face; people mugging each other and stabbed; stabbed!

⁶ The "Club" was another crack house located five blocks away, owned by the man who owned the botanica crack house that Julio managed.

[*Slowing down again*] It's becoming like nothing to me no more. I don't feel nothing no more. You can come out with a gun at me and I'm just going to tell you "Shoot me!" I don't give a fuck. I never got shot before but...you don't fear no more when you're living in a jungle; when you're living in a place where you got to survive. It's either you or me. Either you go, or I go.

That's how life treated me. Life treated me this way so bad that I don't give a fuck no more. And I got the temper and everything from here...from El Barrio [*waving expansively up and down the street, then sniffing and drinking deeply*].

Pierre Bourdieu

The Abdication of the State

The perfectly commendable wish to go see things in person, close up, sometimes leads people to search for the explanatory principles of observed realities where they are not to be found (not all of them, in any case), namely, at the site of observation itself. The truth about what happens in the “problem suburbs” certainly does not lie in these usually forgotten sites that leap into the headlines from time to time.¹ The true object of analysis, which must be constructed against appearances and against all those who do no more than endorse those appearances, is the social (or more precisely, political) construction of reality as it appears to intuition, and of its journalistic, bureaucratic and political representations, which help to produce effects that are indeed real, beginning with the political world, where they structure discussion, and extending to the world of science.

The State Nobility and liberalism

If a good deal of space is given here to the critical analysis of representations, it is not for the simple pleasure of polemics. These collective constructions are part of the reality we are trying to understand, and for which they are in large part responsible. Such is the case with the neoliberal perspective² behind the policy measures in the 1970s concerned with governmental housing subsidies, which have helped create social division, often made material in space, even, as in Saint-Florentin, by a single street running between the owners of small houses and the residents of huge housing projects. But when the “Vaulx-en-Velin riots” or the “Saint-Florentin murder” are the lead stories in the newscasts and headlines in newspapers, who remembers the position paper on the HLMs, the Barre or

¹ The division among disciplines – ethnology, sociology, history and economy – translates itself back into separated segments that are totally inadequate to the objects of study: take the opposition between local monographs incapable of grasping the mechanisms whose effects they record, and analyses that aim at being more systematic but tend to choose more or less arbitrarily among the complexity of facts to construct “stylized” models.

² Liberalism in the French sense is economic liberalism, the belief in free market, laissez-faire economics. Economic liberalism opposes a long-standing French tradition of state intervention in the economy. [Tr.]

Nora-Eveno commissions and all the debates on "aid to construction" and "aid to people" that stirred up management circles 15 years earlier under Giscard d'Estaing and his Secretary of State for Housing, Jacques Barrot? Bureaucracies have a short memory, and the names of all those who participated in the collective development of some of the most decisive postwar decisions have been totally forgotten.³ By the same token, can one expect journalists, and journalist philosophers, who go on and on in their editorials about the "Islamic veil" or "events" in one or another housing project in the suburbs of Paris or Lyon, to really ask themselves how journalism helps produce the very "event" that they think they are recording and analyzing?

The opposition between economic liberalism and statism that preoccupies so many writers these days does not hold up under close observation even for a second. It becomes clear, for example, that the State shapes the real estate market decisively, particularly through its control over property values and mortgage or rental subsidies. It also helps determine the social distribution of space, or, if you like, the distribution of different social categories in space (on which it also acts through its effect on the labor and educational markets). And it is the retreat of the State and the drying up of public construction subsidies (confirmed during the 1970s when subsidies for the construction of public housing were replaced by allocations to individuals) that is essentially responsible for the appearance of sites of relegation, or dumping grounds, where the economic crisis and unemployment have concentrated the poorest and most disadvantaged populations.

So, for housing as for countless other areas, it is impossible to understand the present state of affairs without taking into account the wholesale conversion to neoliberalism that began in the 1970s and was accomplished in the mid-1980s when Socialist leaders joined the camp. This change was not confined to the ideological shifts touted by media "philosophers" as the "return of the subject" or the "death of '68." It was accompanied by a destruction of the idea of public service, in which the new "leading intellectuals" collaborated through a series of feats of theoretical legerdemain and trumped-up equations, founded on the logic of magical contamination and denunciation to which their Marxist adversaries had so often had recourse in the past. By making economic liberalism the necessary and sufficient condition of political freedom, they assimilate state interventionism to "totalitarianism"; by identifying socialism with the Soviet system, they suggest that since inequalities are unavoidable, the struggle against them is ineffective (which does not keep them from blaming the system for discouraging the best people) and, in any case, can only be undertaken to the detriment of freedom; by associating efficiency and modernity with private enterprise, and archaism and inefficiency with the public sector, they seek to substitute the relationship with the customer, supposedly more egalitarian and more effective, for the relation to the user; finally, they identify "modernization"

³ All the names and above all an analysis of how housing policy was produced may be found in nos 81-2 of *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, published in March 1990 and devoted to "the economy of the house."

with the transfer into the private sector of the public services with the most profit potential and with eliminating or bringing into line subordinate staff in the public services, held responsible for every inefficiency and every "rigidity."

The State's right and left hands

We need only pause right here to see that this whole body of clichés – developed in meeting places specially designed to foster exchanges between "thinkers" longing for power and people in power longing for ideas (journals, clubs, and colloquia), and endlessly rehashed in newspapers and news magazines – directly expresses the vision and interests of the higher state nobility, a product of *École Nationale d'Administration* [ENA, the elite school for top civil servants] and trained at "Sciences Po" [political science institute].⁴ These are the new mandarins, hankering for bonuses and ready to jump into the private sector at a moment's notice. Tired of preaching the spirit of "public service" (for everyone else) as they did in the 1960s, or of celebrating the cult of private enterprise, especially after 1980, they claim to manage the public services like a private enterprise even as they protect themselves from the financial or personal constraints and risks associated with institutions whose (bad) habits they ape, especially where personnel management is concerned. These are the people who invoke the imperatives of modernization to attack administrative subordinates, that is, the supposedly "well-off" of the public sector, protected from the risks of free enterprise by the rigid statutes of the corporatist defense of social gains; and these are also the people who vaunt the merits of work flexibility, if they haven't already invoked productivity in order to bring about a gradual reduction in the workforce.

It is understandable that minor civil servants, and more especially those charged with carrying out the so-called "social" functions, that is, with compensating, without being given all the necessary means, for the most intolerable effects and deficiencies of the logic of the market – policemen and lower-level judges, social workers, educators and even, more and more in recent years, primary and secondary school teachers – should feel abandoned, if not disowned outright, in their efforts to deal with the material and moral suffering that is the only certain consequence of this economically legitimated *Realpolitik*. They experience the contradictions of a state whose right hand no longer knows, or worse, no longer wants what the left hand is doing, contradictions that take the form of increasingly painful "double constraints." How can we not see, for example, that the glorification of earnings, productivity, and competitiveness, or just plain profit, tends to undermine the very foundation of functions that

⁴ It can be readily verified that the analysis we carried out on the theme of the state nobility and its social conditions of production, well before its triumph, remains completely valid, despite the apparent reprieve that was brought to it by Socialist graduates of the ENA. See Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski, "La production de l'idéologie dominante," *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, no. 2-3 (1976), pp. 1-73.

depend on a certain professional disinterestedness often associated with militant devotion?⁵

More profoundly, the very definition of this “street-level bureaucracy” has been radically transformed by the substitution of direct aid to individuals for older forms of support in the form of access to services (in housing, but elsewhere as well, with, for example, a guaranteed minimum income). There is ample evidence that these two types of aid have totally different consequences. In a perfect fit with the neoliberal vision, direct aid “reduces solidarity to a simple financial allocation” and aims solely at facilitating consumption (or inciting to greater consumption) without seeking to orient or to structure that consumption.⁶ Which means that we move from a governmental policy directed at the very structures of distribution to a policy that simply wants to correct the effects of the unequal distribution of resources in economic and cultural capital. The end result is a *state charity*, which is destined, just as it was in the good old days of religious philanthropy, for the “deserving poor.” In this way, along with the weakening of trade unionism and organizing groups, the new forms of state activities help to turn a (potentially) mobilized *people* into a heterogeneous aggregate of fragmented, isolated *poor*, “the disadvantaged” as official discourse puts it, who are taken note of mostly (if not exclusively) when they “create problems” or else to remind others who are “well off” of the privilege conferred by permanent employment.

School for the subproletariat

This detour through the State and its policy decisions is indispensable for understanding what we observe today “on the ground,” that is, the precarious situation of “social workers” mandated by the state (or municipalities) to assure basic public services, health and education in particular, for the most disadvantaged populations in housing projects or slum areas that have increasingly been deserted by the State. These agents of the state are shot through with the contradictions of the State, which they often experience as profoundly personal dramas: contradictions between the often endless missions entrusted to them, especially in matters of jobs and housing, and the invariably paltry means granted to them; and those contradictions, no doubt the most dramatic of all, produced in part by their own actions, such as those resulting from the hopes raised and then dashed by the educational system.

How could those who must deal daily with the most economically and culturally disadvantaged avoid knowing how could they hide from themselves, the fact

⁵ It has been observed that people who enter public service, and most particularly “street-level bureaucracies,” often have a certain devotion to their function, seeing it as potentially useful to society. See M. Lipsky, *Street-level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980), p. xii.

⁶ Cf. C. Gruson and J. Cohen, *Tarifification des services publics locaux* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1983), pp. 47–8 and P. Chambat, “Service public et néo-libéralisme,” *Annales ESC* 3 (1990), pp. 615–47.

that many of the problems encountered by families through their children, and by these children themselves, are directly or indirectly tied to School? There is undoubtedly no need to look elsewhere for the real principle underlying the particularities of these "young people," who are often described as indescribable and something that has never been seen before – the equivalent in the sciences of journalistic sensationalism. In their conduct and especially in their relation to the future, these adolescents have all the characteristic traits of the subproletariat, but deeply and permanently affected by a prolonged stay in School.

No doubt descriptions all agree on what is at the heart of these adolescents' experience: the feeling of being tied to a degrading ("rotten") place by lack of money and transportation and doomed to a degradation (and to degradations) that weighs on them like a curse, or, more simply, a stigmata that blocks access to work, to leisure activities, and to consumer goods, etc.; and, more profoundly, the inexorably repeated experience of failure, first in school, then in the labor market, which prevents or discourages any reasonable hope for the future. But what is not seen is that this temporal experience, characteristic of a *subproletariat* fated by lack of power over the present to give up on the future or to constantly switch aspirations, is rooted in an absolute uncertainty about the future and in the conflicting aspirations that school opens and closes at one and the same time.

Destined by their lack of cultural capital to almost certain academic failure, these young people are nevertheless placed in conditions likely to raise their aspirations, often remaining there until a fairly advanced age. By provisionally setting them apart from productive activities and cutting them off from the world of work, School breaks the "natural" cycle of working-class reproduction that is based in the anticipated adaptation to dominated positions. Instead, School inclines these young people to reject manual labor, especially in the factory, and working-class conditions generally, and it leads them to reject the only future accessible to them but without giving any guarantee for the future that it seems to promise, and which, on the contrary, it teaches them to give up on definitively through its invocation of *destiny* and its decrees. These mechanisms are undoubtedly particularly effective for adolescents of foreign origin, notably North Africans, whose particular difficulties on the educational market are reinforced by supplementary difficulties that result, on the labor market, in their *negative symbolic capital*, linked to the external signs of their body hexis that function as stigmata, along with proper name, accent, and also, from now on, place of residence.

These structural factors, which shape dispositions toward time, in particular, and as a result the relationship to work, explain the affinity between these young people with unsettled dispositions and the temporary nature of their jobs. But no account of the dispositions and practices of these adolescents, especially the most "deviant" among them, is complete unless it brings in a number of other factors. There is, first, the shriveling or weakening of organizing associations, such as political and union groups which, in the old "red suburbs," contrary to what is often said, did not simply "channel and regulate revolt" but also guaranteed a sort

of "continual enfolding" of a whole world (especially through the organization of sporting, cultural and social activities), thereby giving a meaning to revolt and also to life in general.

Then there is the crisis in family structures that hits North African families especially hard and marks the major difference between these families – and their children – and other immigrant families: the very high birthrate (which will necessarily decline as their economic and cultural capital rises) makes things very difficult for the education (in the wider sense) tacitly required by their new social environment. Moreover, there is a very wide gap, as much in lifestyle as in the aspirations and the whole social vision of the world, between parents with little or no education and children who have had the full effects of a prolonged stay in School. These effects are contradictory and, at the very least, paradoxical. For young immigrants, School is where they discover and experience their rightful, full belonging to French society (and also, more or less explicitly, to democratic culture, with the universalistic ideals it generates, such as the rejection of racism) and their actual full exclusion, which scholastic verdicts are there to confirm. As for the parents, who suffer the aftershocks of their children's upsets and sufferings, they scarcely have the power to offer, not merely the means of existence but *reasons for living* that could pull their children out of their feeling of being unwanted, supernumeraries. The parents have all the less to offer since they are themselves often excluded from economic and social well-being by unemployment, cut off from their community of origin, and, paradoxically, very isolated in this social setting that brings households together as a function of available apartments and incomes, and not, as was the case in the older slums and shanty towns, as a function of kinship relations. Having nothing to offer for the present and still less for the future, parents have difficulty controlling the desire for consumer goods that children get at school and from a social universe haunted by these goods that are at once inaccessible and all over the place – in the street, with its fancy cars, at the supermarket, or at the very heart of domestic life, via television and the advertisements that fill the mailbox every day.

If there is an effect specific to cohabitation, it lies in the fact that in this sort of environment, nobody can help anybody, so that a social slide downwards encounters no brakes, none of the safety nets that other milieux might provide. It also lies in a sort of rising spiral of violence that occurs when "petty delinquencies" (skipping school, pilfering, automobile theft, etc.), often begun as a game or a challenge, or sudden outbursts of collective violence (as when certain young men trash the premises and equipment that they themselves had asked for) progressively open the way for a small activist and organized minority. The gang often springs up in school, where it tends to bring pressure on those who would like to get out until they come into line with the most disadvantaged; it is then able to work more widely on a fragmented population that is incapable of mobilizing itself. This leaves no other outcome for those under the gang's control: either resigned submission and withdrawal into suffering and hatred, which produces general, undifferentiated denunciations based on a racist essentialism; or

departure, which reinforces the degradation and stigmatization of the site that has been deserted in this way.

Remaking history

If I have found it necessary to describe one of the causal series leading from the most central sites of the State to the most disinherited areas of the social world and, at the same time, to emphasize the properly political dimension of these processes (no doubt infinitely more complex), which have led to a state of affairs no one ever either dreamt of or wished for, it is not to accuse or indict, but to try to open up possibilities for rational action to unmake or remake what history has made.

In this case, the search for a well-grounded explanatory system has nothing gratuitous about it: through the problems they pose, the sites of relegation, the dumping grounds, and their inhabitants, have become one of the major stakes in political struggle. It is essential to checkmate explanations whose highly fantastic nature would be immediately apparent if they did not awaken the oldest phantasms in the Western tradition (I am thinking, for one example, of the euphemistic variant of racist explanation that uses Islamic exceptionalism to set up a radical and definitive alterity). Thus, while care must be taken not to see in it an automatic chain of responsibilities, it is not unhelpful to bring to light the link between the spatial segregation fostered and reinforced by the retreat of the State and a neoliberal policy designed to tear the petty bourgeoisie away from its collective habitat, and thus away from "collectivism," and to tie it instead to the private property of an individual house or condominium apartment, and thereby to the established order. There is also the more obvious link between this segregation, with its highly visible effects, and the place occupied in the political field and elsewhere by the opposition between "natives" and "immigrants," which has supplanted the once salient opposition between dominants and dominated. This connection is fostered by the decline of organized groups and their ability to overcome, as much through theory – by reactivating the internationalist tradition – as through practice – by the creation of new solidarities – the difficulties brought out by the conflicts linked to cohabitation, conflicts arising at the very core of the working-class world, even where the "natives" are in the large majority (as in the most famous "housing projects," the Quatre Mille of La Courneuve outside Paris, Les Minguettes or the Cité Balzac in Vitry).

With the eruption into the political field of a party like the National Front whose whole strategy is based on xenophobia and racism, political debate as a whole has more or less directly turned on the problem of immigration: in the political struggle between opposing authorities, political parties and trade unions in particular, each of which lays claim to the legitimate principle of vision and division, the question of redistribution has become absolutely central, along with the question of determining who has the right to claim all the advantages attached

to membership in the national community. For that matter, it is this claim to monopolize access to the economic and social advantages associated with citizenship that lets dominated “nationals” take sides with dominant “nationals” against the “immigrants.”

It is clear that the abdication or the retreat of the State has brought about unexpected effects, or at least ones that were never sought, which will eventually threaten the proper functioning of democratic institutions – unless, that is, they are countered by an urgent, resolute policy from a State determined to provide the means to make good on the intentions that it proclaims.

Pierre Bourdieu

An Impossible Mission

Pascale R. spontaneously offered her account after I made an appeal during a colloquium of social workers. At the time of the interview, she was a project head at F., a medium-sized town in the north of France. It is, as she herself says, an ambiguous position: as a worker on contract, she is paid by and can be dismissed by the city, but the contract specifies that, although placed “under the mayor’s authority,” she is “in the first place linked to an external structure”: “this is pretty ambiguous: I am supposed to be simultaneously under his authority and independent; I am supposed to attack him and obey him.” This ambiguity is reinforced by the fact that to carry out her functions well, she must deal with representatives who are very diverse and dispersed. On the governmental side, there are 17 departmental agencies (DDE [for equipment], DDASS [acting on hygiene and public health], Action Culturelle (DRAC), the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the Ministry of National Education especially): their directors practically never meet each other, and most of the time she is asking them for favors (while she is supposed to be coordinating, and usually organizing, their activities at the local level). At the regional level, there are elected officials and technicians, with the budgetary decisions that determine the resources at her disposal placed in the hands of the elected officials.

Having previously occupied a similar position in T., a large city nearby, Pascale R. can compare the two experiences. In T. she was attached to the HLM office (and not the municipality), which gave her real power: “I was HLM, I was project chief for a renovation operation and, as such, I had enormous power since I was, in effect, the owner of the residences; I had the power and the obligation to relocate families, then to seek financing, to get the work going and to assign the new residences.” As elsewhere, it was a place where “an effort at dialogue had been undertaken” and where she could rely on groups that had already been mobilized. She could fulfill one of her major functions, “modify relations among people,” among residents in the first instance – as we shall see with the affair of the old woman and her cats – and also between the residents and the authorities, municipal or state – thus bringing together the conditions for real self-management: “the residents’ representatives ended up making housing assignments.” It was at that point that Pascale R. discovered that the institution that had mandated her “couldn’t take me any more.” Her success was a failure: she had fulfilled only too well a contract that kept quiet about the essential things. It was in the form of this double bind that she felt the contradiction at the root of the institution that had

mandated her and of the function that was officially given to her: to revive life in the area and get residents to participate in management – the keywords were just words, the self-mystifying fictions that technocracy uses to give itself a bit of soul.

The comparison of the two experiences shows this clearly. In T., where she had real power over one of the factors of the problem she had to deal with – housing – she was able to push her work far enough to reveal the profoundly contradictory basis of the mission that she had been assigned. In F., where she is left to her own devices, that is to say, to the purely symbolic resources of conviction and persuasion, she is discovering right from the start that she is unable to give the things that people want and can only offer things they don't want (like the "traineeships" that are makeshift remedies for unemployment). What could really change the situation she is being asked to change does not depend on her, whereas what does depend on her cannot really change anything. "I know that what all the people in the neighborhood are after is a job. (...) And that's the one thing they can't be given," and later: "So social work carries its own contradiction, and it is up to the head of the DSQ project to come up with solutions and propose them to the different administrations. And there too there is a contradiction, since when you find something they say: 'it has to fit into the proper category' and the response [of the administration] is always: 'financially, it doesn't fall in my category.'"

Deprived of the exceptional conditions from which she had benefited in her previous position, Pascale R. runs smack into the two major obstacles encountered by any social work: the resignation of individuals demobilized and demoralized by a long series of failures and disappointments, and the inertia of a fragmented and fragmenting administration, closed off by its rigid routines and assumptions (the "categories") and never as dysfunctional as when it practices democracy under the aegis of a technocratic "social bureaucracy." Social workers can give only what they have: confidence, the minimal hope that is necessary if people are to try to make it out of their difficulties. Social workers must fight unceasingly on two fronts: on the one hand, against those they want to help and who are often too demoralized to take in hand their own interests, let alone the interests of the collectivity; on the other hand, against administrations and bureaucrats divided and enclosed in separated universes – to such an extent that, as we see with the RMI [subsistence income for reentry into work], the same services and bureaucrats in charge of paying the recipients are not the ones in charge of their reentry into the workforce. The antinomy between the logic of social work, which is not without a certain prophetic militancy or inspired benevolence, and that of bureaucracy, with its discipline and its prudence, never shows up as clearly as when, obeying "directives from higher up," bureaucrats are converted "to social work from one day to the next," especially when it came to the Tenth Plan: "From a job that works off innovation and conviction and involves relations with people, you reach institutional work; then... it's a disaster!"

Paradoxically, the rigidity of bureaucratic institutions is such that, despite what Max Weber said about them, they can only function, with more or less difficulty, thanks to the initiative, the inventiveness, if not the charisma of those functionaries who are the least imprisoned in their function. If bureaucracy were left to its own logic – the logic of administrative divisions that reproduce at the local level the divisions of the central authorities into separate ministries (precluding effective action), of dossiers that must be “transmitted, passed on” endlessly, the logic of bureaucratic categories that define what is bureaucratically thinkable (“it’s not planned”), of commissions run on prudent judgments, censorship, and control – then bureaucracy would paralyze itself. And it is undoubtedly these contradictions emanating from bureaucratic divisions that open up a margin of maneuver, initiative and freedom which can be used by those who, in breaking with bureaucratic routines and regulations, defend bureaucracy against itself.

interview with a project head in the north of France

— interview by Pierre Bourdieu

“I knew too much”

Pascale R. I spent six, almost seven years in T., and when I left it was precisely because I was becoming completely depressed: I had made connections with people little by little, because there was time to do it and there was a whole dynamic, a whole big group of residents’ representatives, men, women, retired people, young people, even working people – it is very difficult for a working person to spend time on things other than work and family, it’s difficult, but there were also – there were social workers against whom, a priori, I was in opposition: I was representing the HLM – the HLMs give out housing, the social workers ask for it and represent the bad tenants...

[*The first encounters with the social workers were difficult but soon improved during the Ninth Plan. The social workers concerned were often volunteers who participated in the project on their own time: “So we had a selection of people in the begin-*

ning; we had a group that was already set up to work together.”]

Modifying relations among people

Pascale R. So after several years, with work that relied on unpaid workers or militant volunteers among those who worked, you make ties and then at last you can put problems on the table. But only after several years: it doesn’t work right off the bat... Even the first year now at F, I’m just getting to know people on new basis, but I know perfectly well that they don’t have the confidence in me they’ll have at the end of four, five years. It takes time. The way I got to know the real problems was because, on behalf of the HLM office at T., I was actually running the operation I was in charge of; it was a “major” renovation; we were forced to have everybody move out. The first thing I had to do was to find housing for each of the families, and suddenly this gave me a particularly important role since

I knew the families directly (...) I knew who lived in the family, I knew what type of housing they had before, into what type of housing they had been relocated, so I knew people. And then I knew the social workers, the employees at the welfare office, the tenants' representatives who talked to me about people whom most of the time I knew myself.

[...]

Yes, well, I am going to give you an interesting example. At T. we finally got around a table, once a month, the HLM representatives, including me, and residents' representatives who were volunteers and whom we trusted, because not everybody can belong to a group where you talk about people's private lives, so these were some residents who we could be sure weren't going to repeat things to everyone, people whom we really trusted. Then social workers, who can't confide in everybody because they know the families, they are there to support them and especially they are not there to divulge their weaknesses or else they risk losing any chance of getting financial aid or an HLM residence, things like that. So finally we manage to meet, to put cards on the table, to discuss a case. So the example of behavior: it's someone who was the object of petitions because her place was full of cats, cats and dogs who pissed, and it stunk up the whole hallway. (...) And then this woman had asked to move, maybe to be near a friend, I don't really remember what the reason was, it wasn't important or perhaps it was, but yes, the reason was... [*laughs*]... important: it was that her home had become unsanitary!

[...]

And it comes from the people, it's their way of living in the residence. Of course there's the question of finances. To not spend money on fuel, they insulate and don't heat, and they do it so well that air doesn't circulate: humidity takes hold. They have no money, they don't repaint or repair, and little by little the whole envelope comes unstuck, the wallpaper comes unstuck, the paint blisters... It reaches

such a state you see entire ceilings crumbling because the plaster or the cob is waterlogged and then, at some point the whole thing falls, it just crumbles. These are really financial reasons. You have to know about it, and take account of it. And then there is lifestyle. How did they get to that point? Sometimes, over several years, someone who had a husband who died and then lets herself go, or it's the other way round, or there was a breakup, a divorce, someone lost a job, someone lost a child and then let everything go and at that time it is the behavior that changes. There are no financial reasons for it, but they don't keep track of their budget, they let everything go. Then you have certain families. Here it's more difficult because it goes back to the grandparents, the parents, the children are brought up like that and then you don't really see how you can change things.

[...]

So the woman was told [*the woman with the cats*] "it's okay to move, but you have to put the apartment you have now back in shape before leaving." It's difficult to understand because when they want to leave it's because the place is unlivable and they are told "you have to put it back in shape." (...) And this is part of the tenant's duties; when they move into an apartment, it's in a state to be lived in, so when they leave it, it should be in a state to be lived in or else you easily get to a 15,000 francs bill. Consequently the move is refused... So for this person, we asked her, we made her admit - it's the social worker who was with her who could transmit the message because if it was someone from the HLM, it would have been the "cop" who had found a "pretext" to refuse her what she wanted; coming from the social worker who is there to help her, it's something else, she comes to help her, so it was more an advisor in social and family economics, you could say precisely that, who made her understand that she had to put her apartment in order and since she couldn't do it alone, we got some young people from the neighborhood to come, who were already employed for

painting work. They painted and hung wallpaper for her.

There was a whole network, seven people, neighbors, the superintendent, local activists – so neighbors but attentive about the area – the social workers, HLM staff, finally the allocation sector of the HLM, everybody was in on it to get this person to change her way of living there. And then we asked her to give up some of her animals. She did it. So I remember discussions that weren't easy because I didn't know the age of the dogs, the cats, only the social and family advisor could say "well, we can ask her to give up this one but not that one," finally it takes a long time, you spend time over important details and it's people's lives. You even have to know the age of the dog. That's right. And at the end of the day, she was separated from... She kept one dog. And then we moved her. Afterwards I quit. I don't know how it turned out but if you continue to be with people, but up close, you can manage this reintegration, because otherwise this woman would have been expelled... (...) When I came to the operational phase, when I was parachuted into the neighborhood, a coordination effort had been going on for several years, so I had representatives, I had activists, militant residents of the neighborhood.

— *Family associations?*

Pascale R. Really those I knew to be the most active were from the CSCV [unionist confederation on living conditions], but that didn't mean a lot of people.

— *And these people, they played somewhat the role of scouts, lookouts who...*

Pascale R. That's it. They went ahead of events, they went to question the director. When I was hired, I had to start on the first of a certain month; the director had asked me to be there a little ahead of time because he was receiving residents who came to question him, saying "but you are having someone in, you are going to hire that person (before I was hired)... what are you going to ask?" So that evening I was in the director's office and in front of me I had two, three people who were simply CSCV

residents and the director of the neighborhood social center. For several years they had been in the habit of seeing each other, discussing, working together. So there was already some coordination.

— *And what were their professions?*

Pascale R. There were retirees, because they had the time. Later on, I knew some who worked; let's say that the group was sufficiently strong to integrate people who found an event interesting enough to come after work.

— *You are thinking of what for example?*

Pascale R. The worker I'm thinking of was someone who works in the huge supermarkets, and he had realized they were throwing out everything that had holes or had lost its labels and was impossible to sell so it was put in the garbage. So he got his management to let this merchandise be distributed to people who had no resources.

— *And did he go through you at that time?*

Pascale R. He had done it before I started and when he saw that over the area there was a network of solidarity in place, he joined it. And this worked so well that everything moved to the neighborhood level. We had almost all the representatives, since in the background I was in indirect contact with the nuns; in very direct contact afterwards with a priest from the Young Christian Workers who worked on the spot with the young people, with the resident pensioners, the social center with its director and social workers, with the welfare workers and all the agencies... I have Family Welfare, Social Security, I have National Education, I have the mayor's office, maybe there are more I'm not aware of yet, but...

— *And this took the form of regular meetings or else for a particular occasion, for a particular activity?*

Pascale R. The point of departure was my meeting with the residents from the social center. They asked me to organize myself a certain way, and I was the one who accepted; they asked me to hold office

hours in the neighborhood, on market day, they found a site where I would meet the most people. And very quickly we divided the sites into three, each with its rules, even a division of the funds, so really everything was fine, well organized, we knew what we were going to do and so little by little we knew that every Monday morning we were going to meet (...).

The HLM agency couldn't take me anymore

— *It was around what date, all that?*

Pascale R. It began around '83 and it ended in '88.

— *And finished why?*

Pascale R. For me because I stopped at T., it was the end of the operation also.

— *That's it, and the structure continued?*

Pascale R. Ah, not at all.

— *It disappeared?*

Pascale R. Completely. In fact, I stopped this work with a heavy heart, because the HLM agency couldn't take me anymore.

— *That's astonishing...*

Pascale R. They couldn't stand this counterpower being set up anymore.

— *Meaning that it was too involved in the allocation of apartments. The conflicts with the HLM agency were over what?*

Pascale R. They were never stated.

— *So it was a little about everything, then...*

Pascale R. Yes, it was over everything: so my personality became the issue, I was becoming too independent, too... that's all that can be said about someone who...

— *Subversive?*

Pascale R. Yes, subversive. Bad temper. Not bending to authority. There was an evolution in the HLM management; because at first I had a director who said "I trust her, I want her to organize," and I did it. There was a change of municipal administration, a change in the HLM management. (...) I had to leave for reasons of personal survival. I was being kicked out. And kicked out by the HLM office. I asked myself; I said to myself, is it the elected officials or is it the HLM? As a technical

person do I take up too much room on political territory and embarrass the elected officials or is it the HLM office that isn't working? And finally I really think it's the HLM office, that alone; management wanted to go back to the old methods and sweep away the work I had done.

— *In particular the allocation of apartments...*

Pascale R. Quite, yes. That's it, all the power. (...) I think I was someone who knew too much.

— *So afterwards, it all wasted away, that is, people who worked with you, social workers, retirees, everybody...*

Pascale R. No, I think those people are still there, they are still active, but there are fewer of them because with the change in plan the team is reduced to the residents' representatives. We had three institutions: the HLM office, the social center, and the residents. The residents had done something that was pretty new, they had hired a secretary, while usually they used a non-salaried volunteer; here it was the opposite, they had taken the step, "we want very accurate work, very technical. We will behave like an employer" (...).

The residents' representatives ended up allocating the housing

— *In other words, what you had done was something fairly subversive. Associations, all that, everybody likes it a lot, to show democracy at work — "we have a neighborhood association," "we have a local association," etc. — but these are bodies without power which they consult when they want to, listen to when they want to. It's a sort of inconsequential site for letting off steam, but you had done something very different, you had articulated a very real power with that.*

Pascale R. That's it.

— *In other words, you had made a kind of democracy from the ground up quite contrary...*

Pascale R. To the rules.

— *So that is unbearable because you work at having people intervene with real*

decision-making power over the allocation of apartments...

Pascale R. Yes, we got to that point...

— ... over the principal powers exerted at that level; obviously, it couldn't go on because the elected officials, the management, wouldn't like that. They'd lose all the power.

Pascale R. Right. Totally. Little by little the residents' representatives who really wanted to take an interest in the neighborhood — they were the only people whom I, too, trusted little by little; there was reciprocal trust established between one and the other — they were the ones who ended up allocating the housing. One of the activists became an employee of the HLM office. She visited the model apartments. And for me it was a very good thing because she did it for the neighborhood. People didn't come just to see the apartment, they asked for other things we didn't know about. And then she'd answer, she could talk about the schools, "you have this, you have that," or "I know someone, for such a problem I know such a person."

— And these mobilized people around you, there were how many, who were they?

Pascale R. Oh, very few.

— 50 people, 30...

Pascale R. Not even that. It fluctuated.

— Who was it, retirees, teachers, workers?

Pascale R. People who lived in the apartments; especially retirees because they knew things well and they had the time. I had very few salaried people. Because, on the contrary, when I saw new tenants arriving, it was young households, they were completely taken up by their work, children, errands, etc., so I never saw them. I saw women who were housewives, or else who had small jobs as cleaning ladies. I saw unemployed men, around 30 years old. So it was people who had the time to come and who found the means to find people to speak to and get known. That's what's important. It's to participate and have...

— A reason for being...

Pascale R. Right, a reason for being. A way of living (...).

— And among the 30, there was what, social workers? Welfare workers, activity organizers...?

Pascale R. Educators and organizers, the secretary employed by the neighborhood committee, the social and family advisor from the social center, from CAF [family subsidy agency], from Social Security, the town, sometimes National Education. Social workers with more interest in these problems than the average bureaucrat and pretty much outside bureaucratic logic.

— In other words, the ones sent to the frontier posts?...

Pascale R. And when there is a problem, it is their fault.

— Removable frontier guards?...

Pascale R. Yes, and they had no mandate.

— And if by chance they succeed at a structure like the one you made, then it is terribly annoying because it makes things change...

I have no one I can go and talk to

Pascale R. What people were looking for, I could talk about it knowing what's what because there was no filter, I was the one who went to see them at home. That was really essential! It's no longer the role I have now... I'm at the mayor's office, so I end up going through intermediaries to meet the residents, I have no authority over the residents, it's the mayor who could do it, and I must say that, personally, I could have done what other people do, that is to go door-to-door, go meet people directly. But I think that it's because I had already had a first experience that I haven't wanted to do it [at E]. I said to myself, "if I go to meet people, I'm going to bring them hope, someone is at least coming to ask them... they'll expect this person to change their life a little, while as head of the project I myself am not able to deliver, it could be that a primary school teacher, it could be the director of the social center if he changes its... but for myself, I can only modify the attitude of the municipality and then of all those who

intervene in a neighborhood, that is, all the "great" administrations with their local representatives on the ground, but my role is to modify the relations among people, get financing and then I'm gone, I'm no longer here. So if these people do not play this role, if they don't do it right away or if they don't do it themselves, it's for me to push them to do it. If it doesn't come from them, I will never be more than additional staff who is going to mess up the game a little. (...)

— *When someone within a structure tries to escape that structure, like you – or it could be a young engineer from the DDE – over a certain time he does his little bit in the circuit and then after, either he leaves or else he's thrown out, or else he gets tired out...*

Pascale R. He's exhausted, yes.

— *And he lets it go, right?*

Pascale R. Yes, he's exhausted.

— *People are being worn down?*

Pascale R. Oh yes, worn down. Totally. Worn down.

— *And there is no structure at all to coordinate administrative agents: because, just as there are neighborhood associations, there could be associations of administrators (in the wider sense) who could...*

Pascale R. The thing that's seemed to me the most serious now, at F. for example, is that I am someone who can analyze the neighborhood needs; I can pass them on to the mayor and tell them "we're going to act on such-and-such"; and the most important actor in such a neighborhood is the HLM promoter. And the HLM promoter is not up to it, doesn't come, doesn't meet, management isn't present, nothing happens. I can have written, understood, transmitted everything – if they've decided to do nothing, to turn a deaf ear, I have no one I can go and talk to.

People don't show up

So what can you do? You can act on housing, you can act on leisure activities. Something can be envisaged in every domain to give people their confidence back. So you should act on everything, that is every-

thing... (...) What matters is to give each person back the confidence that people can have in themselves, that they can lose in any social milieu, by some accident, by some event happening in your life. But that is the general case; so it's on that you have to act by finding a personal solution for each. Because I think that what is happening in people's heads is... they've come to the end... they're at the end... of nothing. You have to find a way out. And in people's heads, I don't think there is... we've reached a fatalism.

[...]

People don't show up. In any way at all. And I know, at the end of a year, that I've made all sorts of efforts and that it's not for lack of communication. You send round letters saying... "Your mayor..." Maybe the mayor is not sufficiently on the scene, because when there is no HLM representative, people call on the mayor. When the mayor is not present, they have a person who keeps office hours, they can go to the city hall. They don't come. They don't come to the city hall to see the mayor. There are other means: you go ask the mayor to come to you. You establish a presence on the ground by setting up a common locale. We started off in the best possible conditions: the HLMs and the mayor's office use the same premises, the same site, in the center of the neighborhood, at the same hours, so that people want to come, they don't have to make several trips. I had a letter that was distributed in each mailbox: there were 1,000 individual letters deposited by city workers in mailboxes. People were personally invited with a letter signed by the mayor saying to them "such a day, such a time, I will come to such a place near where you live and I hope to meet you." We must have had under 10 people...

[...]

I rather have the impression that they tell themselves it's no use. You absolutely have to dig because I think that the biggest danger is when people say nothing... Silence at a given moment can be followed by an explosion.

[Thus, the gap widens between residents and social workers, not to mention the bureaucracies, who throw the responsibilities back at each other, or ignore them, leaving it up to individuals, that is, to everybody and nobody, to take on the worry and care of the common buildings and grounds, a sort of no man's land destined to abandonment and deterioration.]

Pascale R. The first dividing line is drawn between the company, which manages the apartments, and the mayor's office, which manages the exterior spaces. So you have the street, and the inside. One conflict that often comes up is over lighting. People have to know if the broken bulb that is never repaired should be replaced by the city or by the HLM office.

— *That means they must know whom to take a complaint to, and who should do it: because each could say...*

Pascale R. Who should do it!... The answer is: not me, it's the other guy. Because quite often in the offices, the person who answers the telephone doesn't know either. Since it concerns property, you have to know if you are on a public or a private street, well, except for someone who has been there for a long time, the employee who's starting out doesn't know either.

— *We already have a problem: who is going to make the declaration? Because, after all, people can...*

Pascale R. Yes, "we don't care, someone else will come along"...

— *...and then when you try to say it, you have to know whom to say it to.*

Pascale R. Yes and then it depends on the good will of those who are responsible for it.

— *And there, to create managing agencies for these common problems, it must be extremely difficult because...*

Pascale R. Yes, it's not at all part of people's habits.

— *...and more and more difficult as time passes, things get worse, conflicts appear. There is not one single means of arbitration.*

Pascale R. No, no. You have these huge HLM projects [*she is thinking of T.*] in which you've got retirees who have spent a life... you know, a normal life. They have acquired this apartment, they've furnished it, they've spent their whole life working. With the 1977 reforms in financing, some of them could have acquired a little property but some were too old and they said "no, it's not for us, our apartment is fine, let's keep it." So the idea of buying their own little house, I don't think it even entered their minds, and they were very satisfied with their apartment, with their neighborhood, with their environment, with their life and all. And then the economic crisis: things change and you get another type of population which is there because it has no choice. So we are in another period, the people who come to these apartments, it's not because they've found a job, it's because they can't find another apartment. The ones who come to make demands, who come to demonstrate, are the retirees, people used to defending themselves, saying what they have to say, talking because they have rights and so they continue to talk. When there's something, even when it's little details, they come to put it on the table. And if nobody listens to them in the office in their building, they're going to telephone, they're going to go out, they're going to go to HLM headquarters, they're going to go to the mayor's office, they're going to make their presence known, and you'll know it.

It didn't fit into any scheme

[*And "ground work" has meaning only when it is backed up with a permanent effort to convince, one on one, the bureaucracies shut up within their routines and ill prepared to sustain the "extrabureaucratic" activities of social workers.*]

Pascale R. I had a dossier that was accepted and pissed off those who thought they could say no. And there I saw the different stages of the decision... It's a little like a hunt: who has the money? What's left in their pocket? Are they going to like me?

And then we won't tell anyone else that they've got money, and it's an agreement that goes along like that, like rug sellers.

— *It was a case about what?*

Pascale R. It's a case where I got money to renovate existing shops. And it didn't fit into any scheme. You couldn't have money for shops unless you were creating businesses: everybody imagined that on all the sites we had a huge building complex where there were no shops and that people were bored without shops, you had to make them come. It happened that the neighborhood I had was a very old one where the shops had been there 50 years, 40 years say, and what I wanted was simply to maintain the existing businesses, and that, that was not provided for anywhere. So there was no response, it didn't fall under anyone's competency. Several times I went as far as the Ministry of Commerce and Small Business, because I had no local representative, it was a minor ministry. There was a civil servant who came, who enumerated the criteria and concluded: renovation, out of the question. While the renovation of housing was...

— *Easy.*

Pascale R. Everybody had it. I renovated apartments with enormous masses of financing and then I was left, at the foot of the building, with spaces where nothing happened. And I even went as far as to refuse to allow an architect to give them a coat of paint. He said "I have a finished block, I have renovated it, resurfaced, repainted, it's as good as new and there are still four old spaces looking ugly like warts." He says to me, "you're not going to leave me that?" I said "yes, I did it on purpose because I want to obtain financing for the shops; they have to see that I do not get the money and I'm not going to do it with the apartment money." So then the architects left really disappointed because their work wasn't finished and then I still had these warts. And I'd get people to come by and tell them "you see, no question of painting, I have no money for that." "Well, we're going to study your case, it's true it's interesting, your case is really very interesting" and

then they'd come back, and I'd see the person who had spent hours in the office, who had travelled back and forth, who had worked in the train, who was exhausted, who had given his all just to tell me "no, impossible, it's not in the plan."

[*After a whole series of efforts, Pascale R. manages to convince two heads of the ministry, and, with residual funds, they give her the money to renovate the shops.*]

They found the fastest solution

[*Politicians' concern for a rapid application of a bureaucratic decision leads to entrusting the RMI [subsistence income for reentry into work] to the family subsidy agencies (CAFs), which are the only ones with a national network, and thus in practice to dissociate its payment from the search for reentry jobs and control over the reentry contract.*]

Pascale R. For me, the RMI is a trap, the idea at the start was very, very good but in the application, they screwed up... really screwed up. (...) Not everything was ready in the way they were going to put together this famous reentry contract, but they thought of that later. So to begin with, who was going to make the payments? There were important debates over several months and then they turned to the family subsidy agencies because they had a track record, they had the tools to do it, they distributed all the subsidies, so finally they found the fastest solution... Yet some people asked... social centers in particular, the social workers who dealt directly with families, demanded explicitly, of that I'm certain, that they get the money themselves to place people on reentry contracts themselves, so that they have this basis for exchange: "I'm the one who gives you the money, the allocation, the reentry contract, so the things we expect from the person who gets the allocation, I'm the one who will see if they've been fulfilled or not."

I think that for reasons of fast enforcement, it didn't happen that way; because I think that the situations were too diverse throughout France; all the CAFs were more

or less on the same model but the social centers were much too diverse, and then there were probably sectors that weren't covered. It must have been too big a job to be certain about everyone in the whole of France who could get the RMI. So the CAF paid out the allocation and then they looked for who was going to deal with the work contract and at the end of more than a year they were still stuck. Once again, it will depend on the people who are likely to do it, on the will of each one... it's going to be once again under the impetus of certain personalities: certain volunteer people will see to it that it is really applied and it will be according to how it is seen by one person or another.

[...]

I think that those who are dealing with these people who are looking to society for something reach the answer very fast: most of them are wanting a job! And that's exactly what we aren't there to get them - a job! So it's the gap that we see right away. This famous RMI contract revealed situations about people's income that nobody knew. Which means that RMI recipients are imagined at first like mostly some... well, bums. We're getting to that point... going to think that these are people who have been workers, who have had help from the ASSEDIC [an employment association], who have reached the end of entitlements and who now find themselves without resources. In fact, that group is represented but also many others who have not registered because they have not been officially unemployed, young people who have never had work, who stretched out their studies a little artificially, who have already started a family, who manage with odd jobs and who are always in a precarious situation, who always manage to keep their heads above water, but really in situations where with the family backing them, it's possible... And today when you say to them "come on, you can benefit from the RMI," you have a young couple with one child and not a penny coming in. And how do they manage? Well, the family may

help bridge the gap or else they have temporary jobs... or else they have scholarships. I was saying "they are stretching out their studies a little..." Yes, but artificially, in fact, they say right out that it's not that they want. They're looking a little at traineeships... so in these cases, the RMI, what will it consist of? The only thing offered is traineeships, which are... Now, I don't know the details well, what I do know is that there is a feeling of being fed up when traineeships come up because they know perfectly well it's a stop-gap measure, that in fact each one of them would like a job and that finally everyone is going to take a traineeship... so they're going to look at the traineeship they're headed for, the person looking for a traineeship, on the basis of the paycheck. It's first of all a paycheck they're looking for and the content takes second place. So when you offer traineeships under the RMI or elsewhere, since you have nothing else... outside of work, well... already you're not really responding to the need for reentry that a job represents. This is what the social workers tell me who deal with people and then...

— *And the content of the reentry contract...*

Pascale R. There is no specific content. (...) What happens now is that the CAFs have distributed all the allocations according to income criteria. Now they're waiting for the famous reentry contracts to happen, and the welfare workers directly linked to these people are saying "I don't want to do a bogus contract." And then there are pressures because there are comparisons made in terms of "scores"... the local reentry commission of F. is not performing well because it does not have enough reentry contracts in relation to the number of people on RMI, the commission at E. has many more. They talk in terms of quantity and nobody has the time to go see the details, nobody really has the time to dig into the question, so they ask them to sign reentry contracts, and that's where the welfare worker told me I was completely wrong because I told her "but usually a

time comes when if the person doesn't observe their contract, you're the one who really knows whether they do or not, you can say at a given point, I will not agree to a renewal of the contract." She tells me "yes, but it happens indirectly, it's not me who...I give my opinion." But I say "your opinion is important because it's going...it's an opinion, it's going to be read, they're going to... If all they know is your advice, it will be quite important..." "But there isn't just me, there is the local commission afterwards presided over by the prefect and in reality it's the prefect who signs..."

[*And the institutionalization of social work does not ease the difficulties inherent in bureaucracy, as is shown by the specific description of the circumstances in which the project proposed by Pascale R. was developed, examined and evaluated.*]

Pascale R. What I wanted to describe to you was the attitude of the civil servants who are sent...

— *On orders and who arrive at the meeting...*

Pascale R. ... On orders, indeed! So it was really weird: they institutionalize on government orders and everybody must be present at all meetings and take part; this dates from the start of '89.

— *They institutionalize the coordination between all the activities of all these people you had put into your project?*

Pascale R. That's right: the subprefect organizes the meeting during which he's going to have the representatives of all the agencies that hold money and the representatives of the neighborhood, neighborhood by neighborhood. We had to have produced a document that was the result of the convened meetings in record time: I began at the end of '89, because the whole of '89 — that's why I'm telling you about regions, elected officials and technicians — was spent in discussions with elected officials who couldn't decide on the division of the sites.

— *Meaning...*

Pascale R. The cities that were going to benefit from the financing.

— *There were obviously stakes; they were all interested in having the money...*

Pascale R. Yes, what happened is that at the end of a year, they really had to make a decision...

— *A year of fighting?*

Pascale R. To finally [operate] a sprinkling [of money]...

— *With which you were associated, or...?*

Pascale R. Not at all.

— *Not at all, it took place among the elected officials? And the administration?*

Pascale R. Not that either, I don't think so. I think it happened only among officials.

— *At the level of the regional council? And they didn't consult people like you?*

Pascale R. Of course not!

— *And there weren't people to explain the needs of...*

Pascale R. There were technicians, the famous regional technicians who made evaluations with figures, statistics, they worked at coming up with criteria...

— *And these people, they are permanent civil servants for the region or else are they brought in on a case-by-case basis?*

Pascale R. They are on contract!

— *On contract, but renewable?*

Pascale R. Yes, that's it.

— *And they were technical types, with statistics and such...*

Pascale R. Right, with criteria...

— *... the ratio of immigrants, the ratio of this, the rate of that and what's more the others were arguing over the smallest thing...? Was that it?*

Pascale R. [laughs] Yes. It's really two different worlds.

— *At the regional level, there are elected officials who have political views, some technicians who are used to furnish justifications and at the basis of all these...*

Pascale R. And then at a given moment they make a decision.

— *And of course they have divided it up in the most dispersed manner possible, into little pieces...*

Pascale R. Exactly.

— *And it becomes absurd.*

Pascale R. Yes, that's right.

— *There was no general action of any importance?*

Pascale R. Nothing at all.

— *It's not even certain that the earmarked funds will be used for that?*

Pascale R. Oh no...not even that. The purposes were not given.

— *And so after these meetings what happened?*

Pascale R. So a year went by, at the last minute, end of '89, they hire project heads, in '90 they hire project heads everywhere since finally they figure out where they are [*the "sites"*]; and the project head is one of the conditions, that is, the city is supposed to hire someone with a certain qualification.

[*Here came a description of the ambiguous position of the project head.*]

— *And so during that meeting?*

Pascale R. I wanted to say that the elected officials, at the regional level, spent a year, wasted a year frittering away their time and that, at the last minute, the project heads were hired, had to have meetings with everybody, with people they didn't know at all. And then express...

— *It's the fantasy of associations, the false consultation, the false democracy...*

Pascale R. Right. When you know in what conditions it's done, it's completely crazy! So you have to justify, in a document, that you consulted everyone, that you met everyone, that everyone explained themselves and that there was success in building a project — at the end of six months, it's really a fantasy — a global project. So fine, we write something, yeah... bits and pieces that seem to hold together. And we present it. But I know perfectly well how it functions...

— *About this famous meeting?*

Pascale R. Yes, about this famous meeting. Which is going to give us a response about our options. Are we in agreement or not on such-and-such a subject; you ought to have developed, your neighborhood wants this instead, and you asked for that... (...) So I know, as I was saying,

how it functions, the bad functioning of the administration. Every one had to have a copy to give an opinion in the course of the meeting. So in the month of June, at the deadline of June 10th, you had to have deposited 16 copies of your dossier at the prefecture.

— *For a meeting that would take place...when?*

Pascale R. Nobody knew. Well... July or August. Because it has to be said that everyone in this panic had worked like mad, everybody had worked, the civil servants in dreadful conditions, they had done overtime, all the people I had finally landed up with, in fact they were like me, everybody was under pressure.

— *And these people were at the meetings?*

Pascale R. Yes. Yes.

— *And they had really read the dossier?*

Pascale R. No.

— *That's not surprising?*

Pascale R. No, because the person who was in the prefecture received from one day to the next 20 copies from 60 different senders, some of them didn't know how to do it, she had to verify everything. So I sent my little packet, one day, and then ten days later I drop by again, I go into the office.

— *And they hadn't been sent?*

Pascale R. And they still weren't sent, of course. I said to her "did it arrive? You have the number of copies you need? Everything's fine, I'm not behind," "no, no, everything's fine." I say "because they told me the meeting could happen in two weeks." "Really? But no one told me"...

— *She hadn't sent out the text yet...*

Pascale R. "Well then, I'm going to send them right away." So I knew that during the meeting, people had not had time to read the document.

— *So at this meeting, there were all these authorities concerning your site, right?*

Pascale R. That's right.

— *And who said what? Words...*

Pascale R. Yes. Since I still knew the different levels, branches, etc., to make it more readable I had divided up my presentation

in the same way and everybody congratulated me on the presentation...

— *Each person could read only what they were concerned with.*

Pascale R. Exactly. And since everyone had to find their bit in two different chapters, I knew who had read the first chapter and who had read the second. By their response. That's where I see how someone can react in an assembly and how their behavior can change... Someone is sent on a mission to give an opinion on something they don't know anything about. So they cling to a solid support, they consult fast, "cultural action, that page. Fine. She said that. Fine. I have to appear like someone important, I'll say to her: "this is not enough." Another character is going to say "no, that, really, you haven't under-

stood anything." Each in their sector. And especially what you hear is "that does not correspond at all with our directives, we can only finance things in this direction. What you are giving us does not fit into our sector." Really, I was physically shocked.

— *This was last July?*

Pascale R. Last July. What really shocked me was above all the working atmosphere this had provoked: to see people who had been sent on a job, who weren't up to what was asked of them – there was no time to have a dialogue – and who were forced to respond and came up with only one idea, to jump on the poor person, who was all by herself...

— *Which was you?*

Pascale R. Which was me. (...)

February 1991

Pierre Bourdieu

Institutional Bad Faith

Even though he occupies a very distant position in bureaucratic space from that of Pascale R., project head in the north of France, Denis J., sentencing judge, lives through and speaks of experiences very similar to hers, no doubt because he confronts the same structural contradiction. In charge of “applying” the sentences imposed by the court, that is to say, in most cases reducing them or converting them, granting “semifreedom, surveillance outside of prison, or parole,” he stands at the intersection of two contradictory systems of demands and representations. Always suspected of undoing what the judge’s verdict has done, hence of weakening the authority of the law, he is moreover looked down on by the magistrates, for whom he represents “social concerns”: “Social concerns aren’t interesting: they’re a bloody nuisance and (...) they’re not top level (...), it’s not the noble judiciary (...). The judiciary is the writing of juridical acts (...), it’s legal problems (...). But as for following peoples’ lives to find out how they’re turning out and trying to help them, that’s...” And the difficulty of his position is exacerbated by his need not only to get certain indulgent measures accepted by the public prosecutor’s office and the court, even though they are provided for under the law, and to reassure the directors of penitentiary institutions, who are always ready to use past “misdeeds” to justify their caution: he must also put himself in the position of petitioner making “approaches” to all sorts of bodies, associations, foundations, and representatives of different local collectivities.

Horizontal relationships are no easier than vertical ones: “For example, since I’ve been here, there has never been a general assembly of all the magistrates from the same court. (...) Internal working groups just don’t exist. I’d have – I do have – several projects on (...) alternatives to imprisonment: I don’t know how to speak about them to the others, because every time I speak to the President [of the Court] about them, he says, ‘listen, a working group, an assembly, a meeting... [*I don’t want any*],’ you see, I’m not getting through.”

To explain “the clashes, disappointments and misunderstandings” that he comes up against all the time, he very lucidly describes the contradictions inherent in his position: “Any decision made by the sentencing judge questions the prosecuting magistrate who made the decision to incarcerate... It questions the public prosecutor, because the public prosecutor does not really agree, but doesn’t dare say so, because, well... It questions the director of the prison, because it bugs the hell out of him to manage people who are on the outside, since they

remain under his authority. It questions everybody! Absolutely everybody! So *the more active you are, the more you question the [system] . . .*” More specifically he mentions the “anguish” that “surveillance outside prison” arouses among many civil servants (according to a logic well-known in psychiatric hospitals): “Where are they? What are they doing?” He shows how the possibilities offered by the law are limited by the actual conditions of their implementation, starting with the dispositions of the agents in charge of applying them, such as an attachment to hierarchy and that sort of caste spirit that forbids a direct confrontation with realities or, still more, with other people, especially when they are statutory inferiors: “Getting competent people together (. . .) you’d have to sweat blood to do it”; “the problem is that we have an administration, especially penitentiary, that always functions hierarchically; an equal partnership doesn’t function like that”; “when you have a prison director who is incapable of speaking on the telephone – I’ve experienced this – to an institution as to an equal partner and who gives orders instead, that’s how far it goes!”

In this way he is led to two paradoxical observations (also made by the project head): first, these are people (whose personal characters are much less detached from their function than you might think: “as soon as there’s a change in personnel, there’s a change in policy”) whose innovations or even transgressions pull the bureaucracy out of its inertia, even paralysis; second, devotion to the institution, efforts to enact its positive potentialities and fulfill its mission, are far from being rewarded by the institution. “You ask me if innovation pays for the innovator. . . Not at all! Oh no, quite the contrary! I’m going to take my predecessor as an example. After his experience in Y., he wanted to become a professor, to talk about the function of sentencing judge. He wasn’t appointed. Too awkward, too explosive, not enough. . . They made him counselor at the appeals court of Z., and after that in W., and then, I don’t know anymore. But where he was the most important institutionally speaking, they didn’t want him.”

And he also tells how, after an experiment in Z. that was in some sense too successful, when, strengthened by the capital of prestige and authority left him by his predecessor, and also having all his enthusiasm and ability to exploit the possibilities offered by the law, he managed to achieve the mission assigned by the institution: all of a sudden he was transferred to X., where he is working now – that is, he was demoted. Then he describes, without exaltation or bitterness, the stages of a relatively atypical career: first, lecturer in public law in the law faculty, and member of the Syndicat Général de L’Éducation Nationale, the minority left-wing union; he took his doctorate, then became a lawyer, and then a magistrate. Finally in a choice that was ethical as well as political, he moved into the most socially relevant sector of the judicial body, where he thinks he is able to express the selfless dispositions (these aren’t his words) that he attributes to the influence of his mother, a militant Catholic (he himself went to a Jesuit secondary school). And this is where he discovers and experiences, in the endless conflicts with the administrator and in painful personal tensions, the contradictions of an institution profoundly divided against itself: the right hand – in this case, public

prosecution – does not want to know what gets done by the left hand, the agents and bodies entrusted with “social concerns.” If, along with Sartre, we define bad faith as one’s own lies to oneself, we could speak here of institutional bad faith for the constant propensity of governmental institutions in a sort of collective double game and double consciousness, to reject or to challenge the measures or acts that really conform with the official vocation of the government.

Double Binds

The son of a communist intellectual, Francis T. early on decided to “side with the underdog.” Since his first professional experience in a slum on the outskirts of Paris, he has never stopped exercising his *métier* as street educator, which takes a heavy toll, night and day, especially since he has been working with drug addicts.

A Maoist militant in the 1960s, he was arrested during the demonstrations at the trial of a leftist leader and he went to prison. He considers that he was trained “on the street,” even if “naturally, [he’s] read books,” and trained as an educator while he was working.

Hired by the mayor’s office of a suburban town outside Paris to fight drug addiction, he has set up a “drug information service and support center,” but isn’t content to wait for the young addicts to somehow demonstrate their readiness to give up drugs by coming of their own free will to all the interviews with doctors, educators and psychologists. He gains their trust by being with them in difficult moments, when “they shoot up” and when they express their ultimate hopes, astonishingly modest and “bourgeois,” offering the same understanding to their hopes as he does to their wildest excesses . . . When they are in withdrawal, he gets them medicinal substitutes from pharmacists; he helps them avoid arrest, or even prison, by coming to find them at the police station, by fabricating false payslips for them, and by guaranteeing them constant support with judges and lawyers whom he “knows well.” Close to the addicts by his availability at all times, he puts himself resolutely on their side, transgressing the rules of the institution and not hesitating to “forge” and “cheat.” He is opposed to “academic discourse” which, according to him, “blocks” the addict; he is also opposed to the bureaucratic view of treatment, which is so totally oriented to predicting – through repeated interviews spaced out over time – if the addict is really determined to go through detoxification that it “puts up barriers to the will to quit.” Knowing from experience that addicts do not wait and that “when they ask to quit, you have to respond right away,” he has set up a simple procedure: with the support of the chief resident of a major Parisian hospital where his wife is a nurse, he can use a room at any time for an addict ready for detoxification. Once the treatment is over, the addict can leave to stay with a “host family” and begin to look for work.

As a sort of avant-garde for an institution to which he offers irreplaceable services but which is always ready to disown him, he appears as a spokesman for the drug addicts, as a “guy who was a bit messed up because he spent his life and

his nights in the streets, in bars." He feels as if he's both the good and the bad conscience of the institution. The crisis that breaks when he publicly denounces a delegate for youth who was in favor of a local alliance with Le Pen [leader of the National Front], which led to his being sacked, just reveals the double bind position he was in and the ambiguity of the task assigned to him: "What they can't stand at the mayor's office is that in effect I'd set up countervailing powers." In one sense, as a "street educator," he carries power to the street, but he constantly reminds people in power of the power in the streets, which he helps channel as an advanced antenna of "street-level bureaucracy," but which he is also suspected of being able to mobilize.

The unease associated with this feeling of being in a double bind is reinforced over the years as he discovers the limitations placed on him in his private life by a "tough métier" that the younger educators prefer to avoid by staying "holed up in their youth clubs where there are pinball machines, pinball soccer, etc.," "sites of consumption, in the end, where you drink, but you pay, where you play, but you pay." "You go to the CREAI, the employment bureau for educators, and the job vacancies for street educators . . . they stay unfilled . . . it takes a nut like me to take it!" At 44, he looks 50. Even if he gives an impression of physical strength, an impression reinforced by his powerful smoker's voice, he appears used up, exhausted. He is trying to change to a quieter sector, "home visits to families." His own family, his three children especially, of whom the youngest is four, require a greater share of his time. If he claims the right to "breathe easier" for a while, an "old reflex" always leads him at night to go listen to the drug addicts in the "places where they get together" (the night before the interview, he went to bed at 2 a.m.). He still thinks that an educator owes it to himself to "be with them": "It's only when the addicts identify me as outside the institution I represent, when feelings are created, when a relationship is created outside the institution, that my work can become effective." But this is above all the only way that he feels "able to look myself in the face and not grovel all my life."

with a street educator

— *interview by Pierre Bourdieu and Gabrielle Balazs*

"People on the street are really scary"

Francis T. (...) When he [the mayor] hired me, I was working at a leisure center where young people came to play ping-pong, etc. Then there were the squatters in Montparnasse that the government had tolerated for a long time and where the young people

went to get supplies of hash. And since Olievenstein [a pro-drug professor] had made statements the kids had heard, to the effect that hashish wasn't as bad as all that, it was the same as a glass of alcohol, well, they jumped on the bandwagon. Of

course, then they moved on to needles. So there was a whole network of drug distribution in this suburb...and in fact, if you went through the institution, if you wanted to send them to a doctor or into the associations that were dealing with that, they had to have all kinds of interviews before they could be taken care of. And when an addict wants to quit, it's right away. Even when they are under the hold of the drug, it's always [stressed] right away...When they ask to quit, you have to respond right away, see, you mustn't wait 10 years to figure out if...mentally, he's ready, etc. It's the kid's life that's at stake. So by chance I knew a doctor in a big hospital who opened a room on his ward for me. What's more, I was lucky to have my wife as a nurse in the same ward, and since they all came more or less to eat at our house, they knew her, so that was also a reassuring phenomenon. And so it is by involving neighborhood doctors, and by involving the city social services - who regarded me as being not an addict but as being the addicts' representative and who identified me with...and there's where the obstacles went up. The institution resented me not as a member of the institution but as a guy who was a bit messed up because he spent his life...his...and his nights in the streets, in bars...you see. Whereas the mayor understood perfectly well how I operated. But the problem was that the municipal institution overall did not see me as one of its own...I was the addict capable of speaking. In fact, I was the addict capable of talking, with a certain power...a pip-squeak that they didn't dare to run up against too hard because there was the mayor behind me who supported, and well...in the end the power on high who knows what's what.

They put up barriers to the will to quit

— *You said that with the addicts, you have to move fast... What was the institution offering them? Did they have to wait a long time?*

Francis T. It's the institutions relating to drug information and support, etc. There is a whole process for finding out if he [he slows down to stress the word] really wants, if he has really decided... Which means that in fact they put up barriers to the will to quit. There are times when it's not true that they want to quit, they need to escape to the hospital for a week (it might even be because they've done something bad or something like that...). That's not the problem. Since they want to. If there is room, they go. And start up again afterwards. Some of them have been in detox 10 times! And then the eleventh time it works, and then later there's a search for a job and well, that's it, it's... But to block them in an academic discourse which they don't much understand anyway, where they often go because the law requires followup, etc. It's the principle of directive methods... [hesitation] When you want absolutely to force someone and someone resists... well, that person can bend in order to... because they have no other solution. But in fact deep down... it doesn't change anything whatsoever, whereas if they want to for themselves, for whatever reason, from that moment on... Well, there is the fact too that I was day and night on the town, in town [sigh]. Not infrequently the telephone would ring at 3 a.m. because this guy or that guy is at the police station, he has to be picked up or he appears on the doorstep at three in the morning because he felt sick and he needed a tranquilizer to help him...

[...]

— *You were paid by the city?*

Francis T. Yes, paid by the city. At that time, addiction... hashish appeared, two or three weeks after I arrived. This wave of addiction began right then. It was a coincidence. And I had [hesitates] a distance from the addicts. For me, an addict was a guy who had no willpower, etc., well, who... And then well [makes a wide circle with his hands, starts to smile, hesitates] I had to turn everything around, and then I helped them. I helped the kids through all

the trials they managed to get into. I was dealing all the time with the court at Nanterre, which meant that at the end of two, three years I'd see the judge before the trial, we decided what was going to happen, and the sentence was decided in advance. There were very few imprisonments. Well because ... [hesitates] justice, this judge, at the end of two, three years he had recognized a method and from the fact that he had recognized the method, and me through that method...

— *He supported your activity...*

Francis T. That's right. There was a dialogue, and a sort of complicity, of sympathy, of conviviality... around the kid and well, it allowed an important step. [takes a break] In the end I didn't have strong support from the city, but [hesitates] I had created certain links with the power structures that allowed me to be recognized and with the kids to give them an image of security. And it's through this image of security that all the trust was developed [accelerates the tone]. Which doesn't mean there were no conflicts, between them... There were, as they say, brickbats between them and me. When I didn't agree, things blew up and then we hit...

— *You had to gain trust from both sides, which mustn't be easy every day.*

Francis T. No, but it still lasted 10 years! [laughs] [Silence]

If you go to trial, I'll be there

— *And then all these young people, they are... drifting now?*

Francis T. Yes, some of them drop by, some call, some write, some left for the provinces, some... are married... Well, they are all carrying AIDS, so, HIV positive. How with their life... But you can't do anything about it, I can't do anything... what I tried to do is to socially give them the possibility to rehabilitate themselves. With all the conflicts. I'm thinking of Momo, who became a delivery driver, he's got HIV, but it's not developing and for the time being he's happy... I'm thinking of another who is in the provinces who is a cook, and another one in

the South of France, who is married, who has kids... the kids aren't HIV... Socially, I had loads of successes.

[...]

Francis T. When I come home late — today I got in at 2 a.m. [breathes] well, an old reflex to pass by places where they get together... Well, it was going on, with a needle. So what is interesting is to participate in what is happening when they shoot. Because in their delirium you're going to know the real anguishes, real anguishes, fantasies, desires, well, all that is going to be expressed, going to come out. And then it's a... for a street educator, it's a very strong link to have been able to share... the ups and downs... well... — while knowing that I do not agree, but well — “you're still at the stage where you shoot yourself up, me, I don't forbid anything, on the other hand, the day when you want to quit, I am... there. And if you go to trial, I'll be there too to try to... smooth things over.” How many false testimonies I have given!... well and the judge knew very well they were false testimonies.

— *And it was what, for little things?*

Francis T. Oh yes, it was for petty thefts, that allowed them to buy two, three doses... because by selling a dose at a high price they can buy a dose and a half.

— *And you were saying, their hopes, their desires, they say what, for example?*

Francis T. The frustrations too. I didn't talk about that. And in the end with one exception we were dealing with a very poor population, where the desire was to build your own home, for example. That's very important. And something that came back very strongly was their appeal to me to find an apartment or a room. And that was true of all of them.

— *They lived where, with their parents?*

Francis T. With their parents generally, or in cellars when their parents threw them out.

— *In HLMs?*

Francis T. Yes, HLMs, houses that today have been demolished to build nice offices instead. When I heard the mayor say “in

any case, those people only have to move 50 kilometers away" . . . For me that's a real problem, it's . . .

— *You say their own home, and then what else? A girlfriend?*

Francis T. The aspiration to have a place of their own, a job and a child (I have a slight tendency to hear "child-family-country" [Work-Family-Fatherland was the Vichy government slogan] . . .) [Laughs].

— *That's incredible, it's not the picture that you usually get . . .*

Francis T. Those who went to the provinces, what did they do? They went into host families. They went to the hospital, they did detox, and I worked with an association of host families. So I took them to the train, they didn't even have time to stop by their home, and they got to the host family. And very often when the period was over with the host family, they stayed. Because in fact they had found a substitute family. They stayed, and they found a job, they found a girlfriend, they found an apartment, they got a driving license, they wanted to buy a car, they had constituted an ideal petit-bourgeois world after having lived at the bottom of hell.

— *They were people who had quit school?*

Francis T. Generally, yes. The smartest went to the *quatrième* transition year [third year of junior high].

— *What did they say about school?*

Francis T. They had been rejected at school, they were in remedial class, they were already excluded! They were already excluded at school, so when they left school, they had a mindset of exclusion. And since they didn't have the wherewithal to get a job, well then, they were excluded and they looked for aid, they looked for handouts. And that is something I've always refused. I've made money available, I've given food, I've . . . on specific things with clear objectives . . .

— *They must have expected an awful lot from you?*

Francis T. Well, they were asking me in effect to build them the world they even-

tually found, when they left for the host families and settled down.

— *All you could do in the end was to listen to them, protect them . . .*

Francis T. So what I did, I set up things, too. I set up an association where I get subsidies from the *département* and where I created work structures: we bought two vans, there was a guy who did bodywork on cars so we bought tools, and now he practically has his own shop. We were movers, sellers, apartment painters. Oh, it really worked! Afterwards I set up an ambulance company with a guy who'd been released after 10 years' detention . . . It still costs me a lot today, but that's OK, I don't care [laughs]. We rented premises, the site was in a terrible shape of course since we hadn't taken a place that was decorated, etc. So there was a cellar we could use, I got the kids I was dealing with to work on this site and paid them with subsidies from the *prefecture*, and I hired them as assistant stretcher-bearers, and then they stole the vehicles and then they reacted by knocking down the gatehouse of the hospital [laughs]. What a scandal! The guy had no driver's license, it was the pal who had loaned him the ambulance, great . . . the needles disappeared from the hospitals [breathes], drugs disappeared too . . .

— *That was a little risky . . .* [laughter]

Francis T. I dealt with it! I dealt with it! And then when I went to see the judge, I told him to fix things because otherwise . . . if I don't have the means . . . I'm not going to change them from one day to the next, yeah. It's not because I give work to a guy that from one day to the next he's going to become an angel, is he? So I need a transition stage. He wants needles, he steals needles. It proves that he hasn't quit. It proves that when you're able to hospitalize him in this hospital, on the other hand, he will be in the place he stole from. What's more, he will have as caregiver the wife of the educator, whom he knows well, and we're going to change his outlook. And it often happened like that.

— *Over a long period of time?*

Francis T. Listen, I'm still dealing with addicts, I think I'm soon going to stop though, but I'm still dealing with them, I'd say three years. For three years you can't be sure at all, but at least there is an option. After withdrawal from drugs, after the host family, from the moment when there is professional reentry, you wait to see, you have to have a stretch of three years. This is what I've been able to do over 10 years.
[...]

The powers that be couldn't take it any longer

— *You had quite a few allies in quite a few sectors among the shopkeepers, you set up ambulances...*

Francis T. I set up the nonprofit association myself, even if I was subsidized. The association didn't belong to the mayor's office but to Francis T., president. The mayor's office gave me the subsidy. It was the mayor's office that let me set up the ambulances during my worktime, but the structure never got involved (and now, the intermediary association in the town, it's the Catholics who set it up, and not the mayor's office). It's still odd that it's always the little powers that bring something extra to a superior power. Because the mayor's office gets it back. Politically, it gets it back... The mayor... all the power structures are based on little powers, and these little powers depend on them to keep going. I never would have been able to set up the ambulances if they hadn't left me the time to set them up. I never would have been able to set up the association. They left me the time.

— *Perhaps they helped you to prepare the dossiers to obtain...*

Francis T. Nothing at all. I had my lawyer pal. In fact, what they can't stand at the mayor's office is that in effect I'd set up countervailing powers. And I was a countervailing power. As long as it was a structure that didn't disturb the powers that be, it worked, but as soon as there was the break with the alliance with Le Pen, when I started to put out a newspaper, or rather a

mimeographed sheet that I started to send to all the assistant mayors, etc., from that moment on the countervailing power took on a dimension such that the powers that be couldn't take it any longer, so there was a split.

— *On one side there is the state, and its municipal embodiment, which at the very least does not support you, and on the other, there is a whole set of people with whom you have connections, on the medical side, lawyers, judges... and still others, employers...*

Francis T. Pharmacists. Connections with the pharmacists to persuade them that this or that person I knew well...

— *Why, did they give medication or needles?*

Francis T. Yes, I came in person into the pharmacy and I said, give me a box of Tranxene because I need them, there's a kid, someone who absolutely needed them. He gave it to me and later I brought the prescription.

— *Each time you gained time?*

Francis T. Yes [*silence*]. Yes, I had [*hesitation*], I was contested in fact by the city power structure, but since this structure was incapable of putting itself in my place and doing what I was doing, it was also powerless, and that made my strength. And since I had a setup in fact, I was working with a lawyer, so there were other political powers. I was in contact with two doctors, I worked more with the first one, but the other doctor was legally recognized by the judicial authorities, well, by the judge who lived in the town, we all knew each other well. The whole set of social workers across the town, even if we didn't always agree, we worked together. This meant that there was an operational structure that allowed... And then the mayor would let things go by. [*Silence*] In fact the barriers were the powers underneath the town boss.

— *The little bosses?*

Francis T. It's the little bosses who set them up. But the little bosses, well, when there were too many problems I'd ask for a

meeting with the mayor or I'd write him a report to cut them down.

[...]

I pull out my professional card

— *You work very long hours?*

Francis T. Well, it depends. If at a given time I find myself some place, and for example there is a police operation, well, I pull out my professional card and I say well... But if they nab a guy, it means that I'm going to telephone the public prosecutor, or his proxy rather, that I'm going to intervene at the police station, and negotiation begins. Or else, if there's a guy who is really sick, I'm going to stay with him, I can't leave him...

— *You take him to the doctor?*

Francis T. Or he is in delirium, and on his trip he needs to talk. He needs to be delirious with someone, face to face with someone who is going to listen to him, because his pals aren't going to. So it's part of the recognition process, because they know perfectly well that I don't have the same life they do. But to recognize me as able to help them, they have to identify me with something or with someone. And it's only when they identify me as outside the institution I represent, when feelings are created, when a relationship is created outside the institution, that my work can become effective.

October 1992

Patrick Champagne

The View from the State

The "mediatization" of "social malaises" has the effect of proliferating all sorts of publications and reports to describe, explain and "treat" these "malaises," so bringing them out into the open. The mass media are never, as some people claim, simple witnesses that supposedly confine themselves to accounting for reality or, at the least, describing problems. This is because, on the one hand, the simple fact of speaking about these malaises in public changes their status: what was experienced as a "personal" or "local" problem becomes a "societal problem" that must be resolved politically; what was a personal responsibility becomes a collective responsibility. In short, what was individual "malaise," experienced as intimate or private, tends to turn into a subject for public conversation, then a theme for colloquia and seminars, then pages of "debate" in the national newspapers that pit political commentators against media intellectuals, thereby opening up a veritable market, economically viable and flooded by testimony and investigations, volunteered or commissioned. On the other hand, it is because the media impose their own construction of social problems which relies largely on dramatizing the most spectacular facts and also, often, the most superficial ones; through the terms they impose ("ghetto housing projects," "racist crime," etc.) and the social agents they choose to speak to or interview, they help to bring into existence a veritable public discourse about the "malaises" they discuss. By giving a name to a malaise ("the sickness of the suburbs," for example, or "teachers' woes"), they tell us how we ought to think about it, imposing these interpretations not only on those who are not involved, but also on the principal interested parties who find there a legitimate discourse about a malaise that they may have been sensing more or less confusedly, but that remained inexpressible because it was illegitimate.

This public discourse throws up all the more of a screen because its great strength lies in how obvious it seems because it is so close to the discourse of common sense. In addition, because it tends to present a challenge to political power, this discourse favors the development of a whole series of productions that rely on political problematics ranging from public opinion polls to a bureaucratic type of literature constituted by the reports commissioned by political authorities because they feel pressurized by the press (and by those who speak through it) to come up with a rapid solution to these problems making the headlines.

In this respect once again, the case of problem suburbs is exemplary. Beginning with the end of the 1960s, numerous studies in urban sociology and the sociology

of immigration had already furnished practically all the elements necessary to understand the prevailing situation in these districts (for example, to cite only a few, the work of Henri Coing and of Colette Pétonnet on the working class, of Abdelmalek Sayad on immigrants or of Michel Pialoux on the relation of housing project young people to temporary work, and more recently issue 81-2 of *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* devoted to "household economy"). Known to specialists, these studies have gone relatively unnoticed because they were outside immediate current affairs. When the problem of suburbs and immigration arose in and for the media during the 1980s, notably with the riots in the Minguettes district, then, especially at the beginning of the 1990s, with the incidents in Vaulx-en-Velin, there was a veritable explosion of publications and special journal issues on these subjects: among other reasons because the election victories of the extreme right, in these districts in particular, make them a political problem that is interesting to journalists and also, potentially, to a broad public. And then everything that is written, from the simple eyewitness account to sociological studies, finds itself involved in a symbolic struggle, less intellectual than political, where the stake is the imposition "on the spur of the moment" of a perspective and an interpretation.

Sociology cannot ignore this literature, not only because in certain respects it occupies sociological terrain and by its very nature poses an obstacle to a more rigorous analysis, but also because such a mobilization cannot help but produce interesting news and pertinent analyses. Reading the numerous publications on "the suburbs," "youth," "immigration" and "young immigrants in the suburbs" – these days one would be hard pressed to make an exhaustive list – one is convinced that everything in a sense has been said, and so sociology can hardly be expected to discover a hidden or surprising fact, or a special process that nobody had ever thought about. But the overabundance of miscellaneous news and analyses generates confusion and leaves the field wide open to partial or illusory explanations. From then on each person can easily find the explanations they want to hear. Thus the cause of the "sickness of the suburbs" can be sought in botched urban planning or in the economic crisis, in the laxness of the forces of law and order (or the reverse), in uncontrolled immigration, in the disintegration of the family, in drugs, or in all of those things at once. On these subjects, the principal task for sociology – and not the least difficult one – is to distinguish between what is relevant and what is less so, between what is important and what is only secondary or derivative. Sociology must above all hierarchize and integrate in a coherent explanatory system a collection of factors that are far from all having the same functional weight.

Two examples located at opposite poles of these circumstantial productions give an idea of these articles and commentaries that spring up on the spot: on the one hand, the simple opinion poll, with obviously political intentions; and on the other, the expert report that tries to gather and synthesize the available information for political authorities.

Studies of opinion made by polling are considered “scientific” by both the public and journalists – and even certain experts – because they present all the external marks of “scientificity”: representative samples (as if that were the essential thing), questionnaires, responses presented in percentages or graphs, etc. They have the further advantage of making the sociologist as such disappear, along with the questions specifically designed to extend through and beyond the empirically conducted study to the analysis of social mechanisms. Polls are particularly appreciated by journalists because they never lead to complex commentaries that are impossible or difficult to summarize in a few lines, and because they allow the rapid processing of information that journalists consider trustworthy. The only questions asked are those that politics prompts one to ask. Which is why these questions, produced by and for ordinary political problematics, appear self-evident, at least to those who commission them. In the name of what would you restrain yourself, for example, from asking “the masses” who, in the family or in society, is responsible for juvenile delinquency? Doesn’t one obtain, to a question like that that “everyone asks” – especially since the “problem of the suburbs” has been making headlines – clear and indisputable statistical data, figures that “speak for themselves” and show that we are in the presence of a new “social problem” (unemployment, violence in the media, etc.)?

But the questions posed by the pollsters have also become obvious to the general public by virtue of the fact that polling organizations have been asking them again and again for years in the same terms (to compare the variations rigorously, or so they claim), in such a way that no one – or almost no one – is surprised, having heard them a hundred times already, that these are the questions asked, whereas in fact they only have a meaning and a function within the small circle of people interested in politics. The practice of polling has produced a new type of opinion – opinion for opinion polls – which most often is very far from the reality that it is supposed to measure and screens out the real questions that ought to be asked. Costly and endless – always done in a rush, and sustaining the illusion that an express scientific knowledge can exist – these studies in reality tell us about the mental categories of those who commission, conceive and use them. In other words, the questions often prove much more interesting than the answers because they reveal very directly the preoccupations of political managers and politicians.

To take but one example, this is the case with a poll by the Conseil Supérieur Audiovisuel [broadcasting regulatory authority] carried out in March 1991 (that is to say, several months after the events in Vaulx-en-Velin and the creation of a Ministry for Urban Affairs), for the newspaper *Le Parisien* and the state radio station France Inter (but which could just as well have been commissioned by the Prime Minister’s office and carried out by another polling organization). The eight questions are worth reproducing in their entirety (with a brief commentary in brackets) inasmuch as that they constitute a good sample of the different forms generally taken by these polling questions and, beyond that, by investigations of the variety:

(1) *Do you feel that the inequalities between people in France over the last 10 years... have tended to increase? remained stable? tended to decrease? no opinion.*

[Is this question – in fact a classic subject for an essay for the entrance examination to get into the *École Nationale d'Administration* (especially after 10 years of socialism) – a matter of opinion or of fact? What can be done with “people’s feelings” on this question, which is a question that is mainly the preoccupation of political circles? What will be done with the random responses of the young people polled who can hardly have an opinion on changes over the last 10 years? In fact, you have to wait for the questions that follow to know the true intentions hidden behind this question.]

(2) *In your opinion, are the inequalities among people in France today... unbearable? great? not very great? not great at all? no opinion.*

[What content do the different categories of respondents give to the adjectives “unbearable,” “great,” etc.? In fact, this is not very important because it is only a matter of bringing people onto purely political territory to prepare the interviewees for the two following questions.]

(3) *Which among the following issues are those that should be acted on as a priority: housing? salaries and incomes? health? education and training? no opinion.*

[The problem of priorities is typically a question politicians ask themselves. “To govern is to choose,” Pierre Mendès France said years ago. But at the time, to his mind, it was a matter of choosing in full knowledge of the case and in the general interest, even if a measure turned out to be temporarily unpopular in the polls. In order not to be unpopular, priorities are henceforth set by consulting the citizens directly, their responses allowing it to be assumed – how could it be otherwise? – that they egoistically give priority to the areas that concern them directly and personally.]

(4) *Personally, do you have total confidence, some confidence, little confidence, or no confidence at all in the administration of Michel Rocard [Socialist prime minister at the time] to reduce inequalities among the French?*

[Here is the question they in fact wanted to ask from the beginning, coming in to clinch the three preceding ones. It’s a “vote of confidence” that is put, not to the National Assembly where there was a shifting parliamentary majority at the time, but directly to citizens, to “people” who have had for several years, it seems, a rather “good opinion” of Rocard.]

(5) *In your view, with the development of our society, life in the big cities today is... very difficult? rather difficult? rather agreeable? very agreeable?*

[This vague and general question that does not allow for the collection of specific data is above all designed, like the earlier ones, to set up the following questions

on the suburbs that refer to specific events in the media and to political decisions broadly disseminated in the media.]

(6) *And in the suburbs . . . ?*

[Now we are getting to the question that has been on the tips of the pollsters' tongues from the beginning . . .]

(7) *Among the following categories, which are those whose current state warrants the priority attention of the new Minister for Urban Affairs responsible for the problems in the major cities and suburbs: the elderly? shopkeepers? young people? immigrants? women alone? no opinion.*

[The question is finally unleashed. The phrasing itself reminds us that there is now a new Minister for Urban Affairs who is responsible for, and who wants to deal as a priority with, certain populations. These commonsense categories (but where would one classify, for example, a young single woman of immigrant origin who has a small shop?) are indeed tailor-made to exclude the real problems. In truth, the only function of this question is to see, discreetly, to what extent people would accept that help be given as a priority to immigrants who are, everyone says so, the ones primarily caught up in the problems of the suburbs, and who are here mixed in with categories that are politically less compromising.]

(8) *As you know, communes receive a part of their resources from the businesses within their boundaries through the professional tax. The government is preparing a law under which a part of this professional tax collected by the most advantaged communes would be distributed to those having few or no businesses on their territory. Personally, would you be rather in favor or rather against this project?*

[This typical "logic of politics" question begins with "As you know" precisely because most of the respondents don't know. It continues with a simple, innocuous sentence that in fact serves as a real course in fiscal law (specialists all know that local taxes are a very complex issue about which much has been written) and ends with a governmental project presented in such terms that it seems difficult to be against it: 80 percent of the respondents in fact declared themselves in favor of this law that proposes taking a little money from the richest districts and giving it to the poorest ones.]

The review of this poll tells us what functions it fulfills. Materially, it is a thin document that gives a series of tables without any commentary. At the head of each page, the wording of each question is given in bold and in a block, with the responses underneath. A first page gives the overall distributions; in the following pages, the responses are correlated with the usual "sociological" variables. And so on for each question. In fact, the presentation of results is a function of strictly political concerns: the first page gives the distributions as if it were an election or a referendum ("what the majority of the French think . . ."), whereas the following

pages deliver the correlated responses, one by one and variable by variable, according to the crude groups constructed for politicians, which are in fact categories more useful for action than for analysis (gender, age, profession, political tendencies and residence). In other words, these correlations are intended less to explain than to identify the groups who do or do not support a given opinion fabricated by the politicians, and whose responses are designed to feed their internal struggles. They allow the pinpointing of groups that still need to be convinced, and will be the appropriate "target" of political campaigns (young or old people, men or women, favored social categories or not, city or rural dwellers). Stated in accordance with the 1977 law, the precise date of the poll no doubt constitutes the most pertinent detail: it reminds us that the sole interest of this type of study is less to understand the problem of the suburbs than to find out what the "level of public opinion" is on the day of the poll with respect to the government (pollsters use the metaphor of photography: the poll is just a "snapshot of public opinion"). In fact the date reminds us that the poll entitled "The social preoccupations of the French" in reality reveals the "political preoccupations of Michel Rocard," who was, on this date, the prime minister.

At the other extreme of this literature indirectly stimulated by the media, we can take the example of the report to the Minister for Urban Affairs and Planning entitled *Relegation*. Commissioned by the new Minister for Urban Affairs in 1991 to take stock of the situation in problem suburbs following the incidents in Vaulx-en-Velin, the author of this report, Jean-Marie Delarue, was a member of the Council of State. The quality of the report that he submitted some months later pertains largely to the characteristics of its author: besides a previous interest in social problems (usual in the "leftist" or "intellectual" fraction of the upper level administration), he had a sociological training that enabled him to tackle this question with a certain competence, in particular denouncing the biased presentation that the media give of these problems. In this document, which relies on the reading of diverse sociological works and on an attentive hearing given to all those who work in these neighborhoods, there are a number of interesting developments. In short, this type of report was accomplished in conditions that indisputably allowed it to mobilize know-how about the social world far superior to that in many bureaucratic reports and *a fortiori* to the knowledge about disadvantaged populations and the work of those concerned with them possessed by the majority of senior civil servants.

But this analysis has limits that also pertain to its social conditions of production. The part devoted to description, that is to say to the understanding, properly speaking, of the situation of these problem suburbs, is relatively short (some 20 pages out of a report of nearly 200 pages), the task given to these senior civil servants being, it must not be forgotten, essentially of a political nature. But the analysis itself tends to obey a logic that is more political than intellectual. These senior civil servants must listen democratically to everyone, "impartially," according to a logic of collecting expert advice that almost always falls far short of a rigorous intellectual construction. The authors cited, generally taking bits of

their analysis out of context, belong to very heterogeneous, if not to say frankly contradictory worlds (for a sociologist the list of authors cited in the report comes close to the absurd...). The logic governing the elaboration of this document leads to description more than explanation, and to a compilation of factors at issue and not to the construction of an explanatory system.

Social reality is carved up according to administrative categories (Delarue distinguishes between three sectors: "urban," "social," "youth") that are not necessarily pertinent from a sociological viewpoint but offer a convenient framework, understandable by politicians, for proposing solutions. What is principally expected from these reports are in fact ideas, solutions, ideas for solutions, preferably able to attract media coverage, meaning visible and having an immediate effect. Just how inadequate these analyses are is revealed above all in the solutions proposed, which remain largely superficial. Either it is a matter of simple "commonsense" solutions (for example, the need to coordinate the heretofore segmented activities of the different agencies that have to do with the suburbs). Coming from a senior civil servant and given current bureaucratic logic, this is already a lot but it owes little or nothing to the analysis of the situation. Or else it is a matter of solutions that claim to be more innovative but, besides the fact they do not rely on the preceding analyses any more than the "commonsense" solutions, hardly escape the illusions of political voluntarism, as is the case for example in the Delarue Report, with everything placed under the idea of "citizenship," which is supposed to resolve problems whose origin is by no means purely political.

These reports cannot really break with the problematic preconstructed by the media since their principal function is to respond to the media. The report writer simply does not see what needs to be analyzed, that is, the spatial inscription of social groups. What really ought to be investigated is these groups' mode of social reproduction and the trajectories of the individuals who compose them; what ought to be measured are the effects on these groups of public policies concerning the real estate market, the educational system and the labor market. It suffices to really listen to all the people who work in these "suburbs," social workers, the heads of the state employment bureaux, and the directors of temporary employment agencies, to discover that the solutions are to be found not in the "suburbs" themselves, quite simply because the causes of the problems are not in the housing projects, but elsewhere, often at the very heart of the state.

"Costs" and "benefits" of immigration

— *Abdelmalek Sayad*

"Ideally" immigration and the immigrant have no meaning and raison d'être unless they "bring in" more than they "cost." How to maximize the "profits" (economic especially) and to minimize the "costs" (especially social and cultural) is not only a question of economics treated by economists, but a question that is contained vir-

tually in all statements about immigration. This formulation of the issue is so persistent that it seems to go without saying. Because it is applied to a population with a particular status, the balance of accounts into which it is converted has nothing in common with an analogous set of accounts for another group: when, for example, children, youths or the elderly are concerned the only question posed is how to predict and find the financial support for the treatment designated for the population at issue; in the case of the immigrant, it is, however, a matter of judging the costs and benefits of the policy on immigration, that is, of the existence or the "disappearance" of the immigrant population. An apparently technical question objectively poses the whole problem of the legitimacy of immigration. Especially when commentary explicitly and consciously concerns the function of immigration as is the case with the "economic theory of the comparative costs and benefits of immigration," there is almost no commentary about immigrants that does not sometimes legitimate immigration and at other times condemn its (profound) illegitimacy.¹

Because until now the "economic theory of the comparative costs and benefits of immigration" has only raised disagreements revolving round changes in the factors established as the appropriate ones to be taken into account, agreement having been reached at the outset on everything the theory requires prior to any discussion – for instance, among other things, the very principle of a division between what is "cost" and what is "benefit," the principle of being able to establish a positive or negative balance of immigration, etc. – it has masked a whole series of other questions that have become unthinkable, such as who bears the "costs" and who gets the "benefits" of immigration. But more fundamentally, to characterize exclusively as "cost" or "benefit" each of the elements distinguishable and arbitrarily dissociated from a whole that has no reality (economic or political) except as a totality amounts to

imposing the meaning that it has been decided to assign to each of these elements and to imposing it all the more forcefully since no one has any idea that such an imposition has taken place. One need only take as an example of this work of "making politics technical" Anicet Le Pors's study of monetary flows prompted by immigration, as well as how his conclusions diverge from those that Fernand Icart draws from virtually identical data.²

If there are "costs" imputable to immigration, one thinks first, of course, of the monetary cost borne by the entire country of immigration through the transfer of funds, in part by the immigrants themselves from their savings and in part by social bodies (family allowances, payments of social security, retirement pensions, pensions of other sorts, etc.). But even this "cost," which can be considered obvious and indisputable, does not occur without bringing "profits" of another kind: "in particular, it could be asked what is the incidence of the transfer of savings abroad (...). Now then, it appears that 1 million francs less transferred abroad signifies an improvement in the balance of trade (...) of only about 38,000 francs. In effect, a diminution ex ante of transfers abroad increases household consumption; a good part of this increase is accounted for not by an increase in domestic production but by an increase in imports or a decrease in exports. Moreover, a reduction in transfers of savings to foreign countries limits the acquisitions of these countries' currencies and consequently their imports, including those from France."³

Conversely, if there is an immediate "profit" for the countries of immigration, an initial "profit" and apparently net of any counterbalancing cost, it consists of "importing" adult men who are still young, hence "useful" and productive from the day they arrive; this "profit," which consists of the savings made on what Alfred Sauvy has called the "upbringing cost," is considerably attenuated in Fernand Icart's report, where it is almost

transformed into a "cost": the "quality" of these men who have been raised in poor and underdeveloped countries, hence at a "cost" less than the "average French cost," means that they are more "expensive" (or at least more "expensive" than one thinks) by reason of the "cost" to be paid for their adaptation to the society that makes use of them.

Still more "contradictions" of this type could be listed, with each criterion able to be classified as "cost" or as "benefit" or, at the least, bearing its share of "cost" and its share of "benefit." And the further one moves away from the factors traditionally given priority by economics, or in other terms, the closer one gets to factors neglected by economic techniques because they resist "measurement," the greater the indeterminacy and consequently the easier and more frequent the manipulations and inversions of meaning that can be imposed; and the more it appears that the facts that one analyses and interprets as purely economic data are also, and perhaps above all, facts and realities that are political, social, and cultural. Thus, for example, with respect to birthrates among immigrant families in general and among families of North African origin more particularly: sometimes there is official congratulation for the demographic surplus that these families bring to a population that tends to decrease and to age, and sometimes this same increase is deplored (also quite officially) in a population that continues to be called "immigrant population" (even if the young generations born in France have not immigrated from anywhere), because it is "costly," because it weighs too heavily on the mechanisms of

family support – it's "burdensome." "Economic" arguments or the formulation in economic terms of other kinds of arguments are more easily or more innocently admissible. And what can be said about the ambiguity of the fertility rates of the immigrant population – which is, deep down, all about family immigration and the shift from the kind of old immigrant, the single worker, isolated and without his family, to the head of a family – also applies today, because of the difficulties in the job market, to that other characteristic of the immigrant, which nevertheless constitutes and defines him, that is, his status as worker: the "profit" represented by the labor power he brings – which has its counterpart in the salary paid to him and which he can transfer – tends to be redefined as a "cost," a direct "cost" when the immigrant is unemployed (personally losing the justification for his existence) and an indirect "cost" when the immigrant has an occupation, as if the job he is occupying constituted a sort of absence of an asset, a virtual damage inflicted upon national manpower.

To be acceptable, it would be necessary for this sort of "economics of immigration" to turn into a total economics that would integrate all the other "costs" and all the other "benefits" totally passed over by pure economic theory. Things become still more complicated when one knows that, proceeding from the same logic and justified by the same questions and the same critiques, "the economic theory of the comparative costs and benefits of immigration" can be transposed to the countries of emigration and provide the basis for the constitution of a homologous theory.

¹ The recent "numbers quarrel" over the size of the immigrant population shows how political arguments are turned into more acceptable technical ones: the greater the immigrant population, the higher the "costs" for society as a whole.

² Fernand Icart, Deputy representing the Var, *Le coût des travailleurs étrangers en France*, note de

synthèse (The Cost of Foreign Workers in France) (Paris: National Assembly, 1976).

³ A. Le Pors, *Immigration et développement économique et social* (Paris: La Documentation Française, Études Prioritaires Interministérielles, 1977).

Remi Lenoir

Disorder among Agents of Order

What is called “malaise of the courts” or “the crisis of justice” in fact covers very different realities. These expressions simultaneously designate a social problem (“the rise in delinquency”), the difficulties encountered by one of the public services (“the poverty of justice”), and the struggle that pits a profession, the judiciary, against the governing powers (“corruption scandals”). Combining these is not without foundation, since no one contests the rise in “small and middle-level delinquency” (thefts and drug traffic), the poor functioning of the judiciary (“slowness,” “errors,” etc.) or the rise in the “feeling of insecurity.”¹ Moreover, the conflicts between judges and politicians are in the public domain, or rather, in the media domain. But to speak of malaise of the courts is also to forget that magistrates are not the only actors maintaining order.² We could just as well point to the “crisis” among the police, gendarmes and prison guards – other professions that enforce public order. But in their cases the only things that are brought up are simple problems of salaries, working conditions, trade unionism, training, etc. – in short, what are called “internal problems.”

In fact, the terms used to signal the difficulties of a given social group vary according to the prestige and status of professions. In this respect, the division of labor in the maintenance of the social order is exemplary. The assignments of tasks here is defined institutionally – witness the professionalization of the different functions relating to this activity (arrests, sentencing, imprisonment, rehabilitation, etc.); the competencies of each category of actors are legally fixed in a hierarchical order. If criminal law alone is considered, magistrates play a predominant role; not only do they hold the monopoly on everything that falls within the domain of judicial activity (advisability of prosecution,

¹ As demonstrated by the existence of a “security trade fair,” the development of a “security market” and of “private police forces”: in 1989, private security firms in France employed 73,000 people and had a turnover of 7.5 billion francs, or almost a third the budget of the national police, cf. G. Carrot, *Histoire de la police française* (Paris: Tallandier, 1992), p. 230.

² In France, criminal investigations are the responsibility of “juges d’instruction” or “examining magistrates” in conjunction with officers of the judicial investigation branch of the national police (civil servants under the Ministry of the Interior) or the national “gendarmerie” (under the armed forces ministry). These magistrates in charge of criminal investigations are entirely separate from trial judges. See glossary, “justice system.” [Tr.]

judgment), but their authority also extends over other bodies: the bench or the examining magistrates direct the investigations that the police or gendarmes do on the spot, the sentencing judge has complete authority to fix sentence conditions, etc. This preeminence of magistrates is inseparably juridical and social. In effect, judges overall have higher social origins than police commissioners, prison directors and, even more so, officers in the national gendarmerie, and this social superiority (felt by some people as “arrogance”) comes with a cultural ascendancy that attests, among other things, to greater educational success.³

So it is not by chance that when it is a question of the judiciary, people speak of its “social decline,” an expression that refers simultaneously to the descending slope that it is supposedly following in social space (“small-time judges,” “a little job for little people”) and to the “decay” of its powers (“loss of independence,” “material suffering,” “judges who do everything”).⁴ When it is a question of the police or the gendarmes, what is pointed to is less their social position than their usually unfavorable *image*: “police errors,” for the police, “heavyhandedness” for the gendarmes. And as for prison guards, people refer above all to their *working conditions*: they are sometimes assimilated – and assimilate themselves – to the population they guard: when they are on the job they speak of themselves as being “in detention.”

If, at least as far as representations go, the crisis of the courts is identified with that of the magistrates, it is because, like all bodies that dominate a sector of social activity, they can impose the definition of their malaise on everyone. By virtue of their dominant position in the social order, they are in a position to convert their problems, linked in part to their class membership – their “independence” or their “power” – into general problems, “the crisis in the law,” into social problems, “rising insecurity,” etc.

The use of such general designations leads people to overlook the fact that the actors involved in the maintenance of order are very diverse and that their crises or difficulties result from different factors. Even for the body of magistrates alone, this function clearly relates to contrasting situations, with ordinary perception registering only the two extremes: “low” and “high” judiciary. Does the “decline of the judiciary” involve both categories of magistrates? The method of recruitment has changed since the 1950s and opened up the judiciary to categories which until then seemed excluded, such as, in particular, children of lesser public officials. But all the signs are that the judges’ careers differ according to social origin, so that what is perceived as social decline could well be nothing but a sign of the increasing diversification of the judiciary.⁵

The increase – very relative – in social differences between categories of magistrates, and consequently in the heterogeneity of the body as a whole,

³ Cf. R. Lenoir, “Les agents du maintien de l’ordre: contribution à la construction sociale de l’espace judiciaire,” *Les Cahiers de la Sécurité Intérieure*, IHESI, La Documentation Française, no. 10 (Aug.–Oct. 1992), pp. 149–78.

⁴ Cf. among others J.-C. Soyer, *Justice en perdition* (Paris: Plon, 1982).

⁵ For a closer analysis, cf. J.-L. Bodiguel, *La Magistrature, un corps sans âme?* (Paris: PUF, 1991).

pertains no doubt in part to a decline in a type of recruitment that placed a premium on belonging to a family of jurists,⁶ a decline that seems to have touched the “high” less than the “low” judiciary.⁷ The standardization of training, due to the *École Nationale de la Magistrature* (National School for the Magistracy) set up at the end of the 1950s and replacing competitive entry at a local level, which had operated primarily through cooptation, has not attenuated the increased social heterogeneity of recruitment.⁸ On the contrary, taking into account the relatively large recruitment of magistrates starting in the 1970s, thanks to the increase in positions opened up to competitive entry but also to parallel recruitment procedures (internal competitive selection and incorporation on the basis of degrees), the social differentiation of the judiciary has increased. In addition, this rapid rise in the number of magistrates (40 percent replaced in 20 years) greatly reduced promotion prospects, especially for the younger generations. So that competition within the judiciary became much more acute, and if one adds to these tension-causing factors the effective decline in working conditions, notably from the increase in and transformation of litigation (they speak of “knocking off cases”), there are all the ingredients of a “crisis.” But is it a single crisis, and has it affected all magistrates and in the same way?

Obligatory attendance at a specialized school has imposed properly educational criteria (especially rank at graduation), which allows magistrates to evaluate each other. As a result, the legitimacy of assignments and promotions is both more easily monitored and more easily contested. In fact, this legitimacy is becoming more and more controversial because the boundaries between the “low” and “high” judiciary are more blurred than they were in the nineteenth century: “justices of the peace,” who only needed to have “common sense” and “a sense of equity,” had no ambitions other than to be “prominent” in their home territory, from which they often came and which they didn’t try to leave. This is no longer the case today when the development of the school system and competitive recruitment have extended the market for appointments and career trajectories to the whole country. So while nearly two-thirds of the magistrates come from families with a parent in senior management or the liberal professions, they cannot all make a career corresponding to the aspirations traditionally attached to their qualifications.

This means that among the magistrates themselves, there is not one malaise but several, whose basis varies according to whether it is the “high” or the “low” judiciary. For the higher judiciary – a veritable “corps within a corps” – the malaise principally concerns the relations it maintains with the members of other major governmental legal bodies. These bodies, in effect, can play a card that has become decisive with the development of governmental activity since the

⁶ On this point, see J.-P. Royer, R. Martinage and P. Lecocq, *Juges et notables au XIXe siècle* (Paris: PUF, 1982).

⁷ Cf. A. Bancaud, *La haute magistrature judiciaire entre politique et sacerdoce* (Vauresson: June 1991).

⁸ Cf. A. Boigeol, “La formation des magistrats: de l’apprentissage sur le tas à l’école professionnelle,” *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 76–7 (Mar. 1989), pp. 49–64.

war, that is, direct participation in the exercise of political power, a card that the "high" judiciary does not hold to the same degree. This gives a determining advantage for controlling the ever more numerous authorities that must work together for the maintenance of social order. Thus the multiplication of "commissions," often presided over by a member of the administrative judiciary, something with direct implications for what is covered by judicial competence, attests to the relative decline of prestigious figures in the judiciary proper. More generally, their position has declined within the dominant class because of the rise of other professions, perhaps less in the public sector (even though financial factors now prevail there) than in the private sector, notably in everything tied to the economy and communication, two worlds that have traditionally fallen outside judges' purview.

As for the "lower judiciary" (one speaks of "base-line judges"), its "malaise" also relates to the decline of its power relative to other public authorities (notably the prefect and the prefectural administration). But it is above all the result of internal factors, whether the deterioration of working conditions (multiplication and complexity of procedures, litigation that is less and less "noble," etc.) or the effects of hierarchical authority on agents whose social position depends more and more on their professional activity.

But there is another dimension which, although mentioned, is almost always overlooked except in periods of acute crisis: everything relating to the redefinition of the division of labor among professions and their ceaseless struggles to maintain and extend their reach, which is not unrelated to their feelings of malaise. In this respect, the legal professions are also exemplary. The preeminence of the judiciary is effectively challenged in its monopoly to articulate the law, in the first place by other actors in judicial milieux, particularly the police and to a lesser extent the gendarmerie, who challenge the supervision of investigations by the bench and examining magistrates, and by other legal professions (lawyers, but also solicitors, etc.) and the many administrative authorities that, outside the administrative courts and the Council of State, have been granted quasi-legal powers (customs, taxes, etc.).

This phenomenon is most often ascribed to the development of governmental activity, to the complexity of cases (the necessity of "experts") and to the multiplication of lawsuits, which now exceed the capacities of the courts to deal with them. But these different factors would not have so much effect if the social bases of the supremacy of magistrates had not changed. To consider penal activity alone, a growing proportion of police commissioners and, to a lesser extent, officers in the national gendarmerie, have social, cultural and educational characteristics that bring them close to the magistrates. These new generations of judicial police forces are thus better equipped than the old ones to claim what constitutes one of the essential powers of the judiciary, namely the supervision of investigations. To counter this offensive, especially by the police, the majority of magistrates raise objections of principle that ill disguise, given their effectively reduced activity in the matter, the social basis of their claim. These power

struggles can go as far as open conflicts which reveal their class character, so true is it that the maintenance of public order is always a component in the maintenance of the social order itself.

But these struggles occur at all times and at all levels between the different bodies (especially between the gendarmerie and the police) but also inside of each one (see for example the "war of the different police forces"), which may moreover reinforce the preeminent position of the magistrates. In addition, other cleavages have appeared. If one takes the example of police commissioners, their recognition of judicial prerogative varies according to how they came to their position (having been in the police or not). So the mode of training commissioners is a stake in the struggles inside this corps, between the "old" guys who defend apprenticeship on the beat and the "young" who claim academic qualification, that is to say, their respective manners of getting there and becoming what they are. Nor are these differences without social foundations. Class cleavages no longer cut along functional divisions of maintaining order, but now traverse different bodies, so that in this realm as in others, the army in particular, the struggles between and within bodies can no longer be ascribed solely to class conflicts. Now we need to invoke the struggles within each class, and, particularly for the most elevated positions, between the different fractions of the dominant class.

Remi Lenoir

Woman and Cop

Agnès is 24. She is an only daughter. She has just left the *École Supérieure des Inspecteurs de la Police Nationale* [School for National Police Inspectors]. She entered on examination after having passed a *baccalauréat G*, with an ordinary pass. She comes from a small town in the southwest. I met her three years ago, when I began a study on the reform in criminal investigations.

The difficulty in getting police officers to express views somewhat free of directives from the hierarchy or the instructions of union organizations stems less from their membership of a corps, as with *gendarmes* or magistrates, than from a sort of almost inherent *distrust* of everything that is foreign ("to the service"). This sort of suspicion, transformed into a professional virtue – "vigilance" – is reinforced by the constant concern directed at the "outside world" to rectify a pejorative representation of the organization, which is not the case for other professions where reserve, secrecy, anonymity, etc., are also functional attributes. This obsession with the "poor image" of the police shows up in various ways according to job and rank: it ranges from juridical hypercorrection to linguistic flawlessness via opaque bureaucratic jargon for the higher-ups; and from paralyzing embarrassment to blustering chatter for subordinates.

Moreover, these professionals in interrogation who are always on the defensive have both the intention and the means to control the investigation, to try to affect the definition of the problems, and to make use of all the usual subterfuges – secrecy, conformist topics, apparent collusion, and false confidences, etc.

The problem arises less with those who are not yet totally identified with the job and the institution. This is particularly true for women who, even today, are few in number and are relegated to tasks perceived as "feminine," all the more given the tendency of this masculine world to set up "virility" and everything associated with it as professional virtues. Whence, no doubt, the liberty of tone, the frankness, and even the often scathing humor of women who, while they have internalized "police values," are less constrained, once they agree to talk, to speak conventionally.

If Agnès can speak so frankly and so realistically, it is also because she finds an opportunity in this conversation to express a rebellion both irrepressible and confused. This confusion comes from a triple indignation expressed in three inextricably linked forms: as a young woman in conflict with her parents and the type of life they represent; as an active and dynamic woman scandalized by the routine of regular bureaucracy; and finally, as someone engaged in a social

struggle, which here pits a junior officer against other actors and users of the public service with which she is identified. If she speaks almost exclusively of her working conditions and her training in this interview, it is because her personal life disappears behind the professional occupations and preoccupations that have offered her the means of “getting out” and away from everything that “stifled” her – her parents, school, her hometown. Only the climate of her “hometown” in the south is excepted from this general disaffection.

Her apparently frail build, her chestnut hair in a short boyish cut, her lively look, as if she were on watch, and paradoxically her relaxed demeanor accentuated by the “uniform” now worn by the majority of young police inspectors – sneakers, jeans, a leather jacket over a white polo shirt – immediately show a tenacious will to be “free.” Everything that might arouse that sensation of oppression, whether the “hierarchy” inside police headquarters in the Parisian district where she was assigned after leaving training school or the “blasé” inspectors who “breakdown” the young ones by advising them “not to go in” because the arrested person “is going to deny it,” is “unbearable” – a term she uses frequently.

Her perception of the “old guard,” the police chief “who only does it for the money,” the older inspectors who are “lazy” and “shiftless,” corresponds with her perception of her parents: her father, inspector for “frauds” (unfair competition and price fraud), and her mother, a nurse’s aide, “who no longer give a damn about their jobs, if they ever did.” Then there is her cousin, a police inspector, who encouraged her to take the entrance exam by serving as a role model and who represents everything she “loves in life” and thinks she can find in her new line of work: “investigation” (meaning action and adventure), “results” (in contrast to the “useless paperwork” or “procedural errors”) and the “fraud squad” branch of the judicial investigation division of the police – as far as possible from the squads that deal with minors (“I hate that”), which is the sector with the highest proportion of female inspectors, and whose function is closer to what her parents wished for her. “My parents would have loved it if I had been a nurse; worked in a nursery school, as a social worker, something like that, and most of all, for me to stay in X.”

It is not because of a vocation that she “ended up” in the police, even if, as she asserts, “I have always wanted to be in the police.” It is a fundamental *repulsion* for anything “sedentary,” meaning anything that reminds her of “the old folks” – especially her relatives. Provincial, uprooted, isolated, she is also repulsed by all the impediments to the functioning of the institution, summing up their underlying principle as “people don’t do their share.” And she feels this whether it’s the effrontery of delinquents (“He drops the wallet, that’s it, he didn’t do it”), the negligence of victims who don’t file a complaint or who withdraw one (“They’re afraid of reprisals”), the leniency of magistrates (“They’re too soft”), the cynicism of lawyers (“Even when their client pleads guilty, they’re still going to look for holes in the case”), or the inertia of certain colleagues (“They let themselves go, they drink”), etc. Her aversion to inefficiency, spelling out the main causes – the extreme fragmentation of police work, legal formalities, the absence of material

resources, the indifference of ordinary people to police work – is accompanied by an indignant reaction to everything that runs counter to the purposes of her administration (“You came for the insurance or to find your car radio?”; “For the insurance obviously” (...) “In that case, you don’t even need us!”), and more generally against everything that usurps police activity (“False policemen, I don’t how they do it with a red, white and blue card, they come and go as they please. And we can’t get in!”).

At the heart of her rebellion, over and above the rejection of her background milieu, are the principles of her adherence to an effective mode of management in the maintenance of order, which she expresses abruptly and directly: “to know (...) whether you’ve worked for something or for nothing.” It is not only a question of denouncing anything that has an immediate resemblance to aspects of the social world of her childhood that are oppressive and despised (“I can’t stand someone who comes in to file a complaint and three days later withdraws it”) and small (“We are a small neighborhood station, we just do petty delinquency”), etc. What is “infuriating” are all the obstacles typical of police bureaucracy: the absence of coordination among the services (“Sometimes you wait three hours for a report” (...) “You waste a lot of time”), the disenchanting weariness of the veterans (“It’s not worth it, what can you do? drop it” (...) They’re blasé”). So the emptiness and inertia of the police administration – because it bridles the energy that allowed her to get out of her milieu – is no doubt at the source of her ironic lucidity tinged with bitterness: people who get to an improbable “place” only get there with a sharp sense of how the organization where they work functions and what its social relationships are.

She does not have words sharp enough to condemn her bosses, the commissioners (“The commissioner is out to get money”) or the businessmen who are in no hurry to file a complaint and are only interested in the value of the stolen objects (“Always how much it’s worth but we don’t give a shit how much it’s worth”). This disinterested and neutral relation to money is the scarcely hidden side of her contempt for those who despise her, her and those like her (inspectors, the middle ranks of the police), and whom she just mentions in passing – lawyers, magistrates, higher-ups in the police or casual victims whose behavior she condemns as a way of proclaiming that she is not one of them. And conversely, she never fails to defend the “poor delinquents,” the guy who came out of prison and has no job and who, when he doesn’t find one, will go back to prison; or the “poor girl” for whom “you felt that it was either drugs or prostitution”; or the young adolescent who “let himself be dragged along by yobbos.”

These infuriating disillusionments (“it really pissed me off to see them sent to court”) are felt all the more strongly because they are the forced and painful flipside of a total adherence to the institution to which she feels she owes her change in social trajectory. But far from distancing her from what she is doing, this well-founded disenchantment does not call into question her “interest” in her work (“It’s interesting,” “what I really love are the frauds...”), even if it is sometimes shaken by disappointing experiences (“You do the paperwork, you

follow the procedures, and afterwards it gets filed away: no follow-up"). And if she thinks that in certain cases "there are no solutions," this does not take away the *idée fixe* that there could be "results."

In many respects, Agnès's comments recall scenes from Bertrand Tavernier's film *L.627*. There is the daily routine of the "cop's job," the tension between on the one hand the sports side, the taste for risk and everything that goes with it, like the camaraderie among team members confronted with the same dangers and the same obstacles, and on the other hand, the routine and the inanity of governmental bureaucracy. But the sources fueling these two representations of police activity are different. No doubt because it has to obey genre conventions, the film stylizes situations and characters to the point that it sometimes skirts the stereotypes of police films.

Throughout this ephemeral and singular interaction, Agnès constantly shifted from indignation at everything that jeopardized her "work" to affirmation of everything she has invested in it (especially providing a route out of her status as a woman from the provincial petite bourgeoisie). From this, perhaps, comes the irony that marks her views, common among those who take their jobs seriously while seeing them valued so little or fulfilled so badly. It is undoubtedly her awareness of the most absurd aspects of the exercise of her function – those, it is true, to which she does not seem to give great importance, meaning the ones with which she does not *identify* ("all these things you have to do and have to put on paper") – that explains her sarcastic presentation, in dialogues and short skits, of the problems she encounters and the suffering they cause: "everybody I know, colleagues a year ahead of me, they all say, 'no more anxiety for me because I'm going to make officer.'" In short, her dream and her nightmare.

with a young police inspector

— interview by Remi Lenoir

"The rookies who arrive . . . from the first year they break them down"

Agnès In the district police stations¹ there is first of all the problem of time and means, because when we have a complaint, for example shoplifting, they bring us the guy, you take the complaint and you have to wait for the report from the police on patrol. When that report is written, it puts the individual at our disposal. This report, sometimes you wait three hours for it because the officer has to go off again, and go type it up . . . If it's shoplifting in a store,

the owner doesn't want to come right away, "they're working, they've other things to

¹ The district police stations are under the judicial investigative branch of the police; based here are the plainclothes policemen charged with investigations and with receiving investigative complaints, declarations, etc. For the definitions of the functions and customs of police institutions, the reader is referred to the glossary in the book by M. Jeanjean, *Un ethnologue chez les policiers* (Paris: Metaillié, 1990).

do," etc. They'll file a complaint later, but we absolutely have to have the complaint because the guy will probably be taken to court. So we have to wait too for the store-owner to come and by the time the owner comes it is five minutes to seven!

— *And you keep him in the police lockup?*

Agnès We keep him. If there is still no complaint, we wait for the complaint from the store-owner. Then once we have it, the man is taken into custody. He has to go before the judge at six, for example, and it's four now. We call a van to go to the jail. At five to six, the van isn't yet there because there's another problem, etc. It's like that all the time. You waste lots of time.

— *What happens when the guy is caught red-handed and he can go under the flagrante delicto procedure?*

Agnès In general, he is sent up when a fairly large amount has been taken, when he has resisted arrest, or when he has injured someone. When it's a small amount, his fingers were itchy, in that case he is not pursued but he is listed with us, or else there's a summons, which means we call the *procureur* [public prosecutor] to get an appointment. But for that, you have to be sure of the residence, so you need to do a residence verification, run around left and right, which also takes time... The big problem with shoplifting is with foreigners in an irregular situation. We don't deal with them, it's the 8th section of the RG [*les renseignements généraux*: intelligence bureau]. But given that it's a matter for judicial investigation, it has to come through the police station; so you have to have a file at the station; I think it's for the statistics. So... with a report from Sécurité Publique [*brings together all the urban police forces, essentially the uniformed police in the police station*]. We fill out the preprinted forms, "presented such a day, at such an time, before such an OP [OP]: *Officier de police judiciaire, or criminal investigative officer, a title that authorizes certain categories of inspectors and captains to pursue and establish the existence*

of offenses (through searches, etc.) and to turn their perpetrators over to the police (signature of custody, rogatory commission plea, etc.)], the person has no papers, transfer to the judicial identity service requested." That's it, you just put that; later, it's the RG that deals with the business. So then, like getting the van, it's the same thing. The RGs take people in an irregular situation until 5 p.m. If the person was arrested before 5 p.m. it goes to the RG, and if it's after that, we have to deal with it. The other day, they had the guy arrested at 3.30, they brought him in at 6.30. Without official custody we can only keep him for four hours, for an identity check, at 6.30 he was brought to the RG. It was too late...

— *So what do you do in cases like that?*

Agnès That time we sent him to the RG anyway, and the RG didn't want anything to do with it because it was seven o'clock when they got there. So it came back to the police station; but at the police station, it's closed at night. So we send them to the 5th DPJ [judicial investigative division]. It's like that all the time. Instead of going directly to the RG! It's an incredible waste of time.

— *And what's it due to?*

Agnès It's due to statistics, it's for the judicial investigative division whereas the RG don't do procedures at all, that's why it had to come back! The RG deal with foreigners because it's supposedly an information source! If they can obtain information like that, it beats me, it's really... absurd. The other problems are with the plaintiffs. They come: "Someone stole my car." You take down the information, you find the car, the television, and they aren't happy: "The insurance isn't going to reimburse me."

— *They complain that their things get found!*

I really can't stand someone who comes in to file a complaint and withdraws it three days later

Agnès Almost: "That's it, Madame, we have found your car. Can you come around

right away?" At night we arrest for example a "radio snatcher" – someone who's broken into a car and stolen a car radio – we arrest him right in the act. Usually it happens on the weekend. He spends the night at the station, in custody. The next morning you have to contact the victim. So we contact the victim: "Madame, we have arrested the thief who broke your windshield, you have to come to the station to file a complaint." So we telephone them at 9 a.m., they come at 2 p.m. because it's Sunday (during the week it's the same, they're working). Then we give them back their car radio: "So, Madame, are you filing a complaint?" "Ah no, I am not filing a complaint, I have my car radio. That's enough for me, you see, I don't want to have trouble with the law and all that." It's the same with pickpockets. We catch one in the act, the lady sees him, she gets her purse back but she doesn't want to file a complaint! It's nuts because when we find stolen goods, often we don't have the owner's name. So during a search, we find some car radios. We note the make, the model and the serial number on the computer, it doesn't come back "belongs to M. So-and-so," but "not listed," "not listed," "not listed." People don't do their part!

— *Why don't they want to file a complaint? Are they afraid?*

Agnès They're afraid of reprisals, "they're going to know my name, my address." But the thieves couldn't care less. If they get caught, they get caught. For them, that's it.

— *And for you it's a problem, the fact they don't file complaints?*

Agnès Not really, since the public prosecutor is free to pursue them once the facts are passed on.

— *And you call the procurator regularly?*

Agnès No, it's the judicial investigative division who call as soon as there is someone in custody, in *flagrante delicto*. Even a minor, they call the public prosecutor to find out if the person should be arrested or released... Personally, it infuriates me. For assault and battery, it's the same between husbands and wives: "I'm making a com-

plaint, my husband beat me eight days ago." We take the complaint because she insists. I am sure that three days later, when we've issued a summons to the husband, the lady will be in to withdraw her complaint, because they do not want to get divorced: because of the children and all that... So all the time it's the same, we do the paperwork, we do the procedure and then it's filed: not followed up, not even for assault and battery!

— *And there, the public prosecutor cannot prosecute?*

Agnès For assault and battery between husband and wife, I don't think he'll prosecute; he can prosecute if ever it's very serious, but in general it's nothing at all. He prosecutes, it's true, but not for small things, car radio thefts, things like that, in general, no.

We push papers, that's all

— *He does it systematically?*

Agnès That's right, custody and summons to appear; but for shoplifting, 200 francs, he doesn't prosecute. I think that's 500 francs. It's the store-owners who want absolutely to file a complaint anyway, even if we know very well that it will be filed as "no follow-up." We generally let it pass, unless the person resisted, or if they stole 40 francs and hurt somebody, there we take the complaint. But in general, it's also filed away! Same for bounced checks, 150 francs, 200 francs, it's filed, and it's no good our taking the complaint... It's filed! There are too many things...

— *In the end, as a police inspector, you have the same work, whatever the seriousness of the facts, whether it's a stolen handbag or a check for 2 million francs...*

Agnès Theoretically, under the law it's specified. But in reality, no. For burglaries, when it's a simple investigation, the identification services don't have enough personnel, four of them for all of Paris or something like that; so for burglaries we're going to do the reports ourselves. We only call in judicial identification when the amount is fairly high, meaning over

100,000 francs; but we can go make a report too, if there is a good fingerprint on the window, even if there is almost nothing, we go...

— *You have to know in advance that there is a good print?*

Agnès It's the complainant who tells us, "there's a print." We check it out, but the thing is that the fingerprint only works for certain surfaces and when it's pressed in hard. In general prints are smudged... For example, there is a break-in worth 500,000 francs, we're going to bring in judicial identification on account of the sum. We can see perfectly well there isn't a print, that what print there is, it's smudged, it's unusable, but we have to call anyway to cover ourselves. On a small burglary case, there might perhaps be a good print: but the identity services only act when it's more than 100,000 francs or when there is something a bit fishy... (...) That's it. For a burglary, you have to seize the crowbar, etc. So you have to put the crowbar under seal... But at the court clerk's office, they have hundreds of crowbars, millions of them. It's fine but it's no good. In fact what we do is we push paper, that's all!

— *You fill out a lot of forms?*

Agnès Yes, there are lots of papers, there are more and more of them. Every action that we undertake, we have to put it on paper, "today, I went to this place, I visited that person. We received telephone contacts," everything, everything!

— *The papers are necessary for the insurance, aren't they?*

The victims have more confidence in insurance companies than in the police (...) So it's hardly worth us being there

Agnès Now, the insurance... Victims don't come to the police to declare a theft but to do a paper for the insurance, because they have more confidence in insurance companies than in the police.

— *Insurance requires a paper from the police?*

Agnès Yes, the insurance requires a paper from the police. So the victims come in, "what was stolen from you?" "They stole my television." "What brand?" "I don't know, but I have the papers. Now, in the first place it's a 3,000 franc television" (always what it's worth; we don't give a shit about what it's worth). "What brand?" "I don't know, but I have the receipts I have to send to the insurance." At the insurance company they're going to say to them, what model, what series? And there they're going to tell them everything, but to the police: no. I recently received a list from a break-in at a store. I said to the lady, "you write down everything that was stolen: how many pullovers, color, brand, yes, yes, yes." I get the list, it's got a reference number: "8536, quantity 2, value so much." So try and find something with that! Nowadays my solution is that I don't take a burglary complaint unless I have the receipts or all the references. We are working for the insurance companies (...)

— *Because people don't make a declaration...*

Agnès Yes, sometimes, but people would say "they stole my car radio, a Phillips." But they aren't going to put the model and the serial number. So then it's a fight. We send a telegram, "during the investigation, we found this, please inform if a complaint of theft has been filed." So we have to wait for the sergeant who comes to check it out. People don't think of it, it's nuts, but they think of it for the insurance, that I don't understand. I tell them often, "you're here for the insurance or to find your car radio?" For the insurance, obviously. Once we find it for them, they aren't happy. It's hardly worth us being there: "you see my insurance has reimbursed me, I don't have time, it was too old," etc.

— *People don't think that you're going to find their things?*

Agnès Right, people are convinced that we're not going to find things and we too see that we'll only recover the goods when we catch somebody right in the act. It's true that with the investigation it's rare, because

we have no clues, and because when we investigate in the neighborhood: "police," and they're not going to open up: "no corpse in my house." Whereas the false policemen, I don't know how they do it with a red, white and blue card, they get in wherever they want. And we don't: "I didn't see anything, I wasn't there." And even if they did see: "I don't want to come in, I work, I've got other things to do," "I don't want my name to appear," etc. Nobody saw anything, heard anything. Conversely, there is also the case where the complainant has suspicions about everybody. So there we try to reason – "if it's not true, it could turn back on you" – because we generally know if the suspicions are founded or if in fact...

— *You know?*

Agnès Yes, and then we get a sense of the person in front of us. We see a bit...

— *It's the job that gives...?*

Agnès If someone tells us a certain thing, if there's a basis for it, we note it; if not, if it's because the neighbor was there at such a time, he did this, he did that. You have to see. You look around a little.

— *And your relations with the courts?*

Agnès It depends on the court, some courts are very repressive, some – we call them "far left" – they're soft: "the poor dears, it's not their fault"; so it depends on the courts.

— *And the judges' laxity bothers you?*

Agnès Yeah, because for the pickpocketing for example, we take so many complaints and then, for pickpocketing, when you see them doing it, it's really complicated to catch them; a pickpocket in the act, too, because as soon as they drop the wallet, that's it, they didn't do it, not them, and when we get one and you hear "summons to appear or release," because there isn't enough proof, even though they are known, we have a whole bunch of stuff on them. But without proof...

— *Without proof?*

Agnès In these cases "it's the policeman's word against the crook's word." The policeman will say "I saw him take the..." and

he'll say: "No, no, no, I had nothing on me, it [the wallet] was on the ground, I found it, I picked it up," etc. So there are some who believe the crook, well that's how it is, and then others, no. So in this case, we don't find out what the sentence is once he's arrested, we don't know what happens to him.

— *You don't follow it up...*

Agnès We have a telephone number. Sometimes, after a good job, we'd like to know what he got. So sometimes we telephone to find out and they tell us that this guy got three months, or nothing at all, or a fine that he can't even pay.

— *Does it interest you to have the follow-up?*

Agnès Yes, to find out what happened to them, if we've worked for something or for nothing. Yes.

— *Because you have the impression of having worked for nothing if the guy...*

Agnès If he's let go: even though you did all the interviews: you went to bed at nine in the evening, etc. And it comes out: "the poor kid, it was the first time." There are times too when it's just the reverse. It happened to me three times, it really pissed me off to see these guys sent to court. We saw that he really was a delinquent, but a *poor delinquent*, he'd done it, but really he had no choice. For me, send him to court for that, no!

Enough to make you despair

— *What had they done?*

Agnès There was one guy, he pinched car radios, that's all he did... He had already been to prison six times and gotten out. He hadn't found a job, nothing at all. So, back in he went. So he told me, "I don't wanna go back to prison, I dunno what I'm going to do if I go back there. I lived for three weeks after I got out on what I had earned in prison, because I worked, but then I didn't find work and I had to..." – given that he had already been in prison six times, he was obviously sent down, he couldn't avoid it, it was the seventh time. Another time there was a couple, a young guy, a

mother and then a kid 20 months old. The parents had stolen a bag with a credit card, checkbook and they went shopping, they bought jewelry, Cartier pens. The man was well dressed and the woman, you saw she was a poor girl. They did that, they were very nice, they acknowledged the facts, and well, he was handed over, she, given that she had her kid, she wasn't handed over. We sensed that it was the first time, we sensed that for her it was either drugs or prostitution, if she continued to live with this man. That was it: she was unemployed and all that... He was bizarre, he was well dressed, from a good family. In his wallet there were photos of his apartment, it was comfy. I don't have any idea why he did that. He had already done time, it made me think a little of Bonnie and Clyde. Enough to make you despair!

The third one was a burglary that we figured out after an investigation. It was a young teenager, he was maybe 17, 18. He let himself be dragged along by thugs, and he really didn't have the profile of a delinquent. But he did time; he was in provisional detention. I'm sure that afterwards he'll never steal again, ever, that's for sure. You have others, real delinquents, they only do that and they laugh at you because they know that we don't have proof, things like that. They know the procedure...

— *Yes. What do you see as the solution...*

Agnès For the first group, if you gave them jobs, they'd do it, that would be the end of it.

— *And the others?*

Agnès The others will never work. They are shiftless. They'd rather make 500 francs in five minutes than work three months. You see that right away, the delinquents, the regulars. Even if they had a job, they'd still steal. We see them, pick them up: they already have a job, waiters or something like that, and well, they still keep it up... They've already been to prison, they know it all. There is no solution. Maybe they could sort themselves out — I'm talking about delinquents 18 to 25, stealing a scooter, etc.; maybe when they're older they'll

be able to sort themselves out; then again maybe the sentence isn't heavy enough. For scooter theft, stealing a moped, you get a fine and "watch out, the next time you'll go to prison." They start in again, but they still don't go to prison because they'll get three months suspended sentence, prison is really, it's at the end of I don't know how many times. There is almost never...

— *You think so?*

Agnès For this kind of delinquency, car radios, petty theft, I think so, given the prisons are overflowing and all that. It's always a fine or suspended sentence. I think that if you take them from the first time, you give them a real scare, it might work at least for some: "watch out, for shoplifting, the first time, fine, the next time, it's jail." With some, it scares them, who aren't used to it, the son of the engineer who did that for I don't know what reason. But for the guy who is with thugs all the time in the zone over there, there is nothing to be done. You have to crack down. When he gets out of prison he has no job and what's more, because he's been in prison, he's going to start up again. Community service doesn't help anything. I have seen some, it's really a nice idea, but there's no room, for example there are 1,000 people who want a community service place but there aren't 1,000 spots, and then, for what they make them do!...

— *And relations with the courts?*

Agnès That's within the framework of the CRs:² should we go for a search warrant to look for guns or something like that, or should we not go in? In principle, it's up to the judge to decide. We telephone the judge who says "fine, you continue the questioning or bring him in to me." There he's arraigned, but the CR, I can't tell you much about it because I don't remember anymore what we studied in class and we don't deal with everything. It's up to the judicial investigation.

² A Rogatory Commission is an authorization for cause delivered by the examining magistrate to proceed to a certain number of actions within a criminal investigation.

You're always afraid of forgetting something

— *And what do you think of the verdicts?*

Agnès A case lost on account of penal procedure because we forgot something, a legal technicality, something of that kind: you type a word on the machine and then you put in the margin another word, or at the end of the sentence you put... so a case thrown out for just for that! We do stupid things like that, because we haven't done things as they should be done... I think this shouldn't exist, there ought to be a procedure, but not so strict. Lawyers, even when their client pleads guilty, they're still going to look for holes in the case, and that's really unacceptable.

— *What does that mean to become a judicial investigative officer*

Agnès I'll tell you, a year ahead of time you start being afraid, it's agonizing. Everyone I know, colleagues who are a year ahead of me, they say "I'm really worried, I'm going for OPJ," because you feel you don't know everything, and there are so many things to know. It's unbelievable, you're always afraid of forgetting something, because there are so many things to do at the same time, you're afraid of forgetting some little thing or of not knowing what to do when it comes up, lots of people are afraid...

— *Yes, because it's the responsibilities...*

Agnès The responsibilities are huge, huge, and it hangs over your head.

— *How do they prepare you for them?*

Agnès I had never studied law, but the penal code is interesting; I had never done labor law, not at all. It's interesting. They teach us all that in school from a theoretical viewpoint. For example, the administrative police. You forget it if you don't practice it. They have police training programs in Paris, and you learn the administrative police by spending a week at the counter, lost and found, lost identity cards, and afterwards it's not the counter anymore,

it's weapon permits, adoption requests... Those we almost never do: what's the right form? what do I have to do, etc. That you learn on the job, taking things out of the files, you look up "weapon permits" and then you copy it out. And then parking tickets... The police station is the base, if you want to be an inspector, you have to spend time there because it's where you learn everything and after two, three years, you rise.

— *One can rise?*

Agnès To get to Paris inside the organization is very easy; afterwards, to go into the provinces is something else.

— *It's more difficult?*

Agnès Oh yes, it takes 15 years.

— *Really?*

Agnès It's simple, in the competition for inspectors there are maybe 10 percent Parisians and the rest from the provinces; and they don't want to work in Paris, they prefer their patch over the police stations in Paris. They are very young, the inspectors in Paris, 26, something like that. The farther south you go, the older they are! Around my home they are 40, 55.

— *And you'd very much like to go back home?*

Agnès I'd like to, for the climate, and so on; but from the standpoint of relations with the old inspectors, no. Seniority, I can cope with that, but not the mindset, no way.

— *Why?*

Agnès They are blasé, they've seen it all: "no, it's not worth doing that, it won't be followed up." They let themselves go; they drink. The younger ones, now, less and less, it's disappearing. A few years ago, but it's starting to disappear. That's it, they are blasé: "it's not even worth going in, he'll deny everything." They have their post, they've been appointed to their post, and they'll be there until they retire, they don't have a care in the world. We have one of them here. He's been here 14 years, we've almost never seen him go out on a search or anything else. So the young ones, the rookies who arrive and want to do searches and all that and, right from the first year

they break them down, "it's not worth it, what can you do? drop it." They're blasé.

— *And judicial investigative work is more interesting?*

Agnès That is more interesting, the work is more interesting, it's like what you see on TV... Not on TV, that's the investigation; here we take the complaints. Here we have a case, for a big check fraud, we had a CR. But it wasn't practical because there had to be a hearing in Madrid or in Germany. So that stuff won't come down to us, it'll go to a specialized branch. That's why at the local police stations in Paris, the CRs are pretty rare, they are very specific, only for someone from the district. To pursue an investigation of something like that, because in principle the CR is when the facts are pretty serious. It's not for one small bounced check. It goes high, it's either the DPJ who's going to take it, or the BRB [Brigade de répression du banditisme, acting against] or an office for special assignments (that I haven't seen yet). As soon as there's an element for investigation, it goes on up.

— *It gets sent right away to a specialized branch?*

Agnès A burglary over 100,000 francs goes to the judicial investigation division, because they have more time to deal with this business and they have the means. Because in Paris there's more delinquency and somewhat more serious crimes: murders, things like that. There are more in Paris than in a département, I don't know; in the department of Tarn there must be one murder every so many... I don't know; they are not so used to it...

— *In Paris, Lyon, Marseille, in any case, that's where there are specialized branches, there are even specialized judges...*

Agnès 7th section, 8th, 12th...

— *And would you like to go into a branch like that?*

Agnès I would. What I love are swindles, credit card, Eurocheques, everything to do with fraud, so it's the office of the 5th in Paris, and later... the directorate of the judicial investigative division in Paris.

Personally, I like investigations

— *Why are you interested in that?*

Agnès I don't know, maybe because the investigation, ... there's more investigation, there's more success: a burglary, if nobody saw anything or heard anything, you'll never find the guys, unless sometimes, during a search, once from time to time. But with credit card fraud, at the store when the owner describes the person, people compare if it's the owner of the credit card or somebody else, and then, one day, just by using a credit card to get gas, the man has noted the car registration number... there is more of an investigation.

— *And more results?*

Agnès With forged or stolen checks, we find them more, so there're more results, I really love investigations, pursuing investigations. There are other parts of the police where there are just arrests... personally, I like investigations.

— *Are there women among your colleagues who are interested in the judicial investigative division, in other aspects of that division?*

Agnès Yes, it seems so, women now in the police stations, but there are not all that many women: in a promotion group there is a quarter of women inspectors. You find them in the police stations and then they rise, like everybody else. It's certain that at the BRB or in a branch where you have to go question a guy, you really have to be hefty, there are fewer women, but there are some... for sure there are women... And where you find a lot is with juveniles: I think that there are 50 percent women now, 50 percent men. I hate that. In Paris, people are not surprised that there is a woman inspector, but when I go to the provinces...

— *They don't believe it?*

Agnès Because it's, how many, 10 or so years ago I think, a dozen, since the first women graduated, in '79, and they're still in Paris. Very few of them have gone to the provinces, and that's why.

— *Juveniles, that's it. Are there areas reserved for women?*

Agnès In the beginning, women inspectors got put in the juvenile squad; little by little things have opened up in other branches, in this police station we're young, maybe that's why we are better accepted; I couldn't tell you about the other services... It's certain that when there's a search, they're not going to take a girl.

— *It depends, right?*

Agnès It they know that the guy is dangerous, they won't take a girl.

— *But they'll protect her?*

Agnès Yes. We were in the police station, out in the street we heard "stop thief! stop thief!" right next to us, I passed everyone and I was the first one behind the thief, I had two colleagues behind me who ran, I caught the guy, they said to me "we ran fast, but we tried to run faster because we were afraid for you." I hadn't even thought if he [the thief] had a knife or a tear gas bomb, I just took off running like that. "We were afraid so we ran faster."

In general, the commissioner of police does it to get the money

— *What are the relationships you have with the OPJs, do they stand apart?*

Agnès In the police station, no. Well, there's a hierarchy; there's the commissioner, the inspectors and the investigators. And there is the OPJ. Here it's "Monsieur le commissaire" and it's formal; while the OPJs, that's something else, that's the real police, it's what I always love.

— *And what does the commissioner do?*

Agnès Manages the station... In general the commissioners, it's not a reproach, they are there to make money, to do their confiscations, do their evictions, do the coffin, etc.

— *"Do the coffin"?*

Agnès Doing a coffin means that as soon as you're going to bury someone, when you close the coffin, there has to be someone from the police station to see if it's the

same person who's in the coffin and who's dead. The commissioner is supposed to do it but he sends a delegate, still, he's the one who'll get paid; I think it's 72 francs a coffin. There are different types of commissioners, there are commissioners who do it because they are passionate about it and commissioners for the dough. In their case, they're going to choose the district where there's a hospital, where there's a cemetery, there you have it. So there are police stations that rate high for the cemetery or the hospital. In good spots, in good arrondissements, they make a million a month [10,000 francs] on top of their salary. Eviction, seizure, doing coffins. Doing a coffin, for instance, if you're an official, it's 10 francs and not even six months ago there was a note to the effect that we would no longer make 10 francs because on the bill it was marked 10 francs and that offended the families. So they won't give us 10 francs, but they will still give 75 francs to the commissioner who never goes near the place himself. And even if one day there's a mistake or something like that, it won't come down to him, it will fall on us because our name is on the sheet! In general the commissioner does it to get the money!

— *Yes?*

Agnès It's true, they do very few investigations themselves. A district police commissioner, if you like, is just not interesting as a... I think that there are jerks, the guys who do it for the money, and then the rest. I'm talking about those who are established.

— *Yes, and the heads of the specialized branches?*

Agnès They're the real chiefs. Those ones in the district police stations, when you have a commissioner who drinks or does a bit of everything, they'll take care of him, find him a place. And that's the place for him.

November 1989

Remi Lenoir

A Living Reproach

André S., age 35, is a judge. Married to a colleague, he has very young children. Husband and wife both come from large provincial cities and practice in one of them. They will no doubt stay there, for domestic reasons (one of them has family there) as much as professional ones: their chances of promotion in the judicial hierarchy, which usually implies considerable geographic mobility, are poor. Both graduates of the *École Nationale de la Magistrature* [National School for the Magistracy] with an “average” ranking, they began their “career” in small provincial courts far from Paris – not very promising for a spectacular career. Moreover – each in a different style but with the same intransigence – they are stubbornly against all “arrangements” that ease the way if not to the (good) “functioning of justice,” then at least to the (good) relations without which, in any organization closed in on itself – and the judiciary is one of them – there is absolutely no rapid advancement.

The conversation was held one Saturday at the home of André S. While it was taking place, his wife was doing household chores and taking care of one of the children too young to go to daycare. Her self-effacement was not at all accidental. While she is just as implicated in her professional life as her husband is in his, he has, in his own words, “more things to say.” And in fact, while in general they divide up the domestic tasks almost equally, as soon as it comes to discussing “justice,” even in an open-ended conversation like the one we had at the lunch that followed the interview, it is always her husband who takes the floor, as if he were invested with a sort of legitimacy that his wife does not seem to contest – nor his colleagues, for that matter.

André S. scarcely corresponds to media representations of maverick magistrates: “autocratic potentates,” “irresponsible lawmen,” “cold, thin-skinned, narrow-minded people,” etc. These caricatures remind us to what extent the activity of judges is subject to a public scrutiny that is most especially the work of actors with whom they are structurally in conflict (with journalists over the secrecy of the investigation, with politicians over the independence of the law, and with lawyers over the respect for the rights of the defense), and in relation to which judges describe and evaluate their situation: “People talk a lot about us, but we can’t discuss it as we would like to, and when we do, they think we are joking.” The judiciary is in effect a highly hierarchical system in which the voicing of opinions is heavily monitored; unless they have a sufficiently elevated position in the hierarchy, those who speak out are disqualified in the eyes of their peers.

This social definition of the “malaise of the judicial system” came between André S. and me, and if he spoke to me with such frankness and conviction, it was because, among other reasons, he thought he ought to rectify this image. He found a few clues that allowed him to have confidence in me: I was interviewing not just the “hierarchy” nor just magistrates, I was an academic and a sociologist so I was situated outside the judicial game; and I could bear public witness to the malaise, as he experienced it, through my writings and my courses, etc. In short, by setting me up as a confidant, André S. expected in return that I reproduce, by altering it as little as possible, “his” vision of the workings of the judicial world: that of a “ground level” judge, bullied if not broken, whose sole remaining hope was to write a book about the judicial system and what he called, after so many others, the “dysfunctioning of the judicial world,” so as to become a journalist specialized in this field. Was this project just the imaginary inversion of his current reverses in the judicial system? It is clear in any case that the conditions for the expression of a malaise were all present: an encounter between a marginalized human being, made fragile even in his private life in these highly bureaucratic and hierarchized worlds, the “mental” torture is almost always expressed in a latent and agonizing domestic disarray: relocations accompanied by residential moves and hasty reestablishments, isolation, loss of confidence in oneself and in others, etc.) and a sociologist, a social actor of relatively indeterminate status whose function is to “understand” others, possibly to help them, and whose qualities are close to those he would like to find among judges.

The terms in which the problematic is presented, especially in the media – “the independence of the law,” “relations with officers of the judicial police,” “relations with the hierarchy,” “loss of status,” “need for justice,” etc. – has also contributed a great deal to creating the conditions for this sort of self-analysis because they correspond, but in another mode, to André S.’s analysis of himself. This judge, whose whole life has been fashioned by the legal institution and is defined against that institution, finds in the public representation of the “malaise of the judicial system” both the means and the instruments that allow him to express the unease [*mal-être*] that he would not have been able to feel and especially to articulate if his individual destiny were not so tied to the institution itself as it is publicly constituted. Because the proclaimed values of the judicial institution – “rectitude,” “honesty,” “integrity,” “independence,” “public service,” “the common good,” etc. – are those by which he defines himself, and because the restoration of his own identity depends on restoring the very institution that has disappointed him, and torn him apart, it is the institution itself that in some way drove him out by pushing him to quit. It is the malaise that the institution is undergoing that he experiences deep within himself, on account of the preestablished consonance between an institution deserving to be challenged in the name of its own principles and one of its members who has been the most challenged by the institution. This is all the more true since he acts in concert with what ought to be the functioning principle of this universe and which he makes very explicit when he sets forth his own way of judging: “To apply the law with flair, with

sensitivity to people, at the same time as with firmness in certain cases, to find what is necessary and to show that you are there to apply the law, not for vengeance.”

