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Heterogeneity versus homogeneity? Transformation of wage relations of the French and the German public telephone operators: The case of directory inquiry services

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**discussion paper**



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**Heterogeneity versus homogeneity?**

Transformation of wage relations of the French  
and the German public telephone operators:  
the case of directory inquiry services

Isabel Georges

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CNRS-Iresco-CSU (Institut de Recherche sur les Sociétés Contemporaines - Cultures et Sociétés Urbaines) and Paris VIII, is doing her Ph.D. thesis with Convention Cifre France Télécom under the scientific supervision of Margaret Maruani and has stayed 3 month in 1996 and 1997 at the WZB, (exchange program WZB-Iresco, *Programme Europe CNRS*), with special thanks to Hedwig Rudolph, Swen Hildebrandt and Sigrid Quack.

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## **Abstract**

The paper combines approaches of macro-economic regulation and interactional analysis in order to study the impact of privatisation on wage relations of the French and the German public telephone operator in the field of directory inquiry services. This multi-level (individual, local and company-wide), international comparison provides a concrete case study of the impact of the transformation of socio-economic context on the wage relations of telephone operators in the companies under consideration. The comparison covers several local inquiry centres (5 in France and 5 in Germany), situated in regions supposed to provide a diverse socio-demographic profile of the population (two centres in each country have been chosen to provide evidence for this paper).

The paper aims to show that the definition of productivity and service outcome is at the core of the transformation process. It is at the centre of negotiations between managers, employees and users of inquiry services concerning service output (in daily routine interactions as well as with regard to work organisation).

The nature of changes differ between the countries. The transformation of wage relations takes place at different levels: in France, it varies from one local inquiry centre to another, whereas in Germany it is more homogeneous and company-wide.

This difference is related to the respective ways of implementing the transformation process: while in both countries, ideology is a driving force of (legitimation of) change, in France new technical tools have been more widely used during the phase of change under observation (1995-97) whereas in Germany statutory changes of employees (and outsourcing) have been a key issue.

## **Zusammenfassung**

Dieser Artikel über den Einfluß der Privatisierung auf die Arbeitsbeziehungen in der französischen und in der deutschen öffentlichen Telekommunikationsgesellschaft kombiniert einen makro-ökonomischen Regulationsansatz mit einer Interaktionsanalyse. Der Mehr-Ebenen umfassende internationale Vergleich (Mikro-, Meso- und Makroebene) erfolgt als eine konkrete Fallstudie über die Auswirkungen der Transformation des sozio-ökonomischen Umfeldes auf die Arbeitsbeziehungen von Telefonisten/innen. Der Vergleich umfaßt mehrere lokale Auskunftstellen (5 in Frankreich und 5 in Deutschland), die in verschiedenen Regionen liegen, welche ein unterschiedliches sozio-demographisches

Bevölkerungsprofil aufweisen (in jedem Land wurden zwei Auskunftstellen als empirische Basis für diesen Artikel ausgewählt).

Es wird gezeigt, daß die Definition der Produktivität und das Ergebnis der Dienstleistung den Kern des Transformationsprozesses bilden. Sie bilden den Schnittpunkt der Aushandlungen zwischen Managern, Angestellten und Nutzern von Auskunftstellen (in alltäglichen Interaktionen wie auch mit Bezug auf die Arbeitsorganisation).

Die Änderungen unterscheiden sich zwischen den beiden Ländern. Die Transformation der Arbeitsbeziehungen findet auf verschiedenen Ebenen statt. In Frankreich erfolgt sie uneinheitlich bei den verschiedenen lokalen Auskunftstellen, während sie in Deutschland homogen und firmenweit umgesetzt wird.

Dieser Unterschied hängt mit der andersartigen Implementierung des Transformationsprozesses zusammen. Zwar ist in beiden Ländern der ideologische Diskurs eine treibende Kraft des Wandels (und dessen Legitimierung), in Frankreich spielt die technische Veränderung jedoch eine stärkere Rolle während der untersuchten Transformationsphase (1995-97) als in Deutschland; dort stehen Veränderungen des Status der Beschäftigungsverhältnisse der Arbeitnehmer (und deren Ausgliederung) im Zentrum.

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## 0. Introduction

This paper is about changes in the wage relations of telephone operators in inquiry centres<sup>1</sup> brought about by the transformation of two European public telephone operators into private firms<sup>2</sup>. The focus is placed on the point of view of both managers and employees, with special regard given to productivity in the service sector and more specifically to directory inquiry services. The continuous negotiations between these two groups of actors concerning the definition of productivity in telephone inquiry services is used to reveal the concrete implications for wage relations of a change from public to private governance. This change offers an opportunity to redefine the roles of telephone operators, supervisors and clients, as well as the type of automation chosen (meaning the technical system and its social use).

The attempts of management to organise the labour process in view of its output is confronted with local variations of work organisation in France, while the transformation is more uniform in Germany. This disparity is related to historical differences in the two civil services and in particular in inquiry services, notably the introduction of the „Minitel" in France dating at the early 1980's.

The wider economic context of the transformation of wage relations for both public operators is the deregulation of the telecommunications market in Europe, as stipulated by the legislation in force since January 1998<sup>3</sup>.

In France, a market oriented logic already existed for several years, marked by the creation of a commercial department, with local agencies, in 1977/78 (Bertho 1981, pp. 478-81). In 1990, the postal and telecommunications administration (PTT) changed its legal status and became an „exploitant public"<sup>4</sup>. Postal and telecommunication services were split. "L'exploitant public"

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<sup>1</sup> The „inquiry centres" could also be called „call centres", which is, perhaps a more common term in English. I have chosen to use the first term because the second one implicitly evokes units of an industrial size, which is not necessarily the case for this study, particularly in France.

<sup>2</sup> This process is not evolutionary or deterministic so it can develop in different directions.

<sup>3</sup> For example, *Le Monde*, 27th of November 1997, p. 18: „Le téléphone s'apprête à basculer dans la concurrence totale".

<sup>4</sup> A sort of state company created in France to insure the transition from a state administration to a private company (from 1990 to 97). This meant that the personnel maintained the status of civil servant while the company had no capital and paid no local taxes. An alternative would have been to create an EPIC (établissement public industriel et commercial), like EDF (Electricité de France). But the employees of EDF are not civil servants. Moreover, the tele-

became an incorporated company in January 1997. In July 1996, the French government decided the partial privatisation of the public company<sup>5</sup>. However, up until this time, directory inquiry services were not integrated into the commercial network.

In Germany, the profit-orientation tendency started in 1985, with the „Poststrukturgesetz“ which reorganised the German postal and telecommunication services into autonomous domains, (DBP). This was of the restructuring campaign by the conservative parties forming the Federal government. In 1989, the first postal reform (Deutsche Postgewerkschaft 1994) split postal, telecommunication and bank services. In 1994, the second reform, created three incorporated companies, a change that necessitated an amendment of the constitution.<sup>6</sup> In 1990, the East German post joined.

In both countries, privatisation is only partial so far. In Germany, although shares are on the stock market since November 1996, the State will keep control of a majority of shares until 2000. In France, privatisation should have begun in May 1997, but a change in government delayed the initiation of this process until October, when shares were finally sold on the Stock Exchange<sup>7</sup>.

In the context of the opening of European telecommunications markets, both companies are elaborating new market strategies, particularly interesting in a domain which combines missions of public services and commercial services, like inquiry services. Due to the sensibility of the subject, the following presentation will be limited to only a few possible „scenarios“, to use a word often employed by the managers.

With regard to inquiry services, several „points of view“ on its strategic position within the company are possible:

- inquiry services may be viewed as an independent commercialised service activity, inspired by the aims of profit maximisation and financial autonomy, such as in the case of the German company which has been stimulated by one of its competitors in inquiry services ;

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phone company has its own capital, which was allocated to the public operator in 1997, which is not the case of EDF.

<sup>5</sup> *Le Monde*, 15th of June 1996: „Le Sénat adopte sans difficulté la privatisation partielle de France Télécom“.

<sup>6</sup> Modification of Article 87 of the constitution: public postal and telecommunication services („hoheitliche Aufgaben“) are changed into commercial services offered by private companies which emerged from the old DBP; the state guarantees the infrastructure which is regulated.

<sup>7</sup> *Le Monde*, 10th of September 1998 announced that the State would privatise more than one third of the public operator. 70 % of employees became shareholders on the 20th October 1997, including 92 % of managers, 82 % of the intermediate management and 61 % of technicians and employees.



- inquiries may be seen as part of a whole range of information activities (related to different information services, such as the directory, Minitel, Internet and other commercial announcers, such as the „ODA<sup>8</sup>“)
- or as an after-sales department for telephone services in general. Moreover, the range of obligatory public services has to be integrated into the global strategy.

The following analysis is based on the preliminary results of a multi-level comparative study. The initial level of analysis is the occupation of telephone operator. However, the levels of explanation for the transformation of this occupation are related to more wider issues, both more general and more specific. The following comparison groups together several local inquiry centres (5 in France and 5 in Germany) situated in various regions in order to provide a diverse socio-demographic profile of the population (two centres in each country have been chosen to provide evidence for this paper). Moreover, the transformation of the two public operators on the company level (status of the firm and general employment politics) also provides explanatory evidence. National differences concerning the social role of public services are also relevant, but the link is more difficult to prove. The interactional system (1.2.) is embedded in this context: it is used to provide concrete indicators of the transformation process of wage relations within an activity caught in an intense struggle between several forms of „social relations“<sup>9</sup>, comprising „wage relations“.

