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* For the "Technical resources
and innovation" seminar
** For the "Business life" seminar
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**THE PSYCHOANALYST'S VIEW
OF THE ECONOMIC WAR**

by

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Overview

For several years, Christophe Dejourns has observed the development of suffering in the workplace and the increase in various mental pathologies : new forms of work organisation shatter the old balance between the employee's contribution and the recognition of his effort ; between individual initiative and group co-operation ; and between personal commitment and self-fulfilment. But Michel Villette asks the question : does it really make sense to denounce and make "collaborators" (which we all are, more or less, according to Christophe Dejourns) feel guilty, when none of us really has any other choice ? In addition, is the suffering which he describes, not merely a stage or transition, both in the individual career path of those who are entering the workplace, and in the evolution of our society ?

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TALK : Christophe DEJOURS

What is the psychoanalyst's view ? First of all, it is a look from bottom to top, in other words from body to head, but also, in the context of the economic war, a view which is interested primarily in the fate of the infantry who wage the war, more so than that of the generals who give the orders.

Work : an emotional experience

Before looking at what work is like in times of economic war, I would like to talk about work in peacetime. Why do people work ?

The psychoanalyst's point of view blatantly differs here from that of the economist, who generally thinks that we work simply in order to make money.

When one works, generally one has to follow certain orders, but more often than not, things do not take place according to these orders. All sorts of breakdowns and anomalies arise : you resist, you break, you get worked up, you explode ; clients change their minds, subordinates do not obey or understand orders, tools do not work any more, the machine tool starts heating up, the aeroplane starts vibrating abnormally, the patient has a reaction after an injection, etc.

Working is seeing how we cope with reality, a very disagreeable and annoying experience, even to the point of seeming to be hopeless when the ordeal repeats itself indefinitely ; but paradoxically, it is just at the moment when things most resist knowledge, know-how and experience, that one can be sure that one is really face to face with reality. Working enables us to enter a totally new, previously unknown world : the real world. For a psychoanalyst, working, which always starts with the ordeal of failure and powerlessness, is all about emotions.

How intelligence mobilises the body

How does one face this ordeal ? There again, the view of the psychoanalyst is different from the conventional view and notably from that of classic experimental psychology.

Faced with this sort of difficulty, it is no longer a question of following orders : one has to invent a new path which is different from previously known ones, by using one's intuition ; but one's intuition will only produce a result if there is already a certain familiarity with technical objects, constituents or even the clients with whom one is going to work.

It is at this moment that the body comes into play : in order to face up to unexpected situations thanks to intuition, the body needs to enter into an affective relationship with the technical objects, according to a form of intelligence which the Greeks referred to as *mètis*, and which is currently being rediscovered, notably by German researchers, and is known as *subjectivant activity* (Böhle F., Milkau B., *Subjektivierendes Handeln*).

For example, if you drive a car trying to use the car handbook and the rules of the highway code, you will be a public danger : you will not have time to check with a ruler if your car has enough space to pass between the bus and the truck, and you will be heading straight for an accident. To drive correctly, you have to feel your car with your body, to know it all over : when you overtake, you should feel the indicators almost touching ; it sends a shiver down your spine. The same is true if you are at the controls of an fighter plane or a machine tool or if you run a nuclear power plant : all these activities demand a prior familiarisation as well as this bodily involvement.

We know neither how to measure something invisible, nor work

And yet, this familiarisation does not happen overnight : therefore, you have to have been often faced with difficulties, and to have been totally wrapped up in these ordeals. You have to have been fanatical about this machine, to have been thinking about it outside of work, to have been losing sleep about it, to have dreamt about it. Only then, will you be capable of finding the solutions when it inexplicably breaks down. Working is unearthing things, making constant discoveries, which in itself presupposes the commitment of your entire being.

But none of this can be seen. Subjectivity does not belong to the visible world, and this has huge consequences for what we are thinking about : since we can only evaluate quantitatively and objectively what can be seen and what belongs to the visible world, we do not know how, in the current state of scientific progress, to evaluate work, because we do not have access to this intrasubjective dimension of work by experimental methods.