Like his peers, and more particularly those of his generation, André S. has been affected by the collective decline in this profession, at least relative to other judicial or administrative activities, and more generally to the higher public administration (especially the positions to which the *École Nationale d'Administration* gives access) and by the rise in top business professions. But, added to this communally experienced decline, obligatory topic of all current discourse about the judiciary, there is for him disillusionment – all the greater given his high expectations for “*métier*.” In effect everything predisposed him to this investment from which he is not drawing the anticipated profits. His entry into the magistracy resulted from strategies used by the middle classes in the 1960s that aimed at converting a part of their economic capital into educational capital. His father was a prosperous businessman who shared the ideals of social Catholicism. He pushed his son to do graduate study and also fostered in him that sort of availability with respect to others that is constantly reinforced by his religious belief (he is a practicing Catholic). At different times this social awareness took the form of joining the Scout movement, then political or union activism, and it culminated (as is often the case, notably among provincials) in a career in the public service. As with most young judges, even though his parents are not themselves judges, members of his family have exercised legal professions (solicitor and lawyer for a maternal grandfather and an uncle, respectively), which has not been without influence on his professional direction, as he himself says.

His father incarnates both what he is fleeing (“bosses,” “money,” “hierarchy,” the “Right,” etc.) and what has allowed him to flee. After fights with his father, which were also fights with himself, he was freed by his father’s eventual recognition of the positive nature of his son’s vocation “to do a little to defend the general interest, and in particular the interests of people who were in a fix,” and he gained that energy that enables people to surpass themselves, that is to say, to go beyond the guilt often engendered by social mobility or by a break with their family background. “Finally he [his father] recognized it himself; each time he told me, ‘Well, it’s still better “to be a judge” than to be a businessman.’”

Attempts at changing social positions do not proceed without risk to the extent that they are not always accompanied by the attitudes and behavior implicitly required by a social universe opened up by success on a competitive examination: for want of familiarity – and the ease and suppleness it engenders – these new arrivals take very seriously, “to the letter,” the representations that these worlds present of themselves. André S. brings into the legal world the very values from which judges have fashioned their proclaimed professional ideology, but these values do not necessarily govern their practices, especially the ones having to do with the conduct of their “career,” the focus of all the preoccupations and evaluations in the most exclusive corps. His path led to disenchantment due to the distance between how the judicial milieu actually functions and the principles

that André S. thought he would find there: “honesty,” “independence,” “service to the common man,” and “respect for the other.” And if he did not submit to the judicial order, it is as much out of his own moral strength as it is due to the force morality still has in this universe – even if it is constantly transgressed in the name of “career” imperatives. “Career management is something that judges think about a lot.”

If he presents his career as a succession of trying episodes, it is perhaps less because his behavior and his manner got him “a bad assessment” – though he is still very affected by this – than in the name of an inaccessible moral ideal: “the passion for justice.” Everything predisposed him to adhere to the explicit rule of the judicial game, and especially to refuse to reckon with the “unwritten rules” that pervert the function of the magistrate as he conceived it before entering the school for the magistracy: “honesty doesn’t pay.” The most remarkable element in André S.’s views is undoubtedly the total identification between his way of conceiving of justice, which he still wants to apply, and the way he represents himself. So that if the judicial system has gone wrong, if certain judges are “deplorable,” “nonentities,” “tight-laced,” etc., it is because everything in this universe pains him, “nonentity judges who send shivers up his back,” “the president of the court who makes a woman cry because she had committed a theft when she was separated from her common-law husband”: “I am ill at ease putting up with, or rather being associated with such harshness, it’s true that sometimes you’re ashamed.” This sense of malaise is reinforced by the logic of the functioning of the corps of magistrates: their powerlessness, their “mediocrity,” their “laziness” and their “cowardice” relative to both their own hierarchy and those of other actors in the legal field (policemen, gendarmes or lawyers), and even the political field (Ministry of Justice, local elites). The least that can be said is that he has suffered from it, as his narrative makes clear. But he has suffered because as a result of working so hard “to do his work in peace” and “to do it well,” that is, “honestly,” everything conspired against him: “the hierarchy” (his own but also that of other parties taking part in the legal game), union officials ready to compromise with the Ministry of Justice, and even he himself, when he was threatened with being fired, “took on, a bit, the values of the system.”

But it is perhaps his exaltation of those “terrific judges,” “lawyers who do their jobs well,” and even appreciative criminals – in short, all the “worthy people” – that shows most sharply what is at the source of André S.’s suffering. Having invested everything in defending a (“noble”) cause (which he does in his job, in his union, and more generally in a kind of volunteer work with regard to anyone in distress), he has shut off any way out (notably as a lawyer), all of which brings him, after having been challenged himself, to “challenge” everything, “the system” as well as “himself.”

“Who should judge the judge’s work?” This is the question he tries to answer throughout the interview, at the same time analyzing all the things in the judges’ methods of advancement that run counter to his representation of the concept of justice. In recounting the humiliations he has been subjected to and the conducts

that have scandalized him (the “false scale”), he also reveals aspects of how the judicial world functions to reach its “decisions” and “judgments.” It is above all the touching description of what he sees as the only way of restoring the credibility of the institution (“its legitimacy to judge”) – citing the “work that the judge actually accomplishes,” the “breadth” and “class” with which he does it, as well as its evaluation by all the actors (colleagues, lawyers, police officers and the condemned themselves with whom he has been dealing) – that recalls like an echo, through what it rejects, the real law of how the field functions and what its assumptions are.

Behind the judge’s independence he sees submission to the hierarchy, behind the power of justice, dependence on the police (if not politicians), behind serenity, hatred, behind firmness, timidity, etc. “Doing things that are ordinary in themselves, you realize that it’s becoming scandalous.” All the more disappointed in that he cannot give up his belief in the necessity of the judicial institution (it would be “vengeance” without it) and prisoner of his illusions and his dreams, he sees no other way out than writing a book about “things that ought to be criticized and which go unsaid.” It would be the only way for him to continue to carry on in this universe that he cannot quit without losing what he sees as his value and, what he is seeking by all means to have recognized, “his honesty,” and even his “humanity,” that is, everything that “passes for good in his eyes” and which he would not be able to have appreciated in other professional universes where what counts is “money.” The identification with this institution that has made him a “martyr” by making him suffer intensely is the source of his reform projects. The more he is rejected, the more he hangs on, if only symbolically: his social rehabilitation passes through the rehabilitation of this institution. The very reforms that he proposes bear the marks of the value system he incarnates. Out of the fundamentals of his rejection, he elaborates a project that can only be his own and must be recognized as such, since it is the only means, in his eyes, of a full reconciliation with a universe that is his whole life and his whole passion.

with a judge

— *interview by Remi Lenoir*

“That’s what’s so awful, doing things that are ordinary in themselves, you realize that it’s becoming scandalous”

— *What do you like about being a judge?*

André What I liked about being a judge was the notion of independence, having a profession... the public function was to

work for the public and not have a boss, not have... Yes, not have a boss, simply to fulfill the function that the law prescribes, to respect the law and to serve the common good. And what I liked, too, in relation to

that, was the notion of justice and at the same time the notion of human contact, meaning to apply the law with flair, with sensitivity to people, in certain cases firmly, to find out what is necessary and show that you are there to apply the law, not for vengeance. In short, everything good in the judicial institution on the level of principles; because in its principle the judicial institution remains absolutely indispensable. I think that it represents progress in civilization. All that seemed good to me.

— *How did that idea come to you?*

André By reading the papers a little and then I read a book...

— *At what age approximately?*

André I read that when I must have been in the first year at university, something like that, I must have read it, my grandfather had me read it, a book by a retired examining magistrate. And when I wanted to find it later, I couldn't find it. It's an examining magistrate who talks about his job and I liked it well enough when I was 18... Meanwhile in the press at the time there were the debates of the magistrates' union, and people talked about that; I also went to debates in university about different problems, it was great that there were people like that who thought about their way of trying to work, and advancing their profession. The job seemed interesting to me, I guess. So the job was interesting because there were contacts with people, there were direct implications, encounters, and what's more it touched all areas of life and at the same time there was this notion of good and evil... The judge has an important responsibility, totally on his own he must try to see what is just. I have a rather idealistic conception of things and I generally believe pretty strongly in the truth so perhaps I was less worried than others who said "ah, but the truth... each person has their own truth... the truth doesn't mean anything," etc. I am more pragmatic, I try to have "common sense" in quotation marks and I think that some things are wrong; so it... I believe in the force of the truth, also. So when people are telling the

truth, you feel it. I really liked all that. I knew that obviously there were career problems, there were limits to that independence, but I told myself "if you don't want to make a career at least you can stay quietly in your corner, it will be fine."

— *With the same values you could have become... a lawyer...*

André A lawyer, what bothered me at the time, was that...

— *Or even a doctor...*

André Yes, the liberal profession aspect. A doctor – I wasn't attracted by medicine, I don't have a scientific mind. A lawyer – two things bother me, saying things I don't think, because it's true that at times lawyers are led to defend positions that they don't completely share, even if it's a worthy... and even if some always say what they're thinking at all times; and then there was also the fact, the logic of lawyers: it's always to earn more and more money, which I don't like; it's this relationship with money that seemed complicated to me, while I found that it was good thing to be on a straight salary, you were there in the public service, that seemed a good thing to me. In the image that I had of lawyers, it was the risk of getting carried away by money, running your office, being overloaded with work and not seeing the essentials. Ah, yes... the notion of public service seemed important to me. (...) When I passed the exam toward the end of the 1970s, there wasn't the vogue for Tapie¹ and earning...

— *Yes. It's that that has changed a little...?*

André Yes, absolutely. At the time, on the contrary, you didn't want to work for a boss; the notion of public service was important; I wasn't interested in making lots of money – on the contrary, I was even shocked about it; I didn't want to take money from other people; but to render public service, I find that it's a good thing, to have a salary for serving the common good.

¹ Bernard Tapie, controversial self-made millionaire and politician. [Tr.]

— *Were you an activist in your youth?...*

André Ah yes.

— *...the Scouts, something like that...*

André I was very activist, I am a practicing Catholic, I mean, I've always been an activist; when I took my exams I was in the Socialist Party; at university I belonged to a student movement and was one of the principal organizers. In the army, too.

— *And were you a Scout?*

André I was Scout, right, but not for long, it didn't impress me especially.

— *Yes, but in fact you've always been someone who worked for groups...*

André That's right. (...) For example, my father, he recognized it himself, each time he would tell me "well, it's still better than being a businessman." He said, in his mind he said, "I worked for my own benefit, even in doing my work honestly there is a dimension that's left out." So he admitted it. Let's say I was always passionate about political questions in a general way, I always tried to defend the general interest a little and in particular the interest of people in a fix.

— *Yes, your parents fostered that...*

André Totally, yes. Even my father, even my father as a businessman. He was on the right, but he was a guy who said he didn't pay enough taxes, that there weren't enough... that people didn't give enough money to the poor, he was a little... on the right but with a social conscience, a little more than...

— *Social Catholicism?...*

André An altruist and for equity, or rather, for a certain social justice, that's it... it marked me for sure.

A passion for justice

André At the School [for magistrates] I was a little disappointed, in a certain way rather, by... it's stupid, it's a first impression, but by my colleagues; you see how, they were good students, good pupils but at the same time they were a little lacking in personality, in the sense that I think that to be a good judge you have to have a little freedom, a little detachment, a little independ-

ence and courage, a little forcefulness; those people were more... good students who had learned their lessons well, who were capable of memorizing an article but who lacked, in my opinion, just that extra touch of soul necessary for a good judge. Perhaps they lacked a passion for justice, some of them in any case, and then a little personality, and then a little interest in the general will, and then the desire to explain their decisions... they lacked some public sense, in the general sense because they lacked...

— *They didn't have the vocation, they were there but they could have been doing something else?*

André Yes, they were high on the title without seeing the duties of the function, or what one represented, or what one ought to do, or what that implied about being at people's service or as a challenge or as basic human qualities and... ah yes, I was a little disappointed in a general way, but that said, I met some very nice guys. But the first impression, overall that was it, and then I had seen some who tried the exam, who failed, who were much more sympathetic. That was a little, yes, a little bit of a "detective story" in quotation marks; some of them were good from a legal standpoint, but in my opinion, it wasn't enough. (...) And finally, the mentality. At the Magistrates' School, it was different because we hadn't yet been nominated to a post; and then it was a place where you discussed ideas, you could ask a certain number of questions. But when you arrive in the corps, you see that there are a good many people who stopped asking questions a long time ago, who work in a routine way, who don't care about their work, but I'd say to myself "at least I will do my work in peace," and when I do it well, that will be that, eh!

— *Yes, yes, you've always thought you could do it...*

André Without getting dirty myself, you see, without...

— *That's it. You could make yourself autonomous from the others?*

André Yes, since I wanted to have a specific position, I wanted to be an examining magistrate, so I told myself that I...

— *You knew that from the beginning?*

André Oh! practically right away, I knew that... at first it was the criminal aspect that interested me the most, there were human relationships, and then the pretrial questioning was a job where you had responsibilities, contact with people, a certain power despite everything and then a way of perceiving things, questioning people, all that was interesting. And then the intellectual aspect of understanding people, the curiosity aspect too...

— *It's the aspect of the penal code least like a "detective story," right?*

André Yes, the least technical, the least...

— *At least, apparently...*

André Yes, but even in a general way, it is the aspect that requires the least legal knowledge, at first sight, for the bulk of the cases anyway. But it's also the most human, it's there where you meet the most people. That's what I liked. And then I thought that I could do it, so in total independence and in my own way, without being bothered by... and I thought I could do it honestly and then what disappointed me was that in always exercising my functions honestly — this is later, when I got a position — they tried to fire me several times, while I saw people who were intellectually dishonest, or completely casual in relation to their work, they got the promotions, or who did things that weren't correct, who buried cases, or who on the contrary sentenced people when there was reasonable doubt, and who had made a career, etc. I wasn't looking to make a career, I asked that they let me do my job in peace. Several times they pressured me to leave examining, they wanted to fire me... I found that the whole hierarchy was shabby, in my case anyway the hierarchy was shabby; not one guy said "no, let's see what this is really about"; and then guys who lied about me and said trashy things got promoted. They even had the fastest promotions you can get, but they were

intellectually poor and morally deplorable... Deplorable. All that obviously disgusted me a little.

— *Yes...*

André What has to be said is that whereas at the Magistrates' School I didn't work to the maximum, I took advantage of life a little, in this position I have always done my work, I have always been a hard worker, an honest worker, I didn't run after work, but everything there was to be done in the interest of the defendant, I never wanted to forget something and I did all my work properly and certain periods I worked 12 hours a day, I worked Saturdays, I worked Sundays, because there was a judge absent, I didn't want the defendants in prison to pay; and when you push yourself like that, in the interest of public service and the only thing the hierarchy sees is that you don't conform to the ideas of your procurator or the police, etc., it's scandalous! So when you give your time, you even damage your health to do your job well and then the only things that the hierarchy sees is that you... that you make waves, that you disturb things, that the decisions you take are not satisfactory, it's really shocking. And all the more so since I had been honest, truly, yes, I was appalled.

[...]

Right now, because I am disappointed, I criticize everyone a bit, perhaps it's too easy... Everybody criticizes everybody, but it's true I feel... I find it doesn't work very well... honestly I felt born to be a judge; I think I could be at least an honest judge and do my job right and I think I have a certain passion, I mean that when it's a case that interests me, that's delicate, I look, I dig, I analyze, and then I fight, if I think it is just... During deliberations, I fight to obtain a release, so I get a release, and the others want conviction, or inversely when I get a conviction while the others are ready to release, when it's my opinion that makes the difference, I'm satisfied, I feel that I've done my job well. So I think I could be a good judge. I have no animosity, no sadism, I think I have a certain humanity, I want

people to respect justice, but not get the impression they're dealing with someone inhuman who wants to make them suffer. But fine, if I can't do this job very effectively, I would like to raise consciousness in the most positive sense possible. Obviously, I'm not excluding being a lawyer, because it's true that the lawyer participates in justice. When a lawyer saves a case, saves their client's neck, it's really moving, when they change the court's opinion, well that's good. I by no means exclude being a lawyer, but there are material problems, technical ones, so I will see if I do it... But yes, for the time being I cannot change the system, I can't; I am not a deputy, I am not the President of the Republic, so the system is what it is, you have at least to advance the ideas. To defend this conception of justice that I have. Defend the spirit, yes... so yes, to have people who have open minds, who have some class and who are capable of self-criticism, who accept being fired at the end of 10 years, if they are not good. People like certain politicians who are used to criticism (they are used to being criticized, but also to defending themselves), they are part of the debate. Judges are not part of the debate. They are in their little corner, they play their little game, they hide, they say to themselves "we're not going to trouble ourselves, let's convict anyway"; they aren't capable of explaining their decision. It's not simply in terms of communication, it's in terms of courage, it's in terms, yes, of presence and humanity, of legitimacy. They have the legitimacy, they don't challenge it. Whereas you have to feel yourself at the service of the defendant.

— *But there are union organizations...*

André A magistrate is not alone against the hierarchy, or rather not completely alone when faced with a problem and we all have the tools for claiming the wherewithal, strikes, for example: a little bit more at the level of budgets; I agree, I go on strike like everybody else. I think it's fine, that it goes in the right direction, but what I think is wrong is that it allows the fact to be covered up that lots of judges don't do a damn

thing and nobody wants to fight about that. Because, out of corporatism, *esprit de corps*, there are lots of idlers in the unions, and when they're asked to do overtime, no one steps in, they protest by saying "it's scandalous" while they don't do a god-damned thing. If they worked, it would seem normal. So that's the problem of unionism, but in the end it's true that it has brought certain things, but at the same time there is, perhaps there is a certain weariness: the magistrates' union is in crisis, perhaps several things needed to be challenged and then there was lots of talk about it and in practice things haven't changed much either. There is this gap between speeches and what gets done; there are congresses where we vote to abolish prison and then on Monday everybody goes home, and on Monday they go right back to throwing people in prison left and right; that's always shocked me. And at such times you're better off reflecting on your own practice by making your own conduct coherent, by saying that you practice prison sentences, you continue to put people in prison and you'll continue to do so; then to try to limit it, to have other possibilities, to see in what cases you accept it, you manage it, see the problems in the carrying out of sentences, etc. But I think it's a false discourse, or rather a false intellectuality that avoids real reflection. To have innovative ideas relieves you of the need to think about what you're doing right now. I'm not much of an activist right now, I do things, I do a little for certain principles; what I reproach the unions for is that when it's a fundamental question of independence, they say "ah, but first you have to wait for the person who is the victim of an act that challenges their independence to fight and to ask for help..." I think that it's not like this, independence should not be defended for this particular individual who is personally attacked, but should be defended as a principle. It's not a matter of defending Mr X, Y or Z, it's defending a principle that ought to be respected absolutely, and that isn't. That is not by any means...

One of the most important things is to know who recognizes you

André Another important limit, though I thought it wasn't as important, is dependence on the police, that is to say, we are completely dependent on the police. Meaning that to make yourself respected, a judge has to have allies in the police. So the judge is the one who is almost always in the asking position, and that's not right, the policemen should obey the judge. So you have to manage to maintain this fiction that we give the orders whereas in fact, they are the ones who give the orders, practically speaking, and we need them more than they need us.

— *Yes...*

André They spend their time as they want to and then when we really have to ask for something urgent and you ask them "Monsieur, please, really... it would be very nice if you..." and then the reverse, if things are done they don't like, if the screw is put on the magistrates as well, you get turned down, you get all the blame... I have even been criticized for having checked what the gendarmes had done; a defendant tells me "the gendarmes rigged things, it's a plot, they made up evidence." I didn't necessarily believe the defendant, but I checked; which I thought was a good thing or rather a sane thing from the point of view of justice getting done, and I was blamed for it; there is a letter from a captain of the gendarmerie written to my procurator, probably solicited by him, saying "it's a scandal, this man challenged the word of..." That's not it at all. That's not the spirit at all. I reasoned that if it gave an additional guarantee, if the judge himself went to see...

— *It is part of a judge's duties...*

André Well yes, it was to find out if there was anything to it. Since it had been challenged, it was enough to go see. That I found deeply appalling. Or the simple fact that after having been in a police station without warning them in advance to hear what the officers had to say about something specific, which let me get to know the truth, everything was done to eliminate my

rulings because it could show that the procurator was dishonest; and then they found this scandalous. Because, well, when you go to the police station, you must give them advance warning so that everyone can agree on a version of things! I find that wrong!

And that's what's so awful, doing things that are ordinary in themselves, you realize that it's becoming scandalous, that is, there is the rule of law and grand principles: the judge is free, the judge seeks the truth, etc. And then you come to see that on certain subjects, for example police errors, or in certain cases, for certain sensitive matters, there are actions that must not be done. There are unwritten rules. This doesn't happen everyday but it happens from time to time and that's enough: one case is enough to discredit the judicial system. In any case that's what I think. And then I saw the cover-ups, so many things like that, and on it goes. All that led me to ask myself about the reality of my independence on the one hand and then about the meaning of my functions. I thought that I was competent in this job; I had a certain vocation, and to the same degree I really wanted to do this job. I tried to do it honestly, with courage, resisting everybody, resisting the police, the defendants, the lawyers, the court. I really fought with the court, and the proof is that I really took it on the chin, and I thought that to have respect, to have a certain credibility, the judge must be able to say what he thinks to everyone. And even though I tried to be as polite as possible, I tried to do my job the way it should be done (...).

You mentioned a wound earlier. I was truly wounded to see that in doing my job correctly, with love because I really loved my job, I was not acknowledged, and one of the things that seems the most important to me is to know who acknowledges you, the people you work with. Overall, everyone knows. I was well considered, even respected by the policemen with whom I worked even if I was exacting with some of them; I was respected by the lawyers; by the prison personnel, and especially by

people I threw in the slammer. And that – that is the one thing among the satisfactions I have had in this job, is that I was always well appreciated in the prison. That is to say, I was true to my word, I wasn't full of hate, I was someone who sought the truth, that's how I see myself at any rate, but I really believe that's how I was perceived and that through letters and through what was said at the prison, people knew. And I believe that overall one is judged as much as one judges; the prison does a good job of judging, and I think that I liked that, and what shocked me is that that was never taken into account, the reality of my work; that is, I did my job while trying to make people feel that I wasn't there to make them suffer, so I tried to apply the principles of justice in the noble sense... where it ought to be, meaning that justice is there to judge them, to sanction them, but not to make them suffer. You have a mission that goes beyond vengeance and that is to get them to understand the conviction and so they stop. What really shocked me is that nobody tried to see if my work was well done.

— *In your professional universe?*

André That's it!

— *...which functions according to other rules?*

André Other criteria. And on the contrary, I was finally sidelined by the magistracy, I really got turned into the black sheep. Some people who are promoted are total zeros, people who graduated at the same time as me. I had the feeling, yes, that my worth wasn't recognized. And I had the feeling, this is what is the deepest, I had the feeling that if there was another criterion for "grading" in quotation marks – I'm really not in favor of grades – but if they evaluated judges differently, as a function of their real work, by those with whom they work and by the defendant, well I think that I would have been recognized. Conversely, there are people who don't do a lousy thing and no one puts any pressure on them, who have a regular career. If on the other hand they asked the defendants if they

were satisfied with these people who do not deliver their judgment, who botch their work, who don't go through the files, I think that everybody, all the practitioners who practice, would say no. That's not possible, so there is a gap between the reality of the work and its assessment; that's obvious. So I didn't care about being assessed, but I did not think that the assessment could go so far as to deprive you of certain functions or prevent you from getting the transfers you want and eventually even lead to punitive measures. And then you have to justify yourself, etc. There is also the whole conformity thing. I thought that the important thing was not about knowing if you were well thought of, etc., but to know the quality of the work you did, if it was legally exact, if it was appropriate in a humane sense, if it was... Well, that absolutely doesn't count; on the other hand, not wearing a tie, for example, that's a failing of mine, well, it was a revolution; there were meetings before I came to my first position, where the public prosecutor gathered the whole bench to say "watch out, there's a crazy judge arriving, he's coming without a tie," etc. As if it were really... On the other hand, the public prosecutor messed around with sealed evidence, he made falsifications all the time, he asked the cops to fake evidence, and there, if the hierarchy had been listening, you couldn't ignore that it was true; nobody ever troubled him. Yes, overall, the fact that honesty didn't pay... that what counts in the end is not making waves, so people don't talk too much about you, and everything runs smoothly.

I deeply believe that justice should not be something lifeless, it should be three-dimensional. It doesn't necessarily have to be violent; in certain cases, justice has to be firm, but it doesn't have to be... there have to be sparks to dispense justice, sometimes there have to be sparks; you mustn't systematically close off... you mustn't systematically make judgments according to a very, very precise "scale." There is a false "scale" in quotation marks that is called for and that does not fit reality, meaning that if

you put a boss in prison, people would say “no, it’s out of scale, it’s not right,” and if you indict a policeman in a case of brutality, “no, that’s not right,” in short, they let you know, and then conversely if you feel for ordinary mortals who commit misdemeanours, they criticize you for an excess of sensibility, sentimentality, and so on.

Let the judge show his legitimacy by the work he achieves

— *When you say “they,” is it the general milieu, is it...?*

André It’s the hierarchy, the president of the court, the public prosecutor; and there’s one more thing, wait, it’s that in fact you are assessed by the public prosecutor and if the public prosecutor and the president get along well it’s a disaster, because it’s the president of the court who does the preliminary assessment, who transmits it to the court of appeals, but the president, when you are an examining magistrate [juge d’instruction], first he’s going to go see the public prosecutor; if the public prosecutor cannot get along with the examining magistrate, the examining magistrate will get a poor assessment; and then finally, they censure you, in fact a judge can be censured as a result of his independence vis-à-vis one of the parties; because the public prosecutor is still a party, as much as the defense. And I find that it’s the whole credibility of the court at stake in knowing you are really independent, and well, generally speaking, you aren’t. It’s true that the examining process is about indictment or release; but the examining magistrates are closer to the public prosecutor than to the defendants, which is not always inconceivable. This bias in favor of the court bothers me.

— *Yes, so that, that was somewhat at the heart of why this milieu didn’t function as you thought...*

André That’s right and that the law had no meaning. That is, there are times when the laws should not be applied. I’ll give you an example. Once I was called as a witness for the defense – in fact in this case where the public prosecutor had gone through all his

machinations. Once summoned, a witness must appear and that’s when I was censured... I appeared and I denounced the public prosecutor, or rather I did everything: I could to denounce him, saying that he had not been impartial in this case, that he had taken sides, etc. They just cut me off because these are things that should not be said. But if you want to tell the truth, you have to say things that are disagreeable: You see, here again, in relation to the false scale... For me the true scale is to say to the public prosecutor “no, sir, in relation to this case you have been partial, you have been malevolent, you have been bitter, you conducted a separate investigation, you have done things you ought not to have,” that’s the truth for me, you have to speak it even if it displeases people. And so on this, they blamed me for having testified while theoretically, legally, you can even be sanctioned and be fined if a witness does not come. But in certain cases you have to do it, in certain other cases you mustn’t do it.

— *Yes...*

André There is another thing too that really gets to me, there is a side, and perhaps it is linked, it perhaps comes back to one of the critiques made of public function, but there is a petty side; people who just don’t work; I mean who try to do as little as possible, each one foists work off on the next person; I see an absolutely awful number of lazy colleagues right now. To tell the truth, 50 percent of the judges in X. try to do as little as possible. It’s maddening, it makes for a small-minded, petty mentality; they forget the interests of the defendants; and then there are even lazy ones who say “well, there’s nothing in it for us, so we don’t care, we’ll do as little as possible”; there are some who say “well, Napoleon set up decorations and knicknacks and stuff to get people to work, but we don’t get decorations or medals anymore, so...”

— *They even justify their...*

André Their laziness.

— *...their laziness, or they even show it off...*

André Yes, they practically show off about it. They say "oh, we're not going to wear ourselves out, there are no more opportunities for promotion"; and it's true that it's not stimulating. I think that in a certain way our situation isn't risky enough. It might be better for us to enter into the struggle, to justify our value, and then our legitimacy, instead of being a given, would be something to be won; I believe, who knows, it might change the mentality, for judges to demonstrate their legitimacy by the work that they do, by the legal quality of the decisions they make, whether in civil or criminal courts...

— *This question of acquiring legitimacy, who is it who can...*

André It's complicated, but I think that overall, if you like, it's the gap I was talking about just now, between an assessment made on the basis that since you haven't made waves, you got along well with your president of the court or with your colleagues and you haven't had any problems with the court, and an assessment on the basic, well, of being really acknowledged by people who see you work, meaning the lawyers, the clerks, and when you are an examining magistrate, by the police, the gendarmes, the detainees. It comes down to a gap between an assessment that means nothing, done by people you never see, and then word of mouth but in a general sense; people know that So-and-so is someone who doesn't care; people know that So-and-so is a scrupulous judge. And this "people know" business, even if it's a little subjective, it's... there must be a way of translating it, at least to tailor it better. Greater account should be taken of the reality of what... of each person's work. It's shocking to see that you can work very well and still have a disastrous career; even when you're recognized as being pretty good by the people with whom you work; and then on the contrary work very badly and have an excellent career. Because there are also questions of relations, of the buddy system, so many questions... of political support perhaps...

[...]

Moreover, there are cases that you must investigate and those that you must not, all the fiscal fraud cases which are not followed up systematically, and then cases that are hushed up, not to mention political affairs; there too in a general way, and I'm not the only one to say so, people are starting to be sick of it, all the judges, or rather the great majority of judges, at seeing cases hushed up...

— *At seeing that a certain number of the cases...*

André And people know that, the detainees know it, I'd say that now more than half of the detainees even... who are in French prisons know that justice is inequitable, that politicians' cases get hushed up, notable people, etc., and it's not credible. You lose all credibility. When I hear the Attorney General who says, "that's right, there is no sacred mission, a judge has no sacred mission," for myself I think that to be understood you still have to affirm values, and if you don't try to live up to those values you aren't credible.

[...]

— *Right...*

André If you want to restore faith in the law, you have to give it back the power over the people with whom it works, and in particular, over the police. And a major criticism I have of the reports that recommend change is that they don't challenge the political dependence of the courts, they really don't at all, and then they don't challenge the fact that the law has no power over the police; the essential part of the investigation is done by the police; for the judge it's an exception, judges can't do everything anyway; perhaps they ought to do more, but they can't do everything. (...) But the law has to reach over and above the police, so the police...

— *Why should it reach over and above...?*

André Because it's not simply... yes, the police can be very good, but even the police perspective, often, is insufficient. It's "you did that," fine, they just look for the

motive, the context. Justice is something else; I think there has to be a certain sensitivity to understand, you'd have to weigh things, you'd have to see how the accused lives, how...and the police are rather reductive in relation to that. But it's true that we need the police...For me the notion of judge...you have to have freedom of mind, to be able to express yourself as you want, you have to be independent, to be able to assert yourself, to be firm, to be clear, not to be forced to restrain yourself in your judgments.

— *In relation to whom?*

André Overall, in relation to the police... It's a state within the state, the police, it's very, very important, let's say with their union systems, etc. There are more of them than us, they have an enormous budget, the Ministry of the Interior has the biggest one, and then they decide, they do the work and then we are the end of the whole business and we try to do customer service...I believe that we ought to be people who are... yes, who are free, judges should be a little independent, a little courageous, have a little class, a little vivacity, be capable of explaining their judgments, have a little "authority," in quotation marks, and not always take shelter, be capable of asserting themselves without either being brutal or disrespectful of people, without functioning with *a priori* opinions and prejudices; yes, judges should have a certain breadth, should be capable in their actions of showing they have the legitimacy to judge.

[...]

— *Today, taking account of your experience in this job, would you recommend someone to do it?*

André Honestly? Yes. It's not an uninteresting job; the job is fine; but you have to do it without too many illusions; and you have to fight, really fight to do it right.

— *And in your milieu, are there some who fight?*

André Yes. Yes, oh yes, there are also some great judges...

— *Yes.*

André Judges whom I admire and there are magistrates who absolutely play the game, worthy people, lawyers who do their jobs well and sometimes I am moved when there is a lawyer who says "listen, my client has been in jail for two years, but the examining magistrate was very sensitive, tried to understand his personality and the human contact was very nice," and they are recognized by clients who are delinquents, who have done a certain number of stupid things; fine, they are accused of serious things but they are, they have the respect of their judge; I am proud of these judges. There are judges who have – while being severe and exacting – have searched for the truth, have tried to understand what people did and who have a contact with these people who will have to be integrated into society; there are North Africans in French society, I think that we have an integrating role. In our role of recalling the law, for some people we replace their father a little and when we do our job well, yes, it's great. There are times when you pronounce a sentence, and people in the courtroom applaud, not in the primary sense of the term but because really they think that justice has been done and then people are happy, without your having shown demagoguery, but by making a slightly risky decision; yes, because you have to, you have to also, in any case for very good decisions, you have sometimes to take risks in a sense, not take risks as to the guilt but do things that seem curious, that are daring, since to manage to make the sanction really fit, sometimes you have to get off the beaten track, you have to do other things which were unexpected or that are not at all in line with what was asked for by the court, that are surprising; I believe that to make a good judgment, you have sometimes to be surprising. And when you make, exceptionally, decisions like that which are surprising and people are happy, that overall it has been well judged, yes, I am happy. I am even proud.

— *Do you have examples?*

André Yes, certainly.

— *Can you give me one?*

André There's the example of this woman really involved in major drug traffic, kilos of heroin... This woman had multiple sclerosis with urinary and anal incontinence. She had been in prison for two years and she had always admitted the facts, she was rather dignified. The trial lasted two weeks and the lawyer told us, "the doctor has declared her condition compatible with detention." But someone who is in that condition (she was wearing diapers, you see, she had to be excused constantly, etc.), so you might think that it was contrary to dignity, etc. And it changed our minds, when we were putting her away for eight solid years. And we gave her six years with suspended sentence. They freed her that very evening, I feel that we fulfilled our responsibilities. (...) It showed we were capable of changing our minds. Of challenging ourselves, of taking account, too, of human issues. I was proud of justice that day. I came out and I was happy. I told myself, "in Y. we do our job well."

— *And you are also as happy to convict when someone in your opinion ought to be?*

André Yes, exactly. For example, in a case of labor legislation, during deliberation, everyone was saying "it's a con trick"; I fought because it didn't conform to reality, to labor legislation; a guy who employed people, temporary work, it was completely illegal. The argument presented by the defense was not bad in appearance, but if you dug a little it was completely false and then it opened the door to all kinds of abuses; I found the argument that convinced the two other judges, I was happy, I told myself, I haven't been there for noth-

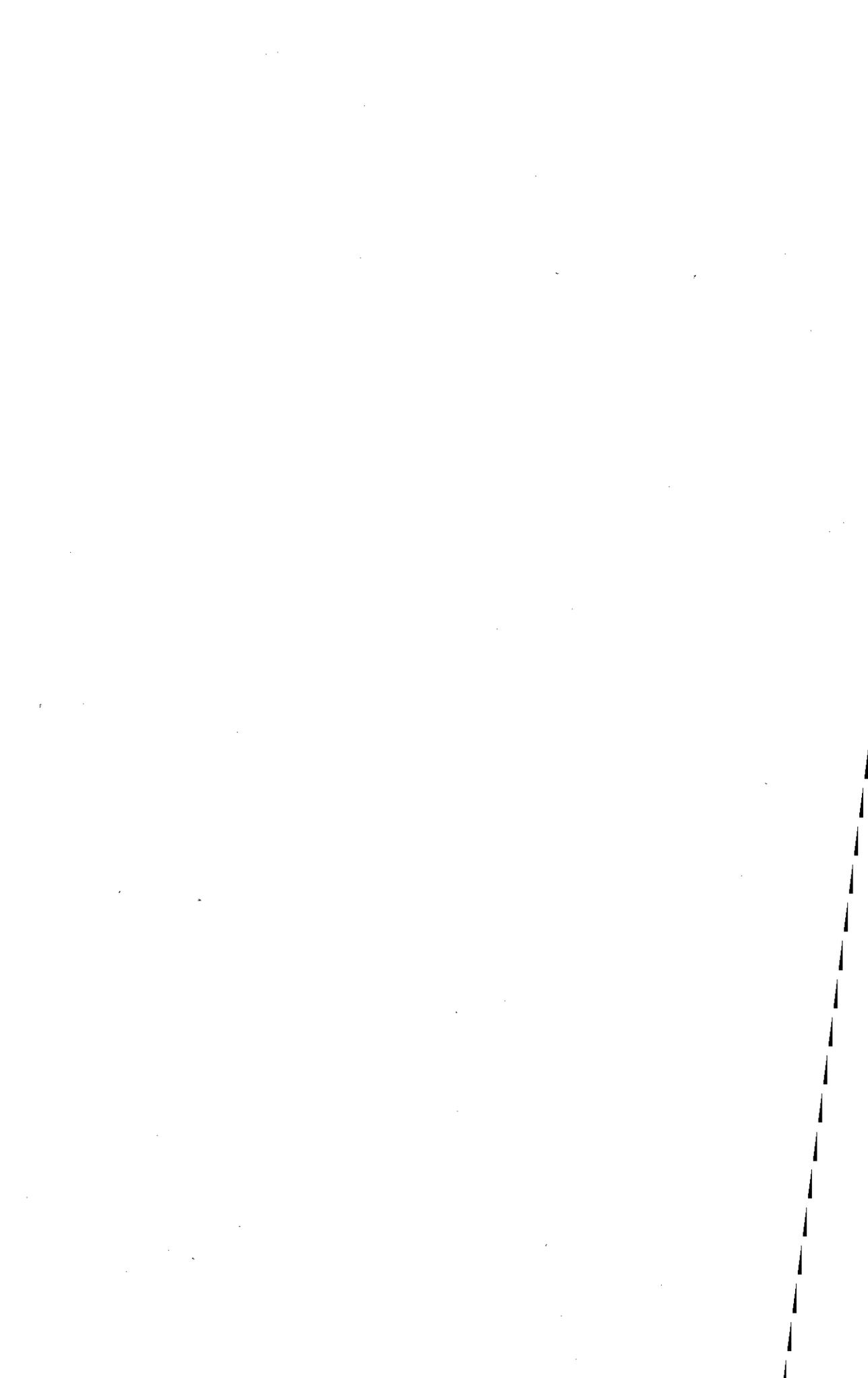
ing. I had seen the files before and I'm the one who stated the case, so I believe that it was just and coherent; it was a case of defending the interest of the workers, without bias against the boss, but it was the law. I was happy there too, to have derailed their plan, we weren't being had by a specious argument (...).

— *That's an exception...*

André Oh no! There are some people, fortunately. There are exceptions, but the system has a tendency to...

— *Yes, the system has a tendency to accumulate...*

André That's it, look, I've opened my mouth a little too often, I mean I've taken it full in the face, they stripped me of all my functions as a single judge, I was almost fired, so even I have somewhat adopted the values of the system. Which means that when I have to say to the president of the court that what he does is scandalous, I now say, I say it politely, "well, we might ask ourselves about," while... well... a judge ought to be capable of saying no, this is inadmissible, it's contrary to a certain principle, it's contrary to the law, it's contrary to... We aren't there to be like a business, for the moment, I believe that we have nothing to do with the logic of the private sector, of the middle manager who must obey their superior; we must be human beings, somewhat public personalities, like elected officials, like a mayor who is there to defend the general interest but who must be capable of saying "you, your interest is what it is, but that's not in this community's interest," and at the same time do things in such a way that the interests of minorities are not injured...



On the Way Down

Michel Pialoux and Stéphane Beaud

Permanent and Temporary Workers

September 1989: the strike at the Sochaux Peugeot plant has been going on for a few days.¹ The first processions in the body section bring out a few hundred strikers, assembly-line workers along with some skilled workers who file through the vast chassis shops surrounding the assembly lines which have just put out the new model launched earlier in the month. Things settle into a sort of ritual, with things taking place more or less the same way every day. After meetings held right next to the final assembly line, the workers file through, making catcalls and yelling slogans. Taking up the entire width of the passageways alongside the assembly lines, they move forward in lines of 10, with the shop stewards in the lead.

The chassis plant is the stake in a battle over the number of strikers and the effects of the strike. To try to halt the momentum of the strike and keep it from spreading to nonstrikers and other workers in the Peugeot group, and also to prove to the financial directors that the situation is under control, management holds to its claims that the strike has barely affected the assembly line and that most of the cars are coming out as usual. The strikers have invited journalists into the shops to see for themselves that the strike has largely paralyzed production. Indeed, much of the work is not being done, or is being done poorly, and all the cars will eventually have to be gone over again.

These processions through the plant have a number of goals: blocking production, maintaining the morale of the strikers and encouraging other workers to strike. The strikers walk slowly. Sometimes they form a compact, homogeneous block, sometimes the procession spreads out and disperses. The seasoned activists and the shop stewards are usually up front, often with megaphones. The others follow any which way, talking among themselves, satisfaction written all over their faces. All of them seem pleased to be there with so many others, and they start talking again about the 1981 strike. There is lots of noise but no damage. Every now and then a few men beat in time on the metal cabinets to make more noise.

A "cordon" of managers, technicians, staff, and supervisors – often older, in coats and ties – has been set up the entire length of the assembly line. (A few of the young engineers look lost, but care has been taken to avoid contact between the

¹ Sochaux is located in eastern France, some 60 miles west of where France, Germany, and Switzerland meet on the Rhine, close to Basel, Switzerland.

strikers and the young ones, the computer specialists.) They are there, accompanied by a process server, standing in front of the assembly lines, to prevent any damage to the "production material." Twelve feet from each other, they watch the "procession" pass by and avoid looking the strikers in the eye. Some look at their feet, others make a point of turning their heads away. It is a difficult moment. Often as they walk by the strikers upbraid someone on the other side; at times they strike up a dialogue. Very soon it becomes clear that these staff (these "tag-alongs" as they are called in the plant from a term used in the 1970s) have been instructed not to respond to jeers or "provocations."

There is tension in the air. A dispute can always erupt, things can deteriorate, and no one can tell what might happen. As they get to assembly line number 4 – the one still in operation which management wants to show in operation – the tension rises: the strikers close rank, insults become more violent, megaphones are pushed only inches away from the faces of those on the management line. People will start shoving, and both sides will try to calm things down.

In fact, the situation around this assembly line is an odd one. Some of those at work, often the older ones, simply go on with their jobs. They look up from time to time to reply to insults or jeers, clearly identifying themselves as nonstrikers. But others are obviously ill at ease. Some of them seem upset, and, with the permission of their foremen, they leave the assembly line when the procession arrives. It is understood that they will return once the procession has moved on. But others stay in place, a bit to the back, smiling, and mostly seem to experience the situation dispassionately. They are "the young ones," the temporary workers, the fill-ins, who are sort of outside the conflict. Occasionally, they put down their tools for a moment, wink, make eye contact with the strikers, and then start working again. Passing in front of them, the strikers avoid yelling insults but make hand signals, with friendly words. They don't know the temps personally, no one calls them by name or first name. They are taken en bloc as the "temps," which everyone seems to find perfectly natural. Some of the temps have put a cardboard sign next to them, or more precisely, a piece of cardboard with "temp" scrawled on it, but their youth is enough to mark them as temporary workers. The word acts as something of a protective shield. It is clear that they cannot be expected to do what would be expected of the others (according to a story that quickly makes the rounds, "certain blacklegs" were trying to pass themselves off as temporary workers to dodge the abuse). On the whole, those who work on the assembly lines during the strike – this is the crucial point for determining the success or failure of the strike – can be divided into two groups: those considered by the great majority of strikers as "scabs" and those they immediately classify as exceptions – the temporary workers.

Especially for anyone who can remember the confrontations during the 1981 strike or over the preceding decades these are astonishing scenes.² The strike is a

² It is important to remember that at Sochaux, perhaps more than elsewhere, and particularly considering the history of the plant (two deaths during the 1968 strike and a general policy of repression of union activists in the 1970s), strike is an infrequent, important and serious act. A strike

moment of truth that puts you on one side or the other. To say that someone is a "striker" in the course of ordinary conversation (outside any context of a strike) is a way of making it clear that this individual is integrated into the political culture of the group (even if not an activist or even a member of the union), and belongs with the workers who are not on the side of the boss. Even two or three years afterwards individuals who have never gone on strike are likely to encounter very strong disapproval.

For this strike, the local union leaders were careful to give very specific watch-words. They also gave strict instructions to keep the strikers from targeting the temporary workers. They are in a good position to realize that the rank and file do not easily accept the "right" of temporary workers to work during a major strike. What, then, explains the belief of all these workers, even the most intransigent with respect to labor and activist "values" (according to which "nonstrikers" have no excuse), that a legitimate exception can be made for temporary workers?

If the older workers are canvassed, the response is "obvious": "it's not their fault," "they don't have the luxury of going on strike," "if they went on strike for a single day, the plant and the employment agency would get together and put them out the door." The stakes are so high – being hired on a permanent basis – that they cannot be asked to make such a sacrifice. Even though they are nonstrikers, temporary workers are not perceived as "strikebreakers." They readily benefit from "extenuating circumstances." Everyone knows that the plant is their only hope of making a go of it. Almost all of them dropped out of school, and the negative consequences of academic failure are immeasurably greater today than "in our day." The strikers, who range in age from 35 to 55, seem to project onto the situation of the temporary workers their own anxieties for their own children, who are up against the new requirement of a degree ("baggage") to get a job. In this sense and at this particular "euphoric" moment of the strike, the temporary workers appear to them less as competitors at work – which, objectively, is what they are – than young people with the same experiences as their children. What from the inside of the plant could be interpreted as a simple opposition between established workers ("workers with an officially defined position") and young workers in a shaky position takes on an entirely different sense when the local social space is set within a larger perspective. A broader view reveals social proximity where the "plant point of view" only showed the formal distance between two generations of workers.

is when "you have to choose your side"; when each party counts its troops, when management and activists assess the attitudes on each side. Strikers are singled out by supervisors, who are free to "sanction" strikers and "recompense" nonstrikers (through the arbitrary distribution of bonuses, slowing down or accelerating salary promotions through manipulation of the point system). During a strike those who do not go on strike are labeled as a group by activists, reputations are made and unmade. Even those who go on strike for one or two days have a special classification. They have shown a form of solidarity, and their position is understandable. But those who deliberately refuse are visibly branded. Both sides settle accounts right after the strike, the work group cold-shoulders the "blacklegs" and puts them on the index.

This sort of compassion for helplessness is added to the hope – a gamble, really – of shared interests. Everything happens as if the most politicized strikers were ready to credit the temporary workers in advance with a critical position and an attitude of resistance toward the leaders (a belief encouraged by some signs from the temporary workers themselves). They confer upon them the combativeness that they had when they were young workers in the plant and are satisfied with the smallest sign of complicity, almost as if the burden that weighs them down would be lifted if only the temporary workers adopted the same “reflexes” and defensive attitudes that they themselves might have had in their youth. But the older workers do not see that the gap that separates them is less a difference of age, in the biological sense, than a difference in generations, that the order of succession of generations of workers has been interrupted by a decade of non-hiring, and, finally, that by the time they get to the plant, these temporary workers, “formed” by years of “slave labor” and dead-end jobs, are already “submissive.”

It is as if there were a tacit agreement (based on misunderstandings) between strikers and temporary workers, and the cardboard “temp” sign put up when the strikers filed by could be taken as a sort of “give and take.” According to this scenario, the temporary workers are showing their respect for the strikers’ “courage” and are asking in return, and in advance, for the strikers’ indulgence. In exchange the strikers “absolve” the temporary workers for their nonparticipation in the strike and ask for a moral commitment that later, once they have a job, the temporary workers will side with the strikers. Most of the strikers would naturally take this gesture as a simple sign of social helplessness, in contrast to the most politicized, who would prefer to see it as an offer of future collaboration in the struggles of labor, a sign of eventual affiliation with the group of strikers, a sort of recognition of the justice of their struggle, and even a pledge of allegiance to the political culture that sustains this struggle. The sign can then be understood as the promise of a (future) integration into the group and of the reunification of that group (in terms of age cohorts). The only thing that has to be done to get the generations of workers back on track is to let time do its work.

A year later, in July 1990, the recession that hits the French automobile industry does not spare the Sochaux plant. Economic forecasts are gloomier and gloomier and the tendency for the cycle to turn down is exacerbated by the Gulf War. Just before the scheduled summer vacation comes the announcement that the temporary workers’ contracts will not be renewed when the plant reopens in September. From now on the numbers of workers in the plant are readjusted immediately according to the short-term production forecasts. At this point, in the new chassis shops (HC1)³ tension is acute. Production quotas can be achieved only by stretching the rules, to a greater or lesser degree, in a stepped-up production schedule and, above all, by mobilizing the workers, who are forced to adapt to

³ HC1 (Habillage-Caisses 1) is the new body plant, constructed a mile and a half away from the old plant. It began operation in 1989. Production there is more highly computerized. The workers wear fluorescent green overalls, they have to sign a “charter” and, when the plant began operating, did not have the right to smoke in the shop.

this new mode of production (set by tightened production schedules and computerization),⁴ subjected to an increased pace on the assembly line, and expected to be ready for anything. Production technique is far from completely mastered in this ultramodern shop – the ideas people for this vast industrial project (the plant for the year 2000) seem to have seen things too big or too “technologically.” There are breakdowns all over the place, the announced objective of “zero faults” on the assembly line is difficult to achieve, more and more vehicles are taken off to be “adjusted,” which means that they are “derailed” from the assembly line and sent to separate sections for the necessary repairs.

Nerves are really on edge. The shops in the new chassis plant may be new, handsome, spacious and bright, but in the month of July the stifling heat is almost intolerable (the blueprints made no provision for either air-conditioning or a cooling system). During the dog days of summer, the plant firemen cool off the shops with powerful streams of water on the roof, although the workers say that it’s really to keep the computer system from breaking down. The workers interviewed confirm the deterioration in the atmosphere in these shops and a greater number of incidents between workers that often involve the young workers.

July 1992: there are no more temporary workers at Sochaux, the last ones having left at the end of December 1990. The employment agencies that had flourished during the previous period in all the small cities around the plant closed one after the other. Offers of temporary employment in mechanics have disappeared, the local unemployment bureau for temporary jobs is full all the time: the young people who can no longer find any temporary work come to request a “training course” (vaguely disillusioned, the counselors observe that the “course” is important mostly because of the 2,400-franc stipend. All told, a few hundred temporary workers were hired on the spot.

When the plant was expanding (1987–90) temporary workers were recruited en masse. There was steady, strong growth, reaching more than 1,500 temps at the time of the 1989 strike and a maximum of 3,500 in July 1990. They are concentrated in certain sections reserved for assembly or painting (at the time of the strike, 70 percent of the paint section). So many temporary workers were taken on that many workers were convinced that a large number of them were going to be hired. On the first day in the plant they were assigned to the assembly line where a worker from the section showed them what to do, and they learned how to do it, sometimes in just a day. Some of them, especially those from the area, only stayed a day; others held on longer in the hope of getting a “hire” (a contract of unspecified duration). Employed particularly in sectors of the chassis plant like the finishing shop, they often filled jobs thought to be the “hardest,” which required both physical endurance and rapid performance – precisely the jobs that the “veterans” found it harder and harder to hold onto in this period of

⁴ Computerization of production allows series production of very diverse models of cars, which means that assembly line workers have to match the part to the vehicle (they no longer have the same part to put on the same model X number of times) and have little time to decipher the assembly instructions of the sticker put on the chassis.

increased speed. The veterans saw the temporary workers as these anonymous young people who “dropped in out of the blue” and were taken directly to their work station by the “head man.” No introductions were made, and they often stayed so short a time that workers in the sector had no idea who they were. Even if they stayed on there was little exchange with the older workers in the section, rather as if everyone intended to stay on guard, in a sort of mutual distrust.

Once the adjustment stage was over, the temporary workers found it far less difficult than the 20-year assembly line veterans to keep up with the stepped-up work pace. They often found it hard to comprehend the kind of continual retaliation from the “veterans,” their grumbling and grouching off in their corner. The coexistence of “old” and “young” workers did not go smoothly; tension was often high between them and the disputes numerous, set off by the rigidification of the work pace (numerous stories circulate about the temporary workers’ refusal to conform to the multifaceted logic of worker slowdowns). The conflicts could have also aimed at the new arrivals’ failure to respect the informal rules and traditional social practices of the assembly line shops (especially concerning the consumption of alcohol in the shops). All these customs taken for granted by the assembly line workers who started at the plant in the 1960s and 1970s were a startling discovery for many of the temporary workers, some of whom (especially those not from the area) became quite indignant about it.

For many of the assembly line workers (or “veterans,” as the term has begun to be used in the shops), the temporary workers symbolized their loss of status and the disregard for their skills. They were in a way living proof that the old guys could be replaced from one day to the next by people with no training whose sole advantage lay in being “young” and physically “fresh.” The presence of this young and ready workforce at their side made their aging even more obvious, through the kind of automatic comparison that no one could help making, either openly or behind their backs.

From now on the workers divide into two subgroups, the “old guys” – the vast majority of the workers who started at the plant in the 1960s and 1970s (the plant stopped recruiting workers in 1979) – and the “young,” almost entirely former temporary workers hired on salary between 1988 and 1989. Numbering in the hundreds, they are well aware that they are the last from the big wave of temps which has completely receded. In 1992, for that matter, they are still called “temps.” Next to them the “younger” generation is represented by a significant number of young technicians often referred to as “BTS” [holders of a *Brevet de Technicien supérieur*, a higher technical qualification], who were recruited in the second half of the 1980s and who do not think of themselves as “workers” but as a separate group. The difference between these two groups lies less in their age, in the biological sense of the term, than in how they came into the plant. Moreover, a number of the “old guys” are not that old. Since they came to the plant in the late 1970s, and given certain aspects of their lives and their lifestyle, they could even be considered young. Conversely, a fair number of the young temporary workers are not as “young” as one might think, some of them being well into their thirties.

What really distinguishes the two groups is the kind of generation each represents. The "generation that grew up at the plant" – the assembly line workers who came to the plant before the crisis – set against the "disconnected generation" who are always seeking stable employment. This opposition is itself doubled by a whole series of homologous contraries (politicized/"depoliticized," unionized/anti-union...). Schematically the young assembly line workers of an earlier period could be said to belong to an educational cohort in which many began to work at 16 and among whom quitting school without a qualification was still relatively frequent. By contrast the young "disconnected" workers of today think of themselves and live like "failures" "shut out" of the academic system who haven't been able to get beyond the lower-level applied qualifications, such as the CAP [Certificat d'Aptitudes professionnelles, a vocational certificate]. This alteration of the relationship between the economic system and the school system and the strengthening of the hold of the school system as a result of the economic "crisis" take a heavy toll on those who are academically the least well endowed.

Modernization of the Sochaux plant (technical, social, and spatial) has therefore produced "relatively old guys," who are not only worn out by their work but are also old in what they have "lost," that is, the ways of doing and being that made the condition of assembly line worker tolerable and were basic elements of their class consciousness. They are also old because of the impossibility for most of them, whatever their age, of making the mental conversion to the new types of work in the plant. Even if they are between 32 and 35, workers who have spent 15 years on the assembly line are to a certain extent too old "in their heads," old by virtue of the models they have internalized and from which they find it very difficult to dissociate themselves. Inevitably, they feel excluded from "modernity." Everything happens as if they had to fight their very selves and combat the "reflexes" acquired over many years. When all those who were socialized into the "culture of opposition" – the culture of the vast assembly line shops of the 1970s⁵ – come face to face with the devaluation of their hopes and ideals, the depreciation of the beliefs that supported their resistance to the plant, and the shared history that is unraveling right before their eyes – in short, the disintegration of the labor movement – they discover that, politically, they have "aged." What is collapsing is the way that these workers made their reputations and the positive part of their self-image of life in the shop.

The young temporary workers had a hard time finding jobs when they left school. They went through training periods, "short contracts" interspersed with short stretches of unemployment. They are always looking for a steady job and a place of their own. Since their entry into working life (and adult life) has been constantly postponed, they see the "big plant" of Sochaux as a virtually unique opportunity to land a secure position. It is for this that many have come from far away (from regions like the North around Lille and from Brittany, for example, where long-term unemployment affects many young people). In the workers

⁵ See Christian Corouge and Michel Pialoux, "Les Chroniques Peugeot," *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* (1984–6).

beside them on the assembly line they see, not a solid, unified, “strong” group but a group divided, people who are tired, worn out, demoralized, and prematurely aged, “grumblers” who “act bad” at work (even including sabotage). They, on the other hand, are eager to show their stuff, to show what they’re worth, and work at accumulating “good points” in order to be hired permanently once their contract as a temp has expired. They try hard to “work well” in their assigned position and to cultivate good relationships with the foremen who “protect” them from their employers (the temporary employment agencies). As a consequence they do not feel obliged to respect traditions that have existed forever in the shop, and they can break rules or customs (like drinking on the job). The “old guys” do not pay much attention to them, with the exception of a few activists who, the temps say, try to sell them on a union card. (The temps consider such “activity” aggressive and almost indecent.) These young temporary workers (outsiders both to the region and to the “Peugeot spirit”) have not worked long enough at Peugeot to understand the nature of the complex relationships that evolve in the shops; they know nothing of the history that formed the different attitudes, the cleavages, the hostilities and the hatreds, the wounds and the scars and even the differences among unions and their strategies. They simply do not see what was at the heart of the activists’ life that offered such a strong principle of identity. Which means that all the workers in the section are perceived as one group, as a single generation of workers lucky enough to have “made their whole life at the plant.”

The coexistence of the “old” assembly line workers and the “young” temporary workers in the same work space constituted a sort of revelation of reciprocal + and structural – misunderstandings. On the one hand, the “old guys” saw the temporary workers as “young,” by projecting their own youth (“carefree” and “rebellious”) onto young people who were above all anxious at the thought of never becoming integrated into the labor force and were haunted by the specter of “exclusion.” The veterans molded in the activist culture “felt” that they could transmit none of their “political” knowledge or experience to this group and discovered that the chain of generations of workers at the plant had been broken. During the years of crisis and non-hiring of workers, there was a belief in the region, a widespread “rumor” that the plant would no longer hire anyone with fewer than two years of academic work beyond high school. In retrospect the unusually acute consciousness today of the necessity of “higher” qualifications (measured by years of study beyond the baccalauréat) has turned the assembly line workers who came to the plant with no degree, “with nothing,” into people who “got lucky.” With the fiercer academic competition and the devaluation of shorter vocational courses (CAP, BEP), young people with few or no skills (notably those who have already come up against the negative verdict of a local or national labor market) have tended to construct, in reverse, the generation of the plant assembly line workers (their parents’ generation for many of them) as a carefree if not “fortunate” generation, simply because it once was easy to get a job. This construction of the older generation after the fact focuses on a single moment of their professional trajectory, the entry into the labor market, which is

abstracted from the system of historical constraints that also affected this older generation (thus, for example, the children of peasants who left the countryside to have access to the goods and the pleasures of the “consumer society”).

From their attitudes (many temps work with a walkman and earphones, wear tee shirts instead of the traditional blue overalls, and sometimes make a point of not communicating with the others) or by the way they denigrate plant work and life and fail to respect the longtime social codes of the shops (which they of course haven't learned under the same conditions) the temporary workers, especially those who come from the area around Sochaux and did not want to be hired by Peugeot, have given the “old” assembly line workers the impression of being “workers in transit.” Since these young people know full well that they are indeed in transit, they have a detached and certain “to hell with it all” attitude toward their work. This outlook stands in complete opposition to the image of the worker constructed by the French labor movement, the image incarnated to a certain degree by the union activists – the producer, the creator of “value” imbued with the nobility of the worker's labor and with the values of solidarity and dedication to one's class – in short, everything that made it possible to fight for and in the name of that “abstraction” that was the “working class.” What the union activists or the “old guys” perceived in these “workers in transit” – the “frivolity” of some of their behavior – seemed to challenge working-class “standards” and the “dignity” that had been carefully and patiently constructed in union and political struggles against the “contemptuous” representations of the working classes constructed by the dominant classes. Their harsh intrusion into the workshops made the assembly line workers aware of an irreversible cultural distance between generations of workers. This questioning of working-class identity was all the more painful because it came from “inside” the working class, and even, in certain cases, from their own children. For many of the old-time assembly line workers the “disconnected” young worker is someone who cannot be thought of as truly “labor” – in the sense that this word fundamentally engages the idea of struggles, of history, of combat, of political and collective hope, – in a word, someone who will never be an activist.

The professional experience and fate of these detached young workers have in some way shown many workers in the plant that, from now on, it is unrealistic to think that their children could begin at the plant without any academic “baggage” and that it has become just as risky to bet on long-term, stable occupational employment through the traditional path of short-term occupational training (at the level of the CAP or BEP). One must instead “invest” in long-term courses of study: the BTS appears as the minimum necessary to avoid unemployment (which leads a good number of working-class children in the area to prefer an unspecified number of years in a general lycée instead of studies in a LEP [lycée specializing in technical subjects], which is experienced as relegation to the social periphery).

Confronted with such requirements for academic credentials most of the activists discover that they are hardly better prepared than the other workers. Whence the fear of these and all the other workers about the academic and occupational

future of their children, exacerbated by a hatred of the plant that has betrayed all their hopes. The old workers discover that they will hardly be able to give their children anything of what they struggled so long for, that this experience is quite simply untransmittable. It is, moreover, an experience of which the school system has no notion and that it even disparages (which explains the attention that many activists pay to the teaching of history and to the place to be ensured there for the political history of the working class). The manner in which certain workers talk about their children signals the anxious, tense relationship of many assembly line workers to the school system: a mixture of fear (fear that the always uncertain and revocable academic “success” of their children will end all at once), extreme tension (the necessity of never relaxing their efforts, in particular in keeping inappropriate contacts at bay), and hope. This is all the more true because many assembly line workers are scarcely in a position to give any “academic help” to their children, except through the hatred of the plant that they try to pass on. The academic universe seems like a world where collective solidarities no longer obtain and where setting up a “favorable power relationship” (to use a typical activist term) does not suffice.

Plant activists who have found themselves in “school” sorts of situations where symbolic intimidation is the arm of choice (negotiations with the personnel management, discussions with government representatives, meetings with the joint consultative committee of workers and management) have “gauged” the importance of mastering the language of such encounters, the weapon constituted by the different forms of cultural expertise. Conversely, they can also figure out the price that they have sometimes paid because of their relative lack of “culture” – the humiliations, intimidation, powerlessness, or anger repressed in “official” situations. And they evaluate as well the effort that they have had to make to get “back in the swim,” for example by reading up on union life (on the right to work, legal texts, basic economic structures, statistics, etc.). Today, they are well aware that “chewing out” the section head and the strategies of “symbolic reversal” no longer “work” as they once did.

The old workers can no longer transmit anything political to their children that is not negative – hostility toward Peugeot, hatred of the foremen, “scorn” for the strikebreakers or “neo-strikebreakers,” disillusionment with the Eastern bloc communist countries, etc. Through their children they want to break with this world (the world of the plant and the working class) by which they have been deeply disillusioned. They want to make another destiny for themselves and open new horizons (as if by proxy), pleased to see in their “kids” what they might have become (good at sports, a good white collar worker) – anything but this worn out and disillusioned worker who could well end up hating himself for having become what he has become. It is as if the violence that they carry in themselves – a destructive violence that leads them to shut themselves off from others – found a relative and provisional respite in talk about their children and their future.

Michel Pialoux

The Old Worker and the New Plant

When Christian Corouge and I get to D., a village in the Haute-Saône about 50 kilometers from Sochaux, about three one afternoon in July 1990, Gérard – who is on the morning shift at the plant – is waiting for us in the garden next to his small house.¹ In shorts and without a shirt, he is spading. Gérard has been on the assembly line at the Sochaux plant since 1965. At not quite 50, he has been working in the final assembly section for almost 15 years, and even though he has had a good many positions, he has always been “on the line.” When he straightens up to welcome us, I am struck by his height, his vitality, and a kind of calm energy; so often the workers in the plant seem old to me, worn out, looking five or ten years older than they should. Gérard seems to me to have resisted the wear and tear of the plant better than many others.

We exchange the usual comments about the “pleasures” of gardening and how tiring it is to work at the plant. Gérard goes to Sochaux every day in one of the plant buses. The trip takes almost an hour. He takes his car (a 405 sedan) only very occasionally. (For decades the entire region has had a network of buses that start out at three or four in the morning. There are fewer workers today but management has kept the old bus routes.) Slowly, talking all the while, we take a tour of the house (five rooms, a big cellar...), and we joke about the garden, which has lots of flowers, some ornamental plants a bit to the side, and a few vegetable beds. Gérard explains to us how and why he had the house built in 1973, soon after he got married. The Peugeot job gave him a guarantee, borrowing rates were not high, and the land wasn’t expensive – “almost nothing” – thanks to the “clever move” of the mayor, a “Communist,” a “sharp guy” who has always known what to do and who figured out the right time to acquire property for the village. He adds – he speaks slowly, with a somewhat muffled voice, quietly, with a bit of irony every now and then as if he wanted to put some distance between him and our questions – that he was never much inclined to work on the land, that he took it up occasionally in the summer, to give a helping hand “here and there” to a relative or neighbor. His father lives not far away, but

¹ Christian Corouge is an assembly line worker in the Sochaux Peugeot plant with whom I worked during the 1980s and with whom I published several “Peugeot chronicles” in the *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* from 1984 to 1986.

he no longer works his land which he has leased out to a neighbor. (Gérard points in the direction of the old house, and during the discussion he points out the houses of his brothers-in-law, his cousins, his wife's parents . . .) I push him a little: does he work his land "on the side"? No, really, he has never been "tempted by that." In any case "that's not done any more." The workers who tried to "hang on" at the plant and to work their farms had to give up one after another ("I had a buddy who worked on the side, he explains, but there came a time when it was one or the other, either the plant or the farm.") These days people are "too tired."

As for him, the only job that he takes on here in the village is cutting wood in the nearby forests, the traditional periodic clearing undertaken "between friends" and which makes it possible for him to heat his house with wood all winter long ("winters are hard, and without the wood, it would cost too much"). And he adds: "I chop my own wood, I putter around, I work in my garden, but I do it for myself, just what I want to do . . ." Hunting is his passion. Three hours later, around 7 p.m., just as we are about to leave, Gérard launches into a colorful description of his hunting: hunting parties with his neighbors and his brothers-in-law, roundups of wild boar that mobilize all the men in the village . . . For the moment he brings up (but discreetly, without emphasizing the fact) how tired one gets and just how difficult it is to recover physically after days of work: "A couple of years ago, I'd come home, I'd fix up stuff, I'd go fishing or go off in the woods. There were no problems. But now when I get home, doing something has absolutely no appeal."

Gérard is an old friend of Christian. They have known each other for more than 20 years and share a lot of memories. When he came to the plant, Christian worked in the same section as Gérard, in the chassis shop. Most important, he took his first steps as an activist with Gérard in 1969 when the plant was full of feisty young guys. "That really creates bonds." They have often met since: in the shops during "breaks," in the cafés near the plant or in union meetings. But Christian has never come to Gérard's village: he's a "friend from the plant," not a "neighborhood" or "village" friend. And the difference is an important one. Christian often talked to me about Gérard, in 1983-4, as soon as we started to work together . . . In his eyes Gérard is the "typical peasant-worker," totally fixed in local life, who has the pastimes of a peasant, who hunts and fishes . . . He incarnates a kind of life that is all the more fascinating to Christian because it is the exact opposite of life in the public housing complexes where workers from other regions or other countries have to live, whether they are immigrants from the inside or the outside. At the same time, what sets Gérard apart for Christian is that he is a "red"; son and grandson of peasants, he nevertheless belongs to the political tradition of the "red" region of the Ronchamp mine and the surrounding workers' villages, the tradition of small peasants who are longstanding anti-clerical republicans. The Resistance [anti-Nazi underground] also left a strong mark on the area, and Socialist and Communist municipalities are both numerous and active.

Both inside and outside the plant Gérard does indeed have the reputation of being a "red." For many years he was an active member of the Communist Party in which he held fairly high office, and even though he turned his card in at the end of the seventies, he still considers himself a "true" Communist. He never ended his affiliation with the CGT union [affiliated with the Communist Party] and belongs to the core of old activists and shop stewards that crystallizes resistance to the plant and its order. Fully integrated into the activist network, that is where he finds his real buddies. But he has never been a shop steward. So that even though his name turns up regularly on the list of the union candidates to the Personnel Delegation or the Hygiene and Security Committee, he remains ineligible.

Once we've finished the tour of the house, Gérard puts on a shirt and we sit down in the kitchen: modern, well equipped, with a sideboard and "rustic" chairs (the antique furniture that we'll talk about has remained in his parents' house). Gérard offers us coffee and cookies. He gets up several times to get various documents: his pay slip, the letter he received when he first got to the Morvillars training program (a three-week program for workers coming to work in the new body plant), union tracts that he has held on to... His wife (who works in the municipal administration) returns at the end of the afternoon. We exchange only a few words with her, and she will not really take part in the conversation since we're talking about the plant. One realizes just how big the divide is between the world of the village and that of the plant.

Gérard knows that I have known Christian for several years. In fact, we met two or three years ago outside the plant one day when the strikers had come out of the shops and had gathered in the cafés near the plant.

Christian proposed and prepared the interview. Even though he did not know exactly what we want to ask him about, Gérard thinks that we will want his "testimony" about the final assembly section, about the changes taking place there, the difficulty of these jobs, the tight production schedules, things getting done "just in time," etc. He also knows that we want to talk about the "training period" at Morvillars from which he was dismissed after four days. He certainly did not think that the interview would get "personal," that, for example, right off and without beating about the bush we would talk about his relationship to "politics," a subject which, at least in the beginning, he would prefer to "keep to himself." Yet at the same time, he certainly knows "his" Christian and anticipates that he will not get out of a discussion on "political" topics. But he certainly does not intend to go very far in the matter.

And in fact we will not dare to ask certain, overly "personal" questions; other matters will be addressed only when the tape recorder has been turned off and we have been talking for a long time in the kitchen or when we have left the house but continue talking for 15 minutes in the garden... It was not included in the initial (implicit) agreement that Gérard would tell his story or that he would talk about himself. Yet the subject of his father comes up right away, his Communist militancy, his work in the Resistance, the many years spent on the town council

("I was raised in the Resistance, my father, my grandfather were in the Resistance . . . my grandmother made bread for the men in the Resistance"). His father had a farm which was considered "middle size" 30 years ago, but which neither he nor his brother (who eventually became a factory technician) ever thought of taking on ("when he saw that no one wanted to take it up, he stopped investing in it, he didn't buy more land . . . and leased out the plots"). His parents "pushed" Gérard to "study," hoping that he would get into the lycée. But he gave up at 14 ("things weren't going too well . . . I saw my friends hard at work and there I was still in school . . .").

After he left school he was hired by a textile factory located only two kilometers from his parents' house but which paid very low wages. ("I was likely to become foreman there.") He decided to leave the factory and to get a job at Sochaux. At the time, the salary of an unskilled worker at Peugeot was significantly higher (by 30 to 40 percent) than that of a skilled worker or even a supervisor in most of the factories in the region, so that being a worker at Peugeot seemed a highly desirable position. It seemed perfectly possible then to reconcile a "hard" style of political activism and a certain form of occupational advancement.

His children and their academic and professional future come up several times. The topic is a painful one that is almost invariably raised by all the questions about his own future and the future of the plant. There is a constant fear that his children (the eldest boy, age 17, is in his last year in school and the second, at 16, in his next-to-last year) will fail at school and will end up like him, blue collar workers at the plant. His relationship to the future is also constructed by his children's relationship. "They're doing pretty well," he says with a smile, but he doesn't venture very far into territory he doesn't know very well, afraid that the future has unpleasant surprises in store for him. Perhaps the most striking thing here is the way he explains all the things he did to keep them out of the vocational technical education track that seems to him like devalued training with practically no other outlet than the factory – as if he carried over his personal antipathy to the Peugeot plant to the world of industry as a whole.

And at the same time – and this is another expression of his ambiguous relationship to the plant, so that if the plant is an object of hatred, it is also, in one sense, an object of love that is bound up with some of the most cherished memories and strongest emotions of his life – he repeats several times that his deepest wish is to have his children work at the plant, as "trainees" during summer vacation: he sees this as a sort of negative apprenticeship, one that will show them what the world of the plant is like and show them, too, why it should be avoided. Yet his words also betray a desire to have his children understand what work on the assembly line was like and how it wore down their father, but also how it was there that he acquired the assertiveness that for him has a certain coherence and grandeur. None of this, he feels, can be understood anymore by the world at large. "I would like them to come into the plant, even for just a month, but they don't want to; but if they got up every morning for a month at 3 a.m., they would feel a lot less like listening to their music."

Once we were seated around the kitchen table and as if to dispel a persistent sense of embarrassment, Gérard invokes the past and emphasizes the confrontation between two eras. He points to Christian – “That guy, he’s someone I trained.” And Christian echoes him – just as I turn on the tape recorder – “that’s right, we spent some good times together, and everyone who worked with us then remembers it as one of the best times of their life.”

From the very beginning it strikes me that the three major issues that come up again and again throughout the interview are put immediately on the table: the increasingly hard work on the assembly line, the deterioration of the “atmosphere” in the shops, and the increasing difficulty of doing union work.

To listen to Gérard and Christian with their innumerable references to their “buddies” and to the “atmosphere” in the shops, to the forms and types of union “work” (deeply embedded in work routines) and the bond that they had with a certain political stance, all of a sudden I realize how and why a distinctive political culture deeply rooted in a complex of work relations (which were also social relations between people “molded” by a common history) could have been transmitted over such a long period of time, and how and why the conditions of this politicization have gradually disappeared or are in the process of disappearing.

What is really striking about this interview is first of all, a certain tone, a mixture of suppressed violence for talking about the present and a somewhat querulous humor for speaking about the past. Then too, there is the continual reference to the deterioration of relationships at work and the close bond between this and the loss of trust within the work group, a loss that is experienced like a physical injury. Attention should undoubtedly focus first of all on how the plant is rejected: a violent, definitive refusal that brooks no appeal. There can be no question of reconsidering this refusal, which is also, itself, the mark of an injury.

In fact, whether as a statement of fact or an accusation, Gérard never stops talking about the dismantling of the old system of social relations that governed shop life for so long (until 1985–6) and gave a kind of power to the work “group,” a group in which the shop stewards and activists occupied a prominent place. At the heart of his concerns is the issue of work collectives, their modes of existence, their characteristic forms of sociability, a certain political effort (which was practically never thought of as such), and the manner in which individual resistance and collective resistance, “moral” resistance and “political” resistance came together, made connections, and sustained each other in that space.

One senses the real injury done to Gérard and the profound disillusionment that is tied to the present but also comes out of a whole history: disillusionment that shows in the way he looks at his own past, at his own future or that of his children; disillusionment that is also rooted in the suspicion that, miracles aside, the new generations of workers – the temporary workers – will not join forces with the veterans and that most of the old forms of labor struggles are no longer viable because they are ill adapted to the new conditions. Turning back to the past, he comes back again and again to the ways that working conditions in the

shop have been transformed for the worse over the past 10 years, the ever greater pressures on the workers, the mistrust and sneaking now pervasive among the workers, the solidarity of the old work groups that has been destroyed, mostly by the system of individual bonuses, and, finally, the way the reorganization of work collectives, even the creation of new ones, has allowed management to steer social dynamics in the direction most favorable to its interests. It seems to be a vicious circle. Memory cannot be abolished. Recognition of what has become of hopes, particularly political hopes, and the way in which the old relationships of trust have been destabilized, both informs and structures Gérard's perception of social relations in the shops today and darkens his vision of the future. In a way, recognition of this failure also spills over onto the past and encourages a kind of derision or black humor that seems most often directed back at himself.

If the violence seems first directed against "the others" – the group of old buddies, those of his generation – it is hard not to think that it also contains a self-destructive element, that it can always in a way be turned against oneself. Because, after all, it is the old group, his own group, the one to which he belonged, that did not live up to the hope that he had placed in it.

He recounts a "set-to" between workers in his shop: as a joke, a few workers threw a handful of bolts at each other and one of them was slightly hurt. The incident – one of the tiny incidents that make up life in the plant – bears witness to the violence of the malaise that he feels in the new working conditions. This story would seem to offer an opportunity to criticize the weakness of the old guys who, so as not to "make a fuss" and out of generational solidarity, adopted the boss's point of view and made themselves party to an injustice. It is a minimal infraction, to be sure, but one that his allegiance to the tradition of union activism cannot let pass... The anecdote in fact is highly significant to the degree that it clarifies the movement by which Gérard clearly marks his distance from the workers of his generation, his buddies, the veterans whom he sees as playing management's game – "I'm determined not to talk to these guys anymore" – and establishes solidarity (but only verbally, and on the basis of a misunderstanding) with the younger workers, or rather "a" young worker who, at a given point, seemed to be the sole individual whose behavior really challenged the order that the administration is trying to impose in the plant – for Gérard there is no choice but to continue to challenge that order with all his might, if only to keep faith with himself.

Yet the description that he gives a few minutes later of the temporary workers' attitude on the job (his shop has quite a few temps) makes it clear that he no longer harbors any illusions that they will one day join forces with the "old" workers. He senses that the temporary workers are too far from him, and are taken up by concerns too different from those of the regular plant workers.

What remains then, and what comes to the fore almost "naturally," is the expression of a violent hatred of the plant, its men, its directors. It is a hostility that feeds on all the humiliations to which he is subjected today, the general feeling of failure in professional life, the fear of an impoverishment that threatens

him and his family. But it also grows out of something quite different, a deeper and older disappointment: the loss of another kind of hope, a collective hope which he never completely renounced and which he never ceases to mourn.

with a Communist assembly line worker

— interview by Michel Pialoux

“You can’t trust anyone anymore”

Gérard (...) There’s no more down time, it’s full speed ahead from the end of vacation to the next vacation, there’s no more catch-up time, when you can make up a bit here and there [*allusion to the ways of “earning” a few seconds through “tricks of the trade”*], you can’t talk anymore (...) [*pause*]. I’d say that it all began around 1977–8 when the American firm SMI arrived... they were the guys who started clearing things out, the ones who set up the plans, and then the timekeeping teams appeared.

Christian Before, your preparer set up your range of work on a provisional schedule and then a team of timekeepers came to time each job, because there had been dust-ups there too, because each time they tried to corner you and put a substitute in your place, someone who’d time the work in your place because they knew you were going to mess around with the times... and those who had the jobs were timed as well, but it’s true that it created too many problems because no one can stand timekeepers, it’s natural! And they cut out the timekeeping, so now in the technical offices, they have a technician do it, and they keep track of the times directly in the technical office, but it’s no longer done under the same conditions: air streams from the screw-cutting machines, the problem of work conditions – all that went down the tubes.

— *And as for the tricks of the trade that let you get a little time off...?*

Gérard It’s up to us to get ourselves out of the mess! (...) Yeah, and now we’ve got I don’t know how many kinds of cars – 23 kinds just for the 405! And about 30 for the 605.

— *And I suppose that the technical office types call this something like increase in the mental requirements...*

Gérard Sure, and then right now we’re making all the cars for export, so there are lots more parts to put together, and they are better made than ours, and in theory these guys are supposed to stick to a certain pace but pacing doesn’t exist. In theory, it’s supposed to be a US [*vehicle for export to the US*] every four cars, but if they don’t have room, they’ll put two, three US, one right after the other. And since there are lots of bolts on the US, the guys just move on down the line... when they get to the end of the line, someone comes to bring them back up [*a worker who doesn’t work fast enough finds himself in the workspace of the worker who follows him; the section head can send a supervisor to help him out and get him back to his regular spot on the assembly line*], when there’s someone to do it, it’s always the same because it’s war where manpower is concerned. Manpower right now is zero: 25 positions, 25 guys, period! The guys who used to move around to give a hand here and there, the breakdown mechanics, aren’t around anymore. The classification still exists but these guys have a fixed position just like the supervisors. (...)

— *It's interesting to figure out how you can increase productivity.*

Gérard At the HC1 body shop in the new plant, it's true that it looks great to a visitor, it's clean... but the working conditions and the atmosphere are worse than where we are right here. And, after all, what's so great when you come right down to it?... the fancy windshields and the side sections that are put on by machine (...).

Christian Now you've got guys on the small assembly lines... they do all the preparation of the front side, then you've got a machine that picks it up and sticks it on the car. And you see the complete car arrive, but you've got to realize that beforehand there are I don't know how many temps who are working their butts off putting on number 7 bolts that you can't even get your hand around and who spend the whole day putting these bolts on.

— *Work's been reorganized....*

Gérard They gain a lot of productivity because what bugged them the most was making sure there was someone in each position, moving people around to different spots, and that's where they make up a lot of time, now the guys have everything to hand.

— *So that doesn't really change anything at all, you save some time but the main assembly is still done by hand....*

Gérard And it works so well at HC1 that it's always on the fritz! Wednesday, we were in the union room, Hamid came around... they put off the break. They announced that there was another breakdown... the week before they lost 150 cars, and Wednesday 100 cars, it's on the way down fast, it's the sudden breakdowns.

— *Breakdowns are their big problem in these shops?*

Gérard Yeah, they haven't been able to deal with the breakdowns... The working conditions over there are getting worse, I don't work over there but from what I've heard...

They can't talk about anything except Japan

— *Christian told me that you almost went to the HC1 plant and that it didn't work out. What happened?*

Gérard Let's say that I was called in like a lot of others to go on this big three-week training period at Morvillars. Right from the first day all they talk about is the Japanese, the automotive industry... they can't talk about anything except Japan... (...)
How you should work as a group... because it's no longer the head men who make the decisions, the section head doesn't have anything to do with it, it's the group. For one lousy day of seniority, a day off or a vacation, the group decides if you can take your day or not, that's how it was presented to us, the group decides. The section head is in the office, he doesn't take care of anything anymore: there is a supervisor who is the intermediary between the group and the section head...

— *And they beat you over the head for three days with this new idea of working in a group?*

Gérard Right, and the whole bit about being available for whatever comes up! The availability bit was what got me, and I said that there was no way that I was going to come in on a Saturday [*angrily*], I'd never done it and I wasn't going to start now! And this was the time when they got back their hour and a half, after the floods, and I said to G. [*in charge of training*], "right now, this hour and a half, I'm not going to do it every evening, at 9.30, I go on strike!" So he said, "if that's the way it is, I don't need you in my shop, so you can go right back where you came from." It didn't take long, just four days (...).

— *In fact, as long as you don't say openly in the meeting that you don't agree with the whole business, they leave you alone.*

Gérard That's it for sure! The fourth day they come on with their big slogan of availability... they ask you "Saturday, you're available?" And if you say "sure, every

now and then," that does the job, but I said "No," and it was... because I knew how it worked, and that day, from one in the afternoon on, I was the one who was talking about availability, and G. kept saying "pipe down, we'll get there!" and then everything was clear, and he told me "Out."

Everyone picks up his pay stub and looks at it off in a corner

— (...) *And in your area, you've also got temporary workers? What kind of relationships do you have with them? Because they can easily have salaries that are 2,000 francs more than yours?*

Gérard The two guys next to me went to get paid this week, one of them makes 9,300 francs, the other more than 10,000 francs. Although I didn't see the pay stub... that's what they made but I don't know what Peugeot gave them! But there is another guy who works near us, they wanted to take him on permanently and he didn't want to: he's there waiting to do his military service and he won't stay there and he didn't want to be hired because he earned more as a temporary worker. But I don't know how much he makes every month.

— *It's got to be hard when you've been working for 20 or 25 years and you see a guy just starting out on the same job... it's almost the exact opposite of the way things were 25 years ago when there was a kind of respect for seniority.*

Gérard Even today seniority is taken into account a bit... but even without bringing the temporary workers into the picture, the things that make the big differences between salaries are the performance bonuses because I'm sure they've got to make 1,000 francs more every month. Performance bonuses have been around for a good 15 years and some guys get two or three a year.

— *They've not become more important in the last few years?*

Gérard The big problem now... people get a bonus, they don't talk about it, it's hard to know. They don't even show their pay stubs

anymore, everyone picks up his pay stub and looks at it off in a corner... Before there wasn't any problem with the performance bonuses, we used to compare pay stubs to make sure there weren't any mistakes... Today we got our pay for the extra month of the year. I tore open the envelope, I read it and put it right on the table, "that's what I got," but the others put theirs in their bag, some don't even open it at the plant, "how much did you get?" "I dunno." They don't know, they don't open the envelope until they get home.

— *And before, who handed out your pay? The head of the team?*

Gérard Right, and some do even today, but now everything is in sealed envelopes. What had a lot to do with the bad climate there is now is the problem of individual raises, for 25 francs at the time, people were capable of anything, squealing...

— *All this took place in the context of the relative salary decrease in the eighties that we were talking about a while ago...*

Gérard And on the sheet that they just handed out on the salary negotiations, it's in black and white: "average increase of performance bonuses, 1.9 percent": average! what do they mean, average? It's more than the raise in salary! And in the average 1.9 percent, how many are there? So it's not 1.9 percent for everybody. And the group stays the same even when there's a rate-buster... since there are no longer any bonuses for the assembly line, what they have is a weekly bonus: 75 francs a week, on the condition that there is quality production... But if there's a goof-off, the group loses its bonus. It's terrible! I saw a pal who lives here, he works on the other shift... just like me, he couldn't care less, but one day he had a glove on one hand and not on the other, and they blew the bonus [*he tells several stories of lost bonuses*]. And I found out last week that this bit about bonuses, if you take a day off for a funeral, a marriage, or a birth, the bonus bounces: it's not just the days of seniority... but if I take a day off for a funeral in my week, I don't get the individual bonus!

— *But the most serious forms are going to be at the level of the group, when the group puts on the pressure... in this situation it's logical. (...)*

Gérard The first days at Morvillars they showed us a calendar with one guy's absenteeism, he'd been out a lot, but that's what they showed first: absenteeism (...) [*Discussion about absenteeism in different shops*]. Absenteeism has continued in certain sectors, you ought to see the really hard spots in the chassis section!

— *Yes, but now with people getting older and being tired out there is also undoubtedly an absenteeism of a different kind than before, tied to chronic illnesses.*

Gérard It's always the same, nobody dares, there is always someone who works himself to death, because there are always problems with the performance bonuses, because over 7 percent absences in a year, you don't get any performance bonus at all. I've learned my lesson, I've stayed... I was talking about it the other day with Michel [*the personnel representative in his shop*], because it's the same, Michel is another guy who never misses... I once went for two years without a day off, not a single sick day... I didn't have any excused absences, I was never late... but I still didn't get a bonus! Which means that something else is going on for the performance bonuses. I've never had any warning about my work, nothing... because as far as work is concerned, I don't want them calling me on the carpet [*angrily*]. They'll never get me on work or on time off. They can get me for my ideas, and on a lot of stuff... I might tell my section head to fuck off someday, but they'll never be able to trip me up on the rest. Moreover, once [*speaking to Christian*], when L. was here, remember? I can't remember what had happened, I think I'd asked for a day off and he'd refused to give it to me... And that guy, he called in sick so he could go work on his country house... he called in sick pretty often that year and he had performance bonuses and everything he wanted! And he told me "sure, but you never come in on Saturdays!"

— *That was the criterion...?*

Gérard But they don't want to hear about it because the last time that I had a talk with my section head, a discussion that he called giving us our "grades," he told me, "working on Saturdays doesn't have anything to do with it, strikes are the only thing that count!"

— *Of course, that's the clear sign that defines your relationship to Peugeot...*

Gérard Even a measly two-hour stoppage once a year and your goose is cooked! And we'd better not even mention the strikes in '89! The guys who went on strike have already gone two years without a performance bonus.

— *That's the price scale? That's what the section head said?*

Gérard Implicitly. And after the strikes there was something else, the nonstrikers got bonuses: some got 150 francs, some got less, even though they hadn't gone on strike! Then some of them went to see the shop stewards – and this really took some nerve – "why did he get more than me?" Where the difference was, that one had gotten more than the other... one had stayed on the assembly line when we filed through the shops and the other had hidden in the john! So the guys who hid got a smaller bonus than those who stayed on the assembly line! It's true! [*everyone laughs*] Those who didn't go on strike were still split into two categories: the guy who made a big deal about staying on the assembly line thumbing his nose at the strikers and all that and the fraidy cat who didn't dare show himself out in the open and stuck himself in the crapper.

That's the mood around here

Gérard The day before yesterday we had a problem in the shop... the section head called one guy a jerk, a young guy. Michel [*the shop steward*] took charge of the file because someone had squealed on him... One guy, Birou, got a bolt in the eye, and he went to the infirmary saying that he had something in his eye but that's all. The next day the section head had a problem

with a young guy who was on the hydraulic jack, we were way up high, the pipe was done for, the jack falls apart and the guy gets it in the leg, so he says to the section head "are you nuts or what? all you have to do is push the cars along the line! You're not the one to call me a jerk!" – "Well then, tough, I'm not taking care of you, and if you don't like it, we'll have it out tomorrow." And the next day somebody said to the section head, "What Birou had in his eye was a bolt and Christophe [*the young guy*] was the one who threw it at him." So the section head made out a report. But I did my own little investigation in the section because there aren't many of us, just 10 or so working there, and in fact they had all thrown a handful of bolts at Birou to rag him... And the one who snitched had thrown a bunch of bolts too. So I said to Michel, "this is the way things went, this guy, that guy, they all threw a bunch of bolts. So now we have to test out the bolt that Birou got in the eye and check it for fingerprints. You're going up there and tell them that." And then the young guy went to see the foreman, he explained how it happened, the foreman said, "OK, we'll see!" That's how things got settled. But otherwise he would have been fired, it's very, very serious! And Birou got yelled at because he hadn't told the section head what had happened to him and how...

— *Birou is a worker?*

Gérard Right, he's a worker who works like us. Three or four of the guys threw bolts at him to rag him... he was behind a cart, fixing up the window panes, and in throwing the bolts, one ricocheted just when Birou was turning around and knocked him in the eye. But the guy who began the throwing was the one who squealed! That's the mood around here!

— *You were talking about a bad climate... But who was this young guy? A temp?*

Gérard He's a young guy, a former temp who was hired, he's 25, 27; but the others... Nicolas is 52, Charles is 47, they're not kids (...) [*angrily*] From now on I'm determined not to talk to these guys anymore...

Christian Yet you get along well with these four guys...

Gérard Sure, but for the rest of them [*angrily*] I've had it! They won't see me at their table anymore, even if they bring a bottle next week for vacation... or the section head brings a drink... which he already did last year... 'cause when it's time to help with repairs, I'm at the breaking point and so... last year he kept a drink for me, I threw it into the trashcan, but this year if he gives me one, I'm putting it in the trash right in front of him! Nothing's right! Can you believe it, here there are nine of us working together and playing dirty tricks like that, running the risk of having a 25-year-old guy booted out the door, you can't mess around! What do they know? And it still isn't even clear whether it's really that guy's bolt? But what happened is that he told the section head to fuck off and the others stood up for the section head... I just can't see myself there anymore. I go because...

— *I get the impression that a lot of guys feel a lot like this.*

Gérard There's work but work is one thing and the mood is another... At the first chance, when there's the least lowering of production, a position goes, they take advantage of the situation to eliminate a job...

— *I think it's awful to say that you don't have buddies any more... Farid told us the same thing.*

Gérard Before there were 15 of us, and at least 13, 14 buddies; there was always a black sheep but...

— *And the non-buddies were in the minority!*

Gérard ... and you could trust them, while now...

Christian Remember the old guy from Alsace, the sweeper who sold his fags? He drove us nuts selling his cigarettes but that didn't keep us from selling his fags for him whenever he went off to the john or wherever. It always happened like that, whereas now it doesn't exist anymore. Individualization pushed to the extreme, everyone

for himself. That's how you made it through working on the assembly line, you had buddies. Now the fellows who have stayed on the assembly line, who are isolated more and more, when you can't even have five of you talking together, what do you do? You take it all on yourself, and sure, you're tough but that only lasts a while, and you're the one with skin off your nose, not the four dopes...

They get on the bus with their supervisor's shirt on

— *The buddies left gradually?*

Gérard No, because they break up the work groups. If there's a position to eliminate according to the modifications in production or in pacing...if there are two buddies with a strong personality, who make an impression on the others, at the first chance they'll move one of them and the other is left all by himself. And getting back to the fancy performance bonuses, no one trusts them anymore. Sometimes you trust a guy, then you find out that he ratted on you to the section head. That's what happened to me not long ago...I don't give a shit, I don't have anything to hope for there, but...you can't trust anybody because of these lousy performance bonuses or to move from 180 to 190 points [*at the lower level of job classification, points determine the salary level*]. Some guys will do anything! Squeal, any kind of dirty trick! Just what the shop foremen're looking for.

— *There are salary problems, money problems, but everything you've just said is really awful. And the choice of supervisors, all that...you take a guy, give him 300 francs more a month...*

Gérard There are lots of them, all they need is a supervisor's outfit...It's not just the 300 francs...they have another role...his wife will hang the shirt out in front of the house so everyone can see it; some of them even go home, they get on the bus with their supervisor's shirt on!

Christian You can see it with the "green lizards" of the new plant, they come back

home wearing the "lizard." As soon as they have the outfit...and you see it when you work regular hours like me, you see them leave in their "lizard" cars...

Gérard All that comes from the fancy logo for outside the plant...if you get your shirt or pants dirty, you don't have to worry about changing clothes, even twice a day, all on account of visitors! You have to make a good impression on visitors (...). That's what the new plant is. That's what they get drummed into their heads! A section head told me one day, "I dream Peugeot, I think Peugeot, at night I dream about Peugeot." He's a technician, I saw him just this morning with a little lion on the collar of his shirt, outside his jacket, and he has another little lion...

— *So he dresses totally Peugeot...*

Gérard There are windbreakers too, remember? Peugeot windbreakers, yellow and blue, when they go skiing they put on the windbreaker with the lion [*laughter*]. That logo, at Morvillars, it's really something! They showed us a tape: this guy goes to buy a Peugeot, his wife is at the hairdresser's with a woman who works at Peugeot; the two are under the drier and the Peugeot woman says "I can't stand Peugeots, when I shut a door, I give it a kick..." When the other one goes back home she tells her husband, "do you have any idea how Peugeots are made? Well, listen to this..." And her old man scratches his head and then goes to the dealer. Then the dealer keeps them cooling their heels, and gives them so little attention that they trot straight off to Renault...

— *After the tape, you get a nice little sermon, here's what you're not supposed to do, here's what you're supposed to do?*

Gérard That's it. For instance, if there are three or four of you in a café, you're not supposed to bellyache, "I've had it up to here! Doors get shut with a kick!" You're always supposed to talk about how good a job you do and yammer on about quality even on the outside. We're all supposed to behave right when we leave the plant, though they don't say so flat out.

— They make sure there's nothing written, nothing to track them. Just like the "ten commandments" business [referring to the "charter" that trainees are asked to sign at Morvillars] that all the papers picked up on, and that's what got people upset with Peugeot.

Gérard I wasn't lucky enough to be here then! I left too soon! I'd've liked to have finished the training period, if only to have three weeks of peace, food and everything... that's not all of it, but... For sure in the union, Paul, Louis, they all told me that I should've stuck it out... But I wanted to be open with them, I didn't want any insinuations afterwards. If they were going to keep me, they were going to keep me! It was up to them... When I came back the next morning, the section head pulled a long face like you wouldn't believe! I think he must've had me sent there to get rid of me; he'd said to himself, "that guy, we'll take care of him, he won't bug us anymore!" When I went back in on Friday morning, I was waiting for him, I'd told myself, "when he sees you..." because he wasn't in on what had happened... And when he saw me coming, it was like a bullet in the face, he was all white... and I said "I'm back," and that was it. He didn't ask me why, they never asked me why I came back. I took the next week for me, I told him "this voluntary Saturday business... what does voluntary mean?" He looked a bit like a fool, "voluntary... you know they're asking for and since volunteers..." "Yes, but over there at HC1 volunteering has another meaning than what's down in the dictionary?" "I dunno. Why?" And I told him "because they kicked me out at Morvillars because I said that I'd never volunteer." If I'd only said "maybe" or "I'll see"... but for them just saying that is already something because they know there are a lot... They keep telling us "if you don't come on a Saturday you have to set things up with your partner so that he'll stand in for you," the section head is no longer in charge of finding replacements, you do it all yourself.

— It's another model of social relations for sure... and what we know about Japanese factories... [discussion about Japan, Italy, England]

Gérard Sure, but it still scares people! Tomorrow instead of Calvet, if my boss has slant eyes, I couldn't care less. If a Japanese buys out Peugeot... The main thing for us is to work in good conditions and a decent salary. I couldn't give a damn if Calvet is replaced by a Japanese because the Japanese already almost bought Peugeot...

The temps? They don't give a shit about the plant

— And the young guys, the temporary workers...? They still find the work hard? Gérard Sure, but they don't give a shit about the plant! We've had one work stoppage... I've only put them out of action once this year... two weeks ago during the strike of the temporary workers. There weren't very many of them, 15, 20, and when I saw no one was interested, I told them "you ought to stop!" There were four or five temps and the next day they called for a revote on the strike, just the four or five of them!

— So among the temporary workers who were there, only a small minority went on strike?

Gérard Of the 3,000 temps at Peugeot, there were 25 (...) The first ones that came, came from the mechanics shop, four or five of them came. The next day the word went out for a strike. I went over there, it's the obvious move, we went around the chassis section, the mechanics section and we picked up 15 or so more, that's all. They had a revote for the next day... and the day after that in the canteen there were about six of them, I said "I'm going back to work, we're not going to be crazy with only 15 of us," four temps, two shop stewards, two or three activists, we really can't... And that evening they had another vote for the next day's strike. Come on, you've gotta be serious! Talking with them, they don't give a shit, "we're here waiting, the day they kick us out on

our tails, we don't give a shit!" They don't give a shit but even so they didn't give in. And afterwards they kicked out the temps who had not stopped work and the guy from the mechanical section who was leading the strike is still at the plant.

— *Did Peugeot levy any sanctions against the leaders?*

Gérard No... There was one guy this week, Monday or Tuesday, he comes in to work at five, they hadn't warned him or anything, and his section head tells him "you're out of here." He left like a big guy, he didn't give a shit: he went to see the foreman in his office and told him "I didn't want to spend my life in your hellhole anyway!" He's right but what I have against him is that he could have come just as easily when we were on a real strike.

— *He didn't participate?*

Christian Not at all!

— *When he was asked to participate, he just said that he wasn't interested?*

Gérard No, they're not interested at all. They're just passing through.

— *They are from outside the region?*

Christian That guy's from around here, he comes to work on his bike.

— *They have no political consciousness?*

Gérard A few of them – the ones we saw over in the mechanical section, but they still don't give a shit, not a bit! Everything is day to day... One of them got kicked out not long ago, and this morning I saw him back again... he came back this morning as a temp to visit the chassis section when before he was working for real just across from us. I asked him what he was doing there, and he said "I've changed jobs"... When he used to come to work in the morning he often came in late... one day he got here at ten, he'd fallen asleep.

— *They kicked him out after that? They interrupted his term? And he hired on in another place?*

Gérard That's right... I don't know where he was, he went to another place and he comes back to the plant... (...) What's really rotten is that they're in the middle of dumping all the guys who come in after

18 months. And at the same time, a group of temps arrives, this morning 30 or so, yesterday too. Because after 18 months, they have to hire them for real now, if they keep them on.

— *You have good relationships with the temps?*

Gérard Sure, they're good but there are a few oddballs, they work all day long with a Walkman on their heads; they're young!

— *It's OK to have a Walkman at work?*

Gérard Yes. It's incredible how many young guys work with it all day long!

— *Most of them have one?*

Gérard 60 percent of the temps have headphones. I get the impression that they don't want to integrate either (...). They've had problems with that because some of the guys stayed on two or three days, then skipped town on the weekend and didn't come back, you've got to understand them. But most of them don't give a shit once they see how things are; they are there, they finish out their contract and afterward they go someplace else. But that's not enough to fight for, today is today, tomorrow is another day.

— *But they can still talk things over with you?*

Gérard Sure, they talk but you can feel they don't care.

— *They aren't interested in the future of the company?*

Gérard No, and not even their own future. Sometimes they're under 20, they don't think about anything, about today, that's all.

— *For the unions it's the same thing?*

Gérard Right, anyhow the union, politics, voting – that doesn't concern them.

— *But the strike in '89 affected them nonetheless?*

Gérard Yes, those who were here during the strikes... And I think that if that happened today, maybe they'd change...

— *Do you think that more of them would be in the union?*

Gérard Yes, having seen what has happened and then the working conditions, all that... Because they made them promises

too, promises of jobs, promises of promotion... "Work every Saturday and you'll get hired..." They understand that they are going to hit 18 months and they're going to be dumped. There's one guy who's working with me, he went to take the tests a

week after he got here, the section head told him "you'll be hired..." Now it's no longer before the long vacation, maybe in September... Well, watch out for that "perhaps!" He's a baker-pastry chef, so he's looking for a job, and to find one...

June 1990

Stéphane Beaud

The Temp's Dream

At the end of July 1991, Montbéliard stands blotted out by the sun, strangely silent with all the workers from the Peugeot plant gone on vacation. During the month of August, following a well-established tradition at Sochaux, nobody stays in the area, except “the old guys” or “the down and outers.” These last few years, however, a number of workers have tended to cut their vacations short, going away for only two or three weeks while most of the younger workers remain in the housing developments near the plant, hanging out in cafés where they dream about a hypothetical departure for the “Coast” [the Mediterranean].

The residence for young workers at Audincourt – one of the many towns (about 15,000 inhabitants) that have grown up around the Sochaux plant – has seven large, well-maintained six-story buildings. For a long time the residence accepted only immigrant workers from the plant, but since 1988 several of these housing sections also take in younger temporary workers. I have an appointment with Alain, a temp from the north of France, who has been living in this residence for more than a year and who worked at Sochaux for three months the year before. I met him a few months earlier at the local unemployment bureau, an institution set up by the government to help young people from low income areas who are having problems finding a job, and I had several opportunities to talk to him. Since September, after his contract was broken, he has been “slaving” in the Sochaux-Montbéliard area looking for an unlikely job. In six months he has only had two very short contracts. At the beginning of the month he found a contract on the clean-up crew for a municipality. His wife (they were married two years earlier in the north), who also “slaved” for a long time in the northern region around Lille, has ended up joining him and lives in the residence on the sly. Their married life is very difficult.

Alain has been watching for me from his fourth-floor window and calls out to me, obviously pleased, no doubt afraid that I would leave him in the lurch. From the outside the residence seems deserted. Only a few immigrants, Moroccans or Turks, seated on the baked grass, are talking together, and some young guys are busy working on a car that they have partially taken apart. Inside the buildings, on the other hand, there is a lot of activity since a sizeable number of the younger workers do not go away for vacation and are settling in to spend the month of August in the residence. Alain's tiny room seems as if it has been invaded by objects: a big black and white TV set up on a chair facing the bed, a cassette tape

recorder on the table, a small refrigerator next to the sink. The walls are covered with posters from films and hard-rock groups as well as Alain's own comic strip drawings. He's the one who had offered to have a discussion with me and a few of his friends, who are also former Peugeot temps living in the same residence.

So he introduces me to his neighbors on the floor: Patrick, Jacques, then Lucien, who is absent when I first get there because he is fixing his mailbox. Patrick is a 25-year-old Breton who had worked for five years at Citroën in Rennes and then had been laid off at the time of the economic layoffs in 1988. Subsequently he came to be signed up as a temporary worker at Sochaux, but after three months, his contract had not been renewed and since December 1990, he had found no permanent work. Jacques, 28, from Somalia, is a skilled construction worker whom everyone calls by a nickname – Ghandi – that goes with his intellectual air, receding hairline and little round wire-rim glasses. Unemployed for over three months, he is hoping to find work on the construction sites.

But Alain had talked to me most particularly about Lucien, because he is "someone," a "veteran" in the residence who is not afraid to protest or to speak in public against the "authorities" – that is, the director of the residence or the people who run the temporary employment agencies. In short, Lucien is something of a spokesman. After getting his CAP in carpentry and after a series of poorly paid jobs in sawmills, he hired on at Citroën in Rennes in 1988 as an assembly line worker. Eight months later, he was laid off for economic reasons. Without waiting for his unemployment payments to run out, he came to work at Sochaux with a friend from Brittany on a six-month temporary contract. He worked on the assembly line for only three months. Afterwards, he worked as an unskilled laborer in construction on temporary contracts that lasted only a few weeks. Of middling height, almost frail, Lucien is wearing Dacron pants, a blue short-sleeve shirt and sandals (he's the only one in the group not wearing jeans and sneakers). Unlike Alain, who has short hair and wears tight jeans with an imitation crocodile belt and a neckerchief around his neck, Lucien does not seem to pay much attention to how he looks. He doesn't sit down and when the meeting ends, is squatting against the wall. He has brought a big bottle of orange soda with him, which he will swig regularly and pass around during the discussion.

Throughout the discussion Lucien is nervous, often shifting position, as if he couldn't get rid of a certain "tension." He speaks with a strong voice in somewhat choppy sentences, often giving a little laugh when he finishes a sentence. At the beginning of the meeting, when he is going over his experience as a temporary worker at Peugeot, he talks calmly, almost solemnly, carefully articulating his words and pitching his voice, and clearly trying to be specific in the description of his work. But he is obviously holding himself in and trying to keep himself under control, plainly afraid of getting carried away. As he tells his story (and tells his life) and comes to the most difficult parts of his life – the lack of money, always having to be on the lookout for a place to live, debts, mistrust among the young, the absence of support – he sometimes lets go in sudden bursts of anger.

These three young men are all in an extremely difficult situation. Since July 1990, when their contracts with Peugeot were not renewed, they have had only short-term contracts (of a few weeks) in various businesses, and have taken every job offered. Since the Gulf War, large and small businesses alike have almost stopped taking on temps. Although they are on the lists at the ANPE [the national unemployment agency], they have found no work in two or three months and have no hope of finding a job in the area during the month of August. Harboring few illusions on the subject, they are waiting for the plant to start up again in September. They know that their failure to make the grade at Peugeot 18 months earlier lost them an exceptional opportunity for permanent employment. If they have “stuck to” the Montbéliard area, it’s because they vaguely sense that they won’t find anything better elsewhere. Without really believing in it, they are hoping for an upswing in economic activity.

When Lucien got there, Alain restated the general theme of the meeting in his own words: “what this guy wants to know is what you did to drop out.” In the beginning Lucien tried to present a less negative self-image than of someone who is “young and uncertain” – unstable, with few skills, not very serious about work – as if to set himself apart from unskilled workers or people who don’t even try to look for a job. Lucien talks proudly about his work on the Peugeot assembly line in the “finishing” section, and even takes a certain pleasure in telling us about what he did at the plant, describing in detail his position on the assembly line, the sequence of operations and maneuvers, or telling us anecdotes that say a good deal about the atmosphere of the shop. He describes himself as a “good worker” (disciplined, smart, inventive) and stresses his ability to do the job and his physical stamina, how fast he learned the tricks of the trade and adapted to work. At Sochaux he discovered the world of the big company. His abilities were recognized, and he had then seen the possibility of getting out of the position of a worker who could be put in any job and was liable to forced labor, the possibility of no longer being the “temp” stuck with “the dirty work,” pushed around from one job to another and who takes it all without a peep. He was respected in his work at the plant, however minimally skilled that work was.

The altercation that set him against an “old” worker who demanded that he submit to an initiation ritual is particularly revealing about the deep break between generations. The subject of alcohol comes up almost immediately when the young men talk about the “old guys” and marks a real break: blaming the old guys’ alcoholism is also a way of revalorizing themselves. In a sense, Lucien’s talk about the veteran assembly line workers is also a moral discourse about himself, as if he were trying to reassure himself and present a self-image that is pretty much the opposite of what the bosses say about the older skilled workers: as young, sober, hardworking, available, committed, and not pushy.

In this sense Peugeot protects him, not from the unemployment that he has learned to integrate into his social and mental universe as a kind of inescapable infirmity, but from arbitrariness, the arbitrariness that temps are subjected to in small companies. By its very size Peugeot gives him an extra capacity from which

to negotiate with the temporary employment agency which he sees as the enemy – an instrument of “exploitation.” The recent transformations of the market and, more precisely, the proliferation of these small companies, more or less subcontractors, that are ready to hire young people under any conditions, lead to something of an “enchanted” vision of the big company. That’s why Lucien, like the other “uncertain workers,” tends to take company recommendations seriously (to take on responsibilities, take the initiative, make suggestions, stress quality, etc.). He accuses the temporary employment agency of being a “racket” and understands the true capitalist concern about the profitability of the business. So that he ends up rejecting the social vision defended by the union activists whom he distrusts as spokesmen of established groups. The way in which the unions set “the boss” against “the workers” is too manichean for him. His years “slaving away” taught him to get along with the boss. The way all of them talk about the unions clearly reveals the distance between the two generations.

If he tends to set himself apart from the old assembly line workers, Lucien cannot overlook the barrier that separates him from those “hired on” who are his own age and who were temporary workers with him. He has to face up to his objective lack of marketable skills, which he sees as in the order of things. Without any hesitation he describes it as a sort of adaptation to a situation over which he has no control, a series of mini surrenders that he cannot quite acknowledge, little failures that force him into an awful humility. Without any hint of melodramatics he recounts the dramas of different aspects of his life as a series of external events. Even if he has gradually been led to “bring down” his professional aspirations, everything happens as if, to defend his dignity, he has to hold on to a bit of the fantasy that he can in fact take charge of his life again.

Lucien and the other young men who find themselves in this shaky situation seem to be caught in and haunted by the condition of temporary worker. They have no other political perspective than that of a timid reformism, with no inkling of subversion, and they seem preoccupied above all with making their situation livable and trying to get rid of the most intolerable parts of the daily life that is their lot. Deprived of a unifying collective political language, they are in a way doomed to talk about their situation in euphemistic, psychologizing terms. Since they have no “political” understanding, their revolt against a social order that makes no room for them takes the form of a violent opposition to the “old guys” (the “fossils” in politics). Everywhere – at work, when they apply for housing, and in politics – the “old guys” seem to occupy the territory and stand in their way. It is against this background of humiliation and defense of their pride that they are led to say, half-say or imply, that even immigrants get better treatment than they do (“the immigrants, they’d never say anything to them”). And if they remain reserved on this point, it’s because, face to face with the investigator, they are afraid that these statements might disqualify them.

with the temporary workers

— interview by Stéphane Beaud

“When you’re a temp, you don’t have any protection”

Lucien (...) Things were good at Peugeot, I had a good job...let’s say we were a gang...*[correcting himself]* men between 30 and 40 and things were fine... We all got along really good except for one real moron. But otherwise things were fine! At Peugeot I didn’t have anything to complain about! I was treated well, better than at Citroën... Yeah, for sure! ...

— *And the work pace? How fast did the assembly line go?*

Lucien How fast did the assembly line go? Well, in the beginning when we got there it was fine, and then as things got better the assembly line slowed down but they added stuff to do.

— *You did two vehicles in a row?*

Lucien Right... I had a 405, a 205, a 405, a 205, and from time to time I had the 205 diesels. Let’s just say that if you wait for the car to get to your level to begin working on it, you’ll never make it. But I always began as far up the line as I could so that when I got to my spot I’d just have a few finishing bits and pieces to take care of... I always started out early... because between each car there was always a “platform” to put in place. Without those platforms, everything would have gone on without a hitch.

— *The regular workers we’ve met, who are all 40 or older, say that the assembly line is getting harder and harder.*

Lucien Yeah, it’s hard for the guys who’ve been there for years. They have to stick it out because they don’t have any choice... But I always say that if I’d been able to stick it out at Peugeot for six or eight months, I’d have stuck there!... but I only did three months, just my luck!

— *Would you have wanted a long-term contract?*

Lucien Sure, and I was ready in any case, I had said so to my section head. I’d told him “if you come across anyone looking for an extra guy to work on the line, count me in.” No problem for me... I told him several times that if they put me up for an eight-month contract or one without term, I’d take it... he knew it anyway. The mood, just for the atmosphere at Peugeot, was a lot better than at Citroën... a lot lot better! ... I made one hell of a comparison between the atmosphere Peugeot and the atmosphere Citroën. It’s totally different. *[Lucien talks about his work on the Citroën assembly line which was lots more of a “mess.”]*

You’d better not forget the bottle...

Alain *[in a low voice, almost as an aside]* Those guys *[the temporary workers hired on salary]* You want them to talk?... *[he gargles ironically]* ... you’ve got to bring a bottle of the good stuff *[everybody laughs]*.

Lucien They begin to really talk when they’re half crocked *[everybody laughs]*.

Alain Alcohol’s not just a problem at the residence, just look at the plant.

Lucien At the job I had, the guy working next to me was 45... the first time his group foreman surprised him on the job, he was drunk!... *[angrily]*. He even fell asleep on the job... He was dead drunk! ... He got a warning... OK, the next time it happened they said a third time and he was out!... He’d never work in any plant, they made that very clear. And then he had this routine of jumping on any new young temp right away so he’d buy him a bottle. That’s what happened with me except that I told him right off “if you don’t like it, let’s step outside for an explanation!” I told him right to his face, “just because you’re 45

and I'm 25 I'm not gonna let you walk all over me." And even on the job I almost had a fight with him...! He was always pushing me around. It was simple: I'd've just gotten there in the morning and I'd be talking to everybody else to see if they'd had a good time the night before and stuff like that, and no sooner than he'd gotten there than he'd jump on me, "yeah, you'd better not forget the bottle," and on and on! I let it pass twice, but the third time I told him to fuck off!... and we almost had it out right there... the third time I told him, "OK, we're gonna go out on the track where they put out the cars and we'll settle our accounts," and right at that moment, the other foreman turned up, "What the hell are you doing?" "Euh, we're having it out for a change" [*joking a bit*]... The foreman was beside himself, he didn't have a clue. [*Next he specifies what the "supervisors" do - workers from the ranks who help coordinate the work group.*]
[...]

— *So what do you think of them, these workers in the plant, the ones who have been there for a long time?*

Lucien They're... well, I'd just say, like they say these days, they're pretty laid back... that's it, pretty laid back. Let's just say that if you've got a little problem you can count on them... It's not the way it is at Citroën, if you don't have the group foreman to fill in for you when you want to go to the john, you know you're gonna piss in your pants... so you know what's what, but at Peugeot, as soon as you call the foreman over, that's it! In five minutes he's there! not even five! He comes over right away, no problem! At Citroën I had problems like that, two or three times I started yelling because I had to go to the john and I couldn't go because the group foreman had taken off to Timbuktu. The first time I didn't say anything, the second time I yelled, and then the third time I just left my spot and went to the john [*everybody laughs*], five or six cars went by, one without a window, another without a part (...)

— *During these three months at Peugeot, your work went well?*

Lucien Well, let's just say that I never had any problems, I got some bad assessments and stuff like that. You got assessments relative to the point system, you got 10 points less every time there was a mistake... For example, there was what they called "Security": if I forgot to put in a circuit, I lost 50 points right on the spot... 50 points at a go! Or some guy who forgot to put in the brake circuit, that's more dangerous, so he'd be socked 100 points at one go and in the end the group foreman would be the one who took it on the nose and would get dragged over the coals. And then afterwards the workers would go after him... [*pause*] Otherwise, I never had any problems. Oh, yes! There was the time when I forgot to put the electric circuit in the starter system, but otherwise I never had any problems.
[...]

As I've always said, if you want to do it, you can

— *In your job on the assembly line, wasn't there any chance to fix things up, to get a little extra time?*

Lucien Sure, that's what I did, I made up the most time I could... I'd start on my car as far up the line as I could so that I'd be free when it got to my spot. (...)

— *It's true that everyone thinks they know what working on the assembly line is, but there are a lot of maneuvers to learn, you need a helping hand, not everyone can do it in two weeks.*

Lucien That's for sure! but you can't tell yourself that you won't make it. You've got to tell yourself just the opposite, you just have to have a good eye. In the beginning you've really got to look close... if you look hard at what the person does who is showing you how, if you get that in your head right away, then things go on their own. (...)

— *Were there lots of temps near you in the finishing section?*

Lucien On my line, I was the only one, the only temp. At that spot there had been at least 10 temps the month before, and not one had been able to take it...and there wasn't anything really hard!...nothing!...

— *Maybe your time at Citroën helped you?*

Lucien No, that's not it...as I've always said, if you want to do it, you can...I wanted to stay in this job and I stayed...if the others had decided not to stay, they fixed things to say that it wasn't working out, that they had health problems, and this and that, so...

— *But the first two weeks of work, you must have really taken to it?*

Lucien Right from the first day...the very first day!

— *Still you must've really taken it to heart?*

Lucien Sure, of course...but I had fun comparing the job I'd done at Citroën with what I was doing at Peugeot. Well, it was lots easier at Peugeot...Because at Citroën I had to keep an eye out on my materials all the time so I could ask for restocking when my cart was still full, so when it was empty, the refill would come just at the right time, because unless I did that, when I'd ask for supplies when I had just 50 parts left in my cart, the supply cart wouldn't get there in time. While at Peugeot the supply cart was right next to the assembly line so you didn't have to go out of your way, it was right next to us... (...) I'm sure that the guy who got my spot took at least two weeks to figure this out...oh, I'm absolutely sure...because there are even guys who told me "you're the only one who learned the job in two weeks." There was one guy who took a good month to figure out the job I had. You get the picture!...So this character, I can just see him running after the machines, he really must've been running all over the place... (...) [He talks for a long time about the organization of work in tight production schedules.]

— *You worked standing up?*

Lucien Standing up!... [proudly] I always stood up!

— *You didn't squat down?*

Lucien Sure!...I was all over the place...always...sometimes the car would be flat on the ground and I'd be standing up, so to get the ball bearings on the clutch I had to bend over every which way...that's the problem.

— *Physically that must've been hard?*

Lucien Not really... [in a low voice], not for me, it wasn't hard...Let's say I've always been able to do the jobs assigned to me. I've always figured out what to do...for anything...even for the boss where I did my CAP, it was the same, when his workers couldn't squeeze into a tiny spot to put on a screw or anything else, he asked me to do it, no problem...

It's automatic, you'll end up on the assembly line

— *You already had certification?*

Lucien I had certification but let's say that I ended up on the assembly line because I didn't have the right certification...I've had buddies with a mechanics CAP and they ended up in the machine shop... When the car didn't start right, their job was to see what was wrong when it started up...

— *What kind of training do you have?*

Alain I've got a CAP in carpentry...cabinetry, frames...everything connected with construction...I ended up on the assembly line without...

Lucien [laughing] Like everybody else as far as that goes!

— *And after your CAP in carpentry you looked for work in that area?*

Lucien In my area, sort of...I worked for a carpenter, I worked for him for a month and then he left on vacation...Then I had lots of promises that he'd take me back...and I believed it! That's for sure!...and finally at the end of the vacation I went to see him to say like that, "when do things start up again?" He told me "well, it's not worth your while coming back, there won't be enough work." Then I worked a bit locally, I worked for six months in a saw-mill not far from my home, in the town just

five kilometers from home... so I worked for six months in the sawmill, that's over four years ago now. I found that job through someone I met... and then the pay wasn't great because I was making a little bit more than the minimum trainee wage, I didn't have my regular salary. It wasn't paid out regularly, one time I'd get 500 francs, another time 600... Fine, let's say that I was at my parents but I still paid for meals, you expect that, but I couldn't make it that way, so I said, "Something has to happen." Still and all I lasted six months and when the six months were up I left... After doing that I worked as a general carpenter in a rest home. I worked six months there, that went fine but there too it was a TUC [Travail d'utilité collective], a public service job, so the salary wasn't much because I had rent to pay, I had 2,000 and some francs to pay in rent and my salary was 2,000 francs, no way! [somewhat strained laughter]... So then I looked for something else, I started a CAP in stone-cutting... and just my luck! I hit on another boss who didn't pay... anyhow I've always had this crummy luck... I'd end up with a lousy employer who didn't pay or who didn't pay regularly... It's not what you'd call fun... and then, well I signed up for Citroën, I got a reply, and there I was!...

— *With your CAP in carpentry, you ended up right on the assembly line?*

Lucien Yeah, right on the assembly line! oh yeah!

Alain In any case, CAP or CAP level puts you on the assembly line...

Lucien That's for sure, right on the assembly line. Unless you've got a CAP in mechanics. Somebody with a mechanics CAP will probably be put on as a "motor-fitter," for example, putting on the combustion head or stupid stuff like that or in the finishing section, "mechanical control," when the car doesn't start up or stuff like that, all that's fine... but a guy like me who comes from construction, certified in carpentry or something like that, it's automatic, you'll end up on the assembly line. (...)

A temp doesn't have a right to anything

Alain The only good thing in the plants is the first day when you visit and you get a meal... after that it's the whole lousy bit! [General laughter, then the conversation comes back to temporary work]

Alain When you come from another region and you get here, there's always a problem getting a place to stay... because a temp doesn't have a right to anything... no loans, no right to anything at all. Instead of helping you, it just pushes you down further.

Lucien Sure, because what happens anywhere a temp works, the temporary employment agency already gets two or three times what the temp gets. Someone makes 4,000 francs, the temporary agency makes three times as much, so you can see what the situation is!

Alain And when you go ask them for something, they tell you to fuck off. They've made money off of us and that's it!

Lucien So that's why we're at Montbéliard, where I was working the secretary in the temporary employment agency, she took it into her head to run everything... because she was supposed to be a secretary and when my contract was up, she found a way to send everything back to my parents in Brittany... all my papers, my payslips and everything... when they say they're a temporary employment agency, fine! I'll do anything as a temp, it doesn't bother me, as long as it pays! but when they say they're a temp agency and have that kind of a secretary, it's not worth the trouble!...

Alain It's no better at BIS! [a temporary employment agency]

Lucien No better! it's been three weeks since I put in my papers, my yellow slip for the ASSEDIC [unemployment fund] and I still don't have a thing...

Alain At BIS you won't get it! in any case, you won't get it! just one more thing that I want to tell you, about the ASSEDIC paper at BIS, how much did I work? I worked for them for 96 days, I asked for my ASSEDIC

paper, and three times in a row they only put down eight and a half hours. I've protested and protested and I've never gotten a thing! So how much did I get taken for? between 70 and 80 hours! and not a word from them! The file was closed in between time, that makes almost 80 hours that I've lost for unemployment. I've lost three months of work (...)

Lucien Do what I do, head for the back office!

Alain Sure, I went into the back office, I even messed everything up, the whole office at BIS! ...

Lucien Right on!

Alain But it didn't change much [*pause*] ... I turned the office inside out, right in front of everybody. I went to see them the first time and then I'd already said that I wanted work. The first time, they told me to come back, supposedly there wasn't any work, "come back," "come back on such and such a day." That worked once, twice, the third time I'd had it, I told them "if that's the way it's gonna be" ... I messed up the whole office. I told them "now if I don't have any work in a week, I'm coming back and breaking everything!" So the secretary was filling in, the other guy wasn't there, the guy in charge. I came back here, it was five o'clock, at six I had a note in my mailbox telling me to come in the next morning, I had a job ... So I said to myself "if that's what you've gotta do in all the offices, that's what I'm gonna do." That's it! And no more problems at BIS since then.

Lucien In any case, when you're a temp you don't have any protection, anything can happen to us ... (...)

— *Do you feel that Peugeot's management protected you against the temporary agencies?*

Lucien Yes, we still had some protection at Peugeot, that was good. But at Citroën, whenever there was a problem, or I asked for a hand from a section head for paperwork, they didn't give a shit! They said yes and behind your back they sent you packing ...

[...]

— *When did you find out that they weren't renewing your contract?*

Lucien They told me a week ahead of time, that left just enough time to get on my feet, time to put a file together for the ANPE, for ASSEDIC ...

Alain That's the big weakness with these temporary agencies, they ought to let you know at the beginning of the last contract, at the beginning of the month, that at the end of the contract, you're out. That way people would have the time to get things together, to sign up for unemployment and all that and there you are. Whereas as now, the last day, or the week before, what sense does that make?

— *You must've been disappointed?*

Lucien Let's just say that it made me shake my butt because I had still and all come 800 kilometers to work and especially the temporary agency here had told us that it was a six or seven month contract, a long-term contract, so no problem! Then finally, here I am, everything was going fine and three months later canned! Now that was really crisis time! [*he laughs nervously*] ... Fine, in any case, we were let go for economic cut-backs, it wasn't worth it to go back to Brittany, might as well try to stay here. But it seems that things aren't any better here! ... It's even turning into a real crisis here, it's not worth looking for work here anymore, we'll start looking again after September because around here it's completely blocked ...

— *After Peugeot you never found a job?*

Lucien I got a few short contracts but really just fill-ins, a week here, a week there, this and that. It pays but eventually you get fed up because in the beginning things are OK and at the end, you can't even pay the rent for the residence, that's still 924 francs a month (...)

Temp at Peugeot! 4,000 smackers

— *In a plant where there hasn't been any new hiring for almost 10 years you feel a big gap between the young and those who have been there for 20 years. Did you feel that people treated you differently?*

Lucien No, I was treated like a regular worker... really as if I'd been hired. There was no difference... you could also say that if you're well thought of by the temporary agencies and by Peugeot, you've got an edge because you're much more likely to be hired... I'll tell you right out: there was one guy, he had the same certification as me, he'd been hired two years before and he was earning a lot more than me. He was earning close to 6,000 francs. I was a temp. [*some-what belligerently*] Want to know how much I was earning? 4,000 smackers! temp at Peugeot!... 4,000 smackers! I got more than that at Citroën.

Alain I made 6,000 francs a month.

Lucien But the other guy who had been hired two years before, he was making close to 6,000 francs... he had the same certification as me... just because he had been hired as a regular.

— 4,000 francs, but without bonuses?

Lucien Oh, the bonuses!... [*a rather grat-ing laugh*] In my position, I didn't have any, it depends on the position and it depends on the sections. Where they have the most is in the steel plate section, they get pretty many bonuses in the steel plate section.

— You didn't get the bonus for over-time?

Lucien No, I was on the regular bonus schedule.

— You mean for regular hours?

Lucien No, I did what everybody else did: a week in the morning, a week in the afternoon, but there weren't any bonuses for overtime. Not for us. Oh, there were temps who did get them but that depended on the job, I didn't get any.

— But the first time you got your 4,000 francs in salary, what did you do?

Lucien I yelled! I remember, it was the morning shift, we used to begin at five in the morning and finish up at 1.18 in the afternoon, and it was 2 o'clock by the time we got here. I get here, pick up my mail, and when I saw my salary slip and all the rest... Well, alright, I took a good look and said to myself "something's wrong

here." I took a shower, changed my clothes, had a bite to eat and took off right away for the temporary employment agency and there I really started to turn the place inside out! I said "who the hell do you think you are anyway! You telephone us all the way up in Brittany to say there's work here at Peugeot, that it'll be between 6,000 and 7,000 francs and long-term contracts, and it could even end up in a real hire if you do a good job." So we all said, "why not give it a try," and then what do we end up with? First paycheck: 4,000 lousy francs! That's enough to send you through the roof right there! [*angrily*] So I started in on my business throwing things around, I wasn't the only one either! There were lots of others there, just the same thing, absolutely the same! We'd really been had... some racket, that's for sure!... I had some buddies who were working at spots only 300 or 400 yards further down the line from me and they were getting 5,000 francs, and what's more, their work was a lot smoother than mine! It's enough to turn you off life forever (...) I even said to them "what fancy digs did you guys grow up in? and you come from the sticks too!" And then I really let them have it, but the problem is that I was the only one shouting, everybody else kept their traps shut... When in fact that's just the time when everybody should yell because otherwise it doesn't do any good. When I figured that out, I yelled once and for all, and then "you figure it out for yourself!"

— And that time you got more money?

Lucien [*with a sigh*]... 300 crummy francs...

— And if you've already worked at Peugeot can you come back and work there again?

Alain No, you can't... "category zero": which means that if you've worked at Peugeot and you've been dumped you're put in the "final zero" category, it's not worth it, you can't come back.

Lucien That's what happened to me, once my contract was up, I put in for Peugeot in Mulhouse, never got accepted!

Alain Of course not! all the info is sent around!

Lucien And what I really think is lousy, I've got a buddy working at Mulhouse right now, and he worked before at Peugeot-Sochaux.

[...]

Join the union? ... In a plant, it's not worth the trouble!

— *When you got here, they told you that there was a chance of being hired permanently and then it didn't turn out that way. But I thought that there'd have been unions in the plant to stick up for you?*

[All three answer at once.]

Alain [*angrily*] A fat lot of good the unions do!

Lucien The union doesn't pay any attention to us, not a bit! Nothing happens!

— *You've had something to do with union members?*

Lucien Yeah, some guys from the union came to see me once.

— *Which union?*

Lucien The union! These guys came around to ask me just like that if I'd been hired, I told them I was working on a temporary contract, as a temp... And when they found out like that that I was a temp, they turned on their heels and went off to see somebody else.

Alain And you have to sign up! you've gotta sign up with the union even to have a chance of getting picked.

— *You've never been in a union?*

Lucien They asked me at Peugeot, but I said no way.

Alain In a plant, it's not worth the trouble!

— *But who asked you?*

Lucien [*with evident irony*] Well, the union, who d'you think?

— *Right, but there are several unions, that's what I mean.*

Lucien Oh! sure, they've got several unions but I couldn't say which one it was. The guy asked me if I wanted to join a union, and I told him "I don't want to have anything to do with all that stuff of yours!" [*very angrily*]... I told him "once you start out with a

union, they never leave you alone, all the time it's do this, do that..."

— *What do you mean by "all that stuff of yours"?*

Lucien What I call all their stuff, it's always the same thing, it's always yak, yak, yak, on this and that. In the beginning, everything is fine and dandy and then after a while you begin to get tired of the whole thing. Because once you're in their union, that's it! You've gotta stay in for the rest of your life! Because then you've had it! No two ways about it, they don't hold back for a second!... It doesn't make any difference if you're at Peugeot, Renault, anywhere, the big companies... all of them are just the same!

— *So you're talking about unions like the CGT or the CFTD? [the more militant unions, associated with the Communist and the Socialist parties]...*

Lucien Yeah... in any case I don't give a shit, that's all there is to it.

Alain Anyway it's not just Peugeot... I worked for two months in a small place, I could've joined a union, I worked in another place too, and I could've been in a union there too, and I didn't want to...

Lucien You're better off minding your own business.

Alain Anyhow a union in a plant... I've seen what the Comité d'entreprise [joint worker-management council] at Peugeot does, and except for getting you seats to the movies and discount coupons, that's all they're good for.

— *The workers of 40 to 45 years old who often come from rural areas, when they were your age, around 20 to 25, they usually joined up with the union fairly soon after they were hired, for some of them it was almost the logical thing to do.*

Alain Well, they made me the offer, they told me just like that, I remember, it was during this accident, I think it was the CGT, he came out with it just like that, "if you want to be hired for real, join us and then we'll try to get you in." So I said "if you have to be part of the union to get a job, then, for sure, it's no way." What's

more, unions don't have a good image... how can I put it... union members don't have a good image with the temporary employment agencies and even with Peugeot.

— *And for the workers I was talking about a while ago, joining a union was a way to protect themselves, to protect themselves against the boss.*

Alain Yes, but before you could tell your boss to go to hell because you could easily find a job someplace else. Today you tell your boss to go to hell, and that's it, you've had it! You end up in "category zero" just like at Peugeot and there you are!

Lucien Yeah, classified once and for all!...

Alain So there you are! because I know that my father used to tell me how many companies he'd worked for when he was young... When he'd had enough, he'd quit, he'd take what they owed him and went next door to look... he even did two jobs at once, at the mine and somewhere else... But now, to take an example, I start out on a CES [*Contrat emploi-solidarité, a special "solidarity" contract subsidized by the government*], I work half-time, and the CES won't let you work the other half. Even if you're married or stuff like that, you can't do it! And I think those sorts of things are even worse... If this keeps up, they'll have you working two hours a day for the same salary, the same 1,800 francs a month and then you're supposed to spend the rest of the day hanging around? Black market jobs are illegal and you can work only four hours, well OK, working on the side is fine as long as you don't get caught! Then you lose everything. And that's no good... The bosses don't want to hire because they're afraid to and it costs them an arm and a leg to pay the employer's share of social security and all that, and then the temporary agencies have them over a barrel!... or else you really have to have pull to get back in, for everything else it's the same thing all over again, training sessions, anything at all...

There's no way we can make it now

— *And Lucien, are you interested in training, or training courses?*

Lucien I did a training course but in Brittany. In stone masonry [*laughter*]... and I really fell flat on my face. I jumped into it with all four feet, with this guy who tells me [*he imitates reassuring tones*], "no problem, you'll see, everything'll be just fine. Two years from now you can take your CAP exam as an outside candidate if you want to." So I said, "why not?" I took the test, but six months later I was still on 2,000 francs. And 2,000 francs with a 2,000 franc rent doesn't square. So I quit, period. Usually for a CAP you're supposed to spend three weeks with your employer and one week at school. But for the six months I spent at this company, I was never at school, never, not even once. When I saw that, I really began to yell! So after six months I gave up, it couldn't work. I did what I was supposed to do, everything the contract said I should do, I read it so I know. I was always on time, I even worked overtime, which I really wasn't supposed to do. And what's more I got cheated. In the beginning, everything goes on just fine, but after a while, when you've had it up to here, you quit and that's what I did, I quit, it was simpler that way... [*pause*] Let's just say that now, I'm 25 after all, to find I'm still unemployed, I'm really beginning to get good and fed up!... it really drives me nuts! [*with exasperation*]

Alain And when you think about all those politicians filling their pockets...

Lucien Politicians?... I'll say!... There's no way we can make it now, we'll never make it!

Alain Sure, they make big plans for creating jobs, I'm all for it... like that Cresson dame [Edith Cresson, Prime Minister in 1990] suggested, I'm all for it, but just think how much they're going to get out of it all!... that's right! Because it's fine and dandy to have young people work half-time or even eight hours a day for 1,200 or 2,000 a month, but that's not

going to help because even if you're in a training program you can't get an apartment. And guys who don't have an apartment, what're they going to do? Even if they find an apartment, they lose their job and they do a training program like that, as soon as they have 1,800 or 1,200 in rent, 1,200 minimum, what're they gonna do with 800 francs? Then there's the electricity, everything you've gotta pay. So what're they supposed to do?... They're always hanging around Catholic agencies or places like that looking for help... Not for me, that's for sure! And it's true that the young guys don't talk about it because it doesn't do any good. And when you see the government sitting on its butt...

Lucien And when they dump the young guys who've been hired at lower cost, the government gets back what it shelled out for two years, don't forget that! Because the government gets it back... that's for sure, the government's happy because it makes all these fancy promises to the companies: "For two years you won't have to pay out any social security or anything if you hire somebody." So the guy starts out and he hires somebody and when the third year rolls around he's got all these government charges that fall in out of the blue. So out go the new hires! (...)

They're all as rotten as each other

— *Politically, what would need to be done?*

Lucien Politically? The first thing, like I've always said, would be a young administration... a young administration... none of these old fogies!... [*scornfully*] 50, what're these fossils doing hanging on in the administration!...

Alain Fossils is right! [*laughter, with an aggressive edge*]

Lucien Yeah, they're real fossils, real fossils!... What good can these 50-year-old fogies do! I mean, really!... the only thing they know how to do is to mouth off... Promises!... That's all!... squeeze us for all we're worth, they know how to do that, for sure...

Alain Live it up in fancy restaurants on an expense account...

Lucien They live high off the hog on our dough, they take big trips on our bread, and that stinks! It really stinks... it's no good!

— *In the next elections do you feel like voting for one over the others?*

Alain For who? they're all alike!...

Lucien As far as we're concerned, they're all as rotten as each other, just as rotten!...

Alain Promises, promises! And then nothing ever comes of it...

— *It seems to me when I listen to you that the government is more to blame than the employers.*

Alain Sure, because the government doesn't do anything anymore, it used to do stuff, it used to before...

Lucien Yeah... before, the government! yeah! Now the government makes great promises, we're dumb enough to believe them, and then we never get anything, not a thing. Just recently the government decided to eliminate certain kinds of contracts, what they call unspecified contracts, sort of like the welfare model, contracts of two, maybe three weeks with particular employers... all these little contracts are going out the window because the government can't make anything on them... [*long pause*]

— *This period of unemployment lasts and lasts, even though you've often got job experience and qualification.*

Alain Yes. [*pause*] Then the longer you're away from the work that you did for your CAP or something like it, the harder it gets... you lose everything!... once I was in a small place, and I had to do a bit of thermal insulation and even though I know a little bit about heating and plumbing systems, well, if you asked me to do anything like that now, lots of luck!

Lucien The same for me.

Alain It took me almost a month out of the two months of the contract to get used to it again. I was lucky, I fell in with a guy on my floor at the residence. I was with him in his team, he was the one who got me in... So I

really lucked out, because I don't know what I would have done otherwise...I'd lost it all! Since '82 I hadn't done anything like this, since I did my CAP from the middle of '79 to '82. So from '82 to '91, not much...And here, when I got to Peugeot, it was supposed to be to work in industrial design and to work on the blueprints for the new Peugeots...But when I got here, I landed back on the assembly line and I found out later that it was because my certification wasn't high enough for them.

— *At the same time I'm struck by the way you talk about work on the assembly line, that's the difference with the workers in the plant who are 35-45, who all say they are tired, "worn out," and they tell me for instance that they need more free time on weekends.*

Alain What for, for god's sake? Now I ask you, what for! [*very angrily*] If they'd kept the temps on, it would've been a lot better. But Monsieur big guy Calvet would rather run around in his plane and all that instead of paying attention to his own plant... that's what's going on!...They kick out the temps. Kicking out the temps, fine with me, but they were happy enough to have them around when they had all the problems with the floods in March '90. They were going full blast with the temps... they had plenty of temps and the regular workers... [*he whistles and turns his thumbs*] The workers lolled around... and now they come back to their regular jobs and with just the workers they had before...No more temps to back them up. And now the regular workers start bellyaching.

Lucien Yeah, what d'you expect?

Alain And next September, what's going to happen? They'll start hiring again, they'll take a few of the temps up until February-March, and then in February-March when they've gotten everything in good order [*hitting his hand*] "so long temps, out you go!" And it'll start all over again...it's like that every year, it's not hard to figure out (...)

At 25 I should have had a steady job a long time ago

Lucien It seems to me that at 25, after all, at my age, I'm 25, I should have had a steady job a long time ago...I should have a regular job...I shouldn't be hanging around like this unemployed...this isn't a life!...Anyhow I have this idea [*pause*] if I go back to Brittany I could end up staying there, things will go on for another eight months just like this, I'd be unemployed trying to find work and I'd end up right where I am now, so frankly I'm not interested...That's why I'd rather stay here...we'll see what happens...but in any case nobody lifts a finger to help, the government makes all these promises, the temporary agencies cut the rug from under our feet, I don't see how we can make a go of it...I really don't see how... [*pause*] and there's the taxes, that's really over the top...so more promises...all we get are promises.

Alain Just like me, if I go back north, I can't stay with my parents, I can't do anything, I don't have an apartment, I haven't got a thing...

Lucien For me I'd have to do another application for an apartment, so it's not worth it...in any case...

[...]

Alain Now, Lucien, he's about to be kicked out [*confidentially*], he's about to be evicted because of the manager.

Lucien I'll tell you straight out, somebody did me in, I'm sure!...really sure! Supposedly the problem is that I haven't paid my rent, but that's not all, I'm sure of it.

— *But your rent is all fixed up now?*

Lucien Not really...I just can't, I just can't do it, BIS gives me all this shit. In any case, I pay or I don't pay, it's all the same, I'll be kicked out, and that won't change anything at all. He told me so, and he had this little smile. (...)

Alain Not much hope there. For example, without being racist...for example, the immigrant workers behind here, they can

be 10 months behind in their rent and they're never kicked out!

Lucien They'd never say anything to them, they'd never say anything to them.

Alain And why not? because of high-level stuff, diplomatic relations and all, they're afraid of getting their hands wet or getting shot in the head...

Lucien So what they do, since they can't take it out on them, they take it out on us!

Alain The smallest thing, that's what happens. (...)

Lucien Here I am killing myself to get some bread and there is that slow-poke over at the company throwing all this shit at me, three weeks ago I gave him my sheet to fill out for unemployment and he still hasn't sent it back!...

— *How much do you get in unemployment?*

Lucien I dunno! I can't even say... with all the different contracts I've had all over the place, I can't really figure it out.

— *But more or less?*

Lucien If it works out, I'll get 3,000, 3,000 is not bad but I won't be able to make all my payments. I'll have to settle in two lots to get everything in order because ASSEDIC, that makes 2,000 and a bit more, so if I pay out 3,000, that's it, there's nothing left for me to eat, so I'll pay up in two lots.

[...]

It's better if the Arabs stick to themselves

— *Otherwise in the residence, there are groups of young guys, groups by nationality?*

Lucien This is the only building where you'll find French... real French... the rest are all Arabs... or at least immigrants... there's a little bit of everything.

— *Do you see much of them?*

Alain Not at all... practically not at all!...

Lucien I do... from time to time some of the Arabs come see me so that I can get their washing machine repaired...

Alain But there aren't very many of them.

— *But you don't have hostile relations?*

Alain No, that's not done... They stick to themselves. In these residences, it's better if they stick to themselves and we stick to us...

Lucien Right, it's just as well like this!... [raising his voice a little] it's just as well, it's everyone for himself... that's all!... as for me I think it's just as well... it's fine this way.

Alain Anyway life is like that now, every man for himself!...

Lucien Yeah, that's what it is, you make it on your own or you don't make it, that's why I want to skip the country.

— *Where do you want to go?*

Lucien I'm getting out of France... Texas! ... yeah!... [laughter]... that's what I've always dreamed of... always... I love horses, there I'd be in fat city because they need protecting over there...

— *You're thinking about it seriously?*

Lucien Yeah, yeah!... I think about it... lots... the idea's been running around in my head for a long time... It's nice there.

Alain Yeah, it would be everybody's dream, I think, to leave France...

July 1991

Rosine Christin

Working Nights

Danielle G. is 32, the daughter of Juliette and Milou C., small-time farmers who are my next door neighbors in the Aveyron [in southwestern France]. I first met her when she was 10, and used to see her several times a year until she left for Paris, less regularly since then.