This analysis focuses on the study of operators' work in different local inquiry centres through the observation of components of wage relations. The empirical body of this work is divided into three parts: 3.1. and 3.2. give the reader an introduction to the major characteristics of the directory inquiry services of the French and the German public operators, 3.3. is devoted to the transformation process: on one hand major transformations at the company level are presented (these transformations are based on three managerial tools: ideology, technical changes and the status of the employees); on the other hand wage relations on the local level are shown.

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<sup>8</sup> Office d'annonces: private announcement company, in charge of commercial announcements in the directory.

<sup>9</sup> In French: *rapports sociaux*.

# 1. Theoretical approaches

## 1.1. The concept of „wage relations“

It is generally considered that „wage relations“<sup>10</sup> can differ from one national context to another.

„Finally, one of many structural forms emerges as being especially important: *wage/labour relations*. We shall use this general term to designate the process of socialization of productive activity under capitalism: wage-earning. This may be organized in one of several ways. The network of legal and institutional conditions governing the use and reproduction of the workforce will be called the *form of wage/labour relations*.” (Boyer 1988, p. 10)

However, the originality of this paper<sup>11</sup> is to initiate a comparison based on the smallest comparable unit, the occupation. This method reduces the danger of biases, frequently met in international comparisons due to a lack of comparability of the objects. This paper does not pretend to explore the concept of wage relations in an extensive manner; links to general transformations and dynamics are not discussed here. Transformations of the labour process are at the core of the analysis, whereas organised labour disputes are left out.

### 1.1.1. The broader context of the interactional system: the concept of wage relations

R. Boyer (1986) studies the connection between transformations of labour relations and macroeconomic dynamics (regulation theory). He is particularly interested in the study of the dynamics of structural crisis and, more specifically, of

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<sup>10</sup> The term of „rapport salarial“ has been translated in the text by „wage relations“, the term of „employment relations“ would also be appropriate. The terms *work- or industrial relations*, on the other hand, appear to refer to the Anglo-Saxon school of labor relations whose theoretical impact is situated on a more restrictive level.

<sup>11</sup> This paper is based on research concerning the work and careers of telephone operators in France and Germany in progress since 1995. This work is being carried out under the scientific supervision of Margaret Maruani and is entitled, „Travail et trajectoires de femmes dans des emplois de télécommunications en France et en Allemagne“. The present article is the first stage towards an integrated framework of analysis of the transformation process of the occupation of telephone operator in a comparative perspective. In this sense, there are some preliminary conclusions which need further verification. The general framework is the introduction of Tayloristic principles in service activities (like growing standardisation and prescription of work content) related to privatisation and its impact on social relations. For the definition of Taylorism, I am referring to Freyssenet (1984a). This author defines the essence of Taylorism as the ideology of the existence of „one best way“ of working (work prescription) combined with the idea of harmonisation of the antagonistic interests of employees and employers.

wage relations. These relations, or „the process of socialisation of production under capitalism" (Boyer 1986a, p. 18), consist of five elements:

„On a more analytical level, wage/labour relations can conveniently be disaggregated into their five components:

- organization of the work process;
- the stratification of skills;
- worker mobility (within and between firms);
- the principle of direct and indirect wage formation;
- use of wage income." (Boyer 1988, p. 10)

These analytical criteria make it possible to study an occupation, for example that of telephone operator. Regulation theory provides a comparative framework for the concrete study of work and career in this category. The approach in terms of regulation is also interesting because it does not use neo-classical market theories, which are based on the deterministic idea of a universal logic of regulation mechanisms by „perfect competition". On the contrary, R. Boyer looks for structural transformations throughout the history of capitalism by the study of concrete transformations, for example in the labour market. Nevertheless, the limits of this theoretical approach have to be considered with regard to the interaction of the national (or international) regulatory level and to the level of everyday-life and work routines as well as the theoretical „roots" in the industrial sector (and its validity for the service sector).

In the present case, this approach makes it possible to overcome the gap between the general evolutions of the two telephone operators in the European context and the specific transformations of working careers of a particular occupational category within their local socio-economic contexts. The interactional system is inseparable from its context (local, national and international)<sup>12</sup>.

The main objectives of this paper are to look for indicators and to start conceptualising the implications for social relation („rapport social") of the transformation from a public service to a market-oriented company. This process transforms a particular kind of social relation (which has to be specified) into „wage relations". The most evident (or formal) aspects of the transformation process concern the status of employees on the one hand and the status of the company on the other. Transformation also affects the rights and choices of the consumer.

Our hypothesis is that, even before the privatisation process began, social relations between employers, employees in the public inquiry services and their users were effected by the importation of certain characteristics typical of a

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<sup>12</sup> However, in this paper, the analysis is concentrated on the company level; other aspects of the concept of „wage relations" will be analyzed in further research.

capitalist relationship. Social relations have been negotiated on a different basis than *wage relations* which are defined by the institutionalisation of the unequal relationship between capital and labour.

The transformation of social relations which are based on an egalitarian principle (which theoretically is the case in public services) into those governed by the principles of a capitalist market historically has followed different paths in France and Germany: for example, whereas in France, all employees of public inquiry services were public clerks, in Germany an important proportion of them perceived a salary, having the status of employees. Moreover, the degree to which work content can be standardised and the attempts to measure and control quality and quantity of the service vary over time and over space. These elements are constitutive of the nature of social relations. The process of transformation is not linear and does not necessarily succeed.

These various combinations of capitalist relations and more egalitarian relations (or relations open to negotiation) in the workplace, and in interaction with users, have to be conceptualised. The definition of service output can be used as an indicator to help analyse which social relations may lead to conflict or which different conceptions may end up in compromises or prevail.

It is assumed that within a common European context, wage relations in the previous French and German public inquiry services continue developing in different directions. This is also true from one local office to another in France, due to differing levels of standardisation of services and to differences in social relations in the past (attempts to copy from the private sector and reactions of employees to these attempts).

The international comparison shows that the switch from public to private re-opens the question of the type of production regime in this sector. Does this switch imply the application of an industrial, Fordist type of standardised mass production or does it give way to a more complex, „interactionist" (with the client or user, but also between the employees) type of production? What does this imply for the social division of work<sup>13</sup> and for the occupations under consideration?

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<sup>13</sup> For an applied analysis of „social division of work" see Freyssenet (1984b), and the present paper, section 3.3.1.

## 1.2. The conceptual framework: inquiries as to the outcome of an interactional system

The definition of the outcome of the labour process is related to the effort afforded by everybody engaged in the interaction that produces inquiries. The distribution of efforts is called social division of labour, which is the result of a negotiation process. This effort may create conflicts.

„But why should we not expect some restriction of production to be found in all occupations? In the social drama of most kinds of work, people interact in several established roles. The people of each category have their own concept of their interests, rights, and duties toward one another and toward people in the other categories. An object of these conceptions will nearly always be the measure of effort, and of product of work, both of which will also vary from person to person, from day to day, and even from hour to hour." (Hughes 1952, p. 302)

In the case of telephone operators, the division of work is affected by the switch from public to private by attempts from management to organise the labour process starting with output, the rendered service. This implies the existence of a measure of this service. The definition of the output, the rendered service, amplifies the negotiation of the social role of the operator.

The negotiation process between the different categories illustrates the relationship between this switch, wage relations and the division of labour in the company as well as with its clients<sup>14</sup>. The question immediately arises as to the possible means of regulation of this process.

### 1.2.1. First approach to the nature of change: the transformation of the interactional system and of wage relations

The observed change in wage relations of telephone operators in France and Germany from 1995 to 1997 is organised around the type of service rendered to the client and the social role played by the client.

In France, an important change in wage relations can be observed<sup>15</sup>. The organisation of the labour process, the division of work and the type of control have been re-defined in relation to the client or user **outside** the workplace. The client's status changes: 1) the organisation of the work process, 2) the

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<sup>14</sup> In this article, I use the term „client" because it has a more neutral connotation in English than the French term „client". In French, „client" means a consumer of a commercial service. The opposite is an „Usager", the user of a public service. At present, the status of the „user" of inquiry services is subject to negotiation.

<sup>15</sup> With regard to its limited use, the social dialogue is embedded in the transformation of the labor process.

transformation of the access conditions to the service (its price and type of commercialisation) and the type of service rendered, 3) the observable (audible, not face-to-face) interaction between client and operator.

„One of the commoner failures in the study of work is to overlook part of the interactional system. We speak of the physician and patient as a social system (as did Dr. L.J. Henderson in an article by this name) or at most include the nurse; or we speak of teacher and pupil, lawyer and client, and the like." (Hughes 1956, p. 309)

### 1.2.2. The impact of change and the nature of activity

It is clear that in every study of work, it is important to include all parts of the system of interactions. This is even more important in the service sector, because there is often no agreement about what has to be produced. Therefore, the question of output may create conflicts.