Co-ordination versus co-operation

In addition, we do not generally work alone, and if everyone contented himself with developing his discoveries on his own, then they might be in contradiction with each other. However, putting one's discoveries together is not as easy as that ; they more or less have to be kept secret, precisely because they often break procedure, rules and orders : you cheat in order to do good, but you cheat all the same. This is why the co-ordination which the company has set up is not, by definition, capable of getting around this difficulty : it could not take into account everything concerned with cheating and breaches of the law.

The second type of organisation which then comes into play is co-operation : the actors put altogether their findings, their tricks of the trade, their ways of doing things, in order to confront them, to criticise them and to make them progress. This is what is called the "ethics activity", in other words, the production, from scratch, of rules which sometimes contradict and compete with the co-ordination rules imposed by the hierarchy. These rules are at the same time technical and social, since working is never purely a question of producing, it is also about living together ; the rules of co-operation take account of these two dimensions.

Taking part in this co-operation gives rise to a certain number of risks : not only do you bring to light your undercover offences, but you run the risk of having your findings pinched by someone who has realised, perhaps before you, their potential.

The construction of identity

Why then do people who work go to so much trouble and take so many risks ? Generally speaking, one assumes that it is simply in order to make a living.

For a psychoanalyst, financial remuneration is merely a secondary aspect of the question. What mobilises people such that they dream about it at night, is symbolic remuneration : the need for recognition, in the sense of *gratitude*, but also for *re-connaissance*, in other words, of what comes after *connaissance* ; people want us to recognise everything of themselves they have put into their work – their intelligence, their intuition and also their effort and their suffering.

The reason they attach so much to this recognition, is that it brings them something essential which helps construct their identity, notably by marking their membership of a community : in order to be of value, recognition should take the form of a judgement on the beauty and usefulness of the finished work, and this judgement should come from the people capable of appreciating the personal work necessary, in other words, one's peers. The employee thus gains membership to the group : «that guy there is a real boilermaker, this one here is a real researcher,

this one is a real psychoanalyst» (getting recognition in the latter profession is more difficult than in all the others, of course...).

What is essential in this process of recognition, is that it centres around work, and not around the person in general – were it to do so, it would be a case of judging a book by its cover and this would spark off the worst feelings of injustice and bitterness.

It is only after this first stage of identity, that of membership, that one can go on to the second type of recognition, that of identity in literal terms, in other words the fact that we are unique, like no-one else : by pushing ourselves to continue to deserve more and more recognition, we improve ourselves, we transform ourselves, we build ourselves. And it is in this way that identity emerges from work.

Work gives us a second chance

One could argue that a person's identity exists well before he starts working. But, the particularity of man, is that his identity is always a bit unfinished, incomplete : as you know, each one of us would have been a genius if only our parents had not stifled our innate talents with their neuroses.

In this way, work seems like a second chance for man. Of course, one could think that it is love which gives us this second chance ; but stories of couples are very complicated and lots of people prove to be immature and/or unlucky in their emotional life. Work offers many more possibilities to build or reconstruct one's identity. The recognition which we find in work, transforms the suffering of work into pleasure, because it enables us to be self-fulfilled.

Work in times of economic war

What I have just described, concerns work in peacetime ; in times of economic war, it is totally different.

Instead of subjective mobilisation which I have described, in other words, the fact that each person mobilises himself in order to get recognition, one finds a general form of mobilisation ; instead of having a work contract negotiated between the manager and the employees, there are contracts linked to goals and the threat of redundancy ; instead of "living together", it is a case of "each one for himself" or even encouraging underhand struggle ; instead of recognition, there is individualised assessment of one's performances, which is idiotic since, as I said before, one cannot assess something which is invisible : assessment by one's peers would be a much more precise method of evaluation, but one prefers to stand by objective methods which do not function at all like recognition, but more like threats.

These new forms of work organisation bring with them catastrophes as far as mental health is concerned, not only because they ruin the psycho-dynamics of recognition and they no longer leave any hope for a reward which compensates the suffering of work and gives it some sense, but also because they very often bring about overwork, isolation, suspicion and sometimes hatred of others – without mentioning the material and moral misery of those who are deprived of work because of the enthusiasm we put in overburdening those who already have a job.

New forms of suffering at work

I will just state some of the pathologies linked to the new forms of work organisation.

The nonsense of work

Working does not make sense any more, not only because work no longer offers the promise of happiness which made recognition possible before, but because it does not even offer security any more : Michel Villette's book shows that even an executive who gives his body and soul can be made redundant, and this even when he successfully completes the task he has been assigned.

The overload of work

The pathology of the overload of work may seem surprising at a time when everyone is talking about the reduction in working hours, and even the end of work. People predicted that technical progress would liberate man, that machines would replace him ; in reality, we see the development of pathologies such as the *karôshi* : these are the sudden deaths of young Japanese between twenty-five and forty years old with no previous cardiovascular history or risk factor, but who work more than seventy hours a week. There are other pathologies like MSD (Muscular Skeletal Disorder), a real epidemic among people who work day-long at keyboards in the West, in Brazil and now India ; or even pathologies ranging from cognitive disorders to mental confusion : some people can be put into hospital with pseudo-insane syndromes similar to Alzheimer's Disease, with the difference that these symptoms can be reversible at the end of a certain period of sick leave.

Pathologies associated with solitude

When you are angry and appalled by the injustice of which you are a victim, this is translated by behaviour which is normally noticed by your family circle ; they are sensitive to this and come to help you in one way or another. But when you are alone, violence ends up by exploding in situations where it was once anticipated and contained by one's close circle : acts of sabotage are on the increase in all the ranks, from operators to executives ; it is not a question of organised sabotage in the framework of a social struggle which by definition is collective, but individual acts committed by people who have abnormal mental states, which is obviously very worrying (forensic acts).

Pathologies linked to solitude also take the form of harassment, very much in the news at the moment, or even suicide. Archives kept by occupational medicine bodies for about fifty years show that, despite the fact that there have always been suicides linked to work, it is only recently that suicide attempts are increasingly taking place at the workplace, a fact which certainly is symptomatic.

Why does the system keep going ?

Why, since many of us suffer at work, do we agree to continue to organise work in this way, and prepare our children and grandchildren to do likewise ? This question is very important, all the more so because if the system is to work, it is not enough for people simply to obey, they have to also be enthusiastic, as I have tried to demonstrate ; if they are happy just obeying orders, we cannot really call this work and this fails.

Of course, one thinks straightaway that people accept this system of organisation because they are frightened ; but in order to frighten people, you have to go to a lot of trouble : try to frighten your children in order to make them obey you, and you will see that it demands a lot of imagination and a lot of effort. In order to frighten people who work in a company, one has to prepare and carry out redundancy plans, withhold information, lie to people by saying that they will be safe and then not keeping one's word, and take a few random people and tear them apart in order to make an example of them ; it is a lot of work, it demands a lot of effort, tricks, intelligence, enthusiasm and co-operation.

The question arises again with even greater pertinence : why do all those who are involved in this system belong to it even though it destroys society, it destroys them and it mortgages the future of their children ?

For some of them, the answer is simple : there are more advantages than disadvantages. But how does one explain the behaviour of those who contribute to the system while condemning it at the same time, or those who hate the way in which things are moving but who still follow the flow ?

Several theories have tried hard to answer this question. Some talk about an internalisation of injunctions or external constraints ; but a psychoanalyst knows that there is nothing more difficult than forcing someone to internalise something. If that were possible, there would not be so many neurotic people ; it is all very well to say to a neurotic person that he does not have to feel guilty, and to repeat it to him, and to unite your efforts with those of all his family and friends in order to persuade him, but you still will not succeed.

The economic war does not exist

So here we find the idea that it is fear which pushes people to act like this : but, at the same time, we cannot talk at the present time of a reign of terror : people are neither threatened with death, nor tortured or deported if they do not do what we tell them.

My interpretation is that the economic war does not actually exist ; it is only an extremely formidable metaphor, since for those who take it seriously, it allows them to do whatever they like, and many things seem normal which would be unacceptable in peacetime.

But, above all, this idea of economic war works like a paralogical rationalisation ; *rationalisation* in the sense that after the event we give reasons for justifying things which are not justifiable, and *paralogical* because these reasons are not really rational : we make do by saying “it’s the system, it’s the market, it’s globalisation”, but, the market is looked upon as a peace mediator in the eyes of numerous specialists, rather than an element of war.

This is at least the idea which Freud expressed in a text entitled *Information on war and on death*, written in 1915 : «*We had certainly hoped*, he wrote, in the middle of the First World War, *that the impressive community of interest established by business and production would provide the beginning of such a constraint [constraint to morality], but it seems that people, for the time being, follow their passions a lot more than their interests ; at the very best, they use their interests to rationalise their passions*». The explanation put forward by the market and by globalisation for suffering at work is only an alibi to spare one’s conscience the guilt of taking part in acts which it condemns.

Economic war seems nothing less to me than a means of passing off evil for misfortune. We cannot be appalled by a misfortune, a hurricane, an earthquake, or leukaemia ; but on the contrary, we can be appalled by evil, which implies human action. Making people think that the economic war is not an evil but a misfortune, is useful to lots of people, even if it troubles others who feel as if they are condemned by fate to do things which seem reprehensible.

Inflicting, suffering, and witnessing violence

But how do they live with this moral contradiction and the mental suffering it produces which we could call *ethical suffering* ? Once again, there are a lot of people who make the best of it : paranoiacs who think that they are acting for the good of the nation, or perverts who derive pleasure from making others suffer. But there are equally lots of people who suffer either from being subjected to violence, or from being forced to impose it on others, or having to witness violence being inflicted on others.

Being subjected to violence is terrible because very often we thought that we would be able to stand everything, and then we notice how we bow our heads and we put up with the worst kinds of humiliation.

Inflicting violence is no less painful. At the end of a board of directors' meeting, the manager announces, for example, that the results are bad, that 10% of the staff has to be made redundant and that no-one will be allowed out of the office until he has given a list of all the executives two or three levels down the hierarchy who, in his opinion, have to be liquidated ; everyone takes their pens and starts writing down names : some people are perhaps writing down the name of their neighbour on their left, whilst their neighbour on the right is writing down their name.

Even violence which one witnesses, without being directly involved, is destructive : you turn to the others present, and they say that they saw nothing, heard nothing, and that they know nothing : you find yourself all alone, and in many such cases, you discover that you are also a coward ; the only possible scenario is a feeling of self-contempt and self-hatred, which is very harmful for one's mental health.

A possible slide towards totalitarianism ?

Nevertheless, the majority of our citizens survive all these ordeals ; how do they manage to get rid of "the eye which was in the grave and which looked at Cain" ? Victor Hugo thought that it was impossible, but we have identified several individual or collective strategies in order to overcome them. One such strategy, which is only feasible in a collective setting, consists of transforming the dirty work into courage : the person who gets his hands dirty is courageous, and the one who refuses to do so is a coward.

Isn't there a possible slide towards totalitarianism in this process ? It is a big debate at the moment. But on the one hand, despite everything, I had one piece of good news, namely that there is no economic war ; on the other hand, thanks to this pseudo-economic war, lots of money has been amassed and if we are courageous enough to take certain decisions, lots of things can be undertaken. But before deciding and acting, I think it is important to spend some time deliberating and this is what we are trying to do tonight by thinking altogether about what exactly is work.

COMMENTARY : Michel VILLETTE

When Michel Berry asked me if I'd like to comment on Christophe Dejourn's talk, I replied that it would be better if he asked someone like Noël Goutard, CEO de Valéo, who, at a seminar of the École de Paris entitled 'Business Life' a few years ago, had declared, for example, that *«in a company's results, every penny counts : if two hundred and sixty thousand people let their attention wander every so much, (in other words, a little) per hour, when driving their machines, talking on the telephone, being with clients, etc., then the sum of their slackening has a disastrous effect on the profit margin»*.

But Michel Berry considered that a confrontation between a psychoanalyst and a sociologist would probably lend itself better to a game of verbal fencing, as practised in the philosophical salons from which the École de Paris draws its inspiration. It so happens that I have a certain number of differences of opinion with Christophe Dejourn, whilst agreeing totally with him on certain points of his thesis, as well as having fundamentally the same critical approach.

I think, for example, that we were all struck and moved - the silence in the amphitheatre proved it - by your description of the familiarity with technical objects, of the love of work, of the bodily

involvement in work, of the enthusiasm which people put into it, of the fact that they dream about it at night.

In the same way, in your book, I was totally convinced by your analysis of the forms of suffering at work ; you study in particular the fear of incompetence, the strain of working badly, the acceptance of doing 'dirty work', the submission to the demands of hierarchy out of fear, and finally this ethical suffering which you talked about again tonight ; all these contexts seem very fair to me.