Danielle has “left the criss-cross.” “The criss-cross,” to distinguish it from the flat center of the village of Saint-Hippolyte, is the term for the land that looks over the gorges of Truyère and, more precisely at this point, the lake made by the dammed-up river. Until the last war farmers from the “criss-cross” were relatively well off. They made their living growing fruit and trading in the produce from choice fruit trees, – cherry trees, plum trees – and from gathering chestnuts and nuts: they made a bit of wine, had some cows, the cooperative picked up their milk, and from time to time they’d sell a calf. Today, only a few old couples or widowers still live in the hamlets of “the criss-cross” where the “cart paths,” which as late as a few years ago people used to take as shortcuts between hamlets, have “closed up.” The small vineyards have been left to run wild, brambles are taking over the land, and the children are in Paris.

The youngest of the children from “the criss-cross,” Danielle was the last to stay on: her brother Maurice, 10 years older, is a gendarme in Paris; her sister Yvette married a boy from the area and went to Paris to run a café with her husband. Danielle was in no hurry to leave; after her secretarial course at Rodez she lived at home for two years, hiring herself out for farm work from time to time, helping her parents, and going to all the dances in the area. She admits that she “made good use” of her time, and relates that these two years were especially happy ones. She was sorry to leave. Danielle is sociable, lively, a bit of a flirt; wears her hair in a “mane” and likes to buy clothes on Sundays at the flea markets whenever she can.

I called her to make an appointment. My call didn’t seem to surprise her since we had bumped into each other in the Aveyron a few weeks earlier and had agreed to see each other in Paris. She was on sick leave following an operation and seemed very happy to spend a few hours with me. Of course I would come to Ulis to see her apartment, and she would be receiving me, would make something to eat; she would show me her photograph albums and especially the one of her marriage which I had not seen; we could also call her parents, so I shouldn’t worry, I was her guest.

I told her also that I'd like to ask her some questions for research that I was doing at work about the difficulties of life in Paris, especially for someone who comes from the country as she does. Would she agree to tell me about her move from the Aveyron hamlet where she was born to the central post office of the 15th arrondissement in Paris, "the troubles" she had had in the beginning that her mother told me about during every vacation? She said right away that, yes, things had been difficult but "really not too bad, since it's not as hard for someone from the country who goes to the city as it is the other way around. Because this way you have all the modern conveniences; someone from the city who goes to the country, to some place like the Aveyron, couldn't take it."

There is no easy way to get to Ulis. It is a growing area of modest houses, surrounded by districts zoned for residential development. Danielle came to meet me at the RER [commuter train network centered on Paris] stop. We had agreed to meet on the platform, where I waited for more than half an hour before she finally arrived, embarrassed, because she had been waiting for me on another platform, the one where she gets off every morning when she comes back from work. Then we took a bus, which took us quickly through elegant suburbs, then onto a section of the highway. From far away Ulis appears like an odd cut-out of a few tops of tall buildings set against the background of cranes and construction sites (later I could tell that some of these houses were being fixed up), and Danielle told me that her friends kidded her about "living in Chicago."

During the whole bus trip Danielle talked about her husband, Serge, five years younger than she is, which seems to bother her a lot even though she doesn't realize it. Son of a garage owner in Versailles, he did not want to continue studying after his baccalauréat because his passion was chess and he wanted to spend all his time on it; he is a ranked player who has taken part in tournaments, and he recently won a trophy which has a place of honor in their apartment living room. It is easy to see that she admires him. She says he's an intellectual who explains lots of things to her that she didn't understand before she met him. On the other hand, she has to admit that the practical side of life is not his strong point. She runs the household with an authority that is quasi-maternal.

As if on cue, Serge called during lunch to ask her what she thought about 150 francs for a hotel room in Lyon where he was going the next weekend for the chess world cup, and Danielle had to spend a long time reassuring him. Then, after she hung up, she turned to me, visibly flattered: "The poor guy, he is so sweet, he always asks what I think, he can certainly spend what he wants, he earns more than I do" (Danielle earns 6,200 francs a month, Serge 6,700).

On the way there and on the way back I noted that all the bus drivers knew her, and they talked to her with the friendliness of people who, even though they don't work together, see each other regularly in the course of their professional lives and who run into each other outside regular hours when everybody else is still at home. This complicity seems to mean a great deal to her.

We have to walk about 10 minutes, go by a number of tall buildings, some really dilapidated and others officially being "fixed up," before we get to the small

four-story building where Danielle lives, set slightly apart, on a side street with a few shrubs. The apartment, classified F3 [three rooms], is on the second floor: a living room and two bedrooms, one of which is a guest room (Serge would have liked to make it an exercise room but Danielle preferred a guest room for relatives and friends coming through). The living room has lots of knick-knacks and photos, particularly of Danielle's family and her marriage, and a low glass table that Danielle had arranged with succulent plants and pieces of rock chosen with care. The kitchen is well equipped with machines, an electric mixer, a microwave (both presents from Serge's mother who likes to cook).

When we arrived, the table was already set with a bottle of cider bought in my honor (and which we had a hard time opening). Throughout the meal Danielle was concerned whether I liked the food, and she kept telling me to make myself at home, and disappeared into the kitchen to fix up the roast with a package of instant sauce or to bring a condiment that I might like. "Have some more, have some more," she said, "have some bread, take a second helping," more worried about being a good hostess than about answering the questions which for her were clearly out of place. The centerpiece of the lunch was a cake that she had made from a recipe from *Weight Watchers*, which she'd joined on the advice of a coworker when she arrived in Paris, since she thought that she was too fat.

Danielle talks very loud, especially when she is talking to people who are not close to her and who intimidate her, as if she were afraid of not being understood. This leads her to explain the same thing several times, even speaking a kind of baby-talk as if she were talking to a somewhat obtuse foreigner. She has a very strong southwestern accent. When she was little, she used to speak "French" at school and patois with her parents: she got out of the habit of speaking patois even with her family, except for special evenings with the neighbors, quite naturally when she, the last of the children, left for her secretarial course at Rodez after finishing her BEPC [junior high school certificate]. But she chooses her words carefully, so much so that it seems a bit stilted: the word "something" separated into its indefinite adjective and noun, the precision of certain words like "enter into" for enter, the invention of other phrases like "taking attention" make what she says seem very impersonal. Similarly, she was very concerned to be precise in describing the gestures that she has to do in her work or the hierarchy of the postal workers, and visibly made an effort to give me both the acronyms and the functions to which they actually correspond. But the image of the world around her at the central post office remained very bureaucratic, almost as if Danielle were reciting a lesson that she had been taught when she started working or as if her supervisors were out of reach or, rather, as if they didn't interest her.

During the entire interview she complained about the physical conditions of work at night but her experience of daytime work brings back bad memories. So, despite the urging of her family and her husband, she keeps on working at night, and in the camaraderie of the night shifts she seems to find some consolation for her exile.

with an employee from the central sorting post office

— interview by Rosine Christin

I never see the sun

— *Ordinarily you work at night?*

Danielle Yes, at night.

— *From when to when?*

Danielle From nine at night to five in the morning, you have to get used to the schedule. I leave here around seven, call my parents...

— *You call your parents every day?*

Danielle Almost every day, not for long, but it's regular, they've gotten used to it. We finish around five or five-thirty, I get the first metro, and for a woman, it's not the easiest thing in the world... You've got to like it, it's different. In the beginning I was a mail carrier, I've been doing this since '82... May '82.

[*She then explains why she chose to change from mail carrier to the night shift.*]

Danielle There are pretty many benefits, pretty much time off and you can call on the other employees to fill in for you: so with a fill-in, plus certain regular leaves, you get a longer leave period, which means that you can work for two weeks flat out and then take two weeks off.

— *What do you mean "flat out"?*

Danielle You fill in for a coworker. You work two nights out of three, and the third night, instead of taking your regular day off, you fill in for a coworker, so that person will fill in for you when you want. Or sometimes you get two days off because you work Sundays; Sunday evening, that counts as three hours of CL – that's compensatory leave – because you get extra compensation for working from nine to midnight, which means that you get an extra day for working three Sundays. So you take that day, which the Administration owes you, and then you get a coworker to fill in for you, plus the regular day off

... And then too you have a lot of free time. Before I met Serge I was a bit homesick, and I thought I'd use the time to go back to the Aveyron more often. You need more than a weekend to go to the Aveyron.

— *And that's when you met Serge?*

Danielle No, it was after that. I met Serge when I was working overtime in '84. I was on a night schedule, it wasn't bad, so I thought, why not stay. Serge wasn't very happy with me working nights but I told myself, I've taken a lot of things for him, he's going to take some things too and then that was the way things went. The ambiance... except for standing up all the time, and it's true that a human being is made to sleep at night and work during the day... so there's an imbalance for the body but... the ambiance... and all that... it's nice, that's all...

Standing up the whole time in one spot

— *How does it work?*

Danielle When you get there, there are steel bins, bins, you know, with like little pigeonholes... then there's a table called the "opening table," that's where the trucks unload, there are handlers or "handler agents" – they're handlers for sure – who unload the trucks, the big postal sacks, they bring them over on little tables, the rolling carts; they bring them over to the opening table, and there's one guy who opens the sack and the others around the table separate the regular size letters from the little size, and they put them in little boxes, the big ones they put in baskets, you know, those metal baskets and then it's sorted by little slots.

The first time that I entered into these rooms, I said, golly, it's huge, it's a factory... no, it's impressive, enormous... and

then the small letters go in little plastic sorters, and it's sorted into little slots; and then there are different departments...to acknowledge receipt of registered letters...insured letters, all that goes in a sack with a red label, and it's called "Reds" or loads, and is sorted at a higher level: GSAX, General Service Agent, they do the sorting in an enclosed office and they're marked in a small notebook and when you go to the distribution section, you have to have the addressee sign.

We remain standing up the whole time in one spot. In front of the setup, for four hours you sort the 15th arrondissement, that's all you do, and you've got to know your stuff...you have to know the Rue Vaugirard, how long that street is and how it turns...it's impossible for one mailperson to deliver the whole street which goes from the 6th arrondissement as far as the Porte de Versailles; it's a street crossed by several districts within the arrondissement, so you put districts 5 and 12 together... 14, 20 and you have to know. You have to know that a given street goes into a given slot.

— *It's already sorted a bit when it gets to the opening table, all Paris isn't in there?*

Danielle It's sorted for the 15th but there are also mistakes, letters that belong in the 17th but end up in the 15th, these are "wrong addresses"; or letters where the sender got it wrong, for example, putting Boulevard Raspail [runs through the 6th and the 14th arrondissements, next to the 15th] in the 15th.

— *How many slots do you have to fill?*

Danielle Sixty-six plus three "zones" plus "bills," "single address zipcodes," and "wrong address," actually I'd say 75 slots and the same for the other employees. But, on the other hand, there's another department, the "in and out" department is what they call it, for us it's the "in" department, the out department is in an annex, Rue François-Bonvin and there it's automated; there are PIMs, HMs (...) a Toshiba, there are machines, computers, so you do the zipcode, you run them through the PIM,

and the agent'll do the zipcode 75014, the agent'll get a reject and then it ends up with the HM (...) in the...it goes in the slots...I can't exactly describe it... and afterwards it's sealed in plastic. That's the "out" department.

— *And you're standing up all this time?*

Danielle That's right. Now they pay some attention because there are some older people who've been working at night for years, with leg problems; they contact phlebologists and all that... They realized how useful a stool could be, a stool adapted to the slot racks, but it's not really possible because the slot racks are so old. They could put in new slot racks but there are too many slots, it would be too fanned out, but there is a proposal to adapt seats to the slot racks, so sometimes we put two stools together, you know two bar stools one on top of the other, and we sit down, we're tired.

— *Do you stop in the middle?*

Danielle There is a small break from a quarter to one to two o'clock to eat a bite or rest.

— *And how many coworkers do you have?*

Danielle About 30.

— *Do you know them all?*

Danielle Yes. There are changes but I've known them for a long time... there is an ambiance, you end up liking each other... I even have a coworker who... who is a big philatelist, he loves comics, he's very intense about a number of things.

He can become postmaster... then prime minister, who knows!

— *There are supervisors with you?*

Danielle Yes, because there are several grades, the lowest grade is auxiliary, it's not even a classified position, then there's the mail delivery woman, you know, mailman... then the agent or AXDA... then there's CDTX, that's the supervisor, an inspector for the routes, an inspector for the mail delivery people, but that's a supervisor; then there is the CT, the inspector in the head section like Serge, but that's part

of the “office”; there is the divisional inspector CTDIV and beyond that... all this comes under the rank of inspector.

— *And they are all in there with you?*

Danielle Yes, yes. Some are there.

— *But they don't do the same work?*

Danielle No, no. They give the orders, they register... they all have their particular job, but on the other hand the CTDIV [divisional inspector] is below the inspector and above the CDTX [supervisor] and then there is the inspector and then that's all... because the head inspector works in the day; the postmaster... with him he's already made the grade... then he can become postmaster... [*she searches for the right word*], then prime minister, who knows!

— *How do the supervisors act with you?*

Danielle It's OK, they are nice enough, I try to do my job; like every other occupation it has its good sides and bad sides.

When I get up, night is falling

— *Especially for a couple...*

Danielle Yes, because you see each other... you see each other... let's just say that if Serge worked nights, it would work, but with him working days and me nights we see each other less often, necessarily we see each other less often. When I met Serge I was already working nights; he's always known me working nights.

— *You spend one night out of three at home?*

Danielle Yes, but I'm always coming out from under; we don't really live like people who... There, you can see for yourself, I've not gotten back on a regular schedule [*she has been on sick leave for three weeks following an operation*], I still don't sleep nights.

— *And vacations?*

Danielle Just the same; my time to sleep is from seven in the morning to three in the afternoon. Sometimes in the middle of winter I don't ever see the sun, I get up... not in total darkness... that's not the case but when I get up, night is falling and I go off to work, I come back... it's still night, there are periods like that.

— *You must not see your husband.*

Danielle Well yes, because he works close by, he has a good schedule, I get to see him. And then he works in shifts, a morning or an afternoon, he had this morning off, he's working this afternoon. He has regular shifts: six in the morning to half past twelve and twelve to six-thirty. Where it's the most serious is when he doesn't work mornings and he works afternoons: I get back, I'm tired and he's getting up, I find it hard to talk, and when he has to leave at noon, I get up and fix him something to eat, but I don't have my wits about me and he leaves just when I'm coming out from under. I don't have to [*fix him something to eat*] but he's so nice, a man's a man, I tell myself that he's not going to know how... well, he'll know what to eat but... I'm always wanting to take attention.

[*She talks about the problems of having a child*]

Even though there are married women with children, to keep from paying daycare one or the other works at night, that happens a lot in my job; to raise their kid, not to pay daycare, one of them does daycare at night, the other during the day and the one who works at night takes the day. I have adapted myself, I was always with my family. My parents were everything for me, I adored my parents and I loved the countryside, nature, I missed it a lot and in Paris I felt stifled whereas here [*in Ulis*] it's 30 kilometers outside Paris, it's not very far... it's not really the country, it's in between.

I stayed in the Aveyron until I was 20, then I went to Rodez to study; it's a small town, I did the secretarial course, a sort of BEP-CAP as office secretary, but it's still a small town; next to the big city, Rodez is a big village. I would have been happy on the farm, but at my parents' place it's too hard, it's impossible to bring it up to date, we'd have had to build a house... with modern facilities... we'd have had to... and it's not even that, but such a small farm! because the terrain is too hilly and then they used to live well because they sold vegetables and fruits but now with fruit coming in from

Spain through the Common Market, that's taken everything... and then for a woman... I would have liked it... but what can you do? My parents told me, "It's not that we don't want to have you here, but you have to be ambitious, take your exams"; and then at that time they used to get a newspaper and I saw an announcement: sign up with this organization, I wrote in, I sent in all the information, all that...

— *You didn't know it was for the postal service?*

Danielle Yes I did, it was clearly marked. The newspaper was *Centre-Presse* or *Midi-Libre*, I don't know which. I signed up and I went to Rodez and there I was accepted under I can't remember which number. They notified me that I was accepted and that I could have a medical exam and "you will be assigned to mail delivery in Paris," but they didn't tell me where. They had asked me what region I preferred, Rouen, the North, Paris, or the East; so I put down the Paris region: I got Paris and I found out where only three months before I started working: "you are assigned to the 15th arrondissement and start work in two weeks," that's how I left.

Entry into Paris

Danielle In the beginning I stayed a few days with my aunt in Saint-Denis [working-class suburb north of Paris] [*This is the wife of Danielle's mother's brother, the owner of a café-restaurant first in Saint-Denis, then in Roissy nearby. He has lived in the Paris region for more than 30 years and has kept a house near her parents' home where they go for a few weeks in the summer and around the end of October, and which he has fixed up very nicely with an eye to retiring there*]. Monsieur Reyrolle [*a neighbor close to her family*] took me to the train station at Rodez, I was really sad, I was only 20, but everybody's got to earn a living, so a bit of sadness... but that was later. My brothers and sisters had their lives, there I was, all alone in a studio apartment faced with all of life's problems, just starting work, a whole bunch of things like

that, I was a bit lost. But even so, I liked the others at work, I used to go out, weekends I was never alone, well, yes, a couple of times... But I didn't have any real friends, we were more like acquaintances who did things together.

— *Don't I remember that you were in a residence at one point?*

Danielle In the beginning I was in a postal service residence, on the Boulevard Pasteur; it's a residence where they let you stay at least three months, and then you fend for yourself... it's the entry into Paris. Afterwards I lived in a residence where you could stay a little longer, there were only four of us, then of course there were always new arrivals, so you had to make room for the newcomers. Everyone, once they've adapted to Paris, everyone has to look for their own place; I looked for anything I could find... a small apartment, I found a studio... it was gloomy inside, Rue Firmin-Didot in the 15th near the Porte de Versailles, I was down in the dumps... then I was on the Rue Blomet, then I moved to the Rue Saint-Lambert [all in the 15th near the post office where she works]...

— *Why did you keep moving around?*

Danielle Because in the first place, I was bored, it wasn't open enough, there wasn't enough air, it was on the fourth floor and there was an elevator but it was gloomy and I couldn't get used to it. Then I was in a maid's room so I had no facilities at all. Then I said to myself, it's all well and good to go clean up at Yvette's [*her sister, who runs a café*], but it's a pain, find something of your own... But before that... to get back my deposit on the first studio, I had to pay double rent for a certain amount of time, the maid's room and the other rent. I lived in the maid's room, I lived there a year, and then another employee told me "Dani, I found a studio at a good rent if you want to go have a look," I said OK. There, there were all the facilities, there was a kitchen, a living room wing that was also the bedroom, a storage place, and a bathroom. I stayed there for a certain time, then I met Serge, we were in an F2 [two-room

apartment] Rue Desnouettes and then we came here.

A kind of tranquillizer

— *Do you remember your first impressions when you got here from the country?*
Danielle Not really, but you're young, you don't see the whole, if I were starting out now, it would be harder, but at the time . . . I was a bit carefree . . . you tell yourself that you're going to meet people, you're going to get married, meet a Prince Charming, all a bit silly. So when you get here . . . but I'd already lived in Rodez, so I knew something of a city. I saw Paris . . . Yes of course, Paris is very beautiful but for someone from the provinces who comes on a visit; if I'd come as a tourist then, I would have stayed with friends, I'd have spent two months, three months seeing all the monuments and all the things Paris has to offer, to take advantage of them, I would've appreciated it, but this way I saw Paris . . . I'll tell you . . . because you get here, perhaps no longer now, but at the time you always hoped to get a transfer, you wait, it's a wait, they tell you "You're a trainee." It takes a year to be classified, so you say "fine for a year, I'll sacrifice a year and then I'll go back home." What makes this not a good solution is because you're only here in passing, you don't look at things, you don't appreciate, you just want the year to end so you can go back home . . . all that. They mislead you at the start, to soften you up, a kind of tranquillizer. It's a bit like blackmail. So you don't want to adapt because you tell yourself that you'll have to get used to the provinces again, perhaps you won't be assigned where you want to go, in your parents' town or that it's going to take time. All that makes you think and then you float, you float a lot. I didn't have the same perspective in '76 as I do now.

— *Your mother always talked about the bag you had there.*

Danielle Yes, it was a satchel with straps. Now they have supermarket-type carts for nearby deliveries, and they have storage sites, postal service buses that take you

around; which means you put half the round in a bag, and someone, a driver agent, that's an agent who drives a vehicle, takes you to a number halfway through your round. For example, if I'm doing the Rue des Bergères, I'll start out and fill my bag up to a given point, halfway along the route, then at that point my bag will be empty, so then I'll pick up the mail in a bag that this person will have given me. I was the one who sorted my route but it's true that it was . . . and three times a day! You worked every morning, you had to be at work at six, and if you got there late, you had to explain why, you got "tickets" they're called, and getting bad marks and all stirs up lots of things. We worked every morning and every other afternoon; the worst day was when you had morning and afternoon, you did three rounds, one "money round" with money orders, registered letters, insured letters, things like that, important things.

— *It's almost harder than at night.*

Danielle That's right. Serge would have liked me to . . . but where it wasn't bad was when, you know, the delivery person presents the calendar to the people on their route and there you got a small thank you amount which didn't hurt at the end of the year, it wasn't a whole extra month of salary but still . . . You paid three or four francs for the calendar and you offered it to the customer, to the individual, and the individual accepted or not, and would give a small present, 50 or 100 francs depending on what they could afford, and that's for you. That makes a little bundle at the end of the year whereas here you're paid for the "thirteenth month," it was a kind of extra month's salary. It's important when you work days.

— *But did you get very much out of it?*

Danielle Oh no! and then you have to like doing it, it's begging, it's different, you can't be ashamed of sticking out your hand all over the place, it's not an obvious thing to do.

November 1990

During our first talk, Danielle had agreed to ask for permission to let me come one night during her shift to the sorting center of the Rue d'Alleray where she works. She had been a bit surprised at my interest, telling me that there was "nothing more to see" beyond what she had described for me but that the center that took care of post office checking accounts was computerized and would be much more interesting for me. In any case T.M., the inspector in charge of getting out the mail, her immediate supervisor, was on vacation and we had to wait for him to return, since the person who did the same work on alternate days was "a workaholic." She let me know, but nicely, that such a visit was absolutely out of the ordinary and had to be negotiated.

About two weeks later, she called me one evening, just before starting work, probably from T.M.'s phone. Right off, even before getting to the reason for her call, she talked to me for a long time and without any obvious reason about the upcoming visit to Paris of a neighbor from the Aveyron, a distant connection for her as for me, but "one of the best friends of [her] supervisor" (she always referred to him this way when she talked to me but, like the other "sorters," she usually called him by his first name). Bringing up T.M.'s status as "supervisor" let her affirm her relations with a superior of whom she could ask a favor and express her pride, even in a subordinate position, in belonging to an institution with a complex hierarchy of supervisors, from the lowest down and the most familiar (who even has ties to her village) to the most important and most inaccessible ("even the prime minister"). Talking about her supervisors, and a bit in their name, she also took refuge in the impenetrability of the institution.

I had already noted during our first talk that she was embarrassed at telling me about her life in Paris and that she always turned the conversation around to our Aveyron connections, to the latest news from her parents or other inhabitants of the hamlet. In this way she injected her "hometown" into her Parisian world, and brought a bit of the tiny Aveyron village to her job on the Rue d'Alleray. Giving the name of this neighbor and telling me about his friendship with T.M. helped turn this mail sorting center in the 15th arrondissement into a place that I would know about and minimized whatever might seem odd about my interest in her work...

We agreed to meet at 9 p.m. in front of the post office headquarters at 19 Rue d'Alleray. I told her that I would be coming with a friend. In the evening the Rue d'Alleray near the Vaugirard metro stop is deserted; the small shops and even the café were shut long ago, and since it isn't on the way to any night spot, few cars go by on the street. The only ones that pass us are the big yellow mail trucks that lurch about with a great noise on the street that is torn up for repairs. Lit up on all three floors, the big square structure with its barred windows stands out in sharp contrast to the surroundings. Danielle was waiting, she had already "signed in," so "no problem." But I sensed that she was nervous, talking volubly and at the same time intimidated. We went around the building to the back as far as the platform for the unloading of the mail trucks that will be delivering the mail for the 15th the whole night long.

On the first floor the “political stuff” is sorted, that is, during the week, the daily papers and, on certain days, magazines and periodicals more generally.

Danielle works on the second floor, which is where letters are sorted. To get there you have to take stairs painted in yellow and gray squares as they are in many offices. The landing between floors has a union bulletin board with various mimeographed sheets and little posters tacked up.

This evening Danielle is wearing close-fitting jeans, an enormous white pull-over with big black designs, and low black heels. Her long hair is sharply tapered at the back and in a mane around her face; a few strands have been lightened. She occupies a spot near the start of the bay window with, on her right, a coworker from Villefranche-de-Rouergue with whom she chats “about home”; on her left a young agent from Vienne who “knows Segondy” from having been invited to the marriage in 1985. This closeness has been achieved by waiting patiently for departures or absences of workers whom she likes less and with obliging authorizations...21 people are working today (it can get up to 31 depending on absences, vacations, or replacements), three-quarters of whom are women. They are all young, from 20 to 35. True, there is one old guy “of 40” in the team but he is not there this evening. A few wear a blue nylon top that is supplied by the administration, which is not mandatory, but many of the women are wearing jeans and a blouse or sweater. For them as for Danielle, work offers the opportunity to try out a new hairdo or a new sweater.

The sorting room is very large, slightly over 120 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 23 or 24 feet to the ceiling, and divided into three rows by two sets of columns. In this milieu Danielle suddenly appears very far away, lost in this “factory” outside of time, a tiny silhouette in the line of “sorters” who stand there all night long without seats or even a rail to lean on. Everything is painted dark gray up to four and a half feet from the ground, light gray above that. The tiles are also gray, and the pale light diffused by neon tubes set in rectangular brackets made of thick glass seems all the more sparse because only the central row is lit (the one where the night work is done), the two others remaining dark. The right and left rows are for separating out the letters for each district into the mailbags, each sorter doing the letters that will be taken out the next day by two mail deliverers; the left side also has the “enclosed office” that sorts the “money” letters and registered letters. A few posters are on the wall, along with a placard that shows the anatomy of the spinal column, another with a drawing that shows the right way to push a car, but both of them placed so high that they cannot be read. In a recess to the right of the entryway are coatsracks hung with windbreakers and jackets. Facing the central row is the “office,” which has no separation between it and the rest of the room: two tables, a telephone and three chairs covered in vinyl with metal armrests, everything very run-down. The only bit of decoration is a yellow and white postal calendar, a poster showing a sailboat on a blue ocean; these are the only seats in this huge room, a supervisor’s privilege that G.M. did not take advantage of during our visit. A few years ago someone in charge began to put together a plan to give the sorters swiveling stools, but nothing came of the

plan before he left and no one has picked it up since. "It would have been necessary to stir up a lot of things," says T.M., "convince the administration, but no one took it under their wing. Only a strike..." he adds in a low voice.

By the time we got there, the "sorters" had already taken up their positions on one or the other side of the row, standing up in front of the 66 vertical metal slots that they have to deal with (a rate of 1,500 letters an hour) of which each one corresponds to the mail for a given street or, more often, to a small part of that street. The slots as a whole have cardboard signs with the names of the streets in the district, put so high that they are impossible to read. Everything looks uncared for, a bit dusty, rather like an empty factory.

To the right of the "office" facing the elevators, the four people who work at the "opening table" have already begun to open the first mail sacks; they too are standing. The table on which close to 30,000 letters are sorted every night is no more than 6 feet long and 2 feet wide. The mail for the 15th arrondissement alone (having already been sorted in other post offices) is divided by "district" in "little cartons" for the small letters or in big metal carts for the big envelopes. Every "sorter" comes to pick up the little cartons for his or her sector. T.M. does not spend much time talking to us, he is used to helping start things up and does not want our visit to cause an exception. Near this table, fastened on an old filing cabinet, are colored postcards sent from vacation spots, and in particular, thumb-tacked on one of the posts the "travelers' calendars" from the SNCF [national railroad] that show discount travel days. In this huge room, this is the only place that the employees have taken over. A very scratchy speaker plays music, probably a rock song which, in any case, is impossible to recognize over all the noise of the carts full of dusty heavy sacks that bang against each other and are shoved out of the elevators by the handlers.

Danielle came over to see us several times and apologized for "not being able to talk to us," even though she did not yet have a large number of letters to sort and it is clear that T.M. would not have objected. As embarrassed to leave us alone as she is to talk to us, and suddenly frightened by this intrusion in a way she had only vaguely anticipated, she adopted a middle road by assuring us with conviction that she could not really talk to us, then, blushing, went back to her spot with her coworkers.

Michel B., a short dark man with a mustache about 60, is the division inspector, a position above T.M. He has spent his whole working life in the postal service on the night shift. He watched us for a while but without daring to start up a conversation, coming and going in the row, on the lookout for everything, disturbed and silent. Not able to avoid us, he came out with "oh, it's the press." If we wished, he could take some time to show us around, a pretext to move us away from the sorting line to talk about old times.

He still remembers his arrival in Paris. He was 18 when he got off the train one day at the Gare d'Austerlitz, carrying his suitcase, having come from his hometown of Saint-Jean-de-Luz [on the Atlantic coast near the Spanish border]. He had to get to the Postal Service Ministry and, even harder, find a place to stay.

They say that it is a little easier for the young people who come here these days with temporary residences, but he is not really sure. Things haven't changed much: the young girls who work the night shift, he adds, all from the provinces or from French territories overseas often do not know anything of Paris outside of the train station (the one that goes to their region), the post office and their room. They arrive from Brittany or from the Southwest, far from their parents for the first time in their lives; they are frightened and they count the days until the few days of vacation that let them go back for a visit. The "sorters" work two nights out of three from 9 p.m. to five in the morning (the supervisors do one night out of three from 9 p.m. to 9 a.m.) and never on Saturday but, through juggling "fill-ins" they can put together enough days to be able to spend a few days in their "hometown." These advantages explain why so many volunteer for the night shift which does not imply, at least at the beginning, a final leaving home with no return.

When they arrive in Paris, these young women from the countryside (women are in the majority working in the postal sorting center) do not know that they won't end up back home, and for years, like Danielle, they will dream of a position as the postal agent in their hometown. Little by little they discover the catch, because to have any hope of getting back home (especially if you come from the west of France or Martinique: "the girls from Martinique never go back"), you have to wait for 10 years in the same rank, which means without any promotion.

Danielle has now been in Paris for 12 years and has been married to Serge for seven. Sometimes Serge's mother ("a very authoritarian woman who sees dust everywhere") comes to spend the day with them, and Sundays, they often go have lunch with Yvette, Danielle's sister, who has a café in Paris. Saturday evening is always free, they go out with friends. Danielle keeps in close touch with the Paris associations of the small Aveyron towns. Just recently she spent a whole weekend, "all by myself, without my husband," at the "Pailherols celebration," where two banquets and dances gave her the opportunity to "get back in touch with my childhood."

A little while after this visit to the Rue d'Alleray, Danielle confided to me over the phone that "things weren't going very well" with her and Serge and for some time now everything had "looked bleak."

Rosine Christin

Possession

Corinne is 50. For the past two years she has worked in a white collar trade union after having spent more than 15 years as a bilingual secretary in a small industrial company which laid her off for economic reasons when the company went into bankruptcy. Her current salary is not as good, and she had to give up the managerial classification that had for many years been a stake in her clashes with her boss and the symbol of an importance that was constantly flouted.

She says little about her parents, immigrants from Italy; her father “did deliveries for a masonry company.” She doesn’t remember clearly what her mother did – “teacher in a family,” she says very quickly. “They didn’t have a thing” when she was little and later, after her marriage, she “wanted things,” to earn some money, to “move up,” “fight for” herself. “It’s hard, but it keeps you on a short leash, you move ahead.”

At 20, after her baccalauréat and a year of law school, Corinne married a fighter pilot, now deceased. For more than 10 years she followed him in his many transfers and raised their two children. But when he left military service for a civilian desk job with a smaller salary and fewer benefits, she started looking for work. She was 31; she found a job in an office near where she lived, took English courses at Berlitz and trained as a secretary. A diploma as secretary-stenographer and an exam from the Franco-British Chamber of Commerce landed her a job as an executive secretary in a small company at a time when it was still not too difficult to get a job. Ten years later, the business was bought out by Roger G., a former accountant in an Algerian printing press, a sort of “small-time Tapie [Bernard Tapie, self-made French industrialist wheeler-dealer] or [Robert] Maxwell” who buys up bankrupt businesses every two years, paying the obligatory symbolic single franc, “to make a fresh start.”

The holding company had about 40 employees and functioned on the authoritarian and paternalistic mode that is frequent in small businesses. Roger G. was fond of saying “here, we’re a family and you have to get along with the family.” A short time after she started working in the business, he put a move on her, which she rejected. It was the beginning of “five years of hell.” Mixing the tragic and the ridiculous, she tells about the threats of dismissal (“I’d like to kick you right out on your ass”), the public humiliation (“Her salary is too high”), her exclusion from the group of managers and relegation to “the workshop people,” the petty

persecutions at every turn, and especially the daily pressure, the fear of being found at fault. If she "made a joke, he wouldn't miss it, it was a mini war. . . which lasted a long time."

She "lived in a separate world" . . . "in these small companies, the boss is really something!" "You have to obey." Everyone was harassed in one way or another but no one protested, no one quit because Roger G. "paid well." At once the measure and the example of success, he was feared for his harshness but admired for an indisputable and acknowledged *savoir-faire*. She could expect neither help nor comfort from her coworkers: they were all afraid. It even seemed to her that some of the women took a certain pleasure in her problems ("who does she think she is anyway?"). A somewhat uncertain position in management protected her from firing, which would have cost the company too much, but it put the burden on her to justify her position and her salary through constant daily effort and a professional attitude beyond reproach. For Corinne, as for Roger G., both of whom started out with no training at all, everything has a price; you have to "fight for yourself" to get ahead. Bringing in "sexual harassment" like an "ordinary secretary" would be too easy an out, a way of disavowing her merit and her importance. She isn't lodging a complaint, and she isn't looking for retaliation; she is appealing for a bit of justice and credit for playing the game of success by the rules.

"I don't have much passion in my life outside," she says to explain her determination at work and to justify the minimal attention that she gives to her private life. And in spite of all the big or little insults, or perhaps because of them, office life brought her intense emotions and events – fear and humiliation but also the taste for action and success as well as this ambivalent dependence on Roger G., which drove her every evening into overwork; next to all this, her all too predictable role in "outside" life seems dull, even "a bit dreary."

She soon recognized in Roger G. this same attraction for action, which went with an expansive masculinity and a sense of honor always on the alert. As he bought up these companies in bankruptcy one after another, he took over men and women, imposing his will and his power as a man and as a boss. All the women "went through the mill" as a matter of course but each according to her rank, from the cleaning woman "laid on the carpet" to the secretary with her "little present," to Corinne, with whom he rather awkwardly tried to play sentimental ("do you love me?"). Corinne wasn't taken in and knew that, beyond the obvious purpose, Roger G. had no interest in love and that he was trying to satisfy a desire for total possession that was impossible to fulfill.

In fact, even the men were not spared. The will to dominate came through in snubs or public mortifications which went along with the blackmail that surfaced whenever it was a question of a job, a salary, or bonuses. But Roger G. also knew how to reward. "Captain of the ship," he liked to pick out certain people and isolate others through complex, temporary strategies and, on the pretext of creating a "model" to be followed, to create suspicion and jealousy, thereby exercising on everyone's life a hold that he would have wanted to be absolute.

Extraordinarily energetic, Roger G. held all the right cards to create a closed world, one that revolved entirely around him, in a desperate attempt to satisfy an insatiable desire for mastery.

with a secretary

— interview by Rosine Christin

“No one can touch this kind of person”

[...]

Corinne I was his secretary. He was a very exacting man who made work tremendously hard and a very hard man. He had an established mistress. So for two years things were fine... (...) So that was just about... Then he dropped that woman and took a good look at me, and after that it was awful. I was assigned to another subsidiary, so for two more years...

— *By chance? Or was he responsible?*

Corinne No, by chance since I knew English and we did a good deal of exporting, so things were fine. And then afterwards I came back to the main office... and then it was very hard, it was if you will... I had to take all this aggression from this man I refused to sleep with because I didn't want to, and it came out... first in an unbelievable amount of work, which went well beyond what anyone could possibly do in a day.

— *What kind of work?*

Corinne For example, I was in charge of all the billing, sending the bills, checking them, recording monies received, answering the phone...

— *Where he could have used someone else or give it to someone else...*

Corinne Give it to someone else... when I saw that things weren't working out, I went to see my immediate superior at the time and told him, I told him “if Roger G. wants to fire me, let him fire me, but I can't continue like this.” And my answer was “no, it's fine if you leave but without being fired.”

[...]

It was anxiety every day. He'd come into my office, I was surrounded by files, and he'd say to me “Corinne, give me this file,” and right away, in seconds, I had to be able to give him the right file. I lived in incredible anxiety. For five years, this I can say, I lived in total fear. I had a datebook that never left me. I used it even at home. Sometimes my husband would come in, “What are you doing with that datebook? It's all marked up in black,” because I had this datebook, every night before going to sleep I used to go over everything that I had done, everything that I had to do the next day, sort of to get myself into it. Five years I lived like that...! So here, I'm working – it's not easy that's for sure – I admit it, but it seems... you know...

— *But then you were saying that he had taken a good look at you, but he continued to bother you physically or...*

Corinne Not that. Because in the meantime he had found somebody else. Because... he slept with everybody. That was a rule. There wasn't a girl, there wasn't a secretary who came to work in that company who didn't take her turn on Roger G.'s bed. That was the rule. So for that reason alone, I wouldn't have wanted to. But if you see what I mean, in the meantime he found a girl, took her up, but that wasn't enough for him, so he always had this aggressiveness toward me... It was an intellectual aggressiveness, I'd call it, continual. For example, I went for two years without any merit raise.

I was on – as everyone told me – my road to Damascus. But it was awful. Awful, because it never let up, never.

— *And you were sometimes alone with him in a room...?*

Corinne Rarely.

— *Rarely.*

Corinne He showed his... aggressiveness toward me in front of everybody. This was a man who called me in his office one day, I don't know what I'd done, everybody was there – everybody was always there, he did it on purpose to get me upset – and said to me "I'd really like to kick you right out on your ass"...

— *Oh, so he used the familiar "you"...*

Corinne He used the familiar "you" with everybody. And I answered "Go ahead, sir," and he said "sure, even if I have to put two people in your place because I've had enough of you."

— *He never said why? There was never any explanation?*

Corinne No.

— *It was always...*

Corinne Always implicit, like that...

— *Like that, but in the beginning there must have been a little something before you were transferred to the first subsidiary?*

Corinne In the beginning...

— *At the time when... you said that "he took a good look at me," what happened then?*

Corinne He set it up like this, one day he says "Corinne, do you love me?" and I said "Yes, sir, just the way the saying goes, I told him, more than yesterday, less than tomorrow, but I told him that's the way it'll stay."

— *So what did he reply then?*

Corinne He didn't say anything, he left. But one day he said "you'll regret that." But, if you see what I mean, this wasn't a man who was in love with me, that didn't mean a thing; he was a small-time Frenchman from Algeria who needed to dominate, and to do that he needed, if you see what I mean, to sleep with me. At work he didn't much like efficient women, that wasn't...

— *That didn't really interest him, I imagine, basically?*

Corinne No. Not at all. That's it. It's odd, guys like that, that didn't interest him at all. My skills, basically... he would have preferred to have me sleep with him. He would have left me alone, afterwards I could have stayed in my office doing nothing. For two and a half years, because in general it would last for two and a half years. But it was awful, and even so I've forgotten, I've forgotten a lot of things because since then I've lost my job, I've lost my husband, so I've had lots of things happen, but I am here to tell you that this kind of behavior, it happens, but it doesn't happen in my opinion so much in big companies, it happens in small ones. Because in big companies, if it happens, you can always turn to the union or to the Joint Worker-Management Council, there was nothing like that in our company.

Madame, stop humming...

— *And what did everyone else think?*

Corinne They were afraid. Then, basically for the women who must have been a bit pleased, there was the "she deserves what she gets, who does she think she is," things like that; as for the men, most of them didn't talk about it... I had gotten something from working in the subsidiary, I had benefited, and all this business brought me both financial benefits and friendliness...

— *From having been insulted by him and having refused to sleep with him because everybody knew about it...*

Corinne That's right, but especially for having – morals in business was not so... people don't care if I sleep with him or I don't sleep with him – but what you'd call the injustice of it all, the professional injustice, not physically or sexual but professional, I think they used to say to me "but that's impossible, you have to..." One day I had a manager who said to me – I'm pretty lively and I like to hum – he said to me "Madame, stop humming, it's a good thing Roger G. isn't around, if he hears you he'll go berserk." It never let up.

— *So he spent five years remembering your refusal, even though he made no more moves on you after that?*

Corinne No.

— *But after all perhaps he was expecting you to give in, throw yourself at his feet ... one day when you couldn't take it any more, that he'd get you like that ...*

Corinne I think ... I think that ... And if you see, when we were in the middle of liquidation, so we were under constraint, we were in receivership, with a judicial administrator, so there were a great number of people laid off, we stayed to finish up the files ... just a handful of us. And even there where, really, I hadn't changed my attitude, but he kept on being aggressive.

— *Still, he was on the carpet then?*

Corinne He was on the carpet, and would you believe it, he had it in for me because he would say, I know that he said to a number of the managers, "she saw it coming." That's true. But I didn't go see him to say "You better watch out, sir, I see this and I noticed that," I didn't do anything. It wasn't even a question of retaliation because that would have been suicidal on my part. If I'd gone to see Roger G. and said "You know, sir, there are some things that are going on," he'd have brought everybody into his office, and he'd have said "Here's what Madame M. has to tell us ..." and that would have been suicide. So I didn't want to do it. But it was terrible. To give you an idea, one day we had a seminar, and there were workers who had come from a plant at Giens, from the shop-floor — but I don't have anything against the people on the shop-floor — everyone was seated at the main table but I was way in the back with the workers, but I don't have anything to do with those people. Nothing but stuff like that! So everybody was at the table, around the table, I can still see myself ... everybody was looking for their place card and there wasn't any card for Madame M. No, of course not, the place card was back there. He pulled that trick two, three times.

— *Why didn't he fire you?*

Corinne But because he'd have to pay up, you have to understand that I was classified as management, he couldn't fire me. But for him firing me would have been the worst solution, if he had fired me but ... right to the end he was rotten to me. I was the only one in the whole company who was bilingual, when they put us in receivership there were dossiers for Nigeria which were very complicated, we had to deal with Lloyds of London, I mean, it was a lot of work. So I finished up these dossiers, and when I finished, I asked, like all the others, I asked to be released from the prior notice requirement, you see ... Since everyone had been released from the prior notice requirement! Well, for me, he refused a release from giving prior notice ...

— *How long did the prior notice last?*

Corinne How long did it last, say that your notice is the 1st of February but you owe three months' work ...

— *Oh, so you wanted to leave at the end ...*

Corinne That's right! For me it was the 8th of March I think, or something like that when I asked to be released, because everyone else ... No one had done ... but for me, he refused.

— *But there was still work to do?*

Corinne No. So I'd get to my office in the morning ...

— *How many people were still there?*

Corinne Oh, there must have been five or six, only the general managers and me. I'd get to my office, there would be a letter in the in-box, I had five minutes of work; so I brought my radio, I read all day, I couldn't not do something. And against that sort of thing, you can't do a thing. In a big company that can't happen. But people who have never worked in small or middle size businesses can't understand how an employee can be so dependent on their immediate superior ... You simply don't have any idea. You are directly dependent on the person right above you. If that person is a good person, fine, but if not, it's hell because small companies don't have any Joint Worker-Management Council (...)

it's often like that, it's awful. You can't... I couldn't fight back, no one would have helped me! Not a soul!

Wicked people

— *And the women the boss slept with, after two and a half years when he'd had enough...*

Corinne Oh no, there's a difference. Two and a half years was for the real mistresses ...

— *Oh so there were different kinds...*

Corinne Right. But the girls, I mean the... he just slept with them.

— *He never had any problems?*

Corinne Never (...). Listen, I worked with that man for over 10 years, I never saw anyone leave. In the first place, he paid good salaries to the people he worked with closely. And the ordinary office staff, there weren't very many of them since we were at the main office, so, no, it was... But he had me in his sights, but for a special reason – to be vulgar about it – for a piece of ass.

— *Yes, it galled him that someone...*

Corinne Galled, that's it. And all around me I saw even in other... we had plants since there were 1,800 people on salary where I worked, there were subsidiaries with plants, I heard about other women who were harassed. For them, it took place at the level of the foreman or things like that and you have no recourse at all! I had no recourse, none whatsoever... There were times when I said to myself, "what can I do, I can't let him walk all over me like this all the time," but I had no recourse... I can't explain it to you. At one point I was in a subsidiary, he came on a site visit, the offices were clean and everything, he invited everyone to lunch except me. Because he was the master after God (...). You know the type who sets up companies like that, like Maxwell – on another level, but still... these people have the qualities of their flaws, that is, they are full of energy, but along with that, they're wicked people. You can't build up businesses like that by being nice, agreeable and... no! And then I

was working on dossiers that brought me into contact with him, but between him and me there were two managers who acted as screens for me. But who used to say to me, for example, "don't go..." We had big corridors, they told me "stay in your office, Madame M., because Roger G. is here," to avoid him seeing me!

[...]

When we found out that Roger G. was leaving on a trip... It was awful, everybody started breathing! Because you know, when he started yelling at people, when he called you on the intercom, everybody heard, there was no longer anyone in the corridors. You didn't see anyone, you didn't hear anything anymore.

— *So everyone stayed in their offices...*

Corinne Because everyone knew that the person called in was going to catch it. It was awful. It was awful, the day when... oh, I'm going to tell you a very specific story. One day I found myself coming into the office at eight in the morning, we were walking side by side, we had nothing to say to each other, we get to the entry hall and we see a big box – a big box for shipping overseas, you know, very hard sides – and he starts yelling like that and he gives the box a big kick, and it was too much for me, I broke out laughing because his foot stuck in the box, he could have broken his foot for that matter; he went on about this box all day long, "get her stuff out of here, that bitch made fun of me, she's getting canned," he spent the whole day bugging everyone with this! He had the accountant figure out my account to see how much he would owe me if he fired me, he let it drop, it cost too much. That should give you a good idea of the individual. Everybody was on deck that day to hear all about it... I know that there were other women, you shouldn't think that it was about me, personally, no, no, no, and there were also some poor guys... he was and still is! ... That's it. Can anyone do anything? No, no one can do anything, because now he has a small company in Suresnes, but no one goes to see him in his office, well yes

(...) if he doesn't give the end of the year bonus, if there are people let go, you see what I mean, no one...no one can touch this kind of person.

— *What kind of training did he have?*

Corinne (...) So he had no management training, but he had an exceptional temperament, an impressive capacity for work, there he had tremendous qualities; and I missed that, if you see what I mean, I missed that because frankly this guy as far as... ideas go, schemes, fantastic swindles. I told you, a small-time Tapie or Maxwell. But...and that was interesting, without stop, we never let a dossier rest.

[...]

For me, fighting, now I run in the opposite direction from a battle; well, I wouldn't give in, but I'd get sick or anything I could think of, and there I fought, I didn't want to, I didn't want to agree, it was really disgusting. But he had an employee who took care of these things, you know, making reservations for hotel rooms and things like that, I saw him come close to hitting her. But it was awful... you know.

They called him tin prick

— *And your husband, what did he think of all this?*

Corinne My husband didn't know anything about it!

— *You were able to hide that?*

Corinne I never talked to my husband about my problems.

— *Even when you left every morning?*

Corinne Never! I never talked about my problems at home. Never, never, never. My husband never knew anything about it. And my husband, he worked for an American company (...) and he got fired out of the blue (...) A year later he started with Matra-Computer, he'd made the transition and he didn't talk to me about it. He didn't talk to me about it. No, no, it's not my nature.

— *You stopped thinking about it once you got home?*

Corinne Oh no.

— *It would have kept me from sleeping...*

Corinne No, for me, on the contrary, I slept as if... oh yes — as if I'd been knocked out. Knocked out! With my datebook always right next to me. For that, sometimes my husband would say, "Put that datebook away." I noted everything. Everything that I did for those people! I lived in my job!

— *But he was right in this case, basically... From a certain point of view...*

Corinne From a certain point of view, if he hadn't been after me as he was... he was right. He was able to do it... because the guiding principle at work was, like that, for everybody who worked for him, watch out, I wasn't the only one who was like that. For all the managers, it was just the same (...) That's right! There was a time when my daughter criticized me, but it was 10 years later, she said to me, "it's a good thing you've gotten away from that job, because you didn't realize it, Mom, but your job was the only thing that counted." It was (...) it had to be done, yes, indeed! In any case, yes! he couldn't stand to have anyone leave work and go home nice and quiet, and that held for everybody in the company. But finally, you could understand him. (...) We worked a lot, but it wasn't really the work, it was the behavior. And on that score there were some people who were really treated badly, appalling, appalling... I can tell you that I heard guys get called poor jerks, men who had 300 and 400 people working under them. Plant managers. And then he treated them this way in front of anybody, it wasn't behind closed doors, it was in front of everybody! A cleaning woman had been hired, he got to the office one morning, he called the cleaning woman on the intercom. The poor girl, she told me, "Madame M., I'm going to have to quit, he wants to screw me on the carpet," but that's the kind of man he was, a man... as I was telling you, they're dictators, these men who set up a company and they're the company. And it's true, I tell myself "if you'd been in his place, a guy like that, what would you have done?" It's true that for work, I'd have

been fierce. He was fierce. There's no other word for it. If he could've had us work all night long, he would've had us work nights. That, it's true, that's something really scary ... you couldn't want ... to do nothing. But that's part of a game, I'll admit that because, I'm telling you, I'd've done it just the same way. But except for that, there is still a limit. And for him there wasn't any. And I think that ... (...) But everybody, I remember, they called him tin prick ...

— *What?*

Corinne Tin prick, to explain it to you, because ... there weren't any other words for it. You couldn't have that man like you, you couldn't ... (...) but you can't understand, you can't understand how that man could be so hard. He'd arrive, if your office wasn't neat, he'd throw everything in a pile on the floor; and I think that when you get a little power and your shoulders aren't broad enough to take it, you become (...) and I don't know how he will end up one fine day. But along with all that, he had a heart too, not for

everybody, not for everybody. It was paternalism through and through. He needed that, he had to have ... it was very difficult, you know, to work like that, it marks you, it marks you for life, that sort of thing. It makes you a bit mean, too, because you can't be on your guard like that for years and years without turning a bit mean, distrustful. Even me, afterwards ... when I got here, I was completely surprised. I didn't trust anyone. I thought that people were too nice. I wasn't used to it. In business you don't give anybody a gift, even between coworkers, you just don't do it ... it's a very hard milieu, in business, it's not at all like ... because there's emulation, you have to do better than the next person. Whereas here, no, that doesn't happen ...

— *No, that doesn't happen in this kind of a milieu ...*

Corinne Not at all! You don't have to fight all the time to get ahead ...

— *Everyone has a job to do ...*

Corinne That's right, everything's set. But you're always ... in a way, it's a bit dreary.

July 1992

Pierre Bourdieu

The End of a World

“**T**he only chance of getting work here is if a small company starts up. Before, there wasn’t any problem about going back to the plant. Our parents, the way our parents went on, when I was 14, the way they went on about it: ‘You’re not doing a damn thing at school, it’s off to the plant with you.’ Parents talked to us like that. Why the plant? Because everyone knew that they hired almost every year, 300 or 400 people. No problem. But now parents can’t say ‘off to the plant,’ anymore, there’s no more plant.”¹ These words of a union member from the Longwy area, a former metallurgist (like his father and his brother), 44 years old (A) and currently working at the town hall, sum up the essential characteristics of a configuration of factors that led to the crisis of a once flourishing unionism which today, to take the words of another former union official, is “a disaster”:² the closing of the majority of metallurgy plants, tied to layoffs or forced early retirement for a significant proportion of workers; the suspension of hiring and, consequently, of the renewal of the workforce with young people, who used to be recruited straight from the apprenticeship center; the disappearance of large factory areas, plants that brought together 4 to 5,000 workers and are now losing out to the small companies with fewer than 50 employees that are always so difficult to unionize. Then there is the break, supported by the school system, in the ordinary cycle of the reproduction of the

¹ Of the five discussions used here, three were done by Pascal Basse. To keep the anonymity and at the same time convey the socially characteristic terms of the speakers, each of the union members in the discussion is designated by a letter of the alphabet (A, B, C, etc.), which is noted every time that person is cited.

² Overall, the CGT [Confédération Générale du Travail, the union linked to the Communist Party] has lost over two-thirds of its membership over the past 20 years, in contrast to about a 30 percent loss for the CFDT [Confédération Française et Démocratique du Travail]. With 600,000 in the CGT and 428,000 for the CFDT in 1990, the two major French unions together barely had a million members, of which perhaps 860,000 were active members: in 1970, they had over 2,200,000 members. This overall decline has been accompanied by a change in the relative strengths of the two unions. Whereas in 1970 the CGT made up three-quarters of the combined membership of the CGT and the CFDT, it made up only two-thirds of the whole in 1980. Ten years later, the gap has narrowed considerably, since the CGT has about 58 percent – and the CFDT close to 42 percent – of the total membership of the two unions. If just the active members are counted, the two unions are quite close in their membership. During the 1970s, the percentage of union members, counting only active members, dropped from 13 to 10 percent of the workforce. The 1980s accentuated the loss of influence. The two organizations represent less than one salaried employee in 20. Cf. D. Labbé, M. Croisat, and A. Bevort, *Effectifs, audience et structures syndicales en France depuis 1945*, end of project report (Grenoble: Cerat, 1991).

workforce; the pervasive unemployment and the constant threat that it holds over those who have a job, driving them to submission and to silence.

There is also a collective loss of morale described by another union member, age 36, a metalworker himself and the son of a metalworker (B): "Everybody thought that with all these retirements at 50, the unions were going to take off again. Not at all. Not a bit! We thought that we were going to pick up lots of people, and instead we have enormous difficulty in finding people at all, even to protect housing and rent, which renovations are driving higher and higher (...). But what surprises me the most is the union official who has fought a lot of battles; I'm thinking of a friend of mine, a real activist: well, my pal cut us off as soon as he retired, he didn't have anything more to do with union activity." The same story comes from another official, also a former metalworker (his father had a career in the military), 54 years old (C), who expresses the disenchantment shared by all the victims of disappearing metallurgic companies: "Retirement at 50, for someone who didn't prepare for it well ahead of time, it's a real crisis (...). I know that at 50, I set up my retirement. I knew that I would continue to be active in the local union and would try to be useful... But the contact with guys in the company, I lost that, that was my break (...). The other retirees took out a union retirement card for the CGT but a lot of them are completely at loose ends now (...). It's bowling, the races, and endless discussions in the supermarket (...). They talk things over, they rehash old times, they're at loose ends. This means that Longwy now has a big divorce problem, the family doesn't function anymore. Because it's another kind of family life: the guy who used to do the three-eight shift, who was at the plant more often than not and who now finds himself with his wife all the time, that's another life beginning (...). In the Longwy area we've got, not tens but hundreds of cases of divorce at 50 (...). There have been suicides too, alas, a few dozen cases, that we know about, others have turned to alcohol."

As things unfold, it is as if the economic crisis and all the difficulties resulting from it had shattered the very basis of earlier ties. Another union official, Italian in origin, now 72 years old (D), suggests as much: "There is a lot of pain, a lot of suffering, mental and physical, people suffer and suffer (...). In the housing projects everything's in complete disarray, there are difficulties, people are embarrassed, they don't talk much. Even families are split because the younger generation buys the house or apartment, and they want the older generation to get out so they can fix it up to rent it out (...). Unemployment divides us and brings out the worst in us, individualism, jealousy, envy; work brings us together, fraternity, solidarity..."

This disenchantment goes hand in hand with a decline in commitment to the union and in political participation that strikes even the staunchest union officials: "Even in supposedly working-class towns, there is no more political activity. There is administrative activity for the Socialists or the Communists, but there is no more real political activity (...). People administer and administer, just the way the right would do it, perhaps a little bit differently, but it's administration

they do . . . (. . .) There's nothing left, there are no more activities. So there are no more activists, people have become just like me, they see all this from a distance and they haven't the motive for doing whatever it might be . . ." (A).

It goes without saying that "disappointments" (particularly concerning the Socialists and their policies since 1981 [election of François Mitterrand as French President on the Socialist ticket] and disillusionment (with the Eastern bloc countries and 'Communist' governments) have a good deal to do with the mistrust that union activists meet with today, which adds to their discouragement. "I'm a little bit lost in all this. I don't know about the others . . ." [long pause]. I've changed perhaps, or the world has changed around me, or else I didn't see things changing, I don't know, but in any case, I'm a bit lost. Perhaps it's getting a little older that makes you less ready to stick your neck out for all the others. It's possible, don't you think? Because, as far as I'm concerned, I was one of those people who believed that the ideas I was fighting for, the ideas that I identified myself with, were ideas that would stand the test of time . . ." (A).

But it's from the oldest activist, a celebrated organizer who became famous in the whole region for his activity during the big strikes at the beginning of the 1950s, that you hear the harshest criticism of the CGT and the Communist Party and of Soviet-style governments: "I can tell you this, quite calmly, if we'd gotten into power, we'd have made the same mistakes (as in Eastern Europe). Because that translates into this: 'Lenin said,' 'Stalin said,' 'Maurice Thorez [long-time head of the French Communist Party after the war] said,' etc. But I said to him, to a guy who was an official and a member of the central governing committee: 'And the workers, what do they say? do you listen to them?' That's it, that's all. There's the problem (. . .). Every one of them just helped himself, every one built a villa on the Riviera! Those are the facts!" (D). And he goes on to inveigh against taking votes by show of hands, against the tendency of a large number of activists to abstain, and finally, against the logic of "social mobility" that has taken hold of union leaders: "Because they have a certain standard of living, their retirement entitlements are linked to management scales, etc. We've created our own caste. Then there are those special retirement homes just for them. Where you go, but you don't pay."

And they all refer to the immense disappointment with the Socialist administration after 1981, most particularly in the Longwy region, when, after a pause between 1981 and 1983, the government reactivated the policy of closing plants that had prompted such strong protest movements at the end of the 1970s: "And then, '82-'83, the Communist cabinet ministers quit the government and right away they began to make these announcements that the metallurgy industry wasn't getting any better, that this plant, that plant was being closed . . . And that's what produced this malaise. So, from the union's point of view, you're holding a losing hand (. . .) '83, you have to tell it straight, the CGT loses 10, 20, 30 percent of its members" (C). It's the same for the Communist Party: "There's no more Party (. . .). There are no more organizers, no more members (. . .). Seven or eight of us left (in 1988) and after that, it's really too bad, really too bad,

there were no more organizers (...). Some activists are still there, card-carrying activists and sympathizers, but there are no more organizing leaders" (C). And especially, to take up the observation of another CGT activist (E), age 36, currently on unemployment: "I know sons of Communists who say right out, 'my father is an asshole!' (sorry about that, but it says what it says). But on that count, on the whole, we've failed with the younger generation. We won't even mention the Socialist Party (...). And youth votes for order. Which explains why they throw in with Le Pen [far-right leader of the National Front] (...). For the first time there are a certain number of Le Pen votes here."

And faced with new forms of exploitation, reinforced by the deregulation of the work place and the expansion of temporary employment, they sense the inadequacy of traditional forms of unionism: "People have to go recruit in the small companies with fewer than 10 employees. They also have to go there, get themselves right in, go see how things work (...). That's the reason that we have to start thinking in different terms. We can't go into companies anymore the way I used to in the central workshop. I'd get up on a small wagon, I'd clap my hands, I'd whistle, and boom, there'd be a hundred people around me, and I'd make a speech. That's all over. And then the union has to be presented differently. In small companies, heaven only knows the problems they have: unpaid overtime. They have to work overtime, and they hardly have time to recover. Those are the job conditions. They have enormous problems" (E). And another witness: "Now we're in a situation where there's unemployment, a certain number of problems, and everyone keeps quiet. I think it is absolutely intolerable that people work for eight hours like crazy, because that's the way it is, for 5,300 francs a month. That is really hard to swallow! But it's true that they don't have any choice: they have to keep quiet. And that's intolerable as well! There may be some movements, we've seen that, and there are sometimes reactions, even in the big companies. Well, we've also often seen the traditional, official unions overrun by coordinating things and stuff like that. You may well ask yourself the reason why: is the language of the unions appropriate anymore? Why does it happen like that? Because the union label must have lost its prestige... Because when you say 'I'm in the union,' the reply comes right back 'but the unions just keep politic-king, they don't get along with each other at all.' Maybe, maybe... There are lots of questions today that I can't answer, even for myself. There's nothing more to connect yourself to. We've probably lost a good many illusions. We believed too much. And when everything falls apart, there's nothing left" (A).

December 1990–January 1991

Michel Pialoux

The Shop Steward's World in Disarray

I should have met Hamid a long time ago. People often spoke to me about him; whenever I referred to the “problems” of the immigrants in the plant, people would say, “Haven’t you seen Hamid?” In fact, I had run into him and seen him on several occasions, particularly during the strike in October 1989. I could pick out his short stocky figure, I’d seen him at the head of the marchers. He’s in a lot of the video documents. He appears in a film made about the plant in 1990 where he was filmed at his work station and he does his own commentary about what he does, the different operations, and about the difficulty of this work. I have also seen him on TV, on the local news. When someone is needed to talk about the new working conditions at HC1, the new body plant, he is often called upon, because he’s a shop steward and because he’s “not afraid” to say what he thinks. He belongs to those few “shop stewards” who can speak with authority for the workers and among whom for the past five or six years women and immigrants have become considerably more important.

Although Hamid has worked in the Montbéliard region for about 20 years and in the Sochaux plant for 15, he is barely over 40. He has had a number of different jobs, always on the assembly line, and for a very long time, worked in the finishing section. Having joined the union two or three years after he got to the plant, he accepted the position of shop steward after the 1981 strike and has held it ever since. For several months, and after having done the notorious three-week training period at Morvillars, he has been working at HC1, the new shop that opened at the end of 1989. There are only a few (“a handful”) of CGT and CFDT shop stewards in this shop. At this point most of the union leaders and shop stewards are still in the “old” finishing plant. But in the elections for DP (personnel delegates) in March 1990, the CGT received a vote in the new shop that was unexpectedly high, in certain sections going above 70 percent.

I had made an appointment with Hamid three days earlier, a Sunday afternoon during the CGT holiday festival at Sochaux. Every year the festival takes place on the playing field of Bethoncourt, a town near the plant with a Communist city council. A few hundred take part, mostly families. The day is organized around pick-up soccer games, with the metal stampers vs the finishing crew, young against old, the chassis section vs the smelters, women vs men. They’re not real games. A few of the players are in disguise, people laugh a lot. Several men are

dressed up as women, or the reverse. The women get lots of applause. The popular workers in the shops are supposed to play, even if for only five or ten minutes. The play periods are about 20 minutes long (three or four years ago, they went well over a half an hour, but everyone has gotten older and gets winded too easily). On and off the field it's a time for real fun. People join or quit the games as they like. (When I was watching these games I was reminded of the metalworkers union band, IG Metal, that I'd seen in a film about the Volkswagen plant at Wolfburg.) It seems to me that all of the workers here today are assembly line workers and all about the same age; perhaps there are a few specialists among these, but very few. Two or three technicians, the ones you always see, and not a single person from management. In the whole festival, I must be the only one who doesn't look like a worker.

That's how I met Hamid. He had just come off the field after having run a lot, and he was breathing hard, half stretched out on the edge of the field. He was with his wife and his little girl, in the midst of a group of "buddies." I was with a group of activists I have known for a long time. I was introduced: "A buddy you've heard about perhaps, who writes articles about the plant, who's been coming to Sochaux for the past few years." "Sociologist" or "journalist," I'm not sure what term they used. In any case Hamid acts as if I wasn't totally unknown to him. And indeed he must have seen me with somebody or other. The conversation continues: "He'd like to talk with you about work at HC1, the atmosphere in the shop, what it's like to be a shop steward." I mention a few things I know about HC1, visits I've made there, some of the workers I've met. He agrees right away, without any difficulty or even the slightest hesitation.

I arrive around 10.30 at the apartment where he lives in the ZUP [zone for priority urbanization] of Montbéliard, a vast "strip" where there are a good many immigrant families – here the only word used for them is "the blocks." In jeans with a big apron over his tee-shirt, Hamid is fixing the family meal, which he will gulp down a little later, before leaving for his afternoon shift (he works "revolving shifts," and this week he is "on in the afternoon," which means that he works from 1.15 to 9 p.m.). The window is wide open, the sky is bright blue outside, and it is very hot. Clearly what Hamid is doing gives him a good deal of pleasure: he has just peeled some vegetables and cleaned some mackerel that he will put in a court-bouillon – he'll give me the recipe later, a recipe from home, from the south, adapted to local ingredients.

He gives me a friendly greeting, as if I were no trouble, he tells me that he hadn't forgotten our appointment and was expecting me. I hardly feel the need to justify being there. It seems to me that everything is unfolding as if we've known each other for a long time and we are picking up a conversation that had been interrupted. I say to myself that this will be a "no problem" discussion.

And then – we're still in the entryway, obviously I have not yet asked his permission to start the tape recorder – he jumps into a somewhat confusing story about what happened the evening before on his shop-floor, and in such a way that I don't want to interrupt him! The story starts out a bit disorganized, but

from the vehemence of his phrases – “that’s just beyond me,” “I’ve never seen that,” “that goes right over my head” – I get the idea that something occurred that is decidedly outside the ordinary “routine,” outside the “union routine,” an event that affects him personally and which in his eyes is of another order than those that we had originally planned to talk about.

What happened? To be brief, the day before, in a section of the shop that is right near his own (where, ever since the temporary workers left after the Gulf War, the work teams have to be continually reorganized because of “veterans” arriving from other sections of the plant), workers his age, veterans from the finishing section he knows so well (“good buddies,” “good workers” who didn’t hesitate to join the strike in 1981 or 1989, who vote CGT even if they aren’t members of the union) and who, therefore at least in principle, share the tried and true values of solidarity – these workers drew up a petition, more or less prompted by the “head guys,” to ask that a worker be “excluded,” not only from the section but from the Sochaux plant. This petition was directed against a veteran union member, who had been working in the plant for 10 or 15 years but who, because he’d never been on the assembly line before, wasn’t able to keep up the pace. Hamid’s attempt to get them to reverse their decision was a total failure.

He’s completely dumbfounded, knocked out by it. He who is usually calm and level-headed starts talking effusively, as if overwhelmed again by the strong emotions of the previous evening. He tells me about his confusion, his indignation, about the way – on his shop steward’s time – he went around to yell at his buddies, question the section heads, put them face to face with their responsibilities, with respect to an event that, to him, is simply “scandalous” and one he can’t accept. He imitates the surprise of the section heads who ask him: “Why do you keep on like this?” “Why does this bother you so much? Especially as usually they don’t exactly treat you shop stewards with kid gloves?” And he explains once again how upset he got, how he went back five or six times to see the section heads and set up interviews and meetings. Something happened that wounded him deeply, struck him at a personal level, in his honor as an activist and a worker.

His protest appears more ethical than really political. It isn’t followed up by a denunciation of management practices, as one would expect from a dyed-in-the-wool activist leader who knows his way around union conflicts. His indignation – but it’s an indignation that is contained, expressed neither in big words nor in a loud voice but rather in a certain vibrancy of tone – points in two directions.

He flies off the handle against “the buddies,” the “old guys” who have gone beyond the limits of forgiveness – who have broken the “elementary” rules of working-class solidarity. A bit later, he talks about the attitude of French workers and particularly that of those sympathetic to the CGT during the Gulf War and the way a good many of the older union members turned out to be more anti-Arab than even certain “company men.” All this in the same tone of contained indignation. Without absolving them completely, he can’t go as far as a full-

fledged denunciation because he knows only too well how much hardship falls on his buddies.

He gets angry too at the management, the people in high-level posts, the "big bosses" who try to pass over the "real" group of workers in order to encourage the development of an artificial group around the supervisors and section heads; who intensify particularism, exacerbate jealousy and rivalries, and practice an obtuse, almost insane policy which, he claims, will someday turn against them.

I am struck by the connection that he makes between the violence of these practices of divide and rule and the destruction of what he perceives as the minimal social ties which, even in these ultramodern shops, assured a relatively organized form of social life. Because, and he will repeat this more than once, these are the basic social ties affected by all these practices that target people torn up with fear and anxious about the future. Thus the risk, which he emphasizes, run by the bosses who will themselves be affected, by ricochet so to speak.

After a while he proposes that we sit down. We take our seats in the kitchen at the table on which he had been fixing the vegetables and the fish. I ask for permission to set up my tape recorder, which he gives as if it went without saying. A few trite phrases. We go back to formal address – "I do not have a good idea of what you want." I tell him that it's precisely "all that" that we should talk about, all these "things" that people don't usually pay enough attention to, that we should come back to these, that "all that" seems important to me too, the fact that no one ever "really" listens to the activists on the front lines.

We stay there for a long time, seated at the table. We have a beer, a cup of coffee. From time to time one or the other of us gets up to check the pot on the stove. After a bit I start peeling some vegetables, as much to give myself something to do as to respond to what the situation "calls for."

His wife's arrival breaks up the discussion. I talk to her a bit (about the countryside). The hour of departure for the plant cannot be put off.

with an assembly line shop steward for the CGT

— *interview by Michel Pialoux*

"The cohesion of the group used to be against the supervisors, now it's workers against other workers"

— *The best thing would be for you to talk about what you want to and then for me to ask you questions...*

Hamid Fine. I was in the finishing section on the line... the assembly line! It was the 35, they call it a line because it sounds

better! A production line, for the 405s and the 205s. While I was there, they weren't yet making the 605, now, I don't know...

— *And you had been there a long time?*
Hamid Since '72, always on the same line. We launched the 604, the 205, the 405 and

it was always a pilot line because the people they chose for this line did good work... compared to... they didn't have many faults. You have to admit that the supervisors still and all recognize that those in charge of the CGT, union organizations in general and especially the CGT, that they can be a pain in the neck as far as the union disputes go and all that, but where work is concerned, they do the work the way it should be done. In any case, they don't complain on that score and they often say so at the plant level, they say "we've never had any problems with the CGT shop stewards."

— *As far as work is concerned?*

Hamid As far as work is concerned, because when we go to tell them "there are people who are finding the work too hard..." they say "that's all very well, but with you shop stewards, we've never had any problems with you," but with us, right away we turn the thing around because we don't want to fall in the trap and let ourselves be flattered into not... At one time or another you can sense how the rest of the workers don't do their work as they should, and why and all that; so we say "we manage to get it done, but with borderline resources." But you have to recognize that when a shop steward can't get his job done, he knows for sure the job is too much, he picks up his pen and notes it, and he knows too that there is a finisher who is paid to do the fixing up. But a worker, even a veteran worker, for that guy it's not always obvious what to do. He doesn't dare: I've seen people move 30 feet down the line to catch up on a job.

— *They get behind and then can't catch up again...*

Hamidand the supervisor, when he sees that someone has forgotten something, instead of doing it himself and then talking to the guy about it, no, he has to come and get him and make him go 30 feet down the line... and the guy does the job over again 30 feet down the line and then he comes back up where he was unless the supervisor replaces him or gets someone to replace

him. So guys fall in the trap. But since we've begun talking with them and everything, we tell them "if he sends you down the line, you have to ask him to replace you. If something has to be fixed, you'll do it, but during that time he replaces you!"

The section head had gotten them all steamed up

— *Yet all the same these are people who for the most part have been in the shop for 10 or 15 years, who know that, who shouldn't be so afraid of going to the section head or the foreman for things like this!*

Hamid At HC1 it's not the same as in the finishing section. For example, they brought in people from other sections, there were workers with different qualifications, and they put them on the assembly line, and those people aren't used to it because after all, we've been on the assembly line for 17 or 18 years, so after all... Then, for us too, the pace has gradually been stepped up. After a few years... Every year they add something for us to do, every year there's a higher production goal, so we finally got used to the idea that every year they were going to step up the pace, it's psychological, and we're already prepared. But people just starting out in this section, who had a specialist position in repairs and were used to quality work, from one day to the next they find themselves on the assembly line and they can't keep up...

— *Do you have a lot of them?*

Hamid Now we do... for example, they take these maintenance car drivers and put them on the line, they can't do it, and there are also specialists who come in from other sectors... Several have come from "supplies," from the supplies warehouses... Yesterday two came from metal stamping who had never worked on the line... Maybe they were press repair technicians, and they couldn't keep up... And that's how the problem I was talking about came up. [Pause] The worst thing is that it's the workers from his team that drew up the petition... after getting all steamed up by

the section head... worked up by the section head who tells them "here you guys are working your butts off all day long and that guy with a measly little assignment can't even do his job!" So we soon found out what happened, while we were handing out leaflets, and I went to see the guys, anyway I know all these guys because they've all worked with me on line 35... And I talked things over with them, one by one, and I said "how could that happen...?" "Well, we do our job but he doesn't do his!"

— *And they drew up a petition to get rid of him?*

Hamid Not just to kick him out of the section, to kick him out of Peugeot! And these were workers! And good workers too because during the strike [of '89], a good number of them went on strike. I couldn't figure it out, so I worked on them bit by bit, one at a time, and I began to see why. I figured out that the section head had gotten them all steamed up about it and then since the person in question couldn't make it, was missing out operations... and then the supervisor and the section head couldn't count on him to fill in for people who take days off... That hits everyone where it hurts, and what's more there was a 50 franc bonus for quality work and they wouldn't get it supposedly because of him, supposedly, but for them it's absolutely because of him. So I got really pissed off with them and I said "it's totally unacceptable for you - workers all of you - for you to draw up a petition to kick out another worker!" I ended up talking with everybody, including the section head, I talked it over with other shop stewards and we went to see the replacement for the head of personnel, and then we said "watch out, if things like this happen, we're not going to stand around with our arms crossed! We'll post the names of the guys and we'll point them out in the plant and all the workers will know that they are... stool pigeons, informers, that they're people who..." And I discussed things with one guy and I said "do you realize

what you're doing... if he's got a family, if he's got kids, if he's in debt... can't you imagine the problems he'll have with all that if he's dumped?" And he said "I don't give a shit, all he has to do is do what we do!"

— *The one they want to get rid of, he's also an older guy who's been in the plant for 10 or 15 years?*

Hamid He's 37, but he's been in the plant for a good 15 years, a good 15... The problem is that before he had a higher-level quality control job, he'd never worked in production, and production is just not the same thing. And he already didn't feel right... because already he thinks that they have put him in the wrong place... because he was one classification, he was P1, and they made him APF3, you can say it's the same classification, but he already felt wronged. And worst of all, his work buddies totally rejected him, they all... the section head was able to convince them that he was a shirker and they shouldn't let themselves be taken in by someone like that.

But the hate these workers had for this guy, I've never seen anything like it

— *But these people whom you gave a kind of moral lesson to, they were also workers who have been in the plant for 15 years and who let themselves be talked into the section head's point of view...*

Hamid The boss, right?... everything that they taught us in those training periods at Morvillars, I thought it was all theory, that once we got out of there, people would... But here it is in practice, because when they talk, they talk about the "group," "he holds back 'the group,' he keeps the group from working," all they talk about is the group. And I say, "group, group... we've been working in a group for years... You have the same number of years here as this guy, tomorrow if they put you in the job he had, you wouldn't know how to do a thing... because he's qualified to do certain things but which..." So I went to his section head and told him, "now look here, take me for example: once I was put in a job normally assigned to a woman, and I was never able

to do it; and yet the foreman who assigned me to that job thought he was doing me a favor. Afterwards, he put me on a harder job, the brake pipe, and I did the job." So you have to start from the right case... "And if this person can't do the job here, why do you make such a big deal about keeping him here? The plant is enormous, find him another spot in another plant or else in another section where there's preparation time, time to get used to the production end of things and then you can bring him back here on our line." Because, I said to him, "stress cuts both ways: if you want to set a team against a worker, those of us in union positions can't let you get away with it, we'll do everything we can to find him another spot... At the same time, you are responsible too because if you do that, things are going to fall apart all over the place and it'll come back to haunt you, sooner or later you'll get it right back in your face." So he began to see what was what. [Pause] But the hate these workers had for this guy, I've never seen anything like it. Since I started working in the plant I've seen a lot of grouching... But here, it's total rejection, they don't even want to hear about this guy, for them "he's a loafer... he doesn't want to work..." I tell them "but I work just like you in a team and when the others don't want to work, it's no skin off my nose; I do my work, anyone who can't isn't going to make me do the management's job for them and tell him: you're not doing your job! you're taking too many days off, you're pulling sick leave!" We're in a team, we say hi in the morning, we do our work, for that matter we don't even have time to talk because the line moves too fast. I tell this guy, "but he doesn't bother you physically, he doesn't keep you from doing your work?" And he says, no. Then I say to him, "then why do you have it in for him?" I feel really bad about it because there are good people among the ones who signed, and for myself, a month ago, I went to see them to give them a notebook for complaints... and the guys agreed with

it... and every time there's a problem, they mark it down, and these notebooks work well for the assembly line... and these people help in gathering questions and now all of a sudden they let themselves be "had" by the section head - I don't know what he promised them. Still two or three guys from other sections didn't sign, they said "this doesn't have anything to do with us... it doesn't bother us, he does what he wants to, we do our job, and it's up to the section head to take care of the problem, it's not something for us to sign!" But the majority signed.

— *The majority signed... but there is still a sort of attachment to this kind of work, there are still people who enter into the system...*

Hamid Absolutely into the system, because for them... the section head has dropped a good deal of the stuff he used to do, he no longer organizes the days off and all that. "It's up to you as a group to make the arrangements." If somebody gets here at seven instead of five, the section head asks the group if he should pay him or not, so he says "I'm going to pay you because that's what the group decided." It's no longer Peugeot who pays, it's the section head who pays the worker, and that sinks in. "Chief, can't you pay me my two hours? I came in late?" So sometimes the section head tells them to stay until 11.30 or midnight, or else they leave at 10 and he pays them for 11.30...

The company line has really gained ground again

— *So the company sets them up for this kind of petty blackmail, all these little pay-offs under the table...*

Hamid Take the work program; we get here at one in the afternoon or at five in the morning, and when you start work, the section head tells us "there aren't any gloves today." Or the day before, he comes around to say "don't throw away your gloves because I can't get you any more since I've gone over my budget," so you work with the same gloves for a whole week and with

this heat, it's really hard. It's really too bad that it's come to this in the new plant. Fortunately it's not that way everywhere, but if you're not careful, it can become dangerous... dangerous for both of us for that matter, because there is tremendous stress with all this heat and if people kick against Peugeot, and if people fall in the trap... that can turn against Peugeot just as much as against the workers... It's something that you won't be able to control... For that matter, there was a meeting yesterday where this was all we talked about because it was impossible to let it pass...

— *A shop stewards' meeting?*

Hamid Right. And after we saw that, we called all our colleagues from the other sections and we had a meeting at HC1, and talked about this problem among others. And what we said about this problem, we have to talk about it because we can't let events take over, because if Peugeot keeps on this way, it can divide us all and afterwards do what it wants... and next month we'll find 50 cars added to our quota... In September there are going to be layoffs... Now we're working overtime, and then there'll be layoffs. One week, for instance, we'll be laid off for two days, Friday and Monday, and we'll only work three, but that doesn't keep us from having to do the production for the whole week because Peugeot will step up the pace, the number of cars. And then people will say "after all, we're not losing out on much since we only work three days and we have two days off..." And we checked on that for the whole period of layoffs, and every time there were layoffs, there was an automatic increase in the number of cars to do. But that doesn't keep people from saying "we'll put up with it since we have two days off, that makes three days off in a row with Saturday and Sunday." But that's not the answer... Peugeot's been doing this for years, and now people are beginning to say "watch out, if they lay us off and they up the pace for us, things are really getting worse!" (...) If we go along with it, really, I don't know how far things will go (...)

I think that the bonus system is worst of all

— *The whole system of bonuses is another way to put the pressure on...*

Hamid I think that the bonus system is worst of all, it's the worst because even with the classifications and all that, Peugeot skirts what's legal. It's really stingy where classifications are concerned, but on the other hand, it's big on bonuses, "if you stay until midnight, you'll get a bonus, you come in Saturday, you'll get a bonus, you don't do anything, you won't get a thing..." And then there's medical control, they sit down with the workers, "you took such and such a day off, you have a given number of sick days and you've gone over the limit... you have to have a quality goal, you've just about made it... and then we ask you to come in every day just before work starts, five or ten minutes before, to listen to the briefings and you don't come... That's over the top, I can't give you your bonus!"

— *Above all it's the group bonuses. If one guy makes the group lose its bonus, that's probably why the workers in his section drew up that petition?*

Hamid Right, the stress comes from that, and then the section head made it clear enough, he said "it's because of him that you're losing your bonuses," and people are so dumb, they think that 50 francs is a big deal... They just can't take losing out on 50 francs on account of that guy! "I do my work..." Worst of all, Peugeot sets things up to give the heaviest jobs to people like this, and for anybody who gripes, they always manage to find him a really neat job, neat here is a manner of speaking because there aren't any really neat jobs... anyway what's for sure is that his job is better than the others. So the others say "he already has an 'easy' job and he can't do the work, and we've got hard jobs and we do the work, and even more than that, he makes mistakes and we don't." Since there's no longer any... now everything, everything is general, it's the team... For example, if I

make a suggestion, it doesn't get me much, it gets something for the group, if I fall on my face, it's the group that pays for it, if I feel like taking a day off and I don't call in... it's the group that says "why didn't you call?" It's workers who call other workers... I knew one woman who called her coworker because she had her number, she said to her "what's with you? You don't come in, you don't call in, and I'd planned to take my day and you..." — the section head had told her "I would've been happy to give you the day off but your coworker isn't here." The section head didn't call, the girl called her friend herself to tell her off. And the other woman cut short her sick time. She only took three days because she said to herself "she's going to be crabby about this for years," so she only took three days... she finished out the week at the plant, yet she was really sick. I explained to her that all she had to do was tell her friend to bug off... I finally got her to understand that she'd made a big mistake, and she told me "the next time, I won't do it," but that didn't keep her from coming in, she went back to work when she wasn't supposed to... her doctor had ordered a whole week off... There's another woman, when there aren't any gloves, she takes the dirty ones home to wash, and then she comes to brag about it in front of everybody and she tells them "just do it like me." There's even another woman who told me, "if Peugeot asked for half my salary, I'd hand it over" ... I told her "Peugeot doesn't give a damn about your salary, not half of it, not all of it." Give me a lousy break! But for her that's the way it is. The company line has really gained ground again, and then they don't allow workers, for example, to hand out... when I hand out my leaflets during work, the section head doesn't say anything, or else he says "I'm marking down that you are handing out leaflets during work time," and I reply "that's fine with me, do what you want." But it's the workers who tell me, young workers, "now's not the time to hand out leaflets; leaflets are for outside the plant, not here!" — and they're guys who mean

well... because someone has told them "anytime you see somebody doing something really dumb, make sure you don't do it." And so I say to them, "but what right do you have to tell me off? You don't move your ass fast enough on the job to give you any right to tell me off or to worry about what I do!" There are people like that...

*That's how people get used to things
... hearing this stuff all the time, they
fall in the trap*

— Compared with the old finishing section... "peugeotism" was already in the air... but here it's something different?

Hamid There is something different and new to the extent that... I'll give one example: yesterday in one of the rooms, my foreman told me "leave the place as clean as you found it!" I said "fine." I went in, there was a girl, a friend who wanted to smoke, and it was her coworkers who told her "no, no — no smoking here!" Since they were told not to smoke during their training session, they didn't smoke, and so it came out automatically. But in this case somebody else said "cut it out, leave her alone, why shouldn't we smoke? As long as we don't leave butts all over the floor, there's no reason not to smoke!" After we finished eating, some people were told to "leave the place as clean as you found it," so everyone picked up their stuff and a girl piped up, "that's right, we mustn't leave it like in the other plant, because there was a cleaning woman who came, there's no cleaning lady here." That's how people get used to things like this, in spite of themselves, hearing this stuff all the time, they fall in the trap... Sometimes we react right away to mark our distance from all these ridiculous things, but sometimes we end up saying them ourselves, automatically, and even if we don't believe them, we say them because people around us are saying them. That's the way it is... even for me, that's the way it is.

— Your first impulse is to go along...

Hamid Just asking for a bottle of water to bring back to your work place isn't easy.

Now at HC1 they've been told so often that they shouldn't have any personal object at their work station that... A buddy asked me, "Are you going to bring back a bottle?" and I said, "Sure, why not? We argued enough to have this and the management gave us permission to bring in a bottle" – "Well then, I'm going to go and get a bottle too during the repair period," and he brought back his bottle.

— *The bottle is a bottle of water?*

Hamid Right... or else water mixed with mint...

— *Bringing wine or beer as in the old shop, that doesn't happen anymore?*

Hamid That still happens... [smiles] even in the new plant, of course, that happens.

— *Wine is accepted?*

Hamid Wine... everything is accepted in the new plant, that is, the workers demanded it... because in the old plant, the section heads stayed in their office and the workers in the canteen. Here everybody mixes with the section heads: we eat together, no one can eat anywhere else... in the rest areas, you'll find workers, section heads, foremen, everybody sitting next to each other. So the workers who've been in the plant for 30 years are used to bringing their bottle, each one taking his turn, they've never been able to change things... so it continues. But for the people who drink a lot, the section heads have ways of putting pressure on them... In with those who signed yesterday evening, there was one old guy who drinks all the time, he's even a bit of an alcoholic, so they told him "if you don't sign, we'll turn you in, we'll write up a report, and you'll be out on your ass," so he signed. It's fear, pressure they put on them...

— *There is this problem of fear maintained by many of the section heads...*

Disappointment with peugeotism

Hamid It's coming back just like in the old plant; it had already begun at the old plant... all these little things happening now at HC1, they'd already been tried out in the old plant... They were put into practice

with a 20 or 30 percent chance of success in the old finishing section, and it's gotten higher in the new one... People fall in the trap, that's true, but even so, there's a minority that doesn't go along... For example, there's a supervisor who wasn't able to... he'd had enough because he'd been promised that he'd move from 225 points up to 265... "If you fill in for the section head..." So he comes in on Saturdays, and all that... And now, he's had it, he said to the section head "screw it, let me stay where I am," and yet here was somebody who took the initiative... to show that he was working more for Peugeot than for the working class... All of a sudden, he'd gone totally off his rocker, he was obsessed with Peugeot, he probably dreamed about Peugeot at night, at home he must've had photos of Calvet and all that because "it's the boss who pays us..." [laughter] Still, now he's fed up, he's realized that younger workers who came in after he did and with less experience than he has... He asked to stay where he was, because there are times when people get disappointed with Peugeot too...

— *That's right, disappointment with peugeotism, that can happen...*

Hamid Because they think that they're only doing good for Peugeot. But Peugeot... the truth is... it can't make everybody happy... there comes a time when you hit the limit, when people don't move in their career at all, or in their lifestyle or anything. Right then, there's a kind of revolt... Not always, just say that it happens... Peugeot doesn't always get it right in training, or in the information it gives out, lots of things have turned against it. Everybody who came in from the Mulhouse plant can't believe it, "what's this, we were told we'd automatically move to 180 points, we were told that we'd get a 200 franc raise as soon as we got here and – nothing; we were promised a straight bonus of 300 francs, which we've never seen because even if we do the work, all that has to happen is for the line upstairs to break down and we end up doing fewer cars..." Lots of criteria

come into play for the straight bonus. By contrast, in the old plant there was a bonus and everyone got it automatically.

— *The bonus system played less of a role in the old plant than in the new one. You got less but you had a better chance of getting it, is that right?*

Hamid In principle everyone had a shot at it: everyone on sick leave... Now certain people are eliminated right out... When we talk things over with the management, they tell us "we don't understand, 90 percent get their straight bonus and you're telling us that..." — "But I'm here to tell you that it's more like 70 percent who don't get their bonus." So they say, "80 percent get it," and we say, "70 percent don't get it." But we're closer to being right than they are...

Good buddies or not, people don't like to show their salary stub

— *In any case, do people talk about their bonuses? Do they tell you or not?*

Hamid They tell you they've gotten it but let's just say that... since I've been on the assembly line, good buddies or not, people don't like to show their salary stub, and I don't know if it's jealousy or what, but there's an uneasiness, "how much did you get?" — "6,000 francs," and when you see the salary stub you see that it isn't 6,000 francs, but, say, 6,500. "How much did you get?" — "I got 4,500," and you find out that it's not 4,500 but only 4,000. Even the section heads don't tell the truth... One guy asks me "How much did you get? I've got 5,600" and I say, "5,600, that's pretty good, a little bit more than me." But then I looked over his shoulder and he had 6,200, and so I said "I saw that you made 6,200." — "Right, 6,200 but that's with Saturdays, you didn't do Saturdays." So then I say to him "but I didn't ask you to take off for Saturdays..." and then they all hang around keeping an eye out for your salary stub and they never let you see theirs... On the other hand, there are a few like me: I open the envelope, I put it in the trash, I leave my salary stub in the shop because I'm not afraid of... I'm up

to 170 points, after 18 years in the company, sometimes I make 5,600 francs, sometimes 5,700, 5,900... even 6,000, it all depends, I'm not afraid... on the contrary, because when you begin work at four in the morning for one week and get home at 9.30 at night the next...

— *But very few show their salary stubs?*

Hamid Certain ones because, for instance, since I'm a shop steward, well, people are less afraid, they give me their stub outright, "here it is, I've got a problem... that Saturday wasn't paid... they took something off here... I don't understand." If I can explain things to them, I do it right away, if I can't, then I go to the comptroller for the answer... people give me their salary stubs right out to take it to the union or... because they know that it's for their own good... but among themselves, there isn't...

— *And if you compare this to the situation in the '70s, there's still a difference because then there was a kind of cohesion in the group, a strong one...*

Hamid Group cohesion then was against the section heads, against the supervisors. Now the cohesion is workers against other workers... The workers who are against all this, who don't accept certain inequities, who find the work load intolerable — these people don't have a good reputation because the section head got it across that people who gripe are going to tear the place apart and if everybody starts griping, we'll never get any cars through and there won't be any more salary at all, and we might as well put the key under the doormat and take off, and that's how it works. From '70 to '78, when they paid us, we'd put all the stubs out on a table, we'd look at them all one next to the other and compare seniority, and it was "how come you don't have more than me?" and it was the guy who had more than me who told me "go see your section head, you have more seniority than I do and you're getting less than me..." It was the worker who encouraged me, at the time I wasn't yet a shop steward... that's in '74-'75... he was the one who told me to go put in a claim. Now, that guy,

when you ask to see his salary stub, "no, no, no!" and if the guy wants to, if he is really brave and he wants to show me his salary stub, he folds it up and only shows me the bottom, the amount written on the bottom, he doesn't show me what is marked on top. Let's just say, "It's personal"...

— *This kind of individualistic reasoning is interesting to look at because people don't talk much about it, and it's true that it makes another victory for Peugeot...*

Hamid Right, for Peugeot, it's a victory... But I've always said that Peugeot's victories cut two ways because it does so many dumb things that they can turn against it... because the workers don't accept it... Well, there's both sides: the people who don't want to show their salary stub because they're afraid they aren't getting enough compared to the others and they say to themselves "I'm not any dumber than anybody else and yet I get less," but then there are others who often have more hours... You don't need anything at all to make people unhappy with their pay and then there are the people who are happy but have paid a high price... because those who have worked overtime 'til midnight, maybe they get a plus on their salary stub, but just think about the sacrifices they make! You have to consider the sacrifices they've made; they get home... If this guy leaves the plant at 9.30 in the evening, he gets home by 10.45, if he stays until 11.30, he doesn't get home until one in the morning. And then these are often people who make special arrangements, when they have transportation, so that they take care of others in the area... they give them rides and such... So for the guys who live far away... the one who is "available," perhaps he gets his gas reimbursed, perhaps Peugeot even pays him cash... unless the section head pays him overtime directly... all this time he's been giving rides to a bunch of friends, four or five from where they live, which means pretty many side trips, and he gets home exhausted... And the next day he starts in all over again... he works and lives for Peugeot.

The workers were the ones who went after me, "you and your big mouth, all you do is gripe"

— *So the section heads have room to negotiate these things one by one... It's rather like reversing the logic of group solidarity*

Hamid Right, it's the same group line. You arrive late... for me, the first time I got in late at this shop... even if I get up at 5.15, I don't get in by 5.30 or six, I get in at seven with the people working regular hours... I arrive with regulars because they'll take my hours away anyway, so I might as well... and that day, the section head says to me "we decided to pay you your hours," I tell him "that's new, never since I've been working at Peugeot has anyone paid me even a quarter of an hour. How come?" And he answers "here it's the group that decides and since it's the first time that you've been late, the group decided to pay you your hours." So I say to him "that's just great, I guess I'll start being late more often!" Then he says to me "not at all, it's a favor that the workers, your coworkers, have done you so you'd better..." In other words, we pay you your hours but watch out! don't pester them the next time around, and that's how they make people feel guilty... Lots of people used to come in late and as soon as they heard that, that was it, no more late arrivals... that's how they buy them off!

— *That's true, they buy them off and at the same time, they make an appeal to a sense of collective morality.*

Hamid Another time the CGT asked me to go to a briefing meeting on the outside. The head of the shop arranges this sort of thing... I got up to speak and said "it's all well and good to let us speak but give us at least 10 minutes to explain our point of view, the workers I see tell me that the pace, the quality, it doesn't work anymore... they tell me that the cars aren't really clean when they leave... but that's only to be expected since we have to put on parts; then take them off, then take the cars down

the line and then bring them back up on the other side because something isn't right... instead of just letting the cars go on down the line, you make us do certain procedures and then afterwards you bring the cars back up the line again, so that makes a lot of bringing up and sending down, taking apart and putting back together, and that's not good for the car. Already there's a large number of cars and every month you add cars for us and... that counts." So then the head of personnel started to answer me but it wasn't the head, it was the workers, the young workers, who were the ones who went after me, "you and your big mouth, all you do is gripe! This is the first time we've seen you around here!" So I said "of course it's the first time, I've been here for six months or a year and it's the second meeting that's been held, but I came and I didn't come to talk with you, young man, but with the head of personnel; you haven't even been here two or three years, and I've been here for 20, so shut up..." But ordinarily you're paid for this time, and all the others got paid, but those who complained... [*gesture indicating "they weren't paid"*]. Agreed, the head of personnel paid me a lot of compliments, then he said to the section head "cancel that guy's hours." So I said to him like that, "otherwise I'll really get upset..." Fortunately there were some workers who stood up for me, who told the other guy to shut up, and all that - even the section head intervened and stood up for me, he said, "anyway, that's the way Hamid talks, he presents his views, his ideas" (...). It's true, in the other plant we got used to another kind of life... Before, guys were in a hurry to go home after work... Now they hang around their work stations... they move around... just to make sure the supervisors know they are there...

— "Available?"

Hamid Right... There's the heat, and all that... but they are "available" because Peugeot, Peugeot's your boss... so you don't... for the assembly line workers right now union work is more and more... difficult.

— Why? Because the section heads tend to take over some of the work that the unions used to do?

Hamid Right... and then these days a lot of workers really play the game... the ones who lined right up to sign the petition to fire somebody were CGT people...

These second-rate supervisors of no account who want to have a good spot

— The supervisors aren't against you the way they were in the '70s?

Hamid No, a lot less... because they have become much more [*looking for the right word*] "clever." They'll tell me for example, "I observe that you are distributing leaflets..." I say to them "so what? doesn't everyone else do it?" They tell me "but we don't want to give any of the unions special treatment." Whereas I know for a fact that they treat the unions very differently, between for example, the CFTC [*Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens*] and the CGT... They told me... [*imitating someone trying to be very nice*] "I'm only telling you this for your own..." So there is no longer any sense, as there was in the old plant, of pointing out the black sheep... Now it's more and more a question of getting a good work station. I've had young people keep me from handing out leaflets, who stopped me... telling me that "people like you shouldn't be here..." And that guy [*who told me that*], he's only been at the plant for two years, not even that, a former temporary worker, and so I explained to him that all of us here, we've been fighting for years... he told me "that's right, and it's because of people like you that we're going to be laid off." [*Long pause*] All that talk from the management goes over more and more easily... Second-rate supervisors of no account at all who want a good spot... All of this counts... It's true that union work is getting... harder and harder...

— Right, the shop stewards are put in a position of being misunderstood... The supervisors are taking over the shop steward's work. In your shop are there "shop advisors"? As there are in the metalworking

section, for example? And are people who might have personal problems encouraged to go see them?

Hamid For us, the "shop advisors" are there, but they're usually from the supervisory staff. For example, the foreman or section head gives a talk... And if they ever see that some guy isn't there, they call him in, "we don't know for sure, but we're ready to really discuss everything with you, if you've got money or family problems, or loans, all that, we're ready to help you...but you mustn't...[lowering his voice] let us down like that. If you're sick, come tell us you're sick." They start out with the family bit... Then another person comes in... he tells him "well, R. [he gives the name] came to see us, he told us that his wife wanted a divorce..." They say "that's right, R. talked to us, and we took care of his problems...we went to see Mr Y. or Mme Y..." That's how they play the game: they give examples...even if it's something private, secret...between people...they'll say "you saw how we took care of R.'s problems..."

— Which is another way of compromising them, of getting them involved?

Hamid That's it for sure [pause]... Because in fact, it's not even true! When you've got problems with your kids, all that... people who don't feel right... then they say "well, we heard about your problems... we know you're out sick... that you've got a problem so we're ready to help you." Then the guy says "well, at least they tried..." And even if he's sick, he comes in! I knew one guy, he was in the middle of a divorce, and all that. They called him in, and then he took a little time off, then a lot off. Then he came back, I went to see him, and he told me "the CGT didn't do anything to help me like that..." He held that against the CGT! I said to him, "But you didn't come ask us...and anyway, it was a personal problem, we don't want to intrude..." He said "sure, but you have to! you have to take on personal problems too..." So you see, it's worth it to them, this kind of intervention from management.

— But isn't that precisely what is so dangerous for the unions?

Hamid Absolutely! It's dangerous for the union...[pause] But dangerous for the workers too... What we say is "Peugeot has ears everywhere... it knows everything... it's the name of the game around here... inside the plant and outside too... But it's true, as the saying goes, if things keep on like this, we're not out of the woods by a long shot..."

— And at the same time, the CGT pulls a 60 percent vote in the elections for the personnel delegates.

Hamid Right. In my section it was 77 percent or 78 percent. They know that Peugeot is putting them in a shitty situation... And they also know that they can count on the CGT. Yet at the same time there's the Peugeot line, the boss, you have to go along... [pause] Peugeot has always been able to get the workers to believe that the CGT is incapable of running the Joint Worker-Management Council... and the workers say "for anything to do with working conditions, the CGT, you're the experts, but for anything that concerns our own assets, the CGT, well it's the same as the Communist Party, all that..." [Defiant gesture] The company has been able to get them to believe that if the CGT gets to run the Joint Worker-Management Council and all that, the workers' money will go straight to the Party or other setups... And it works! There are even people on our side who say "we're not good at running things..." [...]

*Workers who fight among themselves,
I just can't take it*

Hamid Perhaps what is the most striking for me is this idea of workers getting set up against each other. That's what seems to me most threatening for the future... And my own personal feeling is that there's a job to be done on the level of the union sections... I'm speaking about ours, in the CGT... This is the direction we have to go... to try by every means... this Peugeot system... to show it up for what it is...

— *You have to analyze it...*

Hamid I said to a team head who was telling me “but why do you keep on like this? I came down here five or six times in one day...” And so I told him “I keep on for one reason: whenever there are workers in conflict with the supervisors, with the foremen, that doesn’t give me any particular problem. I try to see, to see where the weak point is... But as soon as I find myself in a situation where there’s a worker having it out with another worker or a worker who wants to blackball other workers, I tell myself that if I don’t do everything, absolutely everything to dispel this... [*he looks for the right word*] this “bad feeling”... I won’t be able to say that I’ve done my job.” I said “workers who fight among themselves, I just can’t take it, I can’t.” I said “they’re good guys, the ones who signed, workers that I’ve been around, who went on strike with me in ’89”... So when I see them “exclude” one of their own who also went on strike for four weeks! ... that’s where I have to say “that’s beyond me, completely over my head!” And then, there, he said to me “right...” And I said to him “right, even you, you’d better watch out... because it cuts both ways... because with workers all ‘stirred up’ like that, tomorrow the section head or the foreman will be the target.” I’m speaking of the struggle we had during the ’89 strikes. For example, that strike showed that workers had the ability [*to keep themselves under control*]. We didn’t go after the supervisors, the section heads, the foremen... even though they really bugged us, they really leaned on us... Except for a few jeers... but things didn’t deteriorate the way they did elsewhere. I said to him “but if ‘that’ is allowed to go on, the day that there’s a strike... you’ll be... you’ll be... attacked, with bolts and rails, with anything that’s lying around, because you’ve set things up for this sort of thing...” through everything that you are doing right now. These tactics shouldn’t exist, and I told him so. I’ve already had several meetings with two other shop stewards and the head of person-

nel to try to... to change these things a bit.” The second thing that also seems important to me, is that the foremen, the section heads, they play the sociability card and go on about how interested they are in these people, but for me, it’s hypocrisy pure and simple.

— *They really believe it? Partly?*

Hamid They believe it in part, it’s true. But let’s just say that they don’t practice what they preach! They want to settle all a worker’s problems. But when they find themselves with a worker who really has problems, they move off, “that’s not for us.” As long as people work, as long as they can be influenced to work more, stay longer... come earlier, fine! But when it comes to our bodies and souls, then they back off and in spite of everything they say “we’re not here to take care of your personal problems.” And there are concrete examples... Because what you have to realize is that they don’t want any more sick people! And for them, sick people are the handicapped. They almost say so outright, “somebody who’s sick shouldn’t work, work should be left for the others, for healthy people. If you’re sick, work is not for you.” And that is a very important thing: we’ve moved years backward... Yet it’s not because a guy is handicapped that he can’t come in... that he doesn’t have any rights...

— *That’s pretty much a logic of exclusion that is underway*

Hamid They exclude people outright... [*imitating the section head*] “He’s sick, he’s sick all the time, he doesn’t come in, he’s sick...” They drag this up in every discussion. And the workers, just from listening to this all the time... it’s true, they make sure they don’t get sick. I think that workers have to watch out... that’s what I try to explain to people... because no one can guarantee today that you’ll be healthy tomorrow even if you do sports and everything... one fine day you get sick, you have an accident (...)

March 1991

The old order (the 1960s and 1970s) tied to a certain type of power relations between activists, workers and management rested on a whole set of preexisting conditions, and first of all, on a certain "adjustment" between characteristics elaborated over time. It is this order that has been profoundly disturbed by all kinds of changes in every area of existence. In Hamid's view, with its system of supervisors and bonuses, the management is setting up a perverse kind of regime. The continual appeal to individual interests radically modifies the conditions of the work and the life they share and threatens what he sees as the "normal" relationship between workers and shop stewards.

He is not wrong to think that the management is playing this card systematically. Of course, he is concerned first of all with the method that certain members of the management have come to use to encourage the workers on the team. Obviously, he has put his finger on a very important point: the action of the (new) supervisory staff is inscribed in a strategy that goes against what used to exist in the old shops, a strategy that aims at constituting new working groups ... But things are more complicated than he seems to think when he denounces the management alone. Pressing a bit harder, we might be tempted to say that there is a whole set of changes in the conditions that enabled the old symbolic and political order to maintain and reproduce itself (for example, by assigning specific tasks and well-defined roles to the shop steward and the team heads): for instance, the great majority of the new supervisors are very different from the old team heads, both socially and academically; some of them are former temporary workers who have moved up a notch.

Before, everything happened as if, implicitly, the relationship of the shop stewards to the supervisory staff was regulated by a sort of tacit agreement, a moral code. The disputes that set them against each other might be violent, but each had their own domain in which the other did not interfere. Each had techniques (like the petition) that the other did not use. Each more or less knew the rules in effect and "how far they could go too far." These are the lines that have been crossed, these are the rules that have been broken.

At the same time, what Hamid is discovering, without altogether wanting to admit it, is that it's the people on his side, his buddies, the "strikers" as he says, who have voluntarily bought into the logic of hierarchy, of the boss, a logic that is set up against all the rules of old-style working-class solidarity – since the petitioners had come to the point of asking for the dismissal of a "veteran striker." What he senses very clearly is that this is the end result of a process that has been going on for a long time and that it not only calls into question the perverse behavior of the management at a given moment in time, but is also inscribed in a slow movement of destructuring.

We see here the moral destabilization of a traditional shop steward trained in the logic of the old activist model, even though he is a foreigner and still relatively young. For a whole set of complicated reasons, this model at Sochaux lasted for a long time, longer and stronger than in other plants. Hamid is discovering both that he can no longer fulfill his assignment (his "job" as a shop steward) as he

once did, that there is something abnormal in the situation that he has to face, and also that, on the other hand, more than ever he needs to be in the shop to defend his "buddies," that he cannot give up on this and cannot "drop everything" just when working conditions are getting worse than ever.

From now on Hamid perceives clearly that the growing number of technicians in the shop, the BTS as they are called, the new members of supervisory staff (whose training parallels that of the technicians) as well as the majority of supervisors – all think and act differently, situated as they are on an entirely different terrain from the old-time team heads. In the old days, in the old shop, if you put on the shirt to be a team head, everyone knew what that meant for a worker with a reputation as a brown nose, and you could predict in advance the logic of his conduct. Today figuring out the strategies of the new technicians is something else again.

From here on the obvious falls apart. Old-style relationships have been slowly altered, as if they were being sapped from within. And all of a sudden the effects of this slow shift hit the shop steward right in the eyes. And that's where the disarray comes in.

Sandrine Garcia

The Stolen Work

I met Claudie for the first time at the Paris Women's Center located in the 11th arrondissement, a central location for gay and militant feminists from the least "intellectual" side of feminism. After a long period of unemployment, she was undergoing "reentry training" organized largely around reception and management activity that would lead to temporary jobs well beneath both her training as a journalist and her professional experience (she had had a permanent job at INSEE [Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques, national institute for statistics and economic research], and then had run a shelter for battered women).

At our very first meeting, I was struck by her "tragic" look, by a seriousness punctuated with sudden bursts of strident laughter, as if she were carrying a burdensome drama around with her all the time. The burden is so great that when she decides to tell us about it, she can't keep from going on at great length, reliving each episode of her story with unabated passion, and often unable to hold back her tears, even when she tries to bring out "the positive side" of this whole business – the creation of a shelter, her "work" which had "been stolen away" from her but "has just celebrated its tenth anniversary."

A childhood spent in the country in a family dominated by a father prone to violence who used to beat his wife regularly, the sight of the exploitation of women in a farm community – these were the experiences that brought her early on to "a critical examination of society, its injustices, and especially its injustices to women." This disposition to feminist rebellion found an outlet at her first encounter with the French feminist movement [MLF – Mouvement de Libération des Femmes, Women's Liberation Movement] in the 1970s. She lived through a period of euphoria that carried her from group to group, discussion to discussion and program to program. She locates herself among the "revolutionary feminists," joined the "Red Dykes," a group of Communist gay women, then a "consciousness-raising" group, which put her in regular contact with sociologists and psychologists who "pushed her thinking forward." This experience seemed all the more beneficial since she had dropped out of her university studies and felt a great need to learn. After a first period of activity – moving around the country working on surveys – and despite the satisfaction that she derived from the female and even lesbian company that she met in this professional milieu, she got tired of the instability and went back to her hometown, Y., to settle down and look for work. Once back in Y., a small city in eastern France, she tried in vain to

recapture the atmosphere of Parisian activism. The only people she met in this "deadsville" were hard-line MLF militants straight out of May 1968 politics and concerned solely with "the class struggle."

The points of disagreement intensified: over the priority given to various causes, "workers" or "Palestinians," over problems of women confronting male domination, over the primacy given theoretical considerations or "ideological struggles," over the practical endeavors undertaken to help oppressed women. She soon quit this MLF group – which was marked by growing hostility and resentment and never "let up on" her, constantly criticizing the "typically bourgeois" nature of everything she did – and got closely involved with concrete activity to help women.

It was her "Paris friends" who gave her the idea of working off the model of the SOS hotlines for women being set up in Paris about then and of setting up in Y. a group affiliated with the League of Women's Rights in Paris (Simone de Beauvoir was the honorary president), whose primary objective is to fight domestic violence. From then on, she threw her whole life and all her energy into this project. Outside her work for INSEE, she spent years answering calls from battered women, helping them find a way out of their situation, particularly through legal means, working to sensitize public opinion and to force institutions to recognize the problem. Bit by bit she came to the idea that ended up as the group's project: setting up a shelter for battered women, which would enable them to get away from their spouses and reorganize their lives.

She threw herself body and soul into a difficult battle to convince the institutions concerned – such as DASS [a social services agency], doctors, the Delegate for Women's Issues [a governmental post under the Ministry of Health], local government institutions – of the necessity of such a shelter and to get the money to run it. Sometimes at the cost of her own health, she succeeded in overcoming all the obstacles and all the resistance from the institutions dead set against her until they finally agreed to recognize her "work." But the struggle for women, which had become her *raison d'être*, did not end there. She wanted to set up a second shelter and take on new projects.

She herself took the most active role in the struggle at Y., even to the point of personally confronting the spouses of the women who sought shelter with her, and acted as principal go-between for the institutions that needed persuading. Undoubtedly, she says, she would not have been able to deal with issues so firmly if her activist friends in Paris had not backed her up with advice, moral support and sometimes even direct help (it was thanks to them, for example, that the shelter was brought to the attention of the Delegate for Women's Issues and of DASS, the source of the shelter's subsidies). They also confirmed for her the justice of her solitary combat in this provincial city that is so much more closed than Paris and where the only established group of feminists remained inalterably hostile to her. She says that she needed to feel "justified" by the profound conviction that her work was inseparable from that of her friends in Paris, of which it was also the logical continuation.

Right at the time of her first victory a discrepancy appeared, one that had undoubtedly been there all along, between her activism and that of the other members of her group. Just before the shelter opened, worn out by years of work on the ground, a great many of her friends dropped out of the group, some to go on with their studies, others because they had "other lives to lead." She herself had no emotional life outside the group and no ambitions beyond her feminist enterprise. Left alone with what had practically become her personal achievement, she could not even savor a victory that already tasted like defeat, since from then on she could count only on her own strength and she could no longer enjoy the spirit of a collective mobilization.

Yet she didn't stop there: she quit her job to take over as president of the shelter, actively supervised the construction, then set herself up there, and even lived there, absorbed night and day by all the new tasks that a properly functioning organization requires. At this point in the history of the shelter, which functioned solely because of her volunteer work, all the difficulties surfaced. She hired a secretary, a cook, a woman at night to watch the place, "no problem there," she says, but she also had to hire a "psychologist-counselor" and soon discovered the horror of an intolerable collaboration, of an absolute antagonism between two views of the world: the activist who listens first to her heart and acts out of compassion, often in an emergency situation where she has to improvise creative and generous solutions; against the "professional" woman, whose impersonal actions are scripted according to a strictly bureaucratic logic. After all, a "counselor, that's a professional specialty... credentials are required" to meet its demands, Claudie comments, using (not without a precise intention) the term "specialty" in the same way, as she will later point out, that she "scientifically employs" that of "staff" (in the shelter): for this counselor, she explains, "it doesn't have anything to do anymore" with activist feminism, she "thinks only about her professional union" and "tells me: that's not my job." Her impassioned recollection of everything that set her against this "trained" employee leads her to analyze with great perspicuity just how a bureaucratic world operates – with its terminology and its abstract, impersonal administrative categories – and how these instruments of thought and action create a sense of social distance between the social workers, who have all the rules and categories down pat, and their "clients"; how the division and narrow specialization of tasks exclude the uninitiated; and, finally, how reliance on institutional and collective resources tends to suppress personal involvement and individual responsibility. She notes, for instance, that the shelter counselor "didn't hold out any hope for these women; for her they were one more population group to be treated! It was her job!" She also describes the disorientation of the women in the shelter who complained about the "gap between them and the staff." With me, she explains, there wasn't any gap, what happens to battered women "could have happened to me too," "I don't feel that I'm up in the sky and everybody else is on the ground." But, she adds, "there are certain kinds of people who say, I've got a job to do, I'm a counselor, I'm a psychologist." Without any illusions, but also without any malice, she makes the same remark about all

the professional categories that she has had an opportunity to observe – doctors and social workers who never take any chances, no doubt because they are very respectful of any kind of power and hide behind the convenient alibi of their professional training. Her generosity leads her to relativize the scope of her criticism by raising the differences of “heart and mind” between the individuals in these professions (“some doctors are human beings”) and to conclude naively concerning her own work, “it was a question of temperament, I just liked things like that. It’s true that there were risks, that you had to push hard and when you come right down to it, I was doing what people paid by society don’t do.”

“The counselor with a trade union mentality” who hid behind “the rules,” who insisted on her “rights” and “asked for more and more things,” and wasn’t interested in the women in the shelter, soon became so intolerable that Claudie tried to get rid of her before the end of her probationary period. Feeling threatened, this woman didn’t hesitate to alert Mme de X., the sister of a famous woman writer who played an important role in the feminist movement. Once she became the director of the shelter and did not have the right to occupy two functions, Claudie had asked Mme de X. to take over from her in the purely honorific function of association president, hoping to profit from the symbolic capital attached to her name and to use her in making connections with political and social institutions. And this president, who until then had gone on with her life as a painter without paying much attention to the shelter, got all worked up over the idea of a firing and suddenly decided that she had a duty to intervene and restore a militant orthodoxy that was under threat. Called up before a general meeting charged with examining her work, Claudie once again found herself confronted with her longtime enemies, the “class struggle” feminists whom the president had been able to bring into the association behind Claudie’s back and who gradually became allies in order to take over the association. Together, they elaborated different strategies which resulted in Claudie’s censure for professional misconduct, and then boxed her into a situation where resigning seemed the only way out.

Defeated, “given the death blow” by militant women who could not forgive her for having succeeded in doing something where they had produced nothing but useless words and empty slogans, Claudie spent a long time getting over this feeling of being and having nothing, she who “had put all of herself in the shelter,” who had given it “everything” even to the point where it was “all of her.” Incapable of resentment, she affirms even today that “the shelter works well, that’s important.” But having gone through a personal journey that almost recapitulates the history of the feminist movement as a whole, she admits to “having become distrustful of others,” of groups of militant feminists and their meetings and discussions. She has learned that social and cultural domination also cuts across feminism, that power exists there too and belongs to “the woman who speaks the best” and “knows the most.” “There are certain people,” she says, “they are allowed to fight, they are allowed to work, but they shouldn’t by any means be allowed to succeed. They’re not made for success. That doesn’t fit their image. I’m not Mme de X. I’m Claudie.”

with a feminist activist

— interview by Sandrine Garcia

“These women are making a social critique, but it is a lot easier to work toward the inside, by destroying...”

Claudie I'll begin with the group that I set up. And really I'll begin at the beginning. And the beginning was my childhood, and in my childhood right away I witnessed the oppression of women. As I told you before, my mother was frequently beaten by my father... who was a stationmaster on the railways and who had begun as an ordinary worker.

— *And your mother?*

Claudie My mother had studied accounting, so she worked for the government until she got married, since it was unheard of to have a woman with children still working. There were all kinds of scenes, my father was extremely violent. Which means that he'd shove her on the floor, stomp on her, kick over the table, etc., etc. — I'll skip the details. He was violent quite simply because he wanted to hold onto his money and go out with other women, he absolutely did not want to take on any responsibilities. He wanted to come home and find dinner ready to eat, his clothes clean and ready to wear, and she couldn't help telling him “but you've got children, you've got responsibilities,” and that just set him off.

— *And he got angry?*

Claudie He got angry. There was also a context on the other side, the village side, meaning a microcosm. So I could see for myself, as far as my grandmother and my godmother were concerned, how women were treated by men.

— *Which was how?*

Claudie I especially saw the hard work women did, that was when the first tractors began to appear. And even when I was very little, I knew, people told me: the man runs things, he's stronger, and then I

could see all these guys sitting on the tractors and the women doing the spade work behind them!

— *Did you take part in this work too?*

Claudie I watched, I observed, I was on vacation and all this violence I could see all the time opened my eyes early on. And I had a critical perspective on society when I was very very young. Especially for the injustices against women. And some of the things I heard were really grotesque, like when a man hits, he's always right, he knows why he's hitting, and so I found it very very hard, because I knew what we were living through. So I was aware of things, but I was all by myself. Because even if I talked about it to my friends from school, they had neither the same experience nor the same perspective.

— *They could possibly be living through the same thing but not necessarily have the same critical eye?*

Claudie Perhaps. But I was sure at heart that one day I would find women who thought like me, with the same sensibility, I don't know why since I was all by myself, but I was sure that I would find women who thought like me. So at 19, I came to Paris. And since it was 1970, very soon, after only a few months, I discovered the feminist movement [MLF]. That was when they would hold big meetings, big discussions, and I found myself with girls from the provinces, who had the same experience. It was a joy to find each other.

— *What were these groups? Because there were several factions in the MLF?*

Claudie In the beginning it was very informal. I was part of the revolutionary feminists, there was another group, the Red Dykes, and so it was groups that met on

the weekends, because I was working in the provinces, I did surveys, and I only got home Saturday evening. In contrast a group that really helped me a lot was the consciousness-raising group. My thinking really moved forward because this group ...I had gone to journalism school, I stopped, I hardly went to classes anymore, and here were women who were sociologists or psychologists, who were a bit older, so I learned a great deal. And at the same time, great solidarity and camaraderie. Afterwards, and that brings things to '75, I spent some time in Spain and then I came back to Y.

— *Because of your work?*

Claudie I came back to Y. because I had traveled a lot for my work, for the surveys, I was on the road all the time for my surveys. One week in Grenoble, the next in Lille, I was always away.

— *What kind of place did you work for?*

Claudie I did surveys for L. [*a large food company*] and there too, it was groups of women. They weren't feminists, but there was such solidarity because we were alone, together, in the provinces, young, we wanted to work but also to have fun, we earned good salaries because surveys were not very well known, and you had to do a whole job of explanation at the same time. And there too, the experience was a bit like feminism, women who were completely free, ready to travel, and then too, there was a large number of lesbians. But still, after a certain amount of time, with hotels, restaurants, you've had enough, I wanted to settle down a bit. I came back to Y. and found a job with INSEE, that was the first thing, and then, the city was dead compared to Paris, and compared to all those years. Still, there was a group that called themselves MLF. I went, and there I found about 15 women in a big discussion about a worker, a guy, who had been fired. (...) So I said to myself, no way. And in this group there was a girl who had pretty much the same reaction as I did, her name was Annick and she came from the United States. And had worked for about a year

with American feminists. So there we were, the two of us, having had experience with feminists, with a feminist perspective, with a feminist critique, in the midst of this workers' group. So I let them talk a while, and the weeks go by, it's always the same thing, and finally I say to them "it doesn't seem to me that you are really part of the MLF, that you have anything to do with the MLF or with feminists, all you talk about is workers. Male workers! What does that have to do with the MLF?" Whereas all the discussions I'd had... And so their answer was "once the class struggle is over, women's causes will naturally fall into line..."

A group that doesn't just talk... but a group that does something

— *It was the whole class struggle bit?*

Claudie It was always the class struggle. And since I had after all studied history a bit, because I was interested in it, I knew perfectly well that it was completely false, and I told them that things couldn't go on like that, because I had seen women, who had real problems as women, who had just been kicked out and been told "all that, we're not interested in that stuff at all." So they were misleading other women. And I told them straight out, "You can't go on like this. You have to have another name. To say that you're MLF, and mislead women, all that... that just won't wash, and if you haven't changed your name in three weeks, I'm going to tell all my friends in Paris and people will know about it." [*She talks about a "festival for women" organized by this same group that actually focused on Palestine, about the violence of the criticism directed against her own contributions, and the disappointment of the German women who came to this demonstration for women that had nothing to say about women. She emphasizes the "damage" that MLF militants can do.*]

And then just a few months later, I read in a local newspaper that in a three-month period three women had been found dead from beatings by their husbands, and each

time it really hit home. And then one day my godmother came to my place and told me "It's really pretty bad in Y. This woman was thrown from the window and died from being beaten, and nobody even bothered the bastard at all!" Because then I read the newspaper article, which said it was a heart attack. The upshot was that I got in touch with my friends in Paris with whom I'd stayed in contact to tell them about what was happening. And one of them, a week later, said "listen, here we're starting up a hotline, SOS-women, it might be a good thing for you too." I said "absolutely, but Annick and I are all alone, and since we don't have anything, really nothing, how do we start?" They replied, "of course you can start something, Claudie" – they pushed me a bit, encouraged me. And so we began, with the telephone at my place, I was working at INSEE during the day, which meant I had regular nine-to-five hours, so it was my telephone at home, and that's the way it stayed for three years. I received almost 10,000 calls from battered women. And I began to work virtually day and night.

— *Was there anything organized to take care of these women? How did things work?*

Claudie No, there was a telephone, period, there wasn't even an answering machine because I couldn't afford one, we just began with a personal phone. [*She goes through her activities: counseling battered women, putting together statistics on women in distress based on the telephone calls, soliciting help from women lawyers, looking for space, contacting "consciousness-raising" groups, recruiting activists for the future shelter, women she asks to come and "do something," not "talk for hours."*]

And in fact women started to come in right away. Some came once or twice, others got into it more, and still others would come by to say "I'm free at such and such a time – if you need something done, let me know." It was very well organized. Very soon the "class struggle" group

came back, and we lost a lot of time and energy. They hang on just like ticks and they don't go away. So right away we had to connect with the Delegation for Women's Issues to set up files, etc. The first Delegate for Women's Issues was a woman doctor who was very open to us, but told us, "You know, I'm a doctor, and I've never heard a woman in my office talk about this sort of thing. Stories about alcoholism, other stories... You're making too much of this," and unfortunately for her she said so on paper. So I immediately sent what she'd written to my friends in Paris, which gave us a big boost since they were close to Françoise Giroud who was then the Secretary for Women's Issues [a cabinet appointment]. But afterwards, this woman – and I have to say that this is very important in political, in human terms – after several months she understood, she saw all the articles in the press, she saw that there were discussions in Paris, and she made amends for it, she made all kinds of public statements, in the press, everywhere. Hats off to her! Because a politician, a man, would never have done it. And she had political problems because of it. She was on the right and people told her "you just go off and tend to your knitting, etc." and she resigned from her position as Delegate on Women's Issues. That just shows the way people thought at the time, since male politicians could say all kinds of things in public, in the press, and it went over just fine. And in such a reactionary climate, just imagine us looking for space for battered women in little old Y. Still, I made an appointment with the man in charge of social services who sneered and said that "the city doesn't have a thing." But I knew that the city had a great deal of property and that there was a great deal of space in this city which is, after all, a sizeable city. Fine. That was at the end of '75, beginning of '76. In the beginning of 1976 I did a few surveys on women's deaths, on women who had died beaten by their husbands, I was able to get addresses, I was used to surveys; after all I'd gone to journalism school. And

I did these surveys with neighbors. And... first of all, I approached the family, of course. There were the parents of the woman who had died, for example. So obviously, the woman's family are often people who are completely scared by what happens, and when they find someone they can talk to about it, they agree straight away and very often, they even thank you. So, through the neighbors. There was one in particular who told me "Just look at these little row houses, you see how close they are, and he was our closest neighbor. When he'd come home in the evening, even the dog didn't dare move or bark." And he said to this neighbor "I'm big on sports, if you want to come out in the street, I'll bash in your skull on the spot." So at that point the neighbor didn't budge, didn't interfere anymore. And he just kept on beating his wife, she died because of it, the children were there, she hung on there on the kitchen floor the whole night long. That's the kind of information I couldn't have gotten any other way. And when the guy got convicted, he was counting on getting away with it, he was an upstanding member of society, he even had a business, pretty much money. He thought he'd get off with the three months of his pre-trial detention, and that would be it. The demonstration that I had decided to organize was for all the women who had died from beatings, right in front of their children, and the absence of any reaction, against this general acceptance. We were helped by these really terrific women, who had lots to do, I'm referring to the women from Planned Parenthood. They had their own battles to fight, but when you needed a hand, they were always there, they gave you respect. So, obviously the class struggle women jump in again, "Terrific, another demo! we'll really yell." Because yelling seems to be an extraordinary thing, all you have to do is yell your head off for two hours, once a year, and things take care of themselves! But what we wanted was a totally silent demonstration. When there's a real demo, people say, oh yes, there's a demo, but if

you do a totally silent demonstration, then people wonder what's going on. That's what gets their attention. You have to have some imagination if you want to fight. Especially if you don't have any money. [*She talks about this symbolic demonstration, the wreaths sent by feminist associations from all over the world, then the help from the press.*]

*I was doing what people paid by
society don't do*

— *You had calls from women in every social milieu?*

Claudie That's right, I'll give you an example. Who called us? There was the wife of a law professor. He knew the law. And he also knew where to hit. A doctor's wife too. Wives of businessmen. There were a large number of housewives, and some who had jobs. It doesn't seem to me that there were many regular professionals, more likely business types. There were more women who had no job, and above all, who had children. Then the doctors jumped in. In order to lodge an official complaint, these women had been asked for a medical certificate. Well, the medical association puts out a circular that says that from then on, to get a medical certificate for blows and injuries, it wouldn't be the normal fee but a higher fee, K5, K6, I can't remember the number, but it was 350 francs. I went to ask for an explanation right away. And they told me "but we'll be flooded with requests!" So they recognized the problem. It was to cut down on the requests and on whose back? On the other hand you can't forget that there are also doctors who are human beings and who do just the opposite, who telephone to give us a hand, to say, here's what's going on... Some even went so far as to take in some of these women because they usually didn't know where to go. These were basically sensitive people who saw the human angle. Sometimes the hospital would call us, there were women with severe head injuries who had been thrown out the window. Women themselves called, the

hospital, neighbors, employers, for example, for their cleaning women, institutions. It just shows that ties of friendship aren't to be sneezed at. Even children would call, these were the hardest ones of all... When you read about children killing their fathers, you see that, most of the time, it was trying defend their mother that led them to intervene. The more people found out about us, the more articles in the newspaper there were, the more people all of a sudden dared to talk and became aware of their responsibility. The articles made a big point of complicity by virtue of the principle of nonassistance to a person in danger. When you come down to it, people knew about it. After that, off we went to make the rounds of the government agencies, Because in Paris, obviously, they had done considerable work with these agencies. In Y., the social services agency was DASS. [*She talks about the resistance and the inertia at DASS, where they just sit on the dossiers, and about her activities in Paris with the ministry that finally takes her dossier under consideration.*]

I used to come to Paris every now and then, because I needed new statistics, the latest thinking on the problem, and that I found in Paris, plus a powerful feminist spirit I drew on, and brought back to Y. It was this feminist cohesion, this deepening of research, etc. In our group at Y., there were students, women like me, and then there were women going through divorce who were subjected to violence and felt the need to join the group because they needed someone to listen to them, to no longer be alone, they needed to be together, to know that someone understood them, that their action was part of a whole. There was one woman who didn't know how to talk about things and who came with poems. But most of them were young activists and who hadn't lived through it. There was also the boyfriend of a friend who knew what feminism was, that it was our fight, but who would sometimes give us a hand. Men could play a very useful role in all this, men who know how to talk to

violent men, talk things over with them... They couldn't be part of the group, but they could do that sort of work. Because we were taking care of emergencies. So there was plenty of work if they wanted it, and it turned out that some of them did, and that was nice, that's important too.

Now I'm going to talk about Brussels. We had a meeting about violence toward women, but where women came, feminists from all over the world. That was in '76, it was feminist, it was worldwide, and it was a very big festival. And there we made ourselves known, we met people, saw that problems for women are the same everywhere. That is really a problem of patriarchal society. So we talked about violence and more violence. And then we organized 24 hours against rape at the mutual aid society. And we really saw the major tendencies separate themselves out. Our SOS line was like us, very practical, very active; and then there were other women looking more to define themselves, who were against violence but who thought, for example, that women shouldn't be advised to file lawsuits, that they shouldn't go down that road.

A few minutes ago I mentioned the group, I said a bit about what they did, but very little. I have to say that there were also women who called to say that the police refused to come, and so it turned out that I'd go myself. And there I saw how guys react. There was one character who made me go back out just to look at the doorbell, "see what's written there?" What was written there? His name. He tells me "I'm the one who lives here," so the others, his wife and his children, that's the herd, and in the end they belong to him. I go in. Of course the telephone had been torn out, she had had the time to call, that woman, but then he'd jerked the telephone away from her. I should add that there was blood on the walls. And of course there were two really little children who were so scared they couldn't even talk, they were curled up, waiting for what comes next, and that's it. And the guy tells me that he

works at the plant. That I don't know what it's like. Because I'd gotten in the habit of taking a little notebook to take notes. So I was considered an intellectual. And so because he worked at the plant and got tired out at the plant, that explained why he beat his wife. So I said to him, "but there are also women who work at the plant. As far as I know, they don't beat their husbands." Fine, and that time it was clear, the doctor refused to come, so I had to come. Because what that woman needed was a medical certificate. There were other things too, like the dog on the leash. [She tells about the husband who threatened her with his dog and about the Algerian girl whose family wanted to keep her from studying.]

So our activities were diverse and varied. Now, with hindsight, I have to say that it was a question of temperament because I liked the work. It is true that there were risks involved, that you had to push hard and when you come right down to it, I was doing what people paid by society don't do.

There are always individuals who don't accept hierarchy... it's a question of openness of heart

— *And the history of the shelter?*

Claudie The dossiers lie around for a while, you're called in, we still didn't have any space because DASS had the money, but it didn't have space, you had to go find it. With my friends from Paris, we worked together, not really from the point of view of work, but it made me feel safer with respect to other groups to be able to say, our group is important, it's connected to the Paris group, and so... It was all a matter of strategy. But I have to say that the workload was incredible. We shared things in the group, but there were friends who couldn't do much because they had to study etc. so it wasn't really shared. What's more, there were high school students who came and for me, that was very important. These are things that you can refuse, you can say "I don't have the time," etc. But it

seemed very very important to me for the future of feminism that high school students come, especially those who do home economics and such. All the more so that it spread at the level of the students and the teachers, and at the social level, that is, where people...

— *will do this work.*

Claudie It will be their work. So you had to make time for that. We also had to look for funds, and on the other hand, the main project was the shelter, but for that feminism had to be better known in the region as a whole, since we were beginning to have a public in the region. And there were one or two girls in the group really interested in art. So we decided to do a woman's film festival. This was in '77... [She tells how they were able to get space for their association thanks to the organization of art exhibitions and getting two politically divergent municipalities to compete with one another. But not without difficulty: the first proposal was "a shed next to a gravel pit"; then after they protested, a space that needed 300,000 francs of work to make it usable.]

At that time I was really more than overworked. And because people saw the work that had been done, I got money for a round-the-clock service, because this kind of work has to be done 24 hours out of 24, I couldn't take it anymore, I didn't have any time off, I didn't have anything left. There was money for that in any case, for someone to be there all the time the renovation was being done, for a month before the opening. So it was clear that because I'd done so much of the work and knew the dossiers, etc. that I was the one. I resigned from my job at INSEE to be the person on call. So I watched over all the renovation. The social services... Because I've talked about everything but not about the religious organizations or the social services. So the social services, DASS, is one thing. DASS is charged with determining whether or not an association is viable and only then do they consider what might be done. Oof! For the social workers alone, the

same problems as with the doctors. It's not really a question of individuals, it's a question of openness of mind, of heart. It's a question of an open society. For example, there was a social worker who called me when the shelter opened about a woman who was in the shelter, to tell me "It's Mme So and So, she ran away." I answer "what do you mean, ran away? Is she a minor?" Not at all! So she replies "M. So and So, her husband, is looking for her and you are instructed to hand her over to me." Just like a dog, right? And we had other run-ins with the social workers. There was one woman, the shelter hadn't opened yet, who came to see us and didn't really know where to go. And neither did we. When the group started, I had begun bringing one or two women home with me but that wasn't possible anymore, it didn't work. And this woman had a small child too. So this woman came, she really, I mean really had problems, because after a while you get to recognize the tone, you recognize the situations, and you know very well if a woman is in danger or if she can stick it out another two weeks. And this woman was really in serious danger. We decided to do everything we could, even to go to a hotel, but... The social worker called her subsequently, and gave her orders to go back home! And later, in the press, this woman had been knifed I don't know how many times and she died. Of course the social worker isn't at all responsible. There was another one who came (...) to tell me that now that she was dealing with this man who had the unfortunate habit of tying his child to the bed and hitting him. She tells me that she's telling me because she couldn't do anything about it, because if she did, this man wouldn't trust her anymore, he would feel betrayed. Then she couldn't work with him anymore. She can't do anything, but she's telling me, so obviously I can! There are people like that who tell you "but I can't call the police, you understand, that would be informing!" [laughter] They don't have a clue! And here they've spent three years studying and they can't tell the difference

between informing, which is the denunciation of an innocent person to a hateful authority, and saving a victim who is close to dying. I could never figure it out. It's a sort of fear of power, the fear of the master, of the strongest, and that means the one who does the hitting. Yet for other social workers, it was just the reverse...

[She considers the members of religious groups more open and more inclined to help women in danger.]

I make this distinction between individuals and institutions. There are always individuals who don't accept, who are not going to accept hierarchy... After six months of the works, the shelter opened. We were still a group, but after a while, we had to become an association. It's a question of legal status, liability, etc. At that point I was president, Annick was vice-president, it was our friends who had worked the hardest... Soon there was the problem of power, in the beginning, and all along, and this power problem was quickly resolved. The idea that had been in the air, everywhere, was no power, we worked as a group. And at that point, you can't help noting, when you get in a group, that power is there in spite of everything. The woman who talks the best, the one who knows the most, the one who talks the loudest, I don't know, the one who knows the best way to manipulate things, but in any case power is there, it's just more discreet and negative. We all decided in the beginning, we said "there's always power, we can't help that, but the criterion for power is work, it's effectiveness." I felt strongly that all decisions should be made in common. So, for the shelter, we had to buy furniture, etc. etc....

— Was it a large shelter?

Terrible exhaustion

[She talks about the end of an activist period with the establishment of this shelter for 20 women; the weariness of her friends, their sense of having finished their task, their departure, her own exhaustion, and the sadness of finding herself alone, but

still determined to continue and expand her activities.]

Claudie That wasn't the end! But that's not a criticism. Because everything they had already done, it was already really terrific. Not one of them could work in the shelter. Because one of them had a very important position, she was a judge, from time to time she'd give advice, as a very good friend... She called me again just yesterday, so that proves... [*she starts to cry*] that these ties have remained very strong. But for sure they weren't going to mess up their studies or their job to take care of the shelter. So the problem arose, now DASS wants a certain number of positions, and there was no getting around it. It was a very obvious barrier. The secretary, the cook didn't pose any problem. But counselor, that's a professional specialty, no way you can hire activists for the job. Credentials are required. So... [*she starts to speak painfully and in spurts*] so then, people were hired. Next we had to call on people, on women, to do this work. So then there was a half-time secretary, she was very good, she really knew her job, she'd worked in another shelter before, for drug addicts, so she knew the system. A woman at night too, to watch the place. Fine. Another girl who had joined the group six months before, who was both a counselor and a psychologist. And I said to myself "well, why not, we need a psychologist half-time for the children, because the children are really, really traumatized," and we were off to a good start, women came and I saw something extraordinary. A solidarity between these women, right off. Because when these women leave home, in a hurry, they don't even have a pair of socks, they don't have anything for themselves or for their children. So you have to go with them to get their clothes, and that can be very dangerous, once I asked a counselor to go, tell me about it! that's where I came up against the problem. I was no longer dealing with an activist, I was dealing with staff, and one who thought about her professional union, who told me that it wasn't part of her job. She

was scared out of her mind, that's what! But if that's the case, you shouldn't be working in a shelter! And I had a ton of other things to do, since I was the director of the center. So I had to take care of the dossiers, etc. since this shelter was meant as a lead-in for a 50-bed center which was being set up with the Delegate for Women's Issues. So it was very easy, because once the first center is established and you demonstrate... we had to hold on for a year. You have to show that you know how to run the place. That you don't go over the top... which is what they assume, because DASS told me afterwards that they thought that the word feminist meant not knowing how to run anything. Doing anything you like. You see. They told me that afterwards. So from the point of view of the women, a solidarity, mutual help. And also, for some of them, gratitude... Just last year, I got a call from a woman, from 10 years ago, to say "thanks, and Merry Christmas!"

[She talks about how the group operated, the equal distribution of countless varied tasks.]

So I couldn't count on that counselor to go get the least little bit of clothing. When I had an appointment with the doctor, it was the women, friends, among themselves, who took care of things. And little by little, they asked themselves questions, they put questions to me. They said "we have a sense of a gap between the staff and us. Why?" Because with me there wasn't that gap. Because me, when they said "that only happens to us, that doesn't happen to other people," I could reply "not at all, if I hadn't been a bit luckier, what's happening to you could have happened to me too." I don't feel that I'm up in the sky and everybody else is down on the ground. But there are certain kinds of people who say "I've got a job to do, I'm a counselor, I'm a psychologist." All you need is to look at these women for them to feel demeaned, they are already so very fragile. That's not the goal of the shelter. It's just the opposite.

— *Things happened like that with the staff?*

*I was dealing with a kind of trade
union mentality*

Claudie No, not all the staff. Just one woman. Who unfortunately had the job as counselor. But if she had just kept to her job, she was in her probationary period... she had three months notice. So then this girl who starts right off the bat citing "the agreement." All day long, that's all I heard. She hid behind the rules. Whenever there was something to do she'd say "I'm supposed to have a day off." And when she made a call to a lawyer and she'd say "and for this I'm supposed to get an extra franc and for that I'm supposed to be paid double, and get another day off." Because there are always problems keeping the shelter running Saturdays and Sundays, and with paying people for it. I was dealing with a kind of trade union mentality of someone who would ask for more and more things with no concern for what the women and children were doing, she simply wasn't interested. So I call her in and I tell her that her three months of probation were up in any case, that things hadn't been at all what I had expected, and that it was better for everyone if we separated, that people had to get along but that I was ready, since she wanted to set up on her own, I was ready to help her out. It was pretty nice of me, because I knew all kinds of people in Y. and it made it easier for her to set up on her own. We talk about it, she says, fine. So I tell her "I'll write the letter and we'll sign it tomorrow, together." And then she says "not me, I'm not signing anything, ever." In short, afterwards she went to - because it was me who used to be president of the association, as soon as you become director, you can't be president of the association, you don't have the right because it's double dipping. I'd done something dumb, I'd asked a very well-known lady, an artist, who nevertheless... she had a prominent name, I'd asked her to be president of the association, and we'd decided on this all of us together with the idea that this would give us some clout with the authorities. So

there we are, we'd done all this work by ourselves, killing ourselves, and she tells me "of course, I'm a feminist, but... But in any case, I'll never get involved in your decisions, you are just asking me to occupy this position, so fine." Well, this girl, quick as one-two-three, goes to see this woman... who was the sister of S. de X. [*a famous feminist*]. Her name was Mme de X., she lived in Alsace, she was a painter. She was, but you can understand that, a tiny bit jealous of her sister, and so this girl goes to see her, and Mme de X. was very... "well, we have to see, but it's not at all feminist, something like this, firing somebody! you've all gone nuts!" You can do anything, you can louse up everything, but a feminist never fires anybody! I tell her "it's not firing, it's terminating a probationary period." But this woman was so dense that she didn't know the difference, she was an artist. I don't have anything against artists, I'm a photographer myself, and all that, but what I mean is that you can't mess around in things you don't know anything about.

Well, things got to the point where there was a meeting of directors, and she was president, she was part of the board of directors. And there was Annick, who had worked a lot, there was me, there were one or two others who had worked hard. And here we are in front of the board of directors, I explain the situation, explaining that she upsets everything, that she's not a real feminist, that things hadn't worked out at all and that we had to put an end to this probation. And then she says to me "stop right there, I'm president, what are you trying to do? I'm going to call a general meeting! Because I oppose your decision!" She starts shouting at us, the ones who had set everything up and done everything! All this time at the shelter the women couldn't figure out what was going on, because obviously I was there, doing my work, working hard, and there was a position that wasn't filled. That is, DASS had said "there has to be someone in a shelter at all times." If the least little thing happens and

no one is there, then you're in real hot water. And we hadn't filled one position. When people talked to me about power, finally I said "with the hours that I work divided by my salary, I earn less than the cook!" That's not my thing at all, but since what I heard all the time was "since you have a regular position and this and that," so I'd say, this is the way it is... I did that because I know that at the end of the year I can hand over the accounts in perfect shape. It works well. There was the 50-bed place as a backup. And all my friends who weren't working there anymore but who had struggled with us all along, they had figured out not only the strategy but they had figured out what was happening in the shelter with this woman. But not the women in the shelter, not at all! They kept asking me more questions! Sure, they sensed that something wasn't right. Why did things work with me and not with her? They asked that themselves! And she didn't even hold out any hope for these women, since they were just one more population group to treat! That was her job! (...) that's what she'd learned, that's what she was used to, and it didn't have anything to do with feminism. But Mme de X. absolutely refused to listen. So we had decided, but in the board meeting. So she calls you in, but in front of the general meeting. Who had all the papers? I did of course since I'd taken care of everything. So I have a list of people, of women who belong to the association, who have paid their dues. All of a sudden, she says to me, "Please hand over that list." I don't like to give out lists, but fine.

[At the general meeting she sees in the room "a bunch of women who don't have anything to do with the association."]

Moving in for the death blow

Claudie And what do I find but all the women from the beginning! Every single one of them! (...) All the class struggle types! All of them! Not one was missing! With Mme de X.! Because she had said "I'm president of the association! Because I'm

Mme de X.!" And so I say "how come these individuals have never been in the association? That they haven't paid their dues?" She shows me a list, she shows me forms, 37 forms, 37 signed forms, "Member of the association, signature." When we set up the association, we had put in the statutes that it was possible to join the association in several ways and at the time I hadn't paid much attention. That was when I was taking care of battered women, finding a place for women to stay, I was taking care of the files, I was sleeping there to fill in for the night supervisor. So this stuff had been signed, because there was another way to join the association and all the time I was doing all this, they had gone to look up the statutes, they had gotten together. But I say, "Who signed that?" She answers, "Look for yourself, that's my sister's signature." She would have signed anything, just between us. I'm not criticizing her work, but she was doing her sister a favor...