„Compared to the restrictions; resistance and distortions of purpose, assignments and efforts in a school, a mental hospital, a social agency or a prison, the much studied restrictions of production in a factory is simplicity itself. In the factory, there is at least fair consensus about what object shall be produced. There is often no such consensus in institutions where things are done for or to people." (Hughes 1956, p. 309)

The privatisation process concentrates attention on the definition of the service and its measurability (productivity) because the rules of consumption are transformed. This change is fundamental because the „consumer" of a service is also (partly) its supplier. In the particular case of directory inquiry services, the information supplied by the user is necessary to create the service. The operator needs some basic information, more or less precise, depending on the technical system, the type of service and the competencies of the operator. For example, (in the simplest case) the name and address of the subscriber is necessary to „convert" the given information into another type of information, for example the telephone number. Therefore, the „consumer" in turn becomes a „supplier". A service is always the result of the interaction between the „supplier" and the „consumer". In fact, the privatisation (or the discussion about it) changes the division of work between the „supplier" and the „consumer". It gives way to a new discussion concerning the status of the two categories and redefines the limits of the institution<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> For the definition of an institution, see Hughes (1971, pp. 53-54): „His [Sumner's] statement puts emphasis on an active nucleus of people and upon social definition (a conjuncture appears to be what Thomas might have called a „defined situation") of how and when they are to act. It puts people into the institution but does not close things artificially as the terms *association* or *organisation* do with their implication that some known numbers of people are „associated" or „organised". It does not say what people other than functionaries are involved and in what ways. It leaves us free to discover what people are mobilised, and in what terms, capacities, and ways they are mobilised around

The user has always participated in the production of an inquiry. However, nobody used to care about formalising the division of work between the two categories (between the operators and the users, or among the operators). The user had a global right to obtain a public service, but he negotiated the finally rendered service on an individual basis with the operator. Previously, the client did not participate in the hierarchical relations in the workplace; now he has become a substitute for hierarchical authority. He is used by management to dictate working conditions without being materially present to punch with, as we will see in the analysis of the concrete transformation process.

### 1.3. Output and the transformation of wage relations

Besides empirical evidence (Part 3), from a theoretical point of view, a closer look at definitions of output in the service sector can also prove interesting (1.3.2.).

#### 1.3.1. Review of literature

In France, contemporary sociological literature concerning productivity in the service sector is scarce<sup>17</sup>. One reason may be that it is a complicated matter: material results are lacking and the rendered service is a result of the interaction between employee and client.

J. Gadrey, an exception to this rule, bases his research about productivity in the service sector on the idea of a triangular relationship (Gadrey 1996, p. 171):

„a service is an *operation* which aims at the *transformation* of a reality C which is possessed or used by a client or user B. The service is realised by a supplier A, by order of B (and often in interaction with B), but does not lead to the circulation of a finished product, economically independent of C." (author's translation)

He selects this definition in the stock of definitions developed by other authors, including that based on the „immateriality" of services, that is the fact that services cannot be stocked (a service is a product which must be produced and consumed simultaneously). His choice of definitions is motivated by his interest in the question of output. Its measure necessitates the analysis of the division

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the smaller, more active nucleus of people - be they functionaries in the ordinary sense of that word, or upstarters, entrepreneurs, or prophets."

<sup>17</sup> However, there is some research in progress concerning what is known as „relation de service", related to a more macro-sociological, functional approach to society and its coherence established by some kind of „lien social", which shall be analyzed further on.

of work between distinct actors and the definition of the result of their interaction.

This socio-economic approach to a service in terms of a process has something in common with an interactionist approach: it points out that the rendered service depends on the division of work between different people and is the outcome of a process. However, this approach inspires the idea that an independent, measurable output exists (in spite of the author's precautions to classify the different types of services and to compare some service activities in the United States and France). Gadrey focuses on the economic outcome of the process, whereas the interactionist approach stresses the means of achieving these results. In the present case, it may be more interesting to see in which way management attempts to intervene in the labour process by imposing a standardised outcome affecting wage relations.

### 1.3.2. The historical periodicity of the rise of the question

J. Gadrey points out that the subject of productivity in the service sector resurfaces regularly in times of economic crisis. He refers first to British and American authors from the second part of the 1930's, then to French authors from the late 1940's writing on the subject (Clark 1940; Fourastié 1963). As in the Thirties and Forties, due to the economic crisis at the time, this question again arises during the 1980s. Gadrey explains that the periodic return of this question is due to the strategies deployed to face the crisis: the creation of employment in the service sector to resolve unemployment gives rise to the question of productivity in this sector<sup>18</sup>. According to Gadrey, in order to encourage the creation of employment, the government and big firms believe that the best way out of the crisis is to lower costs and modernise the service industries (Gadrey 1996, p. 56). He concludes that opinions converge in relating productivity to a slowdown of costs. Advances in productivity are identified with lower costs, because costs seem to be the only measurable element.

The author states that the notion of productivity could be relevant for certain types of services, but that it is only a partial indicator of the efficiency of a service. The final effect on the user (which is measured only later) and the social relations involved<sup>19</sup> must also be incorporated into the notion.

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<sup>18</sup> This idea also appears in work by Victor R. Fuchs (1966, pp. 84-116), who relates growth of the service sector to employment, especially that of women (because of the lack of physical effort necessary to accomplish service sector work). „The growth of a service economy also offers employment creation opportunities. Most occupations in the service sector do not demand physical effort. This means that perhaps for the first time in history, women can compete with men on an almost equal footing.” (Fuchs 1966, p. 111, translated by the author)

<sup>19</sup> See Gadrey (1994) concerning this aspect.



Gadrey makes an interesting remark by pointing out the periodic return of the question in relation to socio-economic climate and the common association of the idea of a rise in productivity and the slowdown of costs. It is always important to situate an event within its historic context. The question of productivity and the slowdown of costs are shown as cyclical events and not as a linear evolution; the contrary is identified as an ideological discourse.

However, the periodic appearance of the question is not related to the actual creation of employment, but is part of the ideological disguise of capitalist profit-makers. The amount of permanent employment in the sector is, in fact, decreasing, as in the case of inquiry services. However, it is worth noting that privatisation is taking place during an economic crisis, a fact that is bound to have strong implications for its outcome.

Gadrey's approach also involves „social relations". The concept of „social role", such as used by Hughes (1956) instead of „social relations", makes it possible to follow the process of association and dissociation of certain tasks to or from specific roles and the process of negotiation between categories of actors (and with machines). Freyssenet (1984b, p. 423) called this process „repartition of dead work/work which is alive".

## 2. Methodological remarks: doing research in a firm

While doing research in industry or services, especially when you are employed by the firm<sup>20</sup>, it is essential to avoid adopting the managerial point of view and to distinguish between managers' „ideology"<sup>21</sup> and the point of view of the workers, otherwise at least one side of the story will be missed. As a matter of fact, managers always want to improve productivity and increase profit. They justify their „raison d'être" by assuming that productivity must and can be improved. So, for instance, if management believes (or wants us to believe that they believe) workers do not work hard enough the reasons for this failure must be removed or resolved. These reasons could include political indoctrination of trade unions, communications problems, lack of control, etc. An interesting opposing theoretical point of departure would be the question asked by Burawoy (1979, p. XI): „Why do workers work as hard as they do?"

The managerial discourse varies with ongoing changes in the firm. We intend to show how managers use their discourse as a tool and how it is interpreted by the workers. The various categories of employees and the managers pick out different parts of the old or of the new conceptions of how this should work. These conceptions prove useful in various cases depending on the interlocutor's specific situation and his/her main concerns during this multi-lateral transformation process. Our intention is to explain the reactions of employees and managers from their point of view as well as to explain the deeper sense behind these observations.

In general, the main criticism of so-called „managerial" literature is that it uses the managerial point of view as the undisputed premises of its investigations. It does not discuss working conditions which should be the task of researchers working within the firm (which could as well be a reason for the partiality of a great part of this kind of literature) and part of the observer's role.

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<sup>20</sup> I had a three-year grant attributed to me in 1996 to write my thesis entitled „Travail et trajectoires de femmes dans des emplois de télécommunications en France et en Allemagne". The grant itself is called „bourse Cifre - contrat industriel de formation par la recherche", a mixed public and private financing project by the French Ministry of Education, Technology and Research and by the firm. For the duration of this period, I will be employed by the firm as a researcher.

<sup>21</sup> The use of the term „ideology" is not innocent, it does not describe a moral or political conviction on the part of the managers, but designates their expressed vision of the way things should function. It is part of their ideological tools, used and continually developed to justify their actions concerning the workers and to make them believe in the managers' objectives, and to prove to themselves and to their peers the importance of their existence.

As far as my own research and experience is concerned, my office is situated at the French operator's head office. During my first year, I spent at least half of my working time there, where I shared my office with a manager and went for lunch with the team of managers. The other half of the week, I was either in the inquiry centres, carrying out interviews and observations, or in my research institute.

I have spent quite a lot of time with my manager<sup>22</sup> „colleagues" and informants at the head office, which created a certain level of familiarity and allowed me to communicate easily with them. An atmosphere of trust was established through the exchange of simple personal services. For instance, I helped one colleague take care of some administrative tasks in Germany and another colleague and I re-read one another's papers. I also needed to learn and speak their language in order to communicate with them and to understand their point of view. However, because of this familiarity, as well as the fact that part of my salary is paid by the company, I felt under pressure to adopt their point of view in order to justify my „raison d'être".