It is pointless to wait for recognition from an organisation

On the other hand, I do not agree with you on your principle that people expect recognition for their work. I'm in the habit of explaining to my students that they have to work for themselves, for their own self-esteem, and certainly not in order to seek recognition from an organisation : an organisation is stupid, it is incapable of recognition. As Bill Gates said, «*in business, you never get what you deserve, but what you negotiate*». Therefore, it would be better, I think, to try hard to build one's own identity without the expense of this recognition.

Ethical suffering is nothing new

While reading your book, I thought of my own career path and I found similarities with many of the situations you describe. For example, I found myself having to do the dirty work : just after May 1968, when I was a bit of an ecologist and left-wing, I found myself in a team whose task was to convince people to agree to the installation of new nuclear power plants. I had to persuade the local authorities that there was no risk from nuclear power, which was totally the opposite of my convictions. Of course, I refused to take part in certain operations, like the fact of going at week-ends to spy on ecologists' rallies ; this was my form of resistance, but it was pretty pathetic in comparison to the compromise of my principles which I had taken simply in order to start off my career.

I also found myself doing some work where I felt totally incompetent : in the 1980s, there was a great need for training executives to manage social conflicts, and notably the management of strikes ; I knew virtually nothing about labour law, but my boss gave me two weeks to assimilate the documentation and sent me off to run a week's course at Esso as an expert on labour law ; I was even well received.

Really, God knows I told some concocted lies since I was, after all, a professional in company internal communications.

Suffering is only a transition

I did not feel that it was a suffering but rather an effort, a work which was essential in order to earn my living, find a place in society and probably also, as you say, to "build my identity". In this sense, I am indeed one of these *collaborators* whom you denounce. One of these "*victims of the values of virility who take part in evil*". Very well, granted. But what conclusions can you draw from this ?

In your book and in your talk tonight, you cite very few other authors, some of whom are nevertheless very close in thinking to you, almost as if you want to be on your own, against them all ; for my part, I quote from a book from the 1970s which I think is very enlightening on this question, even though it is from an economist's viewpoint which you will probably find very simplistic.

The book is called *Exit, voice and loyalty* by Albert Hirschmann who says in substance the following : «*Whether you are client, employee or even investor, if your company brings you what*

you expect of it for a cost and a reasonable level of risk, it is likely you will remain loyal to it ; if, on the other hand, you feel that the relationship between the costs and the rewards appears unbalanced, then you will tend to either protest (voice), or leave the company (exit). The choice between these two solutions depends on their relative cost and risks : we protest if it does not take too much effort and if it is not too dangerous ; we escape if we have the chance, etc. »

With respect to this theory, we can analyse suffering in two ways : either we can make a matrix where there are four possible strategies associated with *voice* and *exit* ; or, and this is my personal interpretation, we can consider that suffering is in fact only a transitory state which approaches the choice *exit/voice* – apart from perhaps in pathological cases, which should be studied separately.

Good and evil

Another aspect which disturbs me in your book is the way in which you demonise neo-liberalism globalisation, which you equate with total evil. Members of the École de Paris who were present three years ago at the performance of Ferdinand Galiani's *Dialogue sur le commerce des blés*, know that no economic theory is good or bad in itself : a theory will either be useful to public interest or will become counterproductive, according to the external or internal context of a country and depending on whether the cost of wheat is low or high.

In the same way, you accuse categorically people who do not respect labour law; it seems to me that we can, without being either a madman or a pervert, consider that labour law in France is relatively badly adapted to the state of habits and of competition, that in the end it protects employees badly in the current situation and that there are probably a number of changes necessary. From this point of view as well, it is more complicated than you suggest to distinguish between good and evil.

The real target

In the knowledge that you label the neoliberalist globalisator an enemy, I was also quite surprised by the examples you take. When you talk about fear of incompetence, you cite the example of a doctor who works in a public hospital and whose patients die ; to demonstrate the constraint of working badly, you use the example of a maintenance engineer in a nuclear power station ; for lies, the case of an SNCF (French National Railways) engineer who has to take a technical risk without saying anything because his superior ordered him to do so ; for the story of precariousness, you use the example of temporary workers in the nuclear industry who suffer from being badly treated and despised by the statutory workers. All in all, you do not give a single example of a private capitalist company in the competitive sector, which ought to be your main target.

Having said that, your examples are extremely interesting, even though they are counter-examples, with regards the theory which you defend : they do not show at all the dangers of global liberalism, which should have been studied in true capitalist companies, but they do show perfectly the shifts of what I would call the State monopolist capitalism *à la française*. The suffering which you describe, is that which is generated at the intersection between a wild capitalism and a state-like privatisation, the constraints peculiar to each of these two universes add up, and one can understand that this produces extremely difficult situations for employees ; but it is very different from the *pure* neoliberalism which, in principle, you target.

Moreover, one understands very well why a psychoanalyst has only this field of study : historically, the SNCF and the EDF (Électricité de France) were the first companies to make use of labour psychology, and it was these companies which employed the greatest number of psychologists for a very simple reason : civil servant status deprives management of all means of taking economic action with regards employees, since people gain seniority as they serve in the

company for long lengths of time and one cannot make them redundant ; the only other alternative is to ask psychologists to intervene in order to try and find the way in which we can, all the same, use “sweated labour”. In companies which are really neoliberal, there are no more psychologists ; they are not needed since when someone is not efficient enough, he is fired. At IBM, the founder promised his employees jobs for life and, up until the abandoning of this founding dogma at the start of the 1990s, studies in industrial psychology there were very detailed (as in the work of Max Pages especially). Now that there are no more jobs for life at IBM, what has happened to all the psychologists ?

All victims, all guilty ?

As for the solutions which you propose for resolving the problem of suffering at work, I can only make out two, and neither of them suits me.

The first is to send us all off to see a psychoanalyst ; but I tend to think that a psychoanalytic course of treatment should be reserved for pathological cases, and as far as I’m concerned, I prefer to make do with what I’ve got, by talking to friends, for example, and trying to find solutions together.

The second solution, according to you, consists of denouncing this suffering and being aware that we are guilty each time we collaborate with capitalism by creating suffering ; you use this term ‘collaborator’ on several occasions, without hesitating to make an analogy with the situation during the Occupation. But, on the one hand, I wonder if this collective feeling of guilt will help us very much in the end ; and on the other hand, I would like us to look at it more closely, and so, I will take an imaginary example.

A fifty-five year old French executive was made redundant and has at his disposal, on January 1st 1999, a capital of four hundred thousand Francs, made up of his redundancy payment and his grandmother’s inheritance. If, in the mean time, he buys some Société Générale unit trusts and he has six hundred thousand Francs at his disposal on January 1st 2000, should he consider himself to be a collaborator in the sense used during the Occupation ?

Personally, I do not think so. At the present time, work does not pay any more and shares make a lot of money ; in my opinion, this man is absolutely right to adapt himself to the system : we should all do likewise, not only for personal interest, but because without this, all the capital of French businesses will soon be held by US pension funds. We will lose control of the capital, we will no longer have any revenues and we will no longer be able to pay for psychoanalysis sessions to treat our suffering. This does not prevent this man from thinking and using some of his money in order to organise meetings intended to denounce the abuses of speculation, but in the meantime, he should try and improve his retirement benefits.

Collective learning

In conclusion, if I never trust management doctrines which claim to make each of us into ultra-competitive supermen who are utterly sure of themselves, I am equally embarrassed every time that psychologists tend to place us in the condition of suffering victims in need of therapy. I believe, in view of the situations of suffering which do exist, that little by little people will organise themselves in order to find the solution ; like my unemployed executive, they will start by playing the Stock Market ; young people will perhaps get taken on by big audit firms and then, having been caught up in a spiral and having seen from the inside how it works, they will understand that things have to be done differently and they will modify the spiral.

The wisdom of the ancients, the *phronésis* which I talk about in my book, implies absolutely and necessarily skill, even if this condition is still not enough ; to contribute to the common good, you have to take action and make your own arms and tools : without the skill which allows us to

conquer our means of action, identity and autonomy, we are condemned to powerlessness... unless we inherit... or to being burnt at the stake whilst praying, like the Cathars in the twelfth century who preferred purity rather than the injunctions of Simon IV le Fort, Sire of Montfort, and contrary to the northern barons who made up his formidable army of crusaders ! And what if, before being burnt, we were to re-read Mandeville's *La Fable des Abeilles* (*The Fable of the Bees*) ?