— *No doubt she didn't know what was at stake...*

Claudie No doubt she didn't know what was at stake either, due to her age, it was due to all that. Still and all, it was a huge shock for me. I think it's understandable. All the women in the shelter, that's all the women, every one of them, sat down to write a two-page letter, saying that they didn't understand, that they saw me working all the time, that I was a very good director, that they didn't understand why I was being questioned, etc. So there was a second directors' meeting and there wasn't a single woman from the shelter, nor anyone from Paris who had helped so much, etc., nobody, it had nothing to do with feminism, that was obvious. And so, another directors' meeting which required me to hire a woman immediately, a position that hadn't been filled. Because of the contract with DASS. If you don't discharge the requirements of the contract, no more money, and the shelter goes down the tubes. In your budget, it's clear, you have specific budget lines. Which you don't go

over, especially not the first year. They ask me to hire a woman. I still don't know how I'm going to pay her or how I'm going to pay her benefits. So either I hire her and I don't know how to run an organization, I don't fulfill my commitment to DASS, or I don't hire her, and then I'm at fault, I'm disobeying the directors' orders. Agreed. DASS had gotten wind of all this, and told me "look, things can't go on like this. You work very very well. We want you in that position. Because we trust you, you're a good manager." Then there were other things, I was called in, I didn't know all these quirky things, you're called in, and you have to appear, the official notice was slipped in between two pages of my notebook. I hadn't seen it, and at the last minute I see it. And there again, I'm at fault again: you didn't appear before the board of directors.

And bit by bit things heated up. I went to see a woman in Paris, a friend, a lawyer, I explain the situation, I tell her "there have been irregular votes, counted poorly, other people who stayed told me." She told me "Claudie, you're in a bullring. Either you leave the ring or you don't, but they want to move in for the death blow. The picadors are throwing the lances." So I was in the ring. They had the power, but it was especially that there are certain people, they are allowed to fight, they are allowed to work, but they shouldn't by any means be allowed to succeed. They're not made for success. That doesn't fit their image. I'm not Mme de X. I'm Claudie. You can send Claudie all over the place, you can send her where there are machine guns, knifings, she'll do a good job. But can you see Claudie as a director of the shelter that she set up? Moreover, I was enormously tired, and finally I said to myself, how can I put it, DASS had told me to be careful, that it always heard about these things, in short that the shelter might be shut down. So I'm a good manager, but if I can't get things in shape, the shelter might get shut down. And then Mme A. tells me, "the 50-bed shelter is out the window, nobody even

mentions it anymore, your association with all its crises, nobody talks about it anymore either. That's it." So I started thinking about the bull in the ring, and the death blow, I really felt that, and I said, I can't pay this girl, I'm not going to hire her. So I had to resign. Because of Mme de X.'s dumbass number, you have to call a spade a spade. I left, and the day I left, Claude was born, that is, there was a woman who came and who was pregnant, and I had favored Planned Parenthood over other associations, over other things, we had a bit of money and the Planned Parenthood people came over regularly to explain things and have discussions with the women. So this woman was pregnant, she asked for explanations, but she wasn't sure what she wanted to do. And people kept telling her to have an abortion, "when are you going to have your abortion?" Then she tells me she's had enough. So I don't think it's right, I'm all for women to be free to make their own decisions, but to tell them "have an abortion or don't have an abortion," that's simply persecution. So I said "that's enough! Not another word to her about it from anybody." In the end she decided to keep the child, and I'm the godmother and she named him Claude (...). So there are also some very very nice things, you can't just look at the bad parts. But the good things came either from the activists, throughout the group, or from the women in the shelter, a lot, a lot. But not as far as the staff goes. And I use the term staff intentionally, because it doesn't have anything to do with anything. And some of them were really really terrific.

[*She eventually found out that the counselor ended up being fired from the shelter.*]

— *The shelter is still going?*

Claudie It's still going because I set it up, it's still going. I'll show you some articles about it, it's doing well. And that's important. It celebrated its tenth anniversary last December. I felt bad for a few years afterwards. Completely off base. Because I'd put all of me in it...

— *All your energy...*

Claudie Every bit of it, I had given it everything. And it continues to run. It exists. And that is still and all positive. Perhaps I might have won if I'd filed suit. Well, I left, but the shelter exists. So what I can say, perhaps, it's that after a blow like that, usually ... Oh, there is something that I forgot to tell you. We were on good terms with the environmentalists. Because it's something of the same mentality, they asked us for articles, now and then there'd be phone calls, and I can say that I've stayed a feminist, I've kept a feminist perspective, that absolutely didn't change what is really deep inside, because deep inside me, you can see, it's there. But I've become distrustful. Distrustful of others, I am very careful. If there is something to be done, sure, I'm there. Two years ago I did the Paris to Geneva walk for kidnapped children. So when

there's something to be done, I do it. But meetings, groups, none of that interests me at all. I've had enough. And there are women who claim to be feminists who aren't at all because they're the ones who did me in, and did others in too. I heard that they did the same thing to a guy who had started a neighborhood association, they did that entryism tactic, etc., with their boyfriends. And I heard that the guy committed suicide. Suicide. Because it's total annihilation. Total annihilation of the individual. Total. And they did that, why? When you come right down to it, these women are making a social critique, but it is a lot easier to work toward the inside, by destroying, the way certain feminists do, than to work for real change, toward the outside.

1991

Rosine Christin

A Silent Witness

I arrived in Longwy [in eastern France, close to Luxembourg and Belgium] one Sunday evening in February, about 8 o'clock. It was snowing. The few remaining passengers got off the train: some cars were waiting, their headlights shining on the platform, and then in a few minutes, everything went dark around the train station, the stationmaster closed the doors and went back inside to warm up; the next morning the same train would leave in the opposite direction. On the big empty square, the brightly lit front of the city hall made it look like a movie set, at once testimony to and vestige of the once flourishing city. Behind the central square in the streets of Bas-Longwy [Lower Longwy], the night partly concealed the general state of abandonment, the stores long since closed, the notices of sales.

I had an appointment to meet Maryse, a 45-year-old supermarket checkout clerk. At a time when I was endeavoring to make contact with the wives of workers who had lived through the crisis of the steel industry in Lorraine, her nephew, a 20-year-old student, had told me about her, how she had recently lost her husband, and a bit about her life. It had been difficult to arrange a meeting. She worked during the day and, above all, she lived with her parents in a village a little distance away; perhaps too, she wasn't keen on having me there since her parents were old and sick. But one of her husband's brothers, a sales representative, offered to have us both one evening at his house, which was only about 10 kilometers from the city. Situated in a development that was well kept up, with its rooms lit, its light pine furniture and sense of order, the house seemed warm and inviting as we came in out of the dark night and the snow. Once the meal was over, my hosts sitting with Maryse around the cleared table gave an impression of solidity, of things having gone well, of being up to life. To me, Maryse seemed young, or perhaps defenseless, with her jeans and her slight figure making her look like a student, and an expression that might have been either apprehension or relief at talking to someone she did not know. We sat at the kitchen table while the others watched television in the next room: two women confiding in each other after a family meal – that's what the first discussion seemed to us both.

Maryse was born in 1947 in a village about 10 kilometers from Longwy. Her father "worked on the railroad" and her mother stayed at home. She was the second of four children, all married, none of whom "went very far in school." Today they all have "problems with unemployment." Maryse went to school until

the age of 16, then dropped out. Since she was a good student, the teachers in the local junior high school advised her to go on with her studies at the high school in Longwy. There she came into contact with girls from the city, children of managers and industrial technicians, and she "felt the difference," especially when she began to date and "to dress up the way girls want to (. . .)"; she didn't have any pin money, not even for a cup of coffee; "in everyday life, for a girl, that counts a lot." She did rather well, in spite of some trouble with math, but "she had had enough"; she wanted to quit in order to work and earn some money. She got a summer job at the post office, which she "liked quite a bit," and decided not to go back to school the following October; soon thereafter she "came up with a job as a salesgirl at Prisunic [five and dime store]."

After her first marriage and the birth of her son, at 20 she got a divorce in order to marry, in 1968, the man whose first name she will never use during either the taped conversations or our private conversations (I still do not know his name), almost as if sharing the name would take him away from her. "Her husband," as she always referred to him in confirmation of his faithfulness and his compassion, was a welder in the Ateliers de Longwy (SAF), a small company that operated fairly successfully filling orders from the large plants in the region. He started there as an apprentice, and then "with his real talent for that kind of work" little by little rose up to "the highest classification, Welder F3." He earned a good living, and the overtime on top of the base salary rounded out the monthly pay check quite nicely. There were also the short-term jobs he was sent on all over France that gave them the sense of a life with broader horizons. Maryse recalls one particular three-month period on a construction site in the mountains, where she and the two children went along with her husband.

When she talks about Longwy at that time, Maryse perks up. "It was a city of workers, but it was a real working-class mentality. Sure, you'd come across foremen who thought they were better than everyone else, but you met friends everywhere, you'd go to cafés. On the whole people were pretty well off, didn't stint too much." Today, she says, "what a comedown (. . .); "tramps who come from who knows where, you have no idea how they live, and then you have all the people who took early retirement, who are satisfied with everything, with their little life and their little house and their little car."

The big house that they bought in 1975, almost without putting anything down and with a bank loan that they hadn't even dared hope for, is part of this enchanted world: "a big barn of a place (. . .), eight rooms, with great nooks and crannies, but . . . everything, absolutely everything had to be fixed up. It was run down, but that's what I liked to do, make all these plans with my husband, we were going to do this, we were going to do that (. . .). We'd never have done it on his salary, but that doesn't make any difference." "No money, but we were happy . . . my husband would come back from work, it was 2.30 in the afternoon, and then off! We'd go in the garden, we'd talk things over with people from around here." Their problems began with this unrealistic purchase in economic conditions that were getting worse. At 700 francs a month their payments on the

house were the equivalent of a high rent, and “it got harder and harder to meet the payments.”

Despite the various attempts to rescue the steel industry after the workers' demonstrations at Pompey in 1978, it was already too late to realize their hopes of solidly anchoring their work and their life in the region. Beginning in 1975, plants were closed down at an increasingly rapid rate, and 1979 was a really bleak year. Soon after, the Chiers company plant, SAF, closed its doors, followed by the steelworks at Senell and Rehon. Working-class solidarity crumbled under the proposals for early retirement and redundancy payments. Maryse recalls, “My husband was a member of the CGT [union affiliated with the Communist Party], they explained all this to him, and he thought like that too, and when he talked about it to other people, even in my own family (...) people looked askance, because we seemed like revolutionaries or people who were never happy with what they had.”

On the advice of a former coworker, he was hired as a temporary worker by the SPIE, a public works company. They had to leave for the Gravelines construction site [on the English Channel, just west of Dunkerque] in a secondhand trailer bought with help from the family and from the proceeds of selling some of their furniture. It appears – their fate seemed so unjust to them and Maryse contradicts herself on this point – that for a long time they hoped to come back to Longwy, even after SPIE, his employer, took up where the temporary employment agency left off and started hiring workers directly. They held onto their big old house which no one was living in, and for five years they didn't even try to settle in on a more comfortable footing. At Gravelines, they set up the trailer on a city camping site like everybody else who had also come from all over France to work at this site, a population that moved about from one construction site to another according to the needs of SPIE or other companies.

Little by little they resigned themselves to the situation, more or less content to have “found something,” afraid of unemployment, and quite oblivious, both of them, to the lack of comfort and space since both of them had been used to it since childhood. The “big barn of a house” was a little like a dream that had to end, and their trailer, 30 feet long, was “good looking,” she had “everything she needed” and “the kitchen was pretty well set up.” But as time went on – they lived there for five years, a year and a half at Gravelines and more than three years at Saint-Valéry-en-Caux [in the north, near the coast] – they began to feel cramped in the trailer with everyone living on top of each other. The bedrooms were more like closets with sliding doors, “the kids were in one room that was how big? – the length of the bed (...) it was a bunk bed, they each had a bed and that was their room. So children that age couldn't listen to music, they couldn't do anything (...). We had another room that was like a little living room; so there, we had a bench, a little table and then another piece where we put the TV. TV was our life in the trailer.”

On the camping site at Gravelines, people didn't see much of each other, all of them too taken up by their work and by trying to make a life in conditions

that were especially difficult for families hurt by unemployment and by being uprooted all the time. Neighbors came over one evening for a drink, and they returned the visit. But this couple who might have turned into friends left soon afterwards for another construction site. Two years later, it was the turn of Maryse and her husband to move: SPIE sent them to Saint-Valéry-en-Caux, where they set up in a field rented from a peasant, right in the middle of the countryside. They had to have a car to go into town. Maryse only went out to do the shopping and take the children in to school: the older boy at seven in the morning to catch the bus going to a high school in Dieppe; the younger girl at 8.30 for the junior high school at Saint-Valéry; then she came back to the trailer. Waiting for her husband and kids made the days seem long; it didn't take long to clean up the place, and she spent the days reading books borrowed from the library, anything, she said, novels, detective stories.

Life in this cramped space forced everyone to exercise strong self-control all the time: even a slightly abrupt gesture or protest or an expression of simple impatience was felt with painful intensity. Deprived of friends and forced to be alone because the trailer was so far away from everything, her son stopped working at school and retreated into a hostile silence, as if to take on himself the suffering of the whole family. In the trailer, relations between her son and her husband were often strained: "(...) it was hell...hell because I was always afraid that one word off base and then... a big explosion; (...) he really shut himself off and we couldn't get anything out of him, he was 16, I'd talk, he wouldn't look at us, he wouldn't answer." For a long time Maryse attributed her son's problems to the circumstances of his birth (he was born from her first marriage and his father never even tried to see him). Now she recognizes that the boy could also have been upset by the fragility of family life, exacerbated by the discovery in 1981 that her husband had renal polykystosis, a hereditary illness that his father had died of a few years earlier.

Once she learned about her husband's illness, Maryse knew how it would end. After a long talk with the doctor, she also found out that he could probably not work for much longer. He would have to give up the job that was their only token of security, the work for which they had left their hometown, their family and their house. The fragile stability was crumbling. Once again they had to head for the unknown, with no hope of returning to Longwy where economic conditions and unemployment had gotten still worse. For them, it was the repetition of their tragic situation, the continuation of the wandering and "displacement." Moreover, "we didn't feel at home anywhere because we were always only strangers wherever we went, necessarily so, especially in the camping sites." In 1983 they put all their resources together, the capital gains from the sale of the Longwy house and Maryse's experience as a saleswoman to buy a newspaper-stationery store business in Asnières [outside Paris], which they found through an advertisement in a real estate journal. They took out several loans to pay the 380,000 francs for the business and stock.

From then on she knew that they were only on reprieve and she fell into fierce crises of despair, like the one that overwhelmed her when they were moving into the apartment at Asnières: a windowless room in the back of the store for a living room and three tiny rooms upstairs, that you reached via a winding staircase. The building was very old and in bad shape, and in certain respects less comfortable than the trailer. She had sent for what little furniture she had left at Longwy but they couldn't fit it in the apartment: "We couldn't even put in the armoire that matched the bed, so we had the armoire in one room and the bed in the other; it was crummy! Awful, awful, awful! So once, and I'll even tell you what I did once. We had a lovely velvet sofa . . . it was quite long, and the movers had brought it in through the upstairs window since it couldn't get through downstairs. And I really wanted to put it downstairs, and once I got so out of my mind with rage, because I couldn't get it downstairs and I didn't want to leave it upstairs, that I just took the hammer and smashed it to bits."

The first year wasn't too hard, there weren't yet any taxes to pay, but then, even though they turned a profit, the 10,000 franc bills every month were too much. And they were homesick: "I can't remember who brought it up first, but anyway that's when we dared to admit that we both wanted to come back here."

The year before her husband's death, Maryse was making plans for coming back. They had gone to C., in her hometown, where her parents still live, to pick out a house, the last one on the road going out of town, with a well in the back of the garden, and they planned to buy it after having sold the store. Their son was married and had a secure position as a construction specifications inspector in Asnières. Her daughter, still a student, was the only one who showed some reluctance. Maryse would have easily found a job as a saleswoman, and near her family, life wouldn't have been so hard, even the illness. Her husband died before this return, and she "sold the store off at a sacrifice" in order to come back to Longwy in January 1991.

The day after our first talk, I went to see her at work, at Fouillerie, a mid-size shopping center a few kilometers from town. To get there you have to go by car, taking the main highway from Metz to Brussels, going over a viaduct that overlooks industrial wastelands before getting to the commercial area, which has been transformed from an area that was once zoned for light industry: a few large blocks of concrete put up here and there, a cut-rate supermarket, two car sales agencies, storage for frozen foods. "Fouillerie – one of the world's great markets" shares one of these big concrete rectangles with a storage warehouse for kitchen appliances and a "shoe emporium." The store is spread out over 3,600 square feet, with piles of articles in a hodge-podge, plates, ashtrays, flower pots, food mills, religious cards, Egyptian films from a special collection, synthetic plush squirrels. No false advertising here, no decor, just straight merchandise. Maryse is standing behind her cash register, wearing two big pullovers, one on top of the other, because the place is freezing cold. There is a stool next to her, "but it's not very practical when you have to make change." Ten or so saleswomen are working, most of them putting labels on the merchandise and sorting through the big

bins that are always in a mess, or helping the customers looking for clothes. In the middle of the day during the week, there are not very many customers, mostly retired people who come to pass the time and children who check out prices on the games. Uninterrupted recordings alternate rock music from the 1950s and more recent popular hits.

In this world of frippery, under the harsh fluorescent lights, Maryse looks resigned, like someone who has also lost self-esteem. She complains, but without really daring to do so, about being deprived of her freedom by the somewhat stifling solicitousness of her family: "At noon, I have lunch here, there and everywhere, because I have to go to my mother-in-law's, or my sister-in-law's, or my brother's . . . (. . .). It's tiring. I don't like to go out to eat and then I have to eat, sometimes I'm not hungry, or they've made something just for me, I have to eat it, and I do; then other times I don't feel like seeing someone, I'd rather be by myself and eat without . . . well, I'd like to relax."

Today, a year after her husband's death, she feels dispossessed, a woman without a man, without any social identity, a stranger in her own town, without any place of her own to retreat to where she can make her own meals and have her daughter visit (she's currently a student in Nancy). She doesn't have anything of her own anymore, and she doesn't know any longer who she is. This feeling is only aggravated by the affectionate attention of her two families which robs her of the little liberty and autonomy that she might have, even though she wouldn't really make a bid for them. "My sister often comes to eat Sundays, they stay all afternoon, we're all there, around the table, waiting for Sunday to end. And then there's my husband's mother, whenever she can get a ride, she comes to the cemetery, and then afterwards goes by my parents' house, and there we are for a whole afternoon. When they leave, I have a giant headache (. . .), I've had it."

"That's not my life," she says again after having spent a few days with her son. "They were happy to have me and all . . . I like them a lot. (. . .) Then I see them living their life and I tell myself that it's all over for me . . ." Her daughter, who has also been diagnosed with renal polykystosis, and who up to now has stayed very close to her mother, has just met a young man, "she always hung onto me, and now, obviously . . ."

On good days she thinks about the little house in C. that she had picked out with her husband and ended up buying after having sold the store. She "doesn't live there because there's hardly more than the four walls," everything "has to be fixed up." She will only fix up the first floor, that will be enough; she'll need help from her brother to continue the work that has barely begun, but "Sundays, they relax, they come to have a stroll," and nobody thinks about fixing things up. Perhaps, too, they all like to feel the family pulling together around their parents as they get old and are not in too much of a hurry to see Maryse settle down in her own house, however close by, half a mile away. She herself still doesn't know what she'll do; after all she no longer has her family, she is "the only one who is all alone and the others all have their husband or their wife."

It took us several meetings to get beyond the rather cold narrative that came out in the first discussion,¹ a narrative that was worn around the edges for having been told so often since she returned and one it wasn't even clear that she believed it herself. Little by little, familiarity brought us closer over the course of these conversations: I would question her about herself and ask her to describe for me in as much detail as possible how she spent her time, the places she had lived, or what she had thought about certain events, and she was able to take back possession of the past 10 years.

Listening to Maryse, I was often struck by the analogy between this individual life and the collective destiny of an entire region. It always seemed to her that her life was over, and as a widow without any illusions and hemmed in by others, she made me think of the prosperous and nostalgic retirees that you see wandering around the industrial sites at Longwy and its outskirts, daydreaming about the days when they were the elite of the working class.

In talking about herself, Maryse showed me the life of the worker who had been her husband and, more generally, the reality of a world that is coming apart – all refracted through the prism of a woman's concerns. And I realized that you have to listen differently to people like Maryse, who can talk about a life saturated with collective history only through a personal language, "little things," women's things, which are invariably excluded from official history, even if it's written by women. Through the story of her life, her son's problems as an adolescent, the trailer, the continual anxiety about unemployment, the illness – memories often jumbled up in successive tellings – and more than other interviewees who might have more authority and greater "competence" but who would just mouth the official discourse on poverty, Maryse enabled me to understand the day-to-day life of the families of the workers in the steel industry and the special misfortune of women, simple walk-ons on the social scene, but on whom converge, in the last analysis, all the aftershocks of every economic crisis.

September 1992

¹ This discussion has not been transcribed here. Most of the information that Maryse gave me came in informal conversations, sometimes on the phone, often not taped. This led me to construct a chronological narrative around the significant phrases.

Pierre Bourdieu and Gabrielle Balazs

Such a Fragile Equilibrium

Antonio and Linda Demoura left Portugal more than 20 years ago to come to look for work in France. A good soccer player, he got a three-year contract in construction and departed, leaving his wife and three very young children behind until, a year later, he was able to bring them to a tiny apartment. "Without a blanket, or a sheet or anything to sleep on," they had to buy everything, bit by bit. With both of them working, he as a foreman in a mechanical repair shop, she in the janitorial service in the schools and domestic service for prominent people in the town, and by dint of a great deal of effort and deprivation, they had gotten enough together to build a small house in a quiet neighborhood in Saint-Marcelin, close to the small public housing projects. They felt as if they had succeeded "in living like everybody else."

They could even believe that, thanks to their dedication and their enthusiasm, they had made a place for themselves that was recognized by the leading families in the small town: he through his work as coach of the soccer team, which put him in close contact with prominent members of local society and in a position to render service to the community (in particular by spending both time and money at the soccer club and putting up visitors); she through her good will and her readiness to work at any time. "Even during the Christmas season, my employers called on me. And I went, I didn't dare say no." By virtue of flattering interchange and the kind of identification with the family that domestic service fosters, she came to feel a bit like family.

After having worked so hard ("14-hour days") and having applied themselves without a break, after having built their house and succeeded in getting their children on in school, they could measure the distance covered since Portugal – especially she who had been orphaned at the age of 10 and had quit school very early on to take care of her three sisters before going to work in a jewelry factory. They thought they "had the right to move up."

Suddenly the spell broke: in 1985, at the age of 46, she had a stroke, and in 1990 his toes were cut off by a lawn mower. Right then everything collapsed. Out of work, deserted by everybody, they lost the illusion of being "integrated" into (good) French society. The economic stability they had achieved through their combined efforts turned out to be extremely fragile. Once he was laid off, he had to take "a position as an unskilled manual laborer, at 24.06 francs an hour." At the same time, she discovered that she was not entitled to unemployment insurance and was not covered by social security. They couldn't pay the loans they had

taken out to buy their house and they have a big overdraft at the bank. Their older daughter, who was “doing a DEUG degree [a generalist university degree] in Paris,” left the university.

After working so hard to have their rights recognized, they feel “rejected everywhere.” They feel that they have been misled: their employers, public as well as private, should have told them about their true status (“They couldn’t tell her at the town hall, they couldn’t give her the right information?”) or at least advise them what to do. They recount their stupefaction at finding out all of a sudden that the upstanding individuals whom they had considered friends weren’t about to lift a finger to help them in their distress. And also their disappointment at seeing that the “French society” that they had so wanted to be a part of doesn’t even know that they exist, doesn’t even recognize them. (“I didn’t expect that, not at all. I expected that French society and especially the official agencies would still and all recognize an individual who has worked her whole life long.”) So just as they were thinking about applying for their naturalization papers and even though they were a textbook example of a successful “integration,” they felt themselves becoming “anti-French.”

They discover all those things that had been screened from their memory by their amazement at their relative yet very real success and their feeling of being fully accepted – they who had come from so far away. In short, they found out just how fragile stability can be for people who may have steady employment but who are able to maintain that stability only at the price of constant vigilance, and just how real the danger is of falling behind. The particular events that can cause them to fall back – loss of a job, death of someone close, divorce, illness – are extremely varied and seem to be entirely contingent on chance circumstances. But before drawing the conclusion that social factors yield no explanation at all, it should be noted that these chance events, besides the fact that they are more likely to occur in some life circumstances than others, are only the immediate causes that set off effects that are themselves also inscribed, as potentialities, in specific economic and social conditions. The particular trigger has such strong effects only because it is applied to people like M. and Mme Demoura, model immigrants whose conviction of having succeeded in integrating themselves in French society and the French economy has perhaps led them to overestimate somewhat the support they thought they had. Their distress and their bewilderment become all the greater since it is only when things go wrong that they discover that they do not enjoy the statutory guarantees or the network of family or friendly relationships that ensure for “real French people” (or so they believe) the ultimate safety net.

with a Portuguese couple

— interview by Gabrielle Balazs and Jean Barin

“I did everything to integrate myself into French life”

M. Demoura You know, it's very difficult to explain these things because there are so many things that are unfair... that...

— *That's right... how do you feel about these things?*

M. Demoura I thought so much of France, that's the first thing, five years ago I wouldn't listen to a word against France, because it was a country of solidarity, a country where everyone was sensitive to the poverty of other people; but for the last five years, it's really, really just the opposite, there are lots and lots of things to say.

— *And why for the last five years? What happened?*

M. Demoura Why? That's easy to answer. As long as you are earning a good living and belong to a given level, a level of society... say, in the middle, things are fine. As soon as you are part of... those who are really behind, you're regarded as nothing.

— *By whom?*

M. Demoura By everyone. By everybody, almost... When I say everybody, obviously, it's in relation to people like me...

Mme Demoura By the governmental agencies, especially the town hall, it turns out that there's no one on the line, no one for a man who spent his time...

M. Demoura Listen, I'm going to tell you not just about my own case. Since I've been in France, I've done everything to integrate myself into French life. Because, first of all, I was in a country which wasn't mine; second, I couldn't impose my language or my customs, so I had to be the one to integrate and do the reverse. OK, I was really well integrated, right away I was part of the town's sports team. We put together, the Portuguese here, we put together an association, a folklore group, we put together

the soccer club, we built, with help from the town hall, we built the club's building. I belong, having always been in this town, I was an instructor [soccer coach] for six or seven years, and until two years ago, I still belonged to the club. [*Very upset*] Fine, as long as I contributed, as long as I was able to give, the doors were wide open, and then once I stopped, that was it: the doors shut tight. And my friends weren't there any longer.

— *After your accident?*

M. Demoura That's the problem with soccer, the days when I could be there, and I made a good living, when I could give my support and give without asking for a penny in return, no problem, everything went as smooth as silk. Amateur players from Toulouse — when they came, they stayed in my home, I had a place in the association, and the day I couldn't offer this support anymore, I no longer had a place.

— *Right, dropped by the soccer association?*

M. Demoura Completely dropped. So much so that... 18 years of service to the club, I brought in a lot of support, I brought a lot of money, even though money... I gave money and trips, lost time, paid for repairs to the clubhouse at the end of every season without getting a penny in return from the club. I paid out of my own pocket because it was my group, and today I have to pay to get into the stadium. So you see how unfair things are — 19 years of service to the club, and never a thing for me, I always delivered; as coach I was the one who got the most championship titles, I was the one who put together the best team and now I'm just a nobody. Everybody received a medal given by the mayor's

office for services rendered. I never received a thing. Not a single thing.

— *So your service wasn't recognized?*

M. Demoura That's right because if my name were Dupont or Durand, I'd have my medal. But my name is Demoura.

— *You think that's the reason?*

M. Demoura Of course. I didn't use to think so . . . (. . .) but I really think so now. Now that I'm on the other side of the fence . . .

[. . .]

Because my name is Demoura

M. Demoura What happens in France is that there are two societies, there are the sheep and those are the real dummies; we're part of the sheep. That's the difference. And then there are lots of other things on the level of social services that don't work, because there's the guy who knows the law, they get to administrative problems, whether it's Social Security, or anything else where they have to wait in line, they have their rights. We have to fight all the way. The Portuguese still have to, for the Portuguese there's 10 percent bad eggs, as there is for any race (. . .) people you can't do anything with. But in the other group, you have rights, you have obligations, and if I take care of my obligations, I don't understand why I can't get my rights. Do you understand?

— *You're no longer accepted, isn't that it?*

M. Demoura I'm no longer accepted. To such an extent that I'll give you my accident as an example. I was on medical leave until November 27, I had to go through a Social Security check because my name is Demoura, the doctor-advisor there, he tells me "starting on the 19th, you no longer have the right," and I'm on official medical leave until November 27. And on the 19th, I have to go back to work. Let me explain . . .

Mme Demoura But I don't think . . .

M. Demoura [*very upset, cutting her off*] Wait a minute, wait a minute, let me talk. Social Security gave me orthopedic shoes; I had to go to work like that, with a slipper,

do you think that's right? Social Security prohibits anyone from coming into the plant without safe shoes so here I am with the orthopedic shoes they gave me and then Social Security sends me to work without taking that into account. I get to work, my boss says "I'm not taking him on without safe shoes." So we fixed things up with the doctor at work, who called Social Security, the guy who operated on me called Social Security, and they gave me until January 7th, but who says that I'll be able to work then? In my state? But since the doctor at work set it up . . .

Mme Demoura But that . . .

M. Demoura [*continuing without paying any attention to her*] I have to go, there's nothing I can do.

Mme Demoura [*Thinking that he's telling too much and trying to stop him*] Nobody has to know that!

M. Demoura Just look . . . Yes they do, they have to know because this thing, this thing (. . .) [*Turning to his wife*] Look what happened to you! [*Turning to us*] She didn't have the right, she didn't have the right, she was paralyzed, now she's not any more.

Mme Demoura A bit still, on my right side.

M. Demoura And do you know why Social Security didn't take her? Because, at the time, she hadn't gotten . . .

Mme Demoura I still have a lot of pain.

M. Demoura . . . any daily coverage, and yet for a year, you had to have a year, to be entitled to daily coverage; but who took away this daily coverage? Social Security, who else? They told us that no claim was ever made, I have the letter right here that proves that we made a claim, she was turned down because she didn't have a year.

Mme Demoura There was a journalist who came around a while ago and that's when I complained a bit about French society, but about the administration; I didn't complain about the people around me. If there is someone who looks straight through me . . . I think, fine, that person doesn't like me, and I let it drop; but when you get to a government office where they hear our accent and we try to put in a claim for

something, they don't give us the right information. And we suffer...

M. Demoura We don't get good information.

Mme Demoura We don't get good information. And you know that when you don't write French well, when you don't have... you don't get around easily. Personally, I'm pretty stubborn, when somebody bothers me...

M. Demoura There's French, I speak French.

Mme Demoura Yes, but I'll go a bit further, that's not all because you don't know everything and people don't tell us the truth, and that is really aggravating.

[M. and Mme Demoura talk about their problems with French: she can't write French, never having learned it at school, in contrast to her husband who complains about having "learned a bad accent at school."]

I was rejected everywhere

Mme Demoura So I think that we are rejected, I was rejected everywhere I turned. I was turned down by Social Security, where we had a number of talks with the director who took us a bit down the garden path paved with flowery words, he told us "listen, I..." – and I said "you listen, do you realize that I have worked in France for 20 years, I didn't do just eight hours a day; I was all over the place, wherever my employers wanted me, and I never turned them down, I earned money, that's true, but I never learned how to say no, and when I got sick..."

— *When did that happen?*

Mme Demoura Seven years ago.

M. Demoura In 1985.

Mme Demoura Right, I exaggerated a bit, it was in '85. There I was, thinking I was covered since I was employed by the city. I had worked in the janitorial service in the schools... for 13 years. And 13 years of working in the schools, I thought after all that I would be a bit covered; and you know that up to now, I got my salary when I was sick, that's to be expected,

but... (...) Anyhow, during my long illness, I was paid half-time and then I went for three years without getting a penny, without... I've worked all my life in France, for the past 20 years.

— *But that's the law concerning sickness in government service, after three years of a long illness, there isn't anything else.*

Mme Demoura Yes, but then I had been classified as a handicapped adult. I had a husband who was working, who was earning... he wasn't able to meet our expenses. I had payments, I got 113 francs a month for two years...

M. Demoura 107.

Mme Demoura 107 francs a month for two years, so you're not going to tell me that the mairie doesn't make provision, or the prefecture or Social Security, because if they have foreigners working in a town, they ought to at least make provision for unemployment! So why do they hire people who are here legally, who are Portuguese or Algerian or Spanish and they don't see that illness can happen, just the way it happened to me and to others, and don't say "listen, we really ought to make provision for unemployment for these people," I'd be overjoyed to get unemployment...

— *Right, but government administration makes no provision for unemployment compensation for its...*

M. Demoura What I don't understand is that, because of illness, she was laid off without being able...

Mme Demoura Without indemnification.

M. Demoura ... without indemnification to begin with, and without... Without seeing if she could do something else at the same time...

Mme Demoura That's right, no one ever proposed anything to me...

M. Demoura You're laid off just like that, without so much as a by-your-leave, without even knowing that she's been laid off!

Mme Demoura Yes, and you know, I hadn't yet finished my month.

— *That's the rule for people who work for the government. After a while you are laid off for disability.*

Mme Demoura Social Security didn't accept it.

M. Demoura It's being laid off for a long illness... Because if she had worked in a factory, she has the right.

Mme Demoura Right, I'd be on unemployment.

[...]

— *How many years did you do this, like this?*

Mme Demoura 20 years, ever since I got here, because when I got here, I didn't even have a blanket or a sheet or a bed to sleep on, and thanks to M. X., he's president of the soccer club, I got here... with my four children, and he had some things in his attic, a box mattress, a few blankets...

M. Demoura That's why I don't want to say bad things about France because they helped right away, these people, when I got here.

Mme Demoura When I got here, I began to work right away. Without knowing what things were, I pointed with my hand what a dishcloth was, to know how to say it the next day, what a broom was, because I began working all over the place for people... in a hotel, for Dr A., for the mayor, for Mme S., the directors of the factory, and since it was pretty hard, with four children and an empty house, even if Portugal was hard, I still had to struggle my way through. We were able to earn money. And right away, I began working, we started getting things that we needed. Beds first of all, because we weren't set up very comfortably; afterwards the furniture, and little by little I got the place set up, and you do what you can, and then we made a success of it, and we thought that we were going to stay in the same... Even working hard (...) [*pause, a sigh*]. We thought that the worst was over.

— *Right, You thought that all that had ended.*

Mme Demoura Now, the worst has come back. Because, when that happened to me, I had payments to make.

— *So there were payments to make on the house?*

M. Demoura There still are.

Mme Demoura And I still have some. For four years. For four or five years. But it's not a lot. Then when he had his accident, fortunately there was a small insurance policy, because otherwise we couldn't... make it.

It was terribly unfair to me... being as I've always worked for the French

Mme Demoura I am very happy to be in France and I like the French, but all the same it was terribly unfair to me. Terribly, especially for me! Being as I've always worked for the French.

— *Right, and with your job as someone who worked for...*

Mme Demoura Because I can tell you for sure that if they had to certify me today, "she was here whenever we needed her," I'd certainly get an award. From people... I had one very old woman, she had her mother who was sick, it was someone who belonged to the Rotary Club and things like that, well she'd say to me, "Linda, I need you because my mother doesn't want anyone else, so you'll come such and such a day or such and such an evening, and when we get back, I'll take you home." You know, I often heard the same old song, but I said, it's not the money, it's this person who likes me and then, I don't want to say no. How many times, over three years, with her invalid mother at home... and I'd go, I'd go at four in the morning. I don't regret anything, I rendered service even if they paid me, and she paid me after all, these hours could have been very expensive but I was always paid the regular rate. So, I didn't...

M. Demoura And sometimes not paid at all.

Mme Demoura That was somebody else, that's OK, but at the end of the day I wasn't expecting that, not at all... I expected that still and all French society, and particularly the government agencies, would recognize an individual who has worked her whole life long. I was... if I had known that I was going to be sick and what was going to happen to me, I would have tried to work

in a factory. I needed to work at the time, I would have looked for work in a factory. I wasn't going to work for a place where you didn't have security of employment. And besides, if they had wanted to be nice to me, they would have told me to start working again little by little, because you need 15 years, I think, to be able to get...

M. Demoura [*scandalized*] They couldn't tell her, they couldn't give her the right information at the town hall?

Mme Demoura They couldn't tell me? Of course they could. Of course they could.

— *That's right.*

M. Demoura There is still and all a social level involved here.

Mme Demoura There's negligence here on the part of...

M. Demoura Because they didn't give a damn!

Mme Demoura I'd been working for the town hall for 13 years, 13 years and a half, 13 years and a half.

[...]

M. Demoura In any case it is very complicated, for the French it's complicated, so for us, for foreigners... I never saw anything for her claims and her dossier, it's a ministerial dossier...

— *What they should have done... they didn't explain any of this to you.*

Mme Demoura That's what I reproach them for, and I have the idea in my head, I didn't want to use the term racist, but... I think still and all, there was someone who didn't want foreigners in the janitorial service. And that, in my head, even if I don't say it, I still think it. That's what I still think because one day I was talking to a town councilor, here, right at this table, and this person, I thought he was our friend, and he said right to our face, "anyway, if I had my way not one position, not one single position would be offered to a foreigner," but I say "listen..."

M. Demoura It's just like the other man who didn't want us to receive a family allowance [benefit for child support].

Mme Demoura That's right. So I jumped right in, "how's that again?"

M. Demoura He couldn't understand why foreigners received family allowances.

Mme Demoura When I was called in for that job, I didn't even file a request with the town hall. I went to work there because at the time I was running all over the place, and it was the year when it was very hot, in 1976...? Right, 1976... and the cleaning women were all out sick; they couldn't take the heat and then two of them had their gallbladders removed... and I had a telephone call, because I wanted to go out to work, through a woman that I knew who worked in the school janitorial service. I said "Sure, I'll start working a few hours to help you out..." and then the town hall kept me on. So I didn't even ask for the job, I didn't lack for work in those days. No, no, work fell into my lap all the time, I had too much to do. And then, afterwards, they kept me on. And then... there was a councilor who told me "No, I want this job for the French," and so, no... that's where I got this idea, and the guy, I could tell you who he is, but...

M. Demoura No, no, don't tell.

Mme Demoura And I say "how's that again?" For that matter, I even argued with him a little bit, I said "but we pay taxes like everybody else, they take the same deductions from our pay," and for that matter I had never been on welfare, up to now, and even now, I haven't been and I should be. That's it, because I can't make it anymore. But I'm talking about then, I told him "listen, I do the same work as everybody else, they offered me the job, and I thought, well, the children were growing up, they could manage without me doing cleaning all over the lot, this work was much more stable and all that."

M. Demoura That was a mistake, a big mistake.

Mme Demoura And so I accepted. He said "no, not at all, I'm telling you straight out, that kind of work shouldn't be given to foreigners, I want these jobs for the French." There were foreigners working for the town hall but they were naturalized French. (...) I made an application for

naturalization and then, after, I don't know what was missing and kept it from going forward... and then afterwards I let it drop and then I didn't think I would get sick and what's more I didn't know about these rights, because if I'd known, I would have gotten the naturalization application going (...) Mme de L., I thought she was a good person, well these days, I have some... I have my doubts (...) if she had said "Mme Demoura, come see me because I need to see you concerning your employment, you know that you have been on sick leave for two years, at the end of three years, we have to either offer you a small job on half-time, or..." Nobody lifted a finger! If I had known, I would have... after all, gone to see her to say "Mme de L., you are still going to talk in the council meeting or to the mayor to see if there is something I can get part-time," if I had known that things were going to happen like that, I would have said something.

M. Demoura She stayed, and she was laid off. And the town council knew that she was going to be laid off in two or three months.

Mme Demoura That right, last May.

M. Demoura So you see how things work. [*Raising his voice*] Why didn't they tell us? Why?

They have to make up their minds whether they want us to be integrated or if they want us to be liars and drug dealers

Mme Demoura That is, my husband, he began losing a great deal of his salary, since two months after his sickness, the factory pays his salary minus the bonuses, but after the third month, he was getting 4,000 francs and I was getting nothing at the time, 107 francs. So we weren't able to make it, I had a water bill for 1,100 and some francs. So I got really angry, I wrote a letter, which I took to the mayor, and I said "for the first time, I am asking for help, I can't meet my expenses because of my illness and the negligence of the town hall,

and second, my husband has just had a bad accident – which everybody knew about – and I can't pay... so I'm asking the welfare office to pay my bill, just this once." A month later, the collector sends me a warning. One Friday I call the mayor's office, and I ask to speak to the mayor, "No, he's not here," and I say, "Who is in charge of welfare?" "Oh, that's me, Mme A.," and I say, "Mme A., this is Mme Demoura speaking, I brought a letter in over a month and a half ago, it was a request for..." and she told me, "Oh, but it was turned down!" "What? Don't I even get a reply? What's with this town hall? It was no, and you knew it, and you didn't even give me an answer." And she said "well, come see M. X.," the man who does some sort of technical work, I don't really know what, I said "I don't have anything to do with M. X., I want to see the mayor." I went back to the mayor's office without saying anything to her, with my husband, I said to the mayor "Sir, we've come to see you," he said "Mme A. spoke to me about it, your bill is going to be paid." The mayor, I resent him a bit because my husband, he ran around for soccer, Sunday, every day: it was [*affectionate nickname*], that was it. And there, he didn't even pick up the phone when he had his accident; the city police were there, men who used to go to the soccer games with him, when they heard the siren and they found out that he was the one, they came here, they were friends, they came here. And there are other people on the city council, so they knew that on May 20th when I made this request, when he spoke about our case of nonpayment, and so the next day, it was a Saturday, then all the city councilors called us, to tell us "but it's terrible, we just found out that something awful happened to you a while ago, we didn't even know, and so if you need something, just let us know."

[*Discussion about the city council*]

Mme Demoura Even three years ago, I was still sick and the mayor called me, he said to me "Mme Demoura, I'm really sorry to bother you, but it's first communion

time," it was the month of May, and "we're in a real bind, the French who promised they'd take care of people...I have a bunch of people on my hands, I don't know where I can have them stay," and I said "Sir, what do you want me to do, I can feed two people as I usually do, for beds, I have beds for two single people," and he said "that's terrific, that's very nice." I didn't want to haul all this out, but I think that someday I'll tell him to his face, because, even today, when something is needed, they know that the people who always say yes are there. But to tell the town council what's going on and to do the minimum so that our life doesn't fall apart...Because you know, if my house hasn't been repossessed, I'll tell you why, it's because I am still tutoring children in Portuguese, they gave me money for that. Because our house...it wasn't paid for some time, and the credit on the car, that's over.

[...]

Mme Demoura It's not individuals I'm against, it's not the people I know who are racist, it's the French bureaucracy.

M. Demoura You know, there are times when I say to myself, why do we bother trying to integrate ourselves? They are right; what I should have done is to live here on welfare, make a pile and send it to Portugal. On welfare and making a bundle on the side? No. That's crazy! They have to make up their minds whether they want us to be integrated or if they want us to be liars and drug dealers, to skirt the law, no. We have the right, we have the right, we have rights and obligations. We've fulfilled our obligations, so they should give us our rights. That's what I can't take. (...) Because as long as I'm part of the family everything went along fine and dandy, everything was fine, but the minute you fall in the shit, nobody's around. Even for your rights.

December 1990

Pierre Bourdieu

Hanging by a Thread

She dates her misfortunes from the time she bought her house, “a really crazy thing to do”: 12 million old francs plus the legal fees that she had thought were included in the purchase price. She tries to justify herself, and she will continue to do so throughout our talk. She wasn’t happy in the big apartment complex where she was living and she wanted a garden. When she worked for an industrial cleaning service as a cleaning woman (one of the sectors where the right to work is least assured), she had petitioned to buy a house that would have cost less, but for various reasons her application was turned down.

She has been dogged by bad luck. A few months after this purchase, she was laid off “for economic reasons,” the indirect result of “restructurings in the steel industry,” and for a full year she remained dependent on her mother. During that period she went through “tons of training programs” and then found a job in Luxembourg. But without any means of transportation (the people who gave her a ride had been laid off), she had to give up the job.

She is about 35. The day of our talk she had just finished a “literacy” training period – one more sop, or more precisely, a reprieve – which had taken place in the vast Usinor offices that had been turned into an “information center.” She speaks with a contained anger, punctuating her words with short, abrupt nods followed by pauses. The direct and very personal tone doesn’t confide her secrets so much as it pleads her case. Everything about her, even the way she looks at you, shows her fervent desire to be listened to and, for once, to be heard, and at the same time shows her pleasure at having someone to talk to, someone to whom she can justify herself, or better yet, with whom she can feel justified and accepted. And the compassion prompted by this pressure is so intense that, bit by bit, it is she who takes over the interview, eliciting questions or suggestions that derive above all from a longing to encourage and console.

She goes through the whole litany of the payments she has to meet, the car, the house, the legal fees, the telephone, plus all the everyday expenses. Although she has pared these down to the bare minimum, even where her son is concerned, with the housing tax, the television tax, it all adds up to 3,000 francs a month. She gets very upset over the bank’s persecution: the employees call her at home or even call a friend, threatening to force her to sell her house, and are totally incapable of understanding that she would certainly pay if she could: “I’m honest, I want to pay, give me some money and I’ll pay you right away, but if I can’t do it,

I can't do it, and that's it, that's all I can do" (the exact same words were later repeated to me by an unemployed Algerian immigrant).

The hardest thing to bear in this situation is undoubtedly her family's rather scornful hostility and the solitude that results from it. Instead of helping her, with the exception of a friend, who is also unemployed, and her mother, a former worker whose husband left her to raise four girls all by herself, everyone around her criticizes her for the mess she's gotten herself into: her father-in-law, an unskilled worker who was himself forced out of his job, her mother-in-law, who refuses to let her use the telephone and sits on messages about prospective jobs, and especially her older sister, who is jealous of the help she gets from their mother – they all go out of their way to remind her of the fix she's in and to let her know that if she and her husband don't have jobs, it's because they're loafers and they don't lift a finger to find one. They have no conception of all the effort and the extraordinary sacrifices made by her and her husband to find jobs, or of the no less extraordinary obstacles encountered in that search.

Partly imposed on her, partly willed by a sort of desperate pride, this terrible isolation is also experienced as an absence of any recourse against the omnipresent fear of hitting rock bottom. When during the interview, overcome in the face of such profound distress and yielding to the desire to offer reassurance, one suggests, one after the other, various sources of support that she might be able to find in her family – her sisters or their husbands, relatives or her husband's brothers – each suggestion elicits new disasters. Her younger sister is nicer to her than her older sister, but she is handicapped and the young man she just married, an unskilled worker, is also unemployed. She can only fall back on herself, on her husband, whom she defends with great tenderness against her family's accusations, and her son, whom she helps as best she can with the difficulties in school that are clearly tied to serious psychological problems.

Locked in the vicious circle of poverty, she cannot afford either the motorbike or the car that would allow her to take up job offers at the end of the training period (anyway she has neither a driver's license nor any way to prepare for the driving test). Subjected like her husband to a hopeless cycle of promise and rejection, to the ruthlessness of unscrupulous employers who take advantage of the lack of jobs to offer totally inadequate salaries coupled with false promises of stable employment, she vainly seeks support from the various welfare agencies, which inundate her with insatiable demands for papers ("how do they get away with asking for all this stuff!") and force her to repeat ad infinitum all the procedures to get the RMI [subsistence income for reentry into work] on which she has pinned all her hopes.

Understandably, and almost in the same sentence, she oscillates between a repressed revolt against an inequity that has neither a name nor a face, and a despair that leads to giving up on everything. "This is no life. Sometimes I just want to give up, sometimes even, when there are problems with documents and papers, I'm so tired of it all that I just want to drop everything right where it is."

The feeling of never getting anything except ill will (“the company was mean to me and I was mad at everybody”) is undoubtedly not unrelated to a recurrent nightmare, a desperate story that begins with her father’s leaving and then his death and ends with her sister’s badgering, and seems to be repeated endlessly: “Then there was also . . . first, there’s my father, he died, well I’ve missed him a lot, and then, well, he just left us in a terrible situation and all that . . . all that, when I have problems, it all seems straight out of a novel.”

Time and again she says that she feels as if she is on the edge of an abyss, hanging by a thread to her mother’s survival because she depends on her completely: “When I saw my mother in that trouble, I said to myself, ‘that’s it, that’s it as far as I’m concerned, I’m going to end up in the street, I won’t have a house, no one will bother with me at all.’” How long should, how long can, she stay like this, suspended between life and social death, between her mother’s house, where she feels protected, and her own house which still doesn’t have any furniture or even electricity, always hoping for the social worker to make the move that will push her dossier along to get the welfare stipend or get a real job for her husband?

with a woman out of work

— *interview by Pierre Bourdieu*

“Everything’s going wrong”

— *You went for a long, long time without any money. . .*

Lydia D. That’s right. A year, a year and a bit, I had only 200 francs in the beginning to live on, that’s all. I had no money. Neither me nor my husband.

— *It was your mother who took you in?*

Lydia D. That’s right, she took us in, fed us and everything . . .

— *And then you didn’t do anything, no evenings out or. . .*

Lydia D. No, we stayed at home. That was it, it wasn’t easy.

— *Certainly not. And for clothes and things like that?*

Lydia D. For clothes, I had clothes that I’d already bought, before, when we had some money; I bought things for my son afterwards, when there were difficulties, my mother, sometimes she bought me things

for my kid. Otherwise I couldn’t buy anything, it’s not . . .

— *And all that, that just came out of the blue and hit you on the head. Basically, things were going well, you were happy, you had a kid, you had a house. . .*

Lydia D. When I bought the house, nothing went right.

— *You had big payments?*

Lydia D. I’ll say! I have car payments to finish up, I have . . . what do you call them . . . for the house, what’s that called? . . . the lawyer, I’ve got the telephone to pay because I had a telephone, so I have a 100,000 franc mortgage, I couldn’t pay them so everything piled up and then, and then I have, since unemployment payments kicked in late, I’ve got a million and some [old francs; 100,000 in current francs], I’ve paid off part of it because there was also the residence tax and the television tax, and

I made up the late payments from before, because, as far as that goes, I was regular as clockwork, I paid as I went along, and then there was also, I don't know what ... oh, right, a bank loan I still owe on, and then other things like that, I don't remember very clearly anymore, but I know there was a lot of money involved, and there are still and all pretty many debts ... pretty many...

— *That makes how much that you have to pay out every month?*

Lydia D. 3,000, 3,000 and a bit, every month, and it has to be...

— *And when will all this end?*

Lydia D. Some will end in a year, there are some two-year payments, there are three-year payments, there's a 60-month payment. It varies, they're not all the same. If I'd had any money, some of them would've been taken care of, like the telephone, 1,000 francs, it would've been taken care of but I can't do it, I just can't... because I took out a loan for overindebtedness, and ordinarily, for the loan for overindebtedness, they do it according to a scale of what you have, but they put me too high on the scale, and I told them so... and they say "that's it or we sell the house for you. You choose"; and I didn't know what to do, so I said "well, OK" - I didn't want to say anything because then he was working at Panifrance and ordinarily, there was this possibility (supposed possibility according to them but it's always the big guns who decide), this possibility of a real job; so he was on a one-month contract, it was only a one-month contract and then there was a possibility of a real job. So I didn't want to talk about it seeing that it was scarcely, he'd only been working for a week, so I said "well, we'll see, since they want to sell the house, tell them that you've gotten a job"; but it was just to get by, because we had all these people calling us about payments, "when are you going to pay?" they kept asking us as if we didn't want to pay! I said "Look, I'm honest, I want to pay, give me some money and I'll pay you right away, but if I can't do it, I can't do it, and that's it,

that's all I can do," this person kept harassing us and all that; she even called other people, they don't even know us and I don't know how they knew our name because we certainly didn't know them, and they said, "just say we called," and then, when my husband got back two minutes late, he had been at work, there at Panifrance, she called again, as if she knew that my husband had come back, right afterwards to harass us and it was always the dossier, it was never the same person at the bank who was in charge of our business, there was always someone in between and everything, and we'd find odd names, they never said what it was for, so we had these names, a telephone number and we have no idea where it all was coming from, stuff like that, stuff like that is intolerable. It was just plain mean!

— *That's right, it was a kind of persecution...*

And why aren't you working?

Lydia D. That's right. If I'd been able to screw things up for them, I'd have done it just because the bank was so mean to me, and I was mad at everybody, that's true, I didn't want them to... even with work, and all that when we talked about work, because my father-in-law, he'd talk about work, and he'd say "oh, you don't have a job, or anything"; and I'd say "don't tell me about work, because I've had it up to here," because that's all he talked about, whenever he saw us, that's all he'd talk about, I said "cut it out with all this stuff..."

— *Almost as if you were trying not to work.*

Lydia D. That's right. He thought I was a real loafer; and he's always, always thought his son was a loafer; we heard that all the time, "and why aren't you working?" And "you're not the only ones this has happened to," things like that. So I tell him "it's not our fault if we're not lucky." And then there are the bosses, who... in a company today, there are the bosses, they don't want to pay people, young people especially, they'd like us to work for nothing. Because he'd

worked for companies, they told him, they promised they'd pay him too, and in the end he got nothing, he stopped working, he had nothing, but he had been down in the Meuse [the neighboring *département*], that's not being a loafer, he even slept in the car! So to find carpentry work in the Meuse, he slept in the car, he even ate out of cans and all, otherwise he didn't have any work. He made, not much, 200, 300 francs, that's all, it's not enough. And I say "if it's working just to work, if you can't cover transportation and all that, it's not worth hanging on in a situation like that, it's just not, just not at all." Even in my family, for me to stay... sure, I eat at my mother's, but there are always problems, "you don't even pay for meals at Mom's," and this and that.

— *Who pokes their nose in?*

Lydia D. My sister's the one, she's jealous, things like that.

— *What does she do?*

Lydia D. She's a cashier at the swimming pool. But she's always, always jealous, "you're not even paying for meals at Mom's," and all that. And she has a house and everything, she has everything she needs, she doesn't even stay home, she comes around to pester my mother and everything; she takes care of a two-year-old kid, even though my mother is really tired out, she almost died last year, I almost lost her; when I was working in Luxembourg, I almost lost her, I had problems like that... I had to, I had to... go see her in the hospital, she had water on her lungs, so all those problems piled up, really in 1990, from then to right now, nothing but trouble.

— *That's right, it's a bad situation. And this sister, can't she help you find work?*

Lydia D. Well, she got us appointments and all, but each time the spot had already been taken and everybody... there is lots of unemployment. They pounce on things straight off. And it's just unbelievable, it's incredible. And then all you need is for someone to mention you're a bit late in your payments, and that counts too, that's

what you have to realize. Sometimes they say "no, it's right away," and you call and it's taken by the time you call. And then, I didn't have any way to telephone. My mother-in-law wouldn't let me call from her place, she wouldn't have it; I had a telephone once, now I don't have a phone, same thing when I was home at S., I had a hard time calling my mother, I had problems, I had a hard time calling, there was a booth that worked once in a blue moon; I couldn't call, so she didn't hear from me lots of times, and that's why...

— *You were living in the house that you had bought?*

Lydia D. Yes, yes.

— *So you can't improve anything?*

Lydia D. No. Not at all. There are things needing to be done, I hardly know what anymore, something's wrong with the door, a draft comes through, but still I have hot water, I have the basics. Because before I didn't have hot water, I had nothing, I wasn't paying much, 400 francs, but I had nothing. I didn't have the basics, or anything, it was cold in the winter, it wasn't insulated or anything, I lived on the fifth floor in an apartment complex, and then life in these big housing developments, I didn't like it much and I wanted a garden, and my husband, he grew things, and it helped a bit to grow some things in the garden, because otherwise we couldn't make it anymore, that's for sure.

— *And what's more all the people around you think that you...*

Lydia D. Right, problems like that, they criticize, they criticize a lot...

— *Even your family?*

Lydia D. That's why as far as friends goes, I don't have many. I keep them out. I'm all by myself, I hardly see anyone anymore. Maybe it's me, but I'm like that, I've become like that, sometimes I just can't take someone anymore, I'm better off like this, because everyone criticizes me and all, "how can you stick with a husband like that, who doesn't work," comments like that all the time, and I say, "if you don't believe me, all you have to do is come to my

place, see the letters I've gotten, it's just unbelievable, we'll keep your name for when something turns up," that's all I hear, things like that, promises, form letters too, because once (...), it was just stamped, there's a list of form letters saying there's nothing.

I'm backed into all four corners

— *And what's his specialty?*

Lydia D. Well, he's a unskilled worker, he doesn't have his CAP certificate either. He does a bit of everything, he's been a butcher, a house painter, he did masonry for a while. What else has he done? Salesman, he's done pretty many things like that, he's done what he can. Anything at all, he doesn't give a damn.

— *If you get along well, that's already...*

Lydia D. As far as that goes, he's nice, he's nice... he is really nice.

— *That's important.*

Lydia D. But the problem I had, I even lost my father in 1989, with the house too, I should've had it in 1989 and I really got taken with the house, I didn't get it until 1990. And for the house, ordinarily they'd have given me a million to fix the house up a bit. And, finally, ordinarily the loan for the house should include legal fees, they weren't included, so they took the million away from me — real sharpies they were — to pay the legal fees, so I had to add 2 million and more, so I had two different places for the loan payments.

— *Your house cost you how much?*

Lydia D. 12 million [120,000 new francs]. And I took it just as it was. I didn't fix anything up.

— *And the training period, how did you get in?*

Lydia D. The social worker had talked to me about it, it was supposed to take place and then she said "but it's not the usual thing, but it's all set for you, you've started?" and I say "no, not yet," she says "but that's unbelievable," she tells me, "I set it up for you to do a training period and everything," but it's also because the temporary employment agency called me, it

was a little bit that, because I was at the end of my eligibility period. So they called me and then I did the training period there. And there, that's what I did, because there, you work for a week in a company, and well, supposedly the boss was happy with my work and then there might be a possibility of a real job; and there I've got a problem because I don't have any way to get there, I don't have a license and anyway where would I get a car, my husband needs it, where can I work, I can't, if it's around here, fine, but buses, there aren't any buses from M. to V., not one. And me on a motorbike doesn't work, I can't stay up, I've tried but I can't stay up, and anyway a motorbike would have to be bought and I can't do it, on my salary it's just unbelievable. I'm backed into all four corners. I can't get out: I can't buy another car because I don't have the money, and I don't have the license yet either, so when you come down to it, everything's going wrong.

— *And here, don't they have ways to get your license? You say that you're backed into a corner on all sides, money problems, no car, no work...*

Lydia D. On all sides, that's right, everything gets mixed up together. There's no way out. It's really frustrating that there's no way out. There's no solution. There's no way out, I know... there are some solutions, I'd like to learn how to drive, but there'd still be the problem of how I'd get to work, I'd like to have my license...

— *If your husband gets a steady job, wouldn't that take care of things?*

Lydia D. Yes, but since it's at M.-St-M. and he's got really terrible hours, he can't, he starts at four in the morning, there isn't any bus for M.-St-M. at four in the morning, it's unbelievable, he has to have the car.

— *He does what, at four in the morning?*

Lydia D. He goes from four in the morning to one in the afternoon, then he has a shift from one in the afternoon to nine at night: shifts like that, that's it, it's just unbelievable.

— *He makes a good salary?*

Lydia D. We don't really know, he's just started, he's only been working for a week, we don't really know.

— *He wasn't told how much he was going to make?*

Lydia D. Ordinarily, it's the minimum wage, that's not much, 5,400 francs, it's not clear either how we can pay everything I have to pay and then all the back payments, I'll never make it, it's just unbelievable! I'll have to do without like this for I don't know how long, it's unbelievable, really unbelievable!

I had nightmares...

— *You probably don't sleep very well at night?*

Lydia D. I used to have nightmares before, nightmares, all that to...

— *Like what?*

Lydia D. Well, I'd dream about the problems I had, I saw myself, anyway, I saw myself living in the street, because when I saw my mother with all those health problems, I said to myself "that's it, that's it as far as I'm concerned, I'm going to end up in the street, I won't have any house, no one will bother with me at all."

— *And your husband's parents?*

Lydia D. Well, you can't count on them. They are mean, truly mean. Even with me. Even with him and... (...) His father drinks. And then he's mean, all day long he criticizes this one and that one, everyone. That everyone in the family is a bunch of loafers. Even his son, he calls him a loafer and here he is, he's found a job, and he called him... because at one point he was on unemployment, so I say "what goes around comes around, you should never make fun of anybody, that's what I say, because one fine day, you just might end up without a job," and that's what happened, he ended up unemployed and on early retirement, he ended up unemployed, he doesn't have enough points, so he's out of a job.

— *What was he then? Steelworker?*

Lydia D. He was sort of an unskilled worker, something like that.

— *In the steel industry?*

Lydia D. Right, in the steel industry, that's where he was (...). But my mother-in-law, she's just the same, she criticizes all the time too, it's not a nice family. I never go see them, almost never.

— *You were saying that you had nightmares, it was tied to your job?*

Lydia D. That's right, all that, problems like that, and then the family too, problems like that.

— *About your mother-in-law and all that?*

Lydia D. That's right, sisters-in-law too... My sisters-in-law are just the same, we don't see each other, there's only one of them I see and another one too, otherwise the others I don't see them either.

— *That's right, it was always tied to your work or to the criticisms you got, things like that?*

Lydia D. That's true. Then there was also... first, there's my father, he died, well I've missed him a lot, and then, well, he just left us in a terrible situation and all that... all that, when I have problems, it all seems straight out of a novel.

— *And you'd have these over and over?*

Lydia D. Everything passes right before my eyes, from when I was little, the problems I've had right up to now.

— *What do you mean? Do you remember everything?*

Lydia D. That's it, everything passes right before my eyes.

— *And when you say that the future is all black, what do you mean by that?*

Lydia D. It's... it's all the problems that I've lived through, from when I was little to right now. That's it, I don't see...

— *And you're afraid for the future?*

Lydia D. Uh... I don't see... I don't see things getting any better. I don't know. I don't believe in it anymore. I don't believe in anything anymore. No, I can't believe anymore, after all these promises that I was made, I just can't. It's just unbelievable. I can't. If something like that happened, I'd say "that's a miracle," I'd say "it's unbelievable." I wouldn't be able to get over it, I'd

keep on saying "it's unbelievable." I don't believe in anything at all anymore, not in betting, not in anything, I don't believe in anything at all.

— *No, it doesn't seem to me that's the way to go...*

Lydia D. No, no, and here's where I say... even betting, all that, because even my husband, sometimes, there are those sweepstakes where you write in, things like "You have won..." I'd tell him "don't write in, it's really dumb stuff, just dumb stuff," in my opinion, if we aren't going to work, we don't have anything, that's our solution. I don't believe in anything. I think that if we aren't going to work, I think there's no solution. We have to take care of ourselves... nobody else will, and that's the way it is.

Because it's a disaster

Lydia D. That's the way it is. It's not easy [*laughs a little*]. I know I'm not the only one with problems like this, sometimes that helps, I tell myself that others are worse off than me, and it's a good thing too, I think it's a good thing because, I think it's a good thing that I'm not the only one because that, that would be a real disaster, but what I say is "it's unbelievable that people are living like this today"; that there are still problems like this. People talk about progress moving forward, but it's not true. I think it's moving backward not forward. It's unbelievable, there have to be solutions, they have to do something. It's unbelievable, it's no good making promises and then doing nothing. That's easy enough, I can make promises too. Promises, or else being in a office and saying "I've taken care of your papers," and then just sit on it — I've seen that — they sit on it and then they say "we'll take care of these but not those," just tell me about it; I could be a paper pusher like that too. And I could do it, be a paper pusher like that, I'd do it right away because for all the papers, it's a real mess, it's just unbelievable to have such a mess. I already handed in my papers, and they go and lose the papers, would you believe it? Even since they put in computers,

the dumb things they do, it's just unbelievable. I had a particular number that had me down as being born abroad. I wasn't born abroad, I was born in France. I had a treatment for my eyes from a woman, and I was down for having had an eye operation, I don't know how many offices I had to go to, 50 even! "Well, I'm not the one in charge of this," and they send me back in another line, and the next time it's "no, this is not the person, that's the right one." I mean, is this a life? There are times when I just want to give up, sometimes even, sometimes even, when there are problems with documents and papers, I'm so tired of it all that I just want to dump everything right on the spot.

— *I don't know, if I could make a miracle I certainly would.*

Lydia D. That's it, there's no obvious way. It's hard. There's no obvious way. And there are times when you wonder how come the world is made like this, because it used to be, the world didn't use to be so mean and even, when sometimes you go someplace just to ask for information, people send you packing, things like that, sometimes. It's like my husband, once he had an appointment on the 20th, for the RMI [subsistence income for reentry into work], you've got it; and he said "oh, I don't know if I can come?" And you know what they answered? "Oh, so you don't need the RMI anymore?" That's what they told him, and he said "of course I do, but what if I can't get there?" Can you believe it? So he has appointments all the time, with the mairie [town hall], but nothing happens. Nothing happens.

— *He still doesn't have it?*

Lydia D. No, he still doesn't have it.

— *He put in a claim for it?*

Lydia D. We filled in all the papers and everything, but we still don't have a thing. We're still right where we began. (...) Because she had said that if things didn't turn out right, she would get on the case, because she said, it's just unbelievable, she said "a dossier like this," she said, "it goes through right away," that's what she said.

She said "it's just unbelievable." At one point I even wondered if someone like that wasn't messing around with my life, because I said, it's just unbelievable to have things like this!

— *To have so much bad luck?*

Lydia D. I even wondered if someone was working against me.

— *If someone was throwing a spell over you?*

Lydia D. That's right, that's what I wondered.

— *It came to that, did it?*

Lydia D. Well, yes, because it's a disaster, I don't know if there are other people like me, just now I don't know any; I know there are people with problems but not as much as me, even where the training period is concerned.

— *Even there? Yet these are all people who have serious problems.*

Lydia D. They have problems, but not the same problems as me; I know their problems, but not as much as that; they don't have... some of them have problems but they don't have debts like me, things like that, right there, problems with paperwork; they have their RMI and I don't. I'm the only one where it's still "in process"; I even put it down, because, when we had to sign up for the training session, I put down that she should note "in process," because I didn't know... That's it, I wonder sometimes, I wondered if someone wasn't working against me with all this paperwork in process, or if someone who knows me, who can't stand me...

— *And who's sabotaging you?*

Lydia D. Right, who's sabotaging me with all this paperwork and all, it's just unbelievable! It's just unbelievable! They asked me for papers that I had already sent in, three times they asked me for them.

— *Unfortunately, Social Security is often like that...*

Lydia D. No, no, it's a question of the RMI. You don't have any idea of what they've told me over the phone, I said "I'd like to know where my RMI dossier stands, and all that, because I still don't have a

thing." Because they had told me "after ten days, you will receive payment" and all that. Still not a thing, it's been a month now. I said "you're asking me for the 1990 paper for my husband, his assets, I sent it to you, I'm telling you, it's just unbelievable!" That's what I said. Afterwards she comes back with "but there's something else." I said "no, on the paper it's marked 1990, my husband's assets." And now she asks me for the paper that showed I'd been sick. I said "but then you have to say so, you put down one thing on one piece of paper, not on both of them! It's a good thing that I called, now you're asking me for something else." And I said "you shouldn't assume people are morons!" So she started yelling over the phone, "we don't assume people are morons, it's not my fault if the local authority screws everything up," that's what she tells me. She answers me like that! Can you believe it?

[...]

Dossier pending

Lydia D. Each one throws stones at the other guy...

— *That's right, between the mairie and ...*

Lydia D. That's it, and it's a chain that never ends.

— *...and the RMI. And all that, and nobody ever interviewed you for the RMI, there wasn't any inquiry...*

Lydia D. No, all I had, there was a meeting with my husband, an appointment. The guy said to him "don't you have it?" and he said, "no." He said "oh, then I'll write a letter and then I'll lean on it to get things going, where things stand and all that, and that it's not standard procedure; I'm going to mark it as a fairly important letter." We're still waiting for a response, and he said that it would be two weeks, or I don't know exactly, "you'll have your response." And there it's well over, the time is up. I simply don't understand, whether she forgot to write the letter or she just doesn't do her work, it's just unbelievable, this business at the mairie. Something's going on there.

— *You're the one who fills out all the papers, everything with your husband?*

Lydia D. My husband and I. But I know how to fill out the papers and all that, that's already something. Even a bit better than my husband, so I filled out everything, I sent everything in; I even do it fairly fast, as soon as I get something, I send it right back. Pending, each time they send a paper back to me marked "dossier pending," that's how it's marked each time, it's unbelievable!

— *Maybe it'll be taken care of.*

Lydia D. I don't know, I just don't know. Because not long ago, there was an interview with a social worker from C., from the mairie. And she says to him "I'm sending the letter right here." Now I'm waiting, and the time limit has expired, they sent it for the month of February, it was January. The middle of January, about then. And still nothing. It's unbelievable. After all, you only need three days to get a letter, or a week, I don't know how long... it's unbelievable! There's a problem. I don't know who makes problems like this, I don't know, I can't say. (All they have are problems like this?) Afterwards they ask for a paper that shows that I'm not getting any more family allowance for my boy, that's the last paper I sent them; and I'm still waiting, still nothing. And they ask me for really impossible papers. When I was out sick, how I was paid, assets for '89, assets for '90 and proof that I don't receive any family allowance money for my boy, a bunch of papers, things that make me wonder if they're all right in the head, asking for things like this. It's unbelievable, all this. What's all this for, all these papers?

— *Perhaps things will fall into place all of a sudden, it's certainly possible.*

Lydia D. They even made me open an account for the RMI when she filled out my paper, and I still don't have it. Since October 5th 1990! I still don't have a thing, and I opened an account just for that. Can you believe it? ... It's unbelievable. I even had to pay; she had said "you won't have to pay," I even paid 50 francs, my mother lent me the money. It's unbeliev-

able! There's something wrong! I don't know what they're doing. Even here my electricity was cut off because there was an electricity bill for 10,000 francs, they cut it off, not the heat because they couldn't, because it was indoors and it was closed, but they cut off the electricity. We're in the dark sometimes, because weekends I go back home. To take care of things and all, because I have a dog too. I have a dog of my own. To take care of.

— *And he stays there?*

Lydia D. I can't bring him home, at my mother's, because it's a small apartment, and F3; and my mother-in-law won't take care of him, she had one once, but my father-in-law is always looking for trouble, the dog barks and all that, even though their place is way away, nobody's bothered. So there, because he's pretty big for a dog. It disturbs them. But I'm keeping my dog. I like animals. I love animals.

— *Right, especially you get attached to them. And your husband does some gardening?*

Lydia D. The garden, some gardening, all that.

— *He goes there for that?*

Lydia D. Right, for the garden and all that; he does some canning and all that. He does the canning... He takes care of all that.

— *That helps you get along; that is still and all an asset.*

Lydia D. Well, yes, but it's not easy...

— *No, it's hard, really hard.*

Lydia D. I'll say it's hard (...), I wonder "why me and not everybody else?" and in the beginning I couldn't take it. I'd cry, and my mother would say "cut it out!" Then she'd see me cry, she said to me "what's going on with you, nothing ever goes right." She yelled at me too. And I'd tell her "look, you've got problems and I don't yell at you, so leave me alone, period." That's what I said. Because I know that my mother, she had the same kinds of problems and she can't stand to see me cry. She had money problems. And I said "when you have problems, can you help crying?" She said no, she used to cry, too. And I said "it's

the same for me, don't get upset with me because I cry. I can't help it."

— *There's good reason to cry, that's for sure.*

Lydia D. It's like my brother-in-law, he wanted me to go to Marseille and I didn't

want to; to find work. I said "I don't want to, I've got my house, I haven't finished paying for it, and I've got debts and I don't have the right to leave just like that. It's unbelievable." That's what I said. And, anyway, work where?

February 1992

A Life Lost

Pierre L., age 59, and Henri F. are two very active farmers in a region that has been hit hard by the number of inhabitants who have either left for the city or remained single.¹ In contrast to most of the men in their generation, these two can certainly be counted as successful.

Henri F. inherited a small piece of land (18 hectares [45 acres]) on very steep hills well outside of town – terrain that makes farming both difficult and costly. At the cost of a great deal of work (“in 29 years we didn’t leave the place for more than two days in a row”), he increased the farmable land by over a dozen hectares. To clear and plant the forest land, he had to acquire heavy machinery, which he estimates would farm 100 hectares on a flat surface. At the time of the interview, he had just learned that his son, age 27 and recently married to a city girl, had given in to pressure from his wife and had decided to leave the family home and live with his wife’s grandmother. The disappointment is all the greater in that he was completely unprepared for this sudden about-face: when his son came back to the farm after studying in an agricultural high school, he had seemed fully determined to take up his father’s work. Very dynamic, Henri F. participates actively in the defense of agricultural interests, which is why Pierre L. asked him to take part in the discussion.

Pierre L. has one of the largest farms in the neighborhood: its vast open sheds for drying tobacco and keeping hay were built almost entirely by himself, and he has enormous ultramodern barns for his herd of about a hundred milk cows, fitted with all the necessary dairy equipment, for milking and for treating and keeping the milk. A very active member of the JAC [Jeunesse Agricole Chrétienne, Christian Young Farmers Group] when he was young, he took part in the great boom of the 1950s, got married (at a time when most of his friends were still single) and had a son. His son is now about 30, still single, and came back after two years in an agricultural school to work the farm with him. Respected in the whole village, and especially in the small market town where he personally delivers the milk every morning, Pierre L. was a very active municipal councilor for a long time. His wife died a few years ago after a long illness and he had to have a serious operation for an arthritic hip, which has left him with a pronounced limp.

¹ Their farms are in the Béarn, in the southwest of France. [Tr.]

Father and son thus live alone, working – without any outside help but thanks to heavy machinery – a large expanse of land, most of it held on lease. When one surprises them in the midst of their work, along with an unexpected visitor (like the Chinese economist whom I was to tell about European agriculture), they are busy in their blue overalls in a world of mud and dung with all sorts of things piled up all over the place (worn tools and farm implements no longer in use are strewn about) amidst a nauseous and pervasive stench of silage.

Endowed at the start with a tiny amount of inherited property, Henri F. and Pierre L. have been able to enlarge the land they farm through great investments of money, “thanks” to loans, and especially of time. They have amassed fairly considerable assets in land, and especially in buildings, implements, and livestock. But, in this case more than ever, their inheritance acted like a stroke of fate: as they point out and not without bitterness, whereas those who received bigger legacies left for the city and others who were less enterprising just went on as before, gradually letting a “house” run down so that it would die out with them or else selling off land to keep up their farm and their home without taking out a loan, the two of them “stayed on the land,” as the saying goes, no doubt to keep faith with their parents. Drawn into a chain at first by this inheritance, then by the economic and psychological investment poured into it, they were caught up in a sort of vicious circle where each innovation called for another one. Almost against their better judgment, they heeded the prompting and the various recommendations of agricultural advisors, agricultural councils, credit unions, milk cooperatives, etc.

Today, they inhabit a world of contradictions. They are capitalists, but they cannot realize their capital (or could do so only at the price of an immense psychological as well as economic “exit cost”). They have minimal liquid assets, and their revenue is closer to the salary of an unskilled worker than that of a skilled one (which, even if they might think of forgetting it, all the relatives who come back home for vacation are sure to remind them of). Salaried workers in disguise, employed by a dairy company that can hire and fire them, that sends out “memoranda” with its orders just like any central administrative office, and runs regular quality checks on their equipment and their products, etc., these men can keep up the illusion, which is sustained by the group, of being masters in their own house, and they can continue to cultivate the ancestral myth of the farmer’s freedom. As I realized quite suddenly when I was questioning them on behalf of the Chinese economist I was showing around, they are rather like workers on a collective farm who had financed their own collective farm. In just as harsh and unpredictable a manner as their fate was once – and still is, despite governmental protections and guarantees (more apparent than real) – dependent on the weather and natural disasters, their revenues, and even their decisions on what to plant or purchase hang on the political decisions of the government or, at still greater remove, the Common Market.

Scattered about in their out-of-the-way farms and traditionally attached to the freedoms of independent workers, farmers are henceforth tied down by the

invisible threads of governmental dependence, by its omnipresent regulations and the subsidies that are as essential as they are uncertain. And it is also understandable how these men, raised to abhor disorder and sloppiness (which they identify with the city life against which, once they decided not to leave the land, they built their whole life) and almost in spite of themselves, could be led to participate in demonstrations against the prefecture; how the random violence brought on by the many *double binds* to which they are subjected sometimes reaches an extreme in a sort of suicidal sacrifice (killing livestock); or even how, once the tape recorder is turned off, the *politically unutterable* conflicts that they carry with them produce a deep sigh of sympathy for the leader of the Front National, then just beginning his rise in national politics [Jean-Marie Le Pen, politician of the far right]. All this after long, circumspect stories, so confused and mixed up as to be almost incomprehensible, about the injustice of justice, about the cost of a hospital room and the cost of keeping criminals in prison, about “lavish” unemployment payments, about immigration and urban lawlessness (of which they have no direct experience), about the complicity of politicians on opposite sides of the fence (a few years later in this rural *commune* of about a thousand inhabitants the Front National got 72 votes).

Thus the *double bind* inscribed in the very structure of their economic and familial enterprise is at the heart of a system of dispositions that is itself contradictory and divided against itself, and through it, of all this talk where the – truly tragic – contradiction shows up, but in a veiled manner: no doubt because complete exposure would be fatal to the person concerned, the unveiling is always partial, or expressed in a turning away and in a displacement toward substitutes, like the vaguely racist statements that are as liable to take in the speaker as the listener. We are never so close to a total revelation of an internal break, of a split in the habitus, as when these inheritors taken over by the inheritance are forced to consider the problem of its transmission, with the inheritor who doesn't want to inherit (or who, because he is single, is not in a position to transmit the inheritance), and to face the impossibility of continuing an enterprise that, *when all is said and done*, should probably never have existed in the first place. To discover, like Henri F., that his son, who is *the end* of this enterprise that has taken his whole life, the goal implied in a life's work laboriously brought to term, and at the same time the *condition sine qua non* of keeping it going, to discover that this son might renounce his inheritance, is to see the very *meaning* of a whole life fall apart all at once, a life which in retrospect is the consequence of an absurd initial choice. The departure of the inheritor signs the death warrant of the agricultural enterprise – whose most remarkable characteristics have been shown to depend on the fact that the biological reproduction of the household unit, and therefore of its workforce, conditions the reproduction of the enterprise itself. At the same time it dooms the expectations of the whole of a life, along with the person whose expectations they were and who cannot not feel (without necessarily being able to admit it) that he could not wish such a ruinous project on his own son, that other self designated by society on whom *all his investments* converge.

The son who refuses to let himself be inherited by the paternal inheritance “murders the father” just as surely and more terribly than he would by taking his place, that is, by “bringing him back to life,” as the Kabyle say, killing him but to bring him back to life, to go beyond him in conserving him, by a sort of socially organized and approved *Aufhebung*. He cancels not only the father’s acceptance and his submission to the tradition of the inheritance, but, when it is a question of an inheritance that is almost entirely the product of the transmitter, he also and especially cancels the work of the father, the work of a lifetime. He places his father in a dilemma so intolerable that he can only refer to it by pauses, circumlocutions, extenuations, dissimulations, and contradictions, in a discourse aimed as much at covering up as uncovering: either push his son into the tragic cycle in which he himself was caught (“I worked wholeheartedly for years, always telling myself ‘I’ve got assets, he’ll want them’”); or else save him from this deadly fate by urging him to leave the land (“I gave him the choice. I told him, ‘Watch out, this is a very small farm, you can do seasonal work for the coop’”). A choice that all the small landowners have to face one day or another, very directly, when their sons, in a sort of more or less conscious blackmail, threaten to leave if they don’t get one or another costly improvement (as in “it’s the automatic milking machine or nothing”) which seems to them required by the way they think of the future of the enterprise (and which pushes them into the cycle in their turn).

Often only the historically cultivated illusion of the irreducible singularity of the individual keeps us from *reading the symptoms*, plainly visible, of supposedly individual experience which can obviously be lived as such without ceasing to be the product of an inscription in the social order of particular kinds of social experiences predisposed to manifest themselves in generic terms. It is therefore not by chance that the banality of the most ritualized talk often takes over in the most serious occasions of daily life as the only way of saying the unsayable: the most impersonal is so appropriate to express the most personal only because the most personal is often, as it is here, the most impersonal. To say, as people in the situation of my two interviewees often do, that “the land is finished” is, for people whose whole existence is identified with an agricultural enterprise sentenced to death, undoubtedly the only conceivable way they can speak about their own death, and without being ridiculous, voice the incongruous and self-destructive line of the comic actor, “I’m dead.”

with two farmers from the Béarn

— interview by Pierre Bourdieu

“It’s a chain, and we’re caught up in it”

[The poor condition of the tape made it very difficult, sometimes even impossible to transcribe the interview.]

Pierre L. Farming is going to become more and more difficult. Because there are problems of cultivation in the first place and then there are often family problems. That’s the case with me for example. There’s the health question too. With me slowing down (...) in principle my son is on his own... at least for the big jobs. And one farmer on a farm, one man by himself can’t do it... (...)

Ten years from now... seven out of ten men will be single (...), a lot of farms will be ready to be freed up. But the question is, how are they going to be freed up?

Henri F. There are going to be farmers’ sons who will stay on, and they are going to have an overabundance of property to choose from; they won’t be able to take care of everything.

Pierre L. But can they get hold of them?

Henri F. But if they get hold of them...

Pierre L. Because you’ll see... look at our neighbor, he sells livestock and leases out his land. I talked things over with him, I knew him (...) I had an idea how much he was asking. He told me “I admit it, it’s not you farmers who are going to be able to pay... Those of us who sell livestock, we put out a few animals, they’ll fatten up there, but you can’t...” (...) It’s necessary to “have guarantees for farmers who lease their land”.

A disappointment, a very big disappointment

Henri F. Now, the young men, they marry girls who aren’t... who have another job, for example. As for me, because I’m the district’s agricultural delegate, that’s my

battle with the young men around here (...) I say to them “everything’s fine as long as they’ve got the old man to help out. But the day they find themselves – and it’s likely to be the young guy whose wife will be off somewhere else – when they find themselves all alone at noon staring at a plate”; if he’s got a couple of kids to take care of, and all by himself to work. Then and there, it won’t do him any good to have a lot of land... because he won’t be able to take care of it anymore...

[...]

Take me, I’ve just married off my son (...) he doesn’t live with us. He went off to her grandmother’s. For me, it was a disappointment, a very big disappointment. Because I had spent the year fixing up the place a bit. It was at the last minute, he said no, “my wife decided that we can’t start out living with our parents. But she’s not going to live alone, she’s going to live with her grandmother...” There, I was really disappointed. As soon as you get married to someone who is not in farming, all those government employees or office workers these days (...) these people have too much free time compared to the farmer. Right away the young farmer gives up, whether he wants to or not. They have to have the weekend, an hour free in the evening, and too bad if the alarm clock doesn’t go off early enough... It’s becoming serious. If we were able to make a go of it, our generation, it’s because we didn’t watch the clock.

[...]

Pierre L. Where are you going to look for a girl who’s in farming? Anyhow, they had to, these girls, depending on what they can do, to go on in school, to get a job... Which means that they’re no longer on the farm, at

best you'll find a few women who've inherited their farm, that's it...

[...]

Henri F. These days I think more about the future than about the present, when the son is going to find himself without any help from his parents (...) the day he finds himself all alone, that's when he... (...) when he simply quits, he follows his wife who has a job (...).

Pierre L. And what's he going to do? Whatever comes? Even driving a truck... or anything else. It's very easy for a farmer's son to find a job. (...)

— *Going off to drive a truck when you've got a wife at home... just between us...*

Henri F. But it's the month that changes everything...

Pierre L. You've got a month's pay guaranteed and what's more there's all this free time... If his wife pushes...

Henri F. It's the free time. Up till now you never heard about it, but more and more there's a sense that it's going to be useful, the Ministry of Free Time, because there are people (...) who have lots of free time. That's what's going to push young farmers to quit...

[...]

[*For Pierre L., it's plain: there was often conflict between generations.*]

Henri F. What I disapprove of... I don't know... it's personal, which means what happens at home. Young people have become very hard, they don't give a damn that you've lost your whole life, they want everything right away. For instance, I remember two years ago, I wanted to buy a mowing machine to at least make mowing easier. But no, it was the automatic milking machine or nothing, which already cost a million and a half more [15,000 new francs]... They are very determined, and afterwards they don't go along. Certain times he'd say to me "all we have to do, all we have to do..." All we have to do is do what he wants to do, and I'm fed up. When you've spent more than... Perhaps my case is a bit unusual. I own 22 hectares,

in 1953 five of them could be cultivated. In 30 years I've turned 18 of them into cultivatable land. But I really had to hit hard... And we didn't have bulldozers then either.

Pierre L. Especially because it's hard land.

Henri F. It would be good for skiing, if we had any snow. This so-called low-grade land...

Pierre L. And water everywhere...

Henri F. Which had to be drained... even in the hills... There are three of us working this plot, if we all really earned the minimum wage, we'd make some money (...). I should have planted trees instead of clearing off the trees. I'd have made more that way: because as long as there were trees, you didn't see the water underneath. After seven or eight years, it's all cleared, and there's the water.

[...]

Once you've invested all this effort, you keep on. You're caught in a chain. Little by little you're drawn into the machinery, then it takes your whole body, and you let yourself go with it.

[...]

You have to be right in the middle to see, to see it, to realize... To keep the small hillside plots in good shape, you need a lot of work, work by hand (...). More and more, the young man is by himself... In our generation we spent our time making this land workable and buying equipment, and then to see the young men now who... Except that I'm afraid of one thing, that they just give up and quit. Because you can feel that they're quieter... And that gets you worried, because I'm... the last few months I've been worried... because in the first place I wasn't expecting him to leave and I think that he's started to leave (...) working up to leave for good (...). He's getting older [*he's 27*], he'll need to settle down within six or seven years so he can take advantage of the subsidies to young farmers, and I'm still too young to retire. We don't have enough land for a GAEC [Groupement Agricole d'Exploitation en Commun], to group our property. We'd

need twice as much...you need about 26 hectares.

[...]

What is unfortunate is that we're in a low-grade zone, we know that, but they should have at least made us a piedmont zone. Because for instance when you look at the Assap flatlands (10 kilometers as flat as can be, farms of about 60 hectares, as flat as that, 70 or 80 head of livestock on each one of them, they're making a bundle), and they've got the nerve to call it a mountainous zone. They should have done it one by one, farm by farm. At Asson there's the biggest milk tank at the Villecomtel dairy, here at Rontignon, 4,500 liters of milk, for a zone classified as mountainous, when they're making 150 francs a head...

Pierre L. They have a lot bigger subsidies than the others.

Henri F. In our low-grade zone for example, take my land for instance, I don't have a single bit of land where I use less than 80 liters a hectare to plow (...). I've asked for... "green fuel" (...) that they eliminate the taxes on fuel from mountainous zones through to the low-grade zones, but still, to eliminate the taxes on the flatlands, since we already use an average of 80 to 100 liters per hectare to produce grassland, on the flatlands they use 25 to 30 liters.

[There are four categories of land: mountainous zones, piedmont or foothill zones, low-grade zones, flatlands. The first two get a tax break on fuel, but not the low-grade zones. Eighty liters at 2.50 francs = 200 francs for plowing (preparation). In the flatlands, plowing takes three hours per hectare, on the hillsides eight to ten hours to prepare the land and as much again to plow it.]

This continual investment, and another lot, and another lot

Henri F. You won't find any more guys like us who went through years and years of working more and more to earn less and less. That's what's been happening for the past ten years... Now the younger generation doesn't want anything to do with

that... They go... they stayed in school longer than we did, maybe it's normal for them not to take all that. That's what happened. The other day I went through some bills over the past 10 years. It's appalling to see what's happened. In 1973, a liter of milk bought 2.06 liters of fuel, today with a liter of milk running 1.50 francs, you can't buy more than a half-liter of fuel, which means a quarter less. And we have more and more powerful tractors that use more and more...

Pierre L. We're caught. It's a chain, and we're caught up in it. As long as all we had was one little 20 hp tractor, it was... compared to the two oxen we had before, we were in seventh heaven – and now what can you do with a 20 hp tractor? You can't do a bloody thing... This continual investment, and another lot, and another lot, absolutely all the time... All you need, just like you say, is for the young guys to have some ambition, for them to take the trouble to figure out how much you need...

Henri F. Now I've got enough equipment to work 100 hectares, and I'm certain that someone farming 100 hectares on the flatlands doesn't need all the equipment I need...

Pierre L. That's right. It's an extra expense that's a big burden...

Henri F. So it's a gamble, it's a gamble. Because before, some years ago, I got a new tractor every six years. It'd gotten easy, there was the VAT exemption... for very little extra money you had new equipment all the time. Now, the last tractor I got is already six and a half years old... and I'm not about to get another one, because in six years, it's doubled in price. A tractor without any frills, the same one as six years ago, now it costs (...). You think twice before shelling out twice as much; even taking out the VAT, say I get back 2 million for the VAT, the outlay is still way too high. Where before it was the good years, in... up till the recession... I traded in easily every five years... and then you don't have to worry about anything going

wrong. And that's what's going to be so bad, that if we spend too much time, that's going to be a real mess...

[There are few active farms left, about 150 (against 220 in 1970), and 10 years from now only about 50 of them will be viable and able to be passed on.]

Pierre L. For these 50 farms, it's a big question mark. The situation you were talking about with a young farmer with...with one foot in the house and the other outside, and in any case, at that rate he might just as well be single...

— *Won't they find other solutions?*

Henri F. Where I am, you could make money planting grapes, but the younger generation, as a rule, isn't interested.

— *But that takes a lot of work...*

Pierre L. Right, that and milk cows, it's very exacting work...

Henri F. I know a few farmers who have tried to make their sons understand that with a vineyard, they'd be able to leave for the weekend, except for when the grapes have to be picked. Where with livestock you can't give yourself any time off...

— *Isn't there any kind of arrangement to help each other out?*

Henri F. You have to know what you're doing...and you have to be on the spot...It's turning into a trend, the young take off. We never took off. Twenty-nine years ago, when I got married, I think that we probably went away for a bit, if you don't count those days (...) in 29 years we didn't leave the place for more than two days in a row (...)

[Replacements are very expensive. And what with salary and social security, hired hands are as well.]

Henri F. You have to be able to do the work yourself, at least in the family, otherwise it's better to drop it. Now there are very few farmworkers around here.

Pierre L. Oh, that's a real luxury!...And what's so awful is that you can't find anybody even with all this unemployment...

Henri F. Unemployment payments are too high, too. If all the people on unemployment got only the minimum wage, maybe

they'd find a job...But there's too big a difference...The unemployed person on the minimum wage will find a job. But the person who is already higher up... (...) Because there are lots of details that haven't been decided...The other evening at the cooperative, when I said that we were coming to see you, the president asked me to remind you about the restructuration plans for the vineyards. It's a dead letter because it was announced, I think, for the beginning of the year, so the guys planted and they're waiting for their cash... When you think of the expense for planting a hectare for grapevines, it's pretty discouraging... You always have to wait like this... Things that are promised ought to happen...

— *When was that promised?*

Henri F. It's been in place since 1982 (...). The contract for the Baise district as well. We haven't seen a thing. We took on expenses, and...we don't see anything coming. (...)

[Discussion about the Jurançon wine cooperative; protests against the Common Market regulation that requires them to distill any wine over the quota, even in a very good year. The same people can be penalized one year (with a surplus being bought at a very low price) and be under quota the next (after a hailstorm). "That's what hurts, when we can't spread things out over two years."]

Henri F. It's just like the milk bit. It's awful to see them slap this tax on us when we kill ourselves to produce and we have these dairy companies that want more and more milk; they are undercapacity for their operation and we're the ones who get regulated... like our buddies (except in the mountains who...). There is a demand here... There's a cooperative at Lons (...)

[They agree that the Common Market regulations are especially unfair to French producers, that the subsidies kick in very late or not at all and that a good many let themselves be taken in by the promises. "That makes for a lot of disappointed people."]

Henri F. What frightens me some is that they [young people] don't want too much

responsibility. We were used to a time when you chose your job. We were... we tried to be on time... And that really hurts. Because when you see a guy like my boy...

— *It's tied to school. He went to school until what age?*

Henri F. No, not at all! Only two years in Montondon. Afterwards...

— *He went to school until he was 16 or 17?*

Henri F. He was 18. But I think that he was more inclined when he got out of school. Because then I gave him the choice. I told him "watch out, this is a very small farm, you can do seasonal work for the grain coop and earn money that way (...)." He wanted to keep everything. "Think about it, you're soon going to start thinking about something else."

[...]

I worked wholeheartedly for a few years, always telling myself "I've got assets, he'll want them." But there's... The young people get themselves all worked up too. One guy has one thing, the other one has another...

[...]

The remark that he makes to me these days... I didn't get it before, but for the past two years, twice a year, it's "you're a real damn fool, why didn't you take advantage of the opportunity to take time off?" And I tell him "for crying out loud, then you wouldn't have all this equipment at the tip of your fingers." Because I remember when my daughter got her baccalauréat, an insurance agent came by, "now you can give your daughter a real vacation." Vacation? For me, a vacation is buying one more tool... With the money I'd spend on a vacation, I buy a tool that will make my work a little easier. In the end... (...) because there are others who didn't buy so many tools and who still work hard. Less than we do. Maybe they have more spending money. Well, they aren't as ambitious. Maybe we... Starting from nothing and wanting to do something, that's... very bad.

Pierre L. What's dangerous is that the father wastes his time thinking (...) about

his son, because the son doesn't see things at all like his father... The milieu comes into play...

Henri F. A few years ago I really believed that he was coming along, because, when I proposed that he stay in the cooperative...

— *And his wife, what does she do?*

Henri F. She works in the secretarial pool. She has diplomas and all. She's looking for a job but no luck. Now she's in the secretarial staff in a center for the handicapped in S. But it's temporary. (...)

Pierre L. There too, there was a lot of disappointment with these young people who had a talent for something and who started working... and if they didn't have the knack to do something else, some of them hung on, others got tired of it all and that ends up...

[...]

Henri F. (...) But all these guys who've been let out who are selling drugs, etc., that's just intolerable (...). When you see that guys now have guns at home...

[...]

I think that the previous administration gave the police a freer hand with the trigger, I think that it was still better to have a few glitches than to see... (...) I don't see how... where there's a police cordon to put in place, all they have to do is get them in there, and the first guy who moves... (...) There's no reason to raise an uproar against the police (...) even if he fired an extra shot (...), he is put on trial. When I kill a wild boar, if he doesn't die with the first shot, I shoot him again and... I put myself in the cop's shoes if... (...) They ask us... There's one thing that struck me. They charge (...) for a hospital bed for a guy who needs medical care and when you figure out what it costs to pay for one of these big-time crooks in prison, it's a real disaster. It would be better to free up a few spots there and not make the ordinary citizen pay for his hospital bed... But I look at things from a distance. I don't agree with everybody else. But I see guys who still and all have four or five dead men on their conscience (...). You can't feel sorry for

guys like that... The whole society is falling apart...

Pierre L. That's right, we've lost our bearings (...)

Henri F. They [the politicians] must all be buddies too (...). It's a bit like two lawyers: each one defends their own client, but they end up settling things between them even before they get into court. It must be the same...

— *Sometimes it's a lot worse in the same...*

Pierre L. ... in the same group.

Henri F. Still, everything's too free and easy. And with all that, you have to admit, you can understand those who defend Le Pen... At least he says certain things that are true...

1983

I had conducted this interview in 1983 with the rather vague intention of undertaking a kind of experiment that would be political as well as scientific. I wanted to try and give to people whom I'd known for a long time – farmers, workers, artisans, small-time employees – the chance to express their profound malaise and discontent, that is, everything that is so hard to capture with the ordinary instruments of communication between the “base” and “people in charge,” whether it concerns legislation or political party platforms or opinion polls. It seemed to me that an interview situation in which the individuals interviewed were explicitly consulted by an investigator who was perceived as capable of passing on their observations to the proper parties and therefore worth taking seriously, would be likely to push them out of the attitude of semi-irresponsibility to which they are usually consigned by most polls and into a position as authorized spokespeople determined to raise their problems, their preoccupations, and their claims (which is why before the discussion Henri F., whom Pierre L. had asked to come with him as a “representative” figure, had contacted the managers of a wine cooperative in order to be in a position to pass on to me their expectations and questions).

And in the event, the entire logic of the discussion was testimony to the fact that my two interviewees, quite as if they expected to get something out of my total openness (utterly exceptional in political life and even in ordinary life), simply jumped at the opportunity to say the things that were closest to their hearts. For the most part they presented me with problems, seemingly entirely personal (like the son's departure), which were weighing on them and which, once we put aside questions like the price of land or fuel subsidies, shared in common the characteristic that they are totally excluded from the scope of standard political discourse. Precisely because it was so exceptional, this discussion brought to the fore the artificiality of responses in standard “polls” or “studies” – the responses that ordinary interviewees give more or less lightly and without thinking about it much to problems defined (and often poorly formulated) by studies that are determined, like most opinion polls, by the interests of those who finance them or who “think them up.”

They were supposed to have come to raise public, political problems, but instead my two interviewees posed problems ordinarily designated as personal or private. Much of our conversation (which lasted over three hours) turned on the departure of the son of one of them. Although I'd been aware of this problem

for a long time (in the 1960s I had done a study on unmarried oldest children in the region), I hadn't really heard what they were telling me. No doubt because in the opening statements (about "young people today" in particular) of the individual who introduced himself as "the district's agricultural delegate" I had seen only the obligatory preliminaries that had to be "gotten through" before getting down to "serious business," that is, what I was expecting. So I have to admit that it was only after having transcribed the entire discussion and having saturated myself with his reasoning that I could hear what Henri F. had never stopped telling me, and in a language which, because it stuck with generalities, undoubtedly to maintain dignity and decorum but also to avoid the pain of an overly specific account, was designed to arouse the distracted attention that we tend to give other people's ordinary woes. He had told me, without telling me because he couldn't tell himself, that his son had literally killed him. And it was only after having constructed the explanatory model – simultaneously unique and generic – for the refusal of the inheritance in terms of the negation of the legacy and the murder of the father who produced it that I was able to hear sentences like this: "Young people today have become very hard; they don't give a damn that you've lost your whole life" (where "young people" stands for "my son," which was the case in almost everything he said); or this one, from Pierre L. whose situation – although it is in one sense less dramatic since his son has stayed on, though he's stayed single – is close enough for him not to have any difficulty understanding the drama his friend was living through: "A father wastes his time thinking about his son because the son doesn't see things at all like his father."

A true understanding of that which is the most dramatically intimate is only possible by making a detour through an understanding of that which is the most impersonal, that is, the generic mechanisms, in this case those of inheritance, that only become clear in the unicity of a social condition apprehended in its totality. And it just might turn out that the model constructed from a particular case can help us understand the anxiety (which has nothing natural or universal about it) to perpetuate oneself in an heir or a heritage (material or spiritual) as it manifests itself in (and under) certain social conditions. Should this not be seen as a way of pulling a whole life out of absurdity by keeping alive the ends that life had pursued and in which it had found meaning (like the aristocratic defense of the name and family honor)? In retrospect, doesn't the oblivion into which those ends fall simply take away the meaning that life once had?

and, even before he took over the business, married a girl from a local working-class family. Even though his wife has actively worked with him, she brought neither economic capital nor (since she didn't go past primary school) the skills necessary to make radical changes and help him maintain a strong business in a sector that has been radically transformed by changes in consumption habits and by competition from the supermarkets. This is not the case of his older brother, who also took over a retail wine business in a small town about 30 kilometers away from the family business and who was able to avoid falling behind by marrying the daughter of a rich farming family in the area. His sister has also had considerable social success. After finishing secondary school (rare for girls at the time), she "married well," an antique dealer from a good bourgeois family from near Lyon (even today a good many people remember the big wedding in the small town). Symbolized, among other things, by the fairly elaborate summer home that she was able to buy in the South of France, her rise in society can only reinforce and make intolerable for Pierre – whom she sees regularly, particularly during vacations – the sense of his own social decline.

But this decline is above all that of a whole occupation and a whole way of doing business. The wine trade, which had strong ties to traditional country life, has felt the full force of the repercussions from most of the important postwar transformations – economic and cultural – which together have had the effect of eliminating almost entirely old ways of life and, at the same time, the old form of this particular occupation. The rural exodus progressively reduced the clientele of the many country café-restaurants, an evolution that was reinforced by a turning inward to family life. Business in this kind of sector has really dropped off, and most of the merchants have been forced to close. Local festivals, which represent one of the last occasions for an ever more fragmented group to celebrate, today constitute one of the rare important points, both economically and socially, of this trade wherever it still exists. For a long time these local festivals partly obscured Pierre's decline for him because it is one of the few times when he can still feel indispensable, even irreplaceable. Then it's his turn to be energetic, supplying everything to drink and lending tables and benches (noted in his account books as "festival decoration," which got him a little run-in with the tax authorities), etc.

Moreover, just like retail business generally, the wine trade has also had to confront new and especially strong economic competition. The increasing individualization of beverage consumption has been for the most part taken over by the new distribution circuits that developed during the 1970s, essentially supermarket chains (three big supermarket complexes were set up in Pierre's district in 1992 alone). He vehemently denounces the supermarkets which, from his point of view, practice unfair competition. He criticizes the incompetence of the sales force and the management methods which are not based on the honest administration of a good family man but on "financial deals" ("They're not business people any more, they're financiers"). The sudden incursion of financial capital into the distribution system and the detached application of economic and financial

criteria made possible by that incursion necessarily collided with his moral values, closely tied to ways of doing business in traditional rural milieux. It is almost natural for Pierre to pick up on the old themes of antisemitism that harp on financial capitalism or to follow a scapegoating rationale and denounce Masonic sects that are supposedly at work even in politics.

Pierre is the perfect incarnation of the traditional rural merchant. He is proud of belonging to a family of wine dealers who have been in the area for more than a century. The supermarkets with their signs all over the place change managers all the time, whereas Pierre is in the same old barnlike shed in the back of a courtyard where he's always been, and his customers are entirely local. The stock is piled up in a great disorder. He moves about with the slow and deliberate walk of someone who is not in a hurry. Since time doesn't cost anything, he doesn't count it, neither his nor that of his customers, who often have to wait to be waited on. His business has never been able to sever itself entirely from his personal relationships with his customers. He sends his bills late and people are even later paying him. He doesn't even think about complaining, so that he ends up giving credit for nothing and leaving his wife with all the trouble of getting payment when customers take undue advantage of the situation. And finally, he is very secretive about running the business, not to hide dubious moves, but because he feels required to leave his earnings vague. In short, he is at one with a business that today is a losing business, and he is always able to dredge up a good reason to put off retirement even though his wife pushes him toward it.

He gets carried away against the government which uses tax money not only to pay civil service employees, whom he considers too numerous and too useless, but also to practice an income redistribution that he finds excessive: [in the old days] "we didn't give people RMI, we didn't give this, we didn't give that. We're too generous with our social programs, much too generous." The only government that Pierre knows is what could be called the "mean government," the one that ruins businessmen with heavy social taxes and fleeces upstanding citizens with taxes, the government that supports "propaganda" against wine (even though, he specifies, it is recommended by Pasteur), or else persecutes the honest taxpayer with its strict rules followed to the last dot over the i and cross through the t. The same moral intransigence, which has brought about the economic ruin of his business, pushes him into conflicts – lost before they've begun – with the tax authorities, all of which only reinforces his resentment and his hatred of the government, politicians, and bureaucracies. He considers it symbolic that in Paris the Ministry of Finances has moved to the Quai Bercy, on the site of the old wine market. Even if the modifications in selling beverages owe nothing or little to specific policies, there is a great temptation on the part of the victims of these changes to make the government and the politicians responsible for everything that goes wrong.

Strongly integrated into local life and, hence, prisoner of traditional routines and values, Pierre has been subjected to the transformations that have affected both his occupation and rural society without really understanding them. For

instance, he refused to hook up with another dealer in the region to buy wine in large quantities directly from the producers because he did not want to see his name disappear from the commercial transactions. Converting into a free choice in the past his inability to change, he has never been in a position to see change coming – which is what he is saying, even as he denies it, when he keeps repeating that “you could have figured everything out ahead of time” – or to make the kinds of decisions that would have been necessary to maintain his position in this economic sector. Even today, he talks very vaguely about the changes that have occurred, and the only strategy that he foresees, “if I had to do it all over again,” is still, and especially, to do nothing. His helplessness does not mean that he doesn’t see things clearly: he is perfectly aware of the economic forces that have shattered his business (his often very technical analyses have been largely cut out of the interview). He doesn’t need to understand what’s going on since he knows it already. Except that everything pushes him to reject these transformations and carries him on to a failure that he knows is inevitable.

His village is changing before his very eyes and is becoming so unrecognizable that he no longer feels at home there. He has the feeling of being invaded by foreigners in whom he sees the cause of his misfortune (the only things he knows about the immigrants that he denounces so strongly come from television news). He believes in frontiers and borders that protect and reassure. He is all for the reestablishment of physical barriers, and regrets, for example, the destruction of the “Berlin Wall,” which, he fears, is going leave Europe wide open to the Russians, and eventually, to the “yellow peril.” He advocates restoring moral barriers and denounces the new rights for which claims are being made, and considers that it would be better to remind people of their duties and obligations, since these are the only things, according to him, capable of putting reasonable limits on ambition.

The vehemence of his remarks fits with the social, political, and economic violence to which he has been subjected and which, day by day, has destroyed not only him, but also his wife, since the couple has been on the brink of separation several times. Locked in the position of the strong, dominant man who knows everything and certainly has no lessons to learn from any woman (“women don’t understand a thing” is what he says during the interview when his wife puts in a brief appearance), he cannot hear what his wife has been telling him for a long time (“he’s as stubborn as a mule” is the way she puts it). He has had only himself to fall back on to confront a situation of crisis that was beyond him. Above all, in this small rural society in which no one misses a thing, he restricted himself to deploring the few measures that have been made in favor of commerce by comparing them with the substantial subsidies given to farmers to modernize. How could he not be persuaded that “everything has been done” to make the small shopkeeper “roll over and die” and believe that “all he has left is the rope to hang himself with”?

with a rural shopkeeper

— interview by Patrick Champagne

“For us, it’s just plain murder”

[I explain to Pierre C. that this is a study of “where things aren’t working in France.” He reacts right away by telling me that “it’s all over the place that things aren’t working!” and that he “would like to know where things are working” and that everything that’s happening today “could have been figured out ahead of time.”]

— When you set up shop [in the 1950s] did the wine trade seem interesting to you, viable? What happened? And when did you begin to sense that things weren’t going well?

Pierre It was a very good sector to pick up on, it was an occupation that was holding its own. Now there’s a campaign against wine, against alcoholism. Then there’s the fact that the policy against wine was aimed at wine and not at whiskey or other hard liquor or aperitifs. And then the Frenchman was made to look like the most hardened alcoholic in the world, no one took any account of Russian alcoholism, or the Americans with their whiskey and beer. In all the figures for alcoholism no account has ever been taken of beer consumption, so that France comes out as the most alcoholic country in the world. If any account had been taken of beer consumption, well, we wouldn’t be any worse than anybody else, we wouldn’t be any more tarnished than anybody else!

— You mean that things began to get a bit worse, in the business, with the anti-alcoholism campaigns under Mendès? [Pierre Mendès France, prime minister in 1954–5.]

Pierre Oh. Mendès-France! It was really a dumb-ass thing, he started to put up a milk plant in the Tournus area. I saw the plant being built in 1956. They distributed milk in the schools and the army, and it

didn’t work at all. The plant that he built over there was a utopia, it had to be, with an ulterior motive since this region itself couldn’t produce enough to keep the plant going, so the fresh milk for the plant had to come in from the Ardennes and from all the other regions with milk cows. So by the time the fresh milk got to the plant it had already spent three days in conservation containers and it wasn’t fresh milk any longer. Next, for the milk, they voted a law prohibiting the sale of fresh milk direct from the farm in areas with populations under 3,000. Today you drink skim milk or partly skim milk, but nature’s good milk straight out of the cow never killed anybody. There’s never been more cholesterol than right now. In any case, around here, there aren’t any more milk cows. There aren’t any because the Common Market said there was too much milk. (...) We were selling powdered milk to Italy in order raise French calves. With a bonus for exports! And anyone who says bonus is talking about deals and cheating, at a certain level, people who are right there dealing in the middle of it all.

It’s happened, France is broke

— Can you point to a particular time when your business started to go downhill?

Pierre Oh, yes. It’s easy to pinpoint everything. It could’ve been figured out ahead of time. A good military man is a terrible politician, right? A good politician is a bad economist. The mess we’re in now – I say mess because we’re not the only ones, it’s everywhere. And then you can’t compare with other countries, you have to see what’s going on in France. It’s too easy to say “we’re closing the steel mills, it’s better to buy steel products elsewhere than to

produce it at home, because it costs too much.” That’s simplistic. It’s not a question of politics on the right or on the left, it’s a question of individuals who have made certain decisions. We have produced unemployment, we still have iron ore but nobody knows what to do with it any more. They put all that together and then here we are today, twiddling our thumbs and shelling out money to buy things from somebody else. You have to make up your mind if you want to work or if you don’t want to work.

— *But for your business, when did you sense...*

Pierre Well, as for me, my business, it’s very simple, it developed in a certain direction, like things always develop, and that’s pretty normal. But our economists didn’t figure right or at least they figured things out for a system where some people are lying around in fat city and everything else is in the process of collapse. What’s collapse? Things aren’t working, it’s happened, France is broke right now, it will have to come begging to Europe to ask Europe to take over because it can’t govern itself or take care of itself and right now there’s no way for us to get back on our feet. And you’d need 10 years, if everything goes right and if everybody decides to start working again, you’d need 10 years to get things back on track, and I don’t believe it for a minute. Everything that’s happened could’ve been figured out ahead of time. The people who didn’t figure it out should be strung up. They should be shot. Because they knew what was going to happen... or else nobody listened to them, it’s one or the other. Maybe there was an alarm that went off and then maybe people just said “oh well, it’s just a bunch of old guys over the hill, the future is...” The future has to go on like that, you can’t stay in place, if you stay in place you’re two steps away from falling apart. And we stayed in one place, and now we’re falling flat on our face. It’s as simple as that.

— *And when did you sense this in your business?*

Pierre Well, our business was attacked – and I mean what I say – by wine. People were turned off drinking wine.

— *When was that?*

Pierre Oh, there were two systems. A propaganda system that is bearing fruit. Anyone who says propaganda says advertising. They pushed fruit juice, not fruit juice made from the juice of fruit that you squeeze, but from fruit that has been dried out, put in powder form, hydrolyzed, then you add water and drink it like that. If you put that stuff in a pitcher, after three days you put it under a microscope, it’s a whole mess of germs. That’s good for the gut, for people who are a bit lazy on that score, and it works! But it’s not natural. As soon as you take a fruit, and you squeeze it for juice, you put it in your glass, you’re drinking something natural. But when you take powder and you add water... and when people start drinking this junk, well then they don’t drink anything else, like table wine. People have been turned off drinking wine because they were told they were alcoholics. Finally they admitted the mistake, and in 1978 Giscard d’Estaing decided to do an advertising campaign for wine (...). We’ve got to pay a centime tax to subsidize the advertising after they spent 20 years beating up on wine because of alcoholism and drunkenness! So it was false. Just look at what Pasteur says, wine is part of food. It’s like everything else, if you overdo on whiskey, you’ll get stewed, if you drink too much wine, you’ll get stewed, but that doesn’t mean you’re an alcoholic. (...)

And then they changed the distribution system. The change in the distribution system has changed things so it’s not bars where people are tying one on. The bars have taken it on the nose three times. The price is set on the pretax cost [of the beverages purchased], and then multiplied by three. Necessarily, because taxes are paid on the turnover at three times the pretax cost. People go to the supermarket, at the supermarket alcoholic beverages cost even less than at the producer’s, whether it’s whiskey or aperitifs. There too, there’s a

gross, a really disgraceful irregularity. No matter how much you say that they buy in quantity, and this or that, it's not true (...). Can you tell me how they can sell so much whisky at such low prices?

— *But do you know how they make a go of it in spite of all this?*

Pierre How they do it? Well, there must be an old law from before 1968, before VAT covered everything. [*He launches into an explanation of the "buffer regulation" a very complex fiscal ordinance that, according to him, not even the deputies know much about.*] So all of this is just to say that there are people who dumped this law on us and even today they don't know... (...) The big stores don't pay their VAT to the tax administration of the département, they pay direct to the Ministry of Finances, and there nobody knows how much they really pay. (...) If the big stores have a VAT or some sort of edge over traditional shops, well, we're the ones who've been had, and then the little guy on salary, they've been had too, because they're not going to buy everything in the supermarket. They... well, now they buy almost everything in the supermarket, but 15 or 20 years ago – because now it's 15 or 20 years, all this, since 1968 – the first big supermarkets opened up in '68, '69, '70. And that's when I realized, when I started cross-checking, that there were these deals for 20 percent on the VAT.

[...]

"Colonial trading posts" – that's what I call the big supermarkets

— *So for you it's after '68 that...*

Pierre After '68, the shit hit the fan. It was a real mess when they put everything under the VAT. On the one hand, the *communes* lost their local taxes. The mayors never got them back. And beyond that, in the countryside, all the small retailers were obliged to get out, because after '72 or '73 you had to make compulsory insurance contributions under Social Security rules, and that meant lots of taxes for retailers, the small retailers. A small-time grocer in the coun-

try, a baker, a butcher, has so much to pay he can't even survive. He can work 10 or 12 hours a day and when he's paid up – and sometimes with the wife working right alongside – he couldn't even get a salary for two people out of it at the end of the year when he had finished paying for the state license. (...) Well, all that turned everything inside out and then everything just disappeared.

And after a few years when the supermarkets started moving in, the small shops were really hamstrung, either because of their age or financially, because of a lack of sales... Every small place used to have its small baker, its small whatever... right away you had some activity, and after all, right next door you had everything you needed to get by. Well, now you have to go six or eight places away to find this or that. Everyone cleared out. So then there was a tax just for this (...) because it had already been taken into account and engineered by our economists that these "colonial trading posts" – that's what I call the big supermarkets because they're the only game in town and supported by the government to boot – that these colonial trading posts would swallow up all the small shops that couldn't even sell off their stock. Anyway these colonial trading posts pay a tax so that when a shopkeeper gets to retirement age and can't sell his stock, he gets a departure indemnity. So they had figured out ahead of time that this old guy, he'd collapse and he'd get the hell out. The same thing for the local branch of wine dealers, they had figured out that they were supported to fail and they'd have to get the hell out.

They put on a big propaganda campaign because of this, and you've got the proof right there in Paris where wine... because the wine trade had a lot of potential, the whole world was out there, it was somebody, it was under government control, and it brought the government a lot of money. The [wholesale] wine market in Paris, a campaign was started against wine... it was a political campaign but it served a

purpose for taking back big sites of land in Paris. The first to go was the wine market which was turned into the medical school [in fact, the science faculty of the University of Paris VII]. You're with me here, right? And things just kept spreading, and now today, at Bercy [the location of the old wine market on the Quai Bercy] they put up a big sports complex; and they kept on pushing and they put up the Ministry of Finances. So they assassinated a whole profession in distribution to install the Ministry of Finances on one side of the Seine and the medical school on the other. [Moving on with medicine as the theme] So obviously medicine, that's another whole system... you've got these poor kids, you don't know what to do with them, you have them study a bit and you end up with... Starting out with vets, there it's something more, a vet has to have something upstairs; if he doesn't make veterinary school, he can be a doctor, if he doesn't make doctor, he can become a dentist, after that he can become a physical therapist and eventually you end up with the pharmacist. Doctors are just machines to sign forms, Social Security pays the difference! When you got sick in the old days and there wasn't any coverage, maybe it wasn't better but the whole thing has been blown out of proportion. (...) If we had free health care, you'd have your doc, you'd be taken care of, there'd already be fewer doctors because they'd have to have a vocation, it wouldn't be full of business types any more, and that is a big burden on the social system and in France's system of recovery of productivity. It's a big big burden.

[He explains that it is unfair to have all these fees that "drain off your three pennies of profit without taking any better care of you."]

*These aren't shopkeepers any more,
they're financiers*

— So there are payroll contributions, but you were saying that was also a regulation that gives supermarkets a big break.

Pierre Because they buy in big quantities, they get special prices. I've seen supermarkets sell six-packs of beer with all the taxes included at the price that I'd pay for beer bought by the pallet, before taxes, straight from the brewery!

— How do you think that's possible?

Pierre That's just what I asked the brewery, and I never got an answer. They'll tell you that I buy a pallet or five pallets and they buy a whole truckload, four truckloads of beer. On the one hand, they used to give you up to 120 days to pay – it's illegal now, it's back to 90 days credit. But look at the amount of money that represents compared to what is sold daily and the new money that comes in before they pay the first truckload of beer or wine or whiskey. What does that money do? Where does it go? These are big companies, with computers, they'll run a preliminary balance sheet after two weeks, and they'll have the actual results for the unit – these aren't shopkeepers any more, they're financiers – and they'll hand out what are called balance-sheet bonuses. (...) And that's wheeling and dealing. It's no longer one shop competing against another. Hustling the customer isn't what the law of commerce is all about. Profit for a shopkeeper is in order to balance the budget and what's left comes from the service to the customers through having supplied them and put merchandise at their disposal, and so on. The big supermarkets, that's not commerce. They make financial profits, and I call that swindling, in the good old days, you called it swindling: selling the product three times before you paid for it.

[Pierre takes the example of a particular big wine grower who modernized to work with the supermarkets and was never able to meet the prices they set.]

The supermarkets have the money in the cash register before they pay the supplier! The big stores just swallow up all their suppliers. (...) In four years that wine dealer was as flat as a pancake, not a penny left! They took over the vineyards, the chateau, everything! Everything was

sold off to a guy from London who had already picked up a vineyard in Bordeaux. Now he's down there – that's how you produce unemployment – an office with maybe, who knows, three, four employees, something like that and another two or three in the cellar. The pressings are stored in barrels, they take tank-trucks and send off Beaujolais bottled in Bordeaux, put it on a ship and send it abroad, that's it, that's all there is to it. The French don't get any of it any more and the French company's been eaten up, it's disappeared. Another company struck from the lists. Gone to foreigners. And why? All because of playing footsie with the big stores!

Financial capitalism, that's no more than pimping

— *What's behind these proposals that favor the supermarkets?*

Pierre It's politics, it's from the politicians, under the table . . .

— *Who decides?*

Pierre The financial system! That's who, financial wheeling and dealing. That whole world. You even have sects. We won't even mention religious sects. Catholics don't measure up, they hang around and pray; Protestants too. On the other hand, you have sects that are really solid, you have on the one hand the Jews, you also have the Masons. It all hangs together and they have their political connections, they have financial connections and everything is run by finance. By itself the capitalist system is a good thing. But financial capitalism, that's no more than pimping. Small businesses like us, if industry and big business, say 30 years ago, if they'd given us a financial boost with loans under 10 percent, today we'd be in good shape. Thirty years ago, 50 years ago, we were in a good position, I'd even say a hundred years since my grandparents were already in the business, well let's say the beginning of the century, we were in business. You had to start from scratch. If they'd made it easier for us to set ourselves up and modernize, as time went on . . . we started distributing wine in

wooden barrels and then we changed over to selling by the liter, so we had to get set up with cases and bottles plus machines to wash the bottles, and all the rest. It's all part of a sequence.

[. . .]

Right now we're getting hustled by the banks. An overdraft, that's 18 percent right away. What do you have to charge your customers to be able pay an overdraft rate of 18 percent? And if you make three pennies profit, you still have the government that slaps a tax on it! So what do you have left? The rope to hang yourself with, that's what. It's everything that's not going right. Can't you see, it all fits, one thing right after the other. During the war, good old Pétain was a smart old fox – it's a good thing we had him because the Boches would've taken a lot more French and they might have even slapped their uniform on Frenchmen by force, they took volunteers, but volunteers, that's their business – but if we hadn't had good old Pétain . . . because Hitler respected Pétain, he was a veteran of 1914 and a hard nut to crack. Moreover, I think that De Gaulle, who deserted in 1940 just like Thorez [longtime leader of the French Communist Party], since Thorez left for Russia in 1940 and he deserted, so he deserted like a lot of others who went to England and then stayed there.

[*Pierre talks about the modernization of farming in the region and denounces the profits farmers make from investing part of their government subsidized low-interest loans. He is quite bitter that farmers, who used to be poor, have become rich (which means richer than him), even though they work like office workers ("120 days a year, or 150 days a year, just about like a teacher. . . they just sit around and wait for things to grow!"*)]

I've always said that the shame of financial capitalism is that it produced inflation, so as soon as dust was thrown in people's eyes and all that, that's what pushed things over the brink even faster after '68. But even before '68 it was hard to get an equilibrium. Old man De Gaulle let himself be

completely buffaloes by the French in Algeria, when he repatriated the *pieds noirs* in '62. After '65 he wasn't in control. Because, now just listen to this, the Algerian French were colonists who were used to exploiting the Arabs. (...) And in a few years those people infiltrated, they got themselves back in everywhere – a bit like the Masons – they got back into politics, into finance, and then into all those connections. And they brought something of their old system back over here, their way of exploiting the Arabs. Moreover, they're the ones who brought their Arabs back in to shine their shoes, the relatives they'd had as their servants at home, they brought their children over, France needed them because at one point it needed workers; that's a fact. We had to take them, but it should've been on a short-term contract of some sort. In the end, in banking they're all pimps and they've done us in. So, we have heavy payroll deductions and banks who are mixed up in businesses and a government that's mixed up in businesses through VAT. As long as we had real borders, the domestic system worked well enough, but ever since they started in on Europe, our economy can't stand on its own. It doesn't hold the road. So you have a whole economy turned upside down by a *pieds noirs* system that was based on exploiting cheap labor. They totally changed the system in France.

[...]

Do you think it's going to last a lot longer? Are you going to still have lots of people paying taxes to pay for all this? There're not many left who'll bet on it! Shops, you don't have any anymore, they can't make a go of it: that's a fact! Right here there are three or four bars for sale. There's a hotel-restaurant here too, and no takers.

— *What price do you put on your business? Because this is your problem too?*

Pierre The business, it's 10 percent of the turnover before taxes.

— *Which means how much these days?*

Pierre 150,000. And there're no takers.

— *No takers for 150,000?*

Pierre I had one taker, a real crook. I was too honest. They came with a young couple, they were hustling them into 100–150,000, they were giving them credit to buy me out.

— *They wanted to take over the business?*

Pierre They were taking over the business, right, the couple were about 35. The husband was making the rounds, his wife was taking care of the office, but they required him to get 60 or 80 customers every day. Impossible. I know the business. On good days you get 35 and during the summer when the days are a little longer and you aren't watching the clock, you can get 45. So they'd promised him they could make 15,000 a month with 60 to 80 customers.

— *So you told them that they'd never get 60 customers?*

Pierre I told them "fine, fine, but to be perfectly honest, you won't get 60 to 80 customers." These people, they were coming from a big discount shoe store, a regular mall for shoes... people come... and these are shoes you buy by the weight, you buy 1,000 pounds of shoes and then you sell them off, you just pile them up on a table. So the broker in all this, when he saw that I was being too frank and I was telling them the truth, he interrupted, "here's a form to fill out." But they didn't fill out anything at all, if they'd signed, both of them, then I'd've pocketed 200,000 and that would've been it.

[...]

It doesn't have anything to do with business any more

— *What runs things these days, the distribution system, the supermarkets?*

Pierre The supermarkets! (...) There's a law, the Royer Law. Royer really got dumped on, lower than low, people made fun of him at the time saying that he was an oddball and this and that. But he was the one who was honest and boosted small shopkeepers. That man... he was a good man. But people made fun of Royer because for everybody else who was sitting pretty

with the banks, the discount sellers and the pimps for the system, for all those guys everything had to work from another point of view. (...) The big stores have always done whatever they wanted to do! It goes to a committee, gets turned down by the prefecture, turned down by the mairie, it goes on up to the ministry, where you've got your buddy from the Masons or from the Party, on the right or on the left, it doesn't make any difference because they're all in it together. I don't make any distinction between political parties, the economic system is apolitical: it's not a question of saying "it's the socialists" or "it's the right" or "it's the left," that's just not true! The economic system is a system that... it's running a business, just like old Pinay [Antoine Pinay, prominent politician under the Fourth Republic]. And what'd Pinay do? He ran a business, he ran a tannery, he knew what a balance sheet was, what a budget was, what payroll taxes were, what he had to pay out, what he didn't have to pay out. When you put people in ministries and they're people who have all these diplomas [*feigning exaggerated deference*], well, sure, but can they read a balance sheet? I've got a deputy [in Parliament], I was the one who figured out his VAT coefficient for him. All the big stores represent big purchase power, big financial potential, it's new money coming into the banks. (...) So it doesn't have anything to do with commerce any more.

[...]

For us, that's it, it's just plain murder. For us, it's all over. The big stores have done us in. I talked about it to my accountant five years ago, I said "just look at what's going to happen with the Common Market. If I were 35 again I'd close up shop, clean out the place, I'd put all my equipment in apple pie order and when Europe has been put together – put together, but solidly put together, not just hobbling along – then two or three years later, I'll open my doors and I'll start working again. But until then... we're just sinking further and further, we're not out of the hole." We're not

going to get out. But no sense in talking politics because then...

[*Pierre recounts how he had accepted student trainees from a home economics school in the area, but had refused to let them see the balance sheet for the business because he was convinced that the information about his business would be used against him and against small businesses in general: "I said to them, your students, I don't say they're spies, but computers now have everything that's going on in the region, for every occupation. From the wine dealer to the shoe shop, even the peanut seller, the clothes shop, the seller of this and the seller of that."*]

*It's fine to have rights,
but there are duties too*

Pierre That jackass Mitterrand of ours, all his awards for human rights will just fuck up the whole world, because all that stuff, it's just plain shit! You've got what you've got, the rights of man. The rights of man! The rights of women and the rights of children! And what about duties? It's fine to have rights, but there are duties and obligations too, and you have to put up walls in certain spots to say "fine, this freedom begins where that one ends." And if we really put that to work, the world would be liveable and we'd really get along. But as soon as it's "get out of that chair so I can sit down, shove off and I'm going to take your place, and I don't give a good goddamn" – that's the beginning of anarchy. So all this business about human rights, Gorbachev wanted to give freedom, but you can't get used to freedom from one day to the next, if you're on oxygen, you breathe straight oxygen because you're used to it, if you haven't enough, you get sick. Then all at once, somebody tells you "OK, that's it, you're cured," they cut off the oxygen tank and dump you out in regular air...you go crazy, you can't breathe, you can't keep up, you have to have a transition.

[...]

And here we are again, back to swindling, business swindling, financial swindling, the

business-swindle, not good honest commerce, because when the East Germans used to raise cows, it was to feed the Russians. Then from one day to the next, there were all these Common Market rules and we told Brussels, the cows in East Germany ... the meat men, the money swindlers, the financial swindlers, and the business-swindle, they bought these cows cheap. And what happened? I'll tell you what happened: the Russians starved because they needed that for their economy and to eat. And then the French farmers got starved out because they had cows they couldn't sell. So tell me about these characters! You've got to admit it's one sleazy operation.

— *It's true that the situation in the USSR is a really complicated business.*

Pierre The really dumb-ass thing, what I blame all the French for, all these guys in 1989, the human rights types, and freedom and this and that ... you have to have freedom, no persecution, but still freedom has to have limits! Everybody can't have fancy clothes, everybody can't have a vacation; because it's never been that way and it never will be, where're you gonna get the dough? Not by bumping off this group or that one, where are you going to get the rest of the money? And that's where our economic system just doesn't work any more. And what's more, we've even got foreigners in France, who France takes care of, who are out of a job, who are ... if they've got a green card, well, they've got a green card, if there isn't any work for them any more, you ought to give them some cash and send them home with a little capital and then they'll buy a cow and a pig, and they'll raise stuff at home, they'll set up at home just like here. (...) Old man Pinay knew what he was doing, he ran a business and he knew management when he saw it. You can see when we've got the ministers we have, the Education Ministry takes a hit, Agriculture takes another, a hit to the right, a hit to the left – you'll probably tell me “the ministry doesn't change, the ministry keeps on going” – but I think you need people trained

for the job who know what they're talking about.

— *Of course, that's right.*

Pierre But the problem that nobody talks about and the Americans saw it ahead of time, it's that dividing up Russia the way they did just makes it weaker, if only from a technical point of view since they were after all the first ones to send somebody up in space. The most serious case in the year 2000 will be China, because Russia is Europe's shield against the Chinese invasions and if Russia is split up, well the Chinese can move right in. And they'll move in, and that's the yellow peril. The Russians in the year 2000, they'll join up with the Chinese, they'll pitch in with the Chinese to move in on the Continent.

— *Do you mean that there isn't any politician right now who can make up for the others, not one who ...*

Pierre ... who can pound on the table to say “the party's over, now we have buckle down to work and start all over again at zero,” is that what you mean?

— *I don't really know, I'm just asking to get your point of view.*

Pierre Well, for an economic recovery, you have to lower the interest rates, the rate for loans to put businesses in a better fiscal position. Every business has loans from the bank, they have to go through the banks and the banks pimp for all the businesses. Do you think it's normal, that bank card system, cards to get cash, do you think that's normal? Aren't there enough people at the windows? These people give themselves a 17-month salary, they're overpaid. And the day before a holiday, they're nowhere to be seen! (...) That's modern technology, all these cards and this and that, fine, but I'm against the whole system: when there isn't any money in the machines, people don't have any money! I've never had a card and I'm dead set against it. If I need money, I go to the bank and get it from the window. Anyway, it's mostly for the bank employees, so the customers don't bug them, you get other people to do the work.

It's just like the big stores, people serve themselves, two, three joes who put junk around on the shelves or bring in a cart and then the customers serve themselves, they go to the cash checkout. The woman at the checkout is the only one who's really doing any work. That's how you produce unemployed people because none of that produces any jobs, the big stores don't produce any jobs compared to small business. And why aren't we taking on people? All because of the social legislation. When you hire somebody, you can't turn them out the door again (...) and you have to haul out your checkbook and send them a bundle. We've gone too far with this system, we've got to shift into reverse. And it's not a step backward to ... So, in the first place, banks cost too much, they're overpaid and their interest rates and investment rates are much too high for any business that wants to build itself up. Even a young person who wants to get set up with equipment is strangled. Along with the payroll contributions that are too heavy, you've got the license and the business tax. If you work on your own with just your prick and your knife, well then, then you don't pay a thing! But as soon as you buy a little delivery van, a bottling apparatus, a rinsing machine, a pickup cart, you get taxes assessed on your equipment. (...)

— *So the two solutions that you see are, one, the banks and two ... ?*

Pierre And two, payroll contributions are set up all wrong. To lighten up on the payroll contributions, the first thing is free health care. You cut out the loafers, the guys who get themselves on social security for life, I know some characters around here. (...) Payroll contributions, free health care to lighten up on the payroll contributions, and the business taxes are too high.

[...]

We don't need more laws, we need plain good sense

Pierre It's just like, right here I've got papers to fill out every year for the URSSAF

[Union Régionale de la Sécurité Sociale et des Allocations Familiales: for social security deductions], but sometimes it really gets on my nerves. Look at what they send us [*he shows me the forms*], this is the annual declaration that you fill out every year for salaried employees. It has to get to the computer by January 31st. In '91 I did all the stuff, I've got copies, and it was January 23rd that it was sent. The first of March I get a registered letter from the agency telling me that they had received the form late and given such and such a regulation – you understand, there's nothing that needs paying, it's just the declaration of all the salaries paid out to computerize retirement papers, a file for everybody – and I get fined 400 francs! So I say “that really takes the cake!” (...) I take my form, I go try to get some explanation. So I say to them “show me the envelope with the cancellation date, I'm not the one who put it in the mail” – “Oh, well, we didn't keep the envelope,” so I say “so what's your proof?” – “Oh, well, you just have to trust us,” and I say “that's not the way I see it, you should have notified me on February 2nd or February 5th or the 10th if you got it February 10th, not a month later.” (...) Then the end of May I get a notification saying that two years ago, I paid the agency too much, you get reimbursed two years later, “this is the way it is, we've gone over your figures and we owe you 3,200 francs and we will settle by check October 31, 1991.” (...) The 31st of October, no check. The month of November, no check. Around the 10th of December I'm in Troyes, so I go by to see what gives, “what happened to that check for 3,200 francs you were supposed to send me?” “Well, your check, well yes, we're going to look into it, but we're going to have to hold back 400 francs,” so I say “it's not the same dossier, the two are completely separate.” “We'll send you a check.” And they send me a check for 2,800, they lifted 400 francs just like that. That's just dishonest. So I say, if you think you're going to fill up your coffers with 400 francs here and another 400

francs there, all the while saying they're good guys, they won't say a thing, they'll send you the 400 francs.

— *And you still haven't heard anything on your appeal?*

Pierre I'm going to wait another month. But you better believe it, if I don't hear anything, I'll stick it to them with another registered letter, I'll put in my voting registration card and tell them that as long as we have dishonest administrations, you won't catch me dragging my butt out to go vote! If they don't want to treat me like a citizen, then they can treat me like an Arab or a protester. That's what I said at X., "if you don't see me on election day, it's because they filched 400 francs from me." It's not for the 400 francs, I don't give a shit about voting for the Conseil Général [département council] anyway. And what can you do, everything's like that... We don't need more laws, we need plain good sense. And with some good sense, that's how you'll get some solutions. One day, it was in the beginning, Mitterrand came through in '81 [the year he was first elected President of France], I don't know if you remember, there was a percentage reduction, I can't remember how much, 3 or 4 percent less on low salaries. Any salary under 4,200 francs gross paid a social insurance contribution, I can't say for sure how much, don't quote me on it, but instead of, say 14 percent in payroll contributions, if you weren't over 4,200 francs, then you only paid — I can't say for sure, but let's say 10 percent. A 4 percent reduction. Now for six months I had people on salary who were under the line, and then there was a raise. Nobody notified us to say "watch out, you're going over the 4,200 franc limit, and we'd like to remind you that..." I had one employee who worked a few extra hours and it got to 4,200 francs. But actually — hold on to your seat for this one — it was 4,208.20 francs, 8 francs and 20 centimes over the limit. A year later, this inspector from the agency comes by and goes over all the dossiers. Now I've got you! There were 8 francs 20 centimes too

many for this guy. And you can believe me or not, I said, for 8 francs 20 centimes, it's the same thing. "No it's not, he says, it's 4 percent on the whole thing." He took 4 percent on the 4,200 francs, that came to 160 francs but since he'd come a year or two late, with the interest and everything... So I said "maybe it's the law, but put yourself in my place, and I'll put myself in yours, sit down in my seat." "Well, he says to me, you can always appeal, you can protest if you..."

So I put the dossier together, I file the appeal, I have to go to the office of administrative claims, then to the regional administrative office, they look at the stuff, and they tell me "well, sure, that's not much, but you have to get the judge's opinion." So we go to court, and here was this kid, she must've just rolled out of the cradle, I get there with all my papers, all the stuff to prove that for 8 francs 20 centimes over, it just didn't make sense to... I didn't get a lawyer because right then... Well, just listen to this, I get there with all my papers, I wanted to talk, the judge, she must have been born like that, she said, "That's all. Next case!" "But I haven't had time to explain things and everything." "No, no, that's all. Next case!" They didn't give me any time to explain, not a word, I left, it really made me sick. There was some woman who was the lawyer or the accountant for the social insurance office who represented... I met her in the corridor, I told her "do you realize that you're killing off small business?" I said, you make me sick." I had to shell out 120,000 [old] francs for 8 francs 20 over. Shit! It's the law? I said "is that what justice is in France these days?" And then I said, I don't give a shit, maybe you'll have 1,200 francs in your cash drawer, you'll have them, but will that make you happy? You know, businesses like us, when we go, you'll have to go to the big stores for your money." All this, it's just the little details. And then, you know, there's an election tomorrow, I'm not budging. I'd have stopped voting a long time ago if it

wasn't such a small place where everybody watches who votes and who doesn't. Because all these guys, as soon as they get elected, it's "we don't give a damn, we've got six years in..." And don't talk to them about lowering their pay, not them!

— *It's true that incidents like this are enough to drive you up the wall.*
Pierre It's sad, they're just second-raters. Maybe they make a lot of money but for me they're small-minded. I think these people are really nothing.

February 1992

Louis Pinto

Broken Careers

Getting laid off not only sidelines people indefinitely, it demolishes their expectations. Beyond the loss of income, it undermines claims on the future in a way that tends to destroy or deflate most of the prospects that were part of the previous occupation. Among other painful consequences, losing a job gives the lie to the narcissism that companies sometimes encourage in their executives. For many of them, the work accomplished and the energy expended were part and parcel of an active belief in the expectations associated with the idea of a “career”; they belonged to a process of accumulating benefits that are both material (salary, bonuses...) and symbolic (reputation, connections...). This assurance is what made it reasonable to take on a series of more or less fixed commitments both at work (moving to a small city or abroad, accepting specialized work) and at home (marriage, children, leisure activity, mortgages...). Getting laid off has had the effect of throwing into doubt everything that the individual has put on the line, “individual” characteristics (like “dynamism,” enthusiasm, and loyalty) as well as professional and personal expectations. Because the loss of a job makes the future uncertain, it forces an inventory of available resources and, for some, reveals defects that until then had been repressed or disguised. And if sometimes it becomes so hard to look other people in the eye, whether a spouse, friends, or neighbors, it’s because their look shows the discrepancy that can exist between present circumstances and claims that had for so long been assured.

The ordeal cannot possibly mean the same thing for everyone. The way it is dealt with or, as the case may be, overcome depends on the capital at a person’s disposal. Compare, for example, at one extreme, executives endowed with a set of positive properties – select academic degrees, being male, being young – against, at the other end, those who lack those properties. Since not all executives are equally “executive” types (according to the definition at any given moment), they are not equally subject to unemployment. The first to go are those with the weakest ties to the group, particularly those who became part of the group through an exceptional, and unique, set of circumstances largely determined by the employers. These individuals are victims of the limits inherent in their mode of being executives, which in turn depends on their background, the way they look, their lack of connections, abilities considered too limited, etc. At this point, they discover that the consideration that they had enjoyed, the kind words from their superiors or even the title of “executive” were only very precarious signs of success.

The Waiting Room

It's been 10 years now that M. Sapin hasn't been able to find a job, and he's lost hope. But, at 51, a good talker and solidly built, he is still far from retirement age. In the big mineral water company where he worked from age 26 to 43, he had been what is called a "cadre-maison" [a "home-grown" executive]. With no more than his baccalauréat (he talks about his "two bacs"), he had been rapidly promoted to the position of regional representative in charge of contacts with the medical profession. No doubt his talent in human relations was acknowledged and esteemed. Refusing to be a simple "commercial" person assigned exclusively to supermarket accounts, he considers himself someone who can have "interesting" discussions with specialists. He traveled, came in contact with all kinds of people, had "responsibilities" (for recruitment and training). As for the reasons for getting laid off, today he seems torn between a market explanation, which stresses the necessary cutbacks in the workforce in a sector in decline, and an explanation that points to the recruitment policy and stresses the open preference accorded "youth" over "veterans."

It wasn't difficult to meet him at the "annual encounter" organized by a support group for the unemployed. Affable and open, he gives the impression of seizing any opportunity to talk about himself and, in the process, about a social order that is responsible for unemployment. Obviously used to speaking in public, he has even been on television. His craving for social recognition shows up in his obsession with not leaving the people he is talking to indifferent. From a family of modest means in the north of France, orphaned early on, he hoped for a time to go on with the higher studies that he had quit after a year, and this unfortunate relationship with the academic system is something of a primal scene that he must continually relive. Even though he does not have the actual degrees, he considers himself on that level. But this lack of officially recognized titles is at the heart of the doubt and affirmation that alternate in his discussion: he claims to have been an exemplary student but not "superbrilliant," he claims to have a degree in nutrition but then adds that he doesn't really have a degree, he is an executive, but not really, and so forth. Simultaneously experiencing the effects of success and failure, he feels profoundly divided ("there are two people in me"). An executive, he is unemployed but he lives like someone with private means, a series of family legacies having enabled him to accumulate money and property. He lives off the income from these investments which are a source of relative security. He considers himself almost rich, but, obsessed with saving money, he lives very modestly. Instinctively "on the left," he sees himself as different from his neighbors, co-owners like himself of the fancy building that he lives in (he was very open with them about his unemployment). "Nonconformist," he rejects a bourgeois image: his hair is almost long and a bit mussed up, and he is wearing a sweater-jacket outfit. The same duality shows up in his politics: he is "on the left" but against immigrants, women, youth, teachers, etc. His relationship to culture also bears the mark of exclusion: he

speaks with pride about his “3,500 books,” his conversation is larded with quotations that are more or less apt, he boasts that he can “hold forth for a half an hour” on a subject like Poland under Pilsudski, and he’s even been a winner on a TV game show. Interested in politics, he is moderately but conscientiously committed to the support of the unemployed and performs the services that are expected of him. Far from being unoccupied, he seems to have found the key, envied and sought by most of the people concerned, to an almost “successful” unemployment. Having learned to do without, he is happy to tell you some of his secrets about saving money. And if he imposes a “frugal” lifestyle on himself, it is manifestly as much to try to achieve a clever adjustment of needs to diminished means as to justify a quasi-ethical conversion that consists, in part, in shifting the boundary line that separates what is necessary from what is superfluous.

Such is the largely “positive” impression of his circumstances that M. Sapin works at giving. Then, after he has been talking for almost an hour, a young woman bursts into the room, interrupts the discussion apologizing all the while and asks to speak because she absolutely has something to say. She is nervous and visibly under the strain of being unemployed; and she is far less resigned than M. Sapin.

Mme Laurent was a supervisor in a personnel agency, but with unofficial management responsibilities. The “disgrace” that ended in her dismissal has made her aware of all the satisfactions in her previous position. A woman in a world particularly inhospitable to women, she did not have the higher degrees necessary to get out from under her boss’s will and whims. Even the classification as “specialized” (according to her DESS degree in personnel management [Diplôme d’études supérieures spécialisées]) is the devalued stamp of the recent degrees set up as a response to the growth in the school population. As if these strong statements have suddenly woken him up, M. Sapin then reveals his regrets (for the dental work that he won’t have done, for the vacation that he cannot afford and does not feel like taking anyway), fears, resentments – everything that his talk, in its very excessiveness, had covered up.

with executives out of a job

— interviews by Gabrielle Balazs and Louis Pinto

“The future – I don’t even know what it is.”

M. Sapin I don’t fit in any category.

— *Why not?*

M. Sapin Why not? Because I’m a born nonconformist, I have never been in synch with current opinion, never, I was a com-

mitted anti-Gaullist at 25, a Mitterrandist four times, but now...I’m waiting, I’m waiting for a change in the majority party, not because I’m for the right (basically I’m not on the right), but since I’m a democrat,

for me changeovers take care of a lot of problems. And you have to work through my atypicality, I've come a long way: I lost my mother when I was only six, my father when I was 19, I became an adult prematurely, all that makes me a bit different; then add studies that were not superbrilliant, but helped by two high school bacs and a year in business school. I remember that I passed the entrance exam, I was second out of 275 candidates, and then my father died the same year. I don't think that I had the family support that would have let me finish my studies. I say that because I have a 21-year-old daughter and she'll go places, right now she's doing her B.A. degree, but she should end up as a professor... I took my first high school bac in applied economics which barely existed at the time, and then I'd had enough, and I did a philosophy bac... With two baccalauréats, at that time, you could get in anywhere, studying wasn't much my thing anyway, there had been an absence of direction, of family structure and support. At 16 I met the woman I'm still living with 35 years later – 35 years it's lasted – and we got married pretty fast. I worked for a while for the Ministry of Education, my wife worked, my wife is no intellectual but she's a very intelligent woman with her feet on the ground and curious about everything. She was an executive secretary; she was fully integrated into the working world, she was appreciated, efficient.

— *And your job was...*

M. Sapin I'd make calls on medical personnel, in the beginning it was in the north of France and I had a territory that expanded and then retracted, in a word it was changeable, but then at one point I found myself in the north, in Picardy and Normandy; I was living in Lille, I spent half of the year coming home every evening, and the other half moving around, like birds on migration; starting in March I'd be off, and winters I'd stay home... I'd move around in a trailer. And all that lasted a while because after working in one or two pharmaceutical laboratories, at 26 I started working for

the K. company, which promoted me to be an executive very soon, after two years. And they laid me off when I put in a request for another sector in Nantes. They laid me off with good reason. For the good reason that I wasn't much use anymore. I ended up in Nantes where my job was to work public relations and as you can see, I'm someone who is really very, very much at ease in human contacts. (...) Not afraid of anything, at the last "annual encounter" I got up and spoke before 600 people, called the top director of the ANPE [national unemployment agency] on the carpet; I don't even know what anxiety means... but that's a question of training because my job brought me into contact with dozens of different kinds of people; I went to all kinds of congresses and meetings since we used to meet with medical personnel. (...) In Nantes there were potentially 20,000 people for me to call on, so I really loved the job... I'd see the people I wanted to and that went from the nurse on the ward to the big boss whom I'd see at the medical congresses or with students for whom I'd do a 20-minute prep on uric acid, the spa cure, etc. It was extremely varied, not one day looked like any other, it was always in different places and with good reason. So I wasn't a prisoner inside the company walls, because to understand me (I think it's essential): 25 years as an active worker on salary but not in the company. And not being tied to sales results, you can see...

— *Right... but still you were tied to results...*

M. Sapin Not to numbers. So it turns out that at first business was very favorable; and then when K. was bought out, the bosses just let us loose. And when I got to Nantes, I knew perfectly well that things were coming unglued, the people leaving or retiring weren't being replaced, and after six years they had a meeting of the Joint Worker-Management Council, etc., they didn't want to keep us on as medical representatives, television had taken over for marketing, we weren't useful anymore. So I was put...

— *The title of your position was medical representative?*

M. Sapin Right, I was medical representative, medical caller, but in charge during the final seven or eight years, I had been part of management already for a long time but I was really management to the extent that I trained more than 50 people on the road at a time when there were lots of hires, salespeople; and to fill them in on the medical side of our products, I trained more than 50 people and I hired about 30 of them, and when they were hiring they called me to Paris and with a colleague who was my alter ego from Montpellier, and we decided recruitment... We'll take this guy, we won't take that one. And after recruitment, I was in charge of training so that for a good many years I practically had to spend all my Sundays boning up on medicine; and when I lived in the north, the K. company had sent me to the hospital for three months, I was able to get up to the point to be able to train people. And the woman who was my boss trusted me: I did the recruitment, the training, I went out with people on their calls... (...) So it was very, very lively because I saw lots of people, and then I could choose the doctors I wanted, my medical colleagues would tell me about this doctor and that one who was terrible, I had 20,000 on file, and I had excellent contacts with doctors (...).

I went to lots of medical congresses in Paris and elsewhere, I went to congresses abroad too (I spoke very, very fluent German and English), and it was really very nice because it was pure social relations with doctors who welcomed me with open arms because I'd cut through all the annoying connections to the laboratories. Most of the young doctors had no idea how to prescribe spa cures because no one had ever told them, no, it was really pretty neat. My day had a very flexible organization... my week was organized around three and a half days, I worked like mad when I was on the move; when I was on the road I'd do 12-hour days, starting out with some doctors who began office hours at 7 a.m., and

I've left doctors' offices well after midnight. But that didn't bother me to the extent that I was on my own, and then this job meant lots of traveling (though less than you might suppose). And so I was always on the move with the constraint of being alone and of course, being alone is hard, but I had a wife who could take it; and then, when you come right down to it, as far as life together as a couple goes, that... it was just as well as it was.

Culture and inherited assets

— *And why did you say that things "were coming unglued"? What happened?*

M. Sapin They soon discovered that there were less expensive mineral waters, the hospital market collapsed, just collapsed! They gave up, and offered me a totally dumb replacement job, I wasn't young enough anymore. So they said to me, "whether you want to or not: you're laid off, you'll keep all your rights and benefits," I left with 45,000 francs at today's rates. Well, obviously I didn't go out and buy a BMW with that, I invested it right away, that's what allows me, and here I'm coming back to what I was telling you yesterday when I was talking about the three conditions: culture, a sense of humor and skepticism, inherited assets. Compared to most unemployed people I could be considered well off. (...)

— *Because you made investments, you invested with this money...*

M. Sapin I also inherited property from my grandparents, so that, with some maneuvering, I am in the position of not paying any taxes (...) but I'm not rolling in it either. Let's say that I live on 9,000 francs a month. So since I'm like the proverbial economical ant and I know all the tricks for living and spending the least amount possible, I maintain a middle-class lifestyle; I live in a good solid bourgeois building just occupied by government officials, I even have a former subprefect in my building, a police commissioner, etc., everyone in the building knows that I'm out of a job because I made a point of saying so, loud

and clear, no beating about the bush for me...

— *Loud and clear...*

M. Sapin That's right, loud and clear. For some, I really did it to make them ill at ease, for others just to tell them the truth. There's no problem, that's the advantage of education and culture, I know certain social codes and languages that let me bridge whatever social distance comes into play. So right now, I'm a bit more calm, my payments on the apartment are going down, and at 60, I'll get 12,000 francs in retirement.

— *Fine, from then on everything will get back in line...*

M. Sapin Because what's more, the ANPE told me one day right to my face – I owe them thanks for this because it was someone with whom I had brought about some very positive solutions... so here's ANPE telling me, "someone like you will never find..." I was on television. They remembered my speech against age discrimination. I specified (because I'm a bit of a ham, so I really banged out my words) "personally, I think that age racism is the same as skin racism," and that really got through! You don't have a chance of getting any kind of job. I'll give you some proof, an old friend who stayed on at the company, and then signed on in sales... for me sales were so pedestrian, going around to the supermarkets, all that talk about budgets, not for me! It was too much...

— *That didn't suit you at all?*

M. Sapin I haven't got a lot of degrees but I'm someone who reads 150 books a year, *Le Monde* for 30 years, still and all I'm a bit of an intellectual. To give you an idea of my level, I do the crosswords in *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* in half an hour; that locates my level of culture and I don't despair of appearing some day on *Questions for a Champion*. I've got a fantastic memory, I've got more going there than in straight intelligence, I don't think I'm especially intelligent, I'm hyper-adapted, hyper... since I've had a job where, for people I didn't know, doctors, I'd just go into their

offices, you had 30 seconds, you know the rule of the first three words and the first three looks... I had to figure it out right off the bat! Everything, absolutely everything, what type the guy was, the decor... I took my cues from what was in the waiting room. And that's a kind of mental gymnastics, it's even scary because I can get inside people in 15 seconds. (...)

There are two people in me

— *You said that it was really hard in the beginning...*

M. Sapin That's right. Obviously, when you look at it, right now I'm in the midst of telling you that everything is fine. The slap in the face you get when they tell you, at 45 years old, "that's it!" That said, I wasn't really inside the company. I am at once capable of being a real work horse, working 12 hours a day, I went to congresses in Paris for a whole month straight, but on the other hand I know how to be lazy when I have to be; let's say that I have a rather nonchalant view of life even though I'm very energetic... On the whole my job gave me a good deal because it was very gratifying. I was dealing with doctors who were really great! They'd invite me for dinner, for drinks... One day I get to a doctor who says to me "we're going to listen to some music," he left the whole waiting room right there... It's a fact that even if you aren't a workaholic, which has never been my style, I was interested in too many things, I knew all the museums in Normandy. But even if you loaf around, even if you show off your contempt for work and even if you are saturated with *In Praise of Laziness* by Lafarge [Marx's son-in-law], there's no problem when you take the hit. Well, I'm making the best of misfortune...

— *Right, but still, you had to reorganize your life...?*

M. Sapin Oh yes, well reorganization isn't really that difficult, I wasn't part of the company, I had control over how I spent my time, that didn't change... I got back in touch, because there was after all a good side, I got back in touch with my

family, because I'd been on the road all the time and that's not loads of fun, fortunately...

— *Yes, in fact you work hard because there isn't anything else to do.*

M. Sapin No, I'd take books...all the newspapers, but life outside, it's not fun and games, I met some interesting people, men and women, but it's not the same thing, you can't do sports, you can't have regular meetings during the week if you're on the road, so I thought, and I'd already told them so...so there were reports to do, and then Saturdays and Sundays I'd stuff myself with medical journals. That's right, because I'd spend all day Sunday reading medical material, putting files together, preparing lectures for my colleagues, etc. So I got back in touch with my family...I'm not someone who's obsessed with his family and I have a very poor relationship with my son; my wife and me, that's fine; my daughter is an intellectual, but we don't think alike at all; just to show how, she voted against the Maastricht treaty [on the European Union] because she's been contaminated by Le Pen. Yet I don't know how. Well sure, father on the left, daughter on the right. OK, I can accept that, that's the way it is, she'll change some day, she'll change.

— *Did that change not only the organization of your life but also your vision of the world?*

M. Sapin Oh, my vision of the world! It's simple! I was straight on the left, I moved over into abstention, in the far left vote...no voting for Communists. Beyond voting, I'm pretty disillusioned, pretty pessimistic too, I'm a pessimist, a pessimist who proclaims the catastrophes in hopes that they won't occur. (...) And then I don't at all believe in astrology but I'm a typical Gemini; astrology is a bunch of crap, but more Gemini than me just doesn't exist! Not at all, but there are two people in me, that I know...it's incredible! a phenomenological duality in me, which explains why I'm so perceptive.

[...]

I don't go overboard on consumption

M. Sapin Just to give an example, my inherited assets, including the apartment, come to almost 3 million francs...Oh, I pay 600 francs for this house; so I am an atypical unemployed person and I obviously can't tell this to everybody. (...) My inherited assets don't have as high a return as I could make it, but that's on purpose because I stick to the principle of diversification, because I don't want to put all my eggs in one basket. So there's a side of me that has a guilty conscience: I'm a lousy propertied bourgeois capitalist. Yes indeed! with all my leftist ideas, but that's the way it is, it doesn't bother me. (...) I don't go overboard on consumption like most people, no trips, the car will last as long as I can keep it going, maybe even till retirement, no external signs of wealth, I dress properly, but during the week I wear jeans, I don't have the means anymore of wearing out clothes, the trousers I have came from someone whose shutter I repaired, who passed on four sets of trousers to me, great trousers, my wife fixed them up, my wife does sewing work, we're from the North, she goes regularly when we go to the North once a year – when I say “I don't take any vacations,” I went to the North last year (but can you call that a vacation, in the North?). I'm not taken in by certain things; I won't hide it from you, for example, that I'm against the RMI [subsistence income for reentry into work], I already said so. It has to be clear that if there is unemployment, it's because there are a certain number of women who steal jobs, who have thrown family men like me out on the street out of a job; that's my view and I'm sticking to it.

— *That's what you think?*

M. Sapin That's what I think, but careful, I'm no macho type. Women have a career, for me that's crystal clear and no two ways about it. But you have to go beyond that, and I go beyond, I go beyond that through work share. But I'd add that a bit fewer immigrants, a bit fewer people pushed out

of the countryside, etc., etc. In any case, I'm waiting for two things, I'm waiting for them, don't think that it's *Schadenfreude* on my part, or the worse scenario policy, but I'm waiting for first, a decrease in the birth-rate, and second, the explosion of retirement funds. Women who work (...) an only son is a disaster, women who stop at one should be penalized, it would almost be better not to have any at all; it's all those people on two salaries, two and a half million every month; at home I've got a neighbor on retirement who just got himself a secondhand Mercedes for 17 million [170,000 new francs] (this gives an idea of the milieu I live in), so the BMW for Monsieur and the Volvo for Madame... I just don't understand women! Work is real slavery, you kill yourself working for a company, with all the conspiracies and little intrigues, the boss who acts like a dictator. I just don't see why you should want to spend your life working. If I were a woman with a husband who earned a good life for me, in the first place I'd try to negotiate a good understanding in the couple and then if you've chosen a man, it's in order to try and stay with him, nothing is worth more than fidelity in life, a whole life long; when I see the way people act...and you spend three years with a woman like that, and then the price to pay for kids! No, no, no! And so women working is the real cause...

A young woman, Mme Laurent, appears, introduces herself, and asks to speak.

That's something that I forgot to tell you

Mme Laurent ... what is awful, is not dreaming, because you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, you wait and while you're waiting what's serious is that your family can't make any plans either... That's what I wanted to tell you to say (...).

M. Sapin Oh, she's absolutely right! And that's something that I forgot to tell you ... Thanks so much, really thanks! What

luck that you turned up. Because that... I forgot to tell you that... I forgot...

Mme Laurent ... because it's serious and even though I don't yet have too many difficulties since I've not been unemployed for a long long time, but it's something deep inside of me, and it's something that hurts, that's it, to be in a position where you have to say "I don't know what I'll be able to do tomorrow," and not for anything, anything whatsoever...

M. Sapin Danielle, I've got the answer, I live in an eternal present...

Mme Laurent That's just what I wanted to say to you because everybody was talking at once, that's it, it's living always in the present, where up until now, my life, with my family and my close, really close friends, my life was making plans always a bit in the future... If only you could make use of the Epicureans who said to live in the present because it was extraordinary, you know, the famous...

M. Sapin "Seize the day."

Mme Laurent But it's not the Epicurean present, it's not a present like that at all...

M. Sapin It's a present that's heavy, a present that's hard to take.

Mme Laurent That's it. And for me this present, it's almost not wanting to see tomorrow because I'm afraid, as if you were waking up... And it's as if you were saying "it's still the same, I still don't have anything, I don't know what I'm going to be able to do"... and it's saying too, "I'm going to get a letter or an interesting phone call." That's all I wanted to say to you.

M. Sapin She's absolutely right...

Mme Laurent You know, it's really serious in a life when you can't dream, with the word "dream" in every sense of the word...

M. Sapin No, and that's why I asked "What dreams?" Dreams at night or dreams...

Mme Laurent I've always had dreams! Everything I did in my life, it was precisely in the present, that's true, always telling myself "next month, next week, we're going to do this," just as much at work as at home. And there, I can't do anything!

... And really that's it, and for me that's serious... Of course there are worse things, sure, but... when you don't have any money, but it's still serious for a human being... not to be able to make any plans, not to have any more dreams.

M. Sapin All the more so that as far as I'm concerned, I've got a potential substitution. With two children – my son isn't a great success, but still, he's working, he's making plans; my daughter, in principle, she should go far, perhaps, I don't know, a master's degree or... So they carry the future on for me a bit. But as far as I'm concerned personally, I never think about the future. And that's absolutely right, and I really appreciate you bringing it up because I had completely forgotten, I'm surfing, I'm surfing on an eternal present... The future – I don't even know what it is. Of course, I do tell myself "what do you know, only eight years to retirement," but about tomorrow, never. So my idea of time has completely disappeared. I can tell you one thing; I never had insomnia on account of not having a job, but it was often hard to get up; for months I'd always wake up with the same dream: I was in a doctor's waiting room and it was never the same one. And since I called on some 25,000 of them – maybe not, maybe I'm exaggerating a bit – it was never the same one. But I never had insomnia. As far as a nervous breakdown goes, in my view, I can't even tell you what it is.

— [To *Mme Laurent*] *What kind of work did you do?*

Mme Laurent I was in personnel management, I mean – You see how I always speak in the past, "I was..."! I am... since it's my work (but I can't help saying... it's really pathetic to talk like that). My colleague and I, for two or three years they'd been promising to give us executive status – it's something of a trap, you know, executive status...

M. Sapin That's right, it's the carrot they use...

Mme Laurent It wasn't even so much the salary that we were after, but... we were

fighting a bit for that status. And there was something of a personality problem with a manager who had always been against two women who... But in general they weren't big on promotions, particularly in our division because they figured that moving to executive status – even though we were supervisors with still and all a great many responsibilities – they were afraid that we wouldn't be capable of conveying a certain authority once we had crossed the line: you're an executive or you're not.

[...]

A "terrific" job

Mme Laurent I'm not an executive but I've got a good résumé (there were even people who went straight to my boss, I had a great many responsibilities and it can seem surprising); but I have to admit that, thanks to the company where I was, in spite of the problems with an individual up in the hierarchy, we were very lucky (I say "we" because there were two of us, we worked together absolutely perfectly). Well, this advantage was that we really had work opportunities to do terrific things. So for a while we took advantage of the situation, we said "great, we're getting special assignments, they trust us, we're going for it, and we launched into inspections and audits," it's great for us! But afterwards, we wondered "hey, what's going on?" All kinds of people were being promoted to executive status and we wondered "why?" This in a company with lots of men and, especially, with very few women. And so we wondered "why not us?" And then, "why not us?" the first time – every year we had a meeting with our project heads for the year coming up – and then the next year they said "no" for utterly idiotic reasons that just didn't hold water. And then things got worse, all the relationships degenerated, our administrative director, who was more in finance than personnel, he didn't really know his job very well, he sensed that he was losing control of the division, we were doing our work very well. He didn't have a hold of us any more, the whole thing was getting away

from him, he used to say "but I don't understand it, in this company, I don't have any problems in accounting, and in personnel all I have are problems."

M. Sapin If you'd been married with children, you couldn't have done it.

Mme Laurent No, but one day my companion said to me, "I'm shoving all these papers off, I'm pitching them out the window," he'd had enough! It was so interesting that I'd think... I didn't want to... sometimes on the weekend, I wanted to know, I wanted to work and I was on the road too, and all that. For a year, every two weeks I spent two weeks every month on

the outside, Bordeaux, Clermont-Ferrand, all over the place. So every month it started all over again. So in the beginning it must have been once or twice, and then it just never stopped and... my companion started worrying about me... And then he was extremely exasperated that I hadn't been able to get my executive status. Because he knew that for me it was... it wasn't even, I'm telling you, perhaps it wasn't really even the money...

— *It was the recognition...*

Mme Laurent That's it. He would have been very proud... he used to say "you certainly deserve it."

Nothing happens for naught

It is a bit surprising to find Mme Fournier among people so different from her. In her view, unemployment in no way justifies slackening off in the care taken with one's appearance. Dressed in a suit in subtle dark shades, wearing gold jewelry and with short blond hair, she brings to mind the image of today's "active woman" who occupies a relatively high position in a company. She speaks with assurance, but in measured tones, making a visible effort to have her "character" accepted by those she's talking with, and not, it seems, to elicit any sort of admiring approval.

The inner energy that she shows in all her trials and tribulations is not unrelated to the self-confidence that comes as much from her academic degrees (economics, various specialized degrees) as from her professional experience in management control and financial administration (she considers herself "very very strong in this area"). She did not start working until after her divorce, when she took a position in a software company in the Paris region. With her only daughter, she moved to the provinces following a "career plan" or, more exactly, in hopes of getting an important position as financial administrator. Unable to fulfill her ambition in Paris, she had to move to Nantes, in the same kind of company, to do management control and eventually get the position she had wanted all along. She was intensely committed to her work, which involved the computerization of the management for a rapidly expanding company: she had to "put the whole system in place, organize the work teams, get the hardware, train programmers, train people to use the hardware, structure everything as things went along." But in the "family structure" of this company, it didn't take her long to figure out the contradiction between her apparently legitimate expectations and her employer's desire to get rid of a potential competitor as soon as she'd done what they'd hired her for.

Mme Fournier had already had several setbacks, in particular "three jobs as financial manager denied her because they didn't want to bring her to Paris for

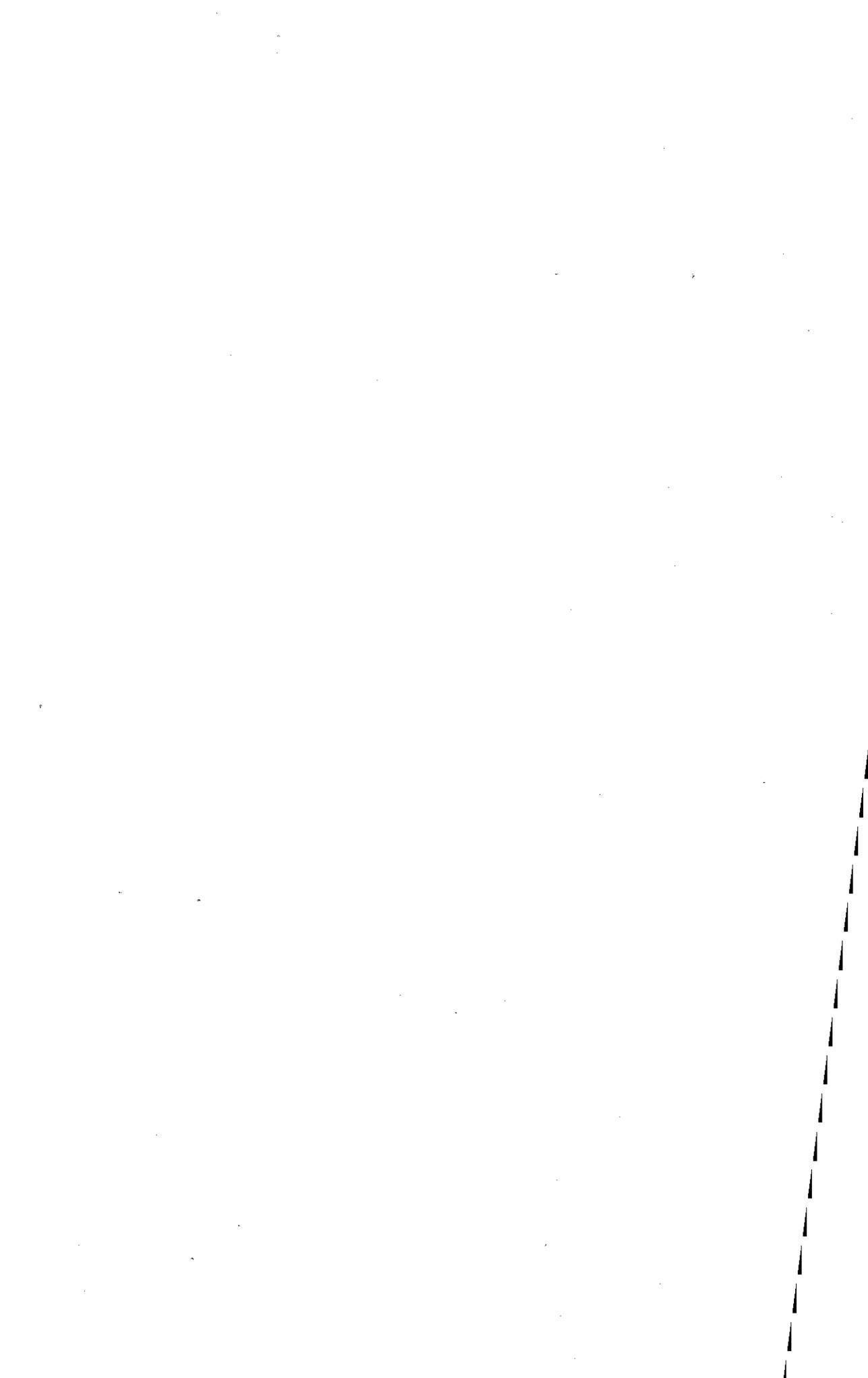
board meetings where only men were members.” A realistic assessment of the situation finally led her to accept the management control position in Nantes, and there she found an unhopd for opportunity for promotion despite the disadvantages that she predicted right from the beginning. Did she really have a choice? “Very soon, I knew that I was going to have run-ins with two people, the manager and his wife. I knew for a fact that there was a fundamental problem, but I always place great trust in individuals, and I thought maybe . . . in any case, I was planning on leaving afterwards, I didn’t think . . . because I didn’t have a career, I was there for a professional career, so I told myself, “when I’ve gotten everything in order . . .” Where I made a mistake is in not leaving a bit earlier, even if everything wasn’t . . . But I’m a real perfectionist, so everything had to be in apple-pie order, and I was caught short. But the problem might have been the same because maybe I would have realized that there wasn’t any work in this region.”

Significantly, the conflict with the administration broke out during a discussion that she had, not with the boss but with his wife, who had the (house) title of financial administrator, a real “zero” as Mme Fournier sees it, the wife had no ability whatsoever, being solely the incarnation of a “keep it in the family” logic that she considers totally unjustifiable. Even the way she was fired was set up to remind Mme Fournier that she is a woman: the boss couple pushed her to resign by trying to get at her pride (impossible assignments, petty quibbles, etc.). “One day, the boss’s wife asked me for something that was absolutely not possible (not possible because I was working with two systems, the old manual system and at the same time setting up the computerized system). I was all alone, I had an absolutely phenomenal amount of work, every Sunday, nights . . . And this Friday she asks me for something for Monday because there were some Americans coming in. I said “listen, there’s no way I can get it for you, there’s simply no way,” and then she says “but I absolutely want it,” and I said “no, it’s just not possible.” “But my husband absolutely wants it for Monday,” and I said “look, if I could physically do it for you I’d do it with pleasure, but I simply can’t do it.” So I explain things to her, I tell her “you know perfectly well it’s true,” and then she just gave a little sarcastic laugh, and that must have pushed me over the edge, because then I hit the roof! And when I say hit the roof, I mean hit the roof! I really told her off, “but you just don’t know a thing! You’re so dumb it’s scary!” Well, that was it, I might just as well have started packing my bags then and there; but I waited because I absolutely insisted on her telling me the real reason for firing me, because there wasn’t anything at all. So I waited a bit to see how she would maneuver things. So she hired someone, in between her and me, to push me to resign. She didn’t have the courage to do it herself, but I’m pretty strong, and quite exceptionally adaptable, that’s part of my character. And she was certainly surprised at the adaptation. Because for six months this guy really “badgered” me; there he was right in front of me, behind glass windows in his office, and I couldn’t make a move without him following me around, I couldn’t get a telephone call without him turning up right next to me. All day long, he’d be there, “where are you at in the assignment, what are you doing?” and things like

that, and not a peep out of me, nothing aggressive, nothing at all. I wanted to see just how far this really awful linking on to me could go. And their plans were upset just a bit by the fact that I didn't say anything and so they had to rethink their plans, and at the end of the year, he said to me "I don't want you in the group," so I said "fine, but I want to know why," "that's just the way it is, I don't want you in the group," I said "fine, I'll see the financial administrator about it," and then she didn't have any idea what was going on, and then I said "now you're going to tell me why." "Well, er... uh..." There wasn't any reason, she wasn't able to give me a reason and then I said to her "look, I'm not sorry for what I said to you, you don't know a thing about this job. It so happens that you are the wife of the director and you do what you want, even so, now I can tell you that you don't know a thing. If you can't take it, that's your problem but you are wrong to take it like that because I was fully prepared to accept that you don't know anything about this work if you had given me all the opportunities I needed to do the work, even if your work is only pro forma." And I said "it's too bad, it's too bad especially for you," and so the reason they put down was "loss of trust."

To get beyond her situation Mme Fournier is concerned to analyze it and understand it: "nothing happens for naught... out of any sort of pain you have to be able to draw an energy so you won't fall apart... everyone has an amazing capacity for taking care of things if you really want to make use of it." Even though she has assessed the scarcity of local job possibilities, she refuses to be fatalistic about the situation and even has a few ideas on how to resolve her problems (notably by setting up a local organization to put unemployed executives in contact with local companies where she still has contacts). Her conviction of her own professional worth allows her to avoid resentment by giving her a perspective on failures over which she has no control. This explains her quasi-detached appraisal, in spite of and beyond her own ambitions, of the masculine world of business, this slightly foreign world "made by men." Putting all her "identity" into "work" the way men do seems to her an illusory luxury.

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Pierre Bourdieu and Patrick Champagne

Outcasts on the Inside

To speak about the “high school malaise” as so many have done, notably with reference to the protest movements of November 1986 or November 1990, is to attribute an unclear and ill-defined “state” (of body or mind) to a social category that is extremely dispersed and diversified. Indeed, it is clear that the world of schools and its student populations is really a continuum, but one which is commonly perceived only in terms of two extremes. On the one hand, there are the schools that have been hastily put up in the ghettoized suburbs where they are intended for ever greater numbers of ever more culturally disadvantaged students. Such places no longer have much in common with the high school system as it was until the 1950s. On the other hand, there are the schools that have been carefully maintained where the student life of upper- and middle-class students is not all that different from the one their fathers or grandfathers knew. Even if the present “educational malaise” can bring together students (or parents) for as long as a protest demonstration lasts, the forms taken by the current, and widespread “school sickness” are many and varied. The difficulties, even the anxieties that touch families and students in the elite sections of the top Parisian lycées differ as night and day when compared to those encountered by students in the vocational junior high schools in the poverty-stricken housing projects in the big cities.

Until the end of the fifties, the secondary school system was characterized by great stability based on the early and brutal elimination (at the beginning of junior high school) of students from culturally disadvantaged families. This socially based selection was widely accepted by the children who were its victims and by their families, since it seemed to be entirely based on the talents and merits of the individuals selected and because the children not wanted by the school system were convinced (notably by the system itself) that they did not want anything to do with school. The simple, clearly identifiable hierarchy of stages of learning, and especially the stark distinction drawn between primary and secondary education, maintained a close, homologous relationship with the social hierarchy. The resulting state of affairs contributed more than a little to convincing those who felt unsuited for school that they were unsuited for the positions that an education opens up (and closes off) – that is, white collar jobs and, especially, managerial positions within these occupations.

Without a doubt, one of the transformations that has affected the school system the most since the 1950s has been the entry into the academic enterprise of social categories that previously excluded themselves or were in practice excluded: shopowners, artisans, farmers, and even (due to the extension of mandatory attendance to age 16 and the corresponding generalized entry into junior high school) factory workers. This whole process has had the effect of intensifying competition and increasing educational investment on the part of groups that were already heavy users of the school system.

One of the most paradoxical effects of this process – somewhat precipitously and accusatorily labeled “democratization” – has been the progressive discovery by the most disadvantaged of the conservative functions of the supposedly liberating school system. Indeed, after an illusory, even euphoric, period, the new beneficiaries slowly came to understand either that access to secondary education did not guarantee academic success or that academic success did not ensure access to the social positions that it once did. In the past, at a time when the vast majority of their age group did not go on to secondary education, these positions were obtained with certificates and degrees, in particular, the baccalauréat. There is every reason to believe that the diffusion of the major social scientific findings about education, particularly concerning the social factors behind academic success and failure, must have helped to change the perception of education among parents and children who have already had a practical lesson in its effects. All this, undoubtedly thanks to a gradual change in the dominant discourse about education: even though inevitable slips of the tongue (about “gifted children,” for example) often bring this discourse back to the most deeply concealed principles of vision and division, the pedagogical gospel – with its arsenal of pop-sociological notions like “social dysfunctions,” “cultural deprivation,” and “learning disabilities” – has spread the idea that failure in school is no longer, or not only, attributable to the “natural” personal deficiencies of those who are excluded. Little by little, the logic of collective responsibility tends to replace that of individual responsibility, which leads to “blaming the victim.” Factors that seem “natural,” like talent or taste, give way to poorly defined social factors such as the inadequacies of the educational system or the inability and incompetence of the teachers (whom parents increasingly hold responsible for their children’s poor results), or, even more confusedly, to the logic of a completely deficient system in need of an overhaul.

Without encouraging the illusions of determinism (or, more specifically, the functions of worst-case scenarios), it would be necessary to show how, in the altogether different school system created by new student populations, the differential distribution of academic profit and correlated social profits has essentially been maintained through a complete carryover of the disparities – with, however, a fundamental difference. By putting off, prolonging, and consequently spreading out the process of elimination, the school system turns into a permanent home for potential outcasts, who bring to it the contradictions and conflicts associated with a type of education that is an end in itself. In short, with its periodic disruptions

and demonstrations, the school system is the site of a chronic crisis that is the counterpart of imperceptible and often unconscious adjustments in structures and dispositions which offer a kind of solution to the contradictions brought about by the recent access of certain social groups to secondary and even higher education. In clearer, but more inexact and therefore more dangerous terms, these “dysfunctions” are the “price to pay” for the (in particular, political) profits of “democratization.”

It is clear that children of the most culturally and economically disadvantaged families cannot gain access to the different parts of the school system, and to the higher levels in particular, without profoundly modifying the economic and symbolic value of degrees (and without, at least apparently, creating risks for the holders of such degrees). But it is just as clear that these students are directly responsible for the devaluation that results from the proliferation of degrees and degree-holders, meaning the new arrivals, who are its first victims. After an extended school career, which often entails considerable sacrifice, the most culturally disadvantaged run the risk of ending up with a devalued degree. If, as is more likely, they fail, they are relegated to what is undoubtedly a stigmatizing and total exclusion even more absolute than in the past. The exclusion is more disgraceful in the sense that they seem to have “had their chance” and because social identity tends more and more to be defined by the school system. And it is more absolute because a growing number of positions in the job market are customarily reserved for, and are in fact held by, ever growing numbers of degree-holders. This explains why, even in the lower classes, people see failure at school as catastrophic. So, to families as well as to students, the school system increasingly seems like a mirage, the source of an immense, collective disappointment, a promised land which, like the horizon, recedes as one moves toward it.

Related to streaming and selection procedures that take place at an ever younger age, the multiplication of tracks toward different levels and qualifications leads to “gentle” exclusionary practices or, better yet, *insensible* ones – taken in the dual sense of continual/gradual and imperceptible/unperceived. “Gentle” elimination is to “brutal” elimination what the exchange of gifts and counter-gifts is to a situation of *quid pro quo*. By stretching the process out over time, the individuals living through it can hide the truth from themselves and give in to a bad faith which sustains their self-deception. In a sense, the most decisive “choices” are made sooner and sooner, as early as the *troisième* [tenth grade], and not, as in the past, after the baccalauréat. Academic fate is sealed sooner and sooner (which helps explain the presence of very young lycée students in the recent mass protests). But, in another sense, the consequences of these choices appear later and later, as if everything conspired to encourage and support high school or university students and give them a “reprieve” which allows them to put off the final reckoning, the moment of truth when they will see the time spent at school as lost time, time wasted.

In more than one case, this work of bad faith can extend well beyond the end of school, notably by virtue of the hazy, indeterminate aspects of certain *uncertain*

sites in social space which, because they are less open to social classifications, leave more room for maneuvering on both sides. This is one of the most powerful and – with good reason – most hidden effects of the school system and its relationship to the space of social positions that it supposedly opens up. The school system produces more and more individuals affected by this chronic malaise created by the more or less repressed experience of complete or relative failure at school. They are obliged to bluff nonstop, for others and for themselves, with a permanently flayed, wounded or mutilated self-image. The model of these innumerable *relative failures* found even at the very highest levels of success – with, for example, students at less prestigious schools compared to the students of elite schools, or, within these elite schools, students ranked low in comparison to those who get a top ranking, and so on – is no doubt the musician in Patrick Süskind's play, *The Double Bass*, whose very deep and very real misery comes from the fact that at the very heart of this highly privileged world to which he belongs, everything is as if designed to remind him that the position he occupies in it is a low one.

Nevertheless, the objective truth of the position occupied in the school system, or in society, is never completely repressed, even when it is buttressed by all the weight of the institution and its systems of collective defense. The “liar's paradox” (“I always lie”) is nothing compared to the difficulties of lying to oneself. Nothing shows this better than the remarks of people who have been “reprieved”: they have coexisting within them an extreme lucidity about an education with no end other than itself, and an almost deliberate decision to join in the illusory game. Perhaps they do it to better profit from the time of freedom and lack of responsibility offered by the school system. Anyone who attempts to take over the lie made for them by the system is by definition caught in a dual consciousness and a double bind.

But official diversification (into tracks or streams) and unofficial diversification (into subtly hierarchized schools or classes, often through the study of modern languages) also help re-create a particularly well-hidden principle of differentiation. The elite students who have received a well-defined sense of place, good role models and encouragement from their families are in a position to apply themselves at the right moment in the right place: in the good tracks, in the good schools, in the good sections, etc. On the contrary, students who come from the most disadvantaged families, especially children of immigrants, often left to fend for themselves, from primary school on, are obliged to rely either on the dictates of school or on chance to find their way in an increasingly complex universe. Which explains their either untimely or inappropriate use of an already extremely meager cultural capital.

Along with the transmission of cultural resources, this is one of the mechanisms that enable the highest levels of the school system, and in particular those leading to positions of economic and political power, to remain as exclusive as they were in the past. It is also what enables this system, by and large open to all yet strictly reserved for a few, to achieve the tour de force of uniting the appearance of

“democratization” with the reality of social reproduction, which takes place on a higher level of dissimulation and consequently with a greater effect of social legitimation.

But this reconciliation of opposites does not take place without prompting a counterreaction. The periodic student demonstrations of the past 20 years over various issues and the varying kinds of violence that are permanent occurrences in the most disadvantaged schools are only the visible manifestations of the permanent effects of the contradictions of the school system and the altogether new kind of violence it inflicts on those who are not suited to it.

The educational system excludes as it always has, but now it does so continuously and at every level of the curriculum (between the slow-track classes and the vocational schools the difference is perhaps only a matter of degree); and it keeps hold of those whom it excludes, just relegating them to educational tracks that have lost more or less of whatever value they once had. It follows that these outcasts on the inside are forced, as a function of the fluctuations and oscillations of the system and its sanctions, to do a balancing act between enraptured adherence to the illusions the system proposes and resignation to its decrees, between anxious submission and powerless revolt. They cannot avoid discovering quickly that the identity of words – such as “school,” “student,” “teacher,” “secondary studies” or “baccalauréat” – hides the diversity of things; that the establishment into which they have been directed by educational tracking is a place for assembling the most disadvantaged; that they are working on a cheap diploma, as when one of them says, “I’m just working on a little accounting certificate”; and finally, that unless they get honors, their baccalauréat consigns them to the lesser tracks of higher education which are higher in name only, and so on. Obligated by the negative sanctions of the school system to give up the academic and social aspirations that the system itself had inspired in them and constrained, in short, to rely on themselves alone, they drag themselves listlessly through a school career they know has no future. Long gone are the days of leather book bags, of neat, proper clothing, of respect shown to teachers – the many signs of belonging that lower-class children used to give the school system and which have since given way to a more distant relationship: disenchanting resignation disguised as careless nonchalance is displayed in the ostentatious lack of school material – the files held by a string or rubber band that they drag along over their shoulders, disposable felt pens that take the place of the expensive fountain pens they used to get on birthdays and similar occasions to encourage them in their studies. It is also visible in the increasing provocation to teachers, like listening to a Walkman in class or dressing in blatantly informal clothes which often carry the names of the latest rock groups – so many reminders right in the middle of school that the “real world” is elsewhere.

Moved by a taste for dramatization or by a desire for sensationalism, people like to talk about the “high school malaise” which, in one of the shortcuts of “prelogical” thought that dominate everyday discourse, they connect to the “malaise in the (poor) suburbs,” itself tied to phantasms about “immigrants.”

Without realizing it, these people have hit on one of the most fundamental contradictions of contemporary society, one which is particularly visible in the workings of a school system that has doubtless never played as important a role as it does today. For a significant portion of society, this is the contradiction of a social order that has a growing tendency to give everything to everybody, particularly when it is a question of material, symbolic or even political goods. But these "gifts" can only be apparent, rather as if simulacra and imitation were the sole means of saving for a few the real and legitimate possession of these exclusive goods.

Pierre Bourdieu

Those Were the Days

Malik is 19 and has already “lived a lot.” When we met him he was doing – without too many illusions – an unpaid internship, giving him minimal training, that he had had to find for himself to fulfill a poorly defined path of study at a nearby, low-ranked suburban high school.¹ Living in a small house with his father, who was still on his own after a divorce a few years before, Malik regularly visited his mother in her housing “development.” He was nostalgic about this world and its ambiance of togetherness – what he calls “sharing.” Perhaps because, beneath his cheerfulness, he was still worried about keeping his family together, and at times seemed to bear all its weight on his own shoulders, he had mixed feelings about his older brother, once his role model – even though he still loved him a lot, he blamed him a bit, without really condemning him, for his indifference towards their father who had been deeply hurt by his bad behavior. Malik spoke of his father with great indulgence and understanding, explaining the man’s fears or his excessive yet futile harshness by his “origins” and by his desire to be recognized and to fit in. Malik was trying his best to protect his father and, if the word isn’t too strong, to reeducate him. Without a doubt, the responsibilities that he undertakes *toward* this man – uprooted, out of sync and deprived of the foundations of paternal authority – but also *in his place*, are without doubt, along with the fear of life and society, the basis of an immense desire for stability that leads him to hang on to the provisional, uncertain, but in the end, relatively comfortable status of high school student. He told us about his life as if in two different time tracks, from two different viewpoints, which he made no attempt to reconcile: first, from the perspective of school, then from the point of view of the “development” where he spent his childhood and part of his adolescence. Two separate, even opposed, worlds and two sets of memories that make sense only if placed in relationship to each other.

Everything in his expression, his bearing, his clothing, even his speech, gives a feeling of great ease, doubtless associated with the physical charm that he cannot be unaware of. He also conveys a feeling of fragility and instability, as they say in bad, educational psychology. He cannot sit still and seems to always be moving about. Illustrating the analogy that Berber mythology makes between adolescence

¹ It is important to keep in mind that in something of a reversal of the stereotypical US and UK idea of “suburbia,” the suburbs of many larger French cities are where housing projects are located along with the cultural idea of immigrant ghettos, high crime and substandard schools. See Loïc Wacquant’s article above, “America as Social Dystopia.” [Tr.]

and springtime, with its alternations of advances and retreats, of clear days and the return of rain and cold, he continually moves between an almost childish insouciance and anxious seriousness. He often loses his train of thought and openly worries about it, a bit excessively, rather as if he were accustomed to this fact and to being reproached for it. Right from the beginning of the interview, after a long silence, he remarks that he “cannot find his words.” A little later he impatiently observes that he’s forgetting yet another word and he works at finding it, encouraging himself out loud, like in a game – “I’m not stuck, I’m not stuck!” In both cases, it is words from school or school bureaucracy terminology – “job search techniques,” “internship contracts.” As if he were taking academic discourse to heart, he says he has a hard time reading books (“I just can’t, I start reading and then I quit ’cause there’re things goin’ on out there, otherwise I could be lookin’ for the stuff I need in books, it’s true it’s inexhaustible and really great stuff [verbal concessions to school subjects] but to do that, I’d have to live like a hermit, with a library”). He blames himself for the confusion (“I’m the one who’s confused, I’m telling you, what I’m telling you is confusing”) that he sometimes falls into when, intimidated by the interview situation, which no doubt recalls his experience in school, he launches into sentences that he does not finish.

Making a kind of virtue of necessity, he sometimes manages to turn this instability into a position: “I’ve got the impression that I’ve gotta...run away...run away all the time but it’s more an escape than anything else, uh, it’s...I’ve...I’ve gotta...I don’t like stability. I need things stirred up all the time, for things to happen, something goin’ on.” Or again: “let’s say that...it’s all the same, they’ll see who I am in my internships ’cause I look hard at each company, I want things to be different.” Everything leads one to believe that the relationships he has formed at and around school (his friends and also the young woman he loves and who teaches at the school) have given him the means to invent a sort of picaresque variation of the artist’s life (particularly visible in his account of a vacation spent in Spain that has not been reproduced here). “Being a CEO and not have time for your girl any more...no more...I’m not interested in that...”

Indeed, his entire existence has been placed under the sign of instability and ceaseless change, at work, at home, at school, with his friends. His father, who was born in Algeria (Tlemcen) and arrived in France shortly before Malik’s birth, has changed jobs and companies several times. “He changed jobs a lot, he...I think he started out as...he was a mechanic, but on scooters, etc.; afterwards he did things, then he was a drill operator, a drill operator in a company, he stayed there the longest, then it went out of business (...) then he found another position in another one that shut down; in another one, he had to move until he’s now...” Both through his father and his mother, a Yugoslav immigrant who has been, in turn, a clerk at a pool (near where they lived) and then in a department store, Malik has, as he says, “moved, moved, and changed schools” a lot.

The profound uncertainty about the present and the future inscribed in such an experience is redoubled and reinforced by the ups and downs and disappointments of a school career that is undoubtedly disrupted by the disconcerting life in the “development”: the “dumb-ass stuff” to have something to do, instead of nothing, so things will “happen” and out of solidarity with the older kids, his older sister and older friends who take you into clubs when you’re 12, his brother who’s two years older, whose escalating “stupidities” (Malik talks in terms of bigger and bigger, faster and faster, more and more) and need for money landed him in jail after a holdup.

One understands that, like the subproletarians who similarly almost totally lack a hold on either the present or the future, all he can do is try to prolong the period of time in the state of uncertainty that itself keeps him from mastering that period of time (“finally, we’re enjoying ourselves there – in school – really”; “in the end, it’s the path I’ve chosen, it’s let me stay in school longer”). It is also understandable that he joins an extreme realism to the riskiest utopianism. On the one hand, he can make (often with a laugh or a smile) outlandish claims: “Watch out! I’m very demanding! I want a job I like from start to finish!” And he can even, at the end of the interview bring up the perfectly unrealistic project that he has thought up, like a millenarian myth, with two pals who are as lost as he is: a kind of Club Med for billionaires in the Far East, in a country he has never visited. But, on the other hand, he has a thousand ways of showing that he knows perfectly well where he stands, that his school is “a dumping ground” (he describes very succinctly how he very quickly figured out where he had ended up, by discovering that the kids seated around him were just like him); and he talks as well about a “dead end” qualification. And, after expressing the desire to leave at all costs, a desire that has never left him ever since he was a little kid, he concludes by reaffirming the truth denied by his dream of escape: “what it comes down to is, I’m sure of one thing, that I’m going to stay here. But, right now, I don’t want to.”

Nothing says more about what we can surely call his “wisdom” than the theory of educational exchange that he proposes at the very end (“at school they don’t ask me to make top marks . . . might just as well do as fuckin’ little as possible, just enough to get by”), as though he were giving a rational basis to the art of surviving at the least cost in the protected universe of the school. Beyond the fact that it allows him to put off entry into the real world and, above all, escape the fear of “the factory” – a fear that school, taken in the strongest sense of adaptation to school life, has doubtless contributed to – this art of endurance has the great virtue of prolonging the indeterminacy of school and thereby authorizing desires that the school system itself works tirelessly to crush.

with a young Beur

— interview by Pierre Bourdieu and Rosine Christin

“My life’s okay”

— *What kind of internship is this? What do you do there?*

Malik I’m supposed to be doing sales, sales and displays. So I do that mornings, I watch things since I don’t do orders. It’s because I’m not familiar with the products and if not that... if not, afternoons I stay in the store a bit and watch, I try to learn. I’m starting to learn.

— *What kind of business is it?*

Malik It makes car parts.

— *Is it a paid internship?*

Malik Not at all.

— *Did the school find it or did you?*

Malik Oh no, no, that’s part of... it’s part of a... I can’t find the words; well it doesn’t matter anyway, it’s part of a job-search technique; let’s say you have to search. You get grades etc. It all depends, how you find it, what you find, etc.

[...]

— *So can we maybe go back to your studies and all, how that has...*

Malik It depends if you want to start with preschool up till...

— *Okay, why not.*

It was more a dumping ground than anything else...

Malik Preschool was fine, except that afternoons I didn’t use to go very much because I was mostly with my mother (...). Back then, she worked part-time in a supermarket (...). After the start, primary school went along like usual to tell the truth, like usual, and then I did my first year of the *sixième* [sixth grade], first because I did it twice: first quarter okay, second not very good and then the third was a disaster.

— *And where was that?*

Malik It was near Cachan [on the outskirts of Paris]. Cachan, to give you your bear-

ings. That’s where it was. And then it was, let us say, the entry into the world of junior high school. I think it’s a coming out time for kids and once you get there, you don’t think about studying much, you ought to think about it a little sooner though. (...) Then I did my second year of sixth grade in a more or less private school. My parents had put me there. It was also a boarding school. For me, no question of boarding ’cause I’m pretty claustrophobic. And no, things went well. Things went very well. And then, the next year was a total disaster.

— *Meaning?*

Malik Well, I didn’t want to work much. It’s a little like... it wasn’t the school, it was me, I was off somewhere else.

— *But why, if you can tell us?*

Malik (...) No, I dunno, maybe my friends, I dunno. No, in the end, it wasn’t even all the stuff going on all around me, it was... I think I needed to take a break at a certain point to stop a bit and figure out certain things.

— *And were your parents supportive of you when...?*

Malik No. The problem, unfortunately, is that my parents were able to help me through primary school because they were... and then, after a point, there’s a gap...

— *But in primary school, they supported your efforts? They helped you...*

Malik Yes, they looked over things, etc., they could help, etc.

— *Okay. What does your father do?*

Malik Oh, my father, he’s – right now – in a lab and he does, he does some of everything. He does little things, he drives the cars; he’s a jack-of-all-trades. He doesn’t really have a set job.

[...]

— *But this private school must have been very expensive for them?*

Malik No, because it was a school run by the postal service, it's called a *foyer des PTT*² and you pay based on the parents' income. There's a quota and so on. So, for that, it was no problem. There I decided, well they asked me to repeat a grade, I refused and then...

— *In the seventh grade, right?...*

Malik Yes, seventh grade and then I decided on a study track, a vocational certification. So they kept me in that school.

— *And your parents helped you decide then on the vocational track or...?*

Malik No, I was very stubborn, no, I wanted to do that, I didn't know where it would end up...

— *A vocational certificate in what then?*

Malik Office employee, accounting...

— *A bit like your mother? Is your mother an accountant?*

Malik No, not at all, she's a cashier. Well, she does a little accounting but...

— *Why accounting?*

Malik Why accounting? Because I had a choice between electronics tech and I don't know what else, a mechanic...and since I'm a real lazy bones...

— *Accounting was better because you get to sit down, is that it?*

Malik Yes, I think so. You sit and then let's say that you don't have to...which would maybe scare me, not scare me, it was the workshop thing, the noises...

— *Yes, the factory.*

Malik Yeah, the factory. Yeah, the factory, that's the word. And no, that must have scared me. (...) And then, well, I did my first year of the CAP vocational certificate, the second, the third and then, still as lazy as ever, I don't know why, I kept moving up...

— *And still in the same school there?*

Malik In the same school. You could say that those three years there, those were the three best school years because...But not in my grades, it was especially with the people around me, in the class, 'cause it's there that I made two friends and then some

others, etc. Later...there started, I know that I was...I finished my CAP and then at the end of that year, there is a huge advisory board session, etc., it's a big deal and they decide if you can go on or not. I think it's completely ridiculous since they should give everybody a chance. Well, ridiculous, I don't know, because, in the end...it's ridiculous in relationship to the CAP; I mean, you're not going to let...you ought to give a chance to, but there's a bit too many... Because of that, I can understand that they pick and choose.

— *Ah, yes! There's not enough room, that's it.*

Malik So, then they didn't let me go on, I didn't get a positive evaluation, which means that my records didn't get sent to admissions offices, they don't get sent on, so afterwards it's up to us to look out for ourselves, so that's what I did, I went to different schools, from office to office, etc., and then I ended up finding a school but, well, it's...

— *You did all that? Finding things...*

Malik I had to because, for me, there was no way I was going to stop. Because back then I think that I had more chance to... Well, it wasn't a CAP that was going to take me very far. (...) I looked into sales (...), so I looked into sales because they had opened a major in sales: sales-operations-merchandising, and I was looking for (...) so I didn't find it, the classes were full, it was...and I ended up finding an address because I'd been to my town's information center, etc., and they told me there would be some places opening up in a school. So I went to this school, they ended up admitting me. But not in sales, not in accounting, not in secretary skills. And they led me to believe that my second year I could do accounting.

— *And where was that?*

Malik In Gentilly [outskirts of Paris]. In Gentilly and as things went along I realized

² These foyers are run by the postal department. Among other things, they offer employees schooling for children, organize continuing education classes and activities for retirees and provide housing for people on vacations. [Tr.]

that it was more of a dumping ground than anything else...

— *What was it called?*

Malik The Val-de-Bièvre vocational-technical lycée [LEP]. It's hard when you realize that...

— *How long did it take you to realize this?*

Malik Very quickly from talking with my neighbors...talking things over with people next to me in the same boat as me. And then the guy in front of me who was in the same situation, and the guy behind me who was in the same situation. So we realized it was a (...) and, then through the others who, of course, were nearby, everybody figured things out...

— *And what did you say then? Did you talk among yourselves?*

*I like it, it's true, I don't know why,
I like it*

Malik Well the problem is, once you're there, you're trapped...you have to go along, it's there that...I told myself: well, no big deal, I'll do a second year of accounting; and then afterwards, finally, you're really happy there. You're happy because you've got pals in class, you're getting to know your teachers, etc. So that goes along fine, not that what they teach us isn't good; it's the school, you feel that there's no...it's a dead end, you get the impression that after that, in any event, it stops at the BEP certificate, you get the impression that it's cut off from the rest and that you go through there if you don't take the regular route, you have to go through this school, it's a bit weird.

— *And the teachers are nice?*

Malik Oh yes! They know the deal, they're not crazy...

— *And they do what they can?*

Malik Usually. Usually. You couldn't say...some of them are there, all settled in and comfy like, because they want to put in their two or three years because for teachers too it's also a school...

— *A dumping ground?*

Malik Not a dumping ground, more a waiting room, something they have to wait out for three years...

— *Until they get something else, right?*

Malik Lots of teachers start out like that. In this school. Young teachers, etc., they stick them in here, they'll still be here (...) I don't know, well, lot's of things like that. And then afterwards, I did my second year and then finally they didn't let me go on to accounting and I did my second year of secretary skills. Then, starting the second year...I wanted really bad to continue, I wanted to do the junior year of reorientation.

— *To catch up...*

Malik To catch up with the class, because I was telling myself, it's better to catch up, and then the same thing: I got turned down. (...) Well, I never worked, but I never needed to work to be able to pass, I don't know, and then I...I passed as usual, no problem, but you'd have to work or show that you're working to maybe...Because they think: if he doesn't work now, perhaps he won't work senior year either. And it's true you have to study for sure. So, there, but then they were really nice since they let me do a senior year over and so that's what I did. And then it was the first time I really, really made a choice. So, it was sales, I took up sales. So, there I am.

— *A while ago, you spoke of friends, in front of you, behind you, etc., and then you said: "Of course you figure it out..." What did you mean by that?*

Malik Well, that you accept it. You tell yourself, well, that's how it is, but it's not all bad, if you realize, if you succeed in... (...) Well, in any event, it's a good time; I like school, it...I like it, it's true, I don't know why...Not because of my pals, nor, really, for what I learn; I don't know why.

— *And when you say that you're lazy, that you...*

Malik Oh, no! I am very, very, very lazy. And when I say lazy, it's lazy for real.

— *Yes, but you set yourself to something, when you go all over looking for a school, etc., you put in a lot of effort?*

Malik It didn't seem like an effort, because I would have done it before without the effort. There, it's, I'm [*inaudible*], once I'm up against the wall, then I tell myself, well, you've got to do something, I try to get a foot in the door, it doesn't matter where, I've gotta go with the flow some. But, it's hard, it's hard... it's not so hard as all that. In any event... No, yeah, I'm lazy because, in the end... if I'd've come home at night and then worked, then, yeah, maybe they'd've given me more of a chance, more choice, it's true... it's not that they... no, they are there for sure, they push, they push, they tell me "as long as you stay on in school there'll be no problems," etc. But they're not there backing you up.

He was on his own ground

— *They don't know what to do to help you, is that it?*

Malik I think they trust me now. They have to trust me, I think it's more that, because they tell themselves, well, after all, even if he doesn't work, we don't know how, but he... But it's true, it's funny what I'm going to say, but even my father doesn't know what I'm doing. Really. He couldn't tell you exactly what I was doing. He doesn't know if it's accounting, or if it's sales, he'd mix it all up with lots of things like that in his head, but he doesn't know exactly what I'm doing.

— *You don't talk to him much?*

Malik No, we don't talk much; he doesn't talk to me much about his job and I don't talk to him much about mine.

— *It's difficult for him, too, isn't it?*

Malik I think it must be... after all, he's not completely illiterate, but let's say he knows his abc's more or less, but he's got problems when it comes to reading, etc.

— *Is he from Algeria?*

Malik Yes.

— *Where from?*

Malik He was born there.

— *Do you know from which part?*

Malik From Tlemcen.

— *Ah, yes! Tlemcen. So he finds it difficult?*

Malik Yes, he finds it difficult and, really, I don't know because really that was, well he'd never been to school, he went into a school once and never went back. I've got the big impression that, for him, it was, it was so frustrating once he got there, etc., he got picked on or I don't know what, and now he realizes that it's (...) and now he'd like and it's not important what you do, no matter what you do, once you start pushing ahead a little. And it's true that he's there, he does what he can. Financially, I mean, he'll help me out, etc., when I'm in school. But it's true that if I stop, he's not happy, not at all.

[...]

— *What does he do for your brother? Is he also with the two of you?*

Malik No, it's a strange situation with him, too, he lives with a girlfriend we don't know; so sometimes he's at home, sometimes he's not. What does he do? My father has given up. I think that's it. I think he has given up, that's what. Because he felt he was slipping away from him completely, but really early on, when my brother was 16 or 17, he withdrew completely...

— *What do you mean by "slipping away" from him?*

Malik He was slipping away because my brother was never, almost never at home any more, he was out all the time, etc. So my father didn't keep up with him for two, three years, wasn't able to see how he was growing up, etc.

— *That must have hurt him a lot?*

Malik I think so... quite a bit... I think. But it's now that in spite of everything I'm coming to realize all this, since he's all alone now...

— *Does he talk more than he did?*

Malik He tries to talk more; he has to try talking more. But I think he needed that too (...) it's more, it's going to be not so much fun, it's more...

— *Can you say something about it? ...*
(...)

Malik Well, after the divorce – well, it's now, it's with the perspective that I have, but my opinion isn't objective – so, after the

divorce, let's say that beforehand he didn't realize...he always looked at us from a father-child viewpoint, etc., and then he didn't let us, well, grow up, I don't know, but discussions weren't possible until a certain point because when I'd talk to him about something, he wouldn't pay attention; for him it was real matter-of-fact and therefore, after the divorce, my mother left, so my brother and I stayed, my sister had already left with her boyfriend. With my brother not being there a lot, there was only me. But since I wasn't there a lot - more than my brother for a time and then less - that means he's been alone for...for 10 months, in fact we'll say since school started last fall. And so he's starting to...because he's been pushed off to the side and I'm sure that deep down he's got to feel like he's been shoved out. Left out. While my mother is closer to our level, I've got the impression that he... (...) He must be...

— *Thinking?* [Malik loses his train of thought and is unhappy about it.] (...) *But after all, if you had spoken like that, before, with him, would it have been different? It wasn't possible?*

Malik Yes, but it was a one-way street, because it's what I was telling you, he was on his own ground, he was on his own ground and I was the one who ought to have gone to him and that only worked in one direction, so I'm talking to you about me. But it's the same everywhere, it was...it's the father who...

— ...*that's it, who is right.*

Malik It's the father in the center who is...about whom you don't say...But it's, but I completely understand that it's, because of where he comes from, etc.

— *Of course, it's natural.*

Malik And, anyway he's great because he's let everything go, etc. I mean religion-wise he isn't at all...what he really wants is to fit in; he even gets paranoid about it because he doesn't want any problems; any time he gets a ticket he goes crazy, as soon as there are problems, etc. He doesn't want any trouble, he's trying to settle in.

But I think he has one fear, he is totally afraid of anything that isn't clear, but there again, that comes from his... Completely. I mean, he gets a notice, I don't know, for example me, I got a parking ticket, etc., after a while there's a...it was the computer, so, there you go, they sent it directly, it's due and he can't understand that it's a computer and not somebody that he can get hold of, etc. It's real paranoid, it's really serious, but (...) you have to explain to him. You have to explain to him, but he has trouble, lots of trouble. It's both funny and not funny at all. So you laugh when it happens and then...

I need things stirred up all the time

[...]

— *And what do you think about for the future?*

Malik [*laughs*] Not here. Not here.

— *Meaning?*

Malik Not here, that's what, not in Paris. Well, I like Paris, you know, it's a city I adore, I mean, well I'm really happy to live here, but I seem to need to...run away...to run away all the time. But it's more an escape than anything else, eh, it's...I have, I've got to...I don't like stability. I need things stirred up all the time, to have things happen, something going on. If I've been sitting there for a while and I realize that everything is starting to be the same, I get...I haven't wanted to get caught like a cog in a machine. That's mostly it. But maybe that'll change. And even so, it only happens to us, anyway, it changes for sure. I'm sure of one thing, I'm going to stay here. But right now I don't want to.

— *Yes, that's it, you don't want to accept it.*

Malik Yeah, yeah, that's it. I think that's it. But I'm going to get out of here [*laughs*].

[...]

— *So this internship now, what does that lead to? Right afterwards?*

Malik The internship? Yes, the internship, it's interesting, let's say...it's the same with

the internships, they're going to discover my character that way because I look into each company that I'm going to work for, I want each one to be different. So I leave one, a big corporation, L'Oréal, say, etc., to land in a small company that just opened six months ago. A little company, really little (...) But it's all the same on the final report... the day that I go take my exams, at the end... there's always an oral exam on the internship report that we have to present, etc., the internship and all on the orals, well on that day, I wouldn't want to tell them twice about the same internship. I'm not interested in that. I'm not interested because they'll get bored and then I'd get fed up and you feel that, you know. But, if I have two, four, I'll be doing four over the two years, I'll be doing the two years, I want them to be different and complementary.

[...]

— *And after the company gets you a position, what does it do?*

Malik Oh no, no, no after... wow, I'd never even thought the company might get you a position [*laughs*]. Maybe they used to do that before but not anymore.

— *And what then, the certificates that you...*

Malik The diploma? It's a vocational bac, it's a dead end street, no way out. I don't know, I don't have the impression that doing it's all that clear, it hasn't been around for long and I don't trust that kind of diploma.

[*The internships are unpaid.*]

— *And how do you make ends meet? You need a little money...*

Malik Me? It depends, sometimes I work, I work...

— *On the side, is that it?*

Malik Not too much, I'm not... I told you, but I've had to work too.

— *And your father gives you a hand...?*

Malik No, it's dad and mom above all, they're nice about that. They have been really, really, really nice about that.

— *Why do you say "about that"?*

Malik [*inaudible*] It's really shitty, isn't it?

It makes for a lot of sharing

— *Can we talk about the development where you live a little... how long you've been there... how it is...*

Malik Okay. I grew up in (...), I left Paris and then the different places where I lived. I can even talk to you about my parents. They arrived in France in '64, I think, '63 or '64, I'm not sure any more; they met. My father lived at Cachan, my mother had rooms in Paris (...) then they met, they fell in love, they shared a room in Paris, so they were close friends who got really close. Later they found a place in Cachan through the HLM housing administration. That's where I came on the scene (...).

It's not a huge project, it's big, but there's not a lot of people like in others... So there, let's say... as for me, I think it's more interesting to live in a place where it's easier to meet one or two pals, it doesn't matter, girls or boys. You get started doing that quicker than if you hole up in a house. And it makes for certain things, a lot of sharing. Well, that's how I feel, I dunno know if it comes from my folks or whatever, but that lasts, because when you have a dime you can buy two pieces of candy, you can't eat both pieces if your pal is right there beside you. And I don't know if... I dunno, maybe you know you don't have any dough and you have to share everything you've got with the other guy, 'cause he'd do the same another day. I don't know. So I grew up there on that. Then my mother asked for housing at the pool, so we went there, to the pool. So in the whole neighborhood... (...)

And then, yes, I swam and all that and then I got to a certain point in swimming, I realized that, I was 13, 13 years old; so they were pushing us, push, push, push, you realize that there's practice everyday, Saturday swim meets, even Sunday, and that's a certain level, that's what happens, etc.

— *And you were pretty strong for having done all that... competitively?*

Malik I guess so, in any case I swam, but I dunno, I thought it was unhealthy. Too

unhealthy. Getting pushed like that, I didn't think it was right. (...)

— *It's a little like school.*

Malik No, but at school they don't push us like that. It's different.

— *Yes, at school they don't push you enough and in sports they push you too much?*

Malik [long silence] In school they don't push enough either.

— *Not in the way they should.*

Malik And then... I think that's what it is, that's what it is, what it really is. Not like it should be. Well there's a well-established teaching system, very academic, but you realize that there's nothing, nothing for the individual, they don't focus on the individual...
[...]

We wanted things stirred up...

— *Were your pals very important?*

Malik Oh yes!

— *That was all your spare time?*

Malik Yeah.

— *In the development?*

Malik A lot in the project, that's where... that's where I was with... I was still in primary school when I moved to the pool and then (...) I moved and moved again, changed schools, but at Cachan everything was going along fine. I'd begun to meet people who lived here. So that didn't change at all for me because I'd always lived, I didn't feel like I was just added on, etc., not at all. But I had some easy contacts, etc., so that was going on fine, one, two... And we'll say that it was at the end of two – I'm referring to school years – the end of two, that's when I started looking at other things, meaning, I don't know, I did some real dumb-ass things as a kid, we'd swipe things, dumb-ass stuff, real stupid things, it's stupid. It's really horrendously dumb-ass because if we'd robbed a big bank, it would've been more interesting. We weren't very ambitious. Yeah, it's nicer, but in the end I think it was the risk, by contrast it's... when you're really a kid, I don't steal because I'm trying to get out of

something; it's this: I don't have that, so I steal; I mean they were dumb-ass stuff, oranges, dumb stuff, just so it was risky. We wanted things stirred up [laughs]. Yeah, it was as much... it was like when you're really (...). But fine, then we changed a bit; and once it happened to me, afterwards, it's there that I was changing, we were changing... I was always with my brother, that's what finally did us... we were always together when we were kids, and then when we got there, when we both found ourselves there, well we were always together, we hung out together, we'd work on our bikes, we'd work on our bikes and then take off on them. Off to conquer Cachan.

[...]

— *But what happened? He...*

Malik He grows up. He grows up and we're still little. Little, though at 14, you know how to figure things out, things are OK, I think. But, ultimately, that's where we took two different paths. For me what was... it's my years at vocational school, I tell you, it was [inaudible]. No, it's true, I'm not being silly, I mean, I had... I don't know, I can't talk to you about it like that, we'd have to talk about it for a long time, it's full of memories, it's full... it's neat, that's what! It's things you don't ever forget. But it's just as often dumb-ass things with teachers as it is things to cry over, like crazy things. In any case, I'd never cried with a pal. But we must've cried, but at the police station it was different; [inaudible] at the police station, but that was for a really dumb-ass thing. So you go back and you change friends a lot.

— *You're jumping around a lot there. What did you do to have to go down to the police station?*

Malik Well... I was with two... it's funny because I can see what's going on [he makes a gesture towards his head] but you, you can't see. I can imagine it and I can...

— *You're not telling us everything.*

Malik No, well no... [laughs]

— *You can, you know, it will go no further.*

[He explains that he "did some stupid things" with some boys, "not reputable but fun to hang out with": stealing for the "risk," playing with fire and accidental blazes, squatting in more or less abandoned houses, during which he was picked up by the police who told his parents.]

Malik (...) So we get to the police station, my folks get there. Mostly my mother, because my mother is... isn't - after all, she never really hit me or beat me up, etc. - but there were severe punishments... like cutting your hair... you don't want to... cutting a big gap on your head. Then on Monday when you go to school with your (...) I mean you're not at all happy. And there you go. So, there it was, it was okay, it wasn't anything bad, I've never done anything bad. And still in this company, it's true that afterwards, it gets bigger and bigger, it goes faster and faster, there's more and more and so you get to a point... and around... so in the *cinquième* [two years into junior high], I start the CAP, I start getting to know people and then, my relationship to all that, I completely, I got out of that completely... I got out of that scene while my brother stayed...

— So he continued to...

Malik To do all the same dumb-ass things, and for a long time. And then it's after...

— He had problems? He was...

Malik Arrested. Arrested, not put in prison, but not far from it, to tell the truth.

— Why? For all the theft, things like that?

Malik Well... once it was for... because he had... because for a time - that was later on - for a time, he'd stopped going to school and then he always needed dough, yet he doesn't know how to spend his money, I don't understand. That's what I don't understand, he doesn't need dough all that much, but he'd stayed in that whole scene, to tell the truth. So he broke into a grocery store. One evening, one evening. That was back when everyone drank Ricard [*an aperitif*], let's say. But he didn't drink, he sold it. He was dealing Ricard to the... they're out there. That's what it was. So he, he did

more, he was often arrested, yes. He ended up... and then he had rotten bad luck. So one night, he runs into some pals, they're on a scooter, he's talking to them, the cops go by, he gets arrested with them, it's always stuff like that. Or he's in Paris, he's not doing anything, he's smoking a joint all peaceful like, and he gets arrested, it's stupid, stuff like that. And, let's say that... and I was a little more; so that's when I meet the people who are now my friends...

[...]

We'd like to open a water sports center

— But you were enjoying yourself so much that you didn't really want to...

Malik To go back home. No, I didn't go home. Well, I'd go home around eight o'clock. I stayed in study hall, then with... and one thing leads to another and then you're talking and then, etc., and you realize that...

— And you didn't feel like working then?

Malik That's it. I think this was the exact moment that, when I met these people, that it clicked, let's say, not really wanting to work... because there were more opportunities like that to take advantage of. More opportunities, more encounters, other encounters that were important. And I don't know if everybody understood what was going on. Who had picked up on it along the way.

— What do you mean by that?

Malik This need to trade things...

[Long, picaresque story of a trip to Spain with his friends.]

— What does this friend do now?

Malik He's doing a vocational bac; he's in second year because there was an open entry, he got it and not me.

— What did you just say, I didn't hear?

Malik He got it and I didn't.

— But what?

Malik The open entry. That means he's a year ahead, a year ahead. Since he couldn't do his CAP, he had an accident; that doesn't mean that it wasn't a real good thing though.

— *You have plans together?*

Malik I don't know what you mean by plans...

— *No, I don't know, because I think that...*

Malik [rather pompously] He's got a plan, let's say that we'd like to open a water sports center.

— *Where?*

Malik In Vietnam [laughs].

— *Why?*

Malik Because it's an expanding market, Vietnam, it just opened up.

— *Yes, that's not a bad idea.*

Malik It just opened up and it seems like a country that's going to...there's going to be money there...

— *Yes, a club's not a bad idea.*

Malik No, not a club, it's not a club, I don't like...

— *So what is it?*

Malik Clubs, like I was just saying. Not me, like I was saying, for me it has to be the real thing from top to bottom.

— *Meaning? For example?*

Malik It's lots of things; sounds, smells, paying attention to everything, so it wouldn't be just anybody who'd be coming. Because we would like to simultaneously open another center, but that would be in the west of France, on the coast, on all (...) since we don't know where; and at that stage it would be more of a recruitment...you could say, it would be proposals of these services to companies, but it's true that we'd have to have a certain kind of people. And during this...— let's say, without their knowledge, they won't know it— so you would see among these people who could...who are looking for this sort of thing; that's it, it's focused on that, this project. And it's up to these people during this project that we'd propose...strictly speaking and it's not for the guy who's fence-sitting. It's cool.

— *No, no, it's cool, for sure.*

Malik No, no, if it's nice. But that'll start from the beginning, say we offer everything from beginning to end. Well, offer...But that'll start off with the eats, everything,

everything. Really everything. Because we're losing that, it's really frustrating, we're losing that these days, but we'll be bastards, and we'll make a bundle off of that, because we're going to do it, well I don't know...But we're losing it and I can't stand watching people who...

— *And you're getting geared up to both go there to see...*

Malik No because he has gone to Thailand, with a friend, the other Frédéric who travels a lot because of his father who's an engineer, but works for the phone company and is all the time traveling; and so he has the chance, it's because of him that we found out that Vietnam was...

— *And what does Frédéric do?*

Malik Frédéric is in his last year [*première d'adaptation*] of high school in Paris. And the other one is doing the second year of a vocational bac but part-time; because he doesn't live with his folks; he had (...) problems, real quick, he was let go real quick.

— *Let go by whom? By his parents?*

Malik Oh yes, not by his parents. But this thing's a little complicated in any event. He'd be real good for here, too, no, no, it's true...So that's that. So he has his own apartment, he is completely independent and...

— *So you're all three thinking about doing that? With Frédéric...*

Malik Yeah, but...

— *And even he went there to see?*

Malik Yes, but not to go see even, they went to Thailand, all happy, with Laurent...

— *But they have enough dough, it's a long way?*

Malik They managed.

— *They work?*

Malik Well one is on part-time, so he works, but he had six lean months after the trip.

— *And what are you going to do this summer?*

Malik I'm going to try to leave with Laurent; so I'm going to try to leave for a week,

so we thought we'd do something together at the outdoor sports center.

— *Where?*

Malik In Le Verdon, go white-water rafting, etc.

[...]

— *Those are really cool things to do. Yeah, it's exhausting, but...*

Malik Yeah, it's exhausting; but well, we'll see, but we need to decide soon, if not then we'll take off for a week to the west of France and we'll do a bit of (...) and some jet skis.

— *What's that?*

Malik You don't know what jet skis are? It's the little jet ski like you see in Bounty, but we'll be in France. It's cool, it feels neat. Otherwise, it's that. Oh yes and then days in... so with... with... with my... my friend, in Spain. Because I like...

She's Algerian and that's not on purpose...

— *Who's your friend?*

Malik It's [female] I.E.

— *Okay, from the way you were saying it, I was afraid to say so. That's it.*

Malik I.E.

— *Who's I.E. if that's not too indiscreet...*

Malik [laughs] I.E. is Fedellah. She's nice.

— *What does she do?*

Malik She's a teacher.

— *In what?*

Malik In a LEP [in fact, in his own LEP]. She's a teacher, she does law, econ., things like that.

[...]

Right, I'll take off for 10 days; yeah, no, it's nicer because she's never been, she doesn't like the water, she doesn't know how to swim and I want to show her... to teach her, all she has to do is put her feet in the water at Gibraltar, because it's the only place that I've found, might as well get to know the water in a good place. The Atlantic and the Mediterranean meeting each other!

— *Where's she from?*

Malik She's Algerian and that's not on purpose [laughs]. It's not on purpose, because all that... well it's not important. Yeah, yeah, that might be nice, I dunno.

[...]

[Malik talks about the house where he lives with his father when he's not with his girlfriend.]

Careers scare me, too...

— *And you live there all the time with your girl or do you go...*

Malik No, at my girl's place? Yes... 'cause ... [laughs]

— *No, no, I'm following my idea, not at all... not at all...*

Malik No it's because I live between the two places. And it's true that, it's true it's nicer to wake up beside...

— *And does your father know your girl?*

Malik Yes, he knows her; he knows her and that's cool; they get along fine, the two of them...

— *The two of them get along well... And her parents, they are... her father is Algerian?*

Malik Her father is Algerian, her mother is Algerian. And as luck would have it, they're from Tlemcen too.

— *Oh yes, that's funny. They didn't know each other...*

Malik No, they don't know each other because her parents... her father got here very early; he arrived in the 1930s and then...

— *And your father arrived a lot more recently.*

Malik That's it.

— *You've told us everything then?*

Malik Yes, except for (...). Yes, I'm going to stay in the place, in school, I like it. That's all, I'm going on to be sure. And then if one day I lose it or I mess up...

— *Yes, you'll need a...*

Malik ... I'll have to make myself stay here and try to make my way by trying to make up for things materially, what everyone does.

— *I don't understand what you mean by that?*

Malik I look at money strangely because it seems to me that money mostly brings compensation. And it seems to me that everyone has their own problems and money lets you make up for some dreams with material things...it's the compensation; I don't really want it, I want to live, and not make up for something.

— *So deep down, money isn't what counts?*

Malik It's not, it's not my...it's not my main goal. But for sure, with what I want to do, I'll need some. Let's say that that'll be the easiest, the most radical way, to get to what I want to do. But it won't be my main goal.

— *Have you thought a little about the dough for your first business?*

Malik The big bank again? [laughs] No, no, I don't know...to get the money, I'll have to work long and hard, find a position that's nice enough, pleasant, well I want an exciting job. Watch out! I'm very demanding, I want a job that makes me happy from start to finish. But not a labor job or a job that eats you up, afterwards you (...) [laughs]. Let's say: not just being another number when you go to work, but staying a bit on this side of things (...) even so, it's important. It can't bother me, careers scare me, too.

— *Yes, so in a way, schools are good.*

Malik To be a CEO and then let, never have time for your girl anymore...that doesn't interest me.

[...]

— *But school, deep down, it's a world you like?*

Malik Yeah, yeah, I like it a lot. I think that now, it's also part, I tell myself, in the end

it's the path that I've taken, it's let me stay in school longer. And I tell myself...

— *At bottom, what pisses you off about school is having to work? Because otherwise it'd be cool.*

Malik Well, I don't work.

— *Yes that's it, so it's cool.*

Malik Yes it's real cool. No, no, but it's cool. It's nice (...) teachers, they're cool, it's nice.

— *Meaning?*

Malik They ask themselves questions. They wonder why I don't work.

— *Yes they wonder, because if you wanted to, you'd do well.*

Malik No.

— *Yes you would.*

Malik No, no, I'm fine like I am. Why, why...that's what I don't understand, at school they don't ask me to get top marks. On the other hand, at work, you have to... not an A, it's zero or a hundred, it's not a B or a C...and at school they let us have the choice of making C, C+, D, well not an F because afterwards it's not too good. So you might just as well do as fuckin' little as possible [laughs], to have...stretch out your D and then in the last quarter throw in a C for your average, and then you take off for a bit and then you haven't done a damn thing but they let you pass. That's where my problems come from, I tell you...to be able to get where I want, because they've got the feeling that it's always going to be like that, it's very, really very; but I'm starting to understand them better because my girlfriend teaches, on the other side of the wall that...you see a bit what's going on. But...it's nice. My life is pretty nice [laughs].

June 1991

Sylvain Broccolichi

A Paradise Lost

Along with a great many students, Claire, Muriel and Nadine share the experience of the sharp devaluation of their educational value when they get to high school. For all three, this discovery has been accompanied by a brake on their hopes as well as by the development of a critical view of the structures and conditions of school work. They come from three different junior high schools and at the Verlaine lycée they were knocked down a peg in their discovery of a more clearly hierarchized world where students not on the “royal road of the sciences” are looked down on and where the same values no longer obtain. Until then part of the group of “good students” that a good school recognizes and encourages, they were especially surprised and shocked by the treatment their new difficulties received in high school. They suddenly found themselves confronted with the violence that the school world metes out to the students who are least prepared for its demands.

In a district that has strictly maintained sectorization, the Verlaine lycée is a 1950s building in not particularly good condition located in a district serving two towns, one of them near Paris. Both towns are mostly working class (although with a progression of categories of “employees” and “intermediate professions” and of the service sector in general). This is the only lycée in the district which offers baccalauréats in sciences (bacs C and D) and in the humanities (A1, A2 and A3). It brings together the best pupils of 12 collèges in the area with the exception of those who move on to high school in Paris. The more “middling” students are divided out between the two general and vocational high schools which offer technical certificates as well as the bacs B and E (economics). The teachers and the administration of the lycée are able to limit this “flight” by maintaining a demanding teaching level, particularly for access to the science track (the pass rate for the science baccalauréat is a major determinant in the reputation of any school). So it is, above all, at the level of junior high school that students of higher social origins leave for schools in Paris.

It is primarily through their results in math and natural sciences, the determining factors for placement in the science track, that the majority of students discover the high demands of the lycée. For many of them, their results are much lower than they expected, since the “jump in difficulty” in the lycée comes across in the “drop in grades.” And in fact, compared to other high schools that, unlike Verlaine, do not offer preparatory courses in the most prestigious categories of the baccalauréat, this school has the most stringent demands and the

severest grading – witness the grade drop for students in the *seconde* [the entry year], particularly in math and French, when compared to their grades from the year before. The drop is greater in this school than in the other two high schools in the district, even though the classes are officially the same.

The importance of this “drop in grades” is also related to the collège of origin, especially since the social and educational characteristics of the population of each junior high school are no longer “brought into line” as much as before by the intensity of the selection process. Far from producing an optimization of the teaching system, the government’s wish to have 80 percent of a cohort in attendance at upper levels of high school translates into an ensemble of administrative measures (relating to the available places in each track) and pressures. They thus oblige the junior high schools to pass through ‘by seniority’ to the *troisième* [final year of junior high] students who never would have gotten that far in the old system. At the same time they have to lower their requirements as a function of the number of students with whom they must work for (at least) four years. The statistics traditionally produced by the Ministry of National Education do not reveal these differences which will show up for the lycée entry year where the educational future of students will vary considerably according to their junior high school of origin (for example at Verlaine, the rate of retakes or of reorientation to the BEP vocational certificate varies from 8 percent to 50 percent depending on the collège of origin). The relativity of junior high school grades largely escapes students who simultaneously find themselves even more affected by their abrupt academic decline on entering high school, a feeling aggravated by the presence in the classroom of much better students than in junior high.

I met Claire, Muriel and Nadine, three students at Verlaine, in the context of some work that I have been doing for several years on secondary education in this high school district and during which I have made many ties both with school personnel and with parents and students. All three girls promptly responded to my request to meet with them about the problems at school. They were equally willing to introduce me to other students in similar situations who had the same kind of school record and who were also politically involved in Communist youth groups. Having observed in the first collective interview the manner in which they encouraged each other to tell about what affected them most in high school (notably the deprecatory or blaming responses to their difficulties by the institution), I proposed a second group interview which – no doubt because it took place in a less “official” and more isolated room – facilitated a more open discussion about the administration and/or the teachers.

From the first mention of their confusion and the impossibility of bringing up their problems with adults at school, they repeatedly stressed the risk of being considered “little smart alecks” making excuses for their insufficiencies, which is why I tended to use the generalized “one” and avoid saying “you” when I would go over some of their comments, as though to show my support for their point of view and to diminish their inhibitions.

Claire R.: “Completely worthless”

Claire is 15. Having been at Verlaine for only three months, she is the least talkative. The daughter of a factory worker and a hospital employee, she has benefited in her school work from the help of an older sister who has a bac A1 in literature with honorable mention and who had herself gotten comparable school help from an aunt, a general supervisor in a hospital.

Contrary to Muriel and Nadine who belong to more culturally and socially privileged families and who dare to make plans (journalism, photography) that fit their tastes and their extracurricular interests, Claire shyly brings up a goal – international commerce – decided as a function of reasonable chances of success (“I’ve been told that there are openings in this sector”) and of her school record (“I do best in languages”). Apparently as “good” a student in junior high school as Muriel and Nadine (this adjective comes up seven times in her quarterly report at the end of the *troisième*), she is the only one to have categorically excluded in advance the track towards a science baccalauréat even though she is aware of the negative character of this choice. In nearly every one of her rare assertions, she talks about bac C, the science bac, as the only sure thing in this period of generalized access to the baccalauréat and of uncertainty in the job market. On several occasions, she deplors the fact that the other sections to which her declining grades consign her are “completely worthless.” The worry that she feels concerning her future finds its best expression in a magazine picture shown by one of her teachers in *troisième* that depicts a “little man sweeping” next to the bac A, while the “bac C was the company’s chief executive.” Her father has no professional qualifications and has worked for a long time in a “maintenance service,” which makes her particularly sensitive to this image.

Claire had always tried for good grades across the board rather than looking to be the best in a few, but in the first part of her lycée entry year she has been able to get good grades only in languages. Otherwise, her grades have gone down by half a grade to a grade depending on the subject, thus following the average curve of students from her junior high school. This junior high, which recruits from all the lower classes, has been increasingly abandoned by the area’s best students (all the more so given the declining standards). In this situation Claire remained one of the few students able to respond to her teachers’ expectations and capable of entering into a mutually satisfactory interaction with them. The nostalgic discourse about junior high school expressed by these ex-“good students” – usually girls – once they find themselves in the mass of students considered “mediocre” in high school, only makes sense relative to the whole picture of the attention they received beforehand. In junior high schools where so many students get “unhinged” in certain subjects and make teaching difficult, the teachers particularly appreciate and value “rare birds” like Claire whom they wish to keep in the school even as they recognize the individual student’s merit in working well in such an unfavorable educational environment. Every chance they get they shower encouragement and personal compliments that turn the teacher–student

connection into a parent-child relationship and lead Claire to say “junior high school was like a little family. . . There was always a teacher backing you up.” But in high school “I don’t feel you can go see a teacher.”

Muriel F.: “It becomes completely incoherent”

As soon as it was a matter of discussing the malaise at school, Claire, like other people I contacted, mentioned Muriel. “Muriel will surely have a lot to say. And she has time, too, she’s doing a bac A1 in lit. . .” That is how it was put by a colleague of Muriel’s father (a professor), who implicitly contrasted her own daughter – who had to “put her nose to the grindstone” to get a baccalauréat in science – with Muriel, who had somehow made the easy choice even though she was a brilliant student and was even a year ahead when she got to *seconde* (she still is ahead of her grade). Muriel owes this unanimous selection to her status as the school’s elected representative and as a member of a national network of high school students affiliated with the Communist youth movement. She agreed to not hide behind a position as “spokesperson” but simply to tell her own story.

She brings up two key breaks in her time at school: first the transition from an understaffed primary school near to her home where the family-like atmosphere was reinforced by the ties between her mother (also a primary school teacher) and the school’s faculty, to the big “gray and cold” junior high school of 600 students, which had once been the junior section of the Verlaine high school. Then the switch to the high school, where the primacy of the sciences (where she is the least at ease) upsets the “good student” image that she had always had.

The Verlaine junior high school is closest to the high school in terms of its social recruitment – the highest in the district – as it is for the level of achievement demanded (grades in the *seconde* drop the least for the students from here). Compared to the average student from her junior high school, Muriel is going against the grain. Although she has progressed fairly well overall, the reverse is true for math and natural sciences, where she has dropped a full grade. Even as she tries to present her tracking into literature as a free decision, she sometimes recognizes that her penchant for literature is relatively recent and is not unrelated to her difficulties in math and natural science in *seconde* as well as her strong dislike for a track that would force her to “work like crazy to get into sciences” and where she couldn’t be sure of the results.

Aware that her “choices” have had a devaluing effect, she tries to relativize them by denouncing the arbitrariness of the science/literature hierarchy and by advocating the principle of equal tracks. With a certain assurance she criticizes a “completely incoherent” world where “to get into a university humanities program it’s better to have a science baccalauréat,” and where the literature teachers themselves suggest the science track to their better students. But despite many denials, these criticisms cannot keep her from feeling and expressing a sense of failure tied to a feeling of occupying henceforth a devalued position in the school hierarchy – a feeling reactivated by the comparison with some of her old junior

high school classmates who have “made it.” “We were all alike. We got to *seconde*, and – math is a lot harder in *seconde* – and, uh, there were things both of us slacked up on. And as for me, there wasn’t anybody at home who could help me with math (. . .). And she was working all the time, with her father all the time working . . . So she made it, she sure did . . . I don’t mean that she has really made it but she’s in the science track, that’s what.” And she cannot stop herself from insistently recalling the negative role of the entry year teacher who ruined math for her and many others as well.

Nadine B.: “I came down from my dream world”

Nadine, 18 years old, is in her last year of an A1 bac in literature. But, for her, it is clear that her two years in *seconde* were the most decisive and the most trying. Coming from a junior high school that is socially and academically very close to Claire’s, she has the same aversion for the lycée and the same nostalgia for her collège where she was a good student, except in math. She took care of herself without asking anything of her parents who have confidence in her. Her father has a position as union representative at the national unemployment agency and her mother is a lab technician at the national research institute.

Planning on becoming a photographer, she found out from a counseling service during her last year of junior high school that the majority of post-bac photography schools require a science degree. “Either you do a bac C or bac D, or you give up your plans” is what they told her. Well aware of the importance of science classes, she pushes herself to improve her math grades at the end of *troisième*, and she succeeds.

But like most of the students from the same junior high school, her grades drop sharply in *seconde*: by half a grade on average, and much more in math where they fall to a D in the first quarter with the teacher’s comment, “Huge gaps!” A big disappointment: she thinks she will never be able “to do advanced studies,” or do a science bac, and she thinks again. On her parents’ advice and because it is difficult for her to give up her career plans, she seizes on the hope that by doing a year over, she can get back on track. During this repeat year, even more “stressful” than the previous one, her results in science classes remain inadequate and bring her “down from her dream world.”

Nadine’s story, the emotion and the confusion in her voice, make it clear that in *seconde* she not only experienced the failure of thwarted educational and professional goals, but also that her vision of herself, of school and adults, was altered by the disillusion and disappointments that came one after another: failure at school (unthinkable only a few months before), loss of esteem and general deterioration in her relationships stand out against the previous harmony. “I always got along well with them,” she says speaking of both her parents and her teachers, but in *seconde* “I got into arguments with everyone.”

While Claire and especially Muriel were able to convince themselves that they were not interested in a science bac, and were still good students in the areas that

they liked, Nadine's repeat year more completely undermined her sense of herself as a "good student." She also felt the full force of failure since for her the science track was more of a transition which had to be made and somehow kept her from making a timely adjustment of her expectations to her opportunities. Moreover, Nadine is realizing too late that she was not being realistic when, in the name of an idealistic conception of school, she refused the help that her parents offered, particularly in math. Used to succeeding without adult help and counting solely on her teachers, she argued that: "There are kids who don't have parents to help them (...) it's up to the teacher... to get me to pass. (...) I still think so: it's not right that parents have to get involved." Without denying this principle, she has given it up in practice and has begun taking private lessons, admitting "that's what's done" all the time these days to get over certain obstacles.

Claire, Muriel and Nadine have a similar trajectory, marked by the shift from a happy experience in junior high school to the painful experience of academic decline in high school. In their statements, this common route takes the form of a history constructed more or less via the political categories supplied by their membership in the Communist youth movement, a story of their transition from the world of the warm, communitarian world of the junior high schools based on the absence of exclusion and on solidarity, for which they are nostalgic, to the cold, anonymous universe of the high school based on the brutality of segregation and competition, whose spirit, organization and operation they criticize. In junior high school, following the dominant model of academic success for girls, all three showed less facility in math or the natural sciences than in other disciplines. When their slight weakness in science turned into true academic difficulties in *seconde*, all three likewise lacked effective family support (support she refused in Nadine's case) which would have allowed them to catch up. Reaching *seconde*, this same academic profile gave them the same choices (which prefigures the post-baccalauréat alternative: university right away vs prep classes for elite schools): slave away to get on the royal road of science and run the risk of possible failure, or take an "unprestigious" literature option and get back their former ease.

Nadine's case clearly demonstrates the great risk of upsetting the balance in relationships and the self-deprecation required by the first scenario in the case of failure. Likewise, for many students in the lycée entry year [*seconde*] who envisioned a science track, the bac C or D, at the beginning of the year but encountered unexpected difficulties, passing science in the following year [*première*] by the skin of their teeth has heavy consequences – witness the rather frequent cases of students who "crack up" in their final year (depression, anorexia, suicide attempts).

After *seconde*, for the ex-good students who do not get used to the lycée world and its stiffer requirements and new hierarchy of disciplines, the literature section A1 can function as a place of recovery because it recreates a world which, on these two points, is close to the order of things they once knew: it is possible once again to find an elevated position in the class, and the disciplines that had become

minor in *seconde* are once again considered worthwhile. Its sole fault, if you can call it that, is the shadow cast on it by the science tracks that are unanimously considered to be those of the best students.

The opposition that the three students make between the hell of a high school dominated by the "law of selection" and the prior, communitarian paradise goes back to objectively experienced differences between junior high school and high school. First, the lack of "segregation" in junior high schools where almost all students, especially in the "good classes," passed together into upper classes, whereas at the end of *seconde*, students are led to divide themselves up into clearly hierarchized tracks. Then there is the fact that everyone had known them for four years in junior high school, whereas no one knew them once they got to high school, a feeling of anonymity that is reinforced by the growing numbers in class. Then too, the quantity of the homework becomes significantly greater in high school. But these differences do not explain everything, and it may well be that this enchanted and nostalgic experience of primary school and junior high school, translated into a metaphor of a (lost) family and home, corresponds to the privileged experience of a small category of high school students. The boys and especially the girls who were part of the small circle of good students in the working-class schools were all the more appreciated and admired because there were so few of them. Once they arrived in a high school with higher scholastic requirements they abruptly lost these gratifying relationships and the resulting serenity. The same holds for poorly prepared students for whom it is obvious that teachers are better disposed towards the "best" students (so much so that the "less good" tend to exclude themselves from a relationship with teachers by making the good students ask all the questions). On the other hand, those who benefit from these good relationships, like Claire, Muriel and Nadine before their arrival in high school, attribute them to affinities without a direct link to class ranking. Perhaps because for two years she was more clearly a failing student, Nadine seems to be the most conscious of this dependence on human relationships concerning class rankings: "What am I to them," she wonders, not without bitterness, remarking that her teachers, and her parents too, no longer saw her in the same light during this period of falling grades.

Claire, Muriel and Nadine note that "the science students have the most prestige" and that "the best students only get put in the science track." But when they speak of their deteriorating relationships with their teachers in *seconde*, they tend to attribute these to a change in worlds and not to their declining position from one world to the other. In junior high school, there was more "solidarity" and "there was always a teacher backing you up"; in high school, they discover the law of selection as well as the "guilt" and the "isolation" which, when coupled with failure, expose them to the risks of a "breakdown."

The idea that these problems could have been faced by other students from their junior high school does not cross their minds (I was able to confirm this by questioning them on this point outside of the recorded interview), and it seems to me that this possible reference to a former, good school world is almost a

necessary condition for them to get angry and criticize high school. In fact, the ability to become indignant loses its edge rather quickly. In order not to create too many problems in the short run, the student in a poor position usually has no other options, in the present state of affairs, than to adopt behavior (hiding problems, copying from the better students) which quickly prevents them from feeling they have the right to criticize the absence of help and lack of esteem that come with that position of inferiority. Claire, Muriel and Nadine are in a particularly good position to be disgusted by the fact that "those who can't keep up, too bad for them" or that "once you fail somewhere, you're guilty" because until then they had been considered exemplary students and believers in a school that helped students who were in trouble.

Claire, Muriel and Nadine participated actively in the high student demonstrations of Fall 1990 which, without always expressing it clearly, point up this contradiction in a system that allows an ever-growing number of students to make it to high school even as it guides the majority of them into devalued majors. Moreover, the system justifies all these redirections into paths which go against the initial wishes of students by inadequate scholastic performance, even though it does not ensure good "working conditions" and forces many students to look elsewhere for the help that the school doesn't provide.

The national policy of delaying selection, which has been applied in an accelerated fashion for five to six years now, seems to engender in many students an estimation of their value and different aspirations than those induced in the past by orientation on the basis of lack of achievement beginning in primary school. Particularly in public-sector schools serving the working classes where the selection process started the earliest and was the most intensive, students who would have been gradually led to accept their "weakness" once the less good students had been eliminated now maintain their good or average class rankings for longer and longer. As the frequency and importance of failure in *seconde* reveal, the development results more from administrative decrees and pressures than from a real equalization of opportunity to fulfill high school requirements. But, accustomed to judging themselves as more "average" than "weak," these students become less inclined to assume full responsibility for the failure (relative to their plans) that affects a good number of them at an age when they are more able to react critically to the situation they have been put in.

The policy of extending access to the baccalauréat across a cohort is not even halfway between the 30 percent that obtained when the policy went into effect and the 80 percent envisioned for the year 2000. If its application remains based on lower requirements early on in schools drawing from the working classes and on a denial of the social inequalities that the present state of the education system perpetuates, we can expect an intensification of the contradictions noted above. With orientation on the basis of failure happening later and more generally, more students like Claire, Muriel and Nadine become capable of condemning the conditions of their failure.

with three high school students from the Paris suburbs

— interview by Sylvain Broccolichi

“In high school we’re so looked down on”

Muriel I remember one thing, it’s when I was in primary school, in a modern school, an experimental one... Really, we were happy to go to school. When there wasn’t any school on Sundays, we were so bored (...). I got to junior high school...

— Which junior high school?

Muriel Verlaine [*the former junior section of the Verlaine high school*]. It was big, it was gray, it was huge, there wasn’t anything there, it was cold, it was very, very cold. That was pretty hard on us... in every way... In primary school we all used to live together, everybody knew everybody. It was nice, we were informal with the teachers, it was really like some kind of family... And then we got there... I don’t know, high school, it’s already twice as big as the junior high school; but the junior high school is like about 600 people [*actually more than a thousand*]. No one knows anybody (...). You come in, you go out... It’s a factory, it’s not a house anymore. So afterwards, when you get to high school, it’s even worse... You get out of class, you don’t even have the time to talk; you’ve got to get to the next class... you’re so rushed that to stop and talk for two minutes, you’ve got to take time out of your classes sometimes... And then the classes are very full, 35 students... Sometimes you don’t know the names of everybody in your classes. It’s cold!

Nadine I felt it right when I got to high school; in junior high school things went fine (...). There’s the problem of over-enrolled classes, worn-out buildings, but that’s something else... in this high school, there’s constant stress that I didn’t have in junior high school. I miss junior high school

but I won’t miss high school. What I want to do is get out of here... That’s what I felt when I came here: permanent stress. I often have to take tranquillizers before going to school, stuff like that... and at night to fall asleep... During my first time through *seconde* I had unbelievable bouts of insomnia. I don’t know, a general ambience, a certain noncommunication...

You don’t have the right to mess up

Muriel I think there’s a game going on too, a game, meaning that the adults push us to be stressed out like that, because it’s true that in *seconde*, everybody’s idea is to take the royal road... the science track. And their goal is that everyone has to and can take that route... And those who don’t, too bad for them... They’ve got to! If that doesn’t interest them, well too bad for them. They’ve got to go along like the others... So we’re stressed out all the time, we have an outrageous amount of work to do, it’s hell... You go to bed whenever so you can get your work done. If one day you’re tired and you can’t work, you can fail everything, a whole quarter. [Nadine agrees]. I was only sick... I had the flu last year. I caught it two times in a row with a week in between in December, I couldn’t keep up with the physics class till the end of the year... They’d started chemistry... I’d never done it before, I didn’t understand anything the whole year.

Nadine And then, they make you feel guilty... Once you fail something, you’re guilty. Once you mention that you’ve got problems... Teachers sometimes make comments that I think are horrible... Once you mention you’ve got problems... You

only have the right to be absent if you're sick... They don't take our mental state into consideration... I remember last year, there was a teacher who lost someone in her family, someone close, so she was out for a week. I think that's understandable. And at the same time, soon afterwards, there was a student who lost a very close friend, too, who was killed in a scooter accident... Well, she couldn't even talk about it. She skipped for a good week and the only reaction of this same teacher was "Sure, she's not even sick, I saw her the other day in the street... she's skipping school, she's not sick." Sometimes you feel like you don't have the right to mess up. We don't have the right to be...

Muriel Moody. (...) Sometimes, you'd like to try to tell them, but you're so looked down on in comparison to... You really get the impression... The teacher, he comes in, he's like God, you ought to listen to him... Of course, they're not all like that, but there's a lot of them. Once he's done his class, he leaves, and never would he talk to a student outside of the classroom.

Nadine Apart from certain ones who come of their own accord, but they're rare... It's hard to arrange to see a teacher and say: I skipped class, but it was because things weren't right... Things weren't right with me... It's very difficult...

— *It's so difficult that, in fact, no one even tries?*

— No [unanimous]

Muriel Well it's as if you were afraid of failing right away. You get the idea... You know... You get the idea that you already know that it won't work anyway. So you don't even try. We'd probably come off looking like little smart alecks — "but that's a good reason not to go to class..." — as if we had a good time not going to school.

Nadine I have never understood why they... Those times that I've skipped and messed up on a bunch of homework, I'd go see the guidance counselors or the teachers and I'd get yelled at. I really felt that for them, I was a little smart aleck who wasn't worried about her future at all...

But that's not true. When I skip a class, I know, I'm afraid... I realize that it's my future that's at risk. They don't have to tell me that. When I skip, I have a permanent anxiety attack until I get that hour excused or until I catch up on the work that I missed... Sometimes you get the impression that they take us for little kids who don't realize that it's their future that's at stake (...).

— *And you, Claire, do you feel that things are like that or not?*

Claire Relationships with teachers aren't... Teachers are... You go to class, you work. There are no relationships...

— *Even in the case of an exceptional problem, you don't feel that you could make them understand that?*

Claire No... I haven't been there for long, but I don't feel that you could really go see a teacher.

— *And in junior high school?*

Claire In junior high, it was like a little family... Everybody knew everybody else. The teachers knew who you were. You always had a teacher backing you up (...).

They always think the science students are so great

— *In seconde the teachers make you feel that there's only one goal and that is to make it into the science track, and, at the same time, to succeed, you realize that it requires a lot of work, so there's a kind of pressure...*

Muriel Sometimes you don't want to.

— *And when you don't want to, maybe you are less stressed...*

Muriel Well, no! in fact.

Nadine They look down at you so much... They always think the science students are so great. In my second time through *seconde*, I'd made up my mind. I wanted to do literature and in my lit classes, things were going well. And they gave me bad overall grades because my math grades weren't up to snuff. I didn't give a damn... I like math okay, physics pretty much, so I kept on. But what interested me most were the lit classes, I had good grades in these

classes and the overall grades didn't reflect that. When that happens, it's a shock. When they don't take your effort into consideration with what you want to do . . . And then, you know they're capable of making you repeat a year for things that have nothing to do with that.

— *It's surprising that non-science teachers play the game . . .*

Muriel It's a problem because now in the science track, they don't necessarily assign the students who are only good in math, physics or at sci . . . They can be average in those classes. What they think is that they'll work in that track, and that the best students, in any event, they only put them in the sciences track. The best students in French, they make them work like crazy in math classes.

— *They push them . . .*

Muriel Exactly. Because I had good grades in French – in math in the first quarter, it's because it didn't interest me very much that I didn't work a lot, so I was average, very average – at the end of the quarter, the math teacher came to see me and said “with the grades that you have in other classes, you'll need to have two points higher in math and I'll get you into the science track” . . . “No,” I answered, “I'm not interested. I don't want to slave away next year working on math and physics, I'd rather do what I want.” He was blown away.

Nadine That's for sure, when you tell teachers that, it blows them away! (. . .) I know that in my first round in *seconde*, most of us wanted to do bacs in the various lit tracks; and we had science teachers who were, who weren't bad – they were very good teachers – but they totally didn't care about us, and there was a constant animosity all year long. From the first day, they told us “you signed up for three languages, we don't like you . . . You don't like us, we don't like you,” that's what they're saying deep down. On the other hand, in the case of the, let's say, more literary teachers, things were better. And in my second round of *seconde*, I fell into a class where the majority of students were headed for

the science tracks; and the French teacher, the administration recognized that he was incapable of teaching (. . .).

Claire At the beginning of the year, I had taken a third language. I wanted to do an A1 literature bac, but I wanted to do a third language. They put me into A2-A3 section [*considered a safe section for students who are weak in math*]. And at the beginning of the year, they told us “so, we know that you're not good in math, that you won't do anything to pass, so we're not going to push math.” That shocked me a bit, when they tell you something like that from day one . . .

— *From day one . . . ?*

Muriel Oh, yes, from the beginning! They don't use kid gloves.

Claire In principle, an entry year, it's an undecided year. (. . .) I don't know, but when they say “you're bad in math, we're not going to push it” . . . [*Following that, Claire was able to change classes*].

[*Nadine regrets the weakening of solidarity between students compared to what she had known before, in junior high school especially.*]

Nadine I started having problems with my parents when I got to *seconde*, the year that I started going backwards academically. Besides my two goes at *seconde*, I've never really had any problems with my family; and, uh, I know that that year they started taking into consideration . . . I wasn't at all used to them worrying about . . . about my work. Since I'd always been a good student, I wasn't at all used to them worrying about my work like that, and that made problems in the family, too . . . and real ones, too, that's for sure!

Muriel [*interrupting Nadine*] And then again, you're so deprived, you're so stressed out all week long that, when Saturday comes, you don't feel like doing anything anymore. You want to sleep, go out, have a good time, go see your friends, to not sleep Saturday night, to do whatever . . . And your parents flip out! And at the same time, they can't very well forbid us because they know very well that somewhere, if you don't have

a bit of fun, well...you wouldn't go on. You couldn't make it to classes anymore. At the same time, if you're having a good time, you also might have trouble keeping up. So...

It was school, school, school

Nadine Something else, in this conflict. From the minute my parents got interested in my work, in *seconde*, because I was starting to...they were watching my marks drop, and drop by a lot! All we ever talked about at home was school! You couldn't talk about anything else! It was school, school, school... And this class? And that? And my mother – it was tied to some kind of hope that I would do a science bac – it was math especially. I would tell her – “I got an A in French.” “What about math? ... What about math?” she'd ask. The A in French was out the window. And it was like that absolutely all the time. And there were times when I remember telling myself “what am I to them?” (...) There were, there were times when it was really hard. We got into big arguments. And since then, we've talked about it again (...) and my mother, it's over now; it comes back at times when I get low grades, but it's mostly over. But two rounds of *seconde* were pretty rough!

— *There's a time when there is the same pressure from teachers and parents?*

Nadine Right. But I think that my parents were also enormously stressed out about my schooling and then by my brother's, too. Enormously. Well, my mother mostly. The stress is maybe not the same kind because it's not the same thing, but I don't know: a real strong stress.

Muriel Parents also get real stressed out because... Just like we know it's our future that's at stake, they know it, too. They're just as interested in our future as we are. But they don't see it the same way perhaps because for them, they're already there. They're already in their future. We're not there yet and maybe you can... they think you can avoid certain things, mistakes that they made. At the same time, for them, it's

hard to advise us, because we don't listen to them [*laughs*]. Well, you really don't want to listen to them... [*Nadine agrees*] Because we've already heard enough in class.

[...]

Muriel I was telling myself in any event, that I knew what I wanted to do, and that these pressures, well I had to get along with them, and even put them behind me. (...) I told myself that it was useless for me to work like crazy to go into science when I didn't want to be there...

— *Because for you, too, your parents were putting on the pressure to go into science?*

Muriel No, no (...). I think it was clear from the start. Even when I was in junior high school, I was good in math, but I wasn't interested in it.

Nadine But my parents never put any direct pressure on me... They never said “you'll do science and that's it” (...). It's weird because the year I did the worst, the first time through *seconde*, they didn't give me too much of a hard time, let's say. It was especially the second go around, the year when my grades went back up. That year, there was some stress! But with my mother, it was... it was totally incredible! Once my math average started going back up, she was saying “maybe you can do one of the science bacs...”

[...]

Do the science bac!

Claire And there's something that's crazy... My sister went to Henri IV [*one of the top lycées in Paris where they have a further “prep” year to get into the grandes écoles: she is in a prep class for the École des Chartes, the school of Paleography and Librarianship*]. She did an A1 literature degree and... I mean: they don't do math any more, physics, all that (...) and three-quarters of the class, they were doing the science bac C: they were the ones who were accepted first. (...) The other bacs are completely worthless. And then, I look at our teachers, too, they tell us “do the

science bac, do the science bac!" Because afterwards, if you want to get right into a school like that, you've got to do science. That's what they tell us right out...

Muriel To get into the lit prep classes, it's better to have done a sciences track! It makes no sense at all!

Nadine There should only be one kind of bac!

[...]

— *In seconde, do you remember the proportion of the students who wanted to go into science?*

Muriel Oh! There were four of us who wanted to do literature from the beginning, out of 35 (...) everybody else wanted to do science.

Nadine At the very, very beginning, when I started *seconde*, I wanted to do a science bac. But I don't know, I wanted to attend a photography school. And now I'm disillusioned. I had told myself, why not? I was working well up till then, so, to me, it didn't seem... And then after two months of that entry year at the lycée, I told myself that in any event I wouldn't be able to handle lots of studying or be able to get into the science classes, so I changed my mind.

Claire Three-quarters of the class wants to do the science bac. (...) I don't want to do that because I really hate math.

[...]

Nadine In all my years at junior high school, I got along well with my teachers. That year in *seconde*, I got into disputes with everybody without exception... What's strange is that up till *troisième*, in collège, I had been a good student. It was something like: somehow, that couldn't happen to me... Failing won't happen to me. And on the other hand, my *seconde*, it's normal that I'd have to repeat it. It's true that that one is a difficult year. My brother had to repeat it. (...) Maybe it's that my mother, without wanting to, really without wanting to, but I feel it in several... Often when we talk, she doesn't have a lack of confidence... but, uh, let's say that she has more faith in my brother than in me. And right from the beginning of *seconde*, I

remember her telling me – but not to be mean, to the contrary, it was to reassure me – “anyway, if you repeat, it's not serious, you brother's already done it.” (...) But when I think about it again (...) it's true that there was a... a lack of confidence in this year of *seconde*, something normal about having to repeat it... that came from the teachers, from junior high school, from my parents, a little from everywhere. So in my first go at it I wasn't really stressed out. My second go round, on the other hand, I was totally stressed out!

— *But isn't there a sense that, well, you're going to repeat and then that, automatically, things'll go better?...*

Nadine (...) As I saw it, almost everybody repeated *seconde*... As it turned out, there were a lot of my friends who went on. I found myself in a class where I knew absolutely nobody (...) and they were work-horses deep down, people who worked real hard. I had relationships with only two people in this class. The others, I never talked to them, I didn't get along with them very well (...) and I had to bear down, too... I realized that even repeating, everything that I was seeing was all new. I had to really bear down on this new work. I had to really try on the personal level, too. I was losing friends who had either finished their bac or had gone on into *première*. So even if you did see each other outside of class, there was a certain distance. And... let's say that I came down out of my dream world... My second round, it was “what am I doing here?” Most of all because, in fact, I realized that my first year, I could've passed (...).

*The ones who lose it first,
too bad for them*

Nadine I've often noticed that in classes. There are groups; and there are people who are isolated, and usually there are a lot who lose it...

— *Isolated people break down?*

— Yes [*unanimous*]

Nadine I felt it (...) in my second time in *seconde*. But I also saw people who were,

either all alone or in a couple, who just lost it; either by dropping out of school altogether, or in the worst cases trying to commit suicide. Because, to my knowledge, in the four years I've been in high school, to my knowledge there have already been five people who have tried to commit suicide in school. I think that's a lot. (...) An important thing is the number of psychosomatic illnesses. There's a girlfriend of mine who's just stopped, she hasn't been back in a month and a half. (...) There was a girlfriend last year who was literally sick all the time because of the stress (...) in her last year, from worrying about the bac in French ...and there are tons of little sicknesses that can't be explained...I get fever blisters...

[...]

— *There's an impression that nothing has been set up to help someone who runs into trouble at some point.*

[...]

Nadine It's a little like the survival of the fittest. If you don't break down you'll make it. It's like in the university, if you don't lose it, you've got a chance to be 200 in the lecture theater rather than 500. The ones who lose it first, too bad for them. It's the strongest who make it.

— *Does it seem right to you that there are no measures taken to help out, assistance services...*

Nadine I don't think it's right, it's just part of their logic. Because there is already the law of selection. There's already a law of selection, of discourage...well, discouragement, I don't know if it's really part of their system, but, uh... given that they look to weed out people at all costs, to make their lycée an elite lycée, their bac an elite bac...and then uh...I mean...They're not going to help all of us pass; they're already trying to get rid of us...

Muriel They're not going to look at it from the outside...I mean you can't ask too much of them!...

December 1990

Cogs in the Machine

For some 30 years now, the most visible transformations in the world of schools have moved in the direction of a formal unification (that is, comprehensive junior high schools, general-vocational high schools) that has, in fact, masked a profound process of differentiation. Not only have the old differences tied to statutes or to the seniority of teachers not disappeared from secondary education, but they are now coupled with an ensemble of concomitant changes that accentuate the differences between schools, notably in terms of the unequal distribution of the most culturally disadvantaged students, which means the most likely to “create problems” for the school. Today, the working conditions of the teaching profession are increasingly heterogeneous and vary greatly across schools.¹

For teachers, especially the ones who work in the schools most affected by these developments, the difficulties they meet are felt all the more acutely because the causes of these problems are so little understood that it makes it possible to saddle them with the responsibility and the blame. The school, which is supposed to transmit knowledge in optimal conditions of equity, seems barely aware of what thwarts its mission, and this to the point of covering up everything that in certain schools makes teaching “impossible.”

Pressures of demand and demagogic choice

Beginning in the mid-1980s the intensification of this process of differentiation has resulted in the concentration of problems in certain schools.² The lengthening of school attendance from the mid-eighties forward followed a decade of a low rate of increase of students coming into secondary education, notably coming into *seconde* [the entry year in the lycée] and gaining a general [nonvocational] baccalauréat. Comparing samples of students who went into *sixième* [the entry

¹ Media imagery that works off stories about “violence at school” or “teacher crisis” sometimes proposes an undifferentiated vision of the teaching profession and of the situation of students, and at other times gives a manichean interpretation of the most flagrant differences opposing “good” and “bad” (schools, students, teachers, principals . . .) or “barbarians” and “civilized.”

² Both nationally and locally (département, town), differences have accentuated between schools in terms of their student bodies. For example, junior high schools diverge more and more in their proportions of working-class, older, or immigrant students. The same trend can be seen over 10 years between working-class junior high schools in the “educational priority zones” (ZEPs) and other junior high schools, accompanied by a concentration, though to a lesser degree, of young and unqualified teachers in the most disadvantaged schools.

year of collège, junior high] in 1973 and in 1980, administrators observe the absence of “real improvement in their course of study for each of the categories considered” (if social origin and age at entry into *sixième* is taken into account). “If the rate (of entry into *seconde*) has risen from 41 percent to 46 percent in seven years, it is because the privileged groups, the children of managerial and white collar professions, were more highly represented among the 11-year-olds at entry in 1980 than in 1973.”³ While the demand for access to a longer period of education was already both strong and general, the school system continued to produce the same social inequalities of educational success sanctioned by the same selective tracks.

Against this, the goal of having “80 percent of cohort studying for a baccalauréat” by the year 2000 and the policy of 80 percent implemented after 1985 can be understood as wanting to give apparent satisfaction to the strong social demand for higher education, taking teachers’ opinions less and less into account. Tracking decisions are increasingly separated from the evaluation made by educational teams, while growing parental pressure, despite the judgment of class councils, gets students into more advanced classes. For this reason the rate of access to a senior year class [*terminale*] in general, vocational or occupational schools moved from 36 percent of a cohort in 1985 to 58 percent in 1991, or 22 percentage points in six years compared to 10 percent growth over the previous 15 years.

Disorder and tensions

In its discriminatory brutality, the old system at least had a certain coherence: It amplified and sanctioned differences, notably in the mastery of knowledge and the liking for school, by separating early on the students capable of “pursuing long years of study” from those whose performance and behavior in school “proved” to teachers that they did not belong in junior high school or in high school. These students were oriented toward the “vocational” courses or towards the “active life” (that is, work) at the age of 16.

The new mode of managing the fluctuations in school populations has upset the entire balance between teaching practices and the ways students choose their direction. To understand its effects on pupils and the reactions among teachers, it is necessary to keep one decisive point in mind: the current organization of the teaching system does not let teachers provide students with intensive, individualized assistance – precisely what is becoming indispensable given the growing number of students with minimal cultural capital who have more to learn at school. So, keeping in school children who would have been “excluded” in the past without creating the conditions for effective educational action focused on students who are ever more dependent on the school system to acquire everything

³ See the *Annexe du Plan pour l'avenir de l'Éducation nationale*, published in *Éducation et Formations*, April–June 1988.

it demands from them, provokes all kinds of difficulties which are of just the sort to undermine the teachers' working conditions without really making the students' situation any better. It is understandable that the uncontrolled effects of the truly demagogic policy of "80 percent" makes many teachers nostalgic for the old order. "I do my work, but I'm not there to wear myself out salvaging students who ought not to be there" tends to become a regular comment in teachers' lounges in junior high and high schools. As could have been expected, problems connected to pedagogical communication and to relationships between students and teachers have gotten worse principally where they were already the most severe, that is, in working-class junior high schools where, until then, selection had been used to reduce the tensions and difficulties tied to academic nonsuitability, as well as in vocational high schools which receive those least suited to study and at an older age.

In junior high school, keeping these "difficult" students through the *troisième* [final year] under conditions where managing difficulties becomes less and less certain as the problems multiply is the result of orders to the directors of these schools and the progressive elimination of the classes leading to a CAP technical certificate, etc.⁴ What disconcerts, discourages or makes teachers despair is not only the obligation to tolerate certain students until an age where they seem much more dangerous – students whose "terrible behavior," "lack of motivation" or "total incomprehension" of academic activities makes them appear "intolerable," "hopeless," even "unsalvageable." It is also the weakening of the power to sanction student work, to get them to do school work and to obtain a minimum of respect for teaching requirements even from the most stubborn cases. Since moving into the next grade is becoming less clearly dependent on students' work, teachers feel they have lost one of the major bases of their authority with certain students and think they are increasingly "powerless" in relation to those least inclined to be interested in school work at a time when the relative proportion of students of this kind is increasing in many junior high schools.

Parental pressure

Right now the current procedures for passing into the next stage of schooling have brought a veritable parade in and out of the Principal's office. It's like the bazaars of Constantinople, as he says, for parents who push so students can move up to seconde. (...) They push, push, push, and, well, he is fed up with it. He says, "Okay to go through." (...) Here in college we're already obliged to. You can still vary things a little bit in the transition from troisième to seconde, but in any event, more and more, and at every level, you find yourself with students who are not up to the level of

⁴ Track statistics by school indicate that in the mid-1980s in the majority of urban and rural working-class junior high schools, more than a third of the students did not make it to the *quatrième* [eighth grade]. The rate of nonaccess to this level is close to 40 percent on the national level for students from lower-class origins whereas only 3 percent of the children of teachers or of upper-level management were in this situation.

the class. So, in fact, you have the choice – and it works completely subjectively – between the student, and you work hard, you pull him out, etc., or you say that you’ve had it, you let him sit off in the corner peacefully on his own, as long as he doesn’t bug us too much; if he gets on our nerves a bit too much, you knock him down a peg or two until he doesn’t piss you off anymore and so there you have it. And there’s the student, he’s waiting around, and the years go by (...).

Parents are now more accustomed to meeting with the head of the school and realizing that he is someone you can make bend. The makeup of the classes, for example, used to be the academic institution. Whatever it decided, you accepted. Now where parents increasingly feel that pressure can move things along in decisions on academic tracks, probably they’re also saying “why not try for that too...” (...)

Since we have a student body that is recruited part from single family residences, part from a housing development, the junior high school survives because, in fact, we have kids who are willing to work. (...) That’s how it works both for us and the other kids. If we no longer have those kids, the junior high school will no longer exist, that’s obvious. (...) Their parents,

obviously, are the ones who pressure us all the time, and that’s why we give into the pressures: for example, to set up good classes, etc. (...). The parents who say “if my daughter ends up in such-and-such a class with this-or-that teacher, she’s going to private school” (...) as long as they were an isolated few, we could get away with it. Now that pressure is increasing, it’s the parents of students who are only average at best, and don’t care much about anything, who want their little darling to be in a good class.

(...) So on the one hand, we talk about the need for teamwork and, on the other, colleagues are completely disgusted because “why bother going to the meeting since, in the end, the principal is going to decide after getting himself out of the mess of all the pressures that he has to deal with anyway.” So the class council no longer has any sense of usefulness. (...)

More and more now, there are no longer any rules; it’s whatever and however. You pass for amazing reasons, because in any event, there’s nowhere else to go...

An excerpt from an interview with a math teacher teaching in a junior high school in the Paris suburbs.

From academic tests to testing by force

It is doubtless in the vocational lycées [LEPs] that the consequences of these transformations are felt the most. Students who once would have prepared a BEP technical certificate are now primarily going to lycée; students who used to enter vocational school at the age of 14 or 15 now get there at 17 or 18 with a heavier academic past, which gives them “accounts to settle” with the school system. These students, kept longer in a junior high school in a failing position [*position d’échec*] likely to produce passivity or violence, have acquired traits that make the vocational teachers’ work much more difficult and trying.⁵ Because

⁵ In spite of the ambiguity tied to their multiple usages, the terms of *échec* [failure] and *inadaptation scolaire* [“academic unsuitability”] serve to recall that, in the present state of education, the least well-placed students are regularly put in a position of “lacking intelligence” in academic activities (in which they are less and less interested). This situation tends to confront them with the alternative of a position of passive acceptance of their inferiority (in relationship to those they call the “eggheads”) or a search for affirmation in other areas such as physical violence (being a “tough” guy rather than a “weak” student, for example).

support conditions do not sustain a real educational role, more and more frequently some students take over as “leaders of a pack” who defy teachers openly, multiplying acts of defiance which take the place of revenge on school for these students who were failed by school.

The school for the poor

— You really feel that things are just getting worse and worse, that kids are so much more difficult (...). When I say more and more difficult, it's mostly that it's harder and harder to make them work, it's a lack of motivation, I find. You sense that they get bored a lot.

— That they get bored, that they are more passive?

— It's not necessarily more passive, no, it can show up in other ways... by aggressiveness... (...). I think that the population has changed... I think that there are more and more children of immigrant workers. And that the good students are leaving here more and more as well. So we're the school for the poor. And what frightens me the most is that I think that public-sector schools in general soon will be schools for the poor.

And then, even I didn't put my children into V. (...). The year *Éric* was in the last year of primary school, I had a *sixième* class [sixth grade, entry year of *collège*] with seven really disturbed kids. They had put them together so they wouldn't disrupt the other classes (we all do this a little). So that cured me and I decided that *Éric* would go to Paris. I'm not the only one at V. to do that, and that explains why we no longer have anything but the tail end of the classes. (...)

Finally, this year, I have a good *sixième* class, it's night and day compared to last

year. (...) In a good class, life rolls along fine. It's a real pleasure: you're there, you feel the life in your class; they carry you along... Oh I don't know, you say something, and there you go, they're off and running! Well, in *sixième* that's how it is and I find it absolutely marvellous. In *troisième* [last year of *collège*], I don't have any disciplinary problems, but they drag their feet. You have to try... motivating them, but you can't even motivate them, I don't know, it's... You have to try to not piss them off. There you have it. I'm no longer even a teacher, I try to not get on their nerves. (...) It's hard because at times I wonder what they can do and what I can do for them... (...). Meaning I don't ask for a *troisième* level. I have really lowered my expectations. (...) I know that, even so, there will be some who'll go on to *seconde*, so I try to push them more, but anyhow there are lots who don't want to, right from the very beginning, who are fed up with school and know that they'll do a BEP vocational certificate and so are just waiting for time to pass...

Excerpted from an interview with an English teacher who has been qualified as a teacher for a dozen years in the *collège* (classified as a zone of educational priority for the last two years) near his home in the Parisian suburbs.

The law of the market

But this process of differentiating schools and concentrating problems, which is tied to keeping students in junior high schools and then in high schools, is reinforced by “decentralization” and by making schools compete, a situation

that engenders new vicious circles. The schools, in fact, have an increased margin for maneuver in the utilization of their resources. If they have to adapt themselves to their public, they also worry about their image in the local market and the effects it has on the clientele that they are liable either to attract or to drive away. With limited resources at their disposal, they have to choose. For example, they must choose between a prestigious track, such as Greek, to keep good students from leaving for competing schools, and assistance programs for students with difficulties. This is how hierarchies are created and strengthened between schools who succeed in defining themselves as “magnet schools” and those who have no possible specialization other than working with problem students, a specialization that is worth little and envied less.

Although autonomy was intended to support the adaptation of schools to their clientele, on the contrary, the constraints of competition cause schools to play along with demand by trying, first of all, to prevent the “flight” of good students that usually accompanies increased numbers of “problem” students (considered still too numerous in these days of weakened tracking). Since the families of the students with the greatest social and academic advantages are also in the best position to make choices based on knowledge and to get what they want, the need to “fill seats” in the schools that have lost the most good students, produces “sites of relegation” even more surely than in the past – dumping grounds where all these problems are concentrated.

Even in districts like the Val-de-Marne which are still divided into catchment areas, the majority of towns show a growing differentiation between the student populations of junior high schools stemming from such flight syndromes. But it is above all in the desectorized urban zones that the playoff between flight and differentiation is the most intense and dependent upon promotional kinds of arguments and on shaky comparisons between close competitors seized on by students’ parents.⁶

Since the surest thing seems to be to flee from the schools that have lost the most and to ask for those most in demand (by parents of the same social group), the beliefs of the majority in what are at first uncertain hierarchies redouble differences and reinforce those same hierarchies. Tied, as we know, to social origins, the quality of the school record essentially determines admission to public-sector or private school. In the desectorized districts, the quality of this record gives the freedom to select a school, a freedom that can be real or fictitious (fictitious when it comes down to articulating demands that cannot be satisfied before a student is summarily assigned to a school less in demand).

This circular process, which progressively transforms suspicions into proof by concentrating in stigmatized schools groups of “problem” students rejected by prestigious schools, effectively produces the equivalent of what is unanimously

⁶ The results of trying out the abolition of catchment areas (in 1985 and 1987) reveal the dangers of accentuating social inequalities that these measures bring about. Yet that did not prevent these measures being extended to more than half of all junior high schools without any evaluation of the consequences.

denounced in “development-ghettos.”⁷ So that, in Paris, these movements of panic – with even more murderous effects than the vague reason behind the initial panic – have affected numerous collèges, and even three lycées with a distinguished history have been declared, almost officially, “ruined” because of their “good-student flight” and because of the accompanying fall in their test results tied to these flights, a fall which seems to justify new flights...⁸

Guilt-ridden and demoralized

The concentration of academically unsuitable students is all the more trying for teachers because it makes their work more thankless: “people keep resigning (...); sometimes you put so much energy into it for nothing or sometimes for just a little something, you tell yourself: I can’t do anything for those kids. (...) I know that I give up on some of them.” Instead of questioning the workings of the system that makes teaching impossible to do satisfactorily, the tendency, on the contrary, is to blame teachers for the difficulties of the growing number of less select students who possess fewer of the social properties that “used to make their work easier” in the past. First of all, on the level of instruction, the declaration that “all students are called on to pass” (soon after the generalization of entry into junior high) coincided with the injunction to teachers (notably in 1985, in the directives addressed to junior high school teachers) to “ensure diversification and individualization in teaching,” with no alteration in the conditions that would make such a change possible. Over the past few years the continual reference to “school autonomy” has put local educational boards on notice to solve for themselves the problems largely produced by the national policy of “the 80 percent.” Whether the teachers, experiencing problems far greater than those legitimately foreseen by these different “directives,” hold themselves responsible or whether they see a real or feigned misunderstanding on the part of the very individuals who should clarify matters, it is in every case “the discrepancy from the ideal” that is so painfully measured by these texts.

Although the school system and education are regularly presented as national priorities, the contradictions between the official vision of a system that guarantees “success for all” (or “equal opportunity”) and its real functioning are perpetuated all the more easily because they remain largely unrecognized. Statistical investigations specializing in determining the flow of students or the differences between academies and schools coexist with, but do not connect to, pseudo-anthropological studies that fail to objectify the conditions regularly associated with the emergence of given kinds of problems. The absence of such an

⁷ Schools and residences have in common their partial definition by their client population. Recent developments accentuate this phenomenon for student bodies: the already significant differences that correspond to the local populations are heightened by the new conditions whereby students “choose” their school.

⁸ Their misfortune seems linked first of all to being “badly sited” geographically in the competitive space of Paris since all three are located between the exterior boulevard of the city and its peripheral boulevard.

objectification inevitably leads to blaming the victims by privileging, for example, "the capacities and commitments of the parties concerned."⁹ So there is a manichean division between schools where there is a "will to move ahead" and changes are even "interpreted as opportunities" ("the parties involved are not tempted by a return to the past") and schools where the "teachers and the administration have both a negative vision of students and differing points of view on the necessary solution." Minimizing difficulties or laying them on those who are living through them is to put up an obstacle to the rigorous understanding of the problems of schools. It contributes to the demoralization of those whose working conditions have deteriorated the most. The polarization over the extension of time in school to the detriment of teaching conditions, and the urging on of ill-considered competition between schools confronted by very unequal difficulties, seem to have greatly contributed to concentrating and aggravating problems in those places where the most disadvantaged students are increasingly being relegated. The absence of measures to counteract the effects of these demagogic and uncontrolled policies has thrown the teaching system into a profound crisis of which the demoralization of teachers is at once an effect and a component.

⁹ This quotation and those following are taken from the article by Olivier Cousin and Jean-Philippe Guillemet, "Variations des performances scolaires et effets d'établissement," *Education et Formations*, no. 31 (1992), which centers on a crude opposition between lycées "on the decline" and those "on the rise."

Rosine Christin

A Double Life

We thought we knew everything about her: her provincial origins, her grandfather the farmer and her working-class parents, then academic honors in high school, studies in humanities at the University of Toulouse, the move up to Paris, then the junior high school in Val-d'Oise and 25 years as a teacher in the Paris suburbs.

In the first interview conducted in January 1991, she talked about the enthusiasm of her first years, her activism as a young teacher, students' often excessive expectations, the periodic violence as well, the video club, colleagues, the ones who broke down, her own weariness; she had spoken of herself as neither a "lazy little civil servant" nor "Mother Teresa," and about the tenacious feeling of having to do a "shitty job."

For the first meeting, she came with a friend, a former assistant to the principal in her school. Her behavior and dress, the long, curly blond hair, the oversize patterned sweater, a slightly exalted language, her liveliness – all made us think more of a student than a 48-year-old woman. The interview had been carefully planned on both sides. It took place on a Wednesday, her only day off, in an office of the Maison des Sciences l'Homme in central Paris. By temperament worrisome and scrupulous, Fanny made a number of inquiries about our work during several preliminary conversations before agreeing to answer our questions. To be sure, we knew several teachers who were stricken with this malaise of teaching and we had already talked to them, but Fanny spoke intensely and sensitively about her junior high school in Val-d'Oise which serves some 700 students, the children of blue- and white-collar workers, who were just able to buy the small houses around the school where she has been teaching for 10 years. Several times that day, she was able to bring this junior high school and other things to life for us: the principal who "wants to show off," the colleagues who accumulate depression and sick leave or "the kids who hassle her" to make videos.

She was also able to express her discouragement, though without blaming or denigrating herself. It was an exemplary portrait that, it seemed to us, got to the bottom of things. However, once the tape recorder got going, only Fanny's professional life came up, as though the impersonal decor had obscured a kind of budding intimacy, natural enough between women more or less the same age, holding in common, if not the same sort of life, at least a certain number of reference points and convictions.

Later, after rereading the transcript, stripped of what we had learned outside the interview, Fanny herself tended to disappear, too representative perhaps of a malaise that is so widespread and diffuse that it was losing its reality. She was hidden behind the banal phrases that applied to so many others, indeed to a whole profession. Without admitting it to ourselves at first, but then more openly, we discovered little by little that, too satisfied with having a good portrait, we had somehow been fooling ourselves, limiting ourselves to the surface of things. Yet, concealed between the lines, little ideas would spring up, hard to make out, like calls for questions. Why these days of 10 hours plus, the unavailability her husband complained about so much, this relentlessness at work, to the detriment of her entire family life for which “her daughters blame her now” – and the divorce that she scarcely mentions? “She doesn’t know any couples where one is a teacher where they haven’t had similar problems.” Is it a simple effect of devotion to a priest-like career requiring a constant self-investment, an irresistible adherence to the role played for others and for yourself, even at home?

We had to go farther in our conversation with her, to find out more in order to understand what so many indicators hinted at, this sort of destructive interpenetration of professional and private life in this particular case and, perhaps, in the lives of many teachers.

In April, after a number of phone calls, we set up another meeting. The interview would take place at her home this time and be filmed with a camcorder; Fanny is rather amused by the idea because, for once, she would be on the other side of the camera. We hoped that the document would allow us to grasp and analyze at our leisure gestures, expressions or looks that Fanny’s very liveliness made us miss.

Thirty minutes from the Porte de la Chapelle [on the northern edge of Paris], a long avenue which is neither sad nor cheerful, far removed from the city center, deserted at this hour of the afternoon, lined by small, respectable five-story buildings grouped in units and surrounded by sparse greenery: she lives here with her 23-year-old twin daughters. Two bedrooms, a small living room; the apartment she lived in with her husband for more than 15 years. They had furnished it together, nothing has been touched and everything needs redoing. The wallpaper is coming unglued and needs to be replaced, the furniture needs repairs. She knows all this and it bothers her some, but she has had too much to do since her husband left in 1985 just “picking up the pieces” with her daughters. One is working on a degree in education, the other is a horticulturist.

Fanny’s life is marked by upheavals, renunciations and breakups. She is the daughter of a textile mill worker, himself the son of a farmer from the Ariège [in the southwest]. From her past, she has retained a strong accent which, even though we try to ignore it, makes some of her statements seem a bit bizarre, that is, the more “intellectual” ones. Her father left his village when she was still very little to “learn his job” in a neighboring community and to “work hard in a factory.” She was still a young kid, but she still remembers this first move that was

so hard on her that she did not go out of the house for more than a month. Later there were the years in boarding school, then Toulouse, Paris, then Avignon in a short-lived attempt to go back to a different south, “then you don’t know where you are anymore.” If she had stayed in the provinces with her husband, she would have had a calmer, more peaceful, “problem-free” life, but, far from their home and their families, these two deserters, these immigrants, “were left to their own devices and had a rough time.”

Her mother, the daughter of a Spanish immigrant and the “village tart,” was taken in charge in her youth by a businessman uncle who had “made his own way” and “had money.” She had made it to the upper levels of primary school before getting married and working in a factory. Her dream was of the schooling for her daughter that she herself had been unable to pursue, of a career in teaching, of a good marriage, of another life. At the Pavia junior high school, in her philosophy class, Fanny was a very good student, she wanted to “be a doctor,” her parents were against it, it’s not a job for women – Fanny’s mother even knew a woman doctor who is not practicing – medical school is expensive. Mostly, teaching, which unites “power and tranquillity,” was very prestigious to the family. Fanny is very bitter. She “has forgiven them, they even laugh about it a little together,” but, when she was 18, it was the first break with her family. She chose philosophy and registered for prep classes at the Pierre-de-Fermat high school in Toulouse which let her take advantage of a scholarship. She quickly forgot about medicine and discovered the university, the big city, intellectual discussions, “enjoyed herself a lot” and failed the entry exam to the *École Normale Supérieure* with few regrets. She got a degree in literature “like everybody else,” got interested in theater, in music: as though she did not dare erase her origins, the interest in culture is, for her, a kind of individual accomplishment or singular feat but not a serious and necessary attempt to enter into a life deemed to be altogether inaccessible.

In Toulouse she met her future husband who was three years her junior: he was not a student like her. In this too, she did not plan, like some students, to marry a future teacher, for example, or to get ahead in life by the game of marriage and seduction; love doubtless joined, perhaps without her knowing it, obscure reasons of realism and humility. You can only count on yourself and people like you. Bernard was from a “very, very modest background”; enrolled at an aeronautics high school, he dreamt of becoming a pilot. They wanted to get married to go to Paris where they would have their opportunities and their freedom (“back then you had to do that to live together”). They thought a bright future possible, it was a period of economic growth, with no talk about youth unemployment, and it was not difficult to find work or an apartment. They were ambitious but they also knew how to make sacrifices.

The young man gave up everything, he took the postal service exam and was immediately named desk clerk in Paris: “So there too, big dreams . . .” This is how she sums up this episode: “I got my degree in ’66; I got married and I followed my husband to Paris. There you have it.” She thus gives herself the image of a young

bride deferring to the rising young manager. And yet she thinks that her “problems as a couple might have begun there.”

In October, she was doing an internship at the Charlemagne high school; they were 19 and 22 respectively and their twin daughters were born about then (at that time, contraception was still not legal and thus not available to many young women, though it was already widely practiced by the well informed). Fate has its hand in things, that’s all. And if, given her background, studies and work seemed like triumphs to her, the fact of carrying on professional life and family life did not yet seem like a feat itself, she doesn’t talk about it. Ordinary life is simply disappointing at times.

Fanny got married against her mother’s wishes and, until her husband left, she hid her problems from the older woman out of pride: “Paris was fine (...) we wanted to look like we were living right; in fact, we would show off when we’d go down south.” But she was undoubtedly hiding the first signs of disaster from herself as much as from her parents, so impatient was she for this new intellectual life that seemed to be there for the taking.

“The girls were dragged around”; when she was teaching at the high school, she left them in the care of “some women caretakers that we’d just found like that by chance (...) it was just something, but often people would hear the girls crying because they were alone in the apartment or were both in the playpen, so...” She “put a lot of herself in her work,” she loves her students with whom she is “unbelievably” patient, but when her daughters were little, she’d come back home annoyed in the evenings, “she had used up all of her patience during the day”; then there were lesson plans to do, things to grade. At home “she no longer put up with anything,” the girls’ homework “was a disaster.” She had to be always, always on the go, she never had any time. She must have been “hateful.” Her daughters tell her, but only now, after so many years, that it “was really terrible.” She had ignored their problems, convincing herself that it was enough to love them.

Her husband did not make a career for himself. By giving up his studies, he condemned himself to staying in the postal service; a supervisor, he stood in for absent postal inspectors or clerks; they never talked about it, but she knows that he suffered from having given up his own studies. Fanny made a point of not showing any interest in his work, she did not like his friends from work, they were too different from her own colleagues, who were quite often disdainful toward “the husband” as he called himself. She blames herself for having let her friends, real “eggheads,” mistreat this man who resembles her in some ways. She admits having been ashamed of him at times, as she once had been of her “working-class parents who were a little poor” with her girlfriends from school who “had everything.” This is the price that she has paid for “the comfy life” for herself, as she likes to say, the dreamed-for life which her mother had dreamed up for her: she cultivated the “intellectual side,” painted, wrote poetry.

Reality hit her in the face in 1985, the day her husband left her, “she hadn’t seen it coming”; they have since divorced, but she still wears her wedding ring

and admits hoping that he will come back. The same day, one of her daughters dropped out of high school. So begins, for one or the other of the daughters, a painful wandering that, even now, is not over: drugs, running away, failures, "big, big problems" . . . Fanny does not want to talk about it, there are tears in her eyes.

Doubtless, she did not know how to foresee or prevent this collapse; it would have required admitting too much, the life that is too difficult, the upheaval, little jostles, the ridiculed husband, the breakups – so many sacrifices made to an uncertain future and the mirage of an equally uncertain participation in culture. She now feels as if she has been "had," she distrusts "everything intellectual," she no longer buys records, she "doesn't have the money anymore" nor even "a good stereo to listen to them." That is all over.

In her job too, the young teacher's drive and the enthusiasm has given way to discouragement and, little by little, to the feeling of having given a lot of her time, her energy, "her own life," without getting anything in return. Scorned by the parents of students, ignored by the school administration and the Ministry of Education, misunderstood by her students, who are more attracted by material success ("money, money") than by intellectual things, she no longer recognizes the career that she chose and which, 25 years later, has nothing of the hopes of the young student from Toulouse and her early experiences. If, along with her colleagues, she happens to bring up the noble mission of the "educator," she often sees herself, at least in the moments of discouragement, as a nurse or a welfare assistant, in short, like a particular kind of "social worker."

As unarmed as she might be facing the improbable, unforeseen situation created by the radical transformation in the teacher's role, she is no doubt less so than others. Her background and her fate as a renegade prepare her to understand the difficulties and the anguish of the newly arrived students, a number of whom are assigned to her. Beyond the fact that they fortify her against the fear of adolescent violence that leads so many of her peers to absenteeism, her life experience and her extraordinary enthusiasm allow her to face them by deploying all of the resources of her cultural proselytism as a new convert and by "giving love" to her students who "are grateful" to her in exchange.

But, paradoxically, the generosity that enables her to be less ill-adapted than others to the new situation facing teachers is also what makes this situation function for her as a snare, that of devotion to students: in effect, she cannot avoid reflecting that it is for the sake of gratitude that they alone give her that which she has given in such abundance – or lost in such abundance.

with a humanities teacher

— *by Gabrielle Balazs and Rosine Christin*

“A shitty job”

— *We were just saying that a lot of teachers want to leave this junior high school.*

Fanny Yes, there's a lot, including me. A lot are feeling a little constricted and want to get out; I'm thinking of a colleague in music; there's already a bad feeling that has something to do with the change in director, I think. Since last year, we have a new director who doesn't have unanimous support at all, and people judge him severely because of it (...). There are some bad feelings about that and then there's a malaise that is more properly related to the teaching situation. I think that people have the idea, in any event I'm expressing my own, the feeling they've been squeezed like lemons and haven't gotten any recognition for it. When I talk with the French lit teachers, that's how it is, you really feel that you're nothing at all, that you're doing a job – to put it crudely – a shitty job. I've heard people say that. So you feel you've almost beaten yourself to death for nothing. Of having been had. And when you get to a certain point in your career, I'm at what career level, I don't even know, the tenth one? I'm 48. You get the feeling right or wrong, I don't know, that everything you've done was for nothing, absolutely nothing. There's a time when young people want to do something else. My music friend says that he gets off on concerts, he's lucky, he's got something else, but those people who don't have anything on the side (...). A Communist colleague has his activism... yet he doesn't really believe in it, he's taken up his studies again, he finds a meaning to his life like that.

— *Everyone is running away one way or another...*

Fanny That's for sure, there's a kind of flight going on, changing schools is another way to run away, but it's running away from the school. It's true that I'm fed up with it, but I don't know what else I'm going to find. I need to teach in a high school because I need to break out a bit, like kids say, to enjoy myself a little, while till now, I feel like I've given and given and all for nothing!

(...) People want to live. Junior high schools and high schools haven't become places for life. When you talk with the kids, I get stuff full of spelling mistakes, there's a desire to talk with adults which might also be that, this need to live for real, and I think that young people understand their teachers' malaise in a certain way, even the malaise in society. I don't know if they really understand it, I don't know if anyone's talked about it, but there's some of that in it.