I emancipated my mind step by step. The more I learned from my observations in the different inquiry centres and noticed the variations in the managerial discourse, the more I was able to identify the meaning of the observed situations both with my colleagues and with the employees. For instance, it soon became clear that the managerial discourse developed in accordance to conflicts encountered with employees. As a result, observing the struggle between these categories around a so-called „administrative logic" and what could be called „the logic of a free market enterprise"<sup>23</sup>, I was able to justify my presence and my research to my colleagues by adopting the role of translator.

Once I had cleared my status in the company with my colleagues in the head office, I had to acquire the trust of both employees and managers in the centres, where I presented myself as a student and trainee of the firm. The most important thing was to make the first contact in each of these centres by myself in order to clarify my objectives with local managers so that I would not appear a „spy" from head office. If the initial contact went badly, it would be difficult neutralising the hostility and distrust of local managers. On the other hand, once managers understood that I was, in fact, interested in their point of view, and that maybe there was a chance I might transmit their message to higher levels, some managers tried to use me as a messenger to their bosses at head office or as a vehicle for their complaints about their superiors.

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<sup>22</sup> Some of the managers in the head office were recently promoted to the status of „cadre", in 1993, during the reclassification of the entire personnel. Four (2 men and 2 women) of the 6 members (comprising 2 additional men) of the operator services management crew were operators themselves.

<sup>23</sup> This expression is not neutral, but denotes what I call „managerial ideology".

The employees themselves were not very preoccupied with my institutional attachment. There was a clear cut difference between the behaviour of managers, including the lowest levels, and that of employees. I always introduced myself to them, explaining that I was very interested in their work and their past experiences. They allowed me to listen in conversations with customers. I said that I would like to write my thesis about them. In general, they were communicative and often astonished that I was interested in their story, although a few did refuse to meet me, but these were rare cases.

### 3. Empirical field studies

#### 3.1. Empirical evidence

The present transformation process clearly shows the conflict between two different logics: that of a public service and the emerging logic of a competitive private enterprise. The contradictions and battles between these two logics are at the core of the matter, because it is they that best show the transformation of a specific form of social relations into „wage relations“. The form of social relations in question developed most widely in the lower levels of French public services, in particular in those related to the direct contact with the user. The term „wage“ implies that employees perceive a salary from „capital“, whereas the former monthly pay of civil servants was more closely related to a kind of state funding<sup>24</sup>. Civil servants „served“ the state and its citizens. Their financial reward was linked to their official function rather than to a particular work content. The specific social relation<sup>25</sup> between the state and its servants was, in principle, based on the presumption that since civil servants were part of the state, on an egalitarian, statutory level, it did not make sense to „exploit“ them. There was no need to control and measure the outcome precisely, although the administration did make some very simple attempts at measuring the outcome.

It should be stressed that due to the absence of the fundamental conflict of interests between „employer“ and „employee“ in civil services (which M. Freyssenet [1984a] would qualify as „consubstantial“ of capitalism), a Tayloristic ideology<sup>26</sup> did not appear in France until privatisation (at least from the Seventies to the Nineties). The „prescriptability“ of tasks by company managers is related to the idea that employees can be controlled. If management could prescribe „one best way“ of working, employees would have no more power over social relations (by means of their knowledge). However, the „prescriptability“ of informational services remains questionable due to the nature of the activity.

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<sup>24</sup> The old French term for the salary of civil servants being *traitement*.

<sup>25</sup> Remember the French term „rapport social“, which, in fact, seems more appropriate.

<sup>26</sup> „*The specificity of Taylorism* is to have affirmed *simultaneously* that it is now possible, thanks to its method and techniques, to determine scientifically, which means impartially, for a particular category of salaried personnel, who is *the best worker*, which is *the best tool*, and what is the *best way* of doing everything and that the company which builds its organization on this bases can *combine and satisfy apparently antagonistic interests* of its executives and its employees.“ (Freyssenet 1984a, p. 324, translation of the author)

The absence of detailed prescriptions and standardisation for some time (roughly from the 70s to the 90s) in inquiry services is partly related to the statutory relations briefly introduced above, but also to other reasons, such as the disregard of the administration for these services and the high concentration of women working in them. In this way, employees were able to acquire tacit knowledge about how to handle their informational work with users and to develop discretionary services. Maybe the administrative disregard was used by employees as a strategy to avoid interference in their work content<sup>27</sup>. Social relations at some levels of French „public services" were a mixture of trust and of distrust.

However, it remains paradoxical that during the era of „egalitarian relations" of civil servants and the „old logic", as well as in the age of privatisation and a „new emerging logic", managers are primarily concerned with the supposed „lack of affiliation" of employees in their work. And what if these female employees had their own scale of values, interests and strategies acting at the bottom of each hierarchy or recognised qualification?

With the changing socio-economic environment, the importance of services within the company strategy (in particular informational services) has changed the attitude of managers to employees; they now have to find new responses and ways of behaving.

Some of the transformations of social relations will be introduced in the empirical third part of this paper, which deals mainly with transformations on the technical and organisational level of the French company and its social presumptions, in comparison with the situation in Germany.

The definition of productivity, meaning the definition of outcome (the product or service), is at the core of the slow transformation from a „global" service<sup>28</sup>, characterised as a „public service", into a more specialised, segmented service, inspired by a commercial logic and supposed to be measurable. In this type of service activity, inquiry services, certain obstacles oppose the adoption of a commercial type of logic: The contractualisation of the service ultimately rendered is problematic as this service is unknown at the beginning of the interaction. These problems are related to the nature of the activity since it consists in the treatment of information given in part by the client. In the worst case, the client pays without getting a satisfactory response, because he could not supply the necessary „right" information.

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<sup>27</sup> As we can now see, the „social relation" comprises a complex variety of factors, including work organisation, work content, social status, social meaning of a particular form of financial reward, trust and distrust, etc.

<sup>28</sup> In French: „service forfaitaire", which means that a range of services is offered but the actually rendered services is unknown in advance, but nevertheless included in the price.

Moreover, the conflicting points of view of managers and of employees on productivity are central because both groups recognise the crucial importance of this item. Managers use productivity as an ideological tool to control employees (see the transformation process); it fits into their ideological set (see Gadrey op. cit. about the discourses of big companies). Operators, on the other hand, as the best specialists of their own occupation, try to resist a restrictive measure of productivity which would restrain their field of activity.

In summary, qualitative research about outcomes of service activities is rare. The rise of the question of productivity in the service sector is periodic and related to the general socio-economic situation. It is not a politically and ideologically neutral topic.

In spite of these political questions, there are clearly distinguishable tasks related to the type of service (i.e. „public service" or „commercial service"). However, these tasks are not identified and counted in the same manner: a „public service" comprises a bundle of tasks (Hughes 1951)<sup>29</sup>, not necessarily clearly identified, whereas a „commercial service" consists of the sale of definite tasks. In the case of inquiry services, the tasks necessary to provide the user with the correct answer are unknown in the beginning.

Service output, or the definition of service, is used by both management and operators as an argument to defend their respective interests.

## 3.2. The inquiry services in France and Germany

In order to introduce the subject, a rough description of the field of activity of inquiry services in these two countries will be given.

### 3.2.1. Characteristic differences

The inquiry services of France and Germany present fundamental differences.

In France, telephone inquiries can be obtained by various means. Besides the local telephone book that provides numbers and addresses of telephone subscribers in alphabetical order by family name, the most frequently used tool is a very simple net-terminal, the „Minitel". This computer-like terminal has been distributed to households for free since 1986 as an alternative to the local phonebook. It functions through a connection to the telephone lines. By simply

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<sup>29</sup> This concept is based on the idea that the work of one person always comprises several tasks, which can be „noble" or „dirty". These tasks may be known or not and sometimes redistributed.

dialling „11”, the user is put through to a main computer, holding the national data basis. The connection is free for the first three minutes and gives the user access not only to local numbers, but to numbers all over the country, listed by town, name, address and occupation. In 1996, 6,2 million terminals provide three quarters of all registered inquiry demands (about 29 requests per line per year). This means that even in 1996, when the activity in the national inquiry services (dial „12”) rose and the activity volume of automatic inquiry service (dial „11”) decreased, the operator services were nevertheless only in charge of one quarter of the inquiry requests (7,5 per line). This is an important factor to keep in mind regarding further developments of the operator services in France.

The existence of the „Minitel” also provides some indications about the particularity of social relations of civil servant telephone operators from the ‘70s to the ‘90’s. Starting at the end of the Sixties, working conditions changed drastically due to increased intervention by the trade unions. Work hours were shortened from 42 hours per week in 1968 to 35 hours in 1983. More pauses throughout the work day have been introduced in relation to new technologies (obligatory rest) and effective work time has been reduced to 5 hours per day. It is quite possible, that this situation, together with an opportunity for the CNET (Centre National d’Etudes des Télécommunications) to show its prowess, lead to the „total automation” solution for directory inquiry services and the introduction of the „Minitel” in 1981. As early as the mid-1980’s, personnel recruitment in inquiry services was completely stopped by the administration as machines were getting old. During this period, people in local inquiry services were left to their own devices; they were free to organise the social division of work and to define the service. As one female member of lower management put it: *„You must admit, we had royal peace.”*

It seems plausible that during this period a fundamental division of work was installed between the machine, the Minitel, for standard research, and „manual” inquiry services for those who needed greater assistance, wanted a faster service or preferred a human respondent. A large scale of services was provided by „manual” inquiry services, which at the same time benefited from a particularly large autonomy in terms of division of work and productivity. The discretionary margin of informational services in general was amplified by this particular situation.

