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First line supervision without any supervisor: what do workers think about groupwork? Anthropological fieldwork at Volkswagen Hanover

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First line supervision without any supervisor:
What Do Workers Think About Groupwork?
Anthropological Fieldwork
at Volkswagen Hanover

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Abstract

"Groupwork" is a particular form of work organisation typical for German factories that has been strongly influenced by union views. Management and trade unions present it as a radical innovation that calls into question the principles of the former Taylorist organisation on the one hand, and the meaning of production workers' work on the other hand. The workers I interviewed at Volkswagen in Hannover actually develop a different analysis of the new work organisation and of its outcome. Their original understanding invalidates the appellation of "groupwork" itself. They strictly separate the *group*: singular form of first-line supervision based on a new normative framework, and the *work*: the meaning of which has remained unchanged despite the implementation of the new organisation.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Gruppenarbeit ist eine für die deutsche Automobilindustrie typische Form der Arbeitsorganisation, die maßgeblich von Gewerkschaftsideen beeinflusst wurde. Aus Sicht der Geschäftsleitungen und Gewerkschaften stellt Gruppenarbeit insofern eine radikale Innovation dar, als dass sowohl die Grundsätze der tayloristischen Arbeitsorganisation in Frage gestellt werden sowie die Bedeutung der Arbeit, die von den Arbeitern geleistet wird. Allerdings stellte sich bei Interviews mit Volkswagen in Hannover heraus, dass die Arbeiter eine völlig andere Auffassung von Arbeitsorganisation und ihren Auswirkungen haben. Die spezifische Vorstellung der Arbeiter widerspricht sogar dem eigentlichen Begriff der "Gruppenarbeit". Sie nehmen eine strikte Trennung vor zwischen der Gruppe einerseits (der singulären unteren Managementebene, auf der Basis einer neuen normativen Anordnung) und der Arbeit andererseits (deren Bedeutung trotz Verwirklichung der neuen Arbeitsorganisation unverändert bleibt).

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INTRODUCTION

Being interested in workers and their work in Germany nowadays, it is actually almost impossible to visit factories, and have discussions with managers or union representatives without mentioning "groupwork" (*Gruppenarbeit*). "Groupwork", as it is implemented in Germany neither fits Japanese teamwork [Womack *et al.*, 1990] nor a group of workers assembling an entire vehicle as in Volvo's plant in Uddevalla [Sandberg, 1995], it is a particular form of work organisation, typical for German factories, that calls into question the principles of the former Taylorist organisation [Durand *et al.*, 1999].

According to the German industrial relations system [Thelen, 1991] the implementation of "groupwork" usually takes the form of a plant agreement (*Betriebsvereinbarