

Quentin DELUERMOZ, “Urban mail carriers in France 1871-1914” (“Les facteurs de ville en France de 1871 à 1914”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Yves Lequin, Lyon 2, 1998, 230 p.

A study focusing on urban mail carriers has given us more precise knowledge of the different categories of carrier service that exist and their interrelationships. The general service appears to be structured by a subtle yet firm hierarchy whose criteria are the areas where the work is done and especially seniority. This study has also enabled us to study the administrative world. As Jean Tulard’s analyses reveal, the service is operated by the guiding principles of discipline and hierarchy that characterize all administrations. This administrative world is compartmentalized, first in relation to the general working world, and then because of the subdivisions within its categories (agent, sub-agent). According to the Duvergier de Hauranne’s phrase cited in F. Bourdeau’s study, it constitutes “a nation within the French nation.” Finally, the administration represents a system of real and important social welfare, although this does not prevent those in unskilled trades from finding themselves between the devil and a hard place.

Urban mail carriers are a unique social group: as working-class men familiar with middle-class financial practice and the value of saving, these qualities helped them to rise somewhat above their immediate social condition. They also showed themselves to be relatively active in the social struggles at the end of the 19th century, although they were more likely to defend the labor interests of their craftsmen than those of the workers’ or civil servants’ movement. But the combative methods they used were also original. As if they had already understood the disadvantages of their work situation (poor qualifications, easily replaceable), they were among the first in the history of labor struggles to stage sit-ins at the workplace. This early development may be related to the fact that before the advent of large factories, the administrative world generally presented many of the same characteristics, including monitoring, discipline, social welfare, and the binding of workers.

Finally, the urban mail carrier’s occupation has a specific professional image. Whether it is due to administrative strategies or people’s hopes, the mail carrier must fit a certain pre-conceived image. During the period of our study, the urban mail carrier found himself in the position of having to adapt to the gradual predominance of the rural mail carrier’s image. This is an interesting development, insofar as we find ourselves studying an occupation that justifies itself not only on the basis of the skills and knowledge required but also on the image created by the occupation.

Let’s try now to focus on defining the craft of the urban mail carrier. First of it should be described as an “administrative craft:” we use the word “craft” because this service is composed of a body of workers organized in hierarchy (like the guild model), with the weight of tradition behind it. The notions of honor and professional identity play an important role here, because mail carriers had their own savoir-faire to defend, not so much a technical know-how as one based on knowledge of people and places; this is what Marie Cartier calls a “social know-how” in her study. These characteristics are incorporated in an extremely solid administrative framework where careers and the work process are managed according to precisely defined administrative rules. Mail carriers also wear a uniform that gives them a certain dignity and they

qualify for significant social welfare benefits. As a professional group of craftsmen, mail carriers are a definite extension of the administration for all the above reasons.

Strikes have revealed the complexity of their situation: working conditions for mail carriers are similar to those for factory workers who develop over time. They work hard and are subject to strict monitoring in an environment where activities are controlled, timed, and pre-planned. Strikes have also shown that these workers are easily replaced, especially by military personnel. This means that they must guard and protect their professional identity. From this standpoint, can we say that mail carriers perform an administrative job or are they simply unqualified sub-agents? The problem with providing an exact definition of the urban mail carrier's craft – one that belongs both to the aristocracy of service and the dross of postal administration – has to do with his "know-how:" since it is not technical but based on private professional knowledge, this know-how does not make the carrier himself indispensable to his work; instead, he is easily replaceable. Socially and geographically, it is still important that the mail be distributed as efficiently and quickly as possible. Soldiers, for instance, had trouble distributing the mail in 1906. The mail carrier is important but not indispensable, walking a fine line between these two qualities.

There is one consistent fact concerning urban mail carriers in the period in question: the decrease in his service from the period 1880-1900 onward. At the beginning of the Third Republic, the urban mail carrier seems to have been literally driven away from his privileged status, despite his resistance. During those pivotal years, there were significant structural shakedowns in the service (the modification of the guidelines for promotion and hiring). The urban carrier's advantages over his rural counterpart also decreased at that time. Better put, the latter's image eclipsed the figure of the urban carrier due to administrative strategies urban mentalities. The decline is paradoxical, since the same period saw the development of cities as well as service: we see a decline in the urban mail carrier's stature at the very moment when he was most in demand.

There are two possible explanations for this paradoxical change. First of all, the Republic's agenda and its policy of equality between town and country is significant: although the city was the capital of civilization during the Second Empire (justifying the view that the mail carrier's service there be most highly regarded), the ruralist and agrarian politics of the Republic saw the gradual leveling off of these differences. It would seem that mail carriers' service was more sensitive to political than economic transformations. The transformations of urban space at the end of the 19th century contributed to a changing perception of the city that was tarnished first of all by the exodus to the country. Then the city became the site of industrialization and social struggles. We see a rejection of urban space by city folk who revived fantasies of country life.