But, to the surprise of administrators, people continued calling the „manual” inquiry services, as shown by internal marketing studies at the beginning of the 90’s. This continuous demand, as well as the question of costs of the Minitel and its limited performance, preceded the context of privatisation, which brought up the question of the position of informational services within the company.



In Germany, the operator inquiry services treat more than twice as many inquiries as in France (in 1995, according to a firm manager, about 13,1 requests per line annually). The existing automatic inquiry terminal, the Btx, has been of minor importance since the start of its commercialisation in 1984 (163,5 thousand terminals in 1989) (Schneider 1989). Operator services handle most of the requests. All together (compared to the number of consultations of the Minitel and inquiry services), the number of requests is lower in Germany than in France. However, until the end of 1996, when a complementary service was offered („comfort-inquiry service"), the research criteria were more restrictive than in France: the user could only receive a subscriber's number by giving the name, and not, as in France, by the address or occupation. The user could not get a hold of a subscriber's name by his phone number either, as is possible in France. Moreover, the French user can get the complete address of the wanted subscriber, whereas in Germany only the full name and the postal code is given (although this system was modified in October 1997).

To sum up the general situation of the inquiry services of the two public operators, in France, the major part of simple requests are covered by the „Minitel" and the range of research criteria offered by the inquiry services dealing with a smaller part of requests is larger. In Germany, the inquiry services deal with the major part of requests (besides those provided by the telephone book or other new supports such as Internet). However, these tools provide a more restricted service given the limited range of research criteria.

Another important difference exists regarding the size and distribution of the sites in the two countries. This is important to keep in mind in order to understand the environment in which managers and employees are interacting.

In France, in 1996, the 5400 persons working in the inquiry centres (including lower management) were distributed over 102 sites (metropolitan and overseas France), compared with about 8000 people in Germany working in 84 sites (figures provided by a manager). On average, the French sites are half the size of the German sites. From the late 1980's onwards, the geographical distribution of sites in France has taken into account the French government's decentralisation policy. Trade unions are another reason for the French distribution of sites, but this factor will not be analysed here. The higher concentration of personnel in bigger and fewer sites in Germany is recurrent. It is particularly apparent in the comfort inquiry service (from 1996 to 1997), provided by six big sites situated in densely populated urban areas.

### 3.2.2. Characteristic similarities

Secondly, this paper will show some of the major similarities between the telephone operators which were characteristic of the relationship between managers and employees in the past. A marked similarity also appears concerning the institutionalisation of the transformation process.

The institutions in both countries were characterised by a very hierarchical and rigid structure providing stable mass employment (with a peak in employment at the end of the Sixties and the beginning of the Seventies). Women with a relatively high level of general education were particularly present in the field of inquiry, because it offered this large-scale stable employment. They needed no special qualifications and learned everything on-the-job. The amount of unrecognised qualifications was very high.

Hierarchical mobility was very low while the turnover rate was relatively high. Employees re-entering work (often after childcare leave) had to first work in the inquiry services before getting jobs elsewhere in the post and telecommunications administration. Discipline was strict; for example, operators had to ask permission to go to the toilet (in Germany until 1995) and they always had to be on time. In both countries, up until the Seventies, supervisors carried out secret hearings of the communications between operators and subscribers to ensure they were not having private conversations and to control their productivity. According to a retired French supervisor, no technical tool was available at the time to count the individual number of answered calls, but individual productivity could be estimated by relating the number of answered calls of a working position to the individual time schedule. A number of the operators interviewed in both countries qualified the inquiry services as „*military*“, or to quote one: „*it was factory life*“. Nevertheless, since the Seventies, the relationship between operators and subscribers in France has been less strictly controlled.

This picture is meant to give the reader an idea of the situation in the past which created a great distance between managers and employees but which is now in the process of changing. At present, control issues are less often related to discipline in the workplace, as was the case in the past, and more often to control over the relation between operators and subscribers. Therefore there is a growing interest in service output and a decrease in rigid hierarchical relations. This changing process is part of the institutional transformation of a public administration into a private firm.

### 3.3. The transformation process

The transformation process is not unidirectional: different intertwined and contradictory conceptions define the characteristics of the emerging company. It is important to know what sort of wage relations existed in the past in order to better understand the conflicts between the old and the new types of relationships as well as the misunderstandings which can grow between managers and employees.

In France, employees are in fact experiencing a contradictory transformation: on the one hand, work rhythm (cadence) is faster; on the other hand, the attitude of managers towards employees is becoming less military. Responsibilities for working conditions are handed over to „the client“, which leaves employees without arguments with their local managers. Thanks to a sophisticated technical system, „the client“ is omnipresent in the workplace. The main issue negotiated between employees and manager is the type of service to be rendered to the subscriber; this issue is relative to employees' working content and conditions.

In Germany, the race for operator productivity is much simpler and the change less profound in the sense that hierarchical relations are less effected. German management has applied personnel rationalisation and has multiplied different, competing statutes for the employees in the inquiry centres. This is an old practice, already observed in the past, as the postal administration always employed women in the inquiry services without giving them the status of a civil servant. The rate of part timers was also higher. Continuity also prevails with regard to the restriction of work content and the services rendered.

The definition of productivity, its relevance and meaning and its control are embedded in wage relations. It is related to work content. It is one of the fundamental items of the transformation of the relations between managers and employees (and between employees). It is also the stage of conflict and misunderstanding between the two categories, characteristic of the old and the new emerging logics.

What is actually happening is a profound transformation of wage relations. This covers the technical and organisational division of labour, employment politics (such as recruitment practices and types of contract), the type of relations existing between managers and employees and the type of control used as well as the relations maintained with trade unions.

The old, public service logic was characteristic of the previous type of wage relations. A service was rendered by anonymous civil servants, exclusively in France and mainly in Germany, based on the idea of general and non-discriminating services. This meant that the employees were under no obligation to

render a precise amount of specific, well-identified services. The range of services was very large and there was no way of identifying the nature of the service rendered, neither in terms of quality nor in terms of quantity. The service was not discriminating in the sense that service was rendered to everybody, at the same price and by personnel with a common status - at least in France. Moreover, there was no profit-obligation.

This old logic (characterised by weak standardisation of service and of division of work in the local centres) was typical of wage relations in French inquiry services from the Seventies until 1995. In Germany, however, the old generation of telephone operators (born during or just after World War II) was inspired by their social status as „Beamter“. Comfort and security were very important to this generation, marked by the absence of fathers. However, for the period from the 70's to '95, contrary to the situation in France, German interviewees no longer established a positive relationship between their status and their work content. This may give an indication why operators in Germany were more inclined to follow work prescriptions and explains, to some extent, the greater homogeneity of German inquiry centres.

Nevertheless in France, there is also an old tradition of measuring output within the PTT administration dating back to the 1970's. The practice of counting personnel and output was inspired more by the obligation to maintain control over the budget within different activities of the administration than by the necessity to control the personnel. With regard to technical tools, managers were able to obtain the average productivity of operators in inquiry services by counting the number of calls treated by the whole call centre and calculating the number of calls per numbered working position. By tracing the work schedules of different operators on the numbered working positions, French managers were in fact able to measure individual levels of productivity. This was done after hours. The fact that managers did this work in the evenings shows that it could not be done during work hours because it was not legitimate. Employees' self-understanding and autonomy (in terms of status and service, the level of the latter being left to their discretion) would have been offended had they known this control was being carried out. Individual productivity was irrelevant. There was no way of discriminating against somebody in a direct manner because of his/her performance. At the national level, performance indicators did exist, but they depended mainly on local definitions of productivity and division of work. Therefore, information was less comparable and, consequently, competition was lower.

It will now be shown by which means a new logic for defining productivity and service output has arisen during the transformation process. This analysis focuses on interactions between employees and managers throughout this process as well as on the use of three managerial tools: manager ideology, technical tools and employee status.

The different uses of managerial tools will be demonstrated and, in a second step, their impact on wage relations will be discussed. A further consideration will be the way in which employees' situations differ from one plant to another.

The tools are used on three interacting levels: the company level, the intermediate management level and the local level. In France, in spite of the centralised character of some of these tools, a comparison of their uses at the company level and on the local level throws light on a major distinction: while these tools are defined at the national level, their application can vary from one local inquiry centre to another. A variety of different conceptions therefore co-exists on the local level. The social division of labour varies within the same technical system. On the contrary, in Germany, where local management and employment practices have traditionally been decentralised through local recruitment, the power of the third managerial tool, the employee status, is uniform throughout the country.

### 3.3.1. The company level

#### *The common ideological blueprint*

According to Gadrey's explanation of present political and managerial discourses about the association of productivity to costs, it has been observed that the present managerial **ideology** is based on four major elements: managers translate the transformation of the firm's status into **competition** with other operators; in order to be competitive, they have to reduce **costs**; and lower costs result in higher **productivity**, whatever this means exactly; the user is transformed into a **client**. This ideological discourse is the same in France and Germany.

Managers use the transformation of the firm's legal status as the event which justifies the invalidation of the previously upheld public service logic and the adoption of new ones, based on individual productivity. These four key-terms are used to justify their demands on the employees to change their behaviour and work harder. The main logic of French managers is to increase productivity : „*In essence, we are interested in productivity.*” However, content and coherence of the demand are not detailed further. In inquiry centres, local managers construct their discourse around these terms when they are in need of arguments to justify their demands on employees.

