

Bruno MAHOUCHE, “Postal sorting centers in the Paris area: the evolution of organizational practices between operating restrictions and social logistics”, (“Les centres de tri de la Poste de la région parisienne : l’évolution des pratiques d’organisation entre contraintes de fonctionnement et logiques sociales (1946-1989)”), Ph. D. Thesis in contemporary history directed by Patrick Fridenson, Paris 8, 2005, 526 p.

This thesis in social history studied the process of how the organization of postal sorting centers evolved in the Paris area from 1946 to 1989. We demonstrate how the organizational practices of this institution were reformulated in relation to political, economic, social, and technological transformations. Changes in the organization of postal sorting centers in the Paris region are subscribed to the study of organizational practices, the analysis of the evolution of the division of labor and professional relations, the qualification and structuring of the professional category, and changes that came about with the elaboration of a professional culture by employees. Thus we can combine a Marxist approach where social class determines decision-making power; the sociology of institutions implies that organizational practices must be analyzed as institutional facts, an approach in the field of the sociology of institutions that is grounded in the cooperation and autonomy of the participants. Combining these different critical approaches allows us to conceive of the organization of the postal sorting centers in the Paris area as a social construct, to admit both the rationality and the legitimacy of different social logics, and to fully understand the dynamics of change in action.

There were three main stages of development: in the first stage, the way business establishments worked was the result of a politics of cost reduction (1946-1963); the second stage was influenced by State injunctions (1964-1974); the third was marked by a serious social crisis that had repercussions on many social constructs (1975-1989). From 1946 to 1963 postal directors were looking, in the context of cost reduction within the existing judicial and economic parameters, for the means of adapting the postal sorting centers in the Paris area, Production demands and the search for heightened flexibility in managing the workforce largely determined the organizational changes. Despite the instatement of civil servant status in 1946 and the rationalization of the sorters’ work, postal directors tended toward the development of a dual labor market. This resulted in a social division of labor that was based on a double segmentation of manpower that separated maintenance workers and sorters on one side and distinguished those with civil servant status from auxiliary workers on the other. The innovative dimension within the organization of labor was derived from Taylorian principles based on the splitting up of tasks, time-keeping, and the imposition of a military-style discipline whose main objective was to increase the sorters’ quantitative and qualitative performance. From 1953 onward, increases in productivity without financial compensation met with dissatisfaction on the part of employees. While workers were blending efficiency and cooperation guidelines with a view to reducing delays in routing the mail (in order support a rational plan of collective action in the best possible way), growing resentments among workers took the form of their massive participation in August 1953 strikes. The specialization of tasks that led to the homogenization of workers favored the emergence of trade unionism with its own set of demands, incorporated by the CGT. Its beliefs were based on the rights of union members who performed a public function; these rights sanctioned the creation of efficient and aggressive union structures. One then gradually saw directors’ efforts to set up judicial measures in order to prevent social conflicts that would have little or no positive effect.

From 1964 to 1974, the practical necessity of responding to State injunctions related to the implementation of a politics of regional planning, together with the tensions between demands for further productivity and efficiency led to a unique political and economic environment. Sustaining numerous debates, this configuration led postal directors to redefine the organization of the postal sorting centers in the Paris area. Rather than taking an antagonistic stance, the relationship between administrative planning and business logic showed that each side complemented the other in limning a new definition of the organization of the postal sorting centers in the Paris area. From this perspective, its process of evolution also corresponded to the crystallization of relations between State politics regarding regional planning and directors' strategies. The redefinition of the organization of postal sorting centers in the Paris region was filtered through the establishment of principles of differentiation in handling the mail that emerged from postal reform, the creation of centers that specialized in handling parcels, and the elaboration of principles that subtended the development of a mechanized system for processing mail. This phase, which was initially related to an experimental phase, led in 1972 to the general adoption of mechanized equipment that was found to be effective. At that time management foresaw the possibility of implanting a mechanized sorting center in each department in the Paris area. But at the same time two distinct social phenomena came into accord: the unionized playing field of protest expanded, thanks to the CFGT and far leftist elements, as workers began to call importance to the quality of life beyond the workplace. Managers were then put in a position of trying to define the social dimension that had to be integrated into the organization in order to counteract the negative effects of employees' behavior.

The period from 1975 to 1989 is distinguished by the gradual transition from an organizational model based on the manual execution of tasks to a different organizational model enhanced with reliable and specialized mechanical means for handling the mail sorting process. Following the strike of "autumn 1974," an automatic sorting center was installed in every department in the Paris area. As a result, the social division of labor was accompanied by a spatial, technical, and gender-based division of tasks. Managers attempted to integrate the rigidity and social constraints they faced into the new organization, so as to limit the number of potential strikes. The mode of social regulation that emerged was based on the principle of working together accompanied by the establishment of a social politics focused on the problems of employee housing and social integration. If the mutation of this organizational system overturned its technical content and its mode of social and spatial organization of work, it was not critical of the fundamentals of the organization of labor based on Taylorian principles. The fluidity of the mail handling process that resulted was based on an increased compartmentalization of labor and remained a collective set of tasks. Some anthropological realities, such as the urban environment where the automatic sorting centers were installed and commercial discourse, influenced the employees' relationship with their work at sorting centers. Their attitude towards their work was characterized by the management of certain guidelines for production in relation to their own interests. The creation of new locations, which encouraged the growth of the number of workers at sorting centers in the Paris area, and the increase in the number of social conflicts contributed to a decrease in productivity at these locations. Political, economic, and business pressures led management to reconsider the nature of professional relations and the ways of controlling the workforce that were implemented at these centers. The use of technical judicial and social measures whose goal was to make the postal network more secure attempted to repress certain



behavioral patterns as much as these same measures sought to refine strategies for monitoring the postal network.