DISCUSSION

Symbolic recognition and social status

Question : *I would agree that the symbolic recognition described by Christophe Dejours is important, but in the world in which we live, recognition also goes by social status, and, therefore, by the money we make. Perhaps you devalue this aspect a bit too much.*

Christophe Dejours : I could give you lots of examples of cases where people have given up all sorts of material gratification in order to have symbolic recognition. Many people who earn a lot of money suffer a great deal all the same, because this money has no sense : it does not have any symbolic value. There is also a paradoxical pathology, the "siding" pathology: it affects people who have a very good salary, but who have received the ultimate insult : «Mister So-and-So, I am terribly sorry, you are useless, I am shunting you into a siding». These people break down completely.

One informed man is worth two

Q. : *I was very struck by Michel Villette's analysis of the examples which you cite in your book, and which effectively concern above all public companies or ones which have just lost this status, or even those which are about to lose it. I think that the nature of the relationship which was established from the start between the company and the employee can explain the emergence of suffering : this relationship seemed stable and permanent and then, all of a sudden, there was a split, which naturally is very disappointing. But, in private companies, especially those which are subject to global competition, their precariousness is part and parcel of their work plan. Of course, every young employee remembers the pride he felt when he was complimented for the first time ; but one cannot say that he is taken unawares if the situation changes and he ends up being made redundant. Therefore, in the end, the situation is more symmetrical between the manager and the employee than you make out in your book : the two of them are involved directly and from the very beginning, in competitive situations.*

C. D. : Michel Villette criticised me for taking my examples from companies in the public sector ; it's true. But everyone knows that the privatisation movement begins well before the moment when the company is effectively privatised. It is in companies like the Post Office or like France Télécom where we are best placed to see and analyse the suffering of people in the framework of new forms of work organisation, precisely because they have to make this difficult passage between the public and the private sectors.

Moreover, we are very intrigued by the difficulties which they encounter : why do they suffer so much, when in principle they are not subject to the same degree of precariousness as employees in the private sector ? It is because they also have to face rationality conflicts between loyalty to public service and profitability requirements. I do not think that we can oppose the public and the private sector as strictly as Michel Villette does : the model adopted by private companies has in some way colonised the public sector.

Suffering or enthusiasm ?

Q. : *My students are engineers of the Corps des mines (a prestigious body of highly qualified civil servants) and I noticed in the last few years that they are much more enthusiastic about their work than before, whether they are civil servants or people who work in the private sector. Today, the ready-made career paths are no longer being taken : everyone has to plot a new course and take risks, which presents drawbacks but can equally prove to be thrilling, as the recent session of the École de Paris on enthusiasm showed. It seems to me that in the economy of time past, there was less misfortune, but also less happiness : companies were boring, but they protected their employees ; today, they offer totally new adventures, but they get rid of those people who are not enthusiastic about them.*

C. D. : Once again, I did not say that there are no happy employees or civil servants ; I even started by explaining what happiness one could find in one's work when it was organised in such a way that it allowed self-fulfilment. In addition, it is true that even in the current situation, many people find think that they are happier now than they were before ; I even saw union activists rejoice that the idea of seniority linked to length of company service was abandoned : «*We are finally going to be able to throw ourselves into our work !* » But, naturally, because of my profession, I am not concerned, for one reason or another, with people who get something out of the new organisation of work ; I am interested in the mass of people who have lost the pleasure of working and who suffer a great deal from that.

Give us the rules of action

Q. : *I am an executive and I have worked in private companies since the beginning of my career ; I greatly appreciated the two talks, but it does not help me a great deal, because tomorrow morning, I would like to be able to have concrete rules of action : how can I ensure, without resorting to violence, the co-operation of all my assistants, so as to improve the efficiency, productivity and the profitability of my company ?*

C. D. : Your question is a practical one, like many of Michel Villette's objections ; I have written other books where I tackle things more clinically with more practical examples from the field ; but this book was devoted to thinking about the current evolution of the world of work. Generally speaking, it seems to me that before administering rules of action, it is better to ask oneself some questions and think. At the present time, many questions remain unanswered, and everyone just wants answers and no more questions ! Thinking is not separable from action : when we begin to see things from a different point of view, curiously, we also start acting differently.

The speakers :

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