**Chart 1: The ideological blueprint**

competition	you have to be better than your competitors; you need homogeneous reference practices to make comparisons possible
costs	in inquiry services, major costs are related to wages and social charges
productivity	to control it, you have to identify the rendered service; which is defined as individual productivity; control over individual work schedules and stoppages; to measure it you need homogeneous, comparable indicators you are able to control
client	the person who pays and chooses, the ultimate justification for all changes; the focus of the managerial discourse about employee's behaviour, the individual operator is responsible for the individual client

*Technical tools*

a) France: tools on the company level and the force of technical change

The most sophisticated element of managerial action on the company level is the **technical** tools used by French managers. The modernisation of the French public operator's inquiry centres began in 1994. The process is based on a national, hierarchical pyramidal structure and aims to transform the links between centres, the interaction with the client, the content of operators' work and the service to be rendered. It effects the division of labour and alters the concept of productivity. It is therefore fundamental. The technical system increases the standardisation of services and decreases human control over the flow of clients.

Wage relations are modified by the reorganisation of the division of work among inquiry centres and by the type of control that managers have over employees and their productivity.

**Chart 2: The technical tools of managers and their impact**

past technical organisation	present technical changes	transformation of wage relations and productivity
local centres with local clients	network between several inquiry centres	principle of telework, small service units with limited power (recruitment); decentralisation of recruitment to a local level; hierarchy between the centres; geographical concentration of clients; conflict in terms of productivity, labour division and definition of service among centres
local treatment of requests	traffic transfer from Paris to the provinces	delocalisation and decentralisation to the provinces, telework closure of Parisian inquiry centres, labour mobility (in or outside the company)
possible control of productivity per working position, average productivity in terms of answered calls	automatic individual measure of the number of answered calls; measure of the client's waiting delay	the interchangeable, anonymous agent becomes a transparent individual
standardised feminine welcome voice, rationalisation of the operator-client dialogue (see table generation of inquiry services)	automatic personalised message (individual standard recording) to welcome the client	limits to the standardisation of the operator-client interaction; loss of control over the dialogue between the client and the operator
beginning of the partial automation of the dialogue	automatic announcement of the number (AVO)	loss of control over the operator-client relation, but repetitive task (dirty work)

The result of this technical reorganisation of the work process is a conflict between regional recruitment politics and local practices concerning labour division and control over productivity. The principle of the technical system is to standardise the organisation of the work process in the different centres and among the centres. Its goal is to obtain a higher level of output by insuring a more uniform distribution of calls among the centres. Although the result is perhaps not intentional, this technical system produces a uniform, standardised service, conforming to the new emerging logic.

By connecting several centres together a maximum number of calls can be answered. In principle, calls are treated by the operator on the first working position which is free (although in practice, delays may occur between centres working together). But the principle establishes a system whereby operators who work faster get more calls.

The centres themselves are responsible for the recruitment and working schedules of employees. For example, the ones that oblige a bigger proportion of employees to work in the evening get more calls during these hours than the others. This means that the technical organisation or structure of the system is based on the principle of homogeneous work practices (with regard to the number of employees, working hours, level of service, division of work), but is in contradiction with the diversity of effective practices. Regulation of work division and productivity takes place on a local level. Unequal burdens of work from one centre to another produce discontent because of higher personnel costs or individual work burdens (and its implications for personnel managers). Moreover, „inequality" contradicts the principle of „equality", which is one of the central values of French public services. In fact, in spite of the technical (or virtual) concentration of personnel facing a flow of clients, the organisation of the work process takes place at a local level.

One result of this „teleworking" or technical organisation of the waiting line is that there is a conflict between productivity in the centres (or techniques of productivity breaking) and employment politics. The digital call distributor is in charge of managing the waiting line, while the management of the physically present operators (with regard to their presence and their way of treating calls) takes place within small local inquiry centres. Within the centres, productivity control is partly done by machines. Their use is left to middle management, on whom efforts in terms of ideological indoctrination are concentrated.

Another result is that operators have to cope with an infinite and anonymous file of clients. As they are no longer aware of the geographical origin of the call, they are less able to anticipate the characteristics of clients with whom they will come in contact on the phone. Anticipation makes it possible to adapt the level of service to the number of other clients waiting on the line according to the social characteristics of the clientele: the social characteristics of clients at specific hours of the day, days of the week or months of the year vary with the geographical region because of different life-rhythms. Operators can recognise the department of origin on their computer screen, but there is a greater variety of types of clients in contact with each individual operator. Therefore adaptation to the varying social levels requires greater efforts.

With regard to the interaction between the operator and the client, there are also some major modifications. Parts of the dialogue between the operator and the client have been automated and standardised: the standard arrival or welcome message for the client is recorded by each individual operator using his/her personal voice; if the information requested is a simple number, this information is also given automatically.

Average productivity (total number of answered calls in the centre per number of operators indicating a mean of answered calls per operator) has



been replaced by individual control (work operations, such as the number and length of answered calls per individual operator) over number and length of calls, as well as over work division (transfers) and waiting time of the client.

#### b) Germany: technical tools

In Germany, the situation differs greatly, because the impact of technological change in the transformation process of wage relations was limited by trade union intervention<sup>30</sup> as well as by the general legislation concerning private companies.

In 1996, due to the lack of social plans („Sozialpläne“) with regard to personnel mobility within the firm, the trade unions prevented a general modernisation of directory inquiry services. According to the trade unions, general modernisation of work stations would have led to the rationalisation of operators for whom other occupations would have to have been provided.

The other element which limits certain forms of technical change relative to control is related to the „Betriebsverfassungsgesetz“. This law prohibits individual control over productivity. Legal framework is a general fundamental factor which may limit the range of possibilities of wage relation transformation within a firm. In the case of Germany, this element combined with the opposition of the trade union severely limited the range of intervention possibilities as far as the technical organisation of inquiry services was concerned.

Therefore, standard inquiry services were kept, but in November 1996, the public operator introduced a different, more complex type of service, called comfort inquiry service or „Komfortauskunft“<sup>31</sup>. Six of the biggest local centres have been re-equipped with new integrated work stations to deal with this type of inquiry. The employees of these plants have been kept on while they receive special training to handle the new variety of software<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> DPG, „Deutsche Postgewerkschaft“, member of the DGB, „Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund“, national federation of trade unions for various sectors of activity.

<sup>31</sup> The main differences between these two types of services are that the comfort service: 1) has a specific access number (01189); 2) provides a greater availability of personnel (more personnel for less calls); 3) As far as the type of „service“ is concerned: a) a greater range of research criteria for directory inquiries is possible (name, address, profession, national research), b) directory inquiries are not the only service offered: environmental information, meteorological information, consumer information, sports information are also available; c) number of answers: multiple answers can be provided; 4) payment principle: the final cost depends on the length of the conversation (1,92 DM per minute, 0,12 DM per 3,8 seconds).

<sup>32</sup> Getting access to these transformed plants is extremely complicated because the „gatekeepers“ in charge of the plants are worried about competing operators in this particular field of activity which is now open to competition. One operator, directed by the old minister of post and telecommunications, Schwartz-Schilling, started activity at the same

The smaller centres, situated relatively near these big centres (at least sixty working positions) had to handle standard-requests from clients living around these big plants. Their calls were transferred by manual manipulation of the software program in charge of call-distribution. This meant that the flow of requests was also transferred to other geographical regions, but by low level technical means.

These technical changes are very different from those that have taken place in France. Although they are related to the formal restructuring of the commercialised product, they do not completely transform wage relations.

### *The status of the employees*

#### a) France

General recruitment policies and hierarchical mobility have fundamentally changed nation-wide in France. The vast majority of the public operator's employees (95%) have kept their status of civil servants, but the old system of hierarchical promotion by seniority has been abolished.

The other fundamental element related to the status of the French public operator's employees is the abolishment of the national system of geographical mobility, which allowed people to move from one city to another, serving the state anywhere on the national territory. This change has a general impact on wage relations.

Historically, the old system of hierarchical promotion by seniority and the national system of geographic mobility directed the hierarchical, horizontal and geographical mobility of employees within the company. Employee trajectories result from a complex interaction of their interests and the rules of the administration (the company).

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time as the opening of the comfort inquiry services. Nevertheless, I was allowed access to one plant for half an hour, in the company of a manager I interviewed. I also interviewed one operator I knew personally, on a private basis outside work.

### Chart 3: The transformation of recruitment practices in France

„concourrs nationaux"	national examination of all candidates, anonymous selection process of civil servants for different job grades, depending on the level of education achieved; hierarchical mobility by seniority or by internal examinations to step from one job grade to the next (four grades existed); complete geographical mobility
„reclassification" <sup>33</sup>	in 1993, indicators replaced the old „grades", and the personnel was classified according to its present occupation; this creates a rupture with the two old rival logics of geographical and hierarchical mobility; some workers benefited from this change, others lost out (especially those in occupations with a low qualification profile, such as inquiry services)
„EDA: examen d'aptitude"	since 1994, local recruitment and hierarchical mobility has been based on written personnel records, geographical mobility no longer institutionalised, place of employment defined at time of hiring
„la reconnaissance des compétences"	since 1997, local recruitment by „co-optation" has occurred; this means that regional direction chooses his candidates among regional civil servants

Besides this background information, (which is different from the German system), the essential aspect of the transformation of recruitment practices in inquiry services is that the local call centres negotiate recruitment with the regional head office (Directions Régionales). Local inquiry centres can employ the number of civil servants specified by the regional head office, but they have a certain amount of autonomy with regard to the status of the personnel they employ. There are a great variety of recruitment practices in local inquiry centres, as will become apparent in the comparison. Recruitment practices are related to labour division and to control over productivity. Depending on the local labour market situation inside and outside the company, employees react differently to restrictive control mechanisms.

