

**Odile JOIN-LAMBERT, “The Postmaster as an intermediary between State and customer” [1944-1973]”, (“Le receveur des Postes, entre l’Etat et l’usager (1944-1973)”)**, Ph. D. Thesis in contemporary history directed by Patrick Fridenson, EHESS, 1999, 648 p.

The professional occupation of postmaster is defined by a set of duties established by the State within the framework of a special status of public service. The network of post offices places the postmaster in contact with customers throughout France. The duties and demonstration of the job in action have gradually shaped its performance. A balance between the three poles of State, staff, and customer (who only exists in relation to the first two entities) was modified between 1944 and 1973, at a time when social sector of the economy was developed, when the State was being transformed, office work became invigorated, and when the social scarcity of management positions was at its lowest.

Our approach is interdisciplinary. The history of postmaster cannot be explained only through the evolution of public rights, nor only from a sociological perspective, nor by reflecting on the efficiency of business concerns: we implement each of these approaches in our study. The postmaster is a civil servant who is not an ordinary salaried employee. His or her responsibility for telephone, mail, and financial services represents a special stability in French society between 1944 and 1973. Postmasters and postmistresses were responsible for performing their duties under the conditions of equality, continuity, and adaptation prescribed by law and encourage by the French concept of public service. The legal and regulatory perspective is significant here, as is the study of the special status of this professional body. We devote particular attention to the differences between the work prescribed by memoranda and praxis, based on the critical methods used in the study of the sociology of labor, management, and history.

We divide the timeframe we have chosen into three distinct periods. From 1944 to 1958 the postmaster was usually a local figure, relatively well-to-do, middle-aged or older, someone who had connections with other civil servants in the main post offices of larger cities and frequent contact with the customers of small rural post offices. With the support of their administrations, postmasters were successful in imposing uniform status on all the offices they controlled; this allowed them to develop an exceptional career path, in a socio-political context where the Republic had preserved a rural base, and where the political reference to the origins of the Third Republic was significant. This balance was in the postmaster’s favor.

The diachronic study of professional careers in the period from 1958 to 1968 indicates that the group was little affected by the demographic and sociological changes that traversed France during those years. Faced with the number of new postmaster positions that were demanded by urbanization, the post office first gave priority in its search to reserves in the public sector followed by reserves in rural areas; only then, progressively after World War Two, did it turn to its reserves of manual workers. The group became more and more individualized within the ensemble of PTT careers, symbolizing fidelity and dedication to administrative service, in marked contrast with a large part of other employees who would not have a full career with the PTT.

From 1968 to 1973 the State took up the initiative once again and assigned new financial duties to the post office: the postmaster simultaneously became a representative of the State and, in a

certain sense, a businessman. Greater changes in the duties of post office representatives resulted in a line of services that became more complex in the search for increased productivity. The postmaster's service became more streamlined as his or her goals and means became more concentrated.

The study of personnel pay sheets reveals some unexpected mobility. As a group, postmasters characterized themselves more and more through their allegiance to administrative service, in contrast with other PTT employees at the management level. Based on our quantitative study of personnel files, we were able to distinguish four postmasters' professional careers that were not originally outlined by the statutory organization or personnel management. These careers bear witness to the adaptability of the title of postmaster to the various types of post offices that existed in this period. Specifically, the most usual profile was the least upwardly mobile, representing someone who ended his or her career in a rural area. This phenomenon evinces the variety of possible careers and indicates a preference among postmasters for stability in the context of economic growth.

When we looked at representations of public service during the period in question, public accounting was a major variable for postmasters. They bore a strong symbolic association with democracy, as an aspect of collective representation. One of the most important associations involved applying the principle of separation of computers and accountants, thus assuring honesty and decisions made by a legitimate political authority. The notion of the separation of powers was crucial to the process of legitimization for postmasters as accountants.

The history of postmasters and postmistresses sheds its own particular light on the history of public service. Each in his or her own way represents a balance between a culture of the State that is permeated by the public, executive demands based on prerogative that require closed financial channels, the management of business activities, and a staff with the status of civil servants.