— *They feel like they're not comfortable with themselves.*

Fanny That's it, I think. With my students, I can't say that it's like that for everybody, they're great, these kids, because they want to be, I see it with my ones in their final year, they really want to help, even to like us. So when I hear colleagues saying, “Well we're not there for that, we're not there to love the kids,” I find that's completely wrong, they need it and the teacher needs it. Anyway, I need it. I need to be right with them, right in every way if I want to do a good job. That's part of the total picture, people need to live. And in society at present, kids live like that, their models are King Money, and I think that's a problem also. (...) They think that we drag them into unhealthy things.

— *And when you say that teachers aren't recognized, that you don't feel appreciated, by whom, in what way?*

Fanny Well by the higher authorities who...I've often noticed that school heads – not all, because I also include other people who talk to me about so-and-so being great, etc. – are often business executives who are working in, I was going to say...the building, or in any case, the institution isn't for the people who are there, either teachers or students. They are there to stimulate you, to ask you to do things that are not part of your job, but you don't feel as if it's for the benefit of the kids, but for the sake of promotion or things like that, things can go on like that for a while if the teacher gets pleasure out of doing this or that, there are a lot of them like that. And recognized also by the parents and by everyone else.

— *Yes, by everybody.*

Fanny Because, frankly when you hear talk about teachers (...) it's old as the hills ... or take the opinion of my family, you've got a real cushy job. They always bring up the vacation time ... etc.

— *Ah yes...vacation, (...) what did your family use to do?*

Fanny My father was a worker, a textile worker. He busted his tail, it's true that his workday was pretty hard. And for him – me, I wanted to be a doctor – really – but he didn't want that because, well he didn't have the money, they told me “blah, blah, blah...” – but, for them, teachers have a secure job, they have it easy, they do their little job. He was imagining the civil servant.

I signed it “Sister Teresa”

Fanny He saw the civil servant, the teacher comfortable with who they are or not comfortable, I don't know. Maybe the teacher as civil servant is comfortable with who they are, because they don't ask themselves...and there are some, eh. There are some who don't ask themselves too many questions. But the teacher who wants to be a teacher and an educator because – I'm

coming back to my big spiel – I think that now what scares teachers is that they really have a role as educator. I got into an argument with some colleagues last year because I think of it like that, a real big word, I don't want to play around with words much, teaching nowadays is not just transmitting knowledge, we are the national education system after all and children expect it. They ask that we be...not that we take the place of their parents but that we be a role model with whom they can talk and when you accept this role, it works. There are teachers who simply refuse. Last year I had a problem class, kids who really had problems, and as a joke, really as a joke, maybe my jokes are too obscure, I called for a pre-advisory meeting because the class presented some problems, and I signed it “Sister Teresa.” Why did I do that? I don't know, a divine inspiration. Good God...what a hullabaloo!

I think that being a teacher these days, that's what grinds you down, it's exhausting because you tear out your guts for these kids, but I don't think that you can make it without that, but at the same time, when I say that I have this feeling of being unappreciated, I have very good rapport with my students and that's what keeps me hanging in there. Because with my students, even when I have difficult classes and even when it's noisy, or when you get upset, etc., there's something going on, I love them and they love me and they keep me teaching. If I didn't have that, I'd be doing any old thing. I don't know, but I'd take whatever job came along! Because students, when there's that, they appreciate you, this recognition, you get it from the children. (...)

— *And concerning your family, you were talking about how hard they worked... did your mother work?*

Fanny My mother was no longer working. She did work when I was a little girl, she was a worker also, a little frustrated because she had gotten pretty far along in school at the time. Her mother wanted her

to work to make some money and then you had to go to the factory to work. So my mother went to the factory and I think that, like the majority of children at the time, I kept to the path that she wanted, that she... (...) that she would have wanted to follow herself. When we would talk about it, I think that she saw it as being something like – how to say it... – for her, the instructor, the teacher was at the top. she still had this mentality of people from the country; at my home they would say the “regent,” my grandfather too, he was also very respectful toward the person who passed on knowledge. He was illiterate, and so the “regent,” as we said in our local patois, was somebody, my mother thought that way, my father a little less...

[...]

My mother has changed her tune

— *And your family didn't feel as if you had succeeded relative to... these objectives to be a teacher, etc.?*

Fanny Oh yes, of course. She felt I had made it, but now my mother has changed her tune, really changed...

— *So that was at a certain time?*

Fanny Yes, in the beginning... For her, the fact that... I was doing well at school, I was passing my tests, I had made it. And now, when she sees how I live, it might also be due to how I live, but the worries I have, she tells me “but all the same, in the end...”; so she doesn't really want to... that's all, there's a lot that doesn't get said in there, she has the feeling that something, she doesn't analyze it, I don't talk about it with her because she already feels guilty about it, I don't talk about it much... she has the feeling that something's rotten even in the kingdom of the national education system, it's confusing, I don't talk about it, but, well, I sense it. She told me when I went there for All Saint's Day, I saw her, I had brought some work with me, she told me “this way, in the end, you never get any peace,” that's all she sees, or when she sees I'm depressed, she tells me

“still and all, your sister is happier than you are.”

— *Yes, so she thinks that... it's not what she was expecting.*

Fanny No. She thinks... I don't know if we can even say “thinks” but... you see, it's kind of hazy... It's unspoken, but no. If we talk about personal things, I was married, I got divorced in 1985, my husband always blamed me for being too tied up with my work. And how many colleagues do I hear about who have problems as a couple because of that, teaching. Really... Hey, the one I talked to yesterday on the phone, a preschool teacher who's sick, she's sick, she's off until the 15th, the doctor wanted to keep her out until the 22nd and she told him, she had seen a psychiatrist from the education department's insurance company who told her “that's what your problem is.” It's a refusal. A refusal. She tells me, “I can't take the noise anymore.” She got depressed...

[...]

— *Often the spouse thinks that the teacher works too hard? Is too busy...*

Fanny Yes, yes... too busy. People from all over, the other day friends on the telephone, he's a tax inspector, always free, so he was saying, “At Christmas, we're going to Poland,” he wanted to meet some Polish people, and Monique says to him on the phone, “And what's your wife going to do?” “You're asking me?” he told her. “In her piles of papers to grade, I've had it with them!” Just snide comments...

— *Yes, but they hit the mark! And what did your husband do?*

Fanny He worked for the postal service, he's still working for them, he's got an easy job, (...) he's in office administration. (...) He used to have to get up quite early when he had to sub for people at some places that were far away, he had to be on site when the mail trucks got there. But, in comparison, I think – that's always the teacher's problem – in comparison with a teacher, what kills me and what stops me from being creative is that you're never done. When you get home, there are lesson

plans to do, and this year I can tell you about that because since the number of French hours was cut, we now have to have four classes to make up our 18 hours. Four French classes in a junior high school, three of which have 30 students, that creates an unbelievable amount of homework to correct, in junior high school you always have to check everything. I do text analyses otherwise the kids won't do them and I always have things to grade ... so, after the workday...

Oh! Every day, I've got assignments. Every day. Because I realized, in the beginning I corrected some of the papers, I realized that the majority of the kids, after they had been called on once, no longer did them, and I base all of my teaching on that, on the texts, on the writing, on reflecting on a text, feedback after communication, so for them it wasn't... Now they've understood; they figured it out and it works, but at first they weren't doing it, so I'd have everything handed in. Other teachers won't tell you the same thing, because in music, my friend there, he doesn't have the same work as I do. It's really strange, but I have some every day. I always get the feeling... of burning myself out with that. It really uses me up.

— *So did people blame you also, well it's your husband who blamed you for it, for not being available...*

Fanny Yes. And with my kids, now that I look back on it, I see that I invested my time badly, I really invested myself in my job and I neglected my girls at a time when they really needed me, I really did them...

— *You have two daughters?*

Fanny Twins. Two daughters, and they tell me about it, they tell me about it! When they needed me, I, I was... well that's a personal matter. For a time there it's true that I invested myself enormously and really opened up in my work, I can't say that it didn't bring me satisfaction, it's true. But it's true that I was giving a lot, I enjoyed being with children, but along with that, I was giving so much of myself that when I got home, my patience was at an end. But

it's true, my girls tell me about it now and when I was in the middle of...

— *How old are they now?*

Fanny They're 20... my girls are 23 years old, 23.

— *Yes, they're not really girls anymore...*

Fanny No, but I always say that... no, but it's because we're in the process of reliving things that we didn't live at the time, so I say my girls, it's true that we've gotten back to each other some now; they're reliving bits of their childhood at the age of 23. You do therapy as best you can. No, well, it's true. So, what were we saying? I no longer remember...

I don't know any teaching couples or even without both of them being teachers... I don't know a single couple where there's a teacher that hasn't had these same kinds of problems, some work them through, but it always plays some kind of role in there, and then there's always this feeling right or wrong... of giving, of giving oneself, of one's own life and for nothing. Like nurses, the feeling that we're nothing in the eyes of other people, and other people, what is it... the kids tell me that, they say "you're doing a great job, but you see, we don't want it for ourselves," they wonder why; well, because of their role models, the young sharks who succeed, etc., business suit, tie, money, money, money...

I read snippets of books

Fanny I think that this demand for a better life that you see everywhere, in every profession, the desire for recognition, I've seen social workers ask for the same thing, the desire that people consider them useful and not people who are doing that just to have something to do, lazy civil servants. Once I was disgusted during the high school protests, I was listening to news on public radio in my car – if not I don't have the time to listen – I listen, it's a cultural thing, I don't have the time to read during the school year (...) I read snippets of books, snippets...!

— *And you're a humanities teacher!*

Fanny Yes, when I read, I have to be buried in my book; my mind is always taken up with something, that's what I was telling you, the feeling of never being through, my mind is always taken up with something, I can't enjoy a book. On vacation, yes. But during the school year, I get no pleasure out of reading because all of a sudden, whoa! I say to myself, hey, there's that to do. So I get moving, looking for something to do. And I admit that, maybe age is a factor, I'm 48, it's fatigue... no, but yes, it's true, I feel I'm not as energetic as I once was, before I always had some ideas about how to do this or that in class, to make it more interesting; when I realized that there was an element of fatigue, I told myself that I would figure out something; now when I've had class all day, parents come to see me... I've got parents practically every day who come to see me...

— *You have appointments or do they just drop in?*

Fanny Appointments, no, I have them almost every day, not every day. Often, right now, there's going to be the class council meetings, people get a bit worried, some honestly enough, others to be able to...

— *... yes, scheme through it...*

Fanny There it is! Yes, it's true, it's to be expected, but once you figure up the hours spent on things that don't count, and people are tired of that; me, too, I feel like... I seem to be puffing myself up, I'm sincere, I don't want to be a typical civil servant, so I can't count the hours I spend, I wouldn't want to; but I've got colleagues who tell me "you're putting too much of yourself into it and because of people like you, others get the impression..." — since there are still some like that everywhere "you give the impression that things are working," you'd have to stop everything outside the classes to show people that it's not working anymore. I can't, otherwise... I don't have anything else outside of this. It's true that you spend a lot of time on it, I think people don't realize it.

— *Have you figured out how many hours a week you work? Or is it uncalculable?*

Fanny Listen, this year, for the moment I haven't done anything apart perhaps from spending some time on student subject orientation on Tuesdays, I'm not doing anything beyond my... for the moment, because that's going to get started, I'm on two school projects — one on the press and one on heritage — so additional hours, movies, production and stuff like that and this year, I'm not working... I work about ten hours a day.

[*She talks about the assimilation, frequent in the media and with negative connotations, of teachers with "civil servants," quoting a radio broadcast of the actor Philippe Léotard on France Inter in which he spoke scornfully of the salary demands of teachers and painted an unflattering picture of their "civil servant mentality."*]

A mess of money and energy

— *I wanted to go back a little to what you were saying because, at first, you said that you get the feeling that you really beat yourself hard and that you were had, and then you go on to say, in effect, that you have been "beaten," including on a personal level, that you have paid dearly in your private life because you ended up getting divorced, you have the feeling that, among other reasons, it's also due to...*

Fanny Among other reasons, but it's true that it was part of the complaints...

— *You say: "beat yourself hard..." What does that really mean? That you invested yourself enormously in the job, that you had been politically active, that...*

Fanny I was an activist, yes, in the beginning of my career, I worked hard at it, I wrote report after report when I was at the St-Germain-en-Laye high school, the Claude Debussy high school, which, at the time, was seen as a sort of pilot school, I was part of a work group on academic failure, even then, we were doing experiments, we were working... so we did reports on the issue. You also get the feeling that up in

the upper administration everything you might have said takes so long to get there that things have changed in the meantime, because school issues are living things, they live, they change; so when the reforms that we wanted 10 years ago finally arrive, it's too late! Last year, this national consultation (...) I kept a cassette; we were joking on the cassette, we made a video cassette, and Mariette talked about these famous "modules," about teaching modules (...); there was a time we talked about that and now I hear that it's coming into fashion. (...) It's such a heavy machine, so hard to get it moving... that you always have the feeling that everything comes too late.

— Yes, that you did so many things and then the return is so slow that...

Fanny Right, and I don't want to accuse the Ministry of Education, I don't really know how things work, I also have the impression that, inside this enormous machine, there's really a mess of money and energy; (...) I also see the danger in what I'm saying, because we were just talking about regionalization, because it's true that if, on the national level, it's hard to get it moving, I can see from here everything that might arise. (...) When you talk about demands, resources, things like that, very often there are things going on in junior high schools that are really a waste of money. Money wasted! Me for example, I do video stuff, I'm a bit tired of it, it's true, because I have problems with my eyes, also, there's my life. I claim the right to be able to quit things I used to do before when I could, when I wanted to, but no, we're harassed all the time, because you used to do something, you've got to continue. I did videos with a team. Since then... we made a movie, our first movie...

[Fanny talks about her activities last year in the video workshop that she runs.]

— How are the students, how would you define them...?

Fanny Overall, in our school, there are two kinds of students, it's a rural school, not

even in the suburbs, next to some ponds, you might say that it's a little... so I can't complain, we don't have the enormous problems like in the suburbs north of Paris, it's not that at all; but there are two kinds of students, pupils from a privileged milieu, there are two big companies here, so there are the children of engineers, those kids do all right, and then there's the rural milieu, employees, workers at a rather low level, it's true, kids... who aren't very ambitious; so in the big picture, there are these two types of students... (...) And so we still have problem students, like everywhere, failing, and well...

— How does that show up in the classroom? The fact that it's difficult.

Fanny Well, this year, for example, I have a class of the *cinquième* [seventh graders], there are only 24 of them; overall, they aren't... their level isn't very, very high and there are three kids in there who have real behavior problems, in fact last week, there were two, no three, so (...) one who comes in from the outside, who gets himself expelled from three schools and who is highly unstable, another who does absolutely nothing, who got nabbed trying to steal.

(...) It was after that that the police took them home, because (...) it's not the first time that they've been stealing, those three kids stick together. So with a class that's already having problems, they are the center of attention; and they are also bigger than the others and those kids...

— Older?

Fanny Older, no, they are about 14, 13 and a half, 14 in *cinquième*; you see, some of them are a full 14 years old, they are big, strong and they, I don't know, I have trouble placing it (...) they have no reference point, they aren't afraid of anything, anything. School punishments, warnings, suspension, suspension makes them happy, when you suspend them from school, they're pleased; I avoid that, the parents are also deprived, for three days you suspend them; on the contrary, they are going to go out and get in trouble, it's not... so

they know very well that we're not going to do anything, so they push you, they push you to the edge, so that too is a call, they too need someone to take care of them and that's what they want constantly and after a while it's exhausting. Exhausting!

There's a teacher, the day of the class council meeting, he arrived, he was sick first off. With a doctor's note. He arrived, he said "I can't stay for the meeting," he was holding his note like an excuse, that made even me sick, you see, because the teachers, the kids and the parent-delegates had a grudge against him; so you might almost have said that it was a way to get out of it; he came in with a doctor's note saying "it's a horrible class, I'm killing myself working here! I'm killing myself for nothing! For nothing, they're sick, they're hellions, I can't do it anymore, I can't do it anymore!" and there you have it. And he left again, the mother just said "get well," and things stopped there. He doesn't get anywhere with his kids, he doesn't succeed, he'd like to be the teacher who passes on knowledge, he sticks to that, he's the teacher, that's his role and... and things went badly. And he's the kind of guy who's very cultured. I think it was the history teacher who was telling me over the phone, because they had talked about it at the parents' meeting, he's the kind who's gifted if there are good students! Well, now there aren't only good ones!

— *All teachers ought to have classes with good students* [laughs]...

Fanny (...) Sometimes I'm obliged to play policeman; two days ago, the infamous A., kicked out of three schools, to place him for you, he needed to move around. He acted up, in fact he is looking for contact. But it's difficult to be a teacher and a counselor at the same time. (...) When you have a kid like that in class with kids who are already having academic problems, who are always attracted by the least little thing that happens, a kid who's always messing around, who is provoking, etc., that drags the class down, you only need two kids like that; yesterday afternoon, for example, they

skipped class (...) they do some stupid things, these are kids in danger. It ties my stomach up in knots. I sometimes feel powerless with these kids and the only thing left is to talk, talk...

— *Was it like that in the other schools you worked in before, in high schools?*

Fanny No, no, no. When I was a young teacher, when I started, I never had problems like that to take care of, no, never, never, I was a high school teacher before 1968, I was a teacher the way my teachers had been with me. I didn't have contacts like that, not personal ones with students. But that's it right there, the change in our jobs. For me it's there and I think that many teachers have completely rejected this role change.

She broke down

— *It's not the same public, it's not the same...*

Fanny That's it. It's not the same public and people say "we don't have to play this role," last year in a discussion we were expressly having about this problem class. I had had them twice, in *quatrième*, kids teachers didn't want anymore. There, too, is a hypocritical discourse, I didn't know any of these kids, I was a volunteer, they'd asked for teachers to volunteer to work with some kids, all failing, all unstable, often asocial, close to delinquency and, at the end of *cinquième*, the teachers didn't want them anymore. There are people who don't say it like that, clearly, "Oh no, no, don't put him in my class... Ah no, no, I'm fed up with him, I've already put up with him for a year, that's it."

The other day, I got angry with some parents concerning the three students I spoke to you about. "What is to be done with them?" I said to one parent who was saying "kick 'em out!" Another one, a student's father, was saying "if you want, we can come to the classroom and play policemen." I said "certainly not, what are you saying, are we going to send these kids off to the ovens? What is to be done with them? If you were these kids' parents,

you'd probably want some help?" They came back even so. I got angry, it really made me blow up, but... but on the other hand, I feel unsupported by the Ministry of Education, the director of this or the director of that, when you have kids like that, no one knows what to do. Because on the one hand we're criticized for spending time on them, so then you say, "Well he's just being a demagogue," I can't put up with that anymore. That's what I mean when I say "unappreciated..."

We want to take care of them, but humanely. We help people in Africa, etc. I'm also in the UNESCO club, we help other people, materially that's no loss to us, it's easy to give up money, a book, things like that, and here when you have a real individual, a responsibility toward a child, three-quarters of them try to avoid it, so there are some...and then a disgust for everything. It's the big problem: what do you do with these kids? The institutional structures don't help us, I don't know if that's going to change any, we have more and more, more and more children like that, everyone going into the entry class, life being what it is, broken families, children have these kinds of problems, there are a lot of them; all that, that was to explain problem classes. (...)

— *Has that happened to you? You were just mentioning a teacher who got sick. In the junior high school, are there cases of depression, illness?*

Fanny Oh yes! There certainly are. There are and have been for a long time. G., who had my daughter in class, it wasn't a piece of cake when she had Valérie, she had a breakdown, as they say, that's an easy way of putting it. With that class, those three, my colleague is wrong, we can say it, I hope there won't be any names quoted, but she has done some really bad things to these children. She insults them, they tell me about it, I'm not going to go give her lessons. There, too, you always have that sort of thing as a teacher, but you're not going to go buttering up a colleague or try to teach them anything, but she, she... how to put

it? Maybe she's solving her personal problems with them, she has a lot of trouble, because they are difficult, she breaks down, she insults them, and at the parents' meeting, and then at the class council, these disciplinary problems were brought up, she said "I can't do it anymore, I can't do it anymore! If this goes on, I'm going to have myself put on leave for three months!" That too is a kind of running away, and there are...

— *There are a lot of them?*

Fanny I can't always know if it's because of the students, I don't know...

— *It's because of this malaise...*

Fanny Certainly, last year, when there was a colleague who cried one day at a meeting... her kids when they... when they sense that... when they sense a teacher's scorn or... or even a teacher's hatred, because there are teachers who don't like them — they like school because they never left it — but who don't like kids, and kids annoy them and when the kids sense that, can they ever be mean! A disciplined child, who fits right in, follows right along, that one almost doesn't even need a teacher, no, it's true... but the problem child, sensing that, they can be mean (...) I don't put all the onus on teachers either, but there's some of that. This teacher, last year, they were threatening her, I don't remember anymore what they were saying to her, I don't remember anymore... that they were going to blow up her car...

— *Had it happened before or were these just threats?*

Fanny They were threats and one day at a meeting, we were talking about these problems on the open floor, all the teachers were there, she started crying, it was her nerves... yes, there are people who can't take it anymore and I'm starting to understand them, that why it's, you've got to be... I think when you have kids like that, you have to be strong, mentally strong. Or love them.

GB, January 1991

“I was somewhere else”

Fanny My husband – well, we’ve already talked about that, it’s truly an eternal problem – I think he had a complex toward me because I had more of an education than he... for all these reasons; I know it all now, when you’re young, you say to yourself “it’s not important,” you really do.

— *And after three or four years of marriage, it wasn’t important?*

Fanny For me it wasn’t, but for him, yes. He told me so afterwards, he often felt like he was Madame’s husband. The friends we had, for example, they were mine, our friends were all mine. And each time we would go to... well, I was really wrong, if you want me to talk about us as a couple as if we were at the shrink’s, I was really wrong and I know it now. But when you’re living it, for example, my Avignon time, I was new at it like him...

— *What is this “Avignon” time?*

Fanny After 10 years in Marly-le-Roi, in the Paris region, we wanted to go back to the south. We’d gotten positions, he had one nearby in Nîmes...

[...]

We moved to the Avignon area – what was I saying there...?

— *The Avignon period...*

Fanny Yes, I recall, we were new there and, in fact, in the building where we were living, we met a teacher who was in the junior high school like me, we were friends, her husband was a pharmacist, well at the time he was in the army, now he has a pharmacy in Berre-L’étang, and my husband met some people in Nîmes, people who worked for the postal service, but I had trouble putting up with them. I remember one horrible scene – I’m ashamed of it now – it’s true, I tell myself...

— *But why? Because...*

Fanny Why, first of all, it was the people, how can I explain it? They were the kind of Nîmes people who loved the bull fights...

— *Yes, okay. But that’s...*

Fanny But yes, yes, because... and well, I couldn’t stand it. I made some dreadful

scenes. (...) I know I couldn’t stand them. On the other hand, before we got divorced, he introduced me to other postal workers whom I found delightful, whom I still see, so I tell myself... I don’t take all the blame, it wasn’t the idea of the post office that upset me, but... I know that I often blamed him for it. It created lots and lots of problems. That didn’t come from that, but, well, they crystallized around all that and my husband really did have incredible anxieties... I wasn’t very nice to him, I’m a pretty frank speaker so there were times when I must have let off with some things that weren’t very nice.

— *What did his parents do?*

Fanny They are real simple people, workers, my father-in-law was a coppersmith, he worked in a little machine shop, to tell you exactly what he was doing... I know that he’d ride his scooter to his job which was about six miles from his house; and my mother-in-law worked for a long time in a textile mill since we’re from a textile region, but with no kind of skill; I know that she was – no, I don’t mean that she was illiterate – she knew how to write, but well... with lots of errors; they wrote me letters where they made even more mistakes than my mother, both of them.

I was the one who stifled him

No, they really are workers, and my husband’s brother, he’s also a worker, a skilled worker, he works in a machine shop; my sister-in-law stopped working because in the textile industry – people have said it before – they fired a lot of people, so she’s at home now, they have three kids, they’re workers too, and well, their kids are doing well at school. I talked about the older one with my mother-in-law, he’s on the science track, he wants to be an engineer and is doing well. You see, it isn’t, I don’t know if it’s the milieu; I think there’s an understanding in the family that results in the kids figuring things out better on their own. Because at their home, you can say

that it's really the kind of place...my brother-in-law, for example, he never writes me because he doesn't know how to write. He makes mistakes with every word.

[...]

I had never asked myself about the equality of the sexes; when I met my husband, I married him without thinking about all of these issues and then, in fact...I think I was the one who stifled him, that's what people tell me, I don't know anything about it, I just don't know, I think so. Because, well, it's tied up with my character. I'm very proud, I like to assert myself at times; we're really doing cut-rate psycho-analysis here, but it's true; that's my character.

— *But in what way did your profession bother him?*

Fanny Well, there...

— *A teacher still has a lot of time?*

Fanny No, no, to be honest, the vacations are very nice, but at home, contrary to what people think, a French teacher doesn't have much time. The first year I was working in Paris, I'd get home at 7 o'clock, 7.30, right afterwards I had to get started on my grading, on my lesson plans. And then, I think it's a job that keeps you very busy and since my friends were colleagues, teachers, when we'd see each other we'd talk a lot about work; that really gets on the husbands' nerves. And it's intolerable, I know it now. But back then, we kept on doing that. That happens; I have a couple who are friends, he's a doctor and she's a teacher. When we eat together, we have to make ourselves stop talking about work. Because we see...that he's had it. No, I don't know if that...well, it annoyed him, it bothered him. I think I used to talk too much, that also bothered my husband a lot. But what bothered him the most in our...He often told me, "I was the teacher's husband." I think it wasn't only due to that, not only — my job played a role in it — but it was also because of me, my character really.

— *Yes, you were saying that you didn't have much time...not enough time for him...*

Fanny Yes, but even so, not enough time, yes, and not enough time for the girls, it's true; it's true and that was in addition, it was in addition to who I was myself, and it didn't help things. I think that if I had been a housewife, I don't...we would have had a different life.

— *But it's a little as if, I read it this way, maybe I'm mistaken, it's a little as if he felt that you were taking the road toward being an intellectual and he was taking another one, whereas in the beginning he had plans, plans for studying...*

Fanny Yes, I think that's it too, there's some of that there too and maybe that's the reason that I hate eggheads so much now. I stopped on the way, somewhere. It's true, I think that the failure of my life as a woman makes me wary of everything that...because at the time, it's so far back now, it's true that I used to like to go out, I liked to go to plays. Now I don't even buy records, well yes, from time to time; no, and I don't have a player to listen to good things, I don't have the money to buy a good stereo, so I don't listen anymore. Back then, I was eager to know everything, to find out about everything, to do this or that, well that's gone out of me now, since my divorce, completely. So why then? Go figure! But it's true that back then I was like that, but he used to like it, he used to like going out — and then, certainly, he often repeated to me, "That's all I was, just the teacher's husband." I was the one who was leading the way, I think.

The big, big failure of my life

— *But the children, you didn't have much time for the children?*

Fanny No, I think the girls suffered enormously from all that, already from our incompatibility from the start. And then, it's true that I didn't have much time for them.

[...]

— *What are the girls doing now?*

Fanny Well, they've struggled, so they... Laurence, the one who worried me the most, she's a special ed. teacher, she will

have to do her certification soon. I don't know what she's doing because I haven't seen her much since February, and that's not by chance either. I think she has suffered so much from what she missed in her...we talk about it, we're able to talk about it now, in her youth, in her childhood, she takes care of dysfunctional children. She works in a center, she does social cases, little kids in *cinquième* [seventh grade], and Valérie, she quit high school the day her father left, she no longer wanted to set foot inside a school, she also used to think that teachers were zeros, pitiful people, worthless people, including me. That we were totally unable to understand anything about the young and since then – I laugh about it, but it's a nervous laugh, for years it was a mess, as young people will say, a mess, a big, big mess.

— *How old was she when she quit school?*

Fanny Well, she was in *première*, how old was she?

— *16 or 17? And now...?*

Fanny Yes. Now she does horticulture but it makes her happy because she's outside, Valérie's a girl who is completely one for the alternative life, and the other...they're twins, my daughters; I think she has trouble putting up with constraints, she's tried a little bit of everything, she did office work, she did internships, now she's outside, in spite of...I'm also astonished that she sticks with it so, through rain or shine, she's still interested in flowers. After two years, two years, no, my husband left in 1985, I saw the light at the end of the tunnel with her last year, let's say. But really, that's the big, big failure of my life.

— *Why, if she landed on her feet?*

Fanny I don't know, because I think that they were unhappy. I'm going to cry if I tell you things like that. It's true, it's something I have trouble talking about.

— *Yes, but now, they have each found their path in life and they are...how old are they?*

Fanny They are 23, I think they are... how to tell you? Incurably wounded, these two girls, by the life of their parents.

— *You lived with your husband for a long time?*

Fanny Yes, 20 years. But I think we did a lot of stupid things, both of us, because we were not mature enough for marriage; because me, I was somewhere else; because we weren't ready to have kids; and a teacher's job mixed in there, that doesn't help things at all. That didn't help me at all in my relationship with the girls. Not at all, not one bit.

— *Do you think that another job would have been easier?*

Fanny I don't know. No, I can't tell you that because I have other examples where I tell you...my friends, the lady, my friend – I say the lady, it's stupid – my friend is a teacher, her husband is a doctor, it's another milieu, they had more money than we did; there were also some problems in their relationship because she...she, on the contrary, it was she who was looked down on by her husband, and even now, when they talk, he's always telling her, "teachers, you're all worthless, etc., etc., me (he's a workplace doctor), I see kids come in to be masons or work in construction who are illiterate, etc., what in the hell are you doing at school?" – so in short, all their problems, they have problems. They have relationship problems – it's difficult to talk about someone else – but there are problems. They have adorable kids who haven't suffered much from that, who knew all about their problems though, who heard everything. And it works even so. One is in prep class in Savigny and the other is in the last year of collège, so they are well-balanced kids, who don't have any academic problems, not at all; and yet there are problems in the relationship and it's continuing. Because she – I compare her a little to my husband, if you will – insofar as she has had problems with her husband, she was looking for compensation elsewhere, just like mine, he was looking for

compensation elsewhere. But that it's really due to the job, I don't know.

— *Yes, but what you were saying the other day was that almost all of your colleagues, where there's a teacher in the couple or both are teachers, so among your colleagues, there are a lot of teachers who married each other. And the others too and so on. You were saying that for almost all of them, at a given moment, things don't go well?*

Fanny Oh yes, yes, it doesn't work well, but certain couples are resistant, in couples, there are people who resist this "not working well"; there are a lot of couples where things don't work right but they stay together. Well, but that... My big problem is the big effect that can have on children. In my case, it went very badly. I know couples who are doing well, I hear comments, but in spite of all...

— *Everything just goes right along? For the kids?*

Fanny That's right. Both of them fool around. I don't pry into people's affairs, for instance I have some friends in Brittany, the husband is a tax collector, she's an English teacher, when he talks about her, he says, "You're asking me what she's doing? She's grading, I'm fed up with it, etc." Now he takes off for vacation on his own, he has friends in Poland, they have received some Polish people at home, so he takes off. I don't know what's going on. If you can survive all that, it's fine, but it creates problems for sure. (...)

I was very sentimental

— *And did your two careers, your husband's and yours, did they get further apart? You said that he was a clerk in the beginning and afterwards postmaster. I don't really understand what that represents careerwise.*

Fanny Now he's a postmaster. When he left me, he still hadn't been promoted. Apart... no, I wasn't very interested in what he was doing. I was never interested in what he was doing.

— *And your common interest, what was it? Because you stayed together for 20*

years, there must have been some good moments?

Fanny Yes, but our common interest — how can I tell you? — for me, it's stupid what I'm going to tell you, for me he was my childhood sweetheart, I was very sentimental, after I got married, I thought it was going to last forever. That's all. And what we had in common, well, we were together, we used to go out a lot. There was that; those were good times. But it's true that... yes, there were good times. We'd go see plays, I tell you, during vacations, the whole family, it was a nice little life for me, I'm not very ambitious and I was content with all that. Without really knowing where the problem lay; and then when he started going to look elsewhere almost certainly to find another self-image than the one I was projecting to him, it was already too late, that's all. But I hadn't realized it yet right then; and that went on for a long time; but it's true that his job never interested me very much. It's true, I had this side, how can I say? Intellectual, it's intellectual. I don't know, yes, no doubt, I was interested in lots of other things, but his thing appeared a little... I would tell myself: stamping things, etc., it's not exciting, I'm not interested. From time to time, I would read in women's magazines that you should be interested in your partner, I would make an effort. No, but it's true! I was really wrong about a lot of that, I wasn't at all interested in that, and now I have cut myself off from all that. Really.

— *Yes, you also had your professional life? In sum, that was filling your life?*

Fanny Yes, friends of mine who saw how I lived told me "your work was everything," while I would deny it because I didn't feel it was like that.

— *Yes, but the job, colleagues and all that, with all that's going on with that? Not just the copies to grade, there wasn't just that?*

Fanny Yes, there it is, the job, students, colleagues, it filled up my life.

— *Were colleagues important?*

Fanny Yes, also. Yes, yes, they were friends. Colleagues, some of them became

my friends. That filled my life up. So my husband, I feel like he was left out. And then I think he felt so. When he told me "I was the teacher's husband," it was that, but...

— *Did you have any activities besides your school life?*

Fanny What do you mean activities?

— *You told me that you weren't an activist, but to stir things up...?*

Fanny Oh! Activist (...) I had a time; when I was in Avignon, I was the cell secretary, both my husband and I were in the Communist Party, he was more militant than I and I was the secretary for a while. Did I do so with conviction? I don't know.

— *For how long?*

Fanny Two years. It was a time when I believed in lots of things, now though, on that... I've gone cold, literally. What did I do? Sports, painting.

— *That's a lot with two children, a husband, school?*

Fanny It wasn't every day; what else did I do? I was writing poems, little things. No, I had a comfy little life, no, when I think about it. Easy, no, I was fine like that, I wasn't aware of anything. It was enough...

— *Not at all? Even a little? You weren't a little aware?*

Fanny No, no, no. No, no and no, I really came to understand when my husband told me – but he was running around on me, I knew it, he had flings – when he told me that he was truly tired of being with me. And I'd never had any notion of that. I thought that, well... I don't know...

— *You didn't see it coming?*

Fanny No. And even now... I wonder if it's really because of my job, because of what I was doing, I don't know, or maybe deeper things that were coming from me, from my childhood, from my mother, from her desire to see me like this or that. I don't know, all the same I did want to be something different than my working-class parents.

— *Yes then, your husband was a little like them? In certain ways...*

Our friends were my friends

Fanny That's it. Yes... I think that he suffered a lot from comments, I'm thinking about stupid things. Our friends were my friends, and well, teachers. Once, there was one guy who was talking about something or other during some meal, he said about my husband, right out loud, "well, he's not exactly a rocket scientist." And I think that hurt him badly. We laughed it off, and other things like that; in the teaching milieu, too, I had friends who were... especially the ones from Paris, when we moved up there, who were truly intellectuals. Intellectuals in the real sense of the word, who put intellectual discussions over everything, etc. There was one, I don't know what he's doing nowadays, I read his name somewhere, once during some conference, he must have gone up in the world (...) and they were from the upper middle class, not at all the same milieu as our own, they really were from the upper echelon, what I call real intellectuals. And they were very scornful. I believe... yes, this comment shows it; I didn't want to accept it, I didn't want to admit it. So, I was at ease with them, I was comfortable with them, my husband wasn't and that's what I didn't want to see. I didn't want to see it. I think that all that, that hurt him a lot, and he wasn't somebody who was stupid but who didn't know how to defend himself in this bourgeois intellectual milieu. I've completely cut my ties with these people. (...) My daughters, too, can't stand teachers.

— *Really?*

Fanny Yes. Except Laurence who has met a very nice one, you should hear what they say about teachers, but it's because of me.

— *What do they say?*

Fanny Most of the teachers that they've met are selfish, self-absorbed, they couldn't talk with them, etc. It's true that I've met some like that too.

— *With whom you couldn't talk?*

Fanny Oh yes! When Valérie was running away, I was very depressed, it was the day their father left, it was the first day back to

school after the Easter vacation, Valérie quit school. I didn't know about it for a while, because she was taking her backpack in the morning, she was going to the school. And when I wanted to talk to her teachers, they hid behind the law, I mean, I'm a teacher, too, I know the rules, but there wasn't anyone to help her really, and right then, I wasn't open enough with her, and I was worrying about my own problems, so I was telling her "you have to go to school," we talked about it a little bit, etc., but I didn't find anyone to help her. I went to the high school several times. So, she, she... (...).

— *She withdrew from school completely, and no one helped her at all?*

Fanny Yes, now that I think about it, she met someone...for instance, I kept her with me in school, I had to, her father was gone during...that's what they say, they didn't have a father really. So they were always looking to male teachers; and in my junior high school where I had put Valérie, there was a geography/history teacher who, with his beard, vaguely resembled my husband and he worked miracles with Valérie, he succeeded in reintegrating her even though she was a difficult girl. They have a real dislike for teachers. I feel guilty about it now, I'm not proud to say... so I try to be, because of them no doubt, I try to be a teacher who is very attentive to my students.

[...]

— *Wouldn't it have been easier to stay in the south?*

Fanny I didn't want to stay in the south, even less. I was the one who made the decision. I was very bored in the south. In fact, that's the problem of... I analyze it like that now... I left the home village that I loved early on to go to the city because my parents were going to work "in the city" – to the city between quotation marks, it's a big, big town; that was my first uprooting, I was still a baby, I wasn't in high school yet but I shut myself up in the house for a month; that was my first upheaval. Afterwards, but I have a...burning...memory of this

departure. And then there were the years boarding at school and then Toulouse, and then Paris and then finally you don't know where you are anymore. And I think that if we had stayed in the provinces, we would have had a calmer life, like my brother-in-law's, easier, more relaxed. And the fact of not having one's family nearby, I think that's a handicap when you're just starting out. I'm all for families, I'm coming back to these values of the past, I think that the family bond is important, all of this family fabric, the parent being there, etc., who make people... how can I put it, pay attention to themselves and other people. There, we, we had to depend on ourselves, we went in the wrong direction.

[...]

— *Ah! So he went back south then? After?*

Fanny Yes, yes, he went back to the south in 1985. Now he's working as a postmaster in a little office and, he too, I think he's given up... he must have a very difficult life, he's rather given up all ambition. What he wants is like me, it's to be peaceful in his office. So I don't know how he's coming along with that, but in any case, the girls never see him.

— *Since the day he left?*

Fanny Yes. But even before, before leaving the Paris area, there would be times he'd come to the house, he was never really interested in them. That too, that comes into it, that has nothing to do with his job, or with mine, I think that it's perhaps because he was too young when we had them, he was 19, it was necessary to be responsible; he was never interested in his kids. That's what they say now, and I didn't see that either. Once and for all, the big error of my psychology, this is what I think – I don't believe it anymore – it's that I always think that people are like me, that they have the same reactions as me. I do things, I see things in my own way, I need to put them in a... I need to, I don't know now, I know that I'm like that and that it's a fault. But I make everything fit into my worldview. So it has to be like I

need it to be. And I see it like that and I don't pick up on all these problems. Sometimes, there were bumps in the road, there were...no, I took responsibility, things worked.

— *Because the household had to go on? There were four of you, even so, you were the one who made things work?*

Fanny Yes, it worked, it worked. Yes, in fact, it worked.

— *That's already something.*

I love them, that's enough

Fanny There it is. And so all the internal problems people had, I wouldn't see them or I would tell myself "it's not serious, I love them, that's enough." So what can we say anymore, I'm talking to you about myself, I don't know if it's heading where you wanted?

— *Yes, yes, quite so.*

Fanny This is like being at the shrink's.

— *Ah no! Not really!*

Fanny Ah! But I've already been to see one!

— *Oh, so you've already been to see one?*

Fanny Yes. No, not for myself, but when Valérie was taking drugs, I went to see a shrink.

— *Does she take drugs any more?*

Fanny No, she's still taking little packs. I read in some medical books that it wasn't very serious; in any case, they are sold like that in pharmacies. But for two years she was using heroin, not regularly; when I realized it, it's because she wanted me to, well, I knew that it was a real bohemian life but fortunately she was with me. When she wanted me to know, she made sure I would find out.

— *And so then you went to counseling to get help for her? With her?*

Fanny No. All alone. When I realized it at the beginning of the matter, I went to see my principal, the ex-principal because he's now a principal at Trappes, he knew me well, knew my problems well, I knew his, we weren't really friends, but we were still connected even so, he gave me the address of a center in Ivry which is called SOS-

Accueil [SOS-Welcome], which takes care of young people like that, kids who are on the slide; and the counselor told me "let's start with you," so I said okay and I told him everything that I told you there; and he...me...the psy...that took place, I told him about it all, that didn't help me go forward one bit. No. And in the meantime my father died and afterwards it bothered me a little to go back there because I didn't know what I was going to say to him, I told him "listen, I'm not coming anymore, my father died," and I was in the process of dealing with this death, it's true that this, too, was an important event in my life. (...)

— *This was recently?*

Fanny In 1987. With my daughters too, I saw things differently. Because for a while, still with my teacher's side, my daughters, I wouldn't admit that they hadn't taken the right path and that a lot of problems were coming from that. And then faced with this dead man, I told myself that none of that was important at all.

— *But in the beginning, you didn't want to come out of your corner and now you don't want to go back there anymore.*

Fanny No, it's not that I no longer want to. I think that the friends I have here are very important, I would have trouble leaving them. Because I left some in Avignon, no...I really have trouble with that. Every year I say that I'm going to ask for a transfer. [*Question about the video*]. I'm ashamed, too, but I'm ashamed, why? Yet I don't deny my origins at all. You have people who come from the provinces, I could have lost my accent, made efforts. I still see my in-laws. She tells me, "Fanny, what I liked about you was that you were simple."

— *You "were"...*

These people who strut around

Fanny You were, because now...for her, divorce is...I think that hurt them a lot, my parents, too; my father was very upset and my in-laws too; she tells me "you were" because it's over, because I can no longer go

to their home like I used to before, "you were simple, you never put on airs," they saw me like that, I think for people who are workers, I... them... My sister has friends who are primary school teachers, who are teachers who do what I would call a bit of swaggering. Is it reality or am I the one who feels it like that, I distrust these people so much who strut around, but, well, when they are with other people, you sense that they are teachers, they show it.

— *You sense it? That's funny!*

— *On the other hand, you were saying that your mother was disappointed to see that you had lots of work, that when she saw you getting there, she thought that the teacher was a civil servant...*

Fanny Yes, I think she realized that when she, when she comes here during the school term, she realized that it was something that takes up a lot of time. I think she understood certain things because – even if she doesn't know everything – concerning my daughters, she knows enough to see that doesn't correspond with the norm, and all. And so she put all the responsibility, and it's true that it's there, on our problems as a couple, on my character, etc., etc. But she saw all the same that it wasn't the easy-street job that she had thought: we don't have anything to do, we get to go home, there are vacations, it's great, etc., etc., she saw that, my mother did. It's true that she saw this side... at the same time power and then no worries. And when she came, several times she came here with my father during the school year, she realized that in the evenings, well I was trapped!

And then even during vacation, I have to work... now I'm going to leave for Easter, surely, I have 90 assignments to grade at least. I have to do it, I have things to prepare. During the vacation, the long ones are nicer, but I still work for school. (...) My big dream is to take the children down there [to the Ariège]. But I maybe won't do it because I think I'm going to be appointed

to high school; but I would have loved, all the same, getting them acquainted with my region before it's completely messed up, because they are really pushing tourism now in the Ariège, I think that one of these days, it will no longer be like it was before.

— *It's what part of the Ariège?*

Fanny I was born in a tiny village which is called Lèran, whereas now my mother lives in Lablanet, it's the land of textiles and rugby, well, their team has dropped of late. The Ariège is quite small, what's the capital? Foix. The prefecture is Foix. No it's not very big, but it has a very pretty chateau. And it's a pretty place, I love it. But I wouldn't move there, moreover I'm fine here, I've made my own burrow or niche in life, I'm here, I only have only one fear, my husband and I never divided our property, it's being obliged to move, to change lots of things; I'm always afraid of... I've suffered so much these last years that I'm always afraid of change. So, well, it'll happen, but if it were necessary for me to move elsewhere, it would bother me a lot. And in fact when you're uprooted – I feel truly uprooted – you are obliged to look for other roots. I found them with the friends that I have had here. Perhaps also, I'm attached to this place because I lived here with my husband. And yet it's not one of the best periods of my life.

But I would have had trouble living in the Ariège, I love Paris. I go there from time to time, not very often, but I love Paris, I have loved this city. I don't know why, I love the streets, I love to take walks, I often took strolls when I was a teacher at Charlemagne, I had lots of gaps in my schedule and I was a young teacher, they were taking care of me! Gaps everywhere. So I had the time to walk about and it's true that I love this city. When I said that to people from the south, they told me I was speaking nonsense. For them, Paris is revolting. It's all black.

RC, April 1991

Rosine Christin

French Class

These days, Colette F. considers her “situation” not too bad since, in the Meaux junior high school where she has been teaching since passing the agrégation exam two years ago, she has just been assigned “two *troisième* and two *quatrième* classes on the first go around,” which is what she asked for; the latest arrival, a temporary replacement teacher, will have what’s left, the most difficult classes and the worst hours: it is not certain that she will be able to handle it.

After her master’s degree and a failure on the first attempt at the CAPES (first level teaching certificate), Colette had decided to take a position as a replacement teacher while working on her degree. She had left copies of her dossier with several school boards near Paris and ended up being assigned to Beauvais as a long-term replacement teacher. She was earning a little bit more than the minimum wage and at first “it seemed fabulous to her,” because until then she had only done little jobs: at last she was making a decent living and vacations came around rather quickly. She soon came down a peg with the more “frightful” classes.

Two years later, she failed the agrégation but passed the CAPES certification and took the tenured job title, assigned to the school board for the Amiens district, which enabled her to not leave the Paris area and still teach a full school year in the same place. She was then working as a French teacher in a school located near an industrial zone in the vicinity of Creil. The students who attend this perfectly ordinary “Pailleron junior high school,” built as two concrete rectangles plus “prefabs” and heated with oil stoves, are the children of workers who are mostly immigrants living in housing developments or small HLM subsidized houses. Fights and verbal violence are daily stuff there, but although some of the older guys have a “name with the police,” the students are still close to childhood, more unstable and agitated than delinquent. A certain academic order is still maintained, and, at first glance, the common rules are often cited, if not respected. Such is this ordinary junior high school as Colette F. tells it, a little like the ones found all over France. In certain classes, even the youngest, there are drugs and if apparently, no drug-trafficking is taking place inside the school – to the teachers’ great relief – nausea and loss of consciousness from overdoses at times cause a tragic interruption.

Previously, she had taught at Château-Thierry in a high school “with no problems, where she never had to give an hour of detention, unless it was for

work not turned in.” Reassured by this more normal teaching experience, she let herself get fooled, as she says. Right from the beginning her new students sensed her vulnerability, and she had to struggle all year long to avoid the worst excesses.

She has to cover 18 hours over five days; the most senior faculty and the oldest, too, the teachers’ union types well established in the region and in the school and in good standing with the administration, demanded classes to suit their schedules. The people in her type of tenured position rotate within the system and are named to a position in a given school for one year only. They are younger, often just barely beyond the CAPES, and are less well served. As soon as she passed her exams, she left her student’s room to set herself up in a rather more comfortable studio apartment in the 18th arrondissement of Paris, near the Nord train station serving the Amiens region. There are few midday trains and, four times a week, she takes the 7.15 train, so she gets up at 5.45 and leaves her apartment at 6.30. She notices other teachers at the train station, some days quite a lot of them. They nod to one another from a distance and, as if by tacit agreement, everyone looks for a place next to strangers in order to sleep a bit more or correct some last assignments. There’s no bus when the train arrives so they have to group together to take taxis: “they take three people, for the fourth person you have to pay a surcharge, for a large bag as well.”

From that moment on, Colette feels “tied up in knots”; she thinks about her problem classes; what will she do today to keep them quiet. Three hours of courses in the morning, two in the afternoon on the hardest day. Between classes, she takes a short break in the teachers’ lounge: a bleak room, furnished with some molded plastic chairs, two green plants and, most importantly, the great comforter, an electric coffee maker around which people warm themselves, whisper and complain. The ambiance is not great and a mute rivalry persists there throughout the year between the “old teachers” and the younger ones.

The school is isolated in the middle of an industrial zone and there is no possibility of going to a café or “getting ahead in errands.” Evenings, those who have cars “drive the Parisians to a train or bus station: it’s the best time of the day,” says Colette, “we chat, we’re more relaxed.”

She especially recalls a class in the *cinquième* [seventh grade] where the students were between 14 and 16 years old: “the day that I had them, I was pretty upset to my stomach . . . I hadn’t slept well, I kept asking myself how I was going to fix things so that they would stay in their seats.”

From the moment you go into class via stairs and hallways covered with graffiti and where there’s endless coming and going, where things are always boiling (a “real pressure cooker”), “you feel you’re done for.” On each floor on either side of a central corridor, there are 10 classrooms with glass partitions halfway up which are a great source of amusement since “they only have to jump up a little to act like idiots and disrupt the class that is going on.” As the day goes on, the students coming in late and the ones wandering the halls cross paths with all those who are “not in class,” having been sent to the guidance counselor whose office is located on the second floor of one of the buildings.

The first obstacle is lining up at the classroom door: “Even that’s impossible . . . 15 (out of 30) of them get in line but then one calls to a friend in another class, they have to make up after a shouting match about I don’t know what . . . It’s endless insults (the most frequent one being ‘motherfucker!’) and verbal abuse. If, in the stairwell, one steps on another’s foot, there’s a volley of insults, and the other one who is evidently thinking it’s a matter of honor wants to start taking swings.”

Just coming into the room sometimes takes 10 minutes. They are not seated yet, but at least “they’re inside”; just then, “one will come in with a fantastic story, he’d gone to see the guidance counselor because he hadn’t been there the day before; the counselor said something to him he didn’t like: he comes in upset, wanting to share his anger with the others, the others backing him up.” Several minutes more go by this way.

They are never all there; some come in the morning, others in the afternoon, or even disappear for several weeks at a time. At the beginning of the year, Colette established a seating chart, giving each one their place for the year. After several weeks the principle is respected well enough but the agitation takes hold again with the rush to the tables and chairs. There are some old, scratched-up wooden tables, covered by graffiti, and the weakest students have to be content with those. “The weakling of the class, the one who did all of his primary school in a special education center had one of these desks (. . .) and for his whole hour, since he couldn’t write – it’s really simple, he could not write his own name – for the whole hour, he would take his knife or his compass and he would dig at his table. One day he was so happy, he had succeeded in making a hole, he’d gotten to the other side.” The best tables are for two. They are formica and adaptable to the student’s size by a system of notches and screws, “so it’s a circus . . . I put it up for you and I take it down for you . . .” The majority of the chairs are broken, so before class you have to go through a whole exchange of chairs, the strongest giving to the weakest the ones that have holes in, are in pieces, or are rickety, “because when you’re the leader, when you’re the chief, when you want to be . . . you get the good chair, you get the good table.”

Twenty minutes have passed, class can begin. Around 10 of the students have their French workbook, the others have nothing, notes and pens circulate. They start on a reading exercise, “silent” reading – “there are 10 of them who really do it and the others do anything else” – then reading out loud, “they always want to read, but at the same time they don’t know how to read . . .” They go on to a questionnaire exercise: “I make them copy down the question and the answer, in a way that’ll keep them calm, I try to make them do a lot of writing so that oral work won’t be the cause of things getting out of hand.” It’s a memory exercise, answering questions about the color of a piece of clothing or another characteristic of the hero; there are also comprehension questions, logic, syntax. Few of them actually do the exercise; most of them give up quickly, get up in spite of reprimands to go look at their neighbor’s. Nothing gets them to participate, neither the appeal of a grade, nor the intellectual interest, nor the taste for

competition. Their passions are elsewhere. "There's the gang, they have things to tell each other about . . . but there are some horrible conflicts among them. Meaning that while they band together when it's a question of opposing the principal or the guidance counselor, among themselves there are terrible insults. For example, they take their report cards, which aren't much use in any case, and they scrawl really defamatory things on them, terrible insults, often between boys and girls."

As is always the case between students of this age, being laid back in speech and clothing is the rule; both shared and imposed, more than a *savoir-vivre*, it is also an individual and collective affirmation. This year's fashion statement is an overlarge sweatshirt and unlaced hightop sneakers with the tongue hanging out.

Sometimes a Walkman appears on the table. Then the bargaining starts to get it put away. It's no use trying to confiscate it: "In any event, that leads to such a confrontational scene, big kids who are stronger than us, it's not worth the trouble. You get all worked up and it gets physical." You have to negotiate, try to establish a relationship of authority and confidence that is a little uncertain and then you have to start all over with the following lesson, "nothing is ever accomplished." Some days, it is better to avoid writing on the board so as not to turn your back on them and give them a chance to "stab you there."

During the written exercises, she sometimes circulates among the rows and one of the leaders, one of "those who don't have anything to do," will comment on the brand of her jeans, Liberto or Levi, will ask her how much they cost, will look closely at her shoes, her jacket, will talk to the teacher about her or about himself, trying to establish an improbable dialogue. "Yes, we know about that, too, we don't wear it, but we know about it, and my brother, he shoplifts Chevignon hightops."

June 1992

Sylvain Broccolichi

The Upper Hand

Her sister-in-law had told me that H el ene seemed very preoccupied by the way things were changing in vocational high schools [LEPs]. When I asked her if she would agree to talk about it, she said yes right away, the situation was serious and she wanted to try to put that on record. The school where she has been teaching secretarial skills since 1985 is located in Paris and has a fairly good reputation. Some colleagues have told her that in "industrial" vo-tech schools (hers includes service and industrial sectors), things are often worse, which she has trouble imagining.

She wanted to become a physical education instructor, but had to accept a track into a secondary specialization. So she became a secretary, even though, "from the very beginning of her training," she knew that this job did not suit her, a conviction that was reinforced during her early experience of work in the business world. "As a camp counselor" she discovers her "taste for teaching children and young people," and when she hears about "stages-jeunes" [short courses for the young] in 1981, she immediately seizes the opportunity. She "has lots of ideas" about what it is possible to do with these new measures to help young people excluded from the school system and she is put in charge of reentry courses, then becomes a coordinator for youth action groups in the area. She loves this work, but since there was no guarantee that these measures would be renewed, in 1985 she obtains certification from the Ministry of Education as a teacher of secretarial skills.

When she starts, she sees the vocational high school as a rather reassuring structure, welcoming "calmer" students with "fewer social problems" than the young people she looked after previously. She experiences there some of these "fabulous" moments where "the kids realize that they can understand something," and even at the age of 15 or 16, "caught up in the game" of activity, "they inadvertently call you 'mama' . . . the boys as well as the girls."

For several years, she has been increasingly "devastated" by the deterioration of teaching conditions and by the type of relationships that tend to be established between teachers and students: "We are in a state of lack . . . a lack of intelligent relationships. You want to welcome them as friends and you become enemies. You're turned into a prison guard."

She believes that her past has prepared her particularly well to confront difficult situations. Until now, she has been able to "face up to things," but she is starting to think about the day when she will be "truly worn out." "Throwing

myself around, hamming it up to get the attention of students who are causing trouble by ‘dogging’ them in front of their friends, that doesn’t bother me too much yet. But in a few years I’ll be tired of it... If it continues, maybe I’ll have to get out of here.”

The worst thing for her is not the test of nerves, nor the feeling that “we’re fooling everyone” by giving students devalued qualifications. It’s the impression that the educational mission that she thought she had been ensuring until then is increasingly destined for failure. The insufficiency of supervision and the changes in the students are, in her eyes, responsible for weakening the educational act and for the rise of gangs whose leaders succeed in imposing their law right in school by beating up on and humiliating students who do not go along with them. “It’s the law of the jungle, the students learn to put up with this violence, to be quiet, to shrivel up.”

with a teacher

— *interview by Sylvain Broccolichi*

Hélène A. You go into a room, you’re alone in front of 30 students the majority of whom have one idea – to not do one damn thing or do as little as possible – and accounts to settle with the study tracks they’ve been guided into. And since their sole interlocutor is the teacher, they start by trying to see what the teacher is made of, if they are going to be able to run over her or not. (...) Simple things at first: when you come into the room, students who turn their back to you and continue their discussion, who don’t respond to requests for them to be quiet or to calm down, students who yell or shout when you ask them something, even if it’s only to take out a pencil or a piece of paper. And they try to see how the teacher is going to react to provocation, in fact, for example by taking apart the typewriters or lab material. (...)

— *And what does this reality feel like?*

Hélène A. That’s never scared me: I’ve seen kids take out knives or who were hitting each other with helmets. I’ve never been afraid because... I’d had a stint that brought me face to face with harsh reality

(...) and prepared me for humiliating situations where you have to defend yourself, situations of real aggression. But there are teachers who are afraid; and there is something to be afraid of, with 30 students who stand nearly six feet tall; you’re not as big as them. (...) I’ve always told myself that I would find the answer no matter what the situation (...) perhaps it’s that, the teaching vocation these days; but it’s true that there are teachers who are afraid and don’t stay on top of a class that takes them on like that. And these people are more and more withdrawn because they are kind of ashamed about not being able to master the situation, they don’t talk about it with their colleagues and you never see them in the teachers’ lounge...

— *And they are not really in the minority?*

Hélène A. Oh no! I’d say that it’s one out of two.

— *In the places where there are difficult students...*

Hélène A. Even in the places where they claim that there aren’t many problem

students, I think that there's one teacher out of two who's painfully living out this "rowdiness." There are colleagues who are really into a subject, French, history/geography, and who suffer deeply, in the deepest part of their being, from their inability to have students share their passion for this or that subject. I teach a subject that doesn't pose this kind of problem. In the beginning I wanted to be a phys-ed. teacher, but secretarial skills isn't an inspiring subject. (...) I have a colleague who is continually depressed about not being able to do her job like she wants by sharing this love for literature. It makes her sick. (...)

— *Is it at the level of the BEP vocational certification that you have noticed changes?*

Hélène A. The CAP technical certificate has become almost defunct. There are only BEP certificates; and even with a BEP, we've known for several years that students won't be hired. So it's necessary for them to try to go beyond that by doing a vocational baccalauréat degree. That's happening at the right time since directives from the Ministry of Education are pushing for 80 percent of a class to get to that level. So they have to get this BEP certificate: and it's there we can see how it's happening. First, from the exams where the content is very clearly dropping from year to year. On the tests that I have had to correct and on others, if the students are capable of copying, they already have half the grade. (...) The answers are in the text itself, all they have to do is know how to read to get the answer. In French, in accounting, it's the same everywhere... and then when in spite of all that, some teachers, who are correcting, want to do their job and give bad grades to students who can't even do that, either the grades are reevaluated directly by the local administrative authorities or others so that there can be a certain percentage of the students who get their qualifications, or the head of the correcting center gets a phone call and passes it on to colleagues saying that it seems that, in comparison to other places, they are grading too harshly, etc.... It's almost systematic. They find themselves in

the vocational baccalauréat track just like that, and since we need the 80 percent we do the same for the vocational bac.

[...]

I'm not an elitist, but doing that is fooling everybody. It's fooling the students because they think that they can get by like that in real life while in fact they won't find work and they won't understand what happened. It's not good for teachers because it's discouraging... We're not there to baby-sit; we want to teach things to students in spite of everything. People are fed up with pretending! (...) In the schoolyard, students spend their time telling each other about their exploits so they won't have to do anything, to piss off the teachers, etc.: "I got myself kicked out," "I haven't brought my book to class a single time this year"; and then, bang, they have their BEP certificate. So afterwards, they think they're real cool, they get big-headed and that they really "screwed over" everyone – that's the expression they use. (...) I'm not at all reactionary, at least I don't think so, but before, the school was a place which had a value where you learned to respect things a little, people, classmates, a place where you learned to live together, where things fell into place. These days, I'll go as far as saying that it's the reverse. It's becoming a place of noneducation; meaning that the ones who go there and haven't yet given up and who believe in what the vocational school can do for them, are at risk. The ambiance there, the violence and the fear that it fosters among those who undergo it for years, must leave marks on a person, on a future irresponsible parent, on a citizen.

[...]

Now you could say that there are no more hall monitors or such in the system. With 40 teachers for 500 students and classes that often have over 25–30 students (...) students have the upper hand, especially the class or school ringleaders, etc. We know students who sign in for classes en masse. These are things that could be taken care of if we took into account that the school is no longer solely nor even really a place for

technical training, but first of all a welcome center for students who have been cast off from junior high schools and high schools – and welcome has to mean structures for welcoming, and also adult supervision: record keepers, social workers, school doctors, supervisors for day students, custodians... Let young people feel like they are surrounded by adults, with adult support. When we do that, when we create humane conditions of welcome, the national education system will find an educational role again.

— *What are the most obvious developments at present?*

Hélène A. What seems most obvious to me is the lower standard of students who are coming (...) whatever the Minister of Education says. And what I find to be very, very serious... it drives me crazy... I don't know how to explain that. [*Her face and voice express a kind of dejection.*] You find yourself with a flock that might be very nice, even full of good will, but with whom increasingly we feel the weight of ringleaders who can take the chance to assert themselves as leaders, as bosses ... and lead this kind of ill-defined society that makes up the school population into absolutely unbelievable things. (...) Because there's a gap between what they

are physically and what they have in their heads. For them, more and more, the answer is to impose themselves physically. (...) Several days ago, I heard some students telling stories about their exploits in the school where they were before: "We really got a good laugh at the secretarial skills teacher! You remember!..." A kid was amusing himself by taking apart a machine. The teacher came by to tell him to stop. The student continued. The teacher came closer and makes a move to place himself between the student and the machine. The student then pushed the teacher onto a radiator. When he got up, his neck was bleeding... "That sure was funny!" Because that day they had the upper hand. It's really very typical of the present trend... I don't think that there's a teacher who's safe from that.

— *It seems a lot more common to you than before?*

Hélène A. Yes, clearly. Because 10 years ago, when I was doing my reentry courses reintegrating students who had been expelled, I would sometimes go to the prison to help them back into the system. They had been vandalizing things, things like that, they were little hooligans. But that was nothing compared to some nowadays. I didn't feel this violence!

October 1992

Institutional Violence

In these times of crisis, the interview with two sociologists introduced by a city school superintendent seemed to be taken for granted by the principal of this junior high school [collège] located near a “problem neighborhood” classified as an “educational priority zone.” Almost 50 years old, this former primary school teacher, a native of the region, might have hoped for better. Little by little, his job has been transformed by the difficulties encountered by and caused by children from social milieux quite distant from that of the school, translating into stresses that have appeared in the school since October 1990. He has to manage the major and minor outbreaks of violence on a day-to-day basis. Forced to be permanently vigilant to keep the buildings clean despite the rapid renewal of graffiti and to prevent these kinds of deterioration, he must also stand at the door of the school every time students arrive and depart to prevent acts of aggression toward teachers and students and to stop fights between students on school grounds. To ensure the effectiveness of this permanent discipline and to attempt to create the proper conditions to make it unnecessary, he has to live at the school, and it is only on weekends that he can go home to his children and wife who is a physics teacher in a large high school in Lyon. He also has to keep close ties with all the municipal authorities. He must above all adapt himself to the characteristics of his public and, thanks to an understanding of his students and to the diverse skills of his discipline, somehow take control of the violence without dramatizing it.

From an academic point of view, contrary to what is usually assumed, the scores from the school are not worse than those elsewhere; they are in line with the district averages, notably in terms of success for junior high school certificates (even though the number of students behind in the entry year is at 65 percent versus 35 percent for the district). From the perspective of the students' social characteristics – the majority are from working-class families and three-quarters of them have foreign parents – it is by far the most disadvantaged junior high school in the district. For example, not one teacher's child attends this school. An orientation class welcomes the students who have just arrived from Africa, Asia or Europe, but the vast majority of the students belong to Algerian families who have been settled in France for a long time. The percentage of students on state assistance has risen to 75 percent against only 30 percent for the district. Neither the interest in belonging to what has been an “experimental, innovative junior high school” since 1982, nor the fact of having 36 teachers for only 400 students –

as opposed to more than 600 in the 1980s – nor even the proximity of Lyon is enough to retain teachers and they are always waiting for transfers. An intensive tutoring system and, more generally, an extensive support structure does not prevent the exodus of students from the residential neighborhoods and even certain housing projects. Their parents request entry waivers for other public-sector schools.

Through the disenchanting tone of his statements, this former teacher with his working-class background and republican sympathies, who says he has always cared about knowing “what to do to save the maximum number of students,” reveals all the sadness that his experience causes him: the aversion to student violence, but also to the violence of the school system; the inner struggle against the malaise that he feels seeing himself constrained to make use of violence as opposed to the image that he had had of the school and his metier as an educator. He cannot accept schools being treated like police stations and is resigned to seeing himself as a maintainer of order, obliged to adopt “strong arm” tactics. As a teacher-in-training he entered the national education system at the age of 16, starting his career as a teacher in an extremely deprived suburb, and then teaching for 13 years in poor neighborhoods. Having therefore done everything to live up to the mission of the academic institution as he conceives it – to carry to the so-called “problem” neighborhoods “perhaps the most useful, the most indispensable thing for the children held captive there, that is, absolute respect from teachers and some means to help them escape, to be autonomous one day perhaps” – he has difficulty excusing the system for placing its most devoted servants in conditions that prevent them from truly fulfilling this mission, or even condemning them to deny, purely and simply, what it taught them, the beliefs and even the values for which, at the age of 20, they had chosen to espouse, as they say, the teachers’ “vocation.”

with a junior high school principal in an “educational priority zone”

— *interview by Gabrielle Balazs and Abdelmalek Sayad*

“We’ve really sweated blood this year”

M. Ramus There are periods of great tension and then there are times when it’s a little calmer. So this year, when the students went back to school, everything was going along fine more or less and then there were these demonstrations. And our students, certain ones at least, participated

actively; others participated via their families, their older brothers and sisters. There were two very different parental reactions, but the children were living in a climate of hysteria for two, three weeks, a month. Pro-demonstration hysteria or anti-demonstration hysteria. The school oper-

ated as it would normally, there wasn't the least interruption. Certain teachers talked things over with their students, because some of them found that, at the beginning of their classes, the tension was such that it was literally useless to begin, so they had to talk about it, it was necessary... But what happened, even in the first week of the riots, was that teachers said to students "you want to talk about it?" and the students said "no, let's have class." So, if you like, it was... it varied a lot from one class to the next, perhaps also from the personality of one teacher to the next.

— *There were no additional absences during the events?*

M. Ramus No, no, not that either. Students were coming to school and I was rather happy because it was about the only place where they could escape family hysteria. From whatever side. We got lots of phone calls...

— *From families, from parents?*

M. Ramus From families who were telling us, "well, what's going on, we're hearing rumors, is the school going to be attacked, is it dangerous?" — all that; we had kids, there was a family, the father came to see me and told me "this is impossible, I'm getting the hell out of here," he actually left for a week in the Drôme [nearby département]. But that remained marginal even so. There were parents who came to tell me "listen, we're taking our children out, we can't leave them here, we can't take the risk and all that," I said "hey, the danger, look around, you've seen what's what, you've come by, it's not a catastrophe," so we had one or two withdrawals on this occasion, tied to that occasion, but no more.

— *Permanent withdrawals?*

M. Ramus Yes, students who withdrew permanently.

Agitation hasn't disappeared

M. Ramus That was the month of October. So there was a kind of unrest; in November there was the big movement of the high school students and we caught a bit of the repercussions, so that has maintained a

kind of agitation. All the more if you take an informal walk through the community, you will see that since October, the agitation hasn't disappeared completely and that it's endemic, quite a few things remain. Rock-throwing incidents, stonings, they've become a means of expression even for the 10–14 year olds, it's not funny at all. There are two buses that pass in the front of the school. In February, once it was time to go in to school, the buses would not go by, there was... I don't know, there were thousands of francs in damages on the bus, broken windows, ripped seats; when the buses were at the school bus stop, the kids would get in, break everything and then leave. So there were work stoppages on certain lines at certain hours. So it was a tense time. Afterwards, in December, it snowed; snow might seem like nothing, but it's a problem...

— *A chance to make snowballs.*

M. Ramus Yes, snowballs, I can remember playing with snowballs but since I'm not extremely, extremely repressive and even so, since I have good memories of the snow from when I was a kid, I didn't make any rules against snowballs; I have colleagues, other schools made rules. But I had to call the ambulance and send students to the hospital. They weren't throwing snowballs, they were blocks of ice. The hardest, the stoniest possible, so I had scalp wounds, things like that. And then especially attacks at the entrance on neighborhood people.

— *On people in the neighborhood?*

M. Ramus Yes, there were people going by in their cars, the kids threw 50 snowballs into the windshield, the drivers would stop, open the window and catch it in the face; people were hurt, all that. Complaints lodged. So the school's image in the community hasn't improved. That was in December, in January and February, there was the Gulf War, what I couldn't tell you... So we had... for example, that translated in the phys-ed. classes as this kind of flare-up "Saddam Hussein, Saddam Hussein" and then graffiti; in

February, the break here was on February 21, there was terrible, terrible tension. It was really very, very hard in the school. There were teachers who went on sick leave; at one point I had five teachers on sick leave and only one substitute, so I hardly need say that problems got worse and the absenteeism of the teachers – it was justified, there's not the least criticism in what I'm saying – increased the problems even more; we were very, very tired then. February vacation came at a good time. When the students came back to school, it was a calm period; great calm, Ramadan didn't cause any agitation. But, for example, during Ramadan for us, the festival day of Aïd last April 16, there were 160 students present out of 410 or 420, with classes where there were four students out of 25. So if you want, it's a neighborhood that's very distinguishable. I remember fights in my childhood, when there were two children fighting in the schoolyard, well, so there were two of them fighting, there were maybe three or four who were there watching; here they are extremely ferocious, we can't tolerate the least sign of a fight and students who take...

— *Because things build up, is that it?*

Its ambiance is rather rugged and violent

M. Ramus Yes, because if two of them are fighting, there are 200 of them looking on, it's because the children who are fighting can't settle their quarrel other than very, very violently because they are pushed, excited... and that, if you like, we can no longer control it. The result, for me personally, I can guarantee you, I can tell you statistically, I have suppressed 99.5 percent of fights inside the school, now it happens out in the street, in front of the school, I'm not convinced that it's much better for the school's image. So you might say that it does happen that I have problems... let's say that this place's ambiance is rather rugged and violent.
[...]

They tell us things, about drugs... Well, the neighborhood here, the Saint-Jacques neighborhood, the people from the housing projects are completely at their wit's end over the drug problem: every time I speak at neighborhood meetings, people talk to me about drugs. Drugs, drugs, drugs. I went to see, I participated in workshops, I had one on drugs; I saw hashish and heroin for the first time in my life, about a month ago, when I participated in a workshop, the police showed me what was in their briefcase. (...) for myself, I feel I can, at all these meetings, say that, first of all, to my knowledge there have never been any hard drugs in this school. When I got there, I was so floored by what was being said that I asked for, and I got assistance from the school board, they appointed, they loaned me some doctors on contract who were retained by the government and were paid fees precisely to do research studies on drugs, things like that.

So for two terms, one term of one school year and one term of another, two different doctors spent an entire term at the school. They were able to see all the students in a class, they systematically saw all the students in one class, the troisième. And then they examined all the students for whom we had an inkling of suspicion... you know, it makes me laugh, when I go to a meeting, the people who know everything and who say "all you have to do is look at the kids who are a little overwhelmed and a little sleepy in the morning," 80 percent of mine are asleep in the morning because they watched TV until two in the morning. The doctors who did the studies on the school in '88 and '89, in both reports, no suspicion of drugs. They found problems of malnutrition, stuff like that, but no suspicions of drugs, of hard drugs, I think. Drugs like hash and all that, I say that, just as I have suppressed 99 percent of fights in the school, I've also stopped 99 percent of smoking hash in school; I had a chain-link fence installed because we couldn't supervise the students everywhere. So I had that fence over there installed which blocks off

the schoolyard, it prevents the kids from going behind the buildings; so the first year that I was here, I was always having to run around...

[...]

— *So all the students stay within sight.*

M. Ramus That's it. Since there's no smoking in the buildings, the only place where you can go smoke and even then not much is in the restroom; it's the high altar in the smoking tradition, it's in the restroom, but, well, it's still very, very limited. That said, there are students who arrive at school in the morning, ostensibly and then, when they are a couple of feet from me, not one step closer or farther, enough to show me that they are really smoking, they crush the butt, so, whether it's only tobacco in the cigarette, I have no means of checking; so that's all, that's all I can say about drugs. But the fights, that's what I'm afraid of. We had a fight that we couldn't choke off in 30 seconds, it ended with a month-long hospital stay for a kid who got knifed in the belly. That was two years ago. So, since then, I'm a little...

— *...cautious? You're describing a little the climate, the difficulties, the aggressiveness or the violence, but is it different after the demonstrations? According to what you have described on a month-by-month basis, there are lots of things which have...*

[...]

M. Ramus I think that the events, yes, all the more so since, I can tell you, the young men who participated in the riots, all that, now they're not the ones who cause the most problems, it's the 10-16 year olds who are attacking people, and make life difficult in the neighborhood. During the events, the school car was stolen and burned; I don't know if you saw the television broadcasts...I don't know if you remember, a small pickup truck that made several round trips between the CRS riot police and the demonstrators, it was...

— *It was the school's?*

M. Ramus It was the school car. Since then there have been no other depredations, I

don't know, I filed two complaints this year, so once for the school car and another time for a burglary in the bursar's office. But that's about...

We put up with things that are intolerable elsewhere

— *Can you have students starting out who are relatively old?*

M. Ramus Oh yes! In *sixième*, the entry class, through a slant in the remedial class where we try to place them as quickly as possible in the regular class, the kids who come from remedial class, in *sixième* that ranges from 11 to 15, 16 year olds. I must have one or two in *sixième* who are 16.

— *And you put up with them because normally they would be sent to special-ed. classes...*

M. Ramus Sure. Sure. But we put up with things that are intolerable elsewhere, sure. (...) There was a troubled period and then people are tired, and then they are a little bitter, a little disappointed because we have really worked this year and we really tired ourselves out. Self-confidence, I'm lucky in that I'm in good health and I thought that such things, my dear lady, that I'd never have to go see a doctor and tell him "I can't take it anymore; I can't take it anymore," and take sleeping pills, I'd never have thought that could happen to me. I had sworn that that would never happen to me. And well, I had to take some in February to make it through the last two weeks before the February break. And that affected me a lot. Precisely because I was very proud and I thought things like that could only happen to others, but certainly not to me. (...) And so - I'm not the only one to be in this position - feeling a little lost at times and being very tired. (...) I hope that I'll be able to be able to sleep during the Easter vacation. But I'm not complaining, I'm just telling you...

There were some events that marked some schools, a renewal of aggression toward teachers. I have a junior high school colleague, right after the events of November, who witnessed a very serious arson

attempt at his school. Two weeks ago his car was burned, a week ago they had to take a monitor who supervised the students' arrival in the morning to the hospital because she was struck in the head with a rock. In the B. and the N. junior high schools, it's also this kind of latent violence with attacks, that kind of thing.

During the festival of Aïd, three students went to throw rocks at the N. school, at the caretaker and her dog. But people are fed up with it now, and they don't just shut up about it, so the caretaker filed a complaint and the police are fed up, they took the complaint and the students were summoned to appear at the police station. They were also summoned by a judge and the educators of the neighborhood seem to have said to the parents, "don't let that happen," and I had two mothers who came and chewed me out about their kids... So in a way, it's kind of amusing, the students go to school, they are excused from school because of a religious holiday; they go and cause trouble in a nearby junior high, the people from that school file complaints and then they come and yell at me. [...]

So, after the burning of the V. school principal's car, the teachers from four junior high schools of the district and a vocational high school had a meeting last Tuesday after a certain amount of disturbance, there were three of us principals participating. And I tell you, it ended with a letter sent by all the teachers of these schools to the rector saying, "we would like you to take into consideration the difficult conditions of our work and life," because, as it stands, we put up with a lot of things that people don't put up with elsewhere, we tolerate a lot more from students.

And so I was led to say that, for example, one way of helping us is when, in a so-called regular school, when a student messes up, they expel him, well, with us, when he does the same stupid thing, we don't expel him. We give him a first or a fiftieth warning. And when we finally get to where we want to expel a student, when I

call my colleagues and tell them "hey, I'm going to send you a student, he's required to be in school, if I expel him, I have to make sure that he's taken in somewhere," they tell me "you're a nice guy, we'd really like to help you out but if a student from your school comes here, the faculty is not going to put up with it, they'll go on strike, and the whole bit"; as a result we are obliged to shuffle students among ourselves but they don't leave the district, so one of the ways might be to request the district office to assist us. When we are really pushed to get rid of a student in the student's own interest or the other students' interest, it would perhaps be to help us find a landing place, so we don't have to do the begging... so that it will be... the district administrator who can make those kinds of decisions who says, "this student will be put in that school and that's that."

[...]

— *What you were talking about then, the matter of the monitor was recent...*

The school was not particularly spared

M. Ramus Very much so, it was only last week. And afterwards... if you like, it happens that the rector of Lyon, the new one was appointed just a month ago. He had just arrived, he was supposed to visit one of the junior high schools in the area in the context of a pedagogical study on the role of the press in school; he was to come on Friday and it was Thursday evening that my colleague's car was burned. So we asked the rector, very politely, if he couldn't see us during his visit, so he saw us and we told him things weren't going very well, that it wasn't going well at all in the district, without crying disaster because we'd been there before. And we asked him, and he said "well, there are two possible explanations, either it's part of a sociological movement and then it's a general situation and will perhaps require general solutions, or it's part of an attempt to destabilize the national education system; the education system must be targeted by..."; so he said "I've just gotten here," you know, which

leads me to infer...because I'm very orderly about that, there are observers from the Ministry of Education who certified or thought it was a good thing to certify that, during the events, the academic and cultural centers went untouched by the events, meaning that the fires, the vandalism were directed toward shopping centers, but the cultural and school equipment went untouched, so, from that they theorized a lot. Well, I'm not convinced...

[...]

The very day of the events, the primary school just across from the junior high school, over there, it's a school which is (I mean, we dabble in innovation, but compared to them, it's really a joke; meaning the kids have teachers trained for computers, they have a computer center, they have I don't know how many thousands of francs of computer equipment in there, it's really a cutting-edge school and all), well, there was a classroom that was completely burned up during the riots and the computers were used as projectiles to break the windows. So you can't say that it was particularly spared. I don't say that this school was especially targeted...

In the days that followed, a preschool was burned, it had to be closed for two weeks, so that's not just nothing. And I'm not talking about the school car, I'm not even talking about the beginning of November, a classroom and a half burned in P. and if the alarm hadn't gone off, they found over five gallons of gas in containers that hadn't been emptied when they arrived; there was probably a gallon and a half that was emptied. That burned a classroom, if the five gallons had been emptied, it's really a very serious fire. It's like that, so I don't think...

But, if you like, the rector who was arriving, who was reading a report, that the education system had been spared during the events, and we, we present a situation to him where apparently we weren't very spared, so his reaction is to say "so, will there...during the events the education system resisted well, will there now be an

attempt to destabilize an institution that resisted well, just as there was some years ago in an attempted institutional destabilization of the police and others." So the rector asked for a meeting with the police chief and the senior police officers saw us a week ago, so the five principals, in addition to the principal from the vocational lycée, were at the regional police headquarters a week ago to talk with the police about what we could do, it's no joke...

I can't stand graffiti

— *And contrary to other areas, people here don't seem to be just giving up, that struck me, because ordinarily in cases like that, people, the faculty, the principals... in the end, all kinds of people are ending up depressed, but that's all. Discouraged and then...here, I've got the impression that...there are lots of initiatives...*

M. Ramus You have to survive... yes, you have to survive of course, one cannot... I can take you to visit the school, for example, I can't stand graffiti; meaning that the service personnel — we're going to take a tour of the school to show you — if there's graffiti, it is a priority: you see graffiti, you remove it immediately, because if you leave it an hour, an hour afterwards there are 10 more, two hours later, there are 150, and that's it. I'm completely indifferent to the laws on work-time for service personnel; I negotiate directly with the service personnel myself. "You have 41 and a half hours on the clock, I don't give a damn if you just mess around the school for those 41 and a half hours; you help me patrol the hallways when the students are moving about. Because, if you're around, they'll do fewer dumb-ass things. If they do less of that, you'll have less work. And in exchange for the work that I ask of you, a work of supervision that's not part of your contract, if you help me do that, I'll give you extra days off, I'll give you some, you take off..."

— *Making arrangements...*

M. Ramus That's it, so in effect if an administrative inspector comes and says

“what’s going on, at this hour I should have x number of people on duty,” they won’t find them, but the place is clean for sure. (...) I’m going to take you on a tour of the school. We hold to that, the number one condition for survival is at the physical level, if it’s messed up, that’s it.

— *To put things into their proper perspective: it used to be that they would take knives and carve their initials onto the table; now there are other methods, they spray-paint stuff on the walls; discipline is necessary, of course, it’s true, but, in the end, in public places, it’s true that these are public places, we have never been able to stop this.*

M. Ramus In public places; but excepting our school. No I’m very strict on this issue, because it’s one of the points where I can’t compromise.

— *All the same not to give it the meaning of...*

M. Ramus No, I don’t make it mean delinquency but I’m saying that if I accept the least bit of graffiti then...

— *I had the chance to do a study in Marseille for the city which wanted to clean up the neighborhoods. I told them, if you make a showy effort toward cleanliness, if you clean up those streets once a day, there you clean up twice a day, and the residents will end up behaving themselves.*

M. Ramus Absolutely. That’s what I think, that’s why there are moments that really make me laugh when the authorities come and say to colleagues “it’s not bad, it’s clean; what are you complaining about?” I don’t complain, I fight so that it stays clean. That said, I have... I don’t know, perhaps by a family background, a great respect for the service personnel. So if you like, they respect me. I attach priority to the idea that no service person will be insulted by a student or anything like that, I feel I’m more likely to be fierce about it than if it were the case with a teacher. And I can guarantee you that in four years, I’ve had two insults directed toward the service personnel, well the kids, they got it coming and going. Well, with the teachers, it’s a lot more frequent.

But it’s perhaps because my mother retired as dishwasher in a restaurant, eh, it’s that, too, maybe. Maybe it’s her that I respect when I respect the service personnel.

— *How many men and women do you have in personnel?*

M. Ramus Oh! A lot more women than men, it’s characteristic of teaching, but I’m careful about it, when I try to negotiate with the administration, I say that in a North African environment, a young woman statistically has more trouble... (...) It’s not a judgment that I make about women and all that, it’s a statistical observation. When they make an effort to place young men with me, it’s not always an easy matter; last year when they named a supervisor here who was... he was nice that’s what. He lasted a month. He was a boy, afterwards they named a girl to his position and she lasted until the end of the year, so you see that it’s not... So you also have to be very cautious. This year, they named a North African supervisor, a North African young man, a math student, a future math teacher. He had done his CAPES teaching certification. I didn’t know him. When I saw his placement slip in August, my first reaction was to say “hey, maybe the administration thought it would go over well,” and I waited with interest, it’s the first time that I’ve had a North African supervisor. And well, the poor thing, he really had a hard time, however it’s not for lack of authority, it’s the image of the North African, I think, he was seen as a collaborator with the other side and he was really insulted a lot more than the others; I had to step in a lot more than with the others; you learn something every day.

What we school heads were saying to the district administrator, to the rector, to the police, what is so hard in these schools is that it’s unforeseeable. It’s just when you’re not expecting them that catastrophes occur and then we always have the feeling we’re walking on eggs, that all it takes is an extremely minor incident to degenerate into something else and then to... It’s that, you

really have to be (...) my problem now, if I'm getting tired it's because... Well, but that's part of my private life, I'd really like to be principal of this school for 12 hours a day and then for 12 hours a day be... and that, for myself, I'm no longer able to achieve this balance.

It's hard being humiliated when you're not prepared for it

— *And what are your relationships like with parents? You recently mentioned that there were families that spoke with you during that particular period, but in normal times I dare say that it's...*

M. Ramus For us, the problem is having the most contact possible with families because we see that...

— *You seek contact?*

M. Ramus Yes. We require them to come to the school. And requiring people to come to school who are not in the habit and who... so well, before I got here, things were in place. We do not send any quarterly report cards to the families, not one. The families come to pick up the report cards at school. So we get organized, and we've achieved a level of 90 percent, and three times a year — well a level of 90 percent for the first and second quarters, in the third quarter, a little less, we get 65 percent, 70 percent, but in the first and second quarters 90 percent of the families come to the school to get the report card, meaning that the class's supervising teacher, who has the students for tutoring... that's the teacher who welcomes them. So for three evenings a year starting at 4 o'clock for some, at 5 for others, until 8.30, 9 o'clock, until they're worn out and we talk to about 70 percent there, and we bug the others until they come in, meaning we force them to make an appointment, all that. So the number of people who resist is minimal. And in spite of everything, it's not enough.

I participated very actively in setting up a parents' association because in other places, in a regular school, students' parents are a pain in the neck for the principals. Here I need them. If the kids have problems, it's

because the parents are completely out of the picture and I observe that, even in poverty, if parents have contact with their children, the kids do fewer stupid things, they work better, so I try, we're in the process of trying to get started, we want to start an initiative to make parents aware, next year for parents whose children are coming into the entry class, to invite them for whole days to the school where they'll meet the teachers, eat with them, make meals with them... They have to come into the school without being afraid, without... for the majority of parents, the junior high school, the primary school for those who only got that far, represents academic failure and then there are still a lot, notably with the North African women who are 40, 45 years old, who never went to school. Never. So they are illiterate, they can neither read nor write and scarcely speak French, they speak Arabic, but they don't know how to read or write it either, it's like that. School must not be the place... I'm fed up with seeing people who...

— *These women come?*

M. Ramus No, very few, very few of them, they come to get the reports, and I'm fed up with it and they come when I send them a notice to say "your son isn't doing well" or "your daughter isn't doing well," and I would really like to see them, I would really like them to come, that they come by to say "how's it going?" without knowing in advance and perhaps I can one day say "yes, it's going very well"... I would like it a lot. Because... I'll tell you a story. There's a gym teacher who has a difficult relationship with some of her classes. She's been there for 12 years, she's tired... And then the students look at gym like it's fun time, while she thinks that gym is a class like any other and she has very demanding standards. One day she takes the students to the pool, she comes back out of the pool and the windows of her car are broken. She thinks, I think so too, that it was students from the class who broke her windows; you can't prove it. So she came to me very angry and she told me a certain number of things,

and there were six students in the class who were annoying her a lot and she asked me to punish them. I said "before taking the step of temporarily suspending them, we're going to call their families."

I asked the families to come in one day, she was there with me, with my assistant principal, there were six families with us. I'll take two out of the six. There was one father that I had to physically throw out of my office because he insulted her, called her a liar, a bitch and all that, so I had to, with my assistant, take him... because I was asking him to leave and he didn't want to, so we threw him out of the office. And his daughter who was right behind, she was laughing her head off. Her father was saying exactly what she said to the teacher, so that suited her fine, so... what do you want us to do with kids like that.

At the other end, completely, a father who was there, he was sitting there, his son behind him, he was talking with his head down, I don't know if he was talking to me or to his son, he was saying "I've been in France for 28 years, for 27 years and a half I've been in the same job because I think that the boss is always right; when he says something, even if you don't agree, you say yes, you're humble, you accept everything, you don't protest, that's how it is. And thanks to this attitude, I was able to bring my wife to France, I was able to raise my children." I thought that his son who was standing behind him was going to hit him; I have never seen such hatred because what the father was saying was totally unacceptable.

— *And how old was he?*

M. Ramus 16. And the two extreme cases of total humility before the institution and total aggression, in the end for the kids it comes down to the same thing. I'll give you another example of situations that we have to face. Last year, there was a bus strike. A lot of young people were in a neighborhood where there was no bus service, so they got into the habit, in the afternoon especially, of walking around, and so they would jump over the gate there, over five feet, that's not bad, and then they would come and go up

to the classrooms, they would open the doors, they would spit on the students and the teachers, they would insult them and once I was told about it and left to look into it, they'd take off running. One day there were three who came in and someone saw them just when they did so. I was warned, I had a little welcome wagon set in place and I was able to trap one. He was 19 years old.

— *A former student?*

M. Ramus No, the one I caught was not a former student. I really had to struggle because he tried to give me the slip. I had caught him and he asked me "what are you going to do?" I said "I'm going to take you to my office." He said, "no." And I said, "yes, I am," I said "maybe I won't succeed and I'll be left for dead, but if you don't kill me, if you don't wound me, I'm taking you to my office," and I took him there. In my office, he told me "you want me to tell you what you're going to do? You're going to call the cops. The cops are going to come, they're going to rough me up. They're going to take me down to the station, they're going to rough me up, they're going to call my father. He's going to come, he's going to cry and the cops are going to give me to my father and he's going to take me home. It's going to last an hour and a half. In two hours we'll be back and there won't be anything left of the school. You do as you like."

While he was in my office telling me that, they came in and there were the three of them. The two others had run off and gathered 50 more. And the 50, they were standing in a semicircle in the courtyard. My assistant went to find all the men on the faculty. That day, he found six or seven who stood in a semicircle in front of my office. That's how it was. So then it was a lot of talk. I go out into the middle of the schoolyard and there are two spokesmen who come in: "What are you going to do, you're not going to call the police for nothing, what are you talking about, a little thing like that. What's the matter, he spat, it's really not very serious, and then you're not going to piss us off because if you piss

us off, you'd better let our friend go with us, because if you piss us off, it's going to go down bad." The teachers were half and half. Half were saying "call the cops, we're not just going to let ourselves be run over," and the other half saying "I warn you, if you call the cops, we'll no longer be able to drive to work," and well... it's hard being humiliated when you're not psychologically prepared to be humiliated, when you're someone who's proud and who has a sense of honor, it's hard.

I refuse to expose the supervisors to insults at the gate, so I do it myself with my assistant, every morning and every afternoon, when students come in; and I'm terrible at recognizing faces and there's the caretaker there, a Frenchman from North Africa who is good at it and tells me "the three there don't belong in the school," so when they arrive at the gate, I tell them "Gentlemen, you're not students here, do you need something? If you need to do something, tell me about it or you're not coming in. No, you're not coming in." So they back off three yards and stand beside the fence and start talking among themselves. And they start talking among themselves in a way so that I can hear that I'm an asshole: "look at his mug" and all that, and all the while talking, they come back, they spit, they spit in my direction. When you've had 10 minutes of that, seven or eight spits that are only a foot away from you and you're someone who's proud, who has a sense of honor and all, well, it's hard. It's very hard. So there it is. So there are days when I'd rather be elsewhere (...).

We had dialogues ad nauseam

M. Ramus They really have it in for school, because school didn't enable them to solve their situation; well in the end, I'm not that surprised. And then again, school is a place of constraints. During the events, I experienced... it was surreal. The last time school started in September 1990, in the vocational lycées [LEPs] of the Rhône district, there were 700 vacant seats, there were no candidates. Every day there were 700 places

available during the entire month of September and the beginning of the month of October, we were looking at the Minitel [computer service], the Minitel bulletin boards, and it was saying "such and such a school has so many places available; this one has so many; this one has so many."

When the events took place, the overall interpretation was that, yes, we have built, we have repainted their facades, but we haven't talked with them, it's because we didn't dialogue that they have revolted, so let's negotiate; we had dialogues ad nauseam in neighborhood meetings, things like that, and in these neighborhood meetings, we'd hear kids saying "yeah, school hasn't done anything for us, we don't have anything, we don't have any education," meanwhile there were 700 empty places in vocational lycées, only what are empty places in a vocational lycée? It's 32 hours a week of work, no pay. Well, well, they don't agree with going there either, in the end, the young losers in the projects are asking for what? They're asking for the means to live. Well, they end up asking for interesting work but the country isn't in the position to be able to offer them an interesting job because they aren't trained, and I am trained and it's not every day that my job is interesting, so... I don't see, in the end miracles don't happen! So, they're angry, they're angry at the institution, they're ready to break everything that gives them the image of a kind of failure, but I don't have many solutions.

— *Yes, but they still have brothers and sisters who are going to school...?*

M. Ramus Yes. When they hear older brothers who tell them "you have to work because, look, I'm in *seconde* or *première* or in *terminale* [final year of lycée] and then I'm out of here"... I have the niece of a college professor who has written a book [*an autobiographical novel about his school years as the child of an immigrant in a working-class neighborhood*] here, her uncle told her "don't fuck up" so she doesn't fuck up. She does what she can, she might do less well than her uncle, but I

think she'll make it, she's in *seconde*, so afterwards... There are some families, the big brothers, you get the impression that they are on relays so that there is always one outside while the others are in jail, so that they all won't be in jail at the same time. There's one family, the three older brothers are in jail for aggravated pimping, it's the mother who runs the bistro they had because it's the only resource for the family; she leaves home at six in the morning, she gets back at midnight or one and the kids, I have one girl in *quatrième* and another in *cinquième*, they're left to themselves, they do as they like. They are real pains in the ass, there are times when I'd like to... I'd like to kill them, but I don't really see why they'd be calm, nice, patient, polite, kind under those circumstances. It'd really be a miracle if they were.

I'll give you another example. It's a thing, it's true that there are things I don't understand and escape me. Last year, at a quarter after eight, I hear some scratching at my office door and no one budged, I went to see and I see a completely veiled Arab woman who comes and tells me in rather approximate French, "my daughter who's in *troisième* came this morning, I didn't want her to come but her father has beaten her all night again, have you seen what she looks like?" I hadn't seen, I hadn't seen because her daughter had hid herself well. "He hits her head against the sink and then he knocks her head against the corners of the table or against the corner of the sink." So she was telling me these things...

I go to see the girl in class, I look at her and, in fact, she was all bent up, full of... I take her out, I shut the mother and the daughter in my office, I call the social worker because these are things that women take care of among themselves. The social worker tells me, "it's absolutely necessary to do a medical exam of the mother and the child." A school doctor, there isn't one, and there wasn't one last year, finally I complained so much that I got one who makes a half-day call every two weeks. Last year there wasn't one at

all. I call a physician in a medical practice who examined them and made out medical certificates, and he came to see me and said "that'll be 160 francs"; I don't have a line on the balance sheet to pay 160 francs, I paid 160 francs from my own pocket, that means that so I wouldn't be 160 francs out of pocket, the doctor agreed to make a false statement, meaning that he said he came to see me, and I was reimbursed 120 francs by social security. That still cost me 40 francs; I'm not complaining.

And after the medical exams, we called the father, so he came in, so to describe it, I was behind my director's desk, well protected, the father was where you're sitting and the social worker was here; the social worker is a nice young woman, 30 years old, and she spoke to the father and said "but people don't do things like that, don't you realize? And if you continue to do so, we're going to stop you, we're going to file a complaint; we have medical statements and all that." The father got up - I had told the girl, I said "listen, the second time he won't hit you because I'll have knocked him down beforehand; but the first one I wouldn't be able to stop because of the time it takes to jump over my desk..." - but he stopped just short, eh; and then he headed toward the door throwing me Allah's curse up to... I don't know to what generation. His thing was to... and moreover, you tell me what you'd have done to him?

He lives in the worst part of town. It's really, really completely the worst; he says "my neighbors there in the alley... the kids skip school, they are drugged up, they're thieves, they are delinquents, they do as they please, no one ever says anything to them. My kids are never absent," it's true, "they have good grades," it's true, "they are polite," it's true, not delinquent, nice, clean, everything "and you want to give me trouble. And you want to send me to the police? You do nothing to the others and... and me?" He left, really he didn't understand.

— *And in the evening, I think that the wife and daughter must have...*

M. Ramus Not the same evening, not that very evening, he waited for a few days. That's what's sad... I don't know, I didn't have many certitudes when I came here... I've even fewer now, because I don't know, I have the feeling...

— *You succeed at least in stopping violence inside the school.*

M. Ramus No physical violence, no fights. Verbal violence... on that subject, there's the phone at the school and the phone when there isn't a switchboard person, like now for example, the telephone doesn't ring here because if someone calls the school, it rings in my apartment; there's no switchboard operator, so it rings in my apartment; and well, when my wife is there, the other day she had come, I was in my assistant's apartment, we'd gone to have a drink together, my wife had come, from five until 8.30 we had a meeting at the social center with my assistant; and she was in our apartment. And at 8.30 she came up to have a drink with us. But she told me "I'm fed up, have the phone service cut off when I'm there and you're not," every 10 minutes people call in with insults.

— *With insults?*

M. Ramus Insults. She answers the phone, "Is Monsieur Ramus there?" "No, he isn't." "Oh, you're his wife, bitch, whore, fuck your mother, fuck your mother..." But 20 or 30 times. She tells me "if I don't answer, it rings, rings and rings," once she counted 27 rings, she didn't answer before it stopped ringing.

— *Yes, that's why you can't make the separation between private and public life...*

M. Ramus No, that's it, and I didn't have a private line installed because I told myself that all they'd have to do is look up my number, I'm not going to have my number unlisted, I don't want to do things like that... So, on Wednesdays when I shut myself up in my apartment because I have work to do or because I want to read or listen to music, something like that, if I unhook the telephone that means my children, my mother, my wife can't call me, it's

like that. And you told me that I had succeeded in stopping physical violence, yes; verbal violence, no. And it's a real pain. And what was the thrust of your question, you were wanting to ask me a question...

— *...about fights.*

M. Ramus Yes, but when I say fights, it's still the fights between students that I have succeeded in stopping in school, but not in the street...

— *Not outside...*

M. Ramus And not outside; sometimes with my assistant, meaning the female caretaker there, we've extended her hours, when the students leave at 12, she's there until a quarter past, when they leave at five, she's there until a quarter after to watch. And when she sees a crowd gathering, she telephones me immediately and then, you might be here in my office for these interesting discussions, if she calls... I'm leaving you, I'm out of here, we get there, once they see us arrive, because we come running, making ourselves seen, it's because we want to dissuade them, so the fights stop. Once we're in the street, we turn back, perhaps at times the fights stop there and then it's over and then at times you feel like its going to... so, sometimes we go as far as going through twice and then afterwards we don't go there anymore (...).

When I talk to the cops... they give us their big theories, they say "there are three options, there's repression and we'll be repressive, there's dissuasion and then there's prevention," but me, I tell them "dissuasion means being there," I'd like the police car to simply pass by the school without stopping at the times when the students are leaving. But they say "but no, we can't watch over all the junior high schools, it's not our job, etc." (...).

— *And the good students?*

M. Ramus The good students are bothered because they are treated as brown-nosers. The gym teachers wrote an article in a union journal (...) they say that the good students are bothered [*he reads an excerpt from the article*]. So there was a temporary faculty member who arrived this year, she

teaches Spanish as a second language, she's young, lives in R., works in conditions that are no fun because she doesn't have a car, she has a little girl, she has an hour and a half commute when there are no teachers to give her a ride, but she's an extraordinary girl. But she really struggled in the beginning.

And we're very well aware of what happens, meaning we supported her doggedly and all, we really helped her put up with it, well, I've seen her come in crying and comforted her with all the best intentions, and the girl told me the other day because in a meeting I had made a really misogynist comment because the women were having an argument among themselves and I said "Good God, I dream of a school where there'd only be guys and where we could settle that in an hour around... we'd settle that in an hour at the bar," I was saying that not seriously, then she came to my room at the end and told me "even though I have struggled at this school, I'll miss it because there is such a human warmth here that..." I think there are no more affectionate relationships and it's a... it's one of the painful elements, I think it's one of the things that bother me in this school, you can no longer invest yourself emotionally in this school; meaning that when things are going well, they're going well and when things aren't, you get upset emotionally, it's a mistake, but, what's more, I don't see how it can be avoided; and the relationships between teachers...

— *You can't keep a distance...*

M. Ramus That's it, the relationships between the teachers are affectionate or conflictual because... in any case, it's emotion; either they are real good friends or they are enemies and again I was saying something at noon... there are teachers who can no longer speak together at a teachers' meeting; and I say, if it were to settle conflicts or political, union, or pedagogical differences, I'd have a chance, but there, it's visceral divisions, it's physical. So, if you like, there are some very interesting sides to it.

— *Your colleague from the vocational lycée, what does he say about all that, he has the same students (...)*

M. Ramus It's not the same students; it's not the same students; he only has about a good half of them.

— *Yes, let's say there is a selection process (...)*

M. Ramus It's not the same students, it's not the same age group and he doesn't have the same constraints. And for example, he'd really get on to me about being too much of a mother hen, of holding their hand, which makes kids not have any independence and they work less well in high school. They're wasting their time in high school, certain ones are.

— *There are fewer discipline problems ...*

M. Ramus Oh! it's not at all the same thing; my wife, in the lycée where she is, she doesn't know what discipline problems are; still, there are some at F., all that; last year there was vandalism against teachers' cars, they were completely torn up, so it happens. In the B. high school, also last year, there was a female teacher who was roughed up by a North African student from the community when the class council came out. So that's how it is. But, in the end, that doesn't have anything to do with... that has nothing to do with the daily life of junior high schools: in these schools, we really have all the students. (...) You're telling me that if it were French kids, that is, French by origin, but who are poor, it would be the same problems? If it's that, my answer is yes. Yes, but I'm entirely conscious of that, the problem comes from stacking together problem families whatever their social origin, whatever their racial origin; we're very much in agreement on that point.

— *I doubt that one could find a solution precisely of a social order...*

M. Ramus But for example one of the ways to ameliorate what can happen: at Vénissieux, at the Minguettes in 1981, well, since then the problems have diminished because the grouping together of the families has

declined, they emptied apartments, emptied high rises and destroyed them when they were empty. I'm originally from Vénissieux, my whole family is from there, my father was born there, all my uncles, my aunts, my cousins are all at Vénissieux. In '81, precisely during the great era of the Minguettes

it was really horrendous, now it's more or less the same kind of population but a lot less crowded together. There's more space now. People can breathe again. So, to start with there's the social category, but there's also probably the effect of being crowded together, I think.

April 1991

The Contradictions of Inheritance

According to Herodotus, everything went along fine for the Persians as long as they remained content to teach their children to ride horses, shoot with bow and arrow, and not to lie. Indeed, it is certain that differentiated societies pose in a very particular manner a question that is fundamental for every society, namely, the *order of succession*, that is, managing the relationship between parents and children and, more specifically, the perpetuation of the line and its inheritance, in the broadest sense of the term. In the first place, in order to continue the individual in our societies who embodies the line – the father – as well as the essential quality of the paternal inheritance – that is, the “tendency to perpetuate in one’s very being” the *social position* that inhabits the father – it is frequently necessary to distinguish oneself from him, to go beyond him and, in a sense, deny him. This enterprise is not without its problems, both for the father, who does and does not want this murderous overtaking, and for the son (or daughter) who faces a heartrending mission that is likely to be experienced as an act of transgression.¹

In the second place, henceforth, and for all social categories (though to differing degrees), the transmission of inheritance depends on the judgments made by the school system; they act as a brutal and powerful *reality principle* which, by intensifying competition, is responsible for many failures and disappointments. Until this point, it was entirely up to the father or mother, depositories of the will and the authority of the entire family group, to set up the inheritance and make it seem preordained. Today this work also falls to school whose judgments and sanctions may confirm, but may well also contradict or counter, those of the family. The altogether decisive contribution to identity construction made by these judgments no doubt explains why we so often find school at the core of the suffering of the interviewees, who have been disappointed either in their own plans or in their plans for their children or by the ways the job market has reneged on the promises and guarantees made by the educational system.

As a matrix of the social trajectory and the relationship to this trajectory, the family is necessarily a matrix of the contradictions and double binds that arise

¹ Throughout this analysis I have focused on the son, reserving for another occasion the variations of the relations of succession according to the sex of the parents and the children.

from the disjunction between the dispositions of the inheritor and the destiny contained within the inheritance itself. As such, it generates tensions and contradictions that are both generic (observable in all families since they are tied to every family's propensity to perpetuate itself) and specific (varying, most notably, according to the characteristics of the inheritance). The father is the site and the instrument of a "project" (or better yet, of a "conatus")² inscribed in inherited dispositions or attributes. It is transmitted unconsciously, in and by his whole way of being, and also overtly, by educational acts aimed at perpetuating the line or what certain traditions call "the house." To inherit is to relay these immanent dispositions, to perpetuate this conatus, and to accept making oneself the docile instrument of this "project" of reproduction. This successful inheritance is a murder of the father accomplished at the father's injunction, a going beyond the father that will preserve him and preserve as well his own "project" of going beyond, given that this going beyond is in the order of things and, as such, in the order of succession. The son's identification with the father's desire as a desire for preservation produces an unproblematic inheritor.³

Inheritors who accept inheriting the inheritance, who therefore accept being inherited by the inheritance, and who succeed in appropriating that inheritance, escape the contradictions of succession (as with the graduate of an elite engineering school whose father is also a graduate of the same school or the steelworker whose father was a steelworker). The bourgeois father who wants for his son what he himself has and what he is can recognize himself completely in the alter ego that he has produced, an identical reproduction of what he is and a ratification of the excellence of his own social identity. The same is true for the son.

Similarly, for the upwardly mobile father whose trajectory has been interrupted, the climb that leads his son to go beyond him is in some way his own accomplishment, the full realization of a thwarted "project" that he now accomplishes by proxy. As for the son, rejecting the real father means accepting, that is, taking over on his own terms, the ideal of a father who also rejects and denies himself by calling for his son to go beyond him.

But, in this case, the father's desire, however realistic, sometimes grows inordinately and reaches beyond any realistic limit: as substitute for the father, the son or daughter is charged with realizing in his place and to a certain extent by proxy a more or less impossible ideal self. Whence the many examples of fathers and mothers who project their desires and compensatory projects on their son, asking the impossible of him. This is a major source of contradictions and suffering. A great many people are *long-term* sufferers from the gap between their accomplishments and the parental expectations they can neither satisfy nor repudiate.⁴

² At the risk of seeming to give in to jargon, to avoid the logic of conscious intent implied in "project," we can refer to *conatus* (a striving, inclination, natural tendency, impulse or effort).

³ The identification with the father and the father's desire to be continued is one of the principal mediations of the entry into the masculine illusion, meaning the adherence to games and to the stakes considered interesting in a given social universe.

⁴ This is also the case when the expectations of the parents, constituted in a prior social world, are in some way out of touch or out of sync with the present world, to which the children's expectations,

If the identification with the father and with his “project” doubtless constitutes a necessary condition for the smooth transmission of the inheritance (perhaps especially when it concerns cultural capital), it is nevertheless not a sufficient condition for achieving succession. For the holders of cultural capital above all (but also for everyone else, though to a lesser degree), succession is subject to the verdicts of school and is therefore passed on by academic success. “Failures” are essentially those who have missed the mark that was assigned to them socially by the “project” inscribed in their parents’ trajectory and in the future that it implied. If they turn indiscriminately against school and against the family, it is because they have every reason to perceive the complicity that unites these two institutions despite their apparent opposition and shows up in the *disappointment* of which they are both cause and object. Having crushed the father’s expectations and hopes, these individuals have no choice other than to give in to self-despair, which means accepting the totally negative image sent back to them by the two allied institutions, or symbolically to kill the parental “project” in its very principle by rebelling against everything the family stands for – like the teenage son of a leftist engineer who signs up for the crassest work of right-wing political activism.

It would be necessary to examine more completely the different forms of the relationship between the often essentialist and totalizing decrees of the school system and the parental judgments made both prior to, and especially as a consequence of, those of the school. This relationship is heavily dependent on the representation, which varies considerably by social category, that families make of the “pedagogical contract,” which itself varies simultaneously in the degree of trust placed in school and teachers and in the degree of understanding of their explicit and, above all, implicit requirements. Locked in a meritocratic vision that ill prepares it to perceive or deal with a diversity of student intellectual strategies, the school system often inflicts wounds that are likely to reactivate basic traumas: negative judgments affecting self-image find reinforcement in the parents, in ways that no doubt vary in their force and form, magnifying suffering and confronting the child or teenager with the alternatives of either conforming or quitting the game through denial, compensation, or regression. (The affirmation of masculinity and relationships based on physical force can be seen as a means of individually or collectively upsetting relationships based on cultural and academic force.)

Another case in point, close to the preceding one but more dramatic, is that of the son who, in order to go his own way, as they say, must deny his father’s way by purely and simply refusing to inherit, which retrospectively annuls the entire

which have been constituted in different conditions of socialization, are better adjusted. Suffering also comes from gaps between the father’s and the mother’s expectations, gaps that may be tied to the social discrepancies between the two parents or between their families as they seek to extend themselves by prolonging their inheritance (this in contrast to the case where the mother’s desire simply overlaps with the father’s). Another possible cause of contradictions and double binds is to be found in the contradictions within the father’s own “project.”

paternal system made material in the rejected inheritance. This is a particularly painful test for the father (and doubtless for the son as well) when, like the farmer we talked to [see "A life Lost," p. 381], he has made this inheritance himself from the ground up, this "house" that will end with him: it is at once his life's work and his entire existence that are invalidated, deprived of their meaning and their purpose.

Of all the drama and conflicts, both internal and external and tied as much to upward as to downward mobility, that are produced by the contradictions of succession, the most unexpected is no doubt the feeling of *being torn* that comes from experiencing success as failure or, better still, as transgression. The more you succeed (meaning the more you fulfill the paternal will to have you succeed), the more you fail, since the closer you come to killing your father, the farther you are from him. Conversely, the more you fail (thereby accomplishing the unconscious will of the father who cannot totally and actively desire his own rejection), the more you succeed. It is as if the father's position set a line not to be crossed, a line which, once internalized, becomes a kind of prohibition against dissent, against setting oneself apart, against rejection or breaking away.

Such limitation of aspirations shows up in cases where the father has been very successful (children of celebrity parents would be worth special analysis). But it assumes all its force when the father occupies a dominated position, whether economically, socially (such as a manual laborer or lower-level employee), or symbolically (as a member of a stigmatized group), and is therefore inclined to be ambivalent about his son's success as well as about himself (divided as he is between pride in his son and the shame in himself that is implied by the internalization of other people's views of him). At one and the same time he says: be like me, act like me, but be different, go away. His entire existence is carried in a dual injunction: succeed, change, and move into the middle class; and stay simple, don't be proud, stick close to the little guys (to me). He cannot want his son to identify with his own position and its dispositions, and yet all his behavior works continuously to produce that identification, in particular the body language that contributes so powerfully to fashioning the whole manner of being, that is, the habitus. He both wishes and fears that his son will become an alter ego, just as he fears and wishes that his son will become other, an "alter." The product of such a contradictory injunction is doomed to be ambivalent about himself and to feel guilty, because, in this case, success really means murdering the father. Guilty of betrayal if he succeeds, he is guilty of disappointing if he fails. The traitor must restore (justice to) his father: whence the allegiance to the cause of the lower classes that pledges allegiance to the cause of the father (our interviews attest, for example, that certain forms of membership in the Communist Party are inspired by a search for a reconciliation with an imaginary people, fictitiously found within the party); and certain kinds of behavior (and not only political) can be understood as attempts magically to neutralize the effects of the change in position and disposition separating the individual from his father and from his peers

("you can't stand us anymore"). Fidelity to these political positions strives to compensate for the impossibility of completely identifying oneself with a dominated father.⁵

Such experiences tend to produce a habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and with its ambivalence, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities.

So even if it has no monopoly on the production of social dilemmas and even though the social world multiplies positions that produce similar effects, the family often imposes injunctions that are contradictory either in themselves or relative to the conditions available for these injunctions to be realized or fulfilled. The family is at the root of the most universal part of social suffering, including the paradoxical form of suffering based in privilege. The family makes possible these privilege traps, which often attract individuals who have received the poisoned gifts of social consecration (as with the "noblesse oblige" of all the beneficiary-victims of any form of consecration or selection – aristocrats, men, elder sons, holders of unusual academic degrees), in the different kinds of *royal cul de sacs*, superhighways that turn out to be dead-end streets. Without doubt the family is the party principally responsible for that portion of social suffering set in motion by the victims themselves (or more exactly, the social conditions that produce their dispositions).

That said, it is necessary to guard against turning the family into the ultimate cause of the malaises that it seems to determine. In fact, as in the case of the farming family, where the eldest son's departure or failure to marry sounds the death knell for the whole enterprise, the most fundamental structural factors (like the unification of the market for economic and especially symbolic goods) are inscribed at the very heart of the family group. This explains the way that narratives about the most "personal" difficulties, the apparently most strictly subjective tensions and contradictions, frequently articulate the deepest structures of the social world and their contradictions. This is never so obvious as it is for occupants of precarious positions who turn out to be extraordinary "practical analysts": situated at points where social structures "work," and therefore worked over by the contradictions of these structures, these individuals are constrained, in order to live or to survive, to practice a kind of self-analysis, which often gives them access to the objective contradictions which have them in their grasp, and to the objective structures expressed in and by these contradictions.⁶

⁵ Here the young Beur caught between two irreconcilable worlds comes to mind (see "Those Were the Days," p. 427). Able to identify neither with the educational system that rejects him nor with the father he must protect, his tension seems to find the beginning of a solution when he finds an adoptive family in his girlfriend's parents and, through her, the possibility of finding himself in the school system.

⁶ This is often the case with the social workers whom we originally considered interviewing as informants, and who became the special objects of an analysis that is all the richer in objective revelations for its extensive exploration of subjective experience.

This is not the place to question the relation between the mode of exploring subjectivity proposed here and that practiced by psychoanalysis. But, at the very least, it is necessary to guard against thinking of these relationships as alternatives to each other. Sociology does not claim to substitute its mode of explanation for that of psychoanalysis; it is concerned only to construct differently certain givens that psychoanalysis also takes as its object, and to do so by focusing on aspects of reality that psychoanalysis pushes aside as secondary or insignificant, or else treats as defenses that have to be breached to get to the essential element (for example, academic or professional disappointments, job conflicts, etc.). In fact, these defenses can contain information that is relevant to things that psychoanalysis also considers.

A true sociogenesis of the dispositions that constitute the habitus should be concerned with understanding how the social order collects, channels, reinforces or counteracts psychological processes depending on whether there is a homology, redundancy, and reinforcement between the two systems or, to the contrary, contradiction and tension. It goes without saying that mental structures do not simply reflect social structures. The habitus and the field maintain a relationship of mutual attraction, and the illusion [*illusio*] is determined from the inside, from impulses that push toward a self-investment in the object; but it is also determined from the outside, starting with a particular universe of objects offered socially for investment. By virtue of the specific principle of division (*nomos*) that typifies it, the space of possibilities characteristic of each field – religious, political or scientific – functions like a structured ensemble of offers and appeals, bids and solicitations, and prohibitions as well. This space acts like a language, as a system of expressive possibilities and impossibilities that prohibits or encourages different psychological processes that are, in any case, different from those of the ordinary world. Through the system of regulated satisfactions that it proposes, this space of possibilities imposes a particular mode on desire, which is then converted into a specific illusion. For example, as Jacques Maître has observed, the religious field gathers in and legitimizes psychological processes likely to be taken by the authorities in charge of everyday life as pathological rejections of reality: celestial figures, imaginary objects inscribed in a socially accepted, validated and valorized symbolism, along with models borrowed consciously or unconsciously from a separate mystical tradition, make it possible to project phantasms which are acknowledged and accepted, and to assure the “religious regulation of illusion” (analogous to the regulation that literary characters and models provide for love).⁷ In the same way, it could be shown how – in each

⁷ Jacques Maître, “Sociologie de l’idéologie et entretien non directif,” *Revue Française de Sociologie* 16 (1975), pp. 248–56. Not everyone who has attempted to reconcile sociology and psychology has shown the same rigor and the same prudence as Jacques Maître in his works on mystics. It is encouraging to see the great vigilance of certain recent attempts to advance in this direction. If socioanalysis is to be something besides a kind of empty intersection, as is often the case with intermediary disciplines, escaping the requirements of the disciplines in question, it is necessary at all costs to guard against eclectic rapprochements of pop “psychoanalysis” which does no more than rebaptize the most naive notions of armchair psychology (ambition becomes the ideal of self, or the

universe proposed for its expression – desire becomes specific and sublimated, assuming the socially approved and recognized forms of the *libido dominandi* here and those of the *libido sciendi* elsewhere.

In his analysis of the “neurotic’s family romance,” Freud pointed out that prepubescent day dreams often take on the “topic of family relationships” in a fantasy that rejects the parents, who are henceforth scorned, and substitutes others “of a higher social standing” and, in a word, “of better birth.” And he remarked in passing that these dreams “serve as the fulfillment of wishes and as a correction of actual life,” and that they have “two principal aims, an erotic and an ambitious one.” And he immediately adds, “though the erotic aim is usually concealed behind the latter too.”⁸ It is not for me to confirm or invalidate this claim. But I would only like to recall the complementary assertion that the psychoanalyst passes over in silence: desire only manifests itself in each field (the religious field has provided one example) in the specific form assigned to it by that field at a given moment in time, which, in more than one case, is ambition.

narcissistic desire for complete power, failure in the loss of the object), and a soft sociology, which, in the name of “complexity” and “postmodernity,” manipulates the empty ideas, with no objective referent, of a mythology founded on the opposition of antagonistic terms, all of which ends up orchestrating yet again the old Bergsonian song of the closed and the open.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, “Family Romances,” in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1959), vol. 9, pp. 238–9.

Alain Accardo

Academic Destiny

Sébastien K. is a political journalist for a radio station with an audience that reaches beyond its regional base. In 1981, after a haphazard academic and professional career, he rather late – he was 28 – took classes in a well-known journalism school. Our interview took place in his new apartment, in a bourgeois building that is old but has been restored, located near the downtown of a large provincial city; its status is more in accordance with the recent improvement in his professional situation. In spite of the success that he is enjoying, Sébastien K. seems to be inhabited by a suffering that the work of social mourning will eventually be able to ease (“rebellion loses its edge,” he concedes) but without ever making it go away completely.

Sébastien is the eldest son of a family from the lowest rung of the petite bourgeoisie; having acquired and developed a disposition to social mobility through exemplary sacrifices and being unable to change their circumstances immediately and completely, they have transferred on to their children their hopes for real success via an overinvestment in the school system. From a Spanish family that had emigrated to Morocco, his father was the son of a railroad man. After his primary school certificate, he had undertaken training that he had had to drop to take a job as a worker on the Moroccan railways, but he became a foreman thanks to evening classes and to the numerous writing exercises he made himself do with the assistance of his better educated wife. In fact, she went all the way to *quatrième* [eighth grade] in junior high school before she too had to drop out for lack of financial support – a kind of unfortunate repetition of her family history since, years before, her own father, a holder of the baccalauréat who wanted to be a notary, had already had his plans wiped out by the sudden death of his parents. So that Sébastien, from a very early age, has found himself committed by parental decree to the promotion of the entire family group through the anticipated academic success.

The very magnitude of the moral burden placed on the child's shoulders – even if he was only vaguely conscious of the importance of the stakes that went well beyond him as an individual – no doubt helped dramatize the difficulties he encountered at school. However, living out an “immense frustration” and through a “veritable obsession” for studies, Sébastien's parents thought that it might at last be possible to break out of the misfortune that the family had known until then when, in primary school, their eldest son seemed to “give them hope.” His parents concentrated all their attention on his performance at school as well

as on that of his brother who is five years younger. They even sacrificed, for example, having a television set so as to not disturb the childrens' school work. The mother did cleaning work to pay for their schooling (notably for private math lessons) while the father, whose ambitions "took off" after Sébastien's first successes, took a very active interest in his son's school performance: he never missed a parent-teachers meeting and had repeated meetings with teachers even though these meetings, Sébastien specifies, for a man "who doesn't speak easily," were so many occasions for "put-downs from the academic world."

In spite of this family mobilization, Sébastien, undoubtedly a victim of the academic "force feeding" to which he is subjected, saw his success, so promising in the beginning (he was ahead of his grade), quickly start marking time (from *cinquième*, he points out). If, by a mixed feeling of recognition and guilt toward his parents, Sébastien recounts his academic history by retrospectively reserving the bad role for himself ("I wasn't a shining star," "It's my folks who really carried me along, they always kept me on life support, if they hadn't been there (...) I wouldn't have made it through to the end"). He does not hide the fact that it was difficult to put up with and live with this anxious tension which often goes along with plans for social ascension.

A number of anecdotes reveal his father's conflictual relationship with the school system, the almost exclusive object of every investment and, therefore, of every reproach. Thus, for example, in the second year of primary school, he got into an argument with the teacher whom he suspected of having deliberately cheated his son of first place in the class in favor of the pharmacist's daughter, "a bad scene," Sébastien soberly comments, "my father had made a mistake calculating the grades!" A former labor union activist, the father, who "has always been more or less in revolt against his lot," clumsily imported this demanding attitude into his relationship with the school system: culturally disadvantaged, having no other weapon with which to oppose the school than that of refusal and mistrustful obstinacy, he thought, at least at the beginning of Sébastien's school years, that he served his son's interests best by ignoring academic judgments when they were contrary to his ambitions. Thus, in the beginning of the 1960s, even though Sébastien had barely made it into *sixième* [sixth grade], he refused to enrol his son in the CEG [junior high school for general education] that was closest to the family residence on the town's outskirts. Instead, "against the judgment of the teachers at the time," he enrolled him in the largest, downtown lycée, a school with a rather elitist reputation which was required by the catchment area policy to take students from certain suburban *communes* and which prepared students (mostly middle-class students) for the baccalauréat and the grandes écoles.

By thus persisting in wanting "what was best for his son," he commits "an error of excess" which has heavy consequences and which he will not repeat with the younger brother. Brutally thrust into the strange and foreign world of the high school, at the age of nine and a half, Sébastien experiences a "shock" which produces a kind of academic paralysis in him: from *sixième* on, it is "an immediate disaster," so much of a disaster that "he has trouble understanding what is

going on.” In high school, Sébastien has the experience of being completely out of his element, of suffering the most complete uprooting, geographic, academic and social: the split away from his family and the familiar universe of his school friends, the early morning bus rides, being a day-boarder and whole days spent away from home; the change in level of academic requirements – for example, he discovers in *sixième* his “complete inability in spelling” – the strangeness of an academic universe where they do “dictations in musical notation,” where the “teachers who teach French-Latin-Greek” seem to him kinds of “monsters,” “demigods,” “foreigners,” in short, people who are not from the same world as he is; he is also continually reminded of the singularity of his social condition by looks and comments from classmates, parents and teachers; he has the feeling of not being where he belongs, a feeling that is reinforced by meetings and painful confrontations between the father and teachers, “who are not very gentle with people who don’t meet their criteria.” These are three black years, three years of suffering and growing failure. He will never, he says, be able to “set foot in a school without getting scared out of his mind.” Then there is his growing terror in class faced with teachers quick to be “sadistic” or to show scornful ignorance, and not always finding peace at home, which becomes another stage for his father’s at times violent “scenes,” “sick” at his son’s failures (“I’ll spare you the family scenes and the set-tos”). At the end of a *cinquième* class so “horrible” that simply mentioning it still puts him “in a cold sweat,” he is “placed in a reorientation class,” meaning, in fact, expelled from the high school, and consigned to a “dark future” by his teachers, in a judgment that brutally denies his father’s socially “misplaced” – because excessive – ambitions.

Bruised and humiliated by this experience which leaves him “deeply disturbed” for a very long time and even when the academic requirements become less demanding, Sébastien will not be able to break out of the cycle of failure. If he just barely escapes the short technical certification track, it is again thanks to his father’s vehement opposition. After taking several grades twice, he finally obtains a technical baccalauréat in the lowest section. During this difficult school career, Sébastien succeeds in having more personal and less conflictual relationships with teachers in the literary disciplines and in obtaining, at the junior high school and in the vocational lycée – perhaps because of his time as a student at a prestigious lycée – the attention that was denied him by teachers at that school. It is above all the discovery of student movements and active militancy in 1971–2, in *seconde*, that allows him to assert himself by offering a means of expression and support for his confused rebellion. In particular, the apprenticeship as spokesperson helps him overcome his “shyness,” his “complexes” and his language inhibitions and progressively brings him a competence and ease that lets him pursue his studies and prolong his militancy in a number of political movements. But the “visceral” aversion for every form of institutional authority stemming from his first experience with the teaching milieu leads him to define himself as a “libertarian-environmentalist-leftist-anarchist” and to proclaim his inability to remain for long in any political or labor organization.

The attraction of journalism for Sébastien is understandable, or at least of its prestigious image as it might be constructed by certain teenagers who have had some failure in their school careers but who remain socially ambitious and predisposed to rebellion and the denunciation of injustices, beginning with those that have been inflicted on them. He hesitates, however, before committing himself, no doubt because at this time he lacks the social relationships that seem indispensable in this career, but also because of the fundamentally ambiguous relationship that he has with journalists, who are also, for him, spokespeople for the power elite. This is why, before going to journalism school, he first prepares a BTS higher qualification in technical commerce which he gets easily, does various “little jobs,” and even thinks about doing a “CAP in cooking.”

If Sébastien was able to get back on his feet and move up the social ladder to a relatively important position, it remains true that this type of progression owes a lot to chance encounters and events that can push the trajectory of the “johnny-come-latelys” of the school system in one direction or the other. These little pushes given by destiny – here, the intervention of a former junior high school teacher, a member of the examining board for the baccalauréat that he runs into by chance shortly before the board meeting – have the effect, by the half-successes that they make possible, not necessarily of setting up a cycle of success, but at least of putting the brake on the spiral of failure and reactivating the aspirations produced by family education which successive failures had put on hold.

At present, even though he is an established and respected professional, Sébastien cannot – or does not want to – integrate himself into the journalist’s milieu: he does not acknowledge a single “journalist buddy” and refuses to occupy a higher position in the hierarchy, declining, for example, the offer of a position as assistant editor-in-chief. This marked distance is no doubt the expression of a more general refusal to integrate himself into the world of the elite, which is marked in his case notably by his use of a language that has vaguely preserved certain popular turns of speech (“I made first,” “I did warehouse stocks”). But it is also the expression of a more specific rejection of the milieu of radio journalists. In fact, he has a perspective utterly devoid of complacency and illusion on this milieu where nothing satisfies him: the work thrown together in a rush, the insufficient air time, the sensationalistic news, or his colleagues, rather resigned, even content with their lot in life, and set in professional routine and intellectual mediocrity. Pushed by the interview situation which he wants to use as an occasion to “reflect a little about (him)self,” he goes so far as to include himself, in a slightly self-destructive manner, in the negative judgment that he makes of the profession as a whole, even declaring, a bit excessively, that he chose journalism because “it’s a job where you don’t have to know how to do much, where you have to be a smooth talker and then do a bit of bluffing.”

In fact, even now, Sébastien has not yet finished “digesting” an academic experience that he lived through as an ignominious disaster. It is the school system which, by refusing to acknowledge him, has powerfully contributed to fashioning his exacerbated sensitivity to all manifestations of class scorn. The ambivalent

response of a rejected lover is the other side of a fascination and a vague desire for recognition, and at the same time, a reaction to academic humiliations (the comment by a student's parent or a teacher, the ambience of the elitist high school) and, more generally, all of the behavior through which social aristocracies put intruders back in their place. Sébastien's resentment also expresses a hatred of self, rather as if, accepting his own denigration and making himself "his own executioner," the young journalist had come to despise in himself that which social judgments had stigmatized as despicable.

It is also understandable that Sébastien is not completely insensitive to the profits and privileges associated with being a journalist, especially when they give him an opportunity for social revenge, particularly when he interviews members of the elite; this applies specifically to teachers, the cause of so much suffering, fear and hatred that, at the sight of their nervousness and shyness in front of the microphone, he cannot keep himself from bringing up his own schoolboy terrors in front of the blackboard. If he believes he has the opportunity at the station that employs him to do a more militant and involved journalism in social struggles, he never loses the lucidity that prevents him from giving himself over to illusions, burying in particular his true ambition which is to practice one day a high-level journalism whose model he sees in the articles of *Le Monde Diplomatique* [monthly journal published by the newspaper *Le Monde*, devoted to foreign policy]. And, no doubt because he learned early on to distrust overly ambitious plans, he seems to be able to envision the future only as the indefinitely repeated, simple projection of a dismal present: "20 years from now" he sees himself (in the same town) "a journalist at the same level, at the same pay position."

with a journalist

— interview by Alain Accardo

"That I go on with my studies, that was my parents' obsession"

[...]

Sébastien I started school when I was four and a half, I went to primary school – because there was no kindergarten back then – a prep class, so I redid another prep class, so I was held back but it's not really being held back since four and a half is really very, very young; then, well, first year of primary school, then second year, then things were going well, I had a good school record. Just one story: my father had a run-in with the second year teacher

because I was second when I ought to have been first, but the first person was the pharmacist's daughter and my father had already started grumbling because yes, it's the pharmacist so...my father had made a mistake figuring out my grades, it was a bad scene! Then, I went on...I...my parents came, had a small house built; they came to V., and then I took the first year of *cours moyen* [CM1: fourth grade] at V.; there I was rather...I was very good, I made first all the time. Afterwards, in

CM2 [fifth grade]; there things went off a little, I don't know why, but I got through to *sixième* even so and, well there, my parents who both very much regretted – I think it's important in my school career – both regretted having dropped out of school, there was an immense frustration, and so their obsession, but truly their obsession was therefore that their son go on and pursue studies and I think on this point I owe them a lot, even if it was hard.

— *How many children were there?*

Sébastien Two, my brother who's five years younger than myself, he was born here in France.

— *So, your parents put their hopes in you?*

Sébastien Very much so, completely, which is difficult to live with at times, but that's what explains how I've almost made it, that's it, because otherwise I wouldn't have made it, I am virtually convinced! So then I went into *sixième*, my parents... also a vision of grandeur, etc., the M. lycée, against the opinion of the teachers at the time, etc. Well! M. lycée was a disaster. Right away it was a disaster. The memory, the recollection that I have of it is the teachers; well, I was really a little kid, I was gone the whole day, etc., but the teachers who taught French-Latin-Greek, I don't know if... they were monsters, that's it! Back then, they were demigods. So in *sixième*, I didn't understand anything; before I... I wasn't too bad in spelling [*and there*] I found myself to be a complete zero in spelling, a complete zero, with mistakes all over the place, etc.

A “dark future,” that was the headmaster's evaluation

Sébastien So, completely lost, I was held back in *sixième*; I go on to *cinquième*; a disastrous year, really disastrous! I still get cold sweats when I think about that year, in the end I had... in the middle of... as an evaluation from the headmaster a “dark future,” well, and then I went before a disciplinary board because I had exchanged copies with a classmate; so, in the end, it

was a horrible year and at the end of the year I was placed in a vocational reorientation class. So my dad was just sick about that, I'll spare you the family scenes and the set-tos [*laughs*].

— *You were a troublemaker?*

Sébastien No, no, I wasn't any trouble, I maybe got more and more complexes, but well, when you're hit by something like that.

— *And your relationship with your classmates?*

Sébastien Oh, they were fine.

— *How was the student body at that time?*

Sébastien Listen, my father, who spent a lot of time on me, went to see... and in the waiting room there were some parents, and he remembers a comment one parent made to him, hmh, it was “Your son doesn't really belong at M.,” meaning, that's the thought, and I remember having a classmate at M., whom I later saw again at the boys' vocational lycée, he was doing a baccalauréat in math and technology and was already in his last year when I was coming into *seconde*: “It's surprising, I'm very surprised to see you there, I didn't think you'd make it this far, you know.” So, there. So I went to S. to the collège; it was more my style, I went into *quatrième* [eighth grade] there. That was more or less the right place, except that my father didn't... my parents had to pay for math classes with the teacher who was teaching me math; so that helped me out a lot for going into *troisième*. In *troisième*, well things went well there also, for the first quarter, and then afterwards, it went... it went downhill in a big way and it was 1968. So there was a disturbance at the end of the year; well, I watched it rather at a distance, you know – I was 14 – so there was a disturbance, it meant that I couldn't go into *seconde*, so I was going into a CAP vocational certification in electronics. My father, nyet! he didn't want this. So I took the year over again, I did what they called there a special *troisième*; meaning that they took most all of the people who were taking that level over and gave them a little more

demanding instruction, etc., it wasn't really taking the year over, well, so. And then, therefore, afterwards I went into the technical track. Why there? My parents, especially my father, were always telling me, if I didn't make it, if I didn't make it to the final year, I could always move over into a CAP to get a job whereas the literature track... so I didn't know at all what to do, then when I got to *seconde* in the technical track, what interested me was French, history/geography, it was too bad, but, well, I was in a track. So in *seconde* I did just OK, very average, I just made it into the F1 technical track. It wasn't by choice, no, it's because they would... the best went into the E track, afterwards F3, F2, then the worst went into F1. And then, well the vocational lycée was rather hard back then, and then afterwards I went into *première*. There it was more or less as it should be, but in *terminale* just so-so. And then I failed the baccalauréat the first year, then I wanted to get out because in any event, to tell you, I hated workshop. We had 12 hours of shop per week and I was a complete zero in industrial design and industrial design was in the bac, 6 was its mean weighting and the first year I had a 4 and the second year a 5. So when you have that on the test, there's no way to make up for it! So I took the second year over at P. and then I passed the bac, but only by one point, really by a point, because by chance I met my old math teacher from junior high school who gave me, I believe, an extraordinary helping hand, I think that he really begged the teachers to give me an additional point or two and I passed the test! There it is, he was on the examination board and, by chance, at the moment he was going... I ran into him, I didn't know that he was on the board, there, I was short by eight points, I think, and I had one point over, he put a point here, a point there but with the coefficients it adds up. So I was... there it is, I got the bac.

So I wanted at all costs to get out of this technical line which... and then I had applied to become a journalist; I went to

educational guidance and they said to me, hey, do you have any connections? I said no. They told me "well, it's better not to do this career if you don't have any connections." So, me, no connections, with some of the complexes of someone who's done a tech degree, well, I said fine, I made my choice, so, what did I do, I looked for something, economics interested me a little because it was... a little of the militant, etc., so everything touching on economics interested me. So I chose a BTS [higher technical qualification] in techno-commerce which T. offered. So that went very, very well there, there I was in my element. So that went well, I got the BTS easily, I think even with honors, and then, well, I looked for a job.

*I was hesitating between a
certificate as a cook and the
journalism school*

Sébastien I did warehouse stocks several months and then I did a bit of life insurance and then I went into W. [a multinational industrial company], little jobs that didn't correspond to my training but it was warehouse stocks at an aftersales service office for Singer, they took someone with a BTS. It was already at the time... they liked to have someone who had... to do a job that wasn't even bac, someone with a degree, there you are, so then they hired me, so, it wasn't really up to the level of my qualifications but it was management, even in a warehouse you have to manage inventory a little, so I was a little overqualified, but well, so I stayed there for three years, I got tired of it after a time, so I stopped and then doing three years wasn't by chance, because I knew that after three years you could get paid training, so, back then that still existed, so I did that and then I left, I worked in a restaurant, it was an independently run operation in X., so... and then cooking interests me, I was hesitating after that between a certificate as a cook and the journalism school, and then after a while this experience came to an end, I wanted to

get some fresh air, I went out to the countryside. There I did outside work, just to do something in order to . . . in order to make a living, I was out of work at times, and then after a while I told myself "you're going to have to do something, you can't spend the rest of your time like that!" and then I went by the journalism school because a buddy who'd been with me at W., who had been fired, had gone to journalism school just before me. So that gave me the impetus again to do that and so there it is, that's how I started to find my path. So what got me there? Well, the explanation is that it's my parents who kept me on life support all along. If they hadn't been there, I mean in the neighborhood where I lived, there isn't a single young person who's got the bac! . . .

— *It was a housing development?*

Sébastien You know these developments, little houses with little gardens, a development with little houses, that's all, that my parents had bought inexpensively back then, on credit, just as you go into V. Well, it was a development of workers, minor civil servants, that's what it was more or less. Three-quarters of them work for the railroad.

— *You were probably one of the few children to be at the M. lycée?*

Sébastien Oh yes, yes! No one had gone to M., no one had gone to M. and my parents didn't make the same mistake with my brother who went to the V. junior high school. So the transition was a lot easier and there wasn't any shock because there too, I have trouble understanding what happened, I have trouble understanding.

— *You had the feeling you were going into a strange universe?*

Sébastien Yes, totally! So it's true that I was only little, well, I was . . . because I went into school very early, in spite of all my repeat years, I was nine and a half, I was real little, I couldn't reach the handles on the bus doors, I had to get up at 6.30 in the morning to leave and spend the whole day there; in the end I became a day-boarder, well there were a lot of things . . . well, kids get used to that, I mean, there's no problem,

it's not extraordinary, but, for me, it must have been a shock, that, and then M.! Back then, M. was "the" school, my parents had chosen the best, only the best for their son. It's true that in primary school I had given them hope, it's true that things went downhill in CM2, but not really, not really, I wasn't as brilliant, but you also have to see how things were at the C. school, and at V., back then it must not have been . . . all my friends, I didn't see almost any in . . . afterwards, that's what. It was a time when you'd go on for a certificate, meaning that the best you could do was still the certificat d'études for having done primary school studies and I think that a lot of my primary school classmates from back then, they went on as far as the BEPC, perhaps, yes, certainly, and then that was it. C., in the 1960s, it was, even V., it was a hole. So, to go from there to M. with people, I mean well, we had music classes. Well, music I didn't know that . . . they would do musical notation dictations and there were people who could do it, who were learning to play instruments, musical notation dictations! There was a grade . . .

— *Did you read a lot? Did you like reading?*

Sébastien No, I read, I read, yes later, I read even so, well, the classics, I read, though.

— *When you were at M.?*

Sébastien Later too, I have always, I read though, well, the classics. I was reading Balzac, Zola, and so on.

— *For pleasure?*

Sébastien For pleasure and because it was assigned, for pleasure too, yes, but perhaps always a little bit behind; when I was young I . . . yes I must have been reading, I didn't have a television. I didn't watch any TV till much, much later. My parents got a TV very late, when I was 18, because they didn't want a television. For a long time they couldn't buy one, my father got his first car when he was 40; he got his license when he was 40, we used to get around on scooters, that's what, on scooters or bikes, so we didn't have a television and then later they didn't buy a TV because that would

have kept me from working, so they didn't want one.

I was a libertarian-environmentalist-leftist

— *A moment ago, you made a reference to militant activities?*

Sébastien Well, May 1968, I didn't really understand what was going on there. I was 14–15 years old, so, back then, moreover, back then I was a little behind, so, even so, it's necessary to say how it was, between my brother and me, I mean to say that he really lived things almost at the same moment as I did, even if there was a five-year age difference. Which means that things were a lot easier for him in school, and then, my parents were, well, I'll just have to explain: it really doesn't have much to do with it, but I just have to explain it: my father was in the CGT [Communist trade union] in Morocco; when he came back to France, the people in the Communist Party accused him of being a colonialist. So he tore up his union card and he was never in the union again.

— *What year did he come back?*

Sébastien He came back between '53 and '56, the events before Algeria, the mood was... it was starting in Algeria.

— *Algeria started in '54.*

Sébastien That's right and in Morocco there were also some events, so there, they returned as supporters of De Gaulle like many people from the lower classes, and I was like my parents, a Gaullist. Afterwards, I saw the difference a little. I saw, it's true, in the schools, there was a difference even so. I had a French teacher when I took my *troisième* class over, who was pretty important in my life; we'd talk, there was always interesting work with this woman, and then, well, I went on to *seconde* and I don't know what happened, I met people who weren't very politicized, but well, and then in *première*, I told myself, I'm going to become a student representative, well, I had a lot of complexes, I wanted to get out of myself, that's what, and to shake things up a bit, it was in 1971–2, and then there was

starting up... there were the lycée demonstrations a little bit after. So, it's something like an unconscious strategy that I had then, and then I really got involved in the revolt, but not card carrying; I wasn't a card carrier.

— *You never really belonged to an organization?*

Sébastien No, in the first year of my BTS, I was with the socialist students, but then that went... I looked to join the people who were starting *Libération* [left-wing newspaper], I missed the meeting, I went to the socialist students instead [laughs] and then, me, in my head, I wasn't on this side of the "political party"; there were people who struggled and then people who accepted things and then, there, I wasn't part of... so I stayed a short time, because, in fact, I didn't feel comfortable there. I stayed during the '74 period, the election Mitterrand–Giscard, the first Mitterrand–Giscard duel, the presidential election, it was more or less at that time, so otherwise I was... how can one say? Libertarian-environmentalist-leftist, there you go, everything there was at the time...

— *Against established order?*

Sébastien There you have it. But what you have to see is that my father had always been more or less revolted by... by his situation in life in a certain way. He was a member of the CGT for a very long time, so he had strong feelings; he had participated in huge strikes, etc., and then, he was always strongly against the hierarchy, but in such a way... a little as an individualist that's what, meaning not as a careerist, but a little, and then it's true that this confrontation with the entire teaching establishment, he must have taken a few! I put myself a little in his place, he doesn't talk all too well, he writes very, very badly, etc., he must have suffered a lot. Well, the teaching establishment isn't always very kind to people who don't meet their criteria, it's true, teachers, headmasters, directors, etc., so he must have suffered a lot.

It took me a long, long time to imagine that teachers could primarily be on the left

— *Why the teachers? To keep up with what you were doing?*

Sébastien Oh yes, to keep up with me. Whenever there was a meeting with the teachers, he would go, as soon as there was a parent-teacher meeting – he was with the student-parent group. But with one goal in mind, he was looking for ways to help me, it was the same with my brother. So, maybe, that made things ... and then from this side, I'd say that ... all these failures, I mean when you're a kid and someone says "dark future," well, for me that led to a huge complex. I was shy and all, well, I mean, either you're completely destroyed or there's still something left in you where ... well, and then meeting some people, well, in *première* I met a history/geography teacher who was really very good and who made us think a lot about history, I also had a French teacher, well, that was something of a decisive year for me, it was at a time also, if you like, there was a debate of ideas, it wasn't very difficult to ... to have, that's what, ideas were coming together then, everywhere.

— *So you felt like you were on the side of people who were challenging things, even confusedly?*

Sébastien Yes, even confusedly, I tell you, it was very manichean: things were black and white; those who were on the left and those who were on the right, there it is, for years things were like that; it's only afterwards that I understood the subtleties a little, but otherwise, for me, that was it. So there it is, but to tell you, for a period – but that's often the case – you don't dare speak out in public, etc., but I was a little curious all the same, and I remember going to meetings and such and making myself speak out, to say whatever, even the stupidest thing in the world, I had to make myself in order to dominate, to speak out, to learn how to speak, etc., it was torture, absolutely awful!

— *But you were speaking out in your own name since you didn't belong to any organization?*

Sébastien Yes [laughs] in my name, I've always had trouble being in an organization. I quit the CGT pretty quickly.

— *You did get your card there?*

Sébastien Yes, in the CGT. A month after my arrival.

— *And how long were you in?*

Sébastien I stayed in for a year, but in a kind of way that ... I got along very poorly because, well ...

— *And you quit because of a serious problem or did things just come unglued for you?*

Sébastien It was a period, I don't mean of far-left, but a visceral rejection of everything that was power, party functioning, unions, etc., bureaucracy, and so for all that, it was a rejection.