#### b) The German case: restrictive national employment policies and their local impact

In Germany, at the company level, employment policies are the most powerful tool managers can use to transform wage relations. A whole range of measures

<sup>33</sup> A very complete analysis of its effect on the internal employment market is given by Reynaud / Reynaud (1996).

have been created to reduce the number of employees. Various types of employment contracts make it possible to fill temporary „gaps” caused by fluctuations: different types of employee status have been created.

Several measures have been introduced to motivate personnel to leave the company. These include:

- early retirement, starting at 55, or at 60 for the upper careers.
- compensation payment for employees who opt to quit (introduced in 1995),
- as well as compensation payment for civil servants who opt to quit (introduced in 1996).

Before actually leaving the firm, civil servants have to transform their status, in order to become ordinary employees and thus take advantage of compensation ranging from 20.000 to 60.000 DM, proportionate to seniority (a minimum of two years' seniority is necessary). People with 40 years of seniority who choose early retirement will be granted 75% of their gross previous salary (rising annually).

Because the company no longer hires new permanent employees, the total number of employees is decreasing. In 1995, the German public operator employed about 220.000 people. This number will drop to 170.000 in 2000. According to the trade union *Deutsche Postgewerkschaft* about 10.000 employees have left the firm annually since 1995.

National managers estimate the number of employees who should be leaving per year and per local unit. Fulfilling this goal is part of the local managers' contract. National management takes into account the „side-effects” of personnel reductions on the remaining employees: the extra pressure on employees, due to an increased workload, is expected to be sufficiently high to persuade workers to leave without material incentives.

### 3.3.2. The comparison of local case studies: company-wide measures *versus* local wage relations

#### 3.3.2.1. Company-wide measures

As has been documented, transformation incentives, which we have referred to as managerial „tools”, exist at the company level in both countries. At the company level, distinct changes which have an impact on the organisation of work and wage relations within all plants have been discerned in both countries. The main characteristic that these transformation policies hold in common is an increased control over the labour process: the organisation of work in the dif-

ferent local plants, the individual worker and the service output, the service to be rendered. The ideology seems to be much the same in both countries.

#### a) France

In France, however, the ideology seems well translated into the new technical system. For the individual operator, this means both an increase in heterogeneous requests from clients and an increasing pressure to produce larger amounts of a homogeneous service. Requests differ increasingly because of the enlargement of the geographical scale covered by one inquiry centre and the principle of random distribution of calls. This means that the uncertainty related to the social origin of the caller (regional populations) and the type of request (related to the variation of rhythm over the day and a difference between urban and rural populations) is rising.

To summarise, the points of view of managers and operators concerning the technical system clearly differ. A manager might say „due to the grouping together of several plants (receiving calls emanating from a certain geographical region), a client is more likely to find an operator free to take his call. As he can see the number of waiting calls on his screen, as well as the length of the clients waiting period, the operator feels a greater responsibility towards the client." Operators, on the other hand, claim that the new technical system obliges each operator to work harder. It also diminishes individual autonomy with regard to the range of service rendered (as the communication has to be as short as possible) and reduces the „informal" organisation of work between operators (i.e. a division of work negotiated between operators, without normalisation).

The work rhythm has accelerated. In 1995, the average conversation length in one Parisian plant was about 65 seconds, whereas by 1997, the national average for the length of communication had been reduced to two thirds of that time. Furthermore, the next step in the transformation of the labour process is to incite local managers and operators to diminish the delay between calls, which has been as long as 15 seconds in the past in some places.

The transformation of the work rhythm aims to homogenise the treatment of calls, that is the type of service rendered to the client, in larger geographical regions.

Recruitment practices are increasingly becoming a regional and local affair, but, according to preliminary results, this transformation does not seem to be having much impact on operators at inquiry centres since upward mobility has always been low in inquiry services. Operators who remained in inquiry centres

appear to have preferred geographical stability (or the return to the department of origin) and horizontal mobility to hierarchical and geographical mobility.<sup>34</sup>

## b) Germany

In Germany, due to the combined effects of German federalism and local recruitment and promotion practices for state civil servants (requiring only that they sign a formal acknowledgement of geographical mobility), it is not surprising to find quite a variation in wage relations from one plant to another. The absence of a „homogenising" technical system could only enhance these effects. In fact, technology is not used systematically to homogenise service output because this does not seem necessary.

Technical tools are similar to those used in France but the conception of their use differs. Telework, for instance is limited; it is used only at certain times (night calls) and for certain services in specific centres. These variations reflect a segmentation of clients and of the service attributed to them which differs depending on the size of the geographical zone covered by a centre, its geographical location and the time of day or night. This segmentation varies depending on the type of service. Geographical zones are larger at certain hours (at night-time, for instance), and for special services (wake-up calls or comfort inquiries). Comfort inquiry centres are situated in dense urban zones. Telework is not used systematically by managers to increase control, as in France. As we have already seen, it is not legal to use technical means to oversee individual workers, either.

Since the range of services has always been more restricted than in France due to the severe limitation of research criteria (directory inquiry services never „completed" the electronic directory, as in France), less variations in terms of organisation of the labour process among inquiry centres have been observed in Germany. On an elementary (or deterministic) level, we could conclude that since there is a more limited number of tasks to organise, there are less combinations possible. There is also less work content with a potential scope for conflict. Yet as we have already seen, social relations in inquiry services developed differently from one country to the other.

However, for the observation period covering 1995-1997, variations were observed with regard to the mobility of workers, particularly leaving the company. The proportion of employees with temporary contracts and their status varied from one inquiry centre to the other as well as over time. The „informal" hierarchy of qualifications was related to employees' job experience. More experienced and usually permanent employees were in charge of more com-

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<sup>34</sup> The relation between work and career is another subject which will be discussed in detail in my Ph.D. thesis.

plex requests, especially in cases where they represented a small proportion of the total number of employees.

### *The outcome*

As this study is based on only two centres per country, it can hardly be postulated that the results are typical of all centres in the two countries. It could also be claimed that the two French inquiry centres selected are not representative. One inquiry centre (A) was created only recently and so does not reflect the historic evolutions described in the preceding pages<sup>35</sup>. Furthermore, the observations made in France are of a better quality than those made in Germany because of limited access to telecommunication installations in the latter. Nevertheless, these examples indicate something about the different roles given to public services in France and Germany, which, in turn, may explain resistance to change.

The results of this comparison point in the opposite direction to what might have been expected: wage relations differ considerably between the two French plants whereas there is a greater homogeneity among German plants. As shown in Charts 4 and 5, comparing wage relations in different local plants, these differences in wage relations are due largely to the organisation of the work process, the hierarchy of qualifications and the mobility of workers (in and outside the firm).

#### 3.3.2.2. Local wage relations

##### *Two French cases*

In France, in spite of efforts by management to homogenise service output from one centre to another by means of ideology and technology, variations in wage relations persist. There is a range of different local situations. Wage relations differ from one plant to the other. Far-reaching measures, such as changing the whole technical system, do not have a clear cut impact on wage relations. Consistent levels of automation combined with a deep transformation of the managerial discourse neither produced the same division of work in the centres nor the same output.

Variations in the division of work are related to the status of employees, their skills and experience acquired with seniority as well as work hours. The division of work can be formal or informal, which means that different tasks can

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<sup>35</sup> A was chosen because some of its employees come from B. Large differences in wage relations were observed in a third centre, which, in fact, suggest that wage relations take on specific characteristics in particular local contexts.

be related to a specific function or status but this is not always the case. The social division of work<sup>36</sup> takes place between humans and machines. The social use of machines refers to the division of work between humans. Local definitions of productivity by middle management become a means of controlling the labour process. In general, this definition can either be based on the quality of responses or the quantity of answered calls. Operators have their own conception of productivity and of their work, therefore conflicts arise between different categories of operators and management. The way in which operators and management engage in this process creates different competing groups. The hierarchy of recognised competencies is correlated to output.

In France, the first inquiry centre (A) is half the size of the second (B). Sixty-nine people work in A, while B employs 150. A is very recent; it has existed for only one year. B has existed since the beginning of the 1960's. A is situated in the same plant as a production and reparation area; it shares facilities like the canteen and library with these other units. Part of A's work involves telework, answering inquiry demands emanating from the clients situated in the geographical area around B.

The personnel at A is very heterogeneous: among the female staff, many workers have been converted from autonomous, technical activities while others come from small scale industrial activities demanding repetitive work (artisan production). They have maintained their activity in the same geographical, rural site. Another 37,7% of the personnel come from B or another inquiry centre situated in the same urban area near B – this group includes mainly male operators. They have worked in two different centres and so can compare their experiences and „import" their competencies. B started working with new work stations one year ago.

30% of staff at B are male while 24,2% are temporary employees. A, on the other hand, employs only civil servants. This was a voluntary decision made by local managers. Local managers are all technicians and male in A, with only one female technician. At B, the entire local and intermediate management staff is female.

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<sup>36</sup> „By inscribing technical choices, machines help economic and social conditions to materialize and, more precisely, social relations which surround and preside over their conception. Thereby, machines act by redefining and by re-delimiting what is at stake in these relationships. In a first (and sufficient) approximation, it could be said that what is at stake is the control of work. When the stakes are high, the various partners present will behave differently depending on the context and their respective abilities but the stakes limit them and indicate a certain path to be followed. This engenders a new distribution between man and the machine, or to be more precise, between dead work/living work, the analysis of which makes it possible to understand what is involved in the latter and to characterize the social form of automation established." (Freysenet 1984b, translation of the author)



The organisation of the work process differs greatly at the two sites, as does productivity. At B, the degree of specialisation and of division of labour is high, whereas at A everybody does everything. However, the „imported“ employees help the beginners in the field of inquiry. At B, operators are organised in „technical“ groups, which means that they are grouped together based on their productivity. Their productivity is controlled individually as well as per group average.

Within these groups, operators have different tasks. Those with a low level of productivity, in general beginners or the „incapable“<sup>37</sup>, only treat standard requests. The others can sometimes treat several requests per call (the client composes a different phone number, but his call arrives in the same general inquiry centres where the individual operator position can treat the inquiry if the necessary software programme is available). These multiple calls take longer. Because of their superior speed, the more productive operators take roughly the same amount of time to handle these complex calls as the slower employees take to handle standard calls. The groups with the better performance rates also treat requests when the client has the number of the subscriber and wants his name or address, whereas standard requests lack this research criteria.

Physical control is low at A: the intermediate management is never physically present in the production area. At B, there is always someone physically watching the operators.

Productivity, defined as the number of calls treated per operator per unit of time, is lower at A than at B. It appears that the productivity of A includes both local requests and requests from the region around B. During the first 11 months, A treated only requests from the region around B. At A, the average length of calls is nearly the double of calls at B.

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<sup>37</sup> A tradition existed (and still does to some extent) for inquiry services to hire people with a low qualification profile or presenting certain problems (such as physical disability, slowness at work, or a tendency to be rebellious). This is another example which illustrates, how, until recently, the inquiry services were not thought very highly of within the firm.

**Chart 4: Comparison of wage relations in different local plants in France (first half 1997)**

	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>
organisation of the labour (work) process	informal division of work, little transfers, no direct supervision, mutual aid, everybody does everything, longer conversation delays	high division of work, high level of transfers, „technical“ organisation of work groups according to performance, permanent physical supervision, use of automatic individual control, short „standard“ conversation
hierarchy of qualifications	only civil servants, no relation between function and qualification, informal hierarchy between experienced operators and technicians	civil servants, one third temporary workers, relation between status and qualification
mobility of workers (inside and outside the firm)	mobility in the firm, origin of the workers : technicians (qualified and chain workers) with no geographical mobility, qualified telephone operators with high geographical mobility, coming partly from B	permanent staff and one third of turning over personnel from outside the firm, mobility inside the firm of young overqualified employees passing through
principle of wage formation	no results yet	no results yet

#### *Two German cases*

The range of service output being traditionally more limited, there is a smaller range of tasks to be divided in Germany than in France. In general, the wave of accelerating productivity of directory inquiry services in terms of numbers of calls answered has moved across the country from West to East. This means that there has been a similar development nation-wide, with some temporal delay. Nevertheless, there is a general tendency in standard directory inquiry services to give an industrialised, standardised form of uniform minimal service. Qualified personnel is limited.

In Germany, one inquiry centre (C) is situated in the old *Länder*, whereas the other (D) is in one of the new *Länder*. C employed 164 people at the beginning of 1996. D employed 93 people at the end of the year.

Fifteen men worked at D, 10 of them were temporary workers including 7 part-time workers from the West. There were 19 men at C, all permanent, including 8 civil servants, 6 employees (with status similar to that of civil servant) and 5 workers, in general technicians. Overall, C employed 107 civil servants (2/3 of the staff). At the end of 1996, temporary workers represented nearly half the staff (43) at D.

D nearly closed in the middle of the year after a massive loss of employees (27 persons on the whole). The remaining staff slowed down because they

could handle no more than a third of requests. The remaining staff trains the non-permanent employees and handles difficult requests. Their main preoccupation is the survival of the local plant, since unemployment is high (18,7 % in January 1997 in the eastern part of the country).

Both centres strive to handle as many calls as possible. C does not fear its closure, while D, which continues working with non-permanent employees and employees from the previous East German Post (who have not been given the same seniority as West German employees), is in a more unstable position. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the 1990's, the turnover rate at C has been about 20 to 25%.

**Chart 5: Comparison of wage relations in different local plants in Germany (1996)**

	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>
organisation of the labour (working) process	no relation between number of answered calls and transfers	high division of work, all complex calls are transferred, number of specialised working positions has been doubled, all middle management handle complex calls
hierarchy of qualifications	no hierarchy of qualifications, hierarchy of functions according to seniority and „submissiveness“, one third of employees remain civil servants	hierarchy of competencies between permanent employees and temporary employees
mobility of workers (inside and outside the firm)	partial mobility of beginners in the firm	high mobility of temporary workers from outside the firm
principle of wage formation	no results yet	no results yet

## 4. Conclusion

It has been argued that the comparison must take into account several levels of analysis to explain restructuring. These levels include the interactional system between individuals, the local or plant level and the company level. In this particular case, the company level can be assimilated with a „national" level, since the analysis is focused on the specific features of employment relations in privatised former public services within a national context. In this sense, the concept of wage relations proves sufficiently flexible to be applied to the different reference levels chosen for our study.

However, the analysis of operators' careers must be linked both to the transformations of the company/administration and to a „sociétal", or nationwide change in „social habits". In this context, some aspects of global consumer behaviour may interfere. For example, in general, French customers seem to have developed a more intense culture of negotiation than German customers.

The findings which have been analysed in this paper, are an intermediate result of the transformation in process. It may, therefore, be interesting to present the latest evolutions in Germany: comfort and standard inquiry services have been combined since October 1997, the price is the same for both services (0,12 DM for 3,8 seconds or the cost of a comfort service call under the old system), but there is a minimum consumption of 30 seconds (0,96 DM). The service also answers multiple and professional requests, but unrelated information such as the weather forecast, are no longer included in directory information services. The show goes on !

As we have seen, a diversity in wage relations within one specific country is possible. For instance, in the case of France, the initial differences in wage relations were partly due to the impact of the Minitel. As a result of the automation of directory inquiry services, manual or „human" services developed autonomously, away from the eyes of head office. It would be interesting to pursue research on the specificity of public services in France, and, with regard to new technologies by examining the inquiry services on the Internet.

In both countries, the transformations presently underway on the company level (initiated by a global European evolution), do not have the same impact on the target occupation. The nature of change seems to be different. In France, in spite of strong firm-wide measures, differing wage relations can be observed from one local plant to another, whereas in Germany, homogeneity of wage

relations seems to be the rule. However, differences in the organisation of the labour process also persist in Germany. They are strongly related to the statutory differences of personnel, which also seems to be the case in one French centre (B). This centre has adopted an „industrial" work organisation: standardisation, fragmentation of tasks and automation. The average length of calls is shortest in France. Although a definite conclusion cannot be obtained at this point in the research, it is possible that statutory transformations are related to a certain type of production.

The most important difference between the wage relations in the French and German inquiry services revealed in this paper seems to be the mode of change. In Germany, change is taking place on a general organisational level of services, whereas in France the general structure of services has not yet been modified. In France, the main changes are happening at the local level and effecting the way in which people work in inquiry services: the „bottom" carries on the transformation. In Germany, on the other hand, decisions are made at the top and tend to concentrate on the structure of services more than the way in which people work.

Evidence has shown that attempts by management to homogenise wage relations do not follow „one best way"; differences persist. (The question of how and why management reaches its goals has not been treated). However, attempts to homogenise service output and wage relations on the company level are more successful in Germany. These findings can be interpreted with regard to the characteristic features of the civil service in both countries: strong initial homogeneity of employee status in France has contributed to strong local and individual particularities of the rendered service and of the job description (which is all the more surprising in an occupation with a low level of formalised qualifications). These differences have given way to a particular interaction with the client. Attempts to unify this interaction contradict historically evolved social relations between members of the civil service and the users.

Depending on the level being studied, French and German inquiry centres present both common features and differences. In France, for cultural reasons, the range of local wage relations and individually negotiated services was large. The transformation process related to privatisation is centred around standardisation. On the other hand, in Germany, the range of local variations was lower and the transformation process is concentrated on work intensification (and service output), but wage relations have not evolved to the same extent as in France. Thus the nature of change differs: in France it is focalised on the work content (mainly permanent employment of civil servants, coming also from other fields of activity); in Germany it is situated more out of work (outsourcing, also of civil servants and statutory changes). In fact, since our starting point was the application of the concept of wage relations on the level of the company, this approach has allowed to distinguish the nature of change in the two

cases. It has been shown that this concept is relevant to explain the transformation process within the French company, while in Germany change takes place on a national level, since employee's trajectories continue on the national labour market.

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