— *The anti-institutionalism of a sixty-eighter?*

Sébastien That's it! First of all, really, first of all, and I've kept it since, maybe it's become secondary, I'm presumptuous enough to think that it's secondary, but it's very visceral and I was, for example, opposed to teachers, I had a hatred for teachers! I detested teachers.

— *Of whom you speak at times appreciatively.*

Sébastien Yes, but not a lot! There may be three or four of them, but the others, I hate them, I hate them! It's awful, that's for sure, when you're in *cinquième*, when you forget three workbooks for the same class and you get three zeros in one morning, when you have to get your hair completely shaved off because the teacher grabs it and picks you up like that, when you get hit with a ruler on the butt because you didn't do, well, what I mean is, it's sadism. For me, teachers, it took me a long, long time to imagine that teachers could primarily be on the left, a very, very long time. We weren't from the same world, that's it, unconsciously for sure, teachers were something else. The caricature was French-Latin-Greek, for me it was like the moon, it was someplace else,

they were foreigners on another planet; and me, it also took me time to realize that there were kids who didn't have any problems with school, who went to school like normal, peacefully – me, I was always afraid, I can't remember going into school without being afraid.

— *In primary school also?*

Sébastien No, no, I mean collège; not primary school, I don't have any, not many...but collège, there! Well, after the second part, *seconde-première-terminale*, well there the political involvement part made me step back a bit, and then mastering after all a certain number of things, and in a way a recognition on the part of a certain number of teachers, who acknowledged me, not so much for my work – because I wasn't a shining star – but who, well, there was a balance of power which established itself, a recognition of a status, of a role, etc., that's all, it was my way maybe of existing, that's what, since I couldn't base my existence on grades, I existed by resisting.

I did journalism school while hating the metier

— *Why journalism school?*

Sébastien I wanted to do journalism after the bac, well, the political involvement side made me interested in current events, well, international things, all kinds of things back then, national events, political events, social things. So I was a big consumer of newspapers, outraged, by TV, radio, by the written press, well, I was never a Communist myself, so not *L'Humanité* [Communist Party daily paper], it wasn't part of my culture, there was, afterwards, the beginnings of *Libération* that we felt like a breath of fresh air, there were magazines like, well, back then *Charlie-hebdo*, *La Gueule Ouverte* [all papers on the left], etc., so that was that, and in *première* I remember doing newspapers in the history/geography field, on history, etc., so a big reader of newspapers, really interested in current events, not a lot of competence even so [laughs], I mean, I wasn't very talented,

everything to do with math was out of the question, French was out of the question. The only talent that I had a little was that of talking, of speaking, of expressing myself, because I had worked at it, and I was succeeding a little, that's what. So I told myself, a job where you don't have to know a lot, where you have to have to be a smooth talker and then do a little bluffing, so, well that's a journalist. So, I wasn't able to do it coming out of school. Afterwards I had a time viscerally, a period...oh the hate! [laughs] I also used to hate journalists as...and that, that's still with me, it's a bit secondary. Well, and I did journalism school while hating the metier, so there, really I had a hatred against the...and I was no longer reading then, meaning there was even a side where it was to be provocative: Oh! me, I don't read anything in the press! I recall having said to one of the instructors who was completely aghast: "Oh no, I don't read anything anymore, I'm not interested" [laughs].

— *You went directly from the school to Radio-Z?*

Sébastien Yes. That came about, too, I was pretty lucky there because the editor-in-chief came to do his shopping, meaning having auditions, and then I wasn't kept back after the auditions, I don't have an extraordinary voice and those were the ones kept back, to keep it simple, and then a teacher said to the editor, "if you put a mike in this guy's hands he'll bring you back a story," that's what. So we were taken on as stringers, six of us from the school, we produced something, and then, well, I caught on, that's what, and then, too, I had professional experience, everybody who had worked before knew what the working world was like and knew more or less what you needed to do to get hired and I had lots of problems because they didn't want to hire a black sheep, you might say; they had gotten some references from W. and so they didn't want to hire me, and the punch line is that I found out that I'd been hired to be a freelancer for Radio-Z while I was visiting W.

with a reporter from NQ [*an important regional newspaper*]!

— *And now you have a full-time position?*

Sébastien Yes, I have a position, and well, I became a specialist in politics, a specialized journalist, that's more or less the decentralized level, and then they wanted me to go to be an assistant editor-in-chief, but I don't want to go up in the hierarchy, I want to go up, a little to meet my abilities, a little to get knowledge of the job, but I don't want to move up to places where I'll have hierarchical power. So I turned it down, I refused it and still refuse it, and there, as it just came out, I was... the CNT offered me an assistant editor job for... there too, to provoke them, because I was wanting to know exactly what they thought of my case and they reprimanded me for being too formal [using the formal "you"] with my director though I had been informal [informal "you"] when he was only an announcer, such subtleties...

— *Do you still "hate" journalists?*

Sébastien Yes [*laughs*] I haven't... I mean apart, marginally, two or three people that I associate with away from work, I don't hang out with anybody, I don't associate with any journalist, I don't have a journalist buddy. Yes, I do have three or four, people who are... well, but there, too, it's "despite" their being journalists. There's one who's resigned from Radio-Z, Colette D., who had a run-in with the law, I mean, there's a saga... Fanny R., who was a psychiatric nurse and now is looking to do something else, and also Germinal G., who has an extraordinary past, a Spanish refugee father who was in the Resistance, the Spanish Civil War, who pushed his son to do studies, he has a Master of Arts and has become a journalist but he is... there it is. They aren't young kids just out of school.

We're like irritants in the system

Sébastien Well, it's not a hatred of individuals! It's a hatred for the job that is done and, well, and it's true, our ability to do something else, to be... we are... those

who are, in the end, people like me, we're a little like irritants in the system, the system is stronger than we are, and then 99 percent of what we do is "crap." You'd better not kid yourself too much, but there are a certain number of debates, that's what, even on a daily basis, I mean, there are the minute-long interviews for example. On certain stations they have 35 seconds on the air, 35 seconds! And it's a battle, a real battle. You've got a minute, so you have to fight! And when it goes over a minute, when you do an interview that last 1 minute 10 seconds—1 minute 15 seconds, you have to, you have to... it's a whole big deal! It's ridiculous. For someone outside of our field, it's a ridiculous battle, but it's a battle that means something... and then you have to try to get ideas across. As for me, my current principal militancy is journalism, it's journalism, but it's really hard, but well, it's like everywhere else. In teaching, you have to, well, fight against mountains, and then well, the system is made so that you'd know if we had the upper hand.

— *You criticize the system not individuals?*

Sébastien I mean, they are both responsible and not responsible, a journalist is also someone who must transcribe what he sees. It's true that those who have the power are people who know how to use the media best and who talk the best. Well, for example: the mayor hosted a banquet yesterday on "the town of X and the sea" and this morning a press conference on the "public works in X." He said nothing at all. We wouldn't accept that from anyone else; we'd come back, we'd be furious, we'd write an angry story, well, there, it's going to go on by. The mayor had the press out all evening yesterday, until one in the morning and this morning a press breakfast — all to say nothing! Well, and I mean: the whole press really bowing down. It's one example, but there are others; what you have to know is that society functions, there's a lead weight over society! Try to get people who work for the DASS [social services agency] to talk, an agency that covers the whole social field.

Impossible! People on salary cannot talk about their jobs; a social worker, she could tell 50... well, about the big regional vineyards who treat their personnel to bottles of wine, and in places, a high level of illiteracy in slums, where people are in houses with dirt floors; you never hear a report on that. Because the social workers who go there, they can't talk about it, they have to keep it secret; agricultural workers, of course, they can't talk! And then you can't even get in; what you can do, all you can get at, is the pleasure of tasting a fine vintage wine, a big label, etc. But you'll never do a report on what really goes on.

— *And if you, a journalist, propose a report?*

Sébastien But I can, well, I can propose it. It's a complicated report! We work in a rush: we'd have to do three – we have a daily production – do, three, four, five reports a day. So the more reports we have, the less we can see the underside of things, the complexity of the mechanisms at work, etc. An investigation like that, I'd have to stay on it, investigative reporting takes time! You have to pry things out! Everyone's afraid in this society, few people are going to talk about things in depth, and at every level. You go see the unions to talk about the school, businesses, etc., they're not going to talk to you about it because they are held to their role in defending workers, they're not going to talk to you about the real workings of society; to understand how things work and to really talk about it, you have to do a sociologist's work and we don't have the means to be sociologists, and we have a lot of difficulty working with the university world which... it moves slowly and then, well, for me, as soon as I say "university professor," "conference," everyone's going to make a face...: "Oh here we go again! You piss us off with your stories, etc."

— *There's an anti-intellectualism in the journalistic world?*

Sébastien Anti-intellectualism, the word "worker"! You're not supposed to say worker, the word "worker" gets taken out

of my report! I have to say, "but then, it's a dirty word?"

— *What are you supposed to say?*
Sébastien Wage earner, employee.

There's censorship at every level

— *Who takes the word out?*

Sébastien The journalists. It's not necessarily the editors, it's the journalists. It's an ambient censorship. It's pressure. And it's at every level. During the Gulf War for example, concerning Perrault, on the call to desert, well that was censured on Radio-H – someone had done an interview – so there, censured on Radio-H, it doesn't go on. They put an article in its place, I do an interview reacting to the demonstration the next day. They ask me for people; I take one young man, I say to him "and you, would you be ready to desert?" He tells me "yes." They took it out! So, in cases of crisis, censorship is there! During the Gulf War you had to be for the Gulf War; I mean, well, other ideas...

— *Is it always an informal censorship?*

Sébastien The problem is very simple, I see it myself, I put euphemisms in my discourse, my language, my words, because it's true...

— *But you weren't the one who took out the young man's answer?*

Sébastien Oh there, it's true! He cut it out with the scissors! He cut it out with scissors and we accused him of censorship (...) justice can't be applied to journalists; that means we can defame, manipulate what we want, you can't do anything, the justice system does nothing against us, and when the system does something, it's a call for arms, "an attack on freedom of the press, etc." Whereas we are often the ones who attack, I mean, there too the testimonies, for example, the sacrosanct "life and times" stories [*faits divers*]: it's always stories about people, little people, and those people, we make fun of them by making them tell their "life and times"; they speak badly, they make slips of the tongue, and we make fun of them, that gets on the air! So the scorn for the everyday! Well that...

— *It's a characteristic, according to you, of the journalistic milieu?*

Sébastien Oh yes! Oh yes! A scorn for the people, meaning “people who listen to the Top 40,” and that's it. A scorn for the people, it's both a scorn for the people and a scorn for... that's to say everything that's not the journalist, of the upper intellectual classes.

— *But, at the same time, a certain fascination by these superior classes perhaps?*

Sébastien For power. The intellectual class does not have the power, while everything that's economics has power. Any little entrepreneur has the right, has a voice to make a point, to express himself, can have ideas on everything, and then political power, but the, yes, the political power, and then this whole ambience Tapie-and-Séguéla [political and financial scandal], that thing.

— *You don't seem to be a happy journalist... Do you ever have the feeling of revenge?*

Sébastien Yes, yes, but, it's true that for me, the biggest revolt is when I see... lately I went to do a story on a place that's back there, after the bridge of the train station, transit housing that has existed since the last war. Well, these poor people, they earn less than 4,700 francs a month, they went out on a limb, their daughter's boyfriend wanted to buy a motorcycle, they co-signed the loan, there was an accident, he bought a second motorcycle, they co-signed, the guy takes off and doesn't make any more payments, and they find themselves 3,000 francs in debt with nothing to show for it; there are some people who go into debt to buy a house, but there; and 3,000 francs, they're at the end of their rope. And the mother who looks like somebody who's always had to struggle, who is stuck to an oxygen bottle because she can't breathe anymore. Well, they are... houses, you ask yourself how it's possible to live there! So their place will be renovated, that means they're going to double their rent. Well, when I get back from a place like that, it's for sure that I... it's a hatred,

it's a hatred, I really hate. But revenge? It's a whim, but the first time I interviewed a teacher, he told me “oho! I'm sorry, but I'm not used to this, I'm shaking” and I told him “oh yes! it's like when I was at the blackboard, me too, I was shaking all over” [laughs]. For sure that... but it's true, often when I have people in front of me — some power, that's what — I have... a battle, and my questions it's deliberately to beat them down, deliberately. Well, what we most lack is weapons, knowledge. It's a job where you have to have a lot more culture than you do have, we don't have enough.

— *It's an education problem?*

Sébastien Yes, but that's where I no longer have any complexes, because, it's true, this lack of academic culture, well, I, it's true, in part by the, by a social curiosity, I caught up on that also in a certain way, meaning I have a better knowledge of the real world than people who have an academic or university knowledge, who have a better cultural background than I do. And it's true that in this job, it's useful to know how things work.

— *From the perspective of remuneration, is it satisfying?*

Sébastien It's very... I net 11,000 francs, with 30 percent deductions for taxes, not paying for movies, concerts, getting books almost for free, 11,000 francs. Moreover, I sometimes teach two or three courses. That interests me, too, it gives me a perspective on journalism, a different way of thinking, I mean, I calculated, with taxes, I netted close to 13,000 francs last year, It's a lot, in fact, it's overpaid in comparison to what is done for a person with the bac plus two years of higher education, that's my case, nurses are bac plus three years and they make half of what I do [laughs] and what work! [laughs]

Three-quarters of journalists, they are in their offices, with a secretary

— *These days people talk a lot about journalists' ethics.*

Sébastien Professional ethics are also an economic problem, meaning in this job what you always have to take account of is time. How can someone... Something happens somewhere in the world, you take a reporter and you send them on site. At best, they're someone who has studied the question. So, they are going to go there. They haven't been there in two years and two, three hours after they get there they've got to write an article; what can they do? How can they transmit it? So what they're going to do is to go see the news agencies, they're going to go see the people who are there, they're going to meet one or two contacts, the ambassador and there you have it, they're going to do a piece about it, well, at best, at worst, they don't know anything, so they're going to take three... and then they have to have a hook, a nice angle, fine, etc., well, and it's true for everything, you have to work fast.

In *Le Monde Diplomatique*, why do the articles seem completely different? Because, first, they have a month, and then they are people who have spent years on a problem! So it's true, it's complicated, spending years on a problem; it's true that you're not always on the cutting edge, all that's true. But it makes work that's a lot more serious, a lot more in-depth, where people really explain things to you, and then you have three-quarters of journalists, well that's even worse, who comment on images from the news service. An example, the announcer on Radio-H, B., the one who does the little spiel before the news, because the news has to go through his formula - he has a spiel that's amusing or dramatic - and the news has to fit in with that! And he sends reporters and says "I want that!" And I have a friend who does general interest stories, well, she started an interview over four times the other day so that the guy would say the phrase that the announcer wanted before she left! That's it! And

then they are people who, for a long time now, have never taken a step outside! They are in their offices, with a secretary; they have the news service and so there it is! Those people, at best, they go out for dinners with the powers that be, whatever power, but a power all the same. They don't see anything in society.

— *You have cases of this around you?*

Sébastien All the announcers!

— *You're talking about the whole country?*

Sébastien Yes, but around me, too. Here, there's a news announcer who does the "six o'clock," he hasn't been out in a while. He has a vision of society that is very... he went to journalism school, there he was in a lawyer's, judge's milieu and there you have it, and the rest, he doesn't know. He didn't know what a "greenhorn" was, he didn't know if it was a funny animal with green horns [laughs]. It's true, that's no joke! So the young people coming out of journalism school, they go straight on to France-Info as announcers. Straight. They haven't seen anything of the real world, those people! They don't know how to do a report! The basics in this job are to take a recorder or a notebook and to go out on the ground, and then to stay there for a bit, to immerse yourself, and that's what you get! It's a problem of training, it's a problem of curiosity, it's an economic problem.

— *And how do you see your future in this career?*

Sébastien I admit that the profession isn't everything for me, meaning that, for me, well, I like meeting friends, having a drink together, traveling, going to the sea, hiking in the mountains, walking, that's it. Moreover, for me, that's life, the job though is...

— *Meaning that you're not looking to make it a career?*

Sébastien No! But I see myself in X., a journalist, at the same level, in the same pay grade, 20 years from now.

October 1991

Charles Soulié

A Compromising Success

Short, short hair, a small purple backpack, a certain sadness in her face, that is how Corinne looked in the café near the Montparnasse train station where the interview took place. She is a 32 year-old primary school teacher in one of the most deprived neighborhoods on the outskirts of Z., a small provincial town of some 50,000 inhabitants. The surprising rapidity with which she took me into her confidence is no doubt due to the fact that I had been introduced by her sister and that I was in a social situation similar to her own, which may have favored a kind of projection. Moreover, I myself very quickly empathized with her.

Her parents are farmers on a 185-acre operation, a relatively modest size for the region, located near the edge of the Beauce and Perche regions [west of Paris]. Following a long series of financial reverses, they found themselves deeply in debt, placed under the supervision of an accountant, and obliged to take on extra jobs in order to live "decently" (Corinne's father has been driving a school bus for four years). According to one of Corinne's sisters with whom I talked at length, they have the feeling of having been "fooled," of being "dispossessed" and of no longer being able, as before, so show this "pride in being farmers" that they had inherited from preceding generations. Their malaise is accentuated even more by a family crisis that occurred over the grandparents' legacy: the second son in a family of 10 children, Corinne's father stayed in agriculture like four of his brothers and sisters, but in the will he was the most poorly provided for of all. And, above all, even though he was a good student, he had to quit school very early to work on his father's farm and he can't get rid of the feeling of having been sacrificed to enable his father to make his farm prosper and to permit his younger brothers and sisters to go to school; it is a feeling that is continually aggravated by his own situation as a farmer in difficulty, and by that of his younger brothers and sisters (two of his younger brothers became doctors, a third is a jet pilot and instructor in the air force, one of his sisters is a social worker) and above all by their attitude toward him which shows neither gratitude nor solidarity.

Corinne and her two sisters went to school even though their parents, disappointed in not having had a son, had scarcely pushed them to do so. Corinne unenthusiastically enrolled in a teacher-training school after her baccalauréat. One of her sisters, after a bac G in business administration, having then dropped out of nursing school, is presently doing poorly paid "odd jobs." Only the youngest sister seems to not have known the hesitations and the material and

psychological difficulties in her studies experienced by her sisters; after a B.A. degree in sociology, she's currently working on a doctoral dissertation which allows her to reflect on the problems of the agricultural world expressed by farmers' demonstrations.

At the time of the interview, Corinne is on the annual training leave that allows her to work on a psychology degree, so she can "do something else" (she would like to become a psychoanalyst): in spite of, or perhaps because of, the total investment that it requires of her, she is finally feeling uncomfortable in this teaching career, pursued in a school that takes in children from very disadvantaged families.

The neighborhood where her school is located on a site surrounded by big highways was originally an "emergency development" destined to relocate "temporarily" on the periphery the inhabitants evicted from the historic city center following a project of urban renewal. Having become a residual zone to which the HLM office managing this transit housing project transfers all delinquent payers and all the families "at the end of their rope," this neighborhood, according to a good number of informants, has a "deleterious effect" on all of the new arrivals, "people [*we've seen*] take a fall, whom we knew living normal lives elsewhere, married with kids." The majority of the inhabitants, three-quarters of whom are French, are without work and live off RMI [welfare tied to reentry into work], unemployment benefits, family allocations (large families are common), and even, at times, theft. Corinne describes families who always have some family member in prison and who are noticeable because of their exceptional material luxury, children wearing "brand-name sweat suits," "the latest tennis shoes, not what you see at outlet stores": families with often complicated kinship relationships, "destructured" by "successive separations," where the children can be at one and the same time "cousins and brothers."

These economic and familial problems concentrated in the same space have repercussions at the school level where Corinne has faced rejection by the families: "It's very difficult to have relationships with the families . . . For example, when I arrived at the school, the school represented everything that they rejected. The families rejected school, the children rejected school, there were graffiti everywhere. The way they talked about teachers, school was like shit. It was like the school wasn't a part of their world . . ."

Along with some of her colleagues, young teachers like herself, Corinne tried to deal with the situation. Various initiatives were undertaken, including reinforced academic support, which falls particularly to Corinne as a specialized teacher in this primary school that the government has classified as an educational priority zone, and the school's participation in the renewal efforts for the neighborhood: the children made little painted ceramic pictures which were put up in all the staircases of the project, a judo room was set up, and, above all, the teachers tried to open up the school to the neighborhood to get parents to go there and to start getting interested in what their children were doing there. The most tangible effect of these initiatives was that the teachers could from now on park their

cars in the developments without being afraid that they would be vandalized. The academic results of the children, however, remain very disappointing (of the 12 students who went into *sixième* [sixth grade] last year, not one, with the exception of one girl, made it into *cinquième*). To explain this failure rate, Corinne cites the lack of motivation of certain members of the faculty rather than the pupils' particularly disadvantaged social and cultural milieu. The inertia of certain of her colleagues weighs on her ("if teachers can't improve in their thinking, then kids certainly can't"), and she particularly attacks the attitude taken by one among them, a woman obviously from a wealthy milieu, who did not go to teacher-training school like the others and shares neither their conception of the teacher's professional role nor their devotion to the children, nor again their investment in all the school activities – which is indispensable, according to Corinne, to succeed with children who are so culturally deprived. Corinne's own experience, its particular form of cultural deprivation, predisposes her to identify with these children in a failing situation, and she cannot resign herself to the idea that the children of these disadvantaged people will fail at school, in her school, and will have the same destiny as their parents simply because they were "born somewhere," because "they don't have any future in mind": contrary to many resigned teachers, she finds it hard to accept that "school functions well for the kids who don't have problems" and has no interest in the others, "the 20 percent accepted failures at the bac." She wants to believe in the effectiveness of a pedagogy especially designed for these children, even though she perceives the risks of mounting an intensive education initiative which – as happens with social workers, who are sometimes seen by lower-class populations as real "child thieves" – would have the effect of transferring educational responsibilities from family to school and taking them away from the families.

Corinne would not feel all of the difficulties inherent in her professional activity so sharply if the malaise that the school system casts back over her did not continuously recall her own malaise from her own family background. She is unhappy about the rift that has opened up in objective terms, in spite of her, between her parents and herself. Even since she grew more distant from them socially, she has felt that a "difference is digging in" between them, painful for everybody, which acts on her like a permanent brake: "I have the impression that I have to tread softly, if you can put it that way...to...uh, to succeed." The possibility of a social disavowal is all the more painful to her because it's already part of her father's family history: he has not gotten over having been somehow betrayed and socially rejected by his brothers and sisters. This no doubt explains the fact that she more or less consciously limited her studies to the apprenticeship of being a primary school teacher, something acceptable to her parents: "I really wanted to go on to university, but I was already locked in, uh (...). And then, considering our background, if you can say a farming one, it wasn't disagreeable to my family for me to be a teacher, symbolically, it was nice for my parents, it was important, and materially, too, I think that was also important, if not I don't know if I'd have gone on."

At present, Corinne is convinced of the necessity for her someday to leave this disappointing career where “you feel like a speck of sand” and which has been struck by a veritable collective crisis (of the five teachers in her school, three of them have gone back to study or are thinking about it). She expects her psychology degree to help her analyze and formulate her malaise, but, above all, to open up the possibility for her, a possibility forbidden to an ordinary primary school teacher whose professional certification is “completely unrecognized outside the profession,” to do something else one day. But during her first round of studies it is as though her resolve were held back by the same brake, the same inhibition as before: at the university, she experiences the same problems she has known elsewhere, in her relationships with the other students, and especially in the relationship with an academic discourse that she understands perfectly but is not able to use and appropriate for her own personal use – as if she could not go beyond a kind of internalized paternal ban and as if, exactly as before, she feared betraying her father in her turn: “I feel that if I appropriate this vocabulary, I’m passing over to the other side, I don’t know, I don’t know how to explain it.” This form of paralysis keeps her in an untenable position, at the borders of two irreconcilable worlds: “for the moment, I’m not succeeding in situating myself in either the one or the other. And, at the same time, I can be pulled toward the one without rejecting the other, and I don’t feel really comfortable in either.”

with an primary school teacher in charge of disadvantaged children

— *interview by Charles Soulié*

“I’ve got the impression that I have to tread softly”

[...]

— *You are not enjoying the situation that you’re in and you want to change, don’t you?*

Corinne Yes, in fact, I’m not able to... So I don’t know if it’s linked to me, because me too, I’m changing personally, we’re not getting the results we’d like to have with the children. I tell myself, for now I’m coping, but maybe you have to give too much of yourself and perhaps I won’t always be so available to give to others. And I tell myself, the day when I don’t want to anymore, I’ll have to do something else, I can’t come without wanting to.

— *You don’t want to act like your colleagues?* [laughs]

Corinne That’s it. Meaning for the moment, when I get up in the morning, I’m more or less happy going to school. I tell myself that the day that I no longer want to, I’ll have to be able to do something else. And, in general, when you’re a primary school teacher, you can’t do something else unless you go back to study, because it’s absolutely unrecognized outside the profession, so if you just show up saying that you want to do something else just like that, I’m a teacher, I want to do something else,

people laugh in your face and there you have it.

[...]

You get the feeling you're a speck of sand

— *But to get back to the nonmotivation of your colleagues, you don't have any theories?*

Corinne There are some of them, even so, who are disappointed, meaning somehow disappointed because of the results that they get with the children.

— *It's their powerlessness rather?*

Corinne Yes, I feel it too... I feel that, well I don't know [*laughs*]. Well, it was time I left school because... I needed to take a step back [*laughs*]. No, but I don't know, you get the feeling you're a speck of sand, so uhm, of not having much power (...) there's everything to be done.

— *And with a real team you would be more effective?*

Corinne That's right, even if sometimes... Afterwards I think more effective for some children, but there are others for whom...

— *But doesn't the problem lie, above all, with the population that you have, in these families?*

Corinne But relationships with the family are very difficult because at the same time they have... Well, for example, when I arrived at the school, you can say that the school represented everything they were rejecting. The families rejected school, the children rejected school, there were graffiti all over the place. The way they talked about teachers, school was like shit. It was as if school wasn't part of their world... (...) Because for them, it was a way of marking their failure, well I don't know, it took them back. Well I don't know, but that's how we saw it. They know perfectly well that they haven't succeeded, so they can't help the child. Several parents don't even know what class their children are in, well that might seem odd, they know that it's with such-and-such a teacher, but they don't know what level that corresponds to.

There is the impression at times that school is so far from those people that, when you talk about it to people, the whole thing seems odd. A lot of people tell us "you're exaggerating, you're blowing things out of proportion." But that's not it. So what we tried was to make it possible for them to come back into the school and to get another perspective on school and to situate themselves according to that, so they'd be less apprehensive. It's more like social work, and I think that on that level we succeeded. But in those places where we're still completely, I wouldn't say completely out of the ballpark, but where we don't really succeed, is that for the moment, the children's level of knowledge, their academic level strictly speaking, uhm, is still relatively average, but it's also true that we can't change that in a year. Last year, we were saying to ourselves that there would maybe be a few more who would pass, well, for the moment, over the year, on the academic level, it really hasn't worked much. On the other hand, we can say that it was fruitful in other areas. Meaning in respect to the view of the school, for that, yes. If you will, if they cross paths with us in the streets, they don't spit on us as they did before.

— *Yet they would like their children to succeed, wouldn't they? What does that mean to them?*

Corinne To them? That means that they want the child to work at school, so, uhm... it's very difficult, because in fact, while they want that, at the same time they are also reproducing. They reproduce an attitude which, taken to the limit, puts the child into a failing position. Meaning, they are going to want the child to work, but he's going to get smacked if he doesn't manage to work. Uhm..., if the child can't work and gets hit, it's more difficult to work.

[...]

We'll bring them back to you better than they were

Corinne I ask myself sometimes if it's me, or if it's the system that's the problem in

relationship to... Because, sometimes, I feel that in fact... that the school works well for kids who don't have any problems... But for the 20 percent accepted failures at the bac, well, they're just those 20 percent, not to be taken seriously. Meaning you have to have an 80 percent success rate and the 20 percent is not a problem, yet there are those 20 percent...

— *Yes, it's like highway accidents...*

Corinne Yes, that's it, we give ourselves leeway for 20 percent, therefore uh... The problem is when you're only working with that 20 percent [*trembling voice and laughs*], its enough uhm...

— *Wouldn't it be better with students from a more advantaged background?*

Corinne [*silence*] Yes, yes... yes, but I think we don't have any chances, or resources, or maybe it is beyond the scope of the school, I don't know, but to help them. There are certainly some deficiencies in the milieu, and there are also some deficiencies at the level of what the school can do.

— *In this sense, you think that the school could do better?*

Corinne It could surely do more. You'd have to change quite a few things at the operations level [*silence*]. I don't know. I have a colleague who left on a three-week snow class. The children planned it, did all the preparations for the trip, it was taken under control by the children, it's not a class to look at piled-up snow, for three weeks they go skiing, and then, for three weeks, it was great, the kids had taken a leap forward. They came back to their environment, to the school, inside the walls, inside everything, and three days later... That doesn't mean that you have to take children out of their setting, but, what I mean is that there are possibilities. What kind? I don't know... We're not going to be the good guys in quotation marks, who take kids away from people who are having problems and say "we'll bring them back to you better than they were."

— *Saving them in spite of themselves, that's what: you don't know how to take care of your children, so we're going to*

take them and we'll give them back to you cleaned up, well-off, cultivated, etc.

Corinne It's not at all that, it's not at all from that perspective that... And I see it but...

For myself, I know I find it difficult

— *But if they succeed, they're going to find themselves in a funny situation in relationship to their parents, aren't they?*

Corinne No but I know that situation very well [*laughs*].

— *You personally, you mean?*

Corinne Yes, it's hard, very hard...

— *Because it's the problem of moving outside of your class that you're referring to?*

Corinne For myself, I know I find it difficult [*silence*]

— *In relation to your parents?*

Corinne Yes.

— *And can you describe how that happens exactly? There you were imitating a pair of scales with your hands, what does that mean?*

Corinne [*silence*] Uhm... I have the impression that I have to tread softly, if you can put it that way... In order to succeed, uhm. As concerns the people at the university, for example, I have a lot of problems speaking, I express myself poorly, well... mostly I understand, I have no problem understanding, but to use, uh... the vocabulary, that's a problem. Problems as much with my relationship with people as with the level of content at the university. I see, for example, if it's only on the level of content in the psych classes, I really have no problems understanding what might be going on at the level of operations, but it's when I have to use it again, I feel that I'm resisting, that I'm locking up and that it's somehow linked to my parents and that, if you will, it would be necessary... there's a difference digging in between us, and I don't necessarily want to... to make it get any bigger, so I don't know, it's hard to explain. But well, and it's very obvious, for example, with Sylvie [*the youngest sister who is writing her dissertation*] and then

my other sister [*who is a housewife and did not go on to the university*], meaning I don't have a whole lot to say to my other sister, the one who's married, whereas I could be closer to her because we have kids the same age, oh well. And with Sylvie, things are better, and then, there are times with Sylvie, I feel like she's pretty far removed from me on that level and I reject her a little, too.

— *Do you mean removed on the intellectual side?*

Corinne And I also reject this intellectual side a little. For the moment, I'm not succeeding in situating myself in either the one or the other. And, at the same time, I can be pulled toward the one without rejecting the other, and I don't feel really comfortable in either.

— *And how does that work at the university? You have trouble reproducing academic discourse, is that it?*

Corinne Yes, in fact, getting back to the level of language, to the level of . . . [*silence*].

I have the impression that if I also appropriate the vocabulary, I'm passing over to the other side, well I don't know, I don't know how to explain it.

— *And your parents, do they perceive that also, or does it only concern you alone?*

Corinne No, I think they pick up on it all the same. I think that, in a certain way, they must have the feeling of not much understanding my life, between quotation marks, and I know that it wasn't all that long ago that my mother told me "but really, just what are you doing at the university?"

— *What did she mean by that question?*

Corinne She didn't really know what I was doing and I think she doesn't understand why I want to study more, she figures I have a career, I have a place to live, that, well, I have a situation . . . She didn't know the content of what I was doing and then, well, she has trouble understanding why I want to do something else.

[. . .]

Emmanuel Bourdieu

The Spirit of Contradiction

Frédéric is 19. His parents, whom he qualifies as “petty bourgeois,” live in Neuilly [very affluent Paris suburb]: his father is an engineer for the national electric company, his mother does not work. They subscribe to *Le Monde* and are politically on the left: Frédéric’s father has even been active in the Socialist Party. Very cold in character and excessively touchy, Frédéric has always represented something of a “case” for his parents, a cause of multiple family let-downs. At the time of the interview, he is going into his senior year in the B track of ecological sciences, after taking both *quatrième* and *seconde* twice. He attends class in a private course in Neuilly where there are many sons of good families, politically on the extreme right, in royalist parties or in the National Front. Repeating *seconde* coincided with his joining the Neuilly section of the youth wing of the National Front. Shortly afterwards, right in the middle of the school year, he had a scooter accident in which his left eye was seriously injured; for two years, disfigured, he no longer went to class; at present, his left eye remains damaged and bothers him a lot. He has very frequent and violent altercations with his father. They scarcely speak to one another any more.

Questioned as a representative of the youth wing of the extreme right, by the brother of a friend to be sure but by someone he knows belongs to the inherently hostile world of the leftist university culture, Frédéric can only be on the defensive and, so to speak, on stage. So that any attempt at analysis encounters a prior, methodological problem: how to interpret the observations of an speaker who, by his own admission, conceives of dialogue in terms of rhetorical strategy? How to draw any sociological truth out of a discourse that may very well be only a fictive reconstruction of the truth adapted to the interviewer’s requirements and presumed norms, and embellished by the censoring of inadmissible positions and the careful dissimulation of personal suffering?

When you ask Frédéric what arguments he employs to recruit new members, he replies: “It depends on the people I’m with.” Elsewhere, he seems to identify culture and rhetoric, education and oratorical training: to listen to him, his sole, true reason for joining the Front was the hope of participating in a summer university program where he would essentially learn to “speak to the media”; a great man is a great orator; Frédéric goes so far as to develop a political aesthetic, inspired by the incisive “wounding” phrases of Drieu La Rochelle, and based on “paradox” and provocation.

That said, on the one hand, the rhetoric is not seamless. Frédéric's discourse sometimes escapes from censorship and composition. On the other hand, if he is constantly on stage, the roles that he gives himself are not entirely false and, above all, they sometimes contradict themselves in such a way that they reproduce, in the representation itself, the real, profound tensions and contradictions of an adolescent in conflict with his father and divided between participation in a provocative and enthusiastic movement and a disenchanted view of political life. Frédéric makes himself, by turns, an exemplary activist who barks out answers to questions we ask him, as he is supposed to and only when he has to; a disillusioned dilettante who no longer much believes in what he is doing and makes fun of "people who believe in myths" and their arrogance as little, make-believe soldiers "who talk about things they don't do"; and someone who simply sticks up posters, modestly contenting himself in the down-to-earth tasks of a ground-level activist and going so far as to contest his own representativeness and, hence, the very legitimacy of the interview.

The instability of Frédéric's personality is reflected in the conflicts that set these different roles against each other: the disenchanted one reproaches the two others for their unconsidered party membership, their total investment in a political life given over to social climbers, and to the deceits of the leaders (Le Pen himself betrayed his base of support by not opposing Saddam Hussein); he scorns the purely technical contribution of the poster-paster in the youth wing, a "real chore" which "gets done fast" and which "anybody can do"; the grassroots activist is "dumb," he does not realize that leaders of the National Front and the real militants "who don't show themselves, ever" treat him like "a hired hand" ("as soon as some posters are needed, they call us, otherwise there's nothing").

As for the loyal activist, a small-time ideologue of the neighborhood bureau caught up in a "movement," an "apparatus," a "court," blinded by the "cult" that he has for Jean-Marie Le Pen, he only has to count off the "news bits" conveyed by the party paper ("Mrs Such-and-Such was attacked by Ahmed So-and-So"), or, in the best of cases, continuously repeat some "platform positions" which he did not originate. To counter the naive enthusiasm of the newly arrived, this disillusioned activist supports "training" over immediate action: "Activism is okay, but we don't have any training." In fact, disillusionment has its own rhetoric: Frédéric cultivates paradox ("I really like contradicting people") and a systematic coolness in speech. On the subject of the summer university of the Front's youth wing, he says he is "very highly interested," then he rectifies: "No, maybe not 'very highly.' 'Interested.'" And once again, in a later phrase, he corrects himself, bringing up his surprise and enthusiasm: "I had never yet seen the amplitude, perhaps not 'amplitude,' but..."

But elsewhere Frédéric seems to contradict himself: "a single round of putting up posters is not going to tell you what's what." The fascination that he felt when he began the work of a grassroots activist, investing himself body and soul in a concrete and sometimes risky political movement, is not entirely repressed by the pessimism that he displays otherwise: he misses the spirit and the rigor of the first

paste-ups, the ones where, reconciling camaraderie and efficiency and after a good laugh in the truck, they would take action in the street, quickly and silently. Going out to put up posters at night, like going on an adventure, remains, in his mind, the paradigm of effective political engagement, as opposed to the cozy relations of the permanent party members, but also the “mythologists” who deploy all of their energy in useless and grotesque “parades”: “When you’re in the truck, you have a good laugh, it’s very exciting.”

The character of the poster-paster is at once romantic and modest; he yields to the arrogance of the local ideologue, gives him the floor, recognizing his limits and his incompetence as far as ideas go: if he writes, it is on technical or administrative questions, “the construction of a party office in Versailles,” “the material that we received”; but he admits not yet being “up to doing an in-depth article” and “leaving that to others who are better at it than he is.” That said, his relationship with the “theoreticians” is highly ambivalent: he has his “word to say” and, above all, he tends to consider the ideological debates as simple pretexts letting the social climbers and the party “mythologists” climb up in the hierarchy at the expense of one another without ever going out in the streets. In short, effective involvement takes precedence over reflection and mistrustful, even disabused, criticism.

But as soon as we touch on political questions, the usual controlled discourse of the exemplary activist once again takes the upper hand: he defends segregating people with AIDS, “to make them think,” and denounces “the great upheaval” to come from North Africans in France; he gives statistics as support (“there’s going to be a gap in the age pyramid”) and hackneyed arguments (“throw them out (...) to eliminate ghettos”). Frédéric declares that he could develop just as well any other “platform position” – security, voting procedures – as though to exhibit his exceptional oratorical virtuosity. Above all, he sticks to the authorized subjects, effectively censoring himself. Once you get off the beaten path of usual political debate, Frédéric’s responses are devoid of all content and he limits himself to vaguely taking up the content of the questions again, veering into tautology.

Sometimes the publishable discourse skids into the unpublishable, but it is immediately recaptured, attenuated: “Throw them out, yes, but not just like that, of course. To get rid of all the ghettos.” The exemplary activist has neither the modest enthusiasm of the poster-paster, nor the ironical detachment of the disenchanting individual, he is only a pure representative, a simple, representative sample of the party, nothing more.

Aesthetic considerations seem particularly conducive to unwary slips of the tongue and rhetorical accidents, as if the very logic of the aesthetic universe authorized the removal of censorship and ideological interdictions: “I really like uniforms (...) but I don’t like the army.” Frédéric has a little “military museum” made up of various helmets and caps. However, he recognizes no link between this taste for military things and his membership in the National Front. Even so, when he speaks of music, he experiences an unusual need to situate himself in

relationship to unusual tastes: after having mentioned “Skyrock,” an uncontroversial cultural reference, he lists a hit parade of military songs of the extreme right, qualifying them at first as “traditional songs,” only to admit that in the final analysis “a Nazi song or a German song, they are after all a little bit alike . . .” – with this new reservation: “I don’t understand the words, so . . .”

Through the medium of this constellation of contradictory characters, Frédéric’s own difficulties and passions emerge, never being articulated, except by denials: once, he spontaneously emphasizes that the problems he has with his father “have nothing to do with politics,” and when, shortly afterward, he is asked again if there is a relation between his membership in the youth wing of the National Front and his family problems, he simply responds, “Yes, perhaps, but no more than that,” and immediately goes on to concrete problems of money, as if he wanted to take back control of the conversation: “To get back to my parents, they wouldn’t give me any money.” Likewise, his parents insisted that he see a psychologist: “I’d do it if really . . . But I don’t feel that I need help”; and one cannot help hearing a denied call for help here. Frédéric seems to need to convince himself that his decision to join is purely a personal choice, that his disagreement with his parents must not be overdramatized, because he is “used to it,” and, he corrects himself, because “it’s not serious”; as if he were forcing himself to exorcise the “mythologist” in his ownself, the adolescent “who’s uncomfortable with himself” for whom the Front “is (his) family” who “only (lives) for that,” a “loser,” thus rediscovering, paradoxically, values no doubt inherited from his father: “education,” “getting his bac on the first try,” “going to engineering school” (like his father). His relationship to his father, this “petty bourgeois man” whom he scorns but whose vision of the world he seems to have internalized, appears much more ambivalent than it seemed at first glance. We can hypothesize that Frédéric’s basic conflict, the root of all his contradictory roles, is that of an adolescent in crisis, confounded by his handicap and his academic difficulties, financially dependent on his parents, a Socialist engineer’s son who did not pass the bac, and who, in order to assert himself, wants to break with this relatively cultivated and progressive universe, without really being able to cut himself off from the values and intellectual claims that it implies.

Destiny seems to have settled in favor of a break: a few months after the interview, Frédéric passed his bac in environmental sciences. His parents then enrolled him, at his request, to take a BTS degree in a private commercial school located in southeastern France, paying very high tuition fees which only increased his financial dependence. But although everything seemed to fall into place, Frédéric had some military training in cells of the extreme right and left to go fight in support of the Croats. This unexpected involvement on the part of a disabused activist confirms the hypothesis of the proposed reading: Frédéric’s discourse with me is less radical than his real positions and it is only through its internal contradictions that the censorship that dominates it can be unravelled.

with a young militant of the National Front

— *interview by Denis Podalydès*

“I had no reason to join”

— *When did you join the National Front?*

Frédéric It's been two and a half years?

— *How old were you?*

Frédéric Seventeen, sixteen and a half or seventeen. I vaguely knew about the movement, very little in fact.

— *You knew about it from the media, television, newspapers, or friends who were already in it?*

Frédéric I didn't know anybody. I didn't see the point in going to see what there was there. For me, it was a band of kids, buddies among themselves. For me, that's what the youth wing of the National Front was. One evening, a friend who was on a motorcycle with me, the same age, too, who was in my class, exactly like me – a priori, it might have been something we liked, but no more, we had no reason to go there – and then, he had to get his hair cut by a guy he knew and who was in the youth wing of the National Front. That evening, he had offered to cut his hair; we went there. There was nobody there. I saw that there was a little bit of propaganda material, a bunch of newspapers, and stuff like that...

— *Where was that, at the place of this guy who was to do the haircut?*

Frédéric No, it was at the local bureau.

— *The office of the National Front or of the youth group?*

Frédéric The youth group. The youth group, it's a small, permanent office of the youth group. I talked a bit with him while he was cutting. At the end of the evening, there were two or three others who arrived, and they talked. We talked a little.

— *What did you talk about?*

Frédéric I didn't talk, eh, I listened to them talk. For me, it was something unknown. I'd never seen anyone in the street putting

up posters, I'd never done tracts, I'd never seen any of all that.

— *Your parents had never had been politically involved either?*

Frédéric Oh that... [expression of scorn] That evening when I went home, I told them that I'd been there, they weren't particularly pleased. And well, I went back, I tried to see people a little that were there, I found it interesting, activism was something I didn't know at all, I thought that it really was something, that it was not a band of youths... it really attracted me.

— *But in the offices of other political parties, there's activism, people putting up posters, doing tracts...*

Frédéric [He smiles while lowering his eyes] Yes, but that wasn't where my buddy was going to get his hair cut, eh... No, but... elsewhere, it would have bored me, and then, well...

— *Your friend knew where he was going to get his hair cut?*

Frédéric Well... the other guy was also a hairdresser...

— *It was to get a special cut?*

Frédéric No, no, he was going to get it cut square, it's not really a special haircut. So there it was, I got in there. I saw the head of the youth group, a 23-year-old, the departmental secretary of the Hauts-de-Seine.

— *The first evening, when you went home, did you think that you were going to join?*

Frédéric No, I joined a year later, but for a special reason, because I wanted to go to the group's summer university. It's the only time that I carried a membership card. That evening, the first time, I simply listened to them talk.

— *What did they talk about?*

Frédéric Activism.

— *Meaning?*

Frédéric They were saying that on Wednesday, they were going to be putting up posters. There were two of them that rolled out the posters. That really surprised me.

— *What they were doing, or what they were saying? Were they trying to convince you?*

Frédéric No, they said hello to me. They were saying to themselves that they had never seen this guy. But they weren't mistrustful. One guy called Jocelyn was talking about a party with some girlfriends. They were talking about this and that.

— *Between this evening and your joining up a year later, did you see them again?*

Frédéric Yes, I saw them again, to put up posters on that Wednesday evening because I wanted to see what they did evenings getting out of classes or leaving the factory. Some of them are at the factory, even if in Neuilly it tends to be mostly people who are focused on studies, upper middle-class people or petty bourgeois people like me. I wanted to find out how things worked like putting up posters, doing tracts, meaning distributing tracts, newspapers in the market place. There was also doing boxes.

— *What's doing boxes?*

Frédéric It's putting tracts in mail boxes. It's organized by neighborhoods, especially during elections. When I arrived, it was the presidential campaign so there were lots of activities, quite a few things to do. So I went to two, three poster-pastings, to better understand as you go along. Because a single round of putting up posters is not going to tell you what's what.

— *All that before joining?*

Frédéric If not, I would have never joined the group without that. I had to know a bit more about the movement, all of the variety, the ideas, the positions of the National Front.

— *You read books on the matter...*

Frédéric Yeah, I read newspapers. Well, what I always read, it was never the... it's always *Le Quotidien* and *Le Monde*, it has always been that. *Le Monde*, because my father brings it home every evening, and *Le*

Quotidien, I buy it, in fact, every other day. At that time, only once a week. So, then even so I'd read the paper from the Front, what's its name... *National Hebdo* is absolutely not interesting, in my opinion. There's nothing in there, no education.

— *But you give the impression, a little, of having joined by chance. What happened that made you join?*

Frédéric For me, membership, I had no reason to join, I didn't see why I should give 120 francs to this movement – I didn't see the point in having my card, it did nothing for me. But there was this summer university.

The summer university: "I told myself, it can't hurt, I'll go there and see what happens"

Frédéric So, to go to the summer program, for a weekend of training at the "Nevis-en-Baronjean" chateau that lasts three, no five days, you had to have your card. I told myself, it can't hurt, I'll go there and see what happens, there'll be friends there. It wasn't that bad in fact, except for some lectures that were a little long, but there were some speakers who weren't too bad, well obviously Le Pen at the end, because, if not, he was mostly at the summer program for the Front, not that of the youth group. So, there was Jean-Yves Le Gallou, Maître Wagner.

— *How did that go?*

Frédéric Mornings we'd get up around seven or eight o'clock, breakfast, a lecture afterwards, with a question-answer session till lunch, the same in the afternoon. There were sessions to learn how to talk to the media. Everybody had to talk in front of a camera because you were graded at the end. There was another exercise where you had to answer questions.

— *How did it work out for you?*

Frédéric Well, there were subjects, they were drawn by lot, there were two that I didn't want to have, the economy and ecology, the one that attracted me the least. Those were the two that I drew, I

practically didn't answer. We talked about ecology, and I couldn't remember the name of Frédéric Mistral [nineteenth-century Provençal poet], so I was annoyed.

— *They were the ones who asked you?*

Frédéric No, I was the one who wanted to talk about it. He's the first ecologist on the right, I wanted to place him like that, in the introduction on ecology and I couldn't remember his name.

— *What is ecology of the right?*

Frédéric Oh but, it was only to place the name: it's not the case that there's an environmentalism of the right or of the left, it's that, at present, it's been taken over by the left. It's what I wanted to say, well to bring it out, on camera. But the exercise only lasted five minutes, it was in the morning and I'd just gotten up.

— *Arriving at this summer program, did you expect a lot, or was it simple curiosity, even mistrust?*

Frédéric More enthusiasm. Very highly interested. No, maybe not "very highly." Interested. I had been in the movement for a year, but I had never yet seen the amplitude, perhaps not "amplitude," but debates, discussions, five days like that . . . I wanted a little to see other things in the movement; because, well, there are the people I call the "mythologists," they're the ones who always have shaved heads and the like, who talk about whatever, about things that they don't do, and that bothered me, I wanted to know if there were a lot of them or not. And to my great surprise, I didn't see a single one. They had short hair but no more than that, like me right now.

Social climbers and the like

— *The mythologists are fanatics?*

Frédéric No, it's not even a question of fanaticism, it's those who are really uncomfortable with themselves, and the Front is their family, they only live for that, they only go out to put up posters, they're losers. There weren't any, and I was happy. That said, there are always some, eh, not mean, who only talk about the Front, not even about the Front, because that's not how

you talk about the Front, guys who are STUPID like that. There are two of them in Neuilly: Jean-Paul, who to my mind is a bit weak on psychomotor skills, really, maybe I'm a little mean. But he must have some defect because his parents are pretty old. We shouldn't take in people who come in like that. We don't keep them either. So, afterwards, I was a member. Every month I'd receive a letter from Jean-Marie Le Pen that I'd scarcely read because it had about as much interest as the *National Hebdo*. It's endless harping or rather little news bits, to know where the next lecture of the Front will take place. It follows current events too little, the announcements are along the lines of "Madame Such-and-Such was attacked by Ahmed So-and-So." No interest.

— *What interested you in the Front, it wasn't especially the media-hyped themes, immigration, security, what theme made you join?*

Frédéric But I never wanted to join! Not any movement! I'm not interested at all.

— *It was really by chance, to go to this summer university?*

Frédéric But even when I was the closest to the Front, I had ups and downs. I'd tell myself that we'd never succeed in doing anything, I was fed up. It was something that I always blamed the Front for: activism is okay, but we don't have any training. For example in Federation 92, in Hauts-de-Seine, a federation that works well, there's no training. Even if you have a good team leader, motivated people, it'll last two, three years, no more. People come, they're drawn in, then they leave again afterwards because we don't train them. You always see the same faces, and we go out to stick up posters together, you've done everything pretty quickly. Even if it's fun in the beginning.

— *You did a lot of that?*

Frédéric Every week for six months. Never any problems. Never any attacks. But for the people in the Front, for us in the youth group, we are mostly there for this — to stick things up. Once some posters are needed, they call us, otherwise nothing.

— *You're a hired hand?*

Frédéric That's pretty much it.

— *You were saying that you had some ups and downs during the period when you were closest to the Front...*

Frédéric Well, I go to a meeting, and I see two, three jerks who come to talk to me, about whatever, to tell me stupid shit, that pisses me off: or rather, I'm preparing for a paste-up and I see that when I ask a guy to bring me the glue, or to simply find some for me [*he's getting angry*], he is incapable of finding any for me, and because of him, the people that I had contacted to do the job, I have to tell them to go back home, because how can you do a paste-up without any glue? Luckily there aren't many of these kinds of guys. Out of 20 poster jobs, I've missed two.

— *What responsibility did you exercise in the youth group of the National Front?*

Frédéric Well, worrying about putting up posters.

— *You got a promotion?*

Frédéric As the head of putting up posters. I don't really consider that a promotion. They told me that I did that well, but organizing a paste-up, you can say that's within anybody's grasp. It consists in calling 20 people in order to get 10 to work, finding a truck, which isn't difficult.

— *You had contacts with other party youth groups?*

Frédéric Yes, in Lille, Aix mostly. We had a newspaper, the *Citadel*. I'll give you some copies. We'd write them ourselves. I did a little article on the construction of a party office in Neuilly, explaining the material that we'd received. I'm not up to doing in-depth articles yet. Everything that's cultural, I leave to others who are better at it than me, although I still have something to say.

— *What do you say to convince people to come to the Front?*

Frédéric People ask me questions about the Front, I answer them as best as possible, and there you have it.

— *Just so, what do you tell them?*

Frédéric They ask me: what do you do, what's happening?

— *They are people who are already in agreement, ready to join?*

Frédéric Yes.

— *You've not convinced any people who were hostile to the Front?*

Frédéric Not me, but there are some old Communists, elderly people mostly.

— *What are those people the most attracted to?*

Frédéric No idea.

— *And you, what are you the most attracted to? Le Pen's personality?*

Frédéric Not solely. The Front is an ensemble. Le Pen is an orator, a good one, that's true. But I don't make a cult of personality. Joining the Front, I was happy, I put up a poster of Le Pen in my bedroom, and after two days I took it down. There are not a lot of people in the Front I admire. Now it is mostly social climbers and the like. It's an apparatus, there's a whole court around Le Pen, but they are pitiful. They'll come to nothing. It's as if I dreamed of getting elected to the National Assembly just by going through the movement. Now, I no longer try very hard to bring back the first days. People are fascinated by the words "extreme right" but that's not enough. What we wanted to do, to change, was to make a spirit of camaraderie and solidarity come to life again, something that no longer exists!

Of course, since it was during my adolescence

Because now I no longer have much trust in the guys in the youth group, they turn up because of a crisis, for a month, and then it's over. The mythologists, too, in little groups, the third path people, it goes nowhere, the champions of GUD, or the Sidos, Olivier Mathieu, Bad Skin, who's a failure, lunatic, a brute. His mother's a judge. He's a MNR, or JNR [subgroup of the Front], the skinheads of Paris-Saint-Germain, it's not at all the youth wing of the National Front. It's little groups of buddies, drunkards stupider than anything, dressed in ranger clothes, bomber jackets, their heads shaved.

— *You never had that appearance, that look?*

Frédéric Here, we don't tolerate combat outfits. We put on blue work overalls or old blue jeans for the paste-ups... These parades of little fascists are grotesque.

— *That didn't pose any problems with your parents?*

Frédéric My parents didn't put up with it when I'd go out to the Front at night, they'd worry. Afterwards, I no longer told them that I was going out to put up posters.

— *When she saw the poster of Le Pen in your bedroom?*

Frédéric She thought it was a little adolescent crisis that wasn't going to last long. But we rarely talk of politics, because to begin with they don't altogether agree. So, necessarily, that created some clashes.

— *Did you try to talk to them about it?*

Frédéric Sure, I tried to convince them. I was much more up on current events than they were, and I spoke better; I stirred them up over it, with arguments. But that'd last five minutes because my father didn't want me to talk about it at home. We'd never agree, they'd tell me "you're an idiot, stupid, you don't know a thing." In the beginning, it was to be expected that I'd talk about it, I was happy, it was new, right away it was "shut up, you don't know who you're talking about." They didn't try to listen to me, ever. With my brother, no problem, but I see him very little. Politics doesn't interest him. Look though, I understand him. Politics isn't very interesting these days; it's too bad. It should interest everybody. But I tend to get disgusted. If things don't change... In any event, I've never voted, never. Not even for the Front. My mother'd tell me "you go out putting up posters to gather a vote for the Front, and you don't even vote!"

— *It is contradictory in fact, isn't it?*

Frédéric Oh yes, very much so. I haven't even gone to get my card from the Front. There are two others in the Front who do the same. Why? I can't answer. I don't feel the need to vote.

— *Is it the electoral system that seems deficient to you?*

Frédéric No, no. Yes a little, of course. It always shocks my mother. My parents vote. Not for Le Pen to be sure. But they don't tell me for whom they vote, otherwise I'd ask them why, if it were for Chirac or Mitterrand, I wouldn't let up on them. In any event whether they vote for Chirac or Mitterrand, there's practically no difference. And what I think is that Le Pen also ends up with them. He's been taken over by the political class.

— *The Front's youth group, does it pose any problems with your school work?*

Frédéric I've never skipped class to go to a meeting. If I skipped, it was for something else. Because I didn't want to go to class. What most affected my school work is my accident. On a scooter in Neuilly, I'd drunk too much and I slipped. I was hit in the eye. They operated on me, and I had the eye out of position. I had three operations to get my eye back in place.

[...]

For two years I only thought about my eye. I looked terrible. Afterwards, I'd gotten out of the habit of going to class. Now I'm really having big problems going back to school. I'm in my senior year in environmental sciences, I have to do a lot to pass the bac.

— *Has the Front made you change?*

Frédéric Of course, since it was during my adolescence...

— *Or somebody that you met...*

Frédéric My best friends are not in the Front, they're even relatively apolitical. I have a mixed-blood friend with anarchist tendencies. Now and again, at the end of an evening, if we've drunk too much, we argue a little, but it doesn't go very far. That's even how we met.

[...]

The fact that people know that I'm in the Front hasn't always pleased them, so I've also lost some friends. But I don't give a shit in fact. Teachers who knew that I was in the Front, I ignored them and they me. In the beginning, I must have talked about it too

much, I was a hyper-enthusiastic, it made me really happy. But the friends that I lost, I replaced them. I admit that I must have talked about it too much. It's what you'd expect.

— *You made racist statements?*

Frédéric People told me "you're in the Front, you're a racist!" In fact, I understand, since it's the image that we have, it's disinformation... They can call me whatever they like. And then people don't distinguish between racism and what's really being said. You have to repeat a thousand times, it gets tiresome. You're wasting your time, you get long-winded.

There's no training

— *Is there cultural activity at the Front, plays, concerts, a system for buying seats in groups?*

Frédéric No, and that's what's too bad. It's what I was saying; there's no training. It's exactly that. There's no library. Or a little one, where they've lost the books.

— *Which were?*

Frédéric Daudet.

— *Léon or Alphonse?*

Frédéric I don't know. I'm not too up on it. But that got me acquainted with Drieu La Rochelle. That I like. *Le Feu follet*, *Le journal d'un homme trompé*, *État civil* and *L'homme à cheval*,¹ which I like a lot, it's the chopped-up style, bitter, little phrases thrown out like that, some amusing comparisons. In *Le journal d'un homme trompé* above all. He talks about whore houses and was saying that it's a homage to the Virgin. I really like that. I've gotten it out several times.

— *Why did you like that a lot?*

Frédéric He talks about the cult of woman. It's a little paradoxical and I love that. And I adore *Le Feu follet*. He speaks and describes something, and suddenly he throws out a little reflection that seems like nothing, but which hurts. I've also read Brasillach, but I didn't like it much: *Comme le temps passe*. I have heard about writers from the right, theoreticians, but I haven't read any.

— *Who introduced you to Drieu?*

Frédéric Régis, a friend, who's clever. He had described his character a little to me. In music, I listen to Skyrock. Well, I like military music, songs, that's okay a little. I don't at all like the Italian fascist songs. The German songs, I have a record, but I also listen to classical music. But it's not Nazi songs, they're traditional German songs, it's not the same thing. But well, a Nazi song or a German song, they are after all a little bit alike, I don't understand the words, so... I don't see a difference. Now, at the Front I'll do a paste-up from time to time, just like that, but not much more. There's quite a few new faces, I'll go discuss things a little with them, just like that.

It's like a live wire with my father

— *Are things going better with your parents?*

Frédéric Right now, it's going okay. From time to time, I try to make an effort, them too, but it's rarely at the same time. But with my father, it goes back a long way. The first time I left home, I was five years old. I'd run away. It was in Morocco. And two years ago, my parents threw me out.

— *Why?*

Frédéric No special reason. Maybe I was wrong because I was hollering as soon as they'd piss me off any. As soon as something went wrong at home, it was my fault. Afterwards, when we'd eat, I'd sulk, so my father would start shouting. My mother also started shouting because I wasn't eating. Things blew up and I left. All it would take even now is a spark to start that up again. Especially with my father. My

¹ That is, *Will-o'-the-Wisp*, *The Diary of a Deceived Man*, *Civil State and A Man on Horseback*. Pierre Drieu La Rochelle was a writer during the interwar years who later veered toward fascism. He was also a collaborator and ended up committing suicide at the age of 52. Alphonse Daudet was a respected and popular Naturalist writer; his son Léon was a writer and polemicist on the right. Robert Brasillach (below), writer and film critic, was tried and executed for collaborating with the Germans in 1945. [Tr.]

mother, well, it's okay. It's like a live wire with my father.

[...]

But everything I see, it's to show that my problems with my father are not new. It has nothing to do with politics or my accident. It's a lot older. I've never gotten along with him.

— *But going into the youth group wasn't a little directed against him, to scare him?*

Frédéric Deep down I don't know. In any case, it didn't please him, that's for sure. They're petty bourgeois people who are a little afraid, so necessarily, with the National Front, they expected anything. They thought that I'd suddenly become a real hooligan when I got in real late from a paste-up.

— *Did you like knowing that they thought that?*

Frédéric No, because it wasn't true and I didn't want them to think that at all. But they didn't want to understand, they wanted me to see a psychologist. They insisted. But I didn't do it. I'd do it if really... But I don't feel that I need help. But my father, he doesn't treat me like someone who's crazy, a kind of problem if you will, no, he simply treats me as a "little brat" because I've always pissed him off. He doesn't at all think that I'm defective or anything. And I say the same thing back to him.

— *Little brat?*

Frédéric Yes.

— *And so?*

Frédéric My bag flies out the window, like that, and I leave, without money, with nothing. It lasted three days, I came back quietly to get a savings deposit book, and I went to a friend's place.

— *All that seems to amuse you, you recount everything so easily...*

Frédéric Because I'm used to it, and it's not important.

— *You don't think that there's an obvious relationship between your difficulties with your parents and membership in the youth group?*

Frédéric Yes, perhaps, no more than that. To get back to my parents, they wouldn't

give me any money. So, what I did to get money, moreover, it's thanks to the youth group, I did security: 900 francs over two nights for the Eiffel Tower festival.

— *What do you want to do later on?*

Frédéric I hope to get my bac on the first try, and afterwards I'll go to an engineering school. I'll find one without too much trouble. A school for aeronautical engineering.

— *You have academic problems this year?*

Frédéric I still skip a lot.

[*I state that we are no doubt going to stop there. He suggests finding me someone more interesting than he from the youth group to interview. I ask him if he doesn't know someone who's very active, very involved.*]

We risk heading toward great chaos

Frédéric I know a guy who is real involved, but who is as stupid as anything, who'll never do anything with his life. So it's maybe not worth the trouble. Otherwise, the others, they do like me, they're all letting go. Our federation is in the process of crumbling, and no one does anything, raises their little finger; it's rather disgusting even so. We had an office, no one did anything there. For a year and a half we waited for this office, telling ourselves that it was going to be great, and when we got it, we didn't do anything. We'd made a bar in the office by selling cokes or beer for a buck; so they'd come. They'd lie around on the couch and not do shit...

— *Why this laziness when you seemed so determined at the beginning?*

Frédéric Within the group, there were only 10 out of 30 who had their cards up to date. But, in fact, the true members, those who have their card, we don't see them. They don't show themselves, ever. We try to contact them. But that's another thing that's disgusting! We told ourselves that with an office, you'd have to do it, contact members, organize, create structure: we asked two members to do it, they called three people and it was over. They didn't do anything else. They all got lazy! We risk head-

ing toward great chaos. This story of Iraq, that's going to lead us to the end, that's for sure. So what Le Pen said, and what he's done there, it's difficult to understand, but more than anything, if you know it's to avoid the catastrophe that is waiting for us, in any event, it's what I think.

— *What great chaos?*

Frédéric If war is declared, it's going to make a huge mess, you don't know how it's going to come out, in Israel it's going to be a mess also, it's going to start uprisings everywhere more or less, on the right and the left, even in France.

— *Who's going to rise up?*

Frédéric The immigrant populations seem probable to me. But you can't put a number on the amplitude of their uprising. But we have proof of it. Two and a half years ago, in Neuilly, they discovered an Arab café, during a raid, machine guns, bazookas, explosives. If it was like that two and a half years ago, they are therefore 10 times stronger at present. And they also found a map of I don't know what. They are very well organized. We have several informants, people from the National Front who live in the housing projects. Of course, they don't say that they're in the Front, otherwise they'd get lynched and the like; if ever they catch one there, it heats up. We come the next day to hand out tracts, and even more. We all go. If someone from the Front is attacked, we respond, of course, for sure. But people don't dare attack us much because there is the myth of the extreme right and all. It chills everyone. For myself, it doesn't occur to me to attack a CGT [Communist labor union] demonstration because they have security guards! We have the myth of mean people and the like, skinheads, beer, razors ... which plays for us.

— *For you and against you?*

Frédéric Yes. Which works for us: that helps us avoid having anyone get hurt. And works against, because it gives a bad name. It's obvious that all this ghetto population, it's screwed up, condemned, there's no integration possible if there are ghettos. I know two blacks who understand

very well. One who's called Mamadou, another Stéphane, who's in the Front, and who's even been a departmental secretary. There are a lot more than you might think. It's not obvious to understand. There's a Madame Medfetna, who's black, who is also very active in the Front. They understand very well that it's necessary to reverse integration. Throw them out, true, but not like that, of course. To get rid of all the ghettos. Immigration brings in a billion francs, I read the figures, and costs the social welfare system 4 billion. There are illegal aliens everyday. For the young Beurs, what it'll be necessary to do, because that presents a problem, they are culturally French, it'll be necessary to make them want to return home. And it'll be necessary to redo the law for nationality. It's too easy. They don't even need to know the language. And they give the right to asylum to all kinds of people, under the pretext that they're in immediate danger where they're from. It's for sure that it's the hardest and most important problem. I could also talk about other platform issues, security, etc. The problem is that the Front is not a party ready for power, in my opinion they won't get it, that's why I don't even vote. But even though I sense that they won't get power, it's a party I like because it takes on these subjects, and I believe that I must stand up for them.

[...]

AIDS, we're going to have human bombs everywhere, who're going to spread it all over... We have to bring together all the people with AIDS, for a certain time and make them aware of the danger that they represent. It's not because they have it that you have to go kill the others... In any event, there's going to be a gap in the age pyramid... it's perhaps platformish as a theme, but you have to address it. It's like for drugs, it's a question of firmness toward these problems, same for security, but I don't think that Le Pen, who'll never be in power, can do anything.

— *Is it the militarism of the National Front that attracted you?*

Frédéric No, no. That said, I really like uniforms, because I have a military museum, but I don't like the army. I'm not planning on doing my service. It's perhaps very paradoxical all that. The military side with me is very particular. I've had a little military museum for four years: I bought a German helmet, and then some soldier helmets, I have several of them, and I have quite a few caps. I even picked up a complete uniform of a lieutenant-colonel of the Foreign Legion. I have a bayonet. But arms would be forbidden for me.

— *There's no connection possible between this taste, let's say, for paramilitarism, for uniforms, and the attraction to the National Front? Your membership seems tied to passion, or impulse rather, and tempered?*

Frédéric Yes, I don't always agree with the Front, it's for certain that I like to contradict. Sometimes, I oppose someone in the Front for the sake of contradiction. Also

because they're often idiots. And that, that won't change, and that ends up disgusting you. But when I try to talk about it, no one understands that it's necessary to get moving.

I have to pass my bac, then we'll see afterwards

— *You never have problems during the paste-ups?*

Frédéric No. We often do them on Sundays at four in the morning, everyone's in bed, we can even go into the working neighborhoods. Once, there was even a guy who stopped and gave us 500 francs and congratulated us. We put it in the Front's coffers. Otherwise people ask us questions from afar, they yell "assholes" and the car takes off right away, and they leave us in peace to put up our posters. But well, pasting-up it's not everything in life. I have to pass my bac, then we'll see.

1991

Jean-Pierre Faguer

Wife and Colleague

Hélène D. is a film editor for television and cinema (she had the good luck to make her start professionally with several important New Wave directors), and she has often collaborated with her husband, a film director, whose departure after 20 years of life together upsets both her emotional and her professional life.

Around 50, she lives in a building surrounded by a park in the western suburbs of Paris. Her apartment has become too large now that she is living there alone with her younger daughter, and apparently it has remained unchanged since her husband left (he comes by every now and then, she says, calling in advance to be sure to not meet her, to take records and books from the shelves in the living room as though his absence were only temporary). During the interview, which takes place more than a year and a half after their separation, she states that she has still not started divorce proceedings.

I was able to meet H el ene D. through the intermediary of one of her friends from IDHEC [film school], where she enrolled in the 1950s at a time when women were still very underrepresented in the skilled positions in the film industry. Even though in her class a greater number of women passed than did men, they knew that they would not have the same career opportunities. This period of expansion for television produced a great demand for "film technicians," and the majority of women coming out of this school found themselves in technical jobs, more stable but also less rewarding than the jobs as directors toward which the majority of their male colleagues were headed. It is significant, for example, that H el ene's friend is the only woman in her class to become a director, but after having been an editor for the first part of her professional life and with a status that is still precarious. During the entire interview, she remains for H el ene both the positive and the negative "reference point" round which the field of possibilities for her generation is mapped.

There was no reason to think that H el ene would choose this profession and she presents it as the result of the "chances" of an academic reorientation. At the age of 19, preparing for a university-level teaching career at the Catholic Institute, she decided to give up her studies in the humanities, which did not interest her much, to enroll in the IDHEC, which she had heard about by chance. Her parents had at first encouraged a change in specialization initially perceiving only the *grande  cole* aspect with entrance exam, prep classes in a *lyc ee* sheltered from the

distractions of university student life, with a state diploma, etc.: they papered over the artistic side.

She is the only child of a lower middle-class Catholic family: her father was an engineer and her mother never worked. H el ene did her studies in the girls' high school of a small town in the Paris area, still quite provincial in the fifties. She lived with her parents until she was 25, a time when, worried that she had not yet shown any intention of getting married, they bought her a studio apartment in Paris. At the age of 30, she married, relatively late for the period, a tardiness explicable by the fact that the film studies that she had begun "a little by chance," without having "a fantastic desire for the work," had pushed her into an unfamiliar milieu, where couples are not very stable, making contacts with men difficult for her at first, even through her work.

So she explains at length in the first part of the interview that the self-sacrifice, or the devotion, rather, that she showed during her married life (it is the concern of not only marrying the man but also the "man's career" that tied her most strongly to her husband, in the absence of a personal desire to be creative on her own account) is only the other side of what one could call the "disciple's" attitude that she showed toward men in her working context. What could have looked like a minor, academic reorientation in fact corresponded to a change in social milieu ("IDHEC, an intellectual milieu, still and all") and led her to meet men different than those from her own background, "superior beings" capable of "creating." It is to them she owes her political and cultural education, in this period marked by the Algerian war ("at home, we never talked politics"), even if she recognizes, now that she is 50, that she "has become very disillusioned since then." Little by little, what her work once took away from her, above all self-confidence in her relationships with men, that same work gave back to her as she became better integrated in her professional milieu. After a long apprenticeship of unconscious readjustments of her relationships with men, marriage finally allowed her to realize, almost magically, with an appreciably younger man, a desire for professional and personal accomplishment. "Instead of becoming an admirer of these young men and idealizing them, I was at last able to start having contacts with people younger than myself, meaning with young men for whom I could already represent something professionally established. I was no longer a silly young girl for them, but someone who knew her job well and someone with whom they could have an interesting professional relationship, and so go a bit farther in a relationship."

The second part of the interview describes the transformation of the view that she has of the man with whom she worked and lived for more than 20 years. What attracted her most of all to this director at the start of his career, only 22 years old, but already with a reputation in the industry, is precisely his "creator's attitude" which could give a more satisfying meaning, a certain plenitude, to her life as a technician without "any particular ambition." For at least 15 years or so, there was, it seems, no problem in the collaboration: both technician and confidente, she was not only responsible for editing his first films, which only

represented a minor part of her activity, but above all, she fulfilled the perhaps more decisive function of encouragement and comforter that a “creator” wants to have from his companion without ever openly asking her for it. But, with time, she became less “admiring” of a husband whose career was not yielding everything that they had together expected. Little by little, even as she continued to be interested in her husband’s films, she held herself back a little from his projects, blaming him for “letting himself do easy things”; imperceptibly, their friends, shared in the beginning, became different; she had to take back control of her own professional career which had become more difficult not only because of the intensification of competition, but also because she had neglected it somewhat during the years when she had to think primarily of the education of her two daughters. For her husband, her “technical” knowledge of the milieu of film was, moreover, capable of shedding a disillusioned, intolerable, light on a career whose limits she could not fail to see. Like many directors of his generation, he had a difficult time during his forties, paying dearly – at the price of long periods of dissipating his professional life over projects not worthy of him and even unemployment – for his refusal to “compromise” with commercial cinema, no longer tolerating as easily as during the early years the obligation to continually prove himself (“he’d say ‘I’m fed up with resitting the bac every time I make a film’”). While she doesn’t identify with her parents’ point of view – they would have liked her to marry “a civil servant” and to have chosen a “more ordinary, but secure, life” – having separated from a man who has become different now that he no longer lives with her (“he’s changed personalities (. . .) he doesn’t have much to do with his children or his old friends”), she is beginning to think a little like them: “when you look at the results, 25 years later, it’s not necessarily positive.”

A shared love for the cinema paved the way, in the early days, for emotional complicity and professional collaboration between these two people who had both (some years apart) studied under Jean-Louis Bory and Henri Agel. In her husband’s eyes, she already had solid professional experience, confirmed by her participation in the editing of films now considered among the most important of the 1960s. But if the cinema was able to bring them together, in spite of the difference in social origins (he was the son of a business manager) and the difference in age (he was six years younger), with time the contradictory interests of their respective careers appear an essential factor in their separation.

The logic of work appears in fact at the center of the retrospective overview of her life; her choice of profession seems to have delayed her marriage and her plans for having children (if only by turning her away from men who were matched to her by her education, her family milieu) and tied her to her husband doubly as wife and colleague. In her case, her position as technician reinforced the effaced, discreet useful wife who always arranged things to carry on her professional work and run the household at the same time, in spite of work hours that were scarcely compatible with a regular family life. Here is everything that marks the difference from teacher couples, for example, for whom career constraints – if only because some of the professional tasks can be accomplished at home – facilitate a more

equitable sharing of familial obligations between spouses. From this point of view, her work is more related to that of those women, engineers or private sector managers and often single, who went out a generation later to conquer professional milieus dominated by men.

This trajectory serving as an example of the professional and sentimental conflicts encountered by women who experienced feminism only as adults shows just how much the historical conditions defining a generational experience separate individuals of different ages in spite of family, and even more, class or gender solidarity.

Born shortly before the war, she belongs to a transitional group caught between the generation that came before the expansion of the schools and that of 1968 (in 1968, she already had over 10 years of professional experience). She belongs with women who experienced in their personal lives the ambiguous effects of the apprenticeship of "autonomy" which access to a qualified profession could procure. For the women of her age and milieu, a milieu marked by the influence of the family values of Catholicism, which assumed that wives stayed at home, "earning a living" didn't carry a guarantee of more equal "negotiation" with men, quite to the contrary. This generation, which preceded that of feminism by only a few years, had to face the same conflicts, but from the perspective of what she calls "a classic education," not without its "sentimentality," a traditional representation of marriage where, in order for the conjugal collaboration to be happy, one of the two, and that could only be the wife, had to know how "to stay rather humble."

Paradoxically, in a certain way, the professional autonomy that she was able to acquire through her studies turned against her and enabled her husband to leave her with no compunction, without even feeling obliged to provide financial support for their two daughters, who are still students. All she has left is the satisfaction, not without bitterness it is true, of having understood after the event what it was that happened to her, a satisfaction that can help to transform an apparently intolerable destiny into a new, unexpected freedom.

with a woman film editor

— *interview by Jean-Pierre Faguer*

"By imagining that I was marrying a man's career I completely fooled myself"

Hélène (...) I didn't have a fantastic desire to do that kind of work. I had done a year to certify myself to teach in higher education and during that year, suddenly, I completely changed direction, off the top of my

head, and all in all, I'm glad I did. It's a little the luck of chance meetings. Someone spoke to me about the IDHEC film school, of this work, it fascinated me and I said "why not" without really knowing what it

was, without really knowing the cinema (...). I went to the prep class in the Voltaire lycée. A lot of girls were accepted in my class because everyone knew that television was going to have jobs in those years: it was the great start-up of the ORTF [national radio and television]. People knew that the industry would systematically take people as they came out of school. In fact, it was true: half of my generation, more than half in fact, not necessarily under contract, worked for television (...). We were 12 girls out of 20 graduates (...) but in fact there were no positions for the girls as directors, there were only technical positions (...); of the 12, two or three wanted to be directors and they told themselves, we're going to make it through editing, we'll get to be directors later on. Only one of them was able to become a director later on. It was only in 1968 that positions opened up for girls. In any case, we only pictured ourselves as technicians and knowing that we should go into television. We had been sort of chosen for that (...). To get into the industry, at the time, there was a kind of rejection of people who had had this training, "they're from IDHEC, they're pretentious, intellectuals, they're going to be awkward" (...). But we were lucky, it was so in my case, to have internships in important movies (...).

— *What were your plans when you were in high school?*

Hélène I was in a girls' high school, in a little town, let's say in the suburbs, and I had the idea of being a social worker, you see that it has nothing to do with (...). Among the girls who were with me in the IDHEC, there were some who knew much better what they wanted to be, they were much more certain, a lot more specific (...) I didn't know anything about anything. It was men like Henri Agel and Jean-Louis Bory who opened up my mind and taught me to know and love the cinema. It's true that a class like Voltaire and two years of the school gave us a certain amount of cinematographic culture, but above all, it gave us the cinema bug (...). Upon leaving the

school, two or three times I had offers from the ORTF as an editor on a yearly contract, and twice I turned them down, although, in fact, we had been chosen in a great number with that goal in mind; but I refused because in 1960, 1965, the profession was doing all right and relatively speaking there weren't very many of us and we had worked a lot, that all fitted together, we worked a lot, and, on the contrary, we went into cinema, we went along with the New Wave, we didn't want to work in television.

A man was a superior being, I've become pretty disillusioned since then

— *What was the difference between the school for teachers, IDHEC and the high school from the point of view of the relationships between boys and girls?*

Hélène Well the school for teachers, I can tell you that I did that as a direct result of secondary education, with no opening of my mind; there were boys but I didn't see them, I was at the Catholic Institute, it was more serious [*laughs*] for my mother who worried a little about my future (...). I was pretty ignorant compared to the girls who are 18 now. I lived in the outer suburbs, evenings I'd go home, which made problems for me afterwards; when I wanted to go the movies in the evening, it was complicated. At the cinémathèque I missed almost all of the ends of films in order to not miss the last train. In fact, boys, I started seeing them after I was 19 when I was at Voltaire and IDHEC; but because of my very strict education, I didn't have much of a relationship with them (...). What's important for me is that when I was 19, guys talked about politics. It was 1956, it was *Budapest*. All of the Communists were supporting the putsch. That's what opened up my mind, I had no political education. At home we never talked politics, and then I learned, it was the war in Algeria, people were going to demonstrations (...). I was learning things. I was listening then I'd choose my side on that basis (...). They were all Communists or Communist

sympathizers, everybody on the left, we were all against the Algerian war. There were always demonstrations, and I followed along, very sincerely, believing in it, thinking that it was, in fact, what needed to be done, that it was the truth, it was very sincere on everyone's part, and in 1958, we all voted against De Gaulle, against one-man rule.

— *Were certain of your friends already living as couples?*

Hélène Yes, of course, there were some who set up together, there were little amours, (...) I didn't have any but it's because at the age of 19 I was still pretty uptight, I didn't know much of anything, so I had to learn how to live, it took my whole time in IDHEC for me to start having a normal life. Because of my education, I was very repressed. To free myself up, it took a rather long time. If I hadn't fallen into a milieu like that of IDHEC, an intellectual milieu, I don't know, I would have become a civil servant, I would have developed much more slowly.

— *How did you perceive boys at the time?*

Hélène I was more or less in love with one or another, I was an admirer.

— *What was admirable in them?*

Hélène There was nothing admirable except that they wanted to be directors. I knew that I didn't want to be a director. In fact, all my life that was it for me; this was good enough for me, that was quite good enough for me. Moreover, I had no desire to create, I had no ambition, and for me, everybody who was going to be a director, the boys, it was miraculous. There were also some musicians. I was completely bowled over that they could be creative, and I was fascinated by men, so I approached them with a lot of difficulty. For me, a man was really a superior being, I've become pretty disillusioned since then [*laughs*], I was rather romantic, silly.

My career gave up all by itself

— *Do you think that in your work there's an advantage when you're a couple?*

Hélène I think so, except that, sometimes, there can be a competition in the couple itself.

— *Did you know of some around you?*

Hélène Yes, I knew some, people who are both directors, sometimes that can turn out badly.

— *In your opinion, what are the conditions to have it turn out well?*

Hélène One of the two has to be rather humble, still, to not have personal ambitions. I think that if both have personal ambitions, it's difficult.

— *It can't be each person in turn, that doesn't exist?*

Hélène I suppose that must exist, I don't know, but not many. I know lots of couples in this profession who are separated, the majority are separated (...). That's what troubled my parents a lot: they saw perfectly well that in this career no couple was stable, and that really worried them a lot. I felt like I was sure of myself and that I could do something over the long haul. I thought and I still think that I could do it. I'm not very fragile, but I think that it's difficult for the majority of people to be able to effectively take on joint projects over a long period.

— *Has feminism had important effects in your professional milieu?*

Hélène First of all, I have worked on feminist projects, but it's very dependent on the projects at any given time; personally, I think that I've had a rather independent life, very independent concerning my career, well, my job, my profession and concerning money. But I don't consider myself a militant feminist. In any case, I think that my life proves that I was a feminist only relatively speaking.

— *In what way?*

Hélène For me, to be a feminist, that means above all having a professional and financial independence, but that doesn't mean anything on the level of relationships with a man; I have always thought of these relationships on a level of equality but not competition. It's true that if I had wanted to be a director, if I had always wanted it,

I don't see why I wouldn't have tried to become one; I chose to be an editor because I didn't want to direct.

— *You have said that one of the two has to be more humble than the other. Do you know of any cases where it's the man?*

Hélène Well yes, I know some (...) where it is in fact the man who is the more humble. I'm thinking of several couples of friends (...). It's perhaps a little simplistic what I'm telling you, lots of people would laugh, but I was raised in such a way that I submit to the desire and the creation of the other, and this other was the man; if I had had the desire, I would have perhaps reacted differently, but in the sense that I didn't have any desire for personal creation, I only had one need, it was to help someone else succeed.

— *You were seen as a stable couple, in fact, in a milieu where the majority of couples aren't any longer?*

Hélène Absolutely. We were seen in such a way that many people told me "oh, we thought the two of you would have lasted forever, that it was guaranteed and all," which wasn't true (...).

— *The profession didn't separate you?*

Hélène No, he was more and more often in the provinces, out of the country; that didn't separate us. I was making a go at my career, the work is a little crazy, being there before eight in the evening for the children (...); that hurt my career some, I wasn't able to do exactly what I wanted, I gave up the idea of having a career. My career gave up all by itself because I was doing more and more marginal things (...). Little by little, it kind of fell apart; it's not completely because of the children, it's also that I wasn't in commercial cinema.

— *You had a certain idea of what you wanted to do?*

Hélène Yes, I had a certain idea which was to not do just anything, to refuse when it was mediocre little things.

— *You talked between yourselves about professional choices?*

Hélène Yes, we talked about it a lot. For example, in 1974 I found myself doing

something with a woman television producer, it was turning out very badly and I wanted only one thing, to throw up my hands completely, because it was truly intolerable working with her (...). Since in fact we were having money problems, he told me "well, it's stupid, when you start something, you have to see it through to the end," and then finally, me too, it's true, I was telling myself, you have to finish what you've started, so I made myself finish, it made me lose a year, and afterwards we both said "we made a mistake, you'd have done better to get the hell out of there."

He changed personality

(...) We had friends in common for more than 20 years who were sometimes his friends and sometimes mine (...). But, little by little, we made others (...) and then something different happened: it's that, the past few years, he made his own friends, more personal friends, they were "his friends," let's say, because with the years, we'd become a little different in our relationships. We got a little apart from one another. I began working on some feature films, I worked with people he knew less, and then he did things for television, videos, things in which I didn't participate. I didn't know the technique for videos back then. And then since he had other professional interests outside cinema, other intellectual interests, he made himself a lot of parallel friendships, they became common friends a bit; I was accepted as his wife, but his later friends were more his friends than mine. And I realize that I no longer see those people whereas as for our friends in common, I continue to see them, but he no longer sees them.

— *He's changed his life?*

Hélène He's changed personality, a kind of break, of rupture. I see, in fact, that he doesn't have much to do with either his children or his old friends.

— *Has he also changed physically?*

Hélène Physically yes, but it's more a change in personality which, probably,

according to my analysis, was taking place surreptitiously over the last 10 years (...). I became conscious of things over the last 10 years; in 1985 there already were some breaks and things that happened I was aware of and knew about, we started up again, then afterwards I paid less attention because, life, my parents died, lots of things that happen in life, I worried a little bit more about my children, my parents, less about him, and there you have it. And then a lot more of my career too since I again started doing feature-length films, I've worked a lot these last years.

The profession didn't tie us together any longer

(...) And then, there's the fact that, for the past 10 years or so, the profession didn't tie us together any more; so we did, him more television, documentaries, me more fictional movies; in 1985 he did a film that I liked a lot, but I had become more distant, he realized it.

— *He felt that his work was being judged?*

Hélène Perhaps he felt that his work was being judged; I admired him less, we never really talked about it (...). He's someone who had fantastic possibilities, who was very rich from the cultural point of view, from the sensitivity point of view, from the point of view of creativity, too, and who, little by little, in contact with the trade, got harder because the job is very hard, who wasn't really able to do what he wanted because the profession didn't allow him to, he tried to do feature films, he didn't succeed because he had to do television like everybody else, then that made him a little bit poorer and then, bit by bit, he wasn't demanding enough with what he wanted to do in the profession, he let himself do easy things, accept things for television that were too easy; I have other friends who didn't accept that, who have come through it because they didn't accept it. But it was hard, they went through difficult times, whereas maybe he accepted it because, in

fact, we had children, but the others had children, too (...).

— *You didn't warn him?*

Hélène That happened towards the end, but doubtless not enough. Moreover, did I have the right to warn him? After a certain time, I no longer thought I had the right to influence his career; I think he was master of himself.

— *He felt that perhaps you had a professional view, in quotation marks, of him?*

Hélène Maybe at the end he was fed up with this professional view of him and he wanted to get away from it, but at the same time, he tells me so now, it's when we worked together that we were together the most, which is perhaps very true, so it's sad if it's that, but it's probably quite true. The first 15 years of his professional life when I could help him, he thought it brought something. Now he has doubtless thought that I was no longer a support for him, that I was no longer good for anything for him; likely, he no longer needs someone with whom he has the same professional goal, I don't know, there's no way I can know (...).

Longtime couples who work together, I don't know a lot of them; in those I do know, in fact, the woman, in general, doesn't do the same job: the man is a director, the wife isn't, she's not in the cinema perhaps, or well, if she is, she does production, secretarial work, but on the side. I don't know many people who have lived a long life together like that.

— *It seems easier to you when they're not doing the same job?*

Hélène I think that it's more difficult because, often, these people who aren't in the profession don't understand the necessity of a total investment, they aren't integrated, but in the long run, isn't it better?

It's the usual thing in this business to change partners

— *And the women from younger generations entering the profession, are they more often single?*

Hélène Younger women who are 40, no. Those of my age who accepted being single as a vocation, they still claim to accept it, but the women who are over 50 are very unhappy, for the ones who are single almost by choice, it's a disaster; they live with it very, very badly, they are very unhappy, it's really worse than anything, they have completely spoiled their lives for the profession, most of the time, for the choice of freedom, of independence, of a career. You have to see with what energy, come 40, they suddenly start trying to have a child, any way possible. When they don't succeed, it's a disaster. The other women I know, on the other hand, who are 40, and in fact at the "normal" age had a life as a "normal" couple with children and who are still living together after 15, 18 years, they succeed, in fact; I think they are very faithful, I think that there is also necessarily one who dominates the other, in general the man, you have to tell it like it is, it's rare that it's the woman; if the wife dominates, I think she stays independent, I think that she doesn't get married, or well, she lives in a couple but without getting married; in any case, you don't get married any more in order to stay more autonomous; but couples like ours, I think that you don't see that anymore in the profession (...). Today, couples have children, they live a certain number of years together and then come 30 or 40, they find another companion with whom, without getting married, they'll spend the rest of their lives. I think that it's more like that that things are turning out. As if the second choice were more sure. I don't know if that's the case with my husband, I don't know anything (...). For me, it's different, this has happened too late for me, this rupture, it's coming too late in my life (...). I'm not the norm for what usually happens in this business. I think that in general, the fact of changing a partner, for a man, it's always easy. For a woman, it's no longer easy at a certain age (...) but maybe that's a little too simple, a little simplified what I'm telling you.

I feel a bit like I've been fooled by my autonomy

(...) Beyond the problem of organizing the children's education, we had a life that was completely independent and free, he really did what he wanted, how he wanted, when he wanted. But maybe he doesn't think so.

— *You were in charge of the children?*

Hélène Yes, I was the one.

— *You're not part of this generation that shared tasks?*

Hélène No, I'm not part of the generation where you shared tasks; unfortunately I think that I'm part of the earlier generation raised with notions that were a little old, a little with the idea that still and all it's the wife who has the responsibilities in the house and therefore she takes care of feeding the children, feeding the household, shopping and everything and, in fact, he didn't share the tasks whereas now I think he does. But it's my fault, I only had to ask him forcefully, but it seemed normal for me to do the things in the house, I only had to ask him; maybe he would have done it; as he was someone who was very interested in his work, his work, his work, I left him the opportunity to be totally free on that point, 100 percent so. Probably I was wrong (...). Maybe we didn't get started on a very clear, very precise basis, I don't know, I can't analyze things very well. I have the feeling that he dominated me in any case. We got started on a rickety basis perhaps; he's only been gone for a year and a half, I haven't sorted everything out yet...

— *What has that changed concretely in your life?*

Hélène Lots of things. In fact, I feel a bit like I've been fooled. On the emotional side, I prefer to not talk about it, because I would perhaps seem too sentimental to you, romantic, so it's not worth talking about it, but on purely the social level and, that will seem more than classic to you and perhaps a little reactionary what I'm going to say to you, it's that I feel that I've been a bit fooled in the sense that we shared something together in every way for more than

20 years and I now find myself having to take the whole weight of everything all alone on the financial side and he certainly left me brutally, from one day to the next, without taking any further share in my costs on the financial side, even for the girls; and certainly he was able to do so a lot more easily because I was independent, I had a way of earning a living, I was free, I had autonomy. In the end, what my father wanted, that I be autonomous, what I wanted, to be autonomous; feminism, autonomy, I feel I am a bit their victim, in the sense that I can imagine very well that like some in his generation who married women who didn't work, they would never leave them because of that, I think if I said that to him, he'd laugh and say "no, no of course no, I'd have left in any case," which is no doubt true, he would have certainly left, but, let's say, he did it with a certain flipness saying "you pay everything that you have to pay, I'm not taking care of anything anymore," meaning throwing everything on me (...). Since for the moment I haven't begun divorce proceedings, we haven't been able to settle it in an official, legal manner, but it's true that now I find myself with the same responsibilities, my younger daughter still lives with me, without having his contribution, which is very burdensome, very difficult and he did it with a lot more ease because he knows I'm independent. Since I've worked a lot lately, he no longer has any feeling of guilt.

— *You used to always share your professional lives?*

Hélène We always each had our own life, I do my own films, maybe he doesn't like the films I do and there you have it, we talk about it, after seeing a film, he's capable of saying "I think this, I think that, it's good, it's not good, there no, you shouldn't have done it," but I think these last years, he really didn't give a damn about what I was doing and then I admired what he was doing less (...). I think that my husband's departure is not only a conclusion of our life as a couple, it's also a moment when his professional life is changing, its balance is

being tipped, in what direction, I can't tell you, I don't yet have the facts to talk about it, my own, obviously, isn't changing direction because I have no personal ambitions, my goal is to continue editing, it's not changing, so there's no crisis concerning my work (...) my life is simpler, it's editing, the children and then him; for him, obviously not: it's, after all, professional success before everything else, so obviously, these last years, there was a problem, a problem that's not only his, but which is one of an entire generation, a problem that's going to be even more crucial these next years for a whole generation, he's getting to 50 without having done the work that he would have liked to have done, it's clear, all that he has been able to do these last 10 years, even if he did some good things, he didn't do only good things, he has also done some mediocre things, for him it's urgent, it's now or never, I think that he's aware of it, I think that in this, he's afraid, and leaving here, it's also – in that I'm a little simpler, my ideas are a little bit more precise, my choices in life are more clear-cut, more, let's say, moral ones, quote-unquote, I try to follow a straight line – I doubtless made him uncomfortable in the sense that he no longer really knew where he was with things, and he goes back and forth between several possibilities including giving up film altogether, he hasn't said so to me but he said it to his daughters, and he perhaps says to himself, I fooled myself for 20 years, I didn't take the right path, well I don't know, he must question a lot of things.

He'd say "I'm fed up with resitting my bac every time I make a new film"

(...) In our profession, your career does not necessarily become more and more secure. As he would say, which used to make him unhappy, "I'm fed up with resitting my bac each time I make a film," in effect, you feel each time that you must prove that you still exist, that you're still the best, that you did something good, which is in fact not such a problem for

technicians. If we do a movie that doesn't make it, we also get some negative feedback, but not as much as a director. For him, it's dramatic, it's dramatic if he makes something which is not recognized every single time; at 40, it's the desire to be recognized more and more, if he's not really recognized as being the best, it can be considered a failure (...). Women directors are fighting uphill against the same problem, and even more so due to the fact that they are women because it's still more difficult, despite everything, even these days to do something when you're a woman, it's more difficult to prove that you're capable.

— *Is it easier for you to work with a woman?*

Hélène It's more difficult for me to work with a woman (...) with women, I have had good relationships at times, awful relationships at others; (...) a woman must always assert herself and strangely enough, she can have conflicts and become oppressive although it's one woman working with another (...). Women who direct are really very hard women and those who keep their femininity (...) have a lot of difficulty because they are challenged just because of their female specificity, they do cinema in a very feminine manner and people condemn them for it constantly. Or else women have to want to make movies in the same way as guys (...).

— *To get back to the professional crisis of men, do you think that a couple can survive that?*

Hélène I think that it's possible to survive that. The problem, perhaps, is that, in fact, you don't realize it, maybe, when you're living it, it's afterwards that you become aware of it (...).

— *And your colleagues, the younger ones, do these women succeed in reconciling professional and family life?*

Hélène I can't really talk about it, I don't know enough young people. The youngest I know are 40 with children who are already older than 10. The youngest that I know are single, 26, 30, and for the moment, they want to be single and work to succeed,

and they'll have children, no doubt, once their professional success is assured.

— *And, at the same time, they don't exercise a pressure on the others?*

Hélène Yes, yes, certain ones, of course, yes, yes. But above all it's the pressures of the work, it's the profession. For example, in a feature-length film, when you want to be sure of a mixing and you've got to spend hours every evening, till nine or ten o'clock, they sure won't take a woman who's just had a baby. I succeeded in continuing my job while trying to impose hours on the director, I was already a head person, I wasn't an assistant. If I had still been an assistant, I don't know if I would have managed.

— *Does it ever happen that a director rebukes a member of his staff for putting family life before work life?*

Hélène Direct reproaches, no, but indirect reproaches, yes. (...) It's a given when you take on an assistant, their time has got to be free.

You end up all alone

(...) Young women can believe in the life of a couple; they simply don't place all their bets on it, they think in fact that anything might happen anytime, that nothing is predicted definitively, something that even though I used to tell myself that nothing has been dealt you definitively, but I believed it in spite of everything, I had a kind of will to believe in it, well, it was also my nature, but I wanted to believe it in spite of everything. He too, wanted to believe in it; he also tried to believe in it, then life made him understand that it was difficult; but he's suffering, no doubt less, from this kind of break in his life because, perhaps, he invested less in our relationship than I did, I invested in it for more than 20 years. So he probably suffers less from this kind of... failure. So he's not a victim, but I feel like a victim, rather wrongly. I think that everybody in my generation is no longer in my situation, there are a lot of women capable of confronting this situation more serenely.

— *But, in any event, your work leaves little time for a family life, concretely, what does film editing represent in terms of work hours?*

Hélène We have rather strict time limits. If you work normally eight or nine hours a day, that's enough; nine more so than eight. The amount I do, in general, I leave around 9 and I come back around 7.30 in the evening, that makes 11 hours of absence, nine of which are work. There are films where I accept still more work. And there are film editors who work even more, who work like crazy; I have women friends who worked to be free, who liked their work, who worked a lot, who didn't have any personal life anymore, who, by dint of not having a personal life, had to work to fill the gaps. There's a sort of vicious circle: you work because you're alone to make money, and by dint of working, you're alone, all alone, and then you end up finding yourself, at 45, all alone and all you have is work until the end of your days. Which is a bit my situation; right now I find myself having invested a lot in the job and I find myself having worked and having raised children, but wondering, what's my future? Now I have to go on working, first I have to come to terms with things, I have to live all alone, so it's a little like I'm single except that I had the good fortune to have children (...). It's a business that must not be idealized, you invest a lot during the time of an

editing, you have very friendly relationships, it's very warm and then the film is finished, pouf, everyone leaves. You have to get used to these kinds of separations after films; at the end of 30 years, you get in the habit, but in the beginning it's hard because, it's true, you invest a lot, a lot too much (...). For me, the balance sheet that I draw up is rather negative where the couple is concerned, because, concretely, my relationship is broken, but also because, when you look back at the reasons why you no longer want to live together, reasons that are not only personal but professional, you realize that to a certain extent you were living with blinders on (...). I'm straddling two generations: I wanted to have autonomy and freedom, and, at the same time, I felt that I wasn't capable of entering into them completely since I wanted, all the same, to live in the classic manner, as I had learned it, and as I would have perhaps liked to live (...). I wasn't able to liberate myself totally so I'm a bit of a victim of my education, and then the fact of being too old, I'd need to have been 15 years younger to really live it properly (...). Finally everyone remains very alone with respect to their own ideas. By imagining marrying a man's career, I fooled myself completely, even if it was true for a certain number of years; it can be like that sometimes, but it's rare. It's not true in the absolute. I haven't tried to figure out why, it's too hard.

December 1991

Abdelmalek Sayad

The Curse

What is an immigrant worker's life? To answer this question in full knowledge of what one is talking about, first of all, one has to have lived that life intensely and, as they say, "without thinking about it too much." Then, with the help of circumstances that favor a sense of distance – the death of parents, the departure of children, both boys and girls, sickness, accidents at work, layings off and retirements, so many occasions to experience the emptiness of an existence that only has meaning through work – one also needs to develop little by little that particular disposition that enables one to "stand apart [se tenir à l'écart] from life and its lies," meaning its vanities. Virtually a ritual of traditional wisdom, the phrase is here used in its full sense: to "suspend (one's) life to look at it as it was," unrolling it before you like an object of observation to which can be applied all the power of reflection that the experience acquired during such a life confers on those concerned to "know themselves and know life in spite of its deceptions (*ghadra*: trap, treachery)."

Abbas, who speaks in these terms, is one such individual. A worker now retired from a big industrial company in the Paris region, he is, in his own way, an intellectual. More than the brief allusions to social origins ("my father was not made for farming"; "my grandfather was the man of letters in my family, he always lived by the Koran"), everything he says proves his intellectuality, and in particular, the sort of distance toward himself that he painfully calls "my divorce from myself." Combining the direct, long-term experience of the immigrant condition with the reflective outlook that enables him, for his own purposes to begin with, to elaborate his own experience, subject it to critical examination, and, even more exceptionally, communicate it to others in the most ordinary language (as here), Abbas eludes the usual alternatives of mute experience or empty talk about an inaccessible experience (the world of immigration and the experience of this world are no doubt completely opaque to most of the people who talk about it). With him, the person being investigated and observed turns himself into the investigator-observer. The presence of the "professional" investigator provides only the looked-for opportunity to articulate the mature product of long self-study ("I've thought a lot about all that . . . More specifically, I don't stop thinking about it, I go over and over all these questions deep inside me"). The final product is not all that far from the scientific model in the sense that, sharing the same interest in the investigation, the investigator and the investigated are in agreement, without prior discussion, as to the issues to be explored, the individual

under study asking himself the very questions the investigator would like to ask him.

How does one achieve this ability to “forget oneself,” as he himself puts it, the better to “remember oneself”? Once again, we need to look at the conjunction of certain social characteristics and in particular in the relationship of Abbas’s family to immigration – a relationship that is quite rare in this area of very dense and long-term immigration – for the profound disenchantment that provokes the turn back to oneself. To make the present situation bearable, the impulse is to look back over the path that led there, beginning with the famous “first day,” site of the initial “curse,” and to reconstitute the social genesis of this path and give something of an explanation for it. By contrast, earlier conditions, recalled with pleasure, promote a critical perspective on the current situation which presages the lucid discourse about a personal trajectory that is also a collective one. Above all, this critical perspective is the effect of a liberation that comes from self-analysis and self-confession.

This is an acknowledgment of the crisis to which this “generation” of immigrants has come, a generation that already belongs to the past. “Things today are no longer what we used to think they were.” This “generation” is living dramatically the radical rupture with the previous state of affairs, which is not so distant and which Abbas – always the consciousness-raiser – retrospectively calls “a state of slumber” (“we were asleep”), “a state of sluggishness.” Aware of how different he is from ordinary immigrants, his contemporaries, with whom he otherwise shares – and he insists on this common fate – trajectory and living conditions, he appeals to them to be more vigilant; invites them to a “watchfulness” (*fayaq*). Believing that he has mastered his situation and accepted his “truth,” he would like everyone to share the “truth” that he puts to them and to produce their “truth,” to drop all the masks and all the dissimulations that immigration requires of everyone in order to be accepted.

It is not an easy task, but an extremely painful test, even if everyone knows that this heart-rending revision is the condition of their survival and of their resistance to the annihilation that threatens them because of changes in their living conditions and, above all, in the image they are used to giving of themselves and their status as immigrants. Abbas feels that he is somehow predestined for this role as consciousness-raiser. His very aristocratic sense of his distinction inclines him toward a certain commiseration (“they are to be pitied,” “their eyes have to be opened (...) but they refuse”) toward others who decline the asceticism that he proposes not only by his acts but also, mostly, by his words. His entire entourage, even his own family, sees him as an exception. They feel for him at once admiration, respect, and fascination, and also the annoyance and irritation that every exception provokes. Consulted by everyone, the close and the not so close, often surrounded by many people who come to listen to him (they call him *sheikh*, he is a wise man), he has made a reputation for himself as a “solitary” man and he withdraws almost ostentatiously, even with his family, into an “isolation” both feigned and real which inactivity has only reinforced.

A man of truth and integrity, he is feared for the severity of his judgments, and though people are grateful to him for telling truths, they are often angry at him for doing so. This is particularly the case every time people touch on the situation of children, an opportunity to see in the plainest way the crisis experienced so intensely by all immigrant families, here manifested by the rupture between parents and their children, products of altogether different social and cultural conditions. That the wise man, who is sometimes also a prophet of doom, proclaims that emigration was a “mistake,” that everyone was mistaken – that can be accepted. But when he proclaims that the immigration of families – his own first of all – is a betrayal, a rejection, an apostasy (in the religious sense of the term) and that its consequence has been a total reconversion whose result is, as he likes to repeat, that “instead of working for (their) prosperity, immigrants (in families) are in reality working for the posterity of others” – the declaration is very hard to take because it is, at the same time, a *denunciation*.

with an “immigrant worker”

— interview by Abdelmalek Sayad

“Nothing came out as we thought it would”

Abbas Nothing is working... And in the end, now that everything is over, you have to realize that not everything works... because we fooled ourselves all along the way: nothing came out as we thought it would. I can't get over it. I doubt myself... I think I'm lying to myself. I've thought a lot about all that... More precisely, I don't stop reflecting, I go over and over all these questions deep inside me... And when I say that I reflect, it's only now that I have come to this conclusion and because I have arrived at this outcome (*elhaqīqa*: truth, reality, certitude) as it is today. For the rest the same things always come to mind. How did we get to this point? Are we the same, the same creatures as the first day [*of our immigration to France*]? What changed us? When does our metamorphosis [*in the strong sense, as the effect of a divine curse*] date from? We didn't see it coming, it came upon us when it was too late to react against it. It has to be accepted as

such...; we have to accept ourselves that way. There's no longer anything to be done. Except to give thanks to God. He knows what He's doing. We're only toys in His hands. His will governs us.

— *Of what does this “malediction” consist? Why this “curse”?*

Abbas But to understand this, perhaps I have to tell you about everything from the first day. Without that, you can't understand anything. I myself only understand the metamorphosis by recalling the first day and reconstructing the itinerary that we followed... I'm not alone... But the others are lucky enough to be blind... to see nothing of the things that are very close to them, right under their feet, in their bellies. They see nothing, they hear nothing, they have forgotten everything, don't remember anything. They're happy.

[...]

Even when you want to, you don't know where to start... only in your mind can you

hold all these things together. When it's a matter of saying them, even for me – sometimes I talk to myself, talk out loud to myself, they're close to thinking that I'm crazy – all these things come at the same time, en masse, they cluster together, you can't separate them. It's confusing. So then, even when I talk to myself, I stop very quickly: I quiet down and let things jostle together, mix up, all come back together and leave again as they came... It's not easy talking about all that.

[...]

Each period has its problems, its difficulties and things get worse with age. But with age, you appreciate things better, you know how to balance things out: on the one hand, things of no importance which you really got worked up about before; on the other hand, the more essential things you neglected, or scorned. It's not things that have changed along the way, it's us; it's our view of these things that has changed between times.

— *For example?*

Abbas For example: in the past, I had very poor housing, in the beginning, one room with three children... then a place that was a danger to health with five kids. Now a real apartment, in a proper building, even if it's subsidized housing, it's certainly a step up. But solely on that point, things have changed: now that the problem of housing is solved... there is the discovery that however real the problem, it's not the problem, the real problem, the one that nothing can solve, the problem that has no solution, no one can find a solution because no solution can come from the exterior. There's one example. Do you want a second example? Work is the same thing: I've known unemployment, meager salaries, the worker's poverty... all that was a problem in its time; later, I got a permanent job, 15 years in the same place, salaries got better, it's not a fortune, but we managed to eat, to clothe ourselves, to raise the children and save a little... There, too, this problem that pre-occupied and preoccupies all workers, now that it's not a problem for me... or that it's

a different problem, I'm discovering after the event that it isn't the real problem either.

— *What is the real problem then?*

[...]

Isn't this the curse?

Abbas The first day! What is this first day? I wonder about it, that's the question I ask myself. (...) I've reflected on it a lot. I tried to understand why this "first day" is different for me than the "first day" of all the others, because there's a "first day" for everyone. Why? Because in my family, I was the first to emigrate to France.

— *Who was there in this family...?*

Abbas My father, his wife, since my mother died when I was 12 or 13, a younger brother or a half-brother rather (he was the child of another wife of my father, she also died in 1948; I was 17–18 years old). My older brother, we have the same two parents, died young, a young man, at 18–20 maybe.

I remember the day: November 17, 1951; it's a day that you always remember. I had been pestering my father for several years to go to France. He played deaf, he resisted... And yet, we weren't made of gold, we were the poorest family in our branch. And there was a reason for that. A secret reason, but a reason that was part of our mentality, of our manner of seeing things in the world. I was 21. I was big. Between my father and me, we talked to each other through other people. I'd send him people to whom I could say certain things, people whom my father trusted some. And he would answer me in the same way, but not necessarily using these people that had intervened with him for me. In the end, we'd formed two groups: my "advocates" with him and the "defenders" of his position with me. This harassment lasted two years. I felt that I had won the match – if you can say that – when my father made me answer by giving me his reasons, the reasons for his refusal, by way of the person that I'd sent to him. (...) He's a relative, a kind of wise man, a very serious man, religious, hard

worker, devout, even though he spent his whole life in France. My father admired him greatly, and it was mutual. Thanks to him and because this man was himself a worker in France, my father softened his stance and his response, but without giving formal consent (...). So it was with this man that I came to France. It was my first trip outside our village and its surroundings, my first contact with the city: the train, Algiers, the boat, France... November 17 and 18, 1951. I was 21 (...).

The reason for my father's opposition (then I treated him as a tyrant, a backward-looking man who willed his poverty), he revealed the morning of the seventeenth when, accompanying us and having reached the point where we had to take leave of one another, he tells me, just when we were hugging each other, and out loud, as though to have as witnesses everyone there, men and women, because there were also women, the mothers of the men who were leaving: "As God is my witness, listen all of you, I never asked you, my son, to go to France for me, to send me money from France. In my whole life, I never thought that such a thing could happen to me. Having money from France to eat with! I thought of it as something impious. I want everyone to know this. I beg you, this money, keep it for yourself, keep it over there; it's a service you'll do me, it's more than a service, it's an order that I give you, save me from this filth. Because if you sent it to me, I wouldn't know what to do with it. I couldn't eat it, I couldn't burn it." Those were the last words of my father, he died a few years later without my seeing him again. Worse than that, at the time, I didn't understand a thing in this exhortation, I told myself [*in French*] *quel cinéma* he's doing with me. It was only later, when it has become too late, that I gauge the importance of his words. Isn't that the curse? Isn't this the malediction that continues to pursue me? And to pursue all the others, even if they don't know it...

[...]

Money from France is illicit money

— *Let's talk a bit about your father. Who was he? Was he a peasant who never left his house, never left his fields, or had he himself worked elsewhere, for money?*

Abbas (...) In fact, my father wasn't supposed to be a *fellah* [small farmer]. It is by necessity that he became a *fellah*, even though we don't even have any land to cultivate or so little that it was a miserable amount (*elmiziria*). But before my father, you have to start with my grandfather. My grandfather was the youngest in the family, he had a lot of brothers and lots of [*paternal*] uncles. He was the "man of letters" of the family, the last [*by age*], a little puny, a bit sickly; they made him do studies [*of the Koran*], he always lived by the Koran, at first in the religious schools as a student. You know how that was done back then. Everybody, the students, the teachers and all the devout men [*the "brothers"*] who attended these places, everybody lived there, lived together. The school would receive gifts, it would organize collections of foodstuffs, we'd go to collect them, we'd also do the cooking and we'd study together at the same time. He was raised in this milieu, and people say of him that even when married and with already grown children, he would drop everything in this world to return to the school from time to time. Obviously everything else didn't interest him, everything in life. When he would work, meaning earning something to live on, it was as a *taleb* (student) at the time, in some village and he was paid, as people were back then, in kind, just enough to live on. And, of course, when things were divided up between his uncles and his brothers, he was the victim. He wasn't there, he didn't care about any of that, he didn't even know where the family lands were.

And on the pretext that he had not worked, that he had not suffered, that he'd been pampered by making him a man of letters, they only gave him a tiny portion; almost nothing. They simply despoiled him.

And it appears that he never said anything, never protested about anything. It seems that the first one to bitterly resent the matter and who tried to revolt, after the event, against what seemed to him an injustice, was my uncle, my father's older brother; I never knew him, he died before my birth or the year of my birth. They say of him that he was more decisive, more determined, more energetic than my father. But both of them had the feeling of having lost something and, above all, of not being made for what they had become. They accepted it, submitting themselves, as my father would say, to what destiny had handed down to them. And it wasn't scorn for working the earth, as they say; far from it. Quite simply, because they weren't raised in farming and because there wasn't any land to cultivate. They had to work an enormous amount. (...) No doubt, they had not made it to the end of their Koranic studies; perhaps the conditions of the *taleb* had changed? They always had to work with their hands, although they had not been trained for it. They worked a lot on the farms as seasonal workers; both of them were able to get themselves a specialty that helped them avoid the hard work on the farms, all the hard labor, such as picking up potatoes: they learned to graft vines. They did two seasons in the year: in the spring, the preparation of grafts or "the graft on the table," as they used to say; and, in autumn, the "graft in the fields." My father, particularly, would go from Tunis to Morocco, he was well known and appreciated. That's what my family was (...).

Yes, it was already an emigration [literally, a "going outside the country"], but an emigration that's nothing like mine... It was always in their territory, they didn't have to cross the sea; it was a seasonal emigration: three weeks to a month and a half at most; it was working the earth, they'd live on the farm and not in town... And, above all, my father – it's something that I often heard him say – it was always in Muslim countries. That was his problem, *money from France* is suspect money,

detestable money, illicit money. You understand that he didn't want any of this money! (...) He lived like that his whole life, he had no respite, no ease. Even my emigration in a certain way responded to his vows; even in spite of myself, moreover, I didn't want it like that but it corresponded point by point to what my father had foreseen and perhaps wanted. I didn't want to admit that my father, in the state of poverty we were in, could refuse money that was going to go into his pocket. It's incomprehensible for me; and then I told myself that he didn't have the right: if such is his will, such is his pleasure, if he wants to live as an ascetic, he doesn't have the right to impose this lifestyle on the others, his wife, my brothers and sisters, older and younger.

— *How did your emigration respond to his vows? I don't understand.*

Abbas It responded to his vows in the sense that he never touched a franc of my money. Life didn't leave him the time to; neither for him nor for me. I arrived in France at a bad time: in 1951–3, times were hard. I never found a job that I liked, little jobs here and there, nothing more. I didn't push myself to send him any money as we did back then, since he'd told me of his embarrassment: was this money right or was it forbidden? (...) I didn't borrow any money once I arrived in France to send to him, that's what people did at the time and still do now: that's what made people think that money was to be had in France, that all you have to do is get to France to find the money that is... precious, rare, impossible – not just difficult – to earn in Algeria. However, I didn't lack for support in France: my brother-in-law's where I ended up and where I lived for a good while; my maternal uncle who is a very old emigrant to France, and many others besides, all relatives far or near (...). When, at last, I settled down well and I started making my own way, it was the inevitable result... the war and its misfortunes (...). But that's another story. [*His father was, according to what they say, one of the first victims of the war in the region, in spring 1955.*]

So that's the memory that I have of my father... It's not even the image of his face when we took leave of one another – did we know that we weren't going to see each other again? But his voice, this terrible voice which still rings today in my ears: "Remember... let everyone be my witness... I did nothing so that you'd go to France, I never asked it of you, I never encouraged you to leave, on the contrary, I did everything so the idea would never come into your mind... You have decided otherwise. I cannot prevent you... you will have only yourself to blame later on, which I don't wish for you (...)." And yes... He saw far ahead, he did. He didn't wish that on me, but it happened. What he feared, no doubt, ended up happening, and sooner than he thought. I still hear this farewell. It obsesses me. The more time passes, the more the thing is fixed in me. And he had ended by saying "I wish you a good trip, may God be with you..."

[...]

We knew that France wasn't paradise

— You were raised, then, in a family we can call "intellectual." And for you, what was it like for you in this sense?

Abbas An intellectual family? That's saying too much. My grandfather perhaps. My father... by his generation, it was already over... As for me, nothing at all; it's no longer the time of devotion, and perhaps not even of simple faith, of belief.

— Yes, even so, something does remain. In your childhood, what did you find of this "intellectual" heritage at home?

Abbas What did I find at home? Some slates [upon which were written the chapters of the Koran], and we took care of them preciously, we'd treat them with respect, because it was the word of God written there, and what's more, people would tell me, this was written by the hand of your grandfather or your uncle! Some copies of the Koran, quite worn, they must have been used. (...) Still in a small box... untouchable, there was a little book, the summun, the complete Koran.

Apart from these several works, some law books, notably Elboukhari [*jurist and theologian*]. I know, because people would come to borrow it from my father. Beyond this little library, from his brother-in-law, the husband of the youngest of his sisters, my youngest aunt, my father had kept some works, some commentaries on the Koran, some religious histories and some reviews in Arabic including *Elbassair* [*the review of the first "Association of the Ulema" in the 1950s*]. There you have the nourishment of a lettered man who was neither a peasant like all the other peasants nor truly educated to the point of living exclusively from his knowledge.

My father was an intermediary case. He had accepted, and one can imagine that it was not with a happy heart, leaving his condition as an educated man. Everyone knew it and respected him for that. They respected in him the peasant that he was and they admired him, because he was headed for having "soft hands" and there he was doing wonderfully in his trade as a farmer. They still respected the pious man that he was. Often he had priority over the village *taleb*, who moreover, did everything to get my father's approval. My father helped him out in everything, my father would take his place for prayers, for the Friday sermon when he wasn't there... My father was at all the funeral vigils in the village and its surroundings when you have to spend all night reciting the Koran. But he wasn't a "professional," my father always refused to take a penny for this service whereas the professional *talebs* had their salary (...).

That's what my father was. Additionally, at that time, you didn't have a choice: going to France was the path for all the young, rich or poor; it was the only way to prove that you are at last a man and no longer a child. My father, deep inside him, never thought that I was going to do like everybody else, that I was just waiting for that... to get to the right age for that... It was totally opposed to the life that he imagined for himself and imagined for me. It

was no longer the period for studies, but for work; and the real work is in France.

— *In these circumstances, you must have yourself received a religious education?*

Abbas When I was born, it was already too late. Even my older brother who had known his grandfather better – they say he died in 1931 – it was already too late for him, he wasn't able to benefit from the teaching that could have been expected. (...) When I was young, I divided my attention between working the land and learning the Koran. It was still in the little mosque of the village and it was mostly in wintertime; in the summer, work in the fields didn't leave us the time. And then, I was lucky enough to have had a very good teacher. He was a wise man, conscientious. But all that remained *bricolage* [makeshift] [*said in French*]. When, in the village mosque, I finally made it to the *quarter* [15 chapters, a fourth of the 60 chapters that make up the Koran], I was already 13–14 years old. It was real poverty, you couldn't find anything to eat, epidemics, countless people were dying. My father wanted me to go on. So I had to go away to the religious school. (...) Also, I was sick... This sickness kept hold of me until I got to France and they hospitalized me because of an attack; it was "kidney stones." All that made me drop everything, I didn't want to know anything else about this life. Obviously, when I returned home and I refused to return [to religious school], my father was upset with me; we'd avoid each other. This atmosphere of discord lasted, more or less, until my departure for France.

So those are the circumstances that brought me to France. As you can see, right from the beginning, it wasn't a very joyous occasion; it's the least you can say. It's never nice leaving your family, your country for elsewhere. Even if you dream of this other place, even if you expect a lot, it's always with regret and with pain that you leave those close to you and your familiar world. When I hear it said that it's because we imagined that France was a

paradise that we all emigrated to France, I wonder if they don't take us for children! We knew that France wasn't paradise; we even knew that in certain ways it's hell (...). In my case, it's more than that: it's not only the pain of separation, it's not only the loss of the confidence that you have when you're at home, the fear of the unknown toward which you're heading, or again, the nostalgia that you feel, sometimes even in your guts; there is regret too, regret for disobedience. My father, inside himself, never actually consented to my departure to France, even if there was an apparent consent, a consent of pure form. For that, I do not forgive myself. And I forgive myself even less because I don't know how I found myself in the present situation: almost 40 years later, with a wife and children, when I thought I'd come to France alone, to work a few months, some years, two or three years at the most. During these 40 years, counting up all my stays in Algeria, I haven't even spent six months in my country. Go and work out why!

Did someone really will that?

— *You're going to tell me why. Or more exactly, how did all that happen?*

Abbas Shortly after my departure, the bad things started, the cruelties of the war. Before I even had the time to get over the difficulties of my new situation, to adapt myself to France and my new situation, because I had suffered enormously from unemployment the first year of my arrival, there were the misfortunes of Algeria. Our village and our family weren't spared. In the beginning, everybody was caught up in it... everybody was a volunteer, one of the mujahedin, a *mousabal*. They thought they were already in a free Algeria. Even those you had every reason to mistrust were for... they made up for the past and pushed even harder.

[...]

Later, when the army occupied the village, they were in the front row; they were the guides and the informants. Atrocities

happened on both sides. That's where my father died. The village occupied, war between the village clans, forbidden zones all around, air bombardments, it's everyone for themselves. Whoever could leave and had somewhere to go, somewhere to take refuge, fled, alone, or with their family. That's how my wife, my sister, too, with her children, were welcomed by a relative living in the outskirts of Algiers. And one day in 1956, in the spring, everyone lands in France, led by this relative who couldn't take it any longer.

[...]

He presented us with a *fait accompli* (...). My sister too also had her husband in France... she already had three children. I had a little daughter who'd just been born. So there were two families. It wasn't simple. Also, we weren't expecting it at all, because we didn't have regular news. So we had to improvise everything. We didn't have the kind of lodging that was an apartment for a family, big or small. And there was no way in Paris in those years that you could get subsidized housing. Not a chance. We found a way to manage among ourselves, with what resources we had. Like you always do in cases of emergency. From one day to the next... not even: it was the same day even, in the space of a day, from the morning to the evening, we had to find lodging for the two families. We weren't the only ones in this situation; families were starting to arrive from all over, no doubt for the same reasons as us, reasons of war, insecurity, death. How did we live? A hotel room shared by three or four, in the 18th, 19th and 20th arrondissements of Paris, in Belleville, Ménilmontant, Rue de Meaux, Rue Secrétan; all these streets, I've stayed there. I was even a privileged person: there were only two of us sharing a room rented by the month, I was living with a relative from the same village and of the same age as me and the room was his, in his name. He left it to me then. He went to join others who took him in. (...) We agreed that we would all gather in the only free room – that allowed my wife and sister, moreover,

to keep each other company, because they didn't know anybody and they knew nothing about France – and in the evenings, when everything is put away, when everybody's in bed, my brother-in-law and I went elsewhere to sleep, wherever there was room. Things remained like this for a long time: live as a family in a single room, a hotel room... Later on, as you had to at the time, we made a detour through the old shantytown, the hovels in Nanterre (...).

There you have it. In the end, now that all this story belongs to the past and you start looking back (looking back is all I do), was that what we really wanted? To spend our entire lives in France... without recognizing what was going on, without realizing that in reality we were filling France up with our children, whereas we thought we were having our children for ourselves! Did someone really will that? Did anyone even think of that? For my part, I admit that at the time I never envisioned that. Never. I couldn't... and nobody could've thought of that. Did I want to come to France and work my whole life there? And yet that's what happened. Did I want to have my wife and children come to France? Sincerely, I can't say so, I can't admit that to myself. In my time, that was still part of a forbidden area, no one talked about it; it was shameful. And however, that's what happened. That happened to me and that happened to many others like me, even for almost everybody. Before, there were still only rare cases; those who had their families in France were exceptions. (...) You take things as they come. The man who's here in France with his family who have come over from over there – there are now some who, more and more often, get married here – cannot not tell himself and say to everybody that what he did is a good thing. (Don't they say about us emigrants to France that we're widowers while our wives are still alive, that we're orphaned by our own children?) The man who doesn't have his family with him simply because life's chances haven't worked out in such a way as to have family emigration,

that guy keeps himself steady by saying that he's alone in France by choice, because he feels repugnance at the ease with which dishonorable men let themselves go. That's what you hear among emigrants ever since it has become the trend to have families come; yesterday and today, each pleads his own case; and everyone pretends to have really wanted his own situation, seeing only its advantages. I've known these interminable discussions since families have been in France in great numbers, and since the end of the war in Algeria (...). Why? Because we no longer have, true or false, the pretext of the war and all the risks tied to a state of war.

[...]

It's high time to realize that it's a total failure

— *But what else is there to do?*

Abbas It's true. Me too, I'm powerless, the weakest of all. But I don't like people closing their eyes. I don't like people inventing illusions [*fictions*] for themselves. First, the truth is in us (or between us), we owe ourselves the truth first of all (...). And it's this truth that I try to tell myself and others: to myself, first – and there I tell myself silently – and then to others – if I have been able to – but unfortunately, these are impossible things to say.

[...]

They call me “unsociable.” I hear it said about me; when they want to be nice, they say “he's a man of truth, he speaks truly, but you can't live with him, no one can put up with him!” That's what I hear said about myself... It's true. The truth hurts and it must hurt. When it doesn't hurt, it is suspicious. I'm not the one who says so, it's the Koran. My father taught me that, he never stopped repeating it to me and I repeat it to myself constantly... The truth hurts, maybe it's because of that I like to say it to myself in silence... I don't insult anybody then... and nobody insults me.

[...]

— *When it's a question of telling the truth, of telling the immigrant his truth,*

the one that is in your thoughts, why does it become an insult, why does it amount to insulting him?

Abbas It's not the having emigrated to come work here that's at fault. It's everything that followed, it's the manner in which each of us has lived all this time in France: it's what he's made of himself, first of all, during all this time; and next it's what he's done to his family, his children, and so on. It's all that. When you look at all that now, when you tally the bill for all that a while afterwards, now that the end of our life here in France is approaching, because we're approaching the total end of life, we're approaching death, well it's high time to realize that it's a total failure [*el khala*]. It's not a happy thought. Along the way somewhere, there was a disorder; on the way, we veered toward the West [we've lost the “East,” the West also being an exile].

— *Why is that? You seem to be saying that there was some kind of a “betrayal,” some kind of error which is not only a misconduct, but an error on oneself and against oneself; like a denial of self.*

Abbas Yes, that's it. We've denied everything, ourselves, our ancestors, our origins, our religion. We're apostates.

[...]

This mosque in the factory is a pure lie

[*This man who has such a good understanding of his situation as an immigrant, and of the ways immigration has inevitably affected himself and his family, also understands the political role that a dominated religion is made to play in the work of the “domestication of the dominated.”*]

Abbas It's not the mosque, it's not prayer that makes a Muslim. You can pray, go to the mosque every day, when a person's heart is black, when they are soiled, when all their actions are going the wrong way, prayer can do nothing. It's for the look of it, it's hypocrisy [*elkhobth*], and hypocrites have always been numerous in religion. More seriously... if it were only that it wouldn't be so much, but it's that the

“hypocrites” are always listened to. I remember when I was still working, there was a lot of talk about having a mosque in the factory, there was a lot of talk. Everybody got in on it. Everyone had their own way of looking at it: some for... others against... Why a mosque in the factory? There had never been one before. In reality, this mosque is a pure lie. People talked about it a lot at the time. We had to have a mosque. I no longer know what’s going on in the factory, I have left it, but I know that everyone, beginning with the very people who were the most vociferous in their demands for a mosque, have forgotten that there’s a mosque in the factory. It lasted a minute. Once the blow was struck – and you can say that they struck their blow – the mosque no longer had any importance, people rediscovered the truth of the whole thing that had been organized so well, which was that the mosque, in and for itself, had no importance: it wasn’t really a question of the mosque, but of something else; and that was so for everyone, everyone agreed on that, everyone went along with it. I knew very well all those who were clamoring at the time “we’re going to get you a mosque here; we’re going to get them to provide a mosque whether they want to do so or not!” Perhaps they imagined that after that, they would go straight to paradise. (...) It would have been a victory for them if the mosque had been refused, then the mosque would have had a price, its real price. Instead of that, they threw it in their face like something that doesn’t count; it’s worth less than a 100-franc raise every month, a raise for which they’d have had to strike, demonstrate, agitate with the unions, negotiate for weeks and weeks before obtaining it. A mosque is worth less, less consideration than a few francs. But can they understand that? Not a one. When they say “there’s no church, but there will be a mosque,” they don’t know that the struggle would have been fierce if there had been a few madmen demanding a church. But, for them, you know, there can’t be madmen of this sort. And the church for

them is so respectable that they are not going to dirty it by putting it inside a factory.

[...]

Even now, I’m retired, I have left the factory, I no longer know what’s going on there, but I still ask myself why they agreed to open a room they call a mosque. Why did the factory agree to that, why did France agree to that? I can’t provide proof, I don’t have it. But I’m sure that it’s against Islam that the factory agreed to it and that it’s against Islam that France agreed to it...

— *Why? Because France is Christian?*

Abbas No, it’s not because France is Christian. It’s because France doesn’t care one way or the other. It has no interest in it. Neither in Islam, nor its own religion. (...) “They want a mosque, they’ll have it; let’s give them a mosque... the main thing is that they leave us in peace...” That’s how I understood the thing. It’s more out of scorn. (...) Yes, it was up to us to impose the respect due to religion and to bring back into line the agitators who thought they were making themselves popular by demanding the mosque... You should have heard them at the time. They were going all over saying that they were going to break the bosses and the government, France and everybody else. They presented the thing like a challenge, a way of annoying management: either management gives in and then they think they’ve won, that they’re heroes; or it refuses, and again they have won because they have the audacity to engage management in a conflict like you have never seen before. If it happens, so much the better; if not, we’d have really bothered the management. In either case, they wanted to look like good Muslims, defenders of Islam. We couldn’t publicly declare war on everybody, because we’d have had to fight everybody, those who demanded the mosque from the boss, all the workers who are Muslim or think they are – we would then have looked like enemies of the mosque and religion – and also, unfortunately, and that’s where it hurts, the company, which, no doubt, doesn’t want to

enter in a conflict with a portion of the personnel. Why? For a mosque! The company will do it when it's a matter of salaries, or work conditions, but for some mosque, what's that come down to? A hangar, 15 square yards... it's not worth the trouble. And, certainly, it's counting on getting back at them, it's counting on catching up and making them pay for its largesse, the tolerance which doesn't cost anything otherwise. When the time comes, it will remember and say "you wanted a mosque, we gave you a mosque; a mosque in the factory, that means at least a quarter of an hour taken from work time..." And for the company, that concerns all the workers of the Muslim religion, whether they pray or not, it doesn't care about that. "A quarter of an hour, without a salary reduction, that means a salary raise... and this de facto raise has to be made up before we can consider any other raises." That's what the factory management will say and they'll be right. In other words, the bill, it's the good Muslim workers, those who'll go on doing their prayers at home, and also all the other non-Muslim workers, who'll pay for it in the end.

[...]

So the mosque, it's not the mosque, it's not for the mosque and as a mosque that they demand it; it's something else. And everybody knows it: the mosque supporters, the unions that support them without supporting them, all the Muslim workers, the factory management.

The immigrant is "shame twice over"

— *You were explaining, I think, what it is to be an immigrant.*

Abbas It was to tell you that the immigrant is shame, shame twice over: the shame of being here, because there's always someone to tell you and to make you say – make you say to yourself, that's how I've felt my whole life – why, for what reasons are you there; you don't have to be here, you're not wanted here, it's not your place, I don't know if you feel the thing like that or if it's only my fault, if it's only me, like a

madness, the madman that I am, but I'm sure that it's like that for everybody, more or less according to the individual, because that's what *being an immigrant* is and it's here, with the experience of here that you learn that. You have to have gone through it (...).

— *What is the second shame?*

Abbas The second shame is over there; it's having left there, it's having departed from over there, it's having emigrated. Because, whether you like it or not, even when everyone hides it, hides it from themselves, even when no one wants to know anything about it, *emigrating always remains an error, a fault*. You do everything to get forgiven and to pardon this necessary "fault," this useful "fault," this "fault" you don't want and which no one wants to be a "fault." That's the emigrant's "shame" and he is, like it or not, "shame" of himself, the "shame" of his people, "shame" of Algeria... Every time someone insults me as an immigrant, as an Algerian, it's Algeria that's insulted (...).

— *In other words, the image of the emigrant isn't any better in the country of emigration than the image of the immigrant is in the country of immigration.*

Abbas Not at all. And it's certainly worse. Before, it wasn't like that. It was healthier. You were emigrating to work, for our families, it was hard for everybody; we were pitied, but there was no question of accusing us of anything whatsoever. If we were accused, it was uniquely because we had failed or when we had failed in our obligations, when we'd forget to send money. On both parts there was a total agreement, it was the same language: our men were emigrating to work for us; we were emigrating to work for our families! But that couldn't last. Especially when the majority of men emigrated to France with their families, everything changed. These families could no longer say "our men emigrated for us," and we emigrants could no longer say "we emigrated for our families." We have got to the point where we are starting to insult each other: on both

sides, each side takes issue with the other; each tells the other side they're worthless. Especially now that matters of money are involved, what everyone here and there calls *currency*: you buy and sell money now, we no longer send money to families as the emigrants did to be emigrants working for their families. Everyone comes to France to purchase *currency* and everyone here sells *currency*, but everyone accuses each other for this, hates each other because of this. They say that the people over there who have nothing, lack everything, only eat thanks to us, and feed themselves on our backs.

— *What is the parallel exchange rate right now, the "black money market"?*

Abbas When it's a relative, a friend, you want to do a favor, it's 1 to 6; otherwise it's 7. They even say that it's going to go up to 8. And why not, there's no reason for it to stop one day (...). Yes, 6, 7, 8 dinars for one French franc. But since everything is expensive over there, everything is on the black market, they get back at us. As soon as you arrive there, for everything that you want to do, everything you need to buy, they say "it's France who's paying!" [*he says this in French*].

We look at each other, no more than that

— *How do things go? You don't regret it? Your children are doing well, the boys and the girls, how do things go between yourselves?*

Abbas (...) First of all, in everything I've said up till now, when I speak of others ... apparently of others, I'm talking about myself, too ... I know, I feel you've already understood that and it's because you understood it that I can admit it, and when I speak of myself, I speak of others ...

— *However, it seems that you blame the others and suffer from the others not using the same language about themselves as you use about them and, therefore, about yourself.*

Abbas That doesn't matter. We don't say the same things at all, we don't tell our-

selves the same things, but that doesn't keep us from all talking about the same things, differently perhaps, but it all comes down to the same thing, words of truth or words of lies, we say the same things, each of us in our own way, because we all find ourselves in the same situation. We all settle our own accounts as we can.

— *But can you talk about your children as you speak about the children of others? ... When, for example, you see all the disasters that strike all the children, unemployment ... drugs ... violence ... prison often ... you can't say the same thing about your children. They are untroubled ... they seem to have succeeded.*

Abbas Oh! That's not so true ... More or less. But it's the same everywhere. In certain cases it's true, the worst thing didn't happen but it could have. It's something that concerns us all ... You can ask yourself: what is having children in these conditions, children like these children? We look at each other, no more than that; we meet each other at home and then everyone has their own routine. If you want to, you can go for months without seeing each other even though you live under the same roof.

— *And why is it like that?*

Abbas Why? Because my father raised me differently than I raised my children.

— *You'd have liked to raise them as your father raised you?*

Abbas No, not necessarily; on the contrary, because I know that it's not possible ... And because I'm not happy with the way my father raised me. But the way in which I was raised was because my parents couldn't do otherwise. Neither they nor the rest. It was like that and nothing more. But, changing situations – here, it's altogether something else – I could have expected, I had the right to think that it could happen differently.

— *And so, it didn't happen differently? [...]*

Abbas No, it's not a question of the schedule of those who are working. On the contrary, it's because they don't work that their schedule isn't the same: sleeping until the

middle of the afternoon, getting up and making a huge breakfast for themselves, going out and not coming back until one or two in the morning; if you're hungry, you open the refrigerator and serve yourself, you sleep until noon the next day or one in the afternoon and you start all over again (...). The house doesn't bring us together, as you say. And it's not only the daily occupations, work, separating people or bringing them together. It's that, in reality, everyone walks their own road, everyone proceeds along their own path. And our paths no longer cross. And that is so in everything. In our ways of working, our ways of seeing, our ways of earning and spending our money, our ways of eating or drinking (...). And that's not only in relation to religion; even when they don't lapse into sin, it's not the same thing, the same way of eating and drinking. In the end, you get very alienated from one another. One sole thing unites us: I'm their father, their mother is their mother, we're their parents, they're our children, do they themselves say that, do they say they're our children? That's less certain (...). We're in two different worlds; each according to their own heart. It's normal that nothing goes on between us... Except for some rare exceptions, when there's a disaster. And this is happening in the best of cases: when for something important I call one of us to me and I ask them to listen to me, to pay attention to what I'm going to tell them, maybe then, they remember there's something that unites us.

— *With your children, I have trouble imagining that things are going as disastrously as you say.*

Abbas Yes. It's like that. And this is happening in the best of cases; it's the case with my children. And yet there are no arguments, no raised voices. Everything is done with the greatest politeness. But that's how it is. From time to time, and more with their mother than me; from time to time, there is a real exchange. Otherwise, we live together; and that's all.

[...]

It's as if they only want to work when they feel like it

— *So the eldest, how old is he and what does he do?*

Abbas Yes... The first is H... He's now... He was born before independence [of Algeria], so he doesn't have French nationality. So he's 31, 32 years old. He's the one I understand least. He has everything, we did everything for him. He can work. He can easily find work. But no. I don't understand. No reason for that. I can't find an explanation. I really have to admit that it's pure laziness, it's only that... that's the only remaining explanation: he doesn't like working, he doesn't want to work, he refuses to work... So he's lazy. I can't pity him, I can't say that he hasn't found any work, he's never looked... On the contrary, he's refused to work. I think they're angry with work. He's not alone, there's a whole group of them dragging around like this.

— *And why then don't all these young people work when they can find work?*

Abbas Ask them!... What do I know?... I ask myself like you and they aren't the ones who'll tell you why they don't work. They probably don't know themselves. I have asked this question... I never got even the beginning of an answer. Silence! That's the only answer. They turn around and leave. But, even so, I hear what is said: the things they must say among themselves, because you still hear them talk; the things that some of them say to their parents, because they talk... and talk violently — they're not all like our children who, I admit, are polite; the things that we say between ourselves, because that's all we talk about, I've never met anybody who didn't immediately start complaining to me about their children: it's the same thing everywhere, it's the same malady, we all complain about the same things, we're all at the same point, more or less, to one degree or another, affected by all these young people... because there are, of course, differences between the cases where there has been

theft, break-ins, the police involved, imprisonment, etc., and the cases where things are confined to the house, where there is no delinquency, where nothing is seen, nothing is heard, everything seems to be for the best; and it's true, the parents in the first situation envy those in the second, the parents in the second case.

— *And what are these things then?*

Abbas To hear them: we don't want to work, we don't want their work. I suppose they mean the French, the work that the French give them, that France gives them . . . us, when we were looking for work, we were happy to find it, and we'd say "our work" . . . we wouldn't say "their work." Now it's the reverse: the work that they can find, and they find some, is no longer their work, it's other people's work, they work for others. So they say, they tell you and they tell themselves it's not worth working for them, for others. You always work for somebody else, for a boss, there's always a boss to work for. They can't accept that. To me, it seems as if they don't want to work, they don't like work, they prefer living miserably, they are assured of not dying of hunger, so they go about repeating that "they won't work for the benefit of the French!" It's only then that they remember that there are French people, that they are in France; in everything else, they are French and say so, they very well say — when it suits them — that they are in France and they are French! But for work, no!

— *But how do they make do? Even if they are sure of the room and board they find at their parents' place, they need a little money for their daily expenses. And they spend a lot: cigarettes, movies, cafés; they have cars, so they need gas, upkeep on the cars. They don't come, still and all, asking their parents for money like little children?*

Abbas Ah! For pocket money, they know how to manage. They never lack for any. And that without ever having to steal it. They work the minimum necessary: one year out of two, a few days in the week, a few hours a day. Just enough to be in order,

to have a pay slip. A little work; a little unemployment. And time goes by.

— *It's what we now call "little jobs" ["les petits boulots"].*

Abbas Perhaps they call that "petits boulots" [*he's speaking in French*]. But usually, they're not little jobs on the side as you might think, they're not so little as that . . . they bring in something or they should bring in enough to live on and, above all, they "puff themselves up." ["I'm a teacher here, I'm a teacher there," *for example*]. I don't know what's true in all that.

— *To whom are you alluding?*

Abbas There are many of them in this situation. The eldest of my sons, for example. He always has classes in such-and-such a school. They're math or physics classes; that's what he learned himself. Along with him there's also my sister's son who is even older than my son. And who gives classes, I don't know what exactly, but he too says sometimes that it's economics, sometimes accounting. I'm also thinking of another young man, the son of a close relative, who should have been an engineer, he went to an engineering school, but he also lives like this. Here I'm only talking about those who can find a real skilled job, I'm not talking about all the others who can't do anything. And then again, there isn't anyone who can't do anything; you can't say that about anyone, unless the person is handicapped, it's not the case here. What you also have to say, you have to give that to them, is that when it's necessary, when they need to earn some money, they'll do anything, they have their own channel. Once one of them finds an open door, lots of others follow him, they pass on the information they have among themselves. They work, but it's as if they only want to work when they feel like it; going to work every day, at the same hours, for the same work, they say that it's boring, that it doesn't interest them. [. . .]

It seems to me that if they really wanted to, they could have found a real job long since. Since they can find work from one day to the next, they could have stayed on longer

at one of these jobs whether they like it or not. And since they don't stop trying, changing jobs, and doing all sorts of jobs, moving, painting, manual labor of all sorts, they would surely find something that suits them, that they like! Nothing.

— *But there certainly are some who don't succeed in finding work; they certainly are unemployed.*

Abbas Oh! yes. There are some, and unfortunately they are quite numerous. But they aren't the same; they aren't comparable. I think that even among themselves, they don't associate, they don't like each other. At a simple glance you see the difference, everything that separates them. But, in the end, the result's the same: some don't work because work isn't to their liking, others don't work because they can't find work; all of them fix it between themselves to have work only occasionally, whatever you can find here or there. That in the best of cases, when everybody agrees on work as the sole, honest means of earning money, not theft, break-ins, black market.

— *You had started talking to me about your eldest. If I understood rightly, he did relatively well in school, you tell me that he sometimes teaches math and physics.*

Abbas Yes, we did everything so he could succeed at school. He took a long time because he changed directions several times; that's what he always told me. Me, I'm incapable of understanding what that means. We did everything, we accepted everything for his sake. To finish, he did a school in the north of France, in Lille, a mechanical school. He came out of there with an engineering degree. He could have made a career as an engineer in industry; a small engineer, of course, but he'd done studies for that, he's got the necessary degrees. He never looked; he always tells me that it's for soon, he's waiting. And we wait with him.

— *He's not married...*

Even if we pretended to see nothing

Abbas That's all I'd need... It's not enough for me to feed him, I'd also have to feed his

wife and eventually his children. Maybe it's this that'll give him a little shot in the head: when he wants to get married – there was a question of it at one time – he'll certainly have to find his own place, and for that, he'll certainly have to set to work seriously. It's high time.

[*His eldest daughter, 35 years old, left home 10 years ago.*]

Abbas Before him, there is in fact a daughter. She's the eldest of all my children. She's 34 or 35 now. She left home more than 10 years ago now. She's not married.

— *She works?*

Abbas She works, since she left the house, she's never stopped working... that is, at least, what I hear. It's what her mother tells me. I don't know anything really specific about her. It seems even that she makes a good living... since she's talking about buying the apartment where she now lives.

— *What kind of work does she do?*

Abbas Oh! She is a real long story. It's because of her that all my reflections on our life here started. How to be here, live here, without being like we are here, without living like we do here? In the beginning, I thought it was possible; that it was even inevitable that it was possible. It was necessary that it should be possible, it couldn't be otherwise. It was still the beginning, the miserable housing, an old house that was falling apart (...). The primary school was going okay. It was nearby, she was a little girl. In school, really, I can't say what she could have done. She went to school and when school was over for her at 16, so much the better. She came back home and didn't go back out again.

— *What does "she didn't come back out again" mean?*

Abbas Why would she go out? What did she have to do outside? Her place is at home. Personally, I found that completely normal. It wasn't a question of it being otherwise. It was like that and no more than that. Her mother didn't go out.

— *And things lasted like that for how long? There was no rebellion or protests on her part?*

Abbas I don't know... Perhaps she wasn't happy with this situation, but what was there to do? She herself must not have known what to do.

— *She didn't ask to work outside the house? Yet, at the time, that must have been in the 1970s, it was easier than now to find work?*

Abbas There was never a question of it at the time. It was out of the question, that's not done... that wasn't done yet in our circle.

— *You refused, you opposed her working?*

Abbas No, not even. I didn't have to. The idea didn't even cross our minds.

— *How did things go for her during this time?*

Abbas She lived at home, that's all. Of course, with her mother, it was an endless squabble.

— *And with you?*

Abbas With me, there was no question about it. Neither with her, nor with the others. I don't have to discuss these things with her. She knows what I think and we don't have to go back over it. It applies to her, and to the others moreover; to her the same as to her mother.

— *In these circumstances, why didn't you marry her off? There would certainly have been some requests for marriage?*

Abbas Yes, there were some requests. But they went through her mother and as none suited me and none suited them, it seems, well I don't want to force them. After all, she's my daughter: she has the right to live at home until the end of her days... or my days; she has the right to lack for nothing, within my means.

— *To lack for nothing, except freedom of her movement!*

Abbas I believe that she never asked for more than she has. Even if, as I said, she sulked. She sulked about everything and everybody, her mother, the meals, herself (...).

— *And how did all that finish?*

Abbas That finished exactly contrary to what I wanted at the time... and what I

still want, if time hadn't gotten away from us, if time hadn't conquered us, if time hadn't constrained us to give in, to accept the unacceptable.

— *In other words, time conquered, but didn't convince you.*

Abbas No. Convinced, never; you have to say what's true. God is stronger...! There are times you have to resign yourself to what you can't avoid; we tried to contest it. We resisted as much as we could. But the reality is there; we cannot live alone in this world; we are in France: whether we like it or not, France is there, we're in its belly and it's normal that it ends up being in our belly, by getting into our belly although not into our hearts. For me, it never entered and will never enter my heart, and I don't hide that, I don't stop saying it, and above all, I live it daily. I know that I'm going to die here, I have seen a lot a people of my age, older than me, die here, people who came here like me for how long? No one could say, but no one could have thought it was for their whole life, that their entire life was going to be spent here. It will be the same thing for every one of us, and for me, too. That'll end up happening, but I can never consider this country my country. So it's for this reason that resisting no longer serves any purpose. (...) Deep inside me, I haven't changed, I have renounced nothing. So I don't have to help or not help. I keep everything for myself now. Now that I know that nobody can approve of me, even in my home, I keep quiet. Let everyone do as things are done here.

— *That means you accept no longer preventing what, in any event, you can no longer prevent. But in the case of your daughter, how did that happen?*

Abbas As for me, I don't know anything... There's a series of little causes. Until the thing happens without your knowing why. It's true. Even if we pretend to say nothing and so to see nothing, the thing is obvious: this girl was unhappy. We agree that she lacks for nothing, that she's at home, that she's taken care of, that she's in her parents' home, thus her own home

quite normally. There's nothing more to say on that . . . and she doesn't seem to say anything against that, it seems that she says nothing. But, in reality, it is a pretence that we see nothing, there's a whole series of signs that reveal the discord, the protest against this situation, at least with me, because with her mother the explanations were in fact violent.

— *Since you knew this, how did you react?*

Abbas Oh. We're used to these things. For me, they're two women in the house, even if one is the mother and the other the daughter, there'd have to be problems between them; that's what I was telling myself. And I wasn't listening or only barely to what her mother was saying, each time I answered "it's your business, it's your daughter, you take care of it between yourselves, I'm not going to get mixed up in your business." So it was as if nothing was happening.

— *Were there other revealing signs of your daughter's malaise, which you missed at the time, which you preferred, as you say, to not see?*

Abbas Oh! Not really. The isolation perhaps, the silence in which this girl took refuge. But after all, it's normal. She has nothing to say, in any case nothing to say to us, today like yesterday. Even now, when she happens to come spend a few days at the house, she says nothing . . . and she has nothing to say. We're not going to tell each other stories. But what gives cause for reflection is when you have to confront bureaucracy in this kind of situation. That's when I realized that there are a lot of things from our world that are incomprehensible for others, that have no place here. Many things that we consider normal like, for example, the fact that my daughter lives with me, aren't admitted here. My daughter was sick for a long time, on several occasions, we don't know why, but each time she had to be sent to a clinic. And at each hospitalization, it's the same story: she doesn't have social security and mine can't cover her. They don't understand why she doesn't have social security, why she isn't at

least registered on unemployment. They didn't understand why I was saying that she didn't ask to work. And each time, it was necessary to request assistance, help. It was even necessary for me to take out private insurance for her.

— *What was she sick from?*

Abbas We don't really know. They say it's nerves. That's what they tell me each time. She has to get a change of atmosphere.

— *And so, how did that end? What has she been like since?*

Abbas Little by little. She became friends with a social worker in the rest home where she was. She went on vacation to spend a few days with her; that happened several times. One day, she said to her mother that she'd be staying longer, that she wouldn't come back right away, because she was going to look for work. Her mother was crushed, but she couldn't believe that, think that she was going to succeed: a daughter who has never worked, who doesn't know how to do anything, and at a time when it's difficult for everyone, for other people than herself, to find work, even when they're used to it. We couldn't believe it. She succeeded. She found work and, it seems, she has never lacked for work. Now she is on an equal footing with everyone, the equal of her other brothers and sisters and perhaps even superior to her brothers, especially those who are still here, who come and go and don't find work. Rather, she's my equal: a "man" like me, she's worth as much as I'm worth. She left, she earns her living, she's taken control of her life . . . I'd have never wanted that for her, nor for myself, nor for the name that I carry, even though this name has seen lots of things on the part of all those who carry it, there are many of us who share it. But, so it is; better that than something worse.

The fault is with emigration

— *After the event, today at the point where we are, since that is the final outcome, do you not regret your past behavior, especially toward your daughter, you made*

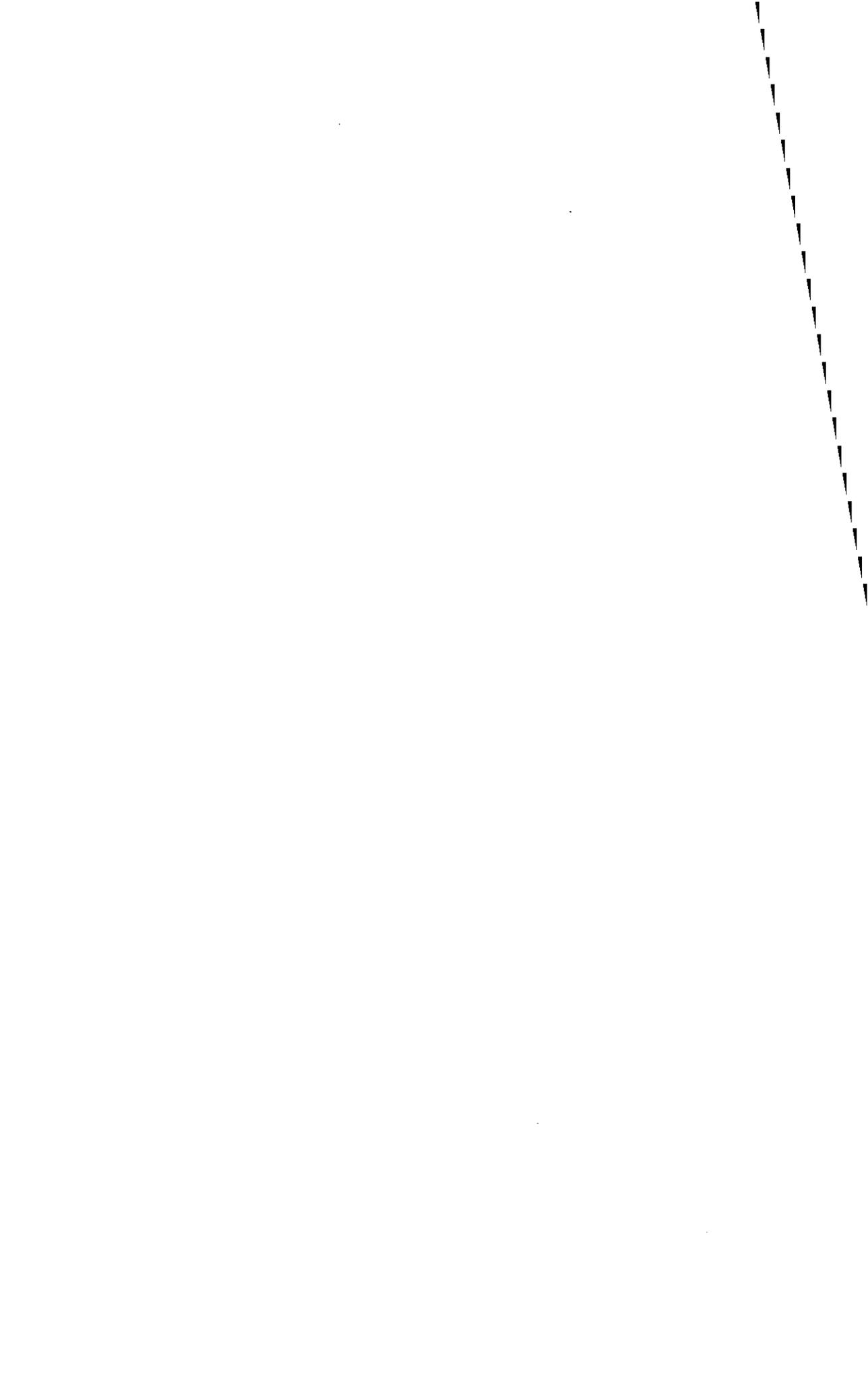
her waste her time and, more than that, she suffered... for nothing, it seems nowadays. Abbas No. I have nothing to regret. And where I have something to regret, it is the present situation. I regret that she blamed me. I'm not wrong any more than she [*his daughter*] is wrong. I don't know if you know the story they tell... we're in the same situation.

— *What story?*

Abbas It happened once, when the winters were cold and the sole means of transportation was walking on foot. They say that a traveler was caught by the snow falling fast. Upon arriving in the nearest village, he requested refuge in the first house that opened up to him, they treated him with hospitality. But the snow continued to fall more heavily, preventing all attempt to move about. One day, two days, soon it was a week, and still no getting out. The masters of the house began to find the presence of this stranger too burdensome in the house. You have to say that at the time,

everybody was poor, especially in the wintertime and, no doubt, they didn't have anything to feed him. The unfortunate traveler understood that. One day, in his presence, a dispute broke out between the husband and his wife. He wasn't fooled. He knew that it was only a pretext. Very embarrassed, he looked toward the door blocked by snow and he addressed his hosts saying: "I know, it's not my fault, or your fault, it's heaven's fault [*the bad weather*] leading me here and keeping me here still!" It's the same thing, it's not my fault, a mistake that I could regret, nor her fault, a mistake that I could blame her for. The fault is with immigration [*speaking in French*], as they say! It's for that reason that it's not at all a question of dealing severely with one or the other, it can't be a question of cutting ties, of shutting my door, of saying, as certain people have done, "I reject you, you are no longer my son or my daughter, you will never set foot in my house again!" No, that's unacceptable.

1990



Abdelmalek Sayad

Emancipation

The interviews partly reproduced here have their own background: three successive interviews of two to three hours, even apart from the many conversations by which they were sometimes preceded (if only as preparation) and sometimes accompanied and followed – conversations which, for this reason, helped to bring out their full sense. This study comes out of another investigation which preceded it and which it was initially intended to extend and complete: looking into the school situation of children in certain immigrant families (Moroccan and Tunisian principally) gave us the opportunity to meet a young woman who had just received (in 1986) her Master's in applied languages from a small provincial university and who was happy to participate in the study. Realizing then that the relevant unit here was not the student but the entire family and all the children, we asked to interview her eldest sister, if possible, along with all of her brothers and sisters. The student promptly offered to introduce us to her elder sister Farida, with whom she was staying temporarily and who had “blazed the trail” quite in spite of herself, without even realizing it.

Because of her lack of experience in work and in public life, this young woman of 35 had the reactions of a young teenager and in the beginning seemed extremely timid, very distrustful and awkward. At the insistence of her younger sister, of course, she ended up agreeing to an interview that was supposed to deal with her relationship to school. But it was her whole history that Farida agreed to recount in detail, with a real satisfaction and a marked relief: the story of her childhood, when, as the daughter of a father who had already emigrated to France, she went (for this reason and also because of the war) to live with her maternal grandparents in the city of Alger; then the story of her arrival in France at the age of kindergarten classes that she does not remember attending; the story of her school years until the age of 16, the end of mandatory attendance. Then the story of “being locked up,” of her “confinement” and, later, the story of her conflicts with her mother, her “hatred” for her father, the transfer of her affections to her younger brothers and sisters; the story of her many bouts of “depression” as well as all the acts of resistance that she thought up to “preserve her mental integrity” (“to not lose my head, even if the feet carrying me were forbidden to walk; that's what counts”). And, finally, the story of her emancipation and the lessons that she herself draws from this trajectory that made her “cross centuries,” as she says, in the space of two decades and made her discover retrospectively the real density of the life that she had, “a latent, almost vegetative life... with no

single interest or charm... a life devoid of both occupation and meaning; a life empty of sense... where would it come from?... a life of idleness... all flat where everything repeats itself... where the days, the years don't count, where there's nothing that makes the days and nights not alike, that makes them different... a life with nothing within, without content... I'm not only speaking of activities – you can always fill up your days and even your nights if you're sleepless, your schedule – but also what's going on in your head... in your thoughts." Hindsight, it's true. But this hindsight is only possible, first of all, provided one has "left the *ennui*" in order to be able to measure the path covered, because beforehand there was only room for a work of "going over the same things again... of the ruminator who always ruminates the same food... and for me, the same questions: 'Why this, why this injustice, what did I do to heaven, why was I born in this misery... what solution is there to this impasse, etc.,'"; and, then, provided one is objectively constrained to adopt what it is aptly called a *posture of self-analysis*? In certain conditions reflection on self constitutes the sole survival mechanism possible. There are situations which contain such strong contradictions that they require that one question oneself in depth if they are to be understood. No doubt because one knows that there are no effective "outside" solutions, to these situations of impasse, no recourse to preestablished procedures, and because one also knows that responsibility for these situations cannot be imputed to some well-defined agent – which excludes even the idea of rebellion – the crucial mode of questioning in these cases touches on the search for sociological truth. Except that the apparently disinterested comprehension that one then gains of the situation allows relative mastery of the situation and turns into the very condition of survival and, in this case, the condition of the final "resurrection." If encountering unequal situations often reinforces the dominator in his sociocentrism, it obliges the dominated person (colonized, black, Jew, woman, immigrant, etc.) to work at clarifying the relationship, which means working upon oneself. It is a necessary, one might even say vital, practice which imposes an inclination to socioanalysis, this predisposition ends up by becoming "second nature" and guides all the individual's acts and gestures.

In Farida's case, wanting to know who, why and how one is what one is or, more prosaically, is not being what others are, is not only a "search for her identity," as we say these days, it is a veritable obsession and one her own biographical data (her birth was not officially registered properly, not even in the community where she was born, nor was her parents' marriage) have helped sustain and dramatize in her own eyes: "So, I have to introduce myself... Who am I? I don't know... I wonder about it and that's all I do... Even my age is unsure, my age doesn't belong to me...; even there, it's false... It makes me wonder whether I exist, everybody has a date of birth; a day, a month, a year... and a birthday (...) same thing for the place of birth... that, too, doesn't exist. I can get a laugh out of all that... They told me of my omission from state records, what a pretty word; I'm omitted and I'm going to start conjugating (which I did) the verb "to omit" in all tenses and moods. There's a verb that I

like...it's a verb that tells the truth..." And, her emancipation accomplished, hardly had she been freed from this obsession than the administration has once again reminded her of "the original fault and mistake." In fact, during naturalization proceedings the agencies in question, noting the gap between her (fictive) date of birth and the (also fictive) marriage date of her parents, later by three years, went so far as to ask her "to produce all documents specifying the date of her parents' religious (*sic*) marriage."

From the very long account that Farida gave of her life and of the numerous experiences of "doubling" and "hiatus" that have been forced on her, we have chosen to retain only the passages that illustrate the evolution, on the whole very rapid, in her family, ending in a complete reconversion of both male and female behavior, of internal family relationships, and of the general pattern of affections and intrafamily feelings. "Her parents learned their role, they learned a little how to be parents," the two sisters agree, as they agree that the ones who were the agents of the obligatory or wished-for apprenticeship (it is both obligatory and accepted), the true teachers, were the girls more than the boys, the eldest more than her younger sisters because it is she who "blazed the trail" for them, paradoxically, by submitting and resigning herself to the treatment meted out to her and only "taking her liberty" much later than her two other sisters. These two had done rather good upper-level studies and left the paternal home at the end of their schooling: now one is a teacher in Germany, and the other works in tourism in Barcelona.

The divergence of the paths followed and the objective parental responsibility (there is no need to make it explicit, to make it the object of scrutiny, and everyone is careful not to do so) in this matter have the effect that a vague impression of culpability haunts the entire system of relationships between parents and children, between brothers and sisters: first of all between the eldest, the devoted "victim" who was sacrificed, and her parents, and also between herself and her brothers and sisters who give her a kind of unspoken recognition. It is, no doubt, this position of victim who has become something of a bad conscience, a position in which Farida takes pleasure, that allows her to behave as a model of "filial piety," as her parents' "best" daughter in comparison to all the other children, especially the sons. Is that a form of revenge both on her parents and herself, on her past (she is an avid autodidact)? Knowing how to forgive and knowing how to show that forgiveness here seems like the supreme form of triumph over the miseries of life.

with a young Algerian woman

— interview by Abdelmalek Sayad

Farida I went to school, but no more, without knowing what it is... and I don't think anyone knows what it is. How can my parents have any idea what it is. They never went to school. I went to school because you had to, that's all. When I was a little older, in junior high school, then in *cinquième* [seventh grade] I was tracked toward a CAP technical certificate for an office employee — I was taught typing and a little shorthand... which I've forgotten — then the run-ins with my father started. It was constant surveillance, I was watched from the minute I left the house. Going out... it was going out to go to school, from the house to the school and from the school to the house, that's it. There was no other going out than that. And even this required *sortie* was suspect. In the end, I was ashamed, my father would come to wait for me at the exit from school and he'd accompany me like I was a little girl... No, not like that. We were never together like when you go look for someone: he'd walk on his side, me on mine as though we didn't know each other. And all my friends, boys and girls, were laughing at me, "Hey, there's your father! You don't see him! You don't go over to him...!" From the window of the house, you could easily see the school and the end of the street, my father would stand at the window to watch me. I don't know why he didn't think of buying binoculars... Things have changed a lot since my time, it's scarcely believable. Things move quickly after all. In my time, my father's obsession, he'd tell everyone, I heard it several times, "there's no way my daughter will be seen in a bus, I wouldn't know what to do with myself!" He went so far as to say that he'd kill himself if that happened. And I believed him, everyone believed him. It was like blackmail... blackmail that served no purpose except

spoiling my life for years; that made me lose a lot of time. And, in fact, all I'd hear back then was "such-and-such's wife was seen... somebody else's daughter was seen... on the street, at the market, on the bus!" So the few women there were were not to be seen. It was shameful, it was a matter of their honor, as the men said. So hiding, hiding, and doing only that while waiting for the walls of the house to close in and hide me all the more surely. That's what made me suffer the most. My last year in school, my father went so far as to find me a route that no one took, which made a long detour, which wasn't at all safe, especially in the winter, my father made me go that way. Just so someone wouldn't say that they had seen Mr —'s daughter. It was a wound to his self-esteem...

— *Seeing you now, I have trouble imagining that. How far everyone has come! You are right to say that things have changed and that it's scarcely believable.*

Farida It's not over. When I start going over it all, what hurts me now that I have gotten out of there, if you can call it getting out of there, is that it was all for nothing, all my father's determination, while from his point of view he thought he was doing the right thing, it was for what result? Zero! Today, I think he's the one to be pitied instead. Deep inside him, I would like to know what he thinks about it now. Does he regret it or not? I don't know. But I don't think so. I know him enough: he has his morality and he's sure of his morality; it's his morality that's left him, it's not he who's left his morality, but then how does he see us nowadays, my sisters and me? Even my mother, even my brothers, it's not what he'd have wished. Now I take walks, I travel, I come back home at night, I go out and even take my mother for walks. I take her to the movies, I take her around, I take

her to restaurants, I got her to take the tour boats on the Seine.

— *From this past, what do you most regret?*

Farida What I regret most is school. I was never supported. Of course, I was the eldest; there was nobody ahead of me, nobody to guide me and now after the event... I can say it now, nobody to teach my parents what school is. They have since learned, if I can judge by what's happened. When I think, and this is what still hurts, that only a few years ago, only 10–12 years ago, putting my head out the window was worth two smacks, now I can go to the beach and come back, dry my bathing suit without anyone saying a thing.

— *What is this business of putting your head out the window and getting smacked?*

Farida Oh! An incident. A long time ago, it was the year after school ended, so I was 17. From the house, I hear my little brother crying in the street. I put my head out the window to see what it is. Obviously, I was seen: a relative, someone in the family, a cousin that my father didn't even like and he didn't like us either – there's no doubt about that – and he doesn't speak to my father, that day as soon as he had seen it, he rushes to tell him "I saw your daughter looking out the window..." I understand how angry my father could be getting told that and therefore being blamed for it. My father comes back to the house and without me knowing why, he smacks me a couple of times. Which I hated. Even now, when I remember that, it still hurts. Another time – and even though we lived in an isolated house almost in the country – one morning, I wanted to wash my hair, I realize there's no shampoo. Quickly, paying close attention, I cross the threshold, my mother was looking and watching me, I run and barely cross the street: a little old woman had a tiny grocery store, it was almost a hovel. I buy a bit of shampoo; back then, it was sold like little pieces of candy. Time for me to buy the shampoo and return home. There, too, of course, I was seen and, of course, someone

reported me to my father. It was like that all the time (...)

As time has gone by and especially as my brothers and sisters have grown up and become adults, everything has changed. So they could no longer impose on me what they had ended up letting go for the others, for the younger ones. That's how it happened. Now, how did I make it through this period? In the dark, a black hole in my life, a black hole in the real sense. There was no longer any difference in my life between day and night, I preferred night because it allowed me to be alone. I ordered my life, my schedule, in such a way so as to be alone 24 hours a day right in the middle of everybody. I could go days and days without speaking, without needing to say a single word, nor having anyone say a word to me. Deaf and dumb. I knew what I had to get done during the day, I had taken my share of household jobs, getting my brothers and sisters up when they were little, getting them cleaned up, breakfast; then cleaning the house, the dishes after the meal. When that was done, I'd shut myself up in my bedroom and no one would come in; all that without a word. It was this silence, especially, that hurt me. I'd comfort myself with my brothers and sisters while they were little, that's all.

They called me the panther

— *What kind of relationship did you have with your parents, especially with your mother, since you were both always in the house, face to face?*

Farida With my father, nothing; it's as if he didn't exist for me and, for him, I think, it's as if I didn't exist. It's odd; he exists for me via my mother, what my mother would say to me, meaning this more or less, "your father told me... your father thinks that... your father wants... your father asks that... what's your father going to say... make sure your father knows... your father doesn't have to know that..." and so on. It was only stuff like that. In the same way, I suppose, I only exist for him via what my mother tells him... or via what they say to

each other when it was a question of me. With my mother, it was opposition. I could take it out only on her. By the end, we weren't speaking to each other anymore. I held her responsible for everything, I found her worse than my father, more repressive; it's obvious, it was up to her to watch over everything . . . over the good conduct of her daughter. I heard my father say to her, "she's your daughter . . ." or "your daughter is like that . . . thinks like that . . . did that . . ."; so it's her fault as mother of this girl. When I think of it now! . . . I was slovenly, I was dirty, I must have smelt bad; I didn't wash myself, a real slob. I was always wearing my apron . . . from the kitchen, I didn't undress, even to sleep; I didn't change clothes. I wouldn't eat either. . . I had bouts of anorexia or I'd eat whatever, standing up . . . never at the table, at meal-times with everyone. In the end, I'd gotten terrible insomnia, I'd no longer sleep, several consecutive nights without closing my eyes a wink. I no longer had any notion of time: what day, what month; I didn't give a shit. I think that I deliberately ignored all that, I'd read the paper without looking at the date; day or night is the same thing, I was always in the dark or in electric light, I never opened the shutters of my room. That, it's true, is the only privilege they granted me, they couldn't do otherwise: I had a room, a room all to myself, for the day and the night, I didn't share it with any of my other sisters. So with my mother, we stared each other down like china dogs. I'd take it out on her, it was all I could do. I was always aggressive, anyone would have been if. . . And there still remains something . . . you have observed it at your expense [laughs]. I was all claws on the outside. They called me, my brothers and sisters called me the panther. Yet it was only with them that there was a minimum of dialogue, a little complicity.

— *Boys as well as girls, your brothers as well as your sisters.*

Farida On the whole, yes. I'd even say my brothers more than my sisters, since my brothers were bigger, two brothers who

come right after me. In their way, without them realizing it, they helped me out a lot.

— *Okay, let's leave that aside, let's continue with your mother, the relations with your mother.*

Farida The relations with my mother. . . it was permanent hostility, not hatred. The hatred. . . I'm ashamed to say so, was toward my father. . . I really detested him. Even today, when I go to the house, if I could somehow avoid seeing him, I would do so. Moreover, it's mutual. I suppose that for him it's better like that. It's another way of lying. Like that, he acts as if he doesn't know anything, doesn't know that I left the house; that I live all alone, meaning unmarried, elsewhere; that I live my own life (. . .). But with my mother, it was a constant fight. I was aggressive toward her as with everyone else, and that really made her angry, which made me even more aggressive. I didn't stop until I had made her cry and I hid in my room to cry. To her, I was a monster and, in fact, I acted like a monster toward her. . .

— *That's still going on. . . ?*

Farida Oh! No. Now we adore each other. It's as if each of us wants to get that time back, to be forgiven, make up for what one's done to the other. Now my mother swears only by me. She has her reasons, I'll tell them to you afterwards. Before, she would curse me, she predicted the worst things for me, she hoped for them, she'd call them down on my head, as she'd say: it was the curse. . . I even heard my mother complain, weep, "What did I do to God to be afflicted with such a daughter?" She also uses the same word, "for having cursed me with such a daughter! For having punished me in this way!" And certainly, she was praying God to forgive her whatever, she doesn't know what fault she might have committed to have borne such a monster! I was evil in person, evil itself. . . it's true. And I couldn't contaminate my younger sisters. It was my mother's obsession, my mother had a good many obsessions.

— *What were her other obsessions?*

Farida My mother's obsession is school. It's all the school's fault. It's because I was in school until I was 16; 16 only, not one day more. And what a school! A nothing school. But despite that, it's school that "turned my head," as my mother says. And swearing that she wouldn't allow it, that they wouldn't do the same another time with my other sisters, that she'd take them out of school before 16. [*Big burst of laughter*] When I think of that now... Now that they have gone to top universities, one teaches French in a high school in Germany, in Frankfurt, the other works in Barcelona, in Spain, in tourism! That's how that turned out. And to say my mother is all proud nowadays, more proud of her daughters than her sons who drag around the house, whereas the daughters work and have all left the house, the last is myself, I'm always the last. The boys all only attended vocational lycées, and they are eking out a miserable existence. But that doesn't keep it from acting like a kind of blackmail on me. How many times did the idea come to me of running away. No, not altogether. Running away, I was never really in favour of it. It always ends badly. I know lots of girls raised like me, relatives or neighbors, who ran away. They all ended up in a bad way because they didn't have the means – where would they get the means when they've been shut up all their lives at home – to make it, not a way of earning a living, or even the idea of what work is, or lodging, or connections, or help from anywhere whatsoever, from people they know or agencies, social workers, unemployment services, that they don't know about. So running away, no. But I thought I'd strike a resounding blow, a real revolt, and slam the door in everyone's face, by getting everything set up... Which I did, moreover, later on, but more skillfully, the circumstances were different. But I believed my mother's threats and I was afraid that they would fall on my other sisters. Sincerely, I believed in my mother's kind of blackmail. (...) If I were to say everything I have to say... I had started writing things during

my periods of insomnia, in my crying jags, bouts of the blues and depression. And then I burned everything. It was good for nothing and then I was afraid that it would end up in somebody's hands, my brothers or my sisters, I wanted to spare them that, spare them knowing. And then, it's personal things.

I had to relearn everything

— *That must have destroyed you mentally and physically.*

Farida Absolutely. And when I left, I realized the damage and the destruction, as you say. I had to relearn everything... No, I had to learn everything. To speak normally, to listen without trembling; to listen and think at the same time, something that I had never learned to do, I didn't know how to listen, to reflect on what someone's telling me since I wasn't listening. I learned to walk, to associate with people and not to run away; in a word, to live. Something still remains: I can't stand public spaces, I took a long time before going to the movies – the movie theater, this place of perdition, this place where you're alone but in the middle of a crowd, in the dark, watching things which aren't always very "right"! All alone, on my own, I'll never go to a restaurant, I've never learned how to eat in public. I had to have a total reeducation, a big effort... to learn what everyone else does naturally. It wasn't natural for me. I once asked to be hired as a chambermaid in the rest home where I was. It almost happened but there were problems with social security and sick leave. I kept going with the help of drugs, medical drugs, antidepressants, and my own drugs.

— *What are your drugs?*

Farida My drug... was reading. I read enormously. I spent my nights of insomnia reading. In the beginning, when my brothers and sisters were little, there was practically nothing to read in the house, not even newspapers. I would save the newspaper pages used to wrap lettuce at the grocer's, I'd read them and reread them. Then, our neighbors' daughter, we were

about the same age, would give me newspapers, magazines, women's magazines above all, some books that she had at her place. Later, it was my brothers who'd bring things back to me, not very much, but at least the papers, journals, the books that were around, mysteries and even novels... that were a little porno. But above all my sisters. I'd read everything they'd bring back to the house, even the class books and obviously the novels and all the literature they were reading. But before that, I had asked this neighbor to go sign up at the city library. Which she did. I didn't even choose what she'd bring me: "you go, there, you go inside, you take the first three books that you come to and you bring them back to me, since you can check out three books at a time." That's how I read a lot; whether I understood or not, I'd read everything all the same. It did me a lot of good. Not only at the time. If it weren't for that, I think that I would have forgotten everything, I wouldn't know how to speak French anymore since at home we didn't speak French, we didn't even say a word. All the children had to be grown for us to speak French very naturally among ourselves and nothing but French. Now everyone finds that normal. There, too, is something that's changed a lot. And to the great displeasure... of my parents of course. Even my mother speaks French now... and she speaks it without an accent, she even speaks it well, she speaks it better than my father in any case. So it's not only for speaking that it helped me, it's also for writing. Because in school, when you've only done a CAP technical certificate, a certificate as an office employee, that or nothing, it's the same thing, that's not going to teach you how to write. Now, without boasting, in a job, I pass for the one who best knows how to draft letters and in any case with no spelling errors and above all with no grammar mistakes. So it wasn't school that taught me that, it was reading... Well, it's an ill wind that blows no good. That's what I have to tell myself now.

— *How did your reconciliation come about? This great new love, you told me that it was as if you had to forgive each other all the bad that you did to one another, how, in what way does this great love manifest itself?*

Farida The reconciliation happened all by itself. From when I left the house and everyone seems to have accepted that, the truth is that it all happened little by little, as changes occurred within the family. If I, the first one, suffered through it, it's my brothers and sisters, those following me and especially my sisters, it's they who introduced the changes that permitted me, later than they, to free myself, because it's a true liberation. And my brothers, I owe them a great deal, contrary to what everyone says about brothers. Deep down, what most upset my parents, what bewildered them even more is when they realized that even the boys, their sons, hadn't followed them, didn't share their point of view. My mother has always been astonished at the freedom that there was between us, between my brothers and me. Without saying anything, without opposing our parents and perhaps without even knowing it themselves, they really supported me. Without taking my side, which would have done no good, they were naturally on my side, all they had to do was to do things, act naturally.

Because, in a certain way, we were accomplices, my brothers – more than my sisters – had become my allies. That totally bewildered my parents; they who were expecting their sons to play the role of rebukers, of censors, to espouse their point of view, my mother wanted to rely on them, "You'll see, when your brothers are older, they'll straighten you out!" as she says, because for her, I was bent out of shape (*mà aw ja*): "you lose nothing waiting... I would not like being in your place and you'll get what you deserve..." There, too, she got screwed up, she really fooled herself. Was she disappointed? She didn't even have the time to realize it and now certainly, she'd say all that was false: she'd

never thought of that. Like my father. You change things when you find everything has been changed. Even work, I remember when I was 16, with parents who tried to reason with him, my father swore to them that never would his daughter work in his lifetime. And no, if I took 15 years to start working, if I'm only a small-time secretary in a company, it's because I was incapable of doing advanced studies like my younger sisters, whereas he didn't even know what higher education is, that it even exists.

— *How does the reconciliation with your mother and, above all, the signs of this new love, the “we adore each other...” that you said to me, show up?*

Farida Yes. I have to say that my mother is seriously ill. It had been going on for some time, she has lost weight, she drags around the house, she doesn't eat, she was vomiting all the time. As for care, it was visiting the corner doctor who'd give a list of medicine each time without really knowing what it was. I'd call the house every evening for news. Finally, in the end, my mother had to have herself hospitalized. They gave all kinds of tests and examined her in every way, it worried me.

[*Her mother was hospitalized. They discover that she, who never drank a drop of alcohol, had cirrhosis of the liver.*]

Farida During this whole period, every time my mother has to make the round of the hospitals, she comes and stays with me; she's my guest and she plays this role very well. It's then that I told you that I took her to the movies – so she'd see that's it not the devil, of course I carefully picked the film to show her, at home they never watch television other than for the news – to a restaurant, to the tour boats. I think that did something for her; her sons aren't ones to take care of her, not only because they still live at her expense, but more than that, they hardly ever ask about her, they live with her, they see her every day, so for them things are going along as usual. I even have to shake them a bit to make them aware that it's not a small thing, that it's very serious.

My father finally realized it; my mother, of course, had to tell him. It seems he made this remark, “Now I know, I know who I can count on. If something happened to me, I'm sure that's she's the one (meaning me) I'd find at my side!” You wouldn't believe it!

[...]

I gave my all, I really worked

— *There's only one thing left to understand everything. How did you leave the house? How did you find work at a time when it was already difficult to get hired even for people with experience? How did you find your housing? Who helped you? At home, did someone help you, by loaning you some money for example, etc.?*

Farida No. Nothing like that. The pretext was a cousin. She was already a woman, married, with kids. She too, she'd really struggled. We're all like that. Perhaps today's generation, the girls who are only 15–16 years old now, who were born here, who seem to make it, can be spared everything that we lived through, those of us who arrived in France the first, the first families. We had to educate our parents [laughs]. And it's the youngest who benefited from this work. So much the better. (...) So she came to my parents' place two or three times and, discussing this and that, she tells me “why don't you come to my place for a few days, it'll be a change of pace for you, it'll get you out of here and be a breath of fresh air?” No reaction from my parents; neither yes nor no, it's as if they'd heard nothing, not even a thank you, no protestation even of politeness. For me that was it. There was no connivance between the two of us. Two days later, the day of her departure, she came by to say good-bye to my parents, my bag was ready. I found myself at her place and I told myself if I wanted to get out, now was the moment. I ran through all the possibilities, ads, the ANPE [national employment agency], training courses. At the ANPE, they pointed me toward a two-month, secretarial course. And what's more, a

paid course. That brought me in a bit of money. I gave my all, I really worked like it's not possible. There wasn't a real class ranking, but they did an evaluation, it seems, I was first. Right away, they proposed a longer course to me, of 10 months, at a higher and more qualified level, a paid course as well. I stayed with this cousin for more than a month. I looked for and found a place in a residence in Paris, I stayed in three places like that over two years. Following my ANPE course, I was placed. I didn't have any choice, I wasn't demanding about the hours or the place, not even the salaries. I was so happy to see that I could make it out, that I could live on my own, by my work, at my place . . . it's a dream! Later I found an inexpensive room in Paris, but it was awful. It didn't matter. I've never been

unemployed. Between work and temporary jobs, I've always worked.

[...]

— *And now, you work?*

Farida Yes, I still have my job. I have to get to executive secretary formally. I've always done the work without it being recognized. I have to really learn English. I'm working on it. I'm taking classes at the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers. I'm in the process of putting something together: registering at ASSEDIC [association for employment in industry and commerce] and asking them for certified training in English. There you have it. I think that now you know everything about me. I don't know what you're going to do with all that. But I can guess. I'm curious to read it . . . the portrait you'll make of me won't be pretty.

1990

François Bonvin

The Sick Person as Object

Born 50 years ago, with a malady that seriously inhibited the development of her limbs and spine, Isabelle has always known life as a handicapped person. In her schooling, marriage, and profession, she has been pushed to the side from the future that, as her sisters' lives suggest, might have been hers in the lesser rural aristocracy from which she comes. In the eyes of those close to her, her handicap predestined her to take over the position occupied by several of her aunts who remained single, and to watch over the family's symbolic patrimony, which has been frittered away by various misfortunes, including the war.

But a series of encounters outside her family milieu, first in a vacation resort for young people with handicaps, where certain counselors, handicapped themselves, offered her models for distancing herself from family expectations, and later in a job obtained through connections, allowed her to escape the surveillance of the family, ever ready to define in her stead what she is capable or not capable of doing, what it is appropriate or inappropriate for her to desire, hope for or undertake. Little by little in this way, she conquers a way of life until then unthinkable, as much for herself as for her family: a position as tutor in a private school once subsidized by her family leads her to live far from home and gives her financial independence; getting a driver's license for a specially designed vehicle allows her to go about freely and without help; a house willed to her by one of her aunts makes it possible for her to lead her life away from her watching family and make connections in worlds foreign to her background. All this at the price of an obstinate struggle to go beyond the limits placed on her by her handicap, while being ceaselessly reminded of these limits by the advice, the attention, the warnings, even just the looks of her family and everyone with whom she comes in contact.

This permanent struggle has developed in her a remarkable ability to organize her life in such a way as to forestall other people's plans, find support and resources outside her immediate family and always be ahead of things. It is no doubt this ability that is at work in the way she organizes and lives a new phase of her existence, the long series of surgical procedures which, preventing premature wear and tear on her joints, should let her get about without arm crutches. She appeals to the highest medical authorities and succeeds in attracting the attention of the biggest names in surgery. But if her operation – a real feat of surgery – is an opportunity for her to bond with the medical establishment, at least during the preliminary stages, and gives her individual and gratifying relationships destined

to afford her every guarantee, she very quickly collides with the harsh and prosaic reality of hospitalization and then physical therapy. The situation of total dependency imposed by the hospital, which the sick ordinarily see as just a parenthesis in their lives, becomes for her, always under the threat of dependency, an unacceptable ordeal.

Her capacity for managing her dependence, her mastery of the art of anticipating risks, and of taking the lead (for example, she is the first to “comfort” certain nurses), sharpen her perception of conditions and make of her a detector who lays bare the logic of the hospital: sick persons with their suffering and their demands seem like one more obstacle to the smooth operation of an institution which, through all its members from the physician to the caregivers, expects total self-abnegation and submission from the patient. The brutal forms of hospital dependency reactivate the fears of regression inscribed in the ever fragile and provisional victories of the handicapped: the body can defect in the proper sense of the word; but it can at any instant both betray and ruin the hopes conceived in a way in spite of it, because it is the lot of the handicapped person to find themselves consigned, “reduced,” as she says, to physical particularities at each new encounter, where the health professionals’ look with its tranquil air of habit has something of the fearsome efficacy of a reality principle.

with a hospitalized woman

— *interview by François Bonvin*

“You’re really just a piece of straw”

— *The operation plan as it was proposed to you, what was it exactly?*

Isabelle They didn’t propose, I went to ask. They suggested it to me after I found myself in a very perplexed state.

— *Meaning?*

Isabelle In fact, nobody knew what to advise me and I understood, throughout the last months of 1990, that it was starting to really take a bad turn for me because what I believed to be a peri-arthritis was, in fact, a definitive destruction of the already very affected cartilage and that, finally, if I was going to see a surgeon, as I was being advised to do, the surgeon was naturally going to tell me that my shoulder could be operated on. Well, I think that wasn’t going to resolve my problem of

autonomy. Therefore, I was prudent, I didn’t go to see this upper-body surgeon and, when I went to spend a month in a spa location, after an injection of cortisone, I noticed the inflammation had disappeared a little, but only very little, and in any case you can’t go playing with cortisone indefinitely, it’s a medicine that can be very wonderful, but must be given in very moderate doses; and I understood that, well, that was it, that I was going to have to completely change the way I lived. For months I had been completely offtrack, I couldn’t get about anymore, couldn’t drive, I could no longer walk, I was going to end up on all fours. That wouldn’t have worked, I don’t know what would have happened. It was impossible. I looked for somebody I could

go see and was told about a professor whose specialty was cartilage. So that was a discovery for me because I didn't know that even existed. So naturally, I rushed off to see him and, since I chanced upon a person who was extremely kind, I immediately accepted what he proposed to me (...). He told me "but your history, which is this genetic history, in fact resembles degenerative polyarthritis treated in the long term by corticoids which destroy the cartilage and tendons, but that wasn't known in the beginning. Overall, we could say that the result is the same for you as them."

— *It was he who examined you first and who advised you?*

Isabelle Yes, well, who examined me, hah! In any event, it's visible right away. Because he has many connections, in effect, I quickly reached the top medical experts. I followed my nose like that through Dr Baron who's a geneticist. In fact for Dr Strauss, you needed three months to get an appointment, plus an introduction with a rheumatologist, in the end... well, I was pushy like crazy, saying "listen, my problem is fairly clear anyway, I don't want to go back to see a rheumatologist, especially one I don't know... and who's going to do who knows what to me and who's going to tell me who knows what." So, by pure chance, I had kept in touch with Dr Baron and, when I told him my shoulder was completely messed up, I said to him "listen, there is perhaps something, though I don't know who, I don't know what, what can be done, whom you can see. Do you know Professor Strauss?" And he told me "of course, he's one of my friends, I'll write you a letter right away." And three days later I had an appointment. I arrived right in the middle of a nurses' strike, nobody was at the hospital, I came in there like a ghost, I had an hour-long meeting, we spoke of painting and everything and nothing and then, between the two of us, he was saying to me "but you can't remain like that, it's impossible, you can't stay sitting down the rest of your life, you're not some-

one who's going to stay sitting down, it's not right. Essentially, we'll put on four prostheses, and up you go!" Well I started blinking my eyes and I said "really, four prostheses?" And he told me "yes, four prostheses." And then afterwards we started talking about everything again, life, events, everything except medical questions. And then, between this and that, he threw it out again. And so he said to me "I think that at that moment I'm going to stand you back up. You have straight legs, you can walk again, you'll no longer support yourself on your shoulders, and then you're off again for 10 years and after that we'll see." So I went home; since in any event he talked about more interesting things than the other physicians who talk to you about benefits for handicapped adults, social workers, things that are crazily funny, he started talking to me about a bunch of things that brought you to life at least, so I told myself that this was the direction that things ought to go.

— *So that decided you.*

Isabelle Oh, yes, it completely decided me. What decided me was the contact with him, because, in fact, the proposition of prostheses had already been made to me and I responded to the surgeon and therapist who'd proposed it to me, "You are completely sick to propose things like that, it's dishonest to propose things like that because all the while you treat people with an ambiguity that I don't like one bit." (...) It was really not very funny. They had impossibly limited minds, they reduced you to your handicap.

— *So it's Dr Strauss's personality that made you make this choice. And so how did you hear about him?*

Isabelle Well, I had first heard about him from one of my cousins who's a journalist; I had always heard her say that the medical reports in her paper were first-rate, with first-rate contacts and interviews; and so my cousin told me "but you can't stay like that." All my friends were completely broken up, especially her, she was calling me, saying "it's not possible, there must be

someone who can do something in some way or another." And two days later she called me again, telling me "right now, the big name, the top guy is Professor Strauss in Paris, here's his telephone number." For a year, I'd known that you always had to have a big name in your pocket, because otherwise I'd not get anywhere. So it was Dr Baron – being a researcher, he just had to know everyone – so I thought that was a wonderful idea; so Dr Baron wrote me the introduction letter to Dr Strauss whom I saw that very week. I couldn't get over it myself. He received me absolutely with no wait, with nothing at all in the corridors. I was received, I had put on my hat, I remember: We were looking at each other out of the corners of our eyes, it was really funny. And there you go, I left with the idea that I was going to do it, but especially, he had relied on the telephone, beep, beep, beep, "Hello, Henri, is that you? I've got a very interesting woman here, come and see." Well, Henri was Professor Leroi who was there, came up to see me and said to me, "As they say now, are you the one asking?" So I said, "Well, listen, hey, it's like you had me drink three whiskeys, I come here, you ask me if I want four prostheses, I came here for, for..." Professor Strauss says to me, "Well, what did you want finally?" I said, "I don't know, uhm, some little medications, something." So he said to me, "But we don't propose little prescriptions to someone like you. You know very well that they are placebos, they do nothing. Between us, you know perfectly well that does nothing, little anti-inflammatory drugs are going to get you nowhere at all, you need solutions that get you cracking, let's get going!"

Hell, they don't seem to know how they're going to go about it

— *And so, after that, you went into the hospital. And all these great professors with whom you had had such an excellent contact, what happens once they have you under the knife?*

Isabelle Yes, well, when they have you under the knife... Professor Leroi, whom I

saw again three weeks later, on an appointment this time, with a waiting line and all, started checking the angles, "It opens to 45, it bends to 90, right leg, note, left leg, etc." He started doing an analysis of the situation with body measurements, and so then I started it all again but I took that rather lightly, and then he told me there was a date available for the operation. I said, "No, it's too short notice. I want to settle my affairs a little first, and then, I think that I'm not going to rush into an affair that's going to take two months. No, it won't work." So he said to me, "Does December 24 suit you?" I answered, "If you come back the next day with the champagne!" He started to laugh and then, after all, he's the bigwig, so he proposed a date in January. I thought Professor Strauss was in on it. In fact, he didn't know anything at all. He told me, "But you should have let me know, my dear, you should have let me know." I was a little surprised, I began to understand that sometimes there are interferences and at the same time you had to get them under control. So, well, I set out to organize them.

— *And so, how did this organization go?* Isabelle Well, in fact, I applied myself to organizing them. But I have to say that he, too, took a complete interest in my case, it's obvious, since it's because of me and then since, also, I'm something of a medical event (...). It was, all the same, rather daring on both sides, daring to operate and daring to accept the operation.

— *Once everything was decided, Professor Leroi took matters in hand, he organized the dossier?*

Isabelle Well I wasn't able to find out anything, meaning that I imagined after the first interview with Professor Strauss, I thought, as he said to me with a laugh, that they were going to do a project of preparing the terrain. Well, the project of preparing the terrain didn't in fact come about, and all I knew was that they were going to put four prostheses on me.

— *They didn't communicate anything to you more exactly?*

Isabelle They didn't communicate with me because they didn't know anything themselves. Because, in fact, it arose as each stage of the work was organized. So that after my first operation, there was a wave of emptiness in my head because I told myself "hell, they don't seem to know how they're going to go about it." And that really scared the shit out of me; and, in fact, I really had a moment of worry because, at first, a few hours before the operation or the evening before, Leroi came and said to me, "Well, finally, we're not going to do your right hip and we're putting the prosthesis on your right knee and logically that should be fine, meaning that, at the last minute, upon Strauss's advice, we're going to try to get back the right hip like that."

[...]

— *They hadn't told you that before?*

Isabelle No, but in any event, I think that on that point, I was very easy to get along with; if I wasn't flexible over other things, I was then for that because I had given them my complete trust. Inside, I told myself "I don't give a shit, it doesn't interest me that they do this or that, what counts is the result." Two, three or five prostheses, that's not what counts. What counts is that it work!

What a job, six hours!

— *In reality, at the beginning, there was an excellent dialogue to motivate you; after that, communication was a little more vague on what was going to happen.*

Isabelle After, when he came the next day, I had been operated on the Monday, it lasted six hours, which is after all not nothing, at that time he told me, "What a job! Six hours! You know, we put a pretty little prosthesis on you just like that, in the end we didn't put a prosthesis at the hip because we're going to try to take a risk, we opened up your muscles through here, we pulled some out over there, otherwise you wouldn't have been able to stretch out your leg." He started telling me all about it, I told him, "Stop! Stop it! It's too disgusting!" He laughed.

[...]

[A second operation is undertaken sooner than planned, only three weeks after the first.]

Isabelle I let them do it, but there I was pretty worried all the same. No, I wasn't worried, I was confused.

— *You never lost confidence in the masters at work?*

Isabelle No.

— *In reality, it was the pain that made this transition difficult. When you got back up from your second operation, when they had redone your whole left side, meaning the hip and the knee, you said "if I'd have known, I wouldn't have come! I was so well off, what did I come here for! I was fine like I was."*

Isabelle No, I don't think that I ever thought I was fine like I was; but I really did wonder if such an intensity of pain and so much improvisation would ever end. Six operations, I think that's a little crazy even so. People have trouble believing it. Moreover, when I arrived here, they told me, "Oh! Here's the little lady they led such a dance!" People think they did it over several years. When you think that they did it in three months. The therapist here [*at the rehabilitation center*], when I told him, he said, "What! What! How long ago? Three months? Chalk another one up for Leroi!" Because he's known for devastating, definitive moves like that. In fact, it seems that I put myself in the hands of the most extravagant one, that I couldn't find anyone better for the daredevil of surgery. Where I started losing confidence a little and where I started telling myself they were crazy, it was on the subject of the pain. It's the pain seen from the side of a medical world that doesn't explain to you why they don't give you any tranquilizers. Was it because of my weight? I got no explanation.

— *But he had told you all the same: "You'll have all the tranquilizers you need, you only have to ask."*

Isabelle And in fact I got nothing at all! I only got Diantalvic with a minimal dosage of morphine.

I'd comfort the nurses

— *In reality, there you were coming up against the wall of the caregivers.*

Isabelle I was never completely treated as a simple patient, because I felt, even so, that because of Mr Strauss, with whom I had an immediate, friendly contact and who was coming to see me three times a week even though I wasn't one of his patients, that produced a certain attentiveness to my room and the way in which I was treated. At first and even afterwards, I was certainly taken care of.

— *You told me that you heard from your room how they treated the other patients. They never treated you like that?*

Isabelle Uh, yes, there were some moments at night when it was really more than painful, when I was stuck to this basin, when I had no right at all to these tranquilizers, when they would ask me, "When you ring at night, get everything collected into one call." The night team was really awful. I was at my limits of tolerance and, also, I think that on the part of the nurses, it was because it was a surgery service, so they really have their guards up. They are submerged in calls. It seemed obvious to me that the evident thing, rather, was to be cooler and nicer. I'd comfort them. Oh, yes! So there was Julie, she'd come in and say "I'm cold, I'm cold!" So I'd tell her, "Poor Julie! Give me your hand." So I'd rub Julie's hand, it was cold, it was in February. And I would say "is that better? Go ahead and put your hand against me." And she'd say: "You're nice, that's better! My poor Isabelle, did you sleep well?" Every morning, I had to do things the other way round, start by asking her how the commute was and if she had been too cold on the train platform.

— *Were they informal with you like that right away? [Using the informal "tu"]*

Isabelle No, but pretty quickly. So I'd answer in the same way. Or then it was always making you do everything on your own, even though you couldn't even pull yourself up, even though a quarter of one

hair out of place on one toe causes infinite pain. So you had to group your calls, meaning you have to know beforehand if there are going to be ridges in your mattress, if the bedsore is going to start to rub, if perhaps you couldn't have a tranquilizer, and so on. So all that, you have to think of it in the quarter hour. And well, Mr Strauss would come from time to time, "I don't know how you're doing it, but I think that it's going fine, you have an aura." Because Dr Leroi's team has the reputation of being terribly hard, whereas the people under Strauss are extremely kind.

— *How did you find that out? Someone told you?*

Isabelle I found out from his secretary. Because in March, when I returned to get my knees moving, he forced me to remain seated on the couch and I couldn't take the circulation of blood which was returning into my legs. And instead of leaving me for the two prescribed hours, they would leave me for four hours and sometimes five hours. I was in awful pain and no one would listen to me.

— *And you were asking?*

Isabelle And how I asked! And I said it every which way. In the end, they'd say to me "we'll see."

— *The nurses told you that?*

Isabelle Yes. Well, suddenly, you had become an object. Because you can say what you want, in whatever manner, it's like it was sliding over an oilcloth. So, in the end, I was telling myself "well, what's going on here, it's not right!" I would try to collect as much of my wits as possible and I said, "Well, I'm going to see Dr Strauss" — "He's not here." I smelt bad, I had been wearing the same nightgown for four days, my hair looked terrible, I hurt, it was deadly hot in the room; and it was like that, that was part of the thing. So I went to ask Dr Strauss if, if I come back, could I be under his care, and so I asked his secretary and she told me, "No, it's impossible. You cannot, you're in the surgery ward." What was also terrible was after the second operation, when I had this famous

500-gram hematoma and they had to do an emergency operation in the beginning of February. And for over a week I had a horrible pain in the hip; in fact, there was a bleeding artery and I don't know why I'm not dead; after all, I had more than 500 grams of hematoma.

Suffering can't be measured

— *Is it then they sent a psychologist to you?*

[...]

Isabelle I saw the psychologist at the beginning of the week, and I saw the psychiatrist, let's say, Thursday, and then on Friday I said "but you know, I continue to hurt a lot." And then Saturday, my nephew came, I said "listen, you go down to the fifth floor and you go see Mr Strauss and you tell him "Isabelle is fed up with it, she wonders if you can't come up for two minutes because, really she's hurting." So he came back in some consternation telling me that he wasn't there. So I said "bah, if he's not even there!" And then on Sunday, I had I don't know how many friends, I was hurting like crazy, the morphine wasn't doing anything for me, a half-shot of morphine that they didn't want to give me and that I demanded. And on Monday morning, Mr Leroi came and said, "But what's all this? Let's get you onto the operating table!"

— *Finally, he opened his eyes? There is a big difference after all between the boss who's doing the treating and the patient? And yet he came by.*

Isabelle And yet he came by. Two or three times a day.

— *Even so, he passed by quickly. Meaning that when you say you are suffering, he thinks you're exaggerating?*

Isabelle I felt that it was like that. Even so, I found that pretty serious. So, obviously, afterwards, I understood what it means to be hard, what it means to shut up your pain. There are a lot of things now, you can figure out the temperature of water from a distance with a little wire, but suffering can't be measured, there's no point of reference. Afterwards, they seemed just a

little abashed Monday evening, also Monday's the same story, afterwards, anemia. Even so, three transfusions of blood during almost the whole day and night with a man who was shouting, attached to tubes, who was in respiratory distress. The recovery room is horrible. Really you have to see that once in your life. Yes, well you think it's World War I that's come back, you're all together, everyone's yelling and the nurses: "quiet down," "breathe," "do this," "turn over," "spit," "I'm coming!" It wakes you up. You think that it's a really nice place, where they hold your hand, and where they cradle you a little, but not at all! It's a place where they shake you up, it's a place to wake you up. You even hear the cries of the others. So, suffering, there certainly is. Because it's every kind of case at once: kidneys, feet, cut-off legs, respiratory distress. And that's pretty much the way it goes.

— *There's another thing you brought up, it's the specialization of the personnel. You know these people who do this kind of thing or that kind of thing: the nurse does this, the nursing assistant does that... etc.*

Isabelle Oh, yes. Well the effect that has on the patient is that, since you've become very dependent, if you have a wee bit of a whim, in the middle of the organization of the day, whim has no place. So the bit of whim is simply to have a glass of water you can't reach. (...) So the physiotherapist was so full of herself that she'd decided it wasn't her job to replace the sheets and covers for example. So she leaves the bed in a mess and you're lucky if she puts your foot back in the right position.

— *You must have been in a lot of pain since I remember that you had to have a very soft support under the toes, down to the millimeter. So she didn't do that?*

Isabelle No, she was also Leroi's therapist. So, watch out! And since Mr Leroi is somebody, his therapist has to be somebody, too. Meaning she's someone who takes her position seriously, and her reputation also. She's there to kowtow, and Mr Leroi is big shit, he doesn't tolerate anyone going against him, moreover no one does so.

Except me: I said, one day, that I was refusing to walk under the conditions that he was asking me to walk. And so he told me, "You refuse to walk?" And I said, "I don't refuse to walk, I refuse to walk like that." I said to Mr Strauss, "I think you can tell Mr Leroi that he takes me for a little electric train, and, deep down, this surgeon is a big child. He operated on me and now he wants me to go a quarter turn round the track." (...) I was clamoring vehemently that they look at me, and moreover, I had anemia, and there was no relationship of cause and effect, they didn't understand. They didn't look. My stomach was all blue and I could no longer stay in bed because the entire hematoma was around my hip and it seems that the artery was blocked by the 400 grams. Another happy thing! In fact, it was an internal hemorrhage that was starting.

— *I remember those difficult moments, to do with very prosaic things like when they give you the basin to pee in, and after all it wasn't easy.*

Isabelle Well, it was intolerable. You sit on it for hours, well what seems like hours, it maybe wasn't hours, but it certainly was quarters of an hour. So with buttocks that no longer exist, iron basins – which by the way disappeared after the second operation in April... after that they were made of plastic. All the same, that hurt a lot less.

— *You told me something about this that I'll remind you of: when you were on the basin and you weren't succeeding in doing it as quickly as they asked you, at night, they told you "do it in your sheets, we'll change you."*

Isabelle Oh yes. They did in fact tell me that. That I always refused. I said "certainly not." But they told me that here, too, one night, "We're going to put diapers on you, you know, it's not serious." I said "that, certainly not!" Yes, it's curious, but I was here with a person who had multiple sclerosis, who was very heavy to push and pull and she didn't want to either. You are reduced to a state of nothingness. It's a question of convenience. They no longer

think that they're dealing with a human being, I think. In surgery it's not possible, there's so much handling of wet, dirty things that you pick up with tongs and take away.

There's nothing to be done, we're human beings

— *Meaning that in reality, it's a disgusting world and you are at the center?*

Isabelle You spend your time spitting, peeing, pooping, sweating, etc. And all that is taken away more and more with tongs and is thrown away more and more. But there's nothing to be done, we're human beings, and we continue to sweat, to pee and you start over. It can go on like that for a long time.

— *There's another point: the personnel change a lot in a team like the one where you were. There's a great many of them.*

Isabelle Yes. I ended up knowing them all because I was one of the people who stayed the longest. Because of these three operations that lasted seven weeks.

— *So you met all of these people. But more immediately, when you arrived the first week, you had the impression of being in a whirlwind of people, always people you didn't know.*

Isabelle Yes, it's frightening. Each time it was a new face. An absolutely inexhaustible reserve of acquaintances and strangers.

— *So you couldn't build up familiarity with someone who would take better care of you?*

Isabelle There was Marie-Thérèse. She was somebody! With dyed red hair, around 55 years old, not very big, very decisive or very firm. And at the same time she was very capable. It was she who told me the story of the uncensored version of Little Red Riding Hood and when she was doing the dressings and they were going to take off the bindings, she'd tell me "one, two, three, you breathe deeply. There you go, we're going on, one, two, three, breathe deeply." That was Marie-Thérèse. And then there was also a person who was a nurse's aide who was a student at the nursing school, she did

her first dressing with me. She was even more afraid than I was, afterwards I congratulated her, I told her she had done very well and that I'd felt almost nothing, so she was very happy. Then she gave me her address and I have kept up a good relationship with her, and when she'd come, she was very attentive. She'd wash me carefully. When I knew she was coming, I didn't worry.

— *Among all these strangers all around you, is it important to have these several fixed reference points?*

Isabelle Yes, because otherwise you're really not very important anymore, you're really just a piece of straw, completely placed in the hands of people and a certain kind of cruelty, especially at night, even sadism.

[...]

July 1992

Solitude

It was a suggestion from the emergency room staff of a large, Parisian hospital that enabled us to talk with Louise B. Nothing in an emergency room is designed to make investigating easy. The coming and going of the nursing staff, firemen, the noise of sirens and hospital carts rolling by, the banging of plastic doors, the shouts from stretcher-bearers as well as the impossibility of being alone in an open space organized to leave room for movable beds with the permanent presence of other patients in the rooms, the impromptu entry of nurses and other visitors – none of this is conducive to doing an interview.

And yet, even though it took place under very difficult conditions, with interruptions to allow an oxygen mask to be put on, for temperature and blood pressure to be checked, the interview given to us by the 80-year-old patient with a worry about her heart, Louise B., evokes in a particularly dramatic manner the way an elderly person experiences the trauma of hospital, the beginning of an irreversible process of being taken in charge.¹

The worry that brought Louise B. to the emergency room makes visible the isolation which, until then, went unnoticed. More than a medical problem, it poses the question of her being taken into care after the initial treatment. Hospital emergency rooms receive more and more elderly people for whom it is necessary to find a sheltered place to live.

After having announced to me that she was tired, that she had slept badly because of the “moving” – patients arrive night and day in the emergency room –

¹ In the space of a quarter of a century, from 1965 to 1989, the proportion of 60-year-olds or over in France has gone from 17 percent to 19 percent. Life expectancy is over 80 for women and 72 for men. The difference of over eight years between the average lifespans of women and men explains the fact that more than three-quarters of people on their own aged 55 or over are women. In 1989, single person households constitute 27 percent of households (against 16 percent in 1901 and 20 percent in 1968), and more than one person in 10 lives alone (10.6 percent in 1990). More than a million people aged 75 or over are alone.

Among elderly people, 450,000 are dependents, a dependence that risks growing further with the increase in life expectancy. In 1990, 210,000 elderly people benefited from being taken in charge by the medical system (43,000 at home, 67,000 in a long-term care center, 100,000 in a rest home).

However, these demographic factors do not explain the isolation of elderly people. Their place in the family has changed: the proportion of elderly people living with at least one of their children has not stopped declining. Not only has the living arrangement changed, but the entire cycle of exchange between generations has been transformed. See *Données sociales* (Paris: INSEE, 1990). Also see Remi Lenoir, “L’invention du troisième âge, constitution du champ des agents de gestion de la vieillesse,” *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 26–7 (Mar.–Apr. 1979), as well as Jean-Claude Boulard’s report on the problem of dependent elderly people.

Louise B. didn't want to interrupt the interview as I was suggesting to her. She insisted on continuing to tell her personal history.

At the beginning of the interview, Louise uses rather often the indefinite "*on*" [one] to talk about herself as if she had internalized the depersonalizing language of the nursing staff ("one has a bit of a temperature this morning"). She then speaks at length of her occupation as social worker which she long practiced on a volunteer basis – as a young woman from a bourgeois milieu whose father was "in business," she did not have to work – then after the war on a salaried basis: everything seems to indicate, in her voice, her tone, her digressions, even the anecdotes where she always portrays herself in her role as social worker, including in her private life – at the butcher's, they call her Miss B. and people ask for her services – that, if she repeatedly comes back to this role, it is to reaffirm a professional and social identity that everyone has forgotten, not only at the hospital, where she feels like a cumbersome package, but also in her building in the 6th arrondissement of Paris and even in her own family for whom she no longer exists except as a "problem." Her suffering is all the greater because as a social worker and like all such professionals she has concerned herself with other people's problems all her life. She knows from professional experience that neither institutions, nor personnel, nor the people losing their autonomy are prepared for managing that dependence. Conscious of the relative penury of institutions, of the average year-long wait to find an appropriate solution of a place to receive her, Louise B. suffers from the idea that she will have to accept material and moral assistance, that she will have to "be a bother," something with which she is obsessed.

Like many social workers, nurses, and school teachers of her generation, Louise B. is single and the family she has left, a brother, a sister-in-law, nephews and nieces, live in the provinces. Louise B. does not speak as if she were complaining or confessing but, rather, in a chatty tone of voice, as if she wanted the levity of her tone to hide the pathos of her situation. The repeated denials, "they're nice, they're very, very nice," emphasize her family's absence. Completely alone, she insists on persuading herself that she "is lucky," that she is supported and that her family is attentive, whereas she was extremely "shaken up" by the visit of a niece who came to persuade her to go into a retirement home as soon as possible. It is in the roundabout way in which she says "everything is fine" that you grasp the almost-nothings that make up her life and which she enumerates sadly: a neighbor's visit, a niece's telephone call, a cleaning lady who drops by. The major problem revealed at the hospital is so painful that it cannot be completely articulated, or even thought: each time the interview brings her close to the truth of her solitude – she can no longer go home, her family cannot and does not want to take her in – she rapidly buries the lucidity that would kill her under a cascade of reassuring affirmations: "I have friends," "I have caring people around me," "I'm lucky."

 with an elderly person

— interview by Gabrielle Balazs

“What are you going to do with an old granny?”

— *I would like to speak first of the difficulties you're encountered...*

Louise B. (...) I warn you, I'm pretty tired. I arrived here Friday at noon, hobbling a little... and then this evening I slept very badly because I had a visit that rather shook me up. I couldn't tell you how much coming and going there was, I didn't get a wink of sleep... noise, everything you could think of! So this morning I wasn't in very good shape and then that came back. A bit of a temperature this morning. So... yes... I didn't try to find out why. They didn't ask me why, moreover, but well... I had a really miserable night.

— *If you're tired, we'll stop. You tell me.*

Louise B. No, you see, it's alright.

— *You tell me if you want to talk or not, you let me know... the Doctor told me that you came in on the ambulance but that afterwards you didn't want to return home...*

Louise B. I can't. [*She insists on the word can't*]. It's different! [*Tense laugh*]

— *Yes. And why can't you? What's happening?*

Louise B. I'm single and before I was a social worker, more than 20 years of it, 25 soon, yes... that's to say, not yet altogether, well I've retired... I was a social worker in Paris, also a social worker in the country, I really love the people who work out in the country. You know each other, you see the problems this one has and that one has (you see a whole family); you feel them because you see them at the baker's or the butcher's, wherever it might be. Really, it's a job that I love a lot; that I don't regret at all having chosen.

— *And when did you stop? Retirement was when...?*

Louise B. In 1971, but with really bad degenerative arthritis, very painful because

of social service, because you're always on the roads, on country roads in a tiny car. And before that, on bicycles. Back in 1949, and then finally that started to... because I did sanitarium work, well in short, that started to break down, the service got a motorbike for me, not bad, with the difficulties of the time that you aren't aware of. And since it was a hilly region, the bike worked or it didn't, on the hills I pushed it or... rather it pulled me. Well, so there. And then finally, in 1953 there was the car.

— *And then afterwards you were living in Paris, you tell me that after retiring, you were living in Paris?*

Louise B. I live in Paris, yes. Well, I'm from Normandy, but... well, I retired in the country near friends. And then, when I found that I wasn't very young anymore, to be staying out in the country alone... the car that I had to have to go anywhere and that I liked a lot, fine, but in the end it was no longer possible (...). So this tiny apartment in Paris, I had it when I was a social worker, eh; because you had to get away. On Sundays, if you went to buy your bread [*imitates her public of clients*] “ah Miss B., is it ok? Have you received my benefits?” “Miss B...” Well, in short, people would run into you, it was very kind, you see, but in the end, you have to get away... [*almost without a voice*]. So I was able to get this little place. And then I went back there when I found that I could no longer live alone in the country. The car... you have to know how to say no one day and... well.

[...]

— *Did you have any help in the house? What arrangements did you make for buying groceries, house-cleaning, did you have a helper in the house?*

Louise B. On retirement? I had this little place there, and then, good heavens, I was healthy...

Little by little, you go downhill and downhill and then...

— Yes, but there wasn't anybody helping you do the cleaning, to...

Louise B. Oh! If I needed, yes, yes. There was someone in the building who was very, very nice, if I had shopping to do, well, who was very, very, kind, telling me "if you're tired some day, if you want to sleep here," because it's only one room with a hallway kitchen — if you can say that — and it's on a courtyard, a real square courtyard, on the ground floor and you can see a bit of sunshine and sky. Above my place there's no sky, I had to look out the corner, there...

— It's dark because of the ground floor?

Louise B. It's dark. And also, they're doing work there, so [ironic] it's the life of a lord. A concierge who's very kind, well, a friend, an Algerian woman, a person who's very, very kind (I know I helped her, but still, she does everything with a kindness that I appreciate enormously, we are good friends), she was telling me, "You're like my mother," she's an Algerian... [silence]. And then little by little you go downhill and downhill and then... There you have it.

— And so what system did you work out at home to help you?

Louise B. This Algerian woman, yes, and then, it's pretty good, there are the municipal clubs, well that's really pretty nice; there was one right near my place, where I belong, so you go eat lunch there as often as you like, well you sign up, and you pay according to your financial... means [cough]; it's very nice, it's served quite nicely, well it varies, it has lots of advantages. And then it's not bad, you talk about your past life, it's nice, and then, and then, and then obviously my heart is wearing out... I fell in June and broke my arm, so that obviously unleashed a whole bunch of things. I preferred to spend a few days here in the hospital because of that, and then I went home with my arm like that, you see

these three fingers here, they weren't working... Well and then, and then and then, I got back into the habit of going to my club; my little cleaning woman drove me if needed, there was (...) she is a very kind heart, very kind, who'd pick me up or help me cut my meat because I couldn't...

— Yes, it was like that for everything there was to do in the house, you couldn't get about?

Finally things fall apart

Louise B. I couldn't, I had this little person (...) she's pure gold, you can have perfect faith, well she has the keys, she knows things, I'm obliged to hold her back, because she works... for example, she comes for one hour to my place and says "what do you want me to do for you?" But... there, well, this fall brought it tumbling down a bit, it happened in June, since then I have had several casts, plastering really, it was put on badly, it was very painful, well, in short. And then August 15, something like that... [laughs] it's long. It's not always very funny because in August, who do you look for? ... everyone's gone... (...). There are people who would like to help me, but... And then, and then, and then well, I started my life back up, like that, hobbling a bit, hobbling rather, walking with a cane, well in short, I'd get out as best I could. And then, and then, well finally things fall apart. What set it off is... yes, it's that I fell in my place. So that set some alarms off a little. And then I couldn't get up. [Noise of hospital carts, voices.] And so a drama that could have been tragic, it's that it was an hour when, it was really early, and yes, but it's that the light of the gas went out; so I managed to crawl to my telephone to alert the concierge, who asked "what's happened...?" She was upset obviously, so that set off quite a few things, "well, this can't go on!" There you have it.

— The concierge advised you to not stay alone then?

Louise B. Ah, her, she was very kind, she helps me okay, and all that, but I don't want

to, it's not her role, is it, to help me, sure I would ask her one day if she's going to buy bread, "can you bring me some back at the same time," okay, or she'd come by while passing out the mail, she'd sit at the foot of my bed and we chat and that's that. But I don't want to, it's not her job and then I'm too heavy to carry, and well obviously everything'll start...so here I am. And this fall that set off alarms, she called my brother, well [laughs], it's a little...

— *And so what does your brother say?*

What can they do with me

Louise B. Oh he says...he takes good care of me, but they...So the next day there's a call between a social worker and this brother — my sister-in-law is very, very kind also — they're in La Rochelle [on the Atlantic coast north of Bordeaux] so...and my sister-in-law is very, very kind and my brother also, so they're looking for solutions; and the social worker from here is in contact with my brother...To figure out what can they do with me, where they're going to put me...It's the drama of people of a certain age. She had thought of Broca [national public hospital], because at Broca, when it happened, well I hesitated a bit and then I had to go back, well what measures to take and all that. And then the social worker is telling me about Broca, I was telling myself that, after all, with my Algerian friend, with the municipal club nearby, I might very well go on like that. But [silence], it's over!

— *It's no longer possible?*

Louise B. What would I have done [interruption]. But this residence is really, you're admitted, I mean that you're well off there, and people can come see me easily, and moreover my door is always open. Like that, no, I'm often put up, so well, it's nice, you arrive well...it's very nice, it's very...And then, and then, and well obviously, and well yes, it's when I fell and the gas was on that it happened obviously, it made people think and then everyone was notified. So the concierge notified my brother in La Rochelle who had, well...

who then very kindly...my heating was gas and my stove was gas; so for this, obviously they wanted to cut off the gas and put everything on electricity, I understand, it's more reasonable, and in reality obviously... Only, it's full of mice, they just discovered it, I knew that I had mice and I try to give them something to eat, but it wasn't enough. So my concierge was a bit upset because the work they have to do for the electricity, with mice you can't do it. So I don't know where it's at for the moment, I don't know what's being hatched, I don't know anything [laughs].

— *Meaning that if you wanted to go home, it'll have to be renovated, it'll have to be redone?*

Louise B. You see...oh, redone...No, it's this question of gas and electricity; well they're perfectly correct, aren't they? And then you see, I see that I can no longer live alone, moreover I was hardly ever getting out; I'd get out with my cane and I'd have outings, I was lucky enough to go to family reunions, but well, they'd come to get me in a car...Yes, yes, well I was able to take advantage of January 1st like that, well it was in January...

— *Do you have any family in Paris?*

Louise B. Oh yes, I have family in Paris, some cousins, well some...I have nieces obviously, I have one...who is unhappy at seeing me like this. I know it, I feel it but she has three children, a husband who was unemployed for a certain time, so she had to go to work, she was a kindergarten teacher, so she started up in education again. So there she has to put herself into that too and then, and well all that is very tiring. Consequently I don't want to ask her to...

[A nurse comes in for her duties.]

It's not for me to go burdening others

— *Yes, you didn't want to ask for anything?*

Louise B. Oh I don't want to ask!

— *Because you think she can't?*

Louise B. Oh everything she can do, she does, telephone calls, all that, moreover, if

you like, I tell her “you take a taxi” when she comes, I pay the taxi for her. So she comes for an hour maybe, the days when...the days when, but well she has her three children and it’s not for me to go burdening others.

— *Oh a burden, but why do you think that you’d be a burden to them? There’s no room or...*

Louise B. Because their life is busy. Their life is busy, you understand, this husband who’s started working again, she has to keep his morale up a bit, well I don’t want to be a burden; when she talks to me on the phone, well it’s very nice, the nieces really...very kindly, but they can’t come to see me, and I don’t want them to, once every now and then, I say “well, well, take a taxi and come by.”

— *And among your nephews and nieces, there aren’t any who could come to your place?*

Louise B. To live?

— *Yes, to live*

Louise B. [*A voice cries out: a patient for number 8, a doctor!*] Ah no, it’s not possible, because it’s a sad room. I think that it’s yes, perhaps five barely, eight meters then a hallway, a wider hallway that I used for cooking...

— *Yes, it’s too small to take someone in?*

Louise B. Ah yes, so sometimes Zorah told me “you know...” (well, my Algerian) “if...I’ll come sleep,” so that happened quite often, we’d put a mattress on the floor and any number of times she came to sleep in my place. “Hello... Yes, we’ll put down the mattress and you come on in,” well and then the other day, she came, but the poor thing got cold – it was when it was cold – and air was coming under the doors. And then it’s not possible, and then there’s not enough room in...no, there’s this measly mattress on the ground... [*annoyed laugh*].

— *Yes, it’s a temporary solution, but there could be someone with you on a permanent basis?*

Louise B. Ah no. Ah no, two people couldn’t live there.

— *And now what do you foresee, going to your brother’s and your sister-in-law’s eventually?*

Louise B. Ah no! Ah no, no! Oh I couldn’t go to anybody’s place...No, ah no! Also, you see, their life is organized, too, they’ve just had a third grandchild, well at one of their children’s houses not far away. Everyone has their life organized, don’t they? No, no, no, it’s... And my sister-in-law understands very well, she calls me very often, very kindly, asks me “how are you,” all that because she sees that I do what I can, but that I don’t bother her. No, no that... I can say, with them, I’m obsessed with...

They keep us living...

— *And where does this obsession with not wanting to be a bother come from? You who always worried about others in your profession?*

Louise B. Well precisely because I saw what it was to bother others, what are you going to do with an old granny? What? No, you see...They keep us living, since it’s a question of that a bit, but I don’t know if you can call it living [*laughs*]. You notice that I like to read, I like crossword puzzles, people come, I tell you, easily, they knock on the door, a game of scrabble, well, when I have a TV that doesn’t work and then... no, because I have nephews, but what you call nephews by choice of heart; meaning the children of friends, for whom I’m an aunt. So there was a family who called me a couple of days ago and told me “hey, we’re bringing you my mother-in-law’s television,” so that gives me a beautiful TV that works well, and from my bed I can...there...Like that, kindly, lots of people try to find ways to please me. [*In a raised voice*] But there are others who understand things a lot less well. [*Angry voice*] And who think they know it all and can run everything, and organize everything [*imitates her authoritative voice*] “why do you have shoes like that?” If you saw... Oh yesterday, it was dramatic! With this niece, really, she has a way of judging, she’s 40...

— *She's the daughter of another brother? She's the daughter, not of the La Rochelle brother?*

Louise B. Oh it's being recorded, oh watch out, oh yes!

[*Very worried about her future and very "shaken up" by her niece's visit, Louise B. worries that she's saying too much, and asks to talk with the tape recorder off; after an interruption, we resume.*]

Louise B. And so my brother and sister-in-law, well my sister-in-law is very discreet. In fact, the social worker just told me, she called me, she told me, they're leaving tomorrow, so they're coming by Paris and there's a meeting with the social worker and then I don't know who, I don't know who yet, to see what they can do with the big weights like us. [*Laughs – Noises in the corridor.*] It's true. It's really true. How many have there been like me? And I tell myself, I'm still lucky because... well, I see what I have; you have to know what you have, still. The telephone works nicely at my place, so I still keep up a very lively life...

— *But what would you prefer?*

Louise B. Me, I've had enough, I would like a peaceful corner in a retirement home...

— *In a retirement home?*

Louise B. [*low tone*] Oh yes... That's all there is left. Not too far so people can come to see me all the same...

— *Yes, in Paris...*

Louise B. Yes, or near Paris... [*silence*]. So I think tomorrow, that's what's going to be looked at; so with multitudinous recom-

mendations from my niece. [*Imitates her voice*] "above all, eh, don't let what they offer get away." What am I getting mixed up in! As if I had appealed to help me keep going... Even so I reminded her yesterday, because I was starting to get tired of it, that I did two years in a sanitarium in 1938 without people knowing! So I said "you know, as for courage, I have had some, consequently, that's enough!" And one day, I say to her "listen, what you just said to me, no one has ever dared say to me," I think that there, she realized a little that she'd come on a bit strong. You have to admit that hearing yourself say that hurts.

— *What does she do as a profession? What does she do as an occupation?*

Louise B. Oh, she did psychology. Yes. [*Laughs*] You know, it's not an example... psych. Moreover, she didn't continue – in fact she didn't need to work – her husband has a position that lets her live, so at times I worry – too much so – about her children. But well, there are others, so I see the others. Again this morning, if you like, a telephone call from Montpellier; it's one of these, what you call a niece of the heart. Yesterday it was from Rouen, how can I say, it was a friend from Cannes, so there. So you still have to see everything that you have. Not only how you're going to come out. (...)

[*A nurse's aide comes in: "Hello, I'm bothering you again!"*]

Louise B. What do you want?

[*He takes the newspaper a visitor brought her and leaves.*]

February 1992

Understanding

I am loath to engage too insistently here in reflections on theory or method addressed simply to researchers: “We do nothing but gloss one another,” as Montaigne used to say. And even if it is a question of doing only that but in quite another mode, I would like to avoid pedantic disquisitions on hermeneutics or the “ideal communication situation”: indeed, I believe that there is no more real or more realistic way of exploring communication in general than by focusing on the simultaneously practical and theoretical problems that emerge from the particular interaction between the investigator and the person being questioned.

For all that, I do not believe that it is useful to turn to the innumerable so-called “methodological” writings on interview techniques. Useful as these may be when they describe the various effects that the interviewer can produce without knowing it, they almost always miss the point, not least because they remain faithful to old methodological principles which, like the ideal of the standardized procedures, often derived from the desire to imitate the external signs of the rigor of the most established scientific disciplines. At any rate it does not seem to me that they do justice to what has always been done – and known – by researchers who have the most respect for their object and who are the most attentive to the almost infinitely subtle strategies that social agents deploy in the ordinary conduct of their lives.

Many decades of empirical research in all its forms, from ethnography to sociology and from the so-called closed questionnaire to the most open-ended interview, have convinced me that the adequate scientific expression of this practice is to be found neither in the prescriptions of a methodology more often scientific than scientific, nor in the antiscientific caveats of the advocates of mystic union. For this reason it seems to me imperative to make explicit the intentions and the procedural principles that we put into practice in the research project whose findings we present here. The reader will thus be able to reproduce in the reading of the texts the work of both construction and understanding that produced them.¹

A translation of “Comprendre” was first published by Sage in *Theory, Culture and Society* 13, no. 2 (1996). Carol Woodward, of the Institut Français, Glasgow, is also thanked for her generous and meticulous help.

¹ In the course of various discussions I set out the objectives of the research and the (provisional) principles of interviewing extracted from many years of both my own experience and that of my close collaborators (most notably, Rosine Christin, Yvette Delsaut, Michel Pialoux, Abdelmalek Sayad). The choice of the possible theme and form of the interview in relation to the social characterization of the potential respondent was attentively examined in each case. In many cases, hearing or reading the

If its objective of pure knowledge distinguishes the research relationship from most of the exchanges in everyday life, it remains, whatever one does, a *social relationship*. As such, it can have an effect on the results obtained (the effects varying according to the different parameters that can influence the relationship.)² Of course, by definition, scientific questioning excludes the intention of exerting any type of symbolic violence that could affect responses. Yet it remains the case in these matters that one cannot trust simply to one's own good faith, and this is true because all kinds of distortions are embedded in the very structure of the research relationship. It is these distortions that have to be understood and mastered as part of a practice which can be reflective and methodical without being the application of a method or the implementation of a theory.

Only the reflexivity synonymous with method, but a *reflex reflexivity* based on a craft, on a sociological "feel" or "eye," allows one to perceive and monitor *on the spot*, as the interview is actually taking place, the effects of the social structure within which it is occurring. How can we claim to engage in the scientific investigation of presuppositions if we do not work to gain knowledge [*science*] of our own presuppositions? We can do so principally by striving to make reflexive use of the findings of social science to control the effects of the survey itself and to engage in the process of questioning with a command of the inevitable effects of that process.

The positivist dream of an epistemological state of perfect innocence papers over the fact that the crucial difference is not between a science that effects a construction and one that does not, but between a science that does this without knowing it and one that, being aware of work of construction, strives to discover and master as completely as possible the nature of its inevitable acts of construction and the equally inevitable effects those acts produce.

"Non-violent" communication

To attempt to know what one is doing when one sets up an interview relationship is, first of all, to seek to know the effects one may unwittingly produce by that kind of always slightly arbitrary *intrusion* inherent in social exchange (chiefly by

first interview raised new questions (either of a factual or an interpretive nature) that required a second interview. Subsequently, the problems, difficulties and lessons of the interview that the various interviewers might have encountered in the interviewing process were regularly discussed at my seminars in the Collège de France during 1991–2. It was by continually confronting these experiences and the reflections of the participants that this method gradually took precise shape by making explicit and codifying the procedures actually carried out in the field.

² The traditional opposition between so-called quantitative methods, such as the questionnaire, and qualitative methods, such as the interview, conceals the fact that they are both based on social interaction which takes place within the constraints of these structures. Defenders of these two methodologies ignore these structures, as do the ethnomethodologists, whose subjectivist view of the social world leads them to ignore the effects exerted by objective structures not just on the interactions they record and analyze (between doctors and nurses, for example), but also on their own interaction with those who are subjected to their observation or questioning.

the way one presents oneself and presents the survey, by the encouragements one gives or withholds, etc.); it is to attempt to bring to light the respondent's representation of the situation, of the study in general, and the particular relationship that it sets up, and of the ends it is pursuing, and to make explicit the reasons that led to participation in the exchange. It is in fact only through measuring the extent and the character of the distance between the objective of the study as perceived and interpreted by the respondent and the object assigned by the investigator, that the latter can attempt to reduce the resulting distortions. At the very least this implies understanding what can and cannot be said, the forms of censorship that prevent saying certain things and the promptings that encourage stressing others.

It is the investigator who starts the game and sets up its rules, and is usually the one who, unilaterally and without any preliminary negotiations, assigns the interview its objectives and uses. (These, on occasion, may be poorly specified – at least for the respondent.) This asymmetry is reinforced by a social symmetry every time the investigator occupies a higher place in the social hierarchy of different types of capital, cultural capital in particular. The *market for linguistic and symbolic goods* established every time an interview takes place varies in structure according to the objective relationship between the investigator and the investigated or, what comes down to the same thing, the relationship between all the different kinds of capital, especially linguistic capital, with which each of them is endowed.

Taking into account these two properties inherent in the interview relationship, we have done everything in our power to control their effects (without claiming to eliminate them) or, more precisely, to *reduce as much as possible the symbolic violence exerted through that relationship*. We have tried to set up a relationship of *active and methodical listening*, as far removed from the pure *laissez-faire* of the nondirective interview as from the interventionism of the questionnaire. In practice, this seemingly contradictory position is not easy to sustain. In effect, it combines a total availability to the person being questioned, submission to the singularity of a particular life history – which can lead, by a kind of more or less controlled imitation, to adopting the interviewee's language, views, feelings, and thoughts – with methodical construction, founded on the knowledge of the objective conditions common to an entire social category.

To bring the research relationship as close to this ideal limit as possible, several conditions had to be met. It was not sufficient to act, as all “good” empirical investigators do spontaneously, on the elements that can be consciously or unconsciously controlled in the *interaction*, in particular, the level of language used and the appropriate (verbal or nonverbal) signs to encourage the collaboration of the individuals interviewed, who can only give a response worthy of the name if they can appropriate the inquiry for themselves and become its subject. On certain occasions we had to act on the very *structure* of the relationship (and, through that, on the structure of the linguistic and symbolic market) and, therefore, on the very *choice* of respondents and interviewers.

Intrusion

One is sometimes amazed at the goodwill and kindness with which respondents answer questions as silly, as arbitrary, and as irrelevant as those so often “administered,” especially in public opinion surveys. That said, one only needs to have conducted an interview once to become conscious of how difficult it is to focus continuously on what is being said (and not solely in words) and think ahead to questions which might fall “naturally” into the flow of conversation, all the while following a kind of theoretical “line.” This means that nobody is immune to the “intrusion effect” created by naively egocentric or, quite simply, inattentive questions and, above all, the fact that answers extorted in this way risk rebounding on the analyst: their interpretation is always liable to take seriously an artefact that they themselves have manufactured without knowing it. Thus, to give an

example, despite being both a considerate and attentive person, a researcher puts a point-blank question to a steelworker who has just recounted what good luck he has had to stay in the same workshop all his life, asking if he “personally” is “ready to leave Longwy,” and gets in reply, once the first moment of complete amazement has passed, a polite response of the type that the hurried researcher and opinion poll coder will categorize as acquiescence: “Now [amazed tone]? Why? Leave? I don’t quite see the point of it...No, I don’t think I will leave Longwy...That has just never occurred to me...Especially since my wife is still working. That holds me back perhaps...But, leave Longwy? I don’t know, maybe, why not? Some day...I won’t say “never” but it hasn’t occurred to me, particularly as I’ve stayed...I don’t know, why not [laughs], I don’t know, you never know...”

So we left investigators free to choose their respondents from among or around people they knew or people to whom they could be introduced by people they knew. For social proximity and familiarity provide two of the conditions of “nonviolent” communication. For one thing, to the extent that interviewer and interviewee are interchangeable, researchers who are socially very close to their respondents provide them with guarantees against the threat of having subjective reasoning reduced to objective causes, and having choices experienced as free turned into objective determinisms uncovered by analysis. For another thing, one finds that in this case we can be assured of immediate and continuously confirmed agreement on the presuppositions regarding the content and form of the communication: this agreement is conveyed by carefully gauged contributions – always difficult to produce in a conscious and intentional manner – of all the nonverbal signs, coordinated with the verbal ones, which indicate either how a given utterance is to be interpreted or how it has been interpreted by the speaker.³

³ These signs of feedback, which E. A. Schegloff calls “response tokens,” such as “yes,” “right,” “of course,” “oh!,” as well as the approving nods, looks, smiles and all the “information receipts,” that is, body or verbal signs of attention, interest, approval, encouragement and recognition, are the conditions for a continuing interchange that flows well (to the extent that a moment’s inattention or distraction is itself enough to provoke a sort of awkwardness in respondents and to make them lose the thread of what they were saying. *Placed at the right moment*, they signal the interviewer’s intellectual and emotional participation.

But there are limits to the social categories reachable under optimal conditions of familiarity (even if homologies of position can provide a basis for real affinities between the sociologist and certain categories of respondents: magistrates or educational social workers, for example). To throw out the net as widely as possible, we could do what we have done in earlier studies, and resorted to certain strategies such as *role-playing*, taking on the identity of a respondent in a specific social position while making pretend purchases or requests for information (mainly by telephone). But here, we took the step of diversifying the interviewers by making systematic use of William Labov's method in his investigation of the speech used by blacks in Harlem. In order to neutralize the intrusion effect of legitimate speech, he asked young blacks to conduct the linguistic investigation themselves. In the same way, we have tried wherever possible to neutralize a major cause of distortion in the investigative relationship by giving training in interview techniques to individuals who could have the kind of familiar access we wanted to certain categories of respondent we wanted to reach.

When a young physicist questions another young physicist (or an actor another actor, an unemployed worker another unemployed worker, etc.), as someone sharing virtually all the characteristics capable of operating as major explanatory factors of that person's practices and representations, and linked to them by close familiarity, their questions spring from their dispositions, objectively attuned to those of the respondent. Even the most brutally objectifying questions have no reason to appear threatening or aggressive because the interviewee is perfectly well aware of sharing with the interviewer the core of what the questions induce the other to divulge, and of sharing, by the same token, the risks of that exposure. And similarly no interviewer can ever forget that objectifying the respondent means objectifying oneself, as where, by the adjustments introduced into certain questions, the switch from the objectifying "you" to the impersonal collective "one" and then to "we," the interviewer clearly signals a personal involvement in the objectification: "In other words, all the studying *you* did, that *one* did, led *us* to love theory." And the social proximity to the person being questioned undoubtedly explains the malaise that practically all the researchers placed in such a position admitted experiencing, sometimes throughout the interview, sometimes beginning with a particular moment in the analysis: in every case, the questioning quite naturally tends to become a double socioanalysis, one that catches and puts the analyst to the test as much as the person being questioned.

But the analogy with Labov's strategy is not perfect. It is not simply a question of collecting "natural discourse" as little affected as possible by cultural asymmetry; it is also essential to construct this discourse scientifically, in such a way that it yields the elements necessary for its own explanation. This requirement considerably increased the demands placed on the nonprofessional researchers. Although we had conducted preliminary interviews with them to learn everything they knew about the respondent and to define with them the outlines of an interview strategy, a fair number of the studies carried out under these conditions

had to be dropped from the book, since they produced little more than sociolinguistic data, incapable of providing the means for their own interpretation.⁴

To these cases where the sociologist finds a substitute should also be added the research relationships in which such social distance can be partially overcome thanks to close ties with the respondent and to the sense of social ease, favorable to plain speaking, provided by various kinds of secondary solidarity liable to offer indisputable guarantees of sympathetic comprehension. In this way, on more than one occasion, family relations or childhood friendships or, as certain of the interviewers report, affinities between women, enabled them to overcome the obstacles linked to differences of social situation – in particular, the fear of patronizing class attitudes which, when the sociologist is perceived as socially superior, is often added to the very general, if not universal, fear of being turned into an object.

A spiritual exercise

But all the procedures and subterfuges that we were able to devise to reduce distance have their limits. Although transcription cannot capture the rhythms and tempo of the spoken word, just reading several interviews one after the other is enough to see what a distance there is between the statements painfully extracted from respondents furthest removed from the tacit demands of the interview situation and the statements of those most closely – sometimes too closely – attuned to such assumptions, at least according to their own conception of them. The latter acquire such a mastery of the situation that they sometimes even impose their own definition of the game on the interviewer.

When there is nothing to neutralize or suspend the social effects of asymmetry linked to social distance, one can only hope to obtain answers unaffected by the research situation itself through a constant labor of construction. Paradoxically, the more successful it is and the more it leads to an interchange that has every appearance of “naturalness,” the more that work is destined to remain invisible (where “natural” is equated with what ordinarily happens in the ordinary interchanges of everyday life).

Sociologists may be able to impart to interviewees at the greatest social remove a feeling that they may legitimately be themselves, if they know how to show these individuals both by the tone adopted and, most especially, the questions asked, that, without pretending to cancel the social distance separating them

⁴ One of the major reasons for these failures undoubtedly lies in the perfect match between interviewer and respondent, which lets respondents say everything (like most personal accounts and historical documents) except what goes without saying (for example, an actor precisely because she is talking to another actor, passes over the hierarchy of dramatic genres, and directors, and also the oppositions constitutive of the theater field at a given moment). Every investigation is therefore situated between two extremes doubtless never completely attained: total overlap between investigator and respondent, where nothing can be said because, since nothing can be questioned, everything goes without saying; and total divergence, where understanding and trust would become impossible.

(unlike the populist vision, which cannot see its own point of view), they are capable of *mentally putting themselves in their place*.

Attempting to situate oneself in the place the interviewees occupy in the social space in order to understand them as *necessarily what they are*, by questioning them from that point on, and to some degree to *take their part* (in the sense that the poet Francis Ponge, in the title of his collection, *Le parti pris des choses*, implies taking the part or “side” of things) is not to effect the phenomenologists’ “projection of oneself into the other.” Rather, it is to give oneself a *generic and genetic comprehension* of who these individuals are, based on a (theoretical or practical) grasp of the social conditions of which they are the product: this means a grasp of the circumstances of life and the social mechanisms that affect the entire category to which any individual belongs (high school students, skilled workers, magistrates, whatever) and a grasp of the conditions, inseparably psychological and social, associated with a given position and trajectory in social space. Against the old distinction made by Wilhelm Dilthey, we must posit that *understanding and explaining are one*.

This understanding cannot be reduced to a sympathetic predisposition. It is put into effect in the way – at once intelligible, reassuring and inviting – the interview is presented and conducted so that the interview and the situation itself make sense for the respondent, and also and above all in the problematic proposed: this, together with the likely responses it evokes, emerges from a verified representation of the conditions in which respondents are placed and of those of which they are the product. This means that researchers have some chance of being truly equal to their task only if they possess an extensive knowledge of the subject, sometimes acquired over a whole lifetime of research, and also, more directly, through earlier interviews with the same respondent or with informants. Most of the published interviews represent only a moment – albeit a privileged moment – within a long series of exchanges and have nothing in common with the limited, arbitrary and random encounters of surveys carried out in a hurry by researchers lacking any specific competence.

Even if this only shows up negatively, through the careful introductions and precautions that give respondents confidence and help them join in the scientific enterprise, or by excluding inappropriate or misplaced questions, this preliminary process of information gathering is what enables constant improvisation of pertinent questions, genuine *hypotheses* based on a provisional, intuitive representation of the generative formula specific to the interviewee, in order to push that formula toward revealing itself more fully.⁵

⁵ This point, as every other, would doubtless be understood better if examples of the most typical errors could be given – errors that are always based in inattention or in ignorance. Some of the virtues of a mode of enquiry sensitive to its own effects are bound to pass unnoticed because they show up primarily in what is not there. This explains the interest of the bureaucratic interviews in which the researcher, locked in personal institutional assumptions and ethical certainties, gauges the respondents’ capacity to adopt “suitable” behavior. These sorts of interviews bring out all the questions which respect based on prior knowledge tends to exclude as incompatible with an adequate representation of the situation or the philosophy of action practiced by the person being questioned.

Although it may produce the theoretical equivalent of the practical knowledge that comes from proximity and familiarity, not even the deepest preliminary knowledge could lead to true understanding if it were not accompanied both by an attentiveness to others and a self-abnegation and openness rarely encountered in everyday life. We normally tend to pay the relatively ritualized talk of relatively common troubles an attention as empty and as formalized as the ritualistic “how are you?” that triggers it. We have all heard stories of struggles over inheritances or conflicts with neighbors about educational difficulties or office rivalries, and we apprehend these through perceptual categories which, by reducing the personal to the impersonal and the unique drama to a human interest story, allow us in a way to economize on thought, on emotion, in short on understanding. And even when one mobilizes all the resources of professional vigilance and personal sympathy, it is difficult to shake off the inattentive drowsiness induced by the illusion that we’ve already seen and heard it all, and to enter into the distinctive personal history to attempt to gain an understanding – at once unique and general – of each life story. The immediate half-understanding based on a distracted and routinized attention discourages the effort needed to break through the screen of clichés behind which each of us lives, and which we use to express both the minor problems and major ordeals of our lives. The “one,” stigmatized by philosophy and discredited by literature, but which we all are, tries with its desperately “inauthentic” means to say something which, for the “I” that in our most common claim to uniqueness we believe ourselves to be, is the most difficult to hear.

Thus, at the risk of shocking both the rigorous methodologist and the inspired hermeneutic scholar, I would say that the interview can be considered a sort of *spiritual exercise* that, through *forgetfulness of self*, aims at a true *conversion of the way we look at* other people in the ordinary circumstances of life.⁶ The welcoming disposition, which leads one to make the respondent’s problems one’s own, the capacity to take that person and understand them just as they are in their distinctive necessity, is a sort of *intellectual love*: a gaze that consents to necessity in the manner of the “intellectual love of God,” that is, of the natural order, which Spinoza held to be the supreme form of knowledge.

The essential part of the “felicitous conditions” for the interview doubtless goes unnoticed. By offering the respondent an absolutely exceptional situation for communication, freed from the usual constraints (particularly of time) that weigh on most everyday interchanges, and opening up alternatives which prompt or authorize the articulation of worries, needs or wishes discovered through this very articulation, the researcher helps create the conditions for an extra-ordinary discourse, which might never have been spoken, but which was already there, merely awaiting the conditions for its actualization.⁷ Although they probably do

⁶ One might cite here Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius writing about the benevolent disposition that welcomes everything deriving from the universal cause, a joyous *assent (prosthesis)* relative to the natural world.

⁷ The “Socratic” work of aiding explanation aims to propose and not impose, to formulate suggestions sometimes explicitly presented as such (“you don’t mean that . . .”) and intended to offer multiple,

not consciously perceive all the signs of this availability (which undoubtedly demands more than a mere intellectual conversion), certain respondents, especially the most disadvantaged, seem to grasp this situation as an exceptional opportunity offered to them to testify, to make themselves heard, to carry their experience over from the private to the public sphere; an opportunity also to *explain themselves* in the fullest sense of the term, that is, to construct their own point of view both about themselves and about the world and to bring into the open the point within this world from which they see themselves and the world, become comprehensible, and justified, not least for themselves.⁸ It even happens that, far from being simple instruments in the hands of the investigator, the respondents take over the interview themselves. The density and intensity of their speech, and the impression they often give of finding a sort of relief, even accomplishment, convey, along with everything else about them, a *joy in expression*.

Thus one might speak of *an induced and accompanied self-analysis*. In more than one case, we had the feeling that the person being questioned took advantage of the opportunity we offered for a self-examination and took advantage of the permission or prompting afforded by our questions or suggestions (always open-ended and multiple, and at times reduced to a silent wait) to carry out a task of clarification – simultaneously gratifying and painful – and to give vent, at times with an extraordinary *expressive intensity*, to experiences and thoughts long kept unsaid or repressed.

Resistance to objectification

It should not be thought that, simply by virtue of reflexivity, the sociologist can ever completely control the multiple and complex effects of the interview relationship, all the more so as the interviewees can also play on those effects, consciously or otherwise, to impose their definition of the situation and turn to their advantage an exchange in which one of the stakes is the image they have of themselves, the image that they wish to give both to others and to themselves. This in a situation in which, in evoking, as the research invites them to do, "what's wrong" with their lives, they

expose themselves to all the negative assumptions that burden these problems and misfortunes for as long as the people subjected to them do not know how to use the legitimate forms of expression of legitimate sufferings, in other words, the forms supplied by politics, law, psychology and literature. For example, in a number of interviews (mainly with members of the Front National) the social relation between respondent and researcher produces a very powerful effect of censorship, reinforced by the tape recorder: it is doubtless this fact that makes some opinions inexpressible

open-ended continuations to the interviewee's argument, to their hesitations or searchings for appropriate expression.

⁸ I have observed many times that respondents would repeat with visible satisfaction the word or phrase that illuminated their own actions, that is, their position (such as when I described the critical position of an employee within the hierarchy of his own institution as a "fuse," which, by its connotations, graphically described the extreme tension that he experienced).

(except in brief snatches or lapses). Certain interviews bear numerous traces of the respondents' attempts to master the constraints contained within the situation by showing that they are capable of taking in hand their own objectification and of adopting toward themselves the reflexive point of view that is inherent in the very conception of the research.

One of the most subtle means of resisting objectification comes from those interviewees who, playing on their social proximity to the interviewer, try, more unconsciously than consciously, to protect themselves from it by seeming to play along and attempting to impose, without always knowing it, something akin to self-analysis. Despite appearances, nothing is further from the participant objectification in which the researcher assists the respondents in a simultaneously painful and gratifying effort to disclose those aspects of the social determinants of their opinions and their practices which they may find it most difficult openly to declare and assume, than the false, collusive objectification – half-baked demystification and therefore doubly mystifying – which affords all the pleasures of lucidity without questioning anything essential.

I quote here just one example: "There is a kind of malaise which means I don't know where to place myself... I'm not too sure anymore where I am socially... maybe it has to do with acknowledging the Other... I'm becoming aware how much other people take a completely different view of you depending on the social position you occupy, and that really is quite disturbing. It wasn't easy for me having a number of different social statuses. I wasn't all that good at sorting out where I was sometimes, especially when it came to how others saw me," etc., etc.

It can happen that utterances like this, tacking on to an apparent avowal the appearance of an explanation, may provoke in a researcher who feels a spark of recognition, because they are constructed with the instruments of thought and forms

of expression close to their own, a form of intellectual narcissism which may combine with or hide within a populist sense of wonder.

So, when the daughter of an immigrant evokes with considerable poise the difficulties of her split existence for an interviewer who may recognize in certain elements of these statements some aspects of her own imbalanced experience, she manages, paradoxically, to have the interviewer forget what is at the heart of the highly stylized vision of her life that she is putting forward, namely her literary studies, which allow her to offer to the interviewer a double gratification: a discourse that closely fulfills the interviewer's conception of a disadvantaged group; and a formal accomplishment that eliminates any obstacle relating to social and cultural difference. Both the questions and the responses need to be quoted in full:

Interviewer This awareness developed when you arrived in France, but awareness of what exactly?

Respondent Awareness of reality in the sense that for me it was there that things began to take shape. I am actually living out the reality of my parents' separation. It takes on meaning for me from the moment when I moved from living with my parents, that is, with my mother and her family, back there [in Morocco, where the mother remained after the separation], to come here, where I finally discovered my father. It was the first time we had really lived together. Even when he was married to my mother his social life was here, in France. So they didn't see much of each other, and we didn't see much of him. I felt that he was someone I was discovering for the first time (...). He came back into my life from the moment we were going to live together. So there was a realization in that regard, the separation took on meaning. I realized that I had never lived with my own father. And also there was the sense of another landscape. It was not the same space-time (...). You know that you

pass from your father to your mother. That also excites you a little, in a certain way, but reality comes little by little to color in and give life to what had happened. So that makes it no longer the same landscape, no longer the same space-time. For myself, from that moment I passed into a period of flux, where, if you like, it was necessary from then on to make a bridge between the two worlds which, for me, were entirely separate. I haven't quite got over that separation, which is much more than the actual separation of my father and mother.

And later on:

— I have the impression, in fact, of being rooted in something. And that the question posed now is, am I going to continue in that or am I going to try to leave it totally? Frankly, I don't really believe I will. So clearly, I will always be half-way. It's true that doesn't mean much to me to be like this or like that, I have a desire to keep this kind of fresh air, this sense of being between-two-worlds. I don't know.

Obviously, the interview becomes a monologue in which the respondent asks the questions herself and replies at great length, hardly pausing for breath, imposing on the researcher (who clearly wants nothing more) not simply her problematic, but her style ("You feel yourself uprooted here?" or else, "What is your greatest dissatisfaction?"). She thus excludes *de facto* any investigation of the objective facts of her trajectory other than those which enter into the project of self-portraiture as she conceives it.

In this exchange relationship, each deceives the other a little while also deceiving herself: the researcher is taken in by the "authenticity" of the respondent's testimony, because she believes it gives access to a raw, dense, inviolate form of speech that others will not have known how to pick up or to provoke (certain more or less stylized forms of peasants' or workers' speech can exert the same seduction); the respondent plays her expected part as the Immigrant. Without having to seek it openly, she is assured that the literary value of her speech is recognized, which testifies simultaneously to the divided character of her consciousness and a quest for salvation through style.¹

¹ If this logic of the double game in the mutual confirmation of identities finds particularly favorable terrain in the face-to-face relations of an investigation, it does not occur solely in the "botched" interviews (fairly numerous) that we had to drop. I could cite some works that appear to me to illustrate this perfectly, such as a recent novel by Nina Bouraoui, *La voyageuse interdite* (Paris, 1990, trans. as *Forbidden Vision*, New York, 1995), and certain new forms of populist literature, which, while appearing to combine the two, side-step the demands both of an authentically sociological testimony and an authentically literary novel because they have a blind-spot about their own point of view. But the example par excellence seems to me to be that of the novel *Small World* by David Lodge (New York: Warner Books, 1984), a mystifying demystification, which presents all the commonplaces of the self-satisfied representation, falsely lucid and truly narcissistic, which university teachers love to present of themselves and their world — a book which, quite logically, has had an immense success in the university world and all the circles connected with university studies.

A realist construction

Even if it is sometimes experienced as such, there is nothing miraculous about this kind of match achieved between the researcher's precautions or attentiveness and the respondent's expectations. True submission to the data requires an act of construction based on practical mastery of the social logic by which these data are

constructed. For example, one cannot properly hear what is being said in the apparently quite banal conversation between three secondary school students [see "A Paradise Lost," p. 441] unless one avoids reducing the three young girls to the first names which stand for them, as in so many "tape recorder sociologies," and knows how to read in their words the structure of the objective relations, present and past, between their trajectory and the structure of the educational establishments they attended, and through this, the whole structure and history of the teaching system expressed there. Contrary to what might be believed from a naively personalist view of the uniqueness of social persons, it is the uncovering of immanent structures contained in the contingent statements of a discrete interaction that alone allows one to grasp the essential of each girl's *idiosyncrasy* and all the singular complexity of her actions and reactions.

Understood in this way,⁹ conversational analysis reads in each discourse not solely the contingent structure of the interaction as a transaction, but also the invisible structures that organize it – that is to say, in the case above, the structure in social space in which the girls are situated right from the start, and the structure of academic space within which they have pursued their different trajectories. Although these trajectories belong to the past, for the girls they continue to orientate their vision of their past and of their educational future, and also of themselves, in their most singular aspects.¹⁰

Against the illusion which consists of seeking neutrality by eliminating the observer, it must be admitted that, paradoxically, the only "spontaneous" process is a constructed one, but a *realist construction*. In order to make this understood – or at least felt – I shall relate an anecdote which shows that it is only when it rests on prior knowledge of the realities concerned that research can bring out the realities it intends to record. Taking the investigation which we have undertaken on the housing problem as an example, in order to get away from the abstract unreality of preferences, particularly as regards purchase and rental, I decided to ask each respondent to talk about their successive places of residence, the conditions under which they had access to them, the reasons and causes that had led them to choose them or to leave them, the alterations they had made, etc. The interviews carried out along these lines proceeded in such a way that seemed to us very "natural," giving rise to some accounts of an un hoped-for frankness. Then, in the subway a good while afterwards, totally by chance, I heard a conversation between two women of about 40; one of them, who had recently moved into a new flat, was telling the story of the successive places where she had lived. And

⁹ That is, in a sense very different from that given to it when the object of study is the manner of conducting conversation, for example the structures of openings and endings, leaving out of account the social and cultural characteristics of the participants.

¹⁰ I could have quoted here the interview with a young lycée student, son of an immigrant, which, in Nelson Goodman's sense, is an "exemplification" of the analysis of the transformations of the teaching system which have led to the increase in those *excluded from the inside*, the interviewee concerned being a perfect "sample" (in Goodman's terms) of this new type of lycée student. [See "Those Were the Days," p. 427]

her interlocutor conducted herself exactly as if she were following the rules that we had laid down for these interviews. Here is the transcription that I made from memory immediately afterwards:

“It’s the first time I’ve been in a new apartment. It’s really nice. The first place I lived in, in Paris, was on the Rue Brancion, it was an old building that hadn’t had anything done to it since the First World War. Everything had to be redone and everything was a mess. And there again, you couldn’t get the ceilings clean because they had got so grimy.”

“It really is a lot of work.”

“Before, with my parents, we’d lived in a tenement without any water. It was marvelous, with two children, to have a bathroom.”

“After that, we moved to Créteil, it was a modern building, but it was already about ten years old . . .”

“At my parents’ it was the same. But, for all that, we weren’t dirty. Having said that, it was certainly much easier.”

And the story continued in this way, very naturally, interrupted only by interventions either to “acknowledge reception,” by simple repetition, in an affirmative or interrogative mood, of the last-pronounced phrase, or to show interest and to offer agreement with certain points of view (“It’s hard, when you work all day standing up . . .” or “At my parents’ it was just the same . . .”). It is this participation, in which one engages in conversation and brings the speaker to engage in it as well, which most clearly distinguishes ordinary conversation, or the interview as we have practiced it, from the interview in which the researcher, out of a concern for neutrality, rules out all personal involvement.

There is a whole world of difference between this kind of maieutics and the imposition of a problematic, which is just what so many opinion polls do with all the appearance of “neutrality.” Their forced, artificial questions produce out of nowhere the artefacts they believe they are recording – to say nothing of television interviews which extort from the interviewees remarks which come straight out of television discourse about them.¹¹ The first difference is the awareness of dangers to be avoided, based on the knowledge of the volatility of what are called “opinions”: deep-seated dispositions can be shaped into many forms of expression and they can accommodate themselves to relatively different, preconstructed formulations (the preset alternatives in the closed questionnaire or the ready-made language of politics). Which means that nothing is simpler, and in a sense, more “natural,” than imposing a problematic: this is shown by the frequent *hijacking of opinion*, with all the innocence of being unaware of it, by opinion polls (which is what predisposes them to serve as the instruments of a rational demagoguery) and also, more generally, by demagogues of all persuasions, who are always in a hurry to confirm the apparent expectations of individuals who do

¹¹ I think it is necessary to recall here analyses I made earlier in a more systematic manner (cf. especially, “L’opinion publique n’existe pas,” in Pierre Bourdieu, *Questions de Sociologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1984), pp. 222–50).

not always have the means of identifying their real needs.¹² The imposition effect applied in the guise of “neutrality” is all the more pernicious in that publication of such imposed opinions helps to impose them and give them a social existence, bringing the pollsters a semblance of validation that reinforces their credibility and their influence.

One sees the reinforcement that the empiricist representation of science is able to gain from the fact that rigorous knowledge almost always presupposes a more or less striking rupture with the evidence of accepted belief – usually identified with common sense – a rupture liable to appear as begging the question or as prejudice. In fact, it is precisely by leaving things alone, abstaining from any intervention and all construction, that one falls into error: the terrain is then free for pre-constructions or for the automatic effects of social mechanisms at work in even the most elementary scientific operations (conception and formulation of questions, definition of categories for coding, etc.). Only active denunciation of the tacit presuppositions of common sense can counter the effects of all the representations of social reality to which both interviewers and interviewees are continually exposed. I am thinking particularly here of representations in the press and, above all, on television, which are everywhere imposed on the most disadvantaged as the ready-made terms for what they believe to be their experience.

Social agents do not innately possess a science of what they are and what they do. More precisely, they do not necessarily have access to the core principles of their discontent or their malaise, and, without aiming to mislead, their most spontaneous declarations may express something quite different from what they seem to say. Sociology (and this is what distinguishes it from the science of little learning that opinion polls are) knows it has to find the means to challenge, beginning with the very questions it poses, all the pre-constructions, all the pre-suppositions belonging to both the researcher-interviewer and the respondent, which operate so that the research relationship is often established only on the basis of such correspondences or connections of which neither party is aware.¹³

Sociology also knows that the most spontaneous and therefore apparently the most authentic opinions, which satisfy the hurried investigator from the public opinion research institutes and those who commission the polls, can follow a logic very close to one that psychoanalysis points to. This is the case, for example, with the sort of a priori hostility to foreigners that is found everywhere among

¹² These reflections are particularly directed at those who teach that criticism of opinion polls equals criticism of democracy.

¹³ In a detailed analysis of replies to an opinion poll about politicians (Giscard, Chirac, Marchais, etc.) conceived on the model of a Chinese game (if this individual were a tree, an animal, etc., what would they be) I showed that, in their replies, without being aware of it, respondents used the classificatory schemes (strong/weak, rigid/flexible, noble/ignoble, etc.) which the authors of the questionnaire had also used in their questions, *without being any more aware of it*. The inanity of the comments the authors appended to the statistical tables they published demonstrate their total lack of understanding of the data they had themselves generated and *a fortiori*, of the operation by which they had generated those data. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 546–59.

farmers or among small shopkeepers who lack any direct knowledge of immigrants. One can only get beyond the appearance of denseness and absurdity which, by comparison with an understanding-based interpretation, seems to characterize that hostility, if we see that, by a form of *displacement*, it offers a solution to the contradictions specific to these small-time capitalists with proletarian incomes and to their experience of the governments which they see as responsible for an unacceptable redistribution of wealth. The real bases of the discontent and dissatisfaction expressed, in inappropriate forms, in this hostility can only be brought to consciousness – that is to explicit discourse – where an effort is made to bring to light these things buried deep within the people who experience them – people who are both unaware of these things and, in another sense, know them better than anyone.

Like a midwife, the sociologist can help them in this work provided the sociologist has a deeper understanding both of the conditions of existence of which they are the product and of the social effects that can be exercised by the research relationship (and through it by the position and primary dispositions of the researcher). But the desire to discover the truth, which is constitutive of scientific intent, is totally devoid of any practical power unless it is rendered as a “craft,” itself the embodied product of all earlier research and quite other than an abstract, purely intellectual way of knowing. This craft is a real “disposition to pursue truth” (*hexis tou alétheuein*, as Aristotle says in the *Metaphysics*), which disposes one to improvise on the spot, in the urgency of the interview, strategies of self-presentation and adaptive responses, encouragement and opportune questions, etc., so as to help respondents deliver up their truth or, rather, to be delivered of it.¹⁴

The risks of writing

This same disposition is at work in the construction of the recorded interview and so we can move more expeditiously in the analysis of the procedures of transcription and analysis. It is clear that even the most literal form of redaction (the simplest punctuation, the placing of a comma, for example, can determine the whole sense of a phrase) represents a *translation* or even an interpretation. This is even more markedly the case with the kind of redaction proposed here: breaking with the spontaneistic illusion of a discourse that “speaks for itself,” it

¹⁴ This is not the place to analyze all the paradoxes of the scientific habitus which presupposes, on the one hand, an effort to bring to consciousness socially constituted primary dispositions in order to neutralize and uproot them (or better yet, to detach them from their bodily incorporation), and on the other hand, an effort – and *training* – to incorporate, and thus to render quasi-“unconscious,” the consciously defined principles of the different methods thus made *practically available*. (The opposition between conscious and unconscious “knowledge” we have resorted to here for purposes of communication is actually totally artificial and fallacious: in fact, the principles of scientific practice can be both present to consciousness – to varying degrees at different times and different “levels” of practice – and function in the practical state in the form of incorporated dispositions.)

deliberately works off the *pragmatics of writing* (particularly by adding headings and subheadings taken from phrases in the interview itself) to orient the reader's attention toward sociologically pertinent features which might escape unwary or distracted perception.

The report of the discourse produced by the author of the transcription is subject to two sets of constraints that are often difficult to reconcile: the constraint of being faithful to everything that came up in the interview – which cannot be reduced to what is actually recorded on the tape recorder – would lead to an *attempt* to restore to that discourse everything that tends to be stripped away by writing and the feeble, impoverished ordinary tools of punctuation – everything that often gives the real meaning and the real interest. However, the constraints of readability, defined in relation to potential readers with very different levels of understanding and competence, prohibit publication of a phonetic transcription with notes aimed at restoring everything lost in the transition from the spoken to the written form, that is, the voice, pronunciation (notably in its socially significant variations), intonation, rhythm (each interview has its own tempo which is not that of reading), gesture, gesticulations and body language, etc.¹⁵

Transcription then, means writing, in the sense of rewriting.¹⁶ Like the transition from written to oral that occurs in the theater, the transition from the oral to the written, with the changes in medium, imposes infidelities which are without doubt the condition of a true fidelity. The well-known antinomies of popular literature are there to remind us that merely conveying their language “just as it is” does not afford true self-expression to those who do not normally have access to it. There are hesitations, repetitions, sentences interrupted and prolonged by gestures, looks, sighs, or exclamations: there are laborious digressions, ambiguities that transcription inevitably resolves, references to concrete situations, events linked to the particular history of a town, a factory, a family, etc. (referred to all the more readily by speakers if the interviewer is more familiar, and therefore more familiar with their whole familiar environment).

It is therefore in the name of the respect due to the author that, paradoxically, we have sometimes had to rid the transcribed text of certain add-on develop-

¹⁵ We know, for example, that irony, which is often the product of a deliberate discrepancy between body and verbal symbolism or between different levels of the verbal message, is almost inevitably lost in transcription. And the same goes for the ambiguities, double meanings, uncertainty and vagueness so characteristic of oral language, which writing almost inevitably resolves, particularly through punctuation. But there is also all the information inherent in proper names, immediately meaningful to those familiar with a particular world (and which have almost always had to be omitted to preserve the anonymity of the respondents), names of people, places, and institutions, on which structuring divisions often hang. Such is the case with the opposition between experimental and boulevard [Broadway] theater which gives meaning to an actress's mix-up between the name of a boulevard actress and a great classical tragedian: a significant slip through which she revealed, for those with ears to hear, the reality of a failure tied to a poor initial choice between the two careers.

¹⁶ Cf. P. Encrevé, “Sa voix harmonieuse et voilée,” *Hors Cadre* 3 (1985), pp. 42–51. (A full transcription (not phonetic) of all the interviews (182 in all) was made, and placed in the archive, along with the corresponding tapes.)

ments, certain confused phrases, verbal expletives or linguistic tics (the “rights” and the “ers,” etc.), which, even if they give their particular color to the oral discourse and fulfill an important function in communication (by permitting a statement to be sustained during a moment of breathlessness or when the interviewer is called to support a point), nevertheless have the effect of confusing and obscuring the transcription, in some cases to such a point that it becomes altogether unreadable for anyone who has not heard the original. Similarly, we took it upon ourselves to divest the transcription of all its purely informative statements (on social origin, studies, job, etc.) wherever these could be moved into the introductory text. But we have never replaced one word with another or changed the order of the questions or the progression of the interview, and all the cuts have been indicated with ellipses.

By virtue of the exemplification, concretization and symbolization which they effect, and which at times give them a dramatic intensity and an emotional force close to those of a literary text, the transcribed interviews can have the effect of a *revelation*, especially for those who share some general characteristics with the speaker. Like the parables of prophetic speech, they provide a more accessible equivalent of complex, abstract conceptual analyses: they render tangible the objective structures which scientific work strives to expose, doing so even by way of the most individual characteristics of enunciation (intonation, pronunciation, etc.).¹⁷ Being able to touch and move the reader, to reach the emotions, without giving in to sensationalism, they can produce the shifts in thinking and seeing that are often the precondition for comprehension.

But emotional force can also generate ambiguity, even confusion, in symbolic effects. Can racist remarks be reported in such a way that the person making them becomes intelligible, and can it be done without legitimating racism? How can one do justice to the remarks without entering into the reasoning, without accepting that reasoning? Or, in a more ordinary case, how is one to refer to the hairstyle of a low-ranking clerk without playing on class prejudice, and how is one to communicate, without seeming to approve it, the impression she inevitably produces on someone attuned to the canons of the dominant aesthetic – an impression that forms part of her most inevitably objective truth?

Clearly, intrusion of the analyst is as difficult as it is necessary. In taking the responsibility for *publishing* these discourses which, as such, are placed, as Benveniste says, “in a pragmatic situation implying a certain intention of influencing the interlocutor,” the analyst not only has to accept the role of transmitter of their symbolic efficacy, but, above all, risks allowing people free play in the game of reading, that is, in the spontaneous (even wild) constructions each reader necessarily puts on things read. This game is particularly dangerous when applied

¹⁷ The words of the postal employee [“Working Nights, p. 297”] say much more than is said – while covering what it does say – in an analysis (conveyed with all the abstract coldness of conceptual language) which examines the social trajectory of provincial white-collar workers, forced as they very often are to pay for entry into the profession or for career advancement with a long exile in Paris. See Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 124.

to texts which were not written and which, for this reason, are not protected in advance against feared or rejected readings, above all, when applied to the words of speakers who do not speak like books and who, like so-called popular literature whose “naïveté” or “awkwardness” is the product of the cultivated eye, have every likelihood of not finding favor in the eyes of most readers, even those with the best intentions.

To choose a *laissez-faire* approach out of a concern to avoid any limitation imposed on the reader’s liberty is to forget that, whatever one does, every reading is already, if not constrained, then at least oriented, by the interpretative schemas employed. We have observed that, in some cases, nonspecialist readers read the interviews as though they were hearing confidences from a friend or, rather, remarks (or gossip) about a third party – an opportunity for identification, but also for differentiating themselves, for judging, condemning, affirming a moral consensus in the reaffirmation of common values. The very particular political act which brings into the public sphere, through publication, something that does not normally come into it – at least, never *in this form* – might be said to have been in some way distorted, and totally emptied of its meaning.

It thus seemed indispensable to intervene in the presentation of the transcriptions both by providing headings and subheadings and, above all, prefatory sections, to provide the reader with tools for a comprehensive reading, a reading capable of reproducing the stance that gave rise to the text. The sustained, receptive attention required to become imbued with the singular necessity of each personal testimony, which is usually reserved for great philosophical and literary texts, can also be accorded, by a sort of *democratization of the hermeneutic stance*, to the ordinary accounts of ordinary adventures. It is necessary, as Flaubert taught us, to learn to look at Yvetot the way one so easily looks at Constantinople: to learn, for example, to give the marriage of a teacher and a post office worker the attention and interest that would have been given to the literary account of a misalliance, and to give the statements of a steelworker the thoughtful reception reserved by a certain tradition of reading for the highest forms of poetry or philosophy.¹⁸

¹⁸ The reception of sociological discourse clearly owes much to the fact that it concerns the immediate present or current events; in this respect it is like journalism, which is, however, its opposite. We know that the hierarchy of historical studies corresponds to the remoteness of their objects in time. And it is certain that a transcription of a sermon by the Bishop of Créteil [working-class diocese], even though it is equally rich in rhetorical subtleties and theologico-political skills, does not receive the same attention as a text by Adalberon of Laon, written, moreover, in Latin; and more value will be attached to the (probably apocryphal) words of Olivier Lefèvre, founder of the Ormesson dynasty, than to an interview with the last of his descendants [the novelist and member of the French Academy Jean d’Ormesson]. Nothing escapes the logic of the academic unconscious which guides this a priori distribution of respect or indifference, and sociologists who succeed in overcoming these prejudices in themselves will, no doubt, find that the minimal consideration required for the documents they produce and the analyses they make of them is all the more difficult to obtain because the daily and weekly press are full of sensationalist declarations of teachers’ anguish or nurses’ anger – which are, for that matter, better designed to satisfy the kind of conventional goodwill offered to good causes.

We have therefore striven to transmit to readers the means of developing an attitude toward the words they are about to read which will make sense of them, which will restore the respondent's *raison d'être* and their necessity; or more precisely, to situate themselves at the point in social space from which all the respondent's views over that space emanate, which is to say that place in which this particular worldview becomes self-evident, necessary, *taken for granted*.

But there is doubtless no writing more perilous than the commentary which a public writer must provide for the messages that have been confided to them. Forced to make a constant effort to master completely the relation between the subject and the object of the commentary or, more exactly, the distance that separates them, the writer must strive for the objectivity of "historical enunciation," which, in the terms of Benveniste's alternative, objectivates the facts without the intervention of the narrator, while eschewing the cold distance of the clinical case study. While trying to deliver all the necessary elements of an objective perception of the person questioned, such writers must also use all the resources of language (such as the free indirect style or the "as if" dear to Flaubert) to avoid the objectivating distance which would place that person in the dock or, worse, in the stocks. All this has to be achieved while still respecting a categorical ban (this is another of the functions of "as if") on projecting themselves improperly on to this alter ego, which always remains an object, like it or not, in order abusively to make themselves the subject of that individual's worldview.

Rigor, in this case, lies in the permanent control of the point of view, which is continually affirmed in the details of the writing (the fact, for example, of saying "her school" not "the school," in order to signal the fact that the account of what happens in this organization is given by the teacher interviewed and not the analyst). It is details of this sort which – if they do not pass purely and simply unnoticed – will most probably appear as matters of literary elegance or journalistic sloppiness, which continuously underline the difference between "the personal voice" and "the voice of science," to use Roland Barthes's phrase, and the refusal to slide unconsciously from one to the other.¹⁹

Sociologists cannot be unaware that the specific characteristic of their point of view is to be a point of view on a point of view. They can re-produce the point of view of their object and constitute it as such by resituating it within social space, but can do so only by taking up that very singular (and, in a sense, very privileged) viewpoint, being obliged to place themselves there in order to be able to take (in thought) all the points of view possible. And it is solely to the extent that they can

¹⁹ This constant control over one's point of view is never as necessary, nor so difficult, as when the social distance that has to be surmounted is only minimal. Thus, for example, in the case of the woman teacher, whose favorite expressions ("I feel guilty," "relationship problems," etc.) can seem both off-putting and unreal, and prevent one from feeling the drama they are expressing, it would be only too easy to let the associations of day-to-day polemics come into play, so as to characterize by caricature a life and lifestyle which only seem so intolerable because of a fear of recognizing one's own conflicts in them.

objectify themselves that they are able, even as they remain in the place inexorably assigned to each of us in the social world, to imagine themselves in the place occupied by their objects (who are, at least to a certain degree, an alter ego) and thus to take their point of view, that is, to understand that if they were in their shoes they would doubtless be and think just like them.

Postscript

The political world has gradually turned inward, absorbed in its internal rivalries, its own problems, its own interests. Like the tribunes of ancient Rome, politicians capable of understanding and expressing their constituents' expectations and demands are becoming increasingly rare, and their political organizations leave much to be desired. Future leaders are chosen in television debates or party caucuses. Those who govern are prisoners of a reassuring entourage of young technocrats who often know almost nothing about the everyday lives of their fellow citizens and have no occasion to be reminded of their ignorance. Journalists, subjected to the constraints weighing on them from the pressures and judgments of both internal and external forces, and especially from competition and the resulting haste that has never fostered reflection, frequently give careless, often imprudent, descriptions and analyses of the most burning issues of the day; the effect they produce in the intellectual as well as the political world is at times all the more pernicious because they are in a position to validate each other and to control the circulation of competing discourses, such as those of social science. Then there are the intellectuals, whose silence is deplored. Yet some of them never stop talking, often "too soon," about immigration, about housing policies, about relations in the workplace, about bureaucracy, about the political world; but they say things that people do not want to hear, and they say it in their own language, which people do not understand. On the whole, people prefer to listen, in an unplanned way, and not without contempt, to those who speak indiscriminately, without worrying excessively about the effects that might result from observations that are poorly thought out on questions that have been poorly posed.

Nevertheless, all the signs are there of all the malaises which, since they find no legitimate expression in the political world, can sometimes be identified in frenzied outbursts of xenophobia and racism. With only the old-fashioned category of "social" at their disposal to think about these unexpressed and often inexpressible malaises, political organizations cannot perceive them and, still less, take them on. They could do so only by expanding the narrow vision of "politics" they have inherited from the past and by encompassing not only all the claims brought into the public arena by ecological, antiracist or feminist movements (among others), but also all the diffuse expectations and hopes which, because they often touch on the ideas that people have about their own identity and self-respect, seem to be a private affair and therefore legitimately excluded from political debate.

A truly democratic politics must give itself the means of getting away from the alternative of a technocratic arrogance that claims to make people happy in spite of themselves and a demagogic resignation that accepts the verdicts of supply and demand, whether expressed in market tests, poll results or approval ratings. “Social technology” has advanced to the point where we are all too familiar with clear demands that can be easily met, and social science can usefully remind us of the limits of a technique like a poll, which, because it is simply a means to any number of ends, risks being turned into the blind instrument of a rationalized demagoguery. But social science cannot by itself combat politicians’ propensity to ensure their own success by gratifying superficial demand, all of which turns politics into a barely disguised form of marketing.

Politics has often been compared to medicine. We need only reread the “Hippocratic Corpus,” as Emmanuel Terray has,¹ to discover that, like the physician, the conscientious politician cannot be satisfied with information gleaned from statements which, in more than one case, are produced by a mode of questioning that is unaware of the effects that it can have: “Anyone can take down symptoms and statements. If that were enough for effective treatment, there would be no need for doctors.” The physician must strive to discover illnesses that are not obvious (*àdèlà*), precisely the ones that the practitioner can “neither see with his eyes nor hear with his ears.” Patients’ complaints are vague and uncertain; body signals are obscure and convey their meaning only very slowly, and often after the event. So we must look to reasoning (*logismos*) to uncover the structural causes that statements and apparent signs unveil only by veiling.

In this way, Greek medicine anticipated the lessons of modern epistemology. It affirmed at the outset the necessity of constructing the scientific object by breaking with what Émile Durkheim called “preconceptions” – the representations that social agents make of their own condition. And just as early medicine had to work with the treacherous competition of soothsayers, astrologers, magicians, charlatans or “hypothesis makers,” so social science today is up against anyone and everyone with a claim to interpret the most obvious signs of social malaise, as when, for example a scarf worn by a schoolgirl is immediately labeled an “Islamic veil.” It has to deal with all these people, too clever by half and armed with their “common sense” and their pretensions, who rush into print or to appear on television to tell us what is going on in a social world that they have no effective means of either knowing or understanding.

According to the Hippocratic tradition, true medicine begins with the knowledge of invisible illnesses, with the facts patients do not give, either because they are not aware of them or because they forget to mention them. The same holds true for social science, which is concerned with figuring out and understanding the true causes of the malaise that is expressed only through social signs that are difficult to interpret precisely because they seem so obvious. I am thinking of the outbreaks of senseless violence at sports events or elsewhere, about racist crimes,

¹ Emmanuel Terray, *La politique dans la caverne* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), pp. 92–3.

about the electoral success of the prophets of doom, eager to exploit and magnify the most primitive expressions of moral suffering that – as much as and more than by the poverty and the “passive violence” of economic and social structures – are produced by all the small privations and muted violence of everyday life.

To go beyond appearances, fought over so bitterly by all those whom Plato called “doxosophists” – “experts-on-opinion-who-claim-to-be-scholars,” would-be scholars of the obvious – it is clearly necessary to get to the real economic and social determinants of the innumerable attacks on the freedom of individuals and their legitimate aspirations to happiness and self-fulfillment: determinants manipulated today not only by the merciless constraints of the labor and housing markets, but also by the decisions of the educational market and the overt penalties and covert aggressions of working life. To achieve this, it is necessary to break through the screen of often absurd, sometimes odious projections, that mask the malaise or suffering as much as they express it.

Producing awareness of these mechanisms that make life painful, even unlivable, does not neutralize them; bringing contradictions to light does not resolve them. But, as skeptical as one may be about the social efficacy of the sociological message, one has to acknowledge the effect it can have in allowing those who suffer to find out that their suffering can be imputed to social causes and thus to feel exonerated; and in making generally known the social origin, collectively hidden, of unhappiness in all its forms, including the most intimate, the most secret.

Contrary to appearances, this observation is not cause for despair: what the social world has done, it can, armed with this knowledge, undo. In any event, what is certain is that nothing is less innocent than noninterference. If it is true that it is not easy to eliminate or even modify most of the economic and social factors behind the worst suffering, particularly the mechanisms regulating the labor and educational markets, it is also true that any political program that fails to take full advantage of the possibilities for action (minimal though they may be) that science can help uncover, can be considered guilty of nonassistance to a person in danger.

And, even though their effectiveness, and therefore their responsibility, is lesser and in any case less direct, the same holds true for all the philosophies holding sway today that (often citing the tyrannical uses made of the reference to science and reason) work to invalidate every intervention of scientific reason in politics. Science can have nothing to do with the totalizing excess of a dogmatic rationalism, at one extreme, or with the aesthete’s resignation to nihilistic irrationality, at the other. It is content with the partial and temporary truths that it can conquer against the common perception and the intellectual doxa, truths able to secure the only rational means for using fully the margin of maneuver left to liberty, that is, to political action.

Glossary

EDUCATION

agrégation highly selective competition on national examination for upper-level teaching positions in lycées.

baccalauréat terminal high school (lycée) qualification taken upon nationwide examination, now specialized by field (science, math, literature, economics, etc.). From a highly prestigious because exceptionally selective qualification the baccalauréat has become a more general one: in the 1970s one student in five received the bac, in 1995 the figure was one in two.

BEP Brevet d'études professionnelles: vocational high school certificate.

BEPC Brevet d'études du premier cycle: junior high school certificate.

BTS Brevet de technicien supérieur: higher technical qualification.

CAP Certificat d'aptitudes professionnelles: certificate earned following vocational classes and work internship.

CAPES Certificat d'aptitude au professorat de l'enseignement du second degré: first level teaching certificate.

Certificat d'études primary school certificate.

collège "junior high school" or middle school, the first cycle of secondary school education, comprising the four years between primary school (l'école primaire, from age six to 11) and the lycée (three years).

DESS Diplôme d'études supérieures spécialisées: specialized degree preparing for entry into the working world.

DEUG Diplôme d'études universitaires générales: generalist degree for the first cycle (usually two years) of university study.

educational system Education in France remains highly centralized at all levels, dependent upon the Ministry of National Education (which accounts for some 20 percent of the total national budget). Even private schools (15 percent of students in primary and secondary education) are "under contract" to, and therefore financially dependent on, the government.

ENA *École Nationale d'Administration*: elite school for civil servants.

grande école post-baccalauréat school entered upon competitive examination (in contrast to the university, which is open to any student with a baccalauréat), ranging from the broadly based, traditional (from the eighteenth century) and highly prestigious *École Polytechnique* (engineers) and *École Normale Supérieure* (preparation of lycée teachers in literature, philosophy and science), to the more recent *École Nationale d'Administration* for governmental administrators, founded in 1945), to more specialized schools such as the *École de Magistrature* (for judges).

LEP *Lycée d'enseignement professionnel*: high school specializing in vocational and technical subjects (see also *lycée*).

lycée "high school," the last three years of secondary education. Until recently, the lycée remained an elite institution, since only a minority of the age cohort continued secondary education in the lycée. The 1989 *loi d'orientation* stipulates that 80 percent of the age cohort should enter the lycée and has brought about massive growth in the secondary school population. There has also been a proliferation of lycées specializing in vocational and technical preparation (see also *LEP*). For the final two years, students choose one of several tracks, which are specialized by area (physical sciences-math, economics-social sciences, literature-philosophy, and four technical tracks, the latter often in the *LEP*).

Sciences Po *Institut d'Études Politiques*: political science institute in Paris.

seconde "second," the entry class of the lycée, at the level of tenth grade in the US. The following year is *première*, "first," and there is a final year, *terminale*. (See also *lycée*.)

troisième "third," the final year of collège, at the level of ninth grade in the US. The earlier years in rising order are *sixième*, *cinquième* and *quatrième*, sixth, fifth and fourth. See also *collège*.

EMPLOYMENT, HOUSING AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

ANPE *Agence nationale pour l'emploi*: national unemployment agency.

ASSEDIC *Association pour l'Emploi dans l'Industrie et le Commerce*: association for employment in industry and commerce.

CAF *Caisse d'allocations familiales*: family subsidy agency.

CFDT *Confédération Française et Démocratique du Travail*: trade union associated with the Socialist Party.

CFTC *Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens*: union of Christian workers.

CGT Confédération Générale du Travail: trade union associated with the Communist Party.

comité d'entreprise joint worker-management council in an industrial enterprise.

CSCV Confédération Syndicale du Cadre de Vie: unionist confederation on living conditions.

DDASS Direction départementale de l'action sanitaire et sociale: agency at département level dealing with hygiene and public health.

DDE Direction départementale de l'équipement: equipment/renovation agency at département level.

DP délégués du personnel: staff representatives.

HC1 Habillage-Caisse 1: modern Peugeot body plant opened 1989 at Sochaux, eastern France.

HLM Habitation à loyer modéré: subsidized public housing administered by a national government agency.

JAC Jeunesse Agricole Chrétienne: Christian Young Farmers Group.

Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne Christian Working Youth.

RMI Revenu minimum d'insertion: subsistence income for reentry into work, a benefit established in 1988 to integrate people in difficulty back into the economy. The RMI is distinct from unemployment benefit although there is an important overlap for the individuals concerned. Given the double-digit rate of unemployment in France since the 1980s, unemployment is the major economic problem facing the country.

SMIC salaire minimum interprofessionnel de croissance: minimum wage, re-evaluated every year and adjusted for inflation. The SMIC has replaced the SMIG, salaire interprofessionnel garanti.

SMIG see *SMIC*.

TUC Travail d'utilité collective: public service job.

LOCALITIES AND ADMINISTRATIVE LEVELS

arrondissement an administrative subdivision (here of Paris).

banlieues suburbs: used here in the sense of the outer areas of large towns with heavy concentrations of public housing projects and many of the problems identified with the "inner city" in the US and the UK.

commune the basic unit of local government, at the level of a village in the countryside, represented by an elected mayor and municipal council with a

mayor's office. The over 36,000 *communes* give France a governmental unit some five times smaller than the comparable local government unit in other European countries or the US. (See also *mairie*.)

département regional subdivision of France for administrative purposes. There are 95 départements in metropolitan France.

DSQ Développement social des quartiers: social development districts.

mairie administrative office of the elected mayor of a local government area, local town hall.

préfecture prefecture: the office of the prefect, a regional official of the central government.

quartier "neighborhood" or "district," technically an administrative unit for local and national government as well as a general topographical reference.

ZEP Zone d'éducation prioritaire: educational priority zone, school district designated for special attention and investment by the national government.

ZUP Zone d'urbanisation prioritaire: zone for priority urbanization, urban area designated by the national government for priority investment.

POLICING AND INVESTIGATION

BRB Brigade de répression du banditisme: a unit acting against organized crime.

CRS Compagnie républicaine de sécurité: paramilitary police used in riots.

DPJ Division de police judiciaire: criminal investigation division of the police, including officers in local police stations, but under the ultimate authority of the Ministry of the Interior.

gendarme a member of the Gendarmerie Nationale, the national police force (as opposed to local police) under the direct authority of the Ministry of the Army.

OPJ Officier de police judiciaire: criminal investigation officer, plainclothes police officer charged with investigating offenses and receiving investigative complaints, statements, etc.

RG *les renseignements généraux*: intelligence bureau.

POLITICS

Assemblée Nationale National Assembly: French legislative assembly.

Beur (loose anagram of *arabe*) Often referred to as "immigrants," *les beurs* are the second generation: the children of North African immigrants, they were born

in France and were therefore (at the time of these interviews) automatically French citizens.

Front National National Front: a far right, xenophobic political party founded and led by Jean-Marie Le Pen. Among other extremist positions the National Front advocates the expulsion of immigrants. The party is particularly strong along the southeast coast, in the northeast and, in general, in areas where there is a significant presence of North African and other African immigrants.

MLF Mouvement de Libération des Femmes: women's liberation movement.

pieds noirs term used for French citizens of European, largely French origin, who settled in Algeria beginning in the late nineteenth century and came to France, under considerable duress and difficult economic conditions, when Algeria became independent in 1962.

JUSTICE

CR Commission rogatoire: rogatory commission, an authorization for cause delivered by the examining magistrate to proceed to a certain number of actions within a criminal investigation.

juge d'instruction examining magistrate. (See also *justice system*.)

justice system *magistrats* (magistrates) or *juges* (judges) are appointed civil servants with training in law and usually attendance at the École Nationale de Magistrature (National School for the Magistracy). "Sitting" magistrates (that is, on the Bench, *le Siègre*) are not recruited from the ranks of practicing lawyers from the Bar (*le Barreau*). "Standing" magistrates, primarily the local public prosecutors (*le procureur* or prosecuting attorney) are also civil servants attached to the public prosecutor's office (*le Parquet*). All magistrates are ultimately responsible to the Ministry of Justice and to the Minister of Justice (Attorney General). More generally, there are far fewer jury trials than in the Anglo-Saxon legal system. One or two examining magistrates conduct an investigation to determine whether a trial is warranted. The majority of cases are tried by a court of three judges, presided over by a President of the Court (Chief Judge).

procureur public prosecutor. (See also *justice system*.)

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Index by Zeb Korycinska

Confined to their governmental ivory towers, and with their eyes fixed on the opinion polls, politicians and state officials are all too often oblivious to the lives of their citizens. On the other hand, the ordinary men and women who have so much hardship in their lives, and so few means to make themselves heard, either protest outside the official frameworks or remain locked in the silence of their despair.

Under the direction of Pierre Bourdieu, a team of sociologists spent three years analysing the new forms of social suffering that characterize contemporary societies – the suffering of those who are denied the means of acquiring a socially dignified existence, as well as the suffering of those who are poorly adjusted to the rapidly changing condition of their lives.

Declining housing estates, the school, the family, street-level state services, the everyday world of social workers and policemen, factory workers and white-collar clerks, the universe of farmers and artisans, of teachers and the unemployed and partly employed: these are just some of the spaces where conflict occurs, where specific discriminations and recriminations, tensions and contradictions abound and accumulate, and where new forms of suffering are produced.

This book can be read like a series of short stories – the story of a steelworker who was laid off after twenty years in the same factory and who now struggles to support his family on unemployment benefits and a part-time job; the story of a trade unionist who finds his goals undermined by the changing nature of work; the story of a family from Algeria living on a housing estate on the outskirts of Paris whose members have to cope with pervasive, everyday forms of racism; the story of a schoolteacher confronted with urban violence; and many others as well. Reading these stories enables one to understand these people's lives and the forms of social suffering which are part of them. The reader will also see that this book offers not only a distinctive method for analysing social life, but another way of practising politics.

The original publication of this book was a major social and political event in France, where it topped the bestseller list and triggered a wide-ranging public debate on inequality, politics and civic solidarity. It will be essential reading for all those – including social scientists, educators, social and political activists and ordinary citizens – who are concerned about the current state of contemporary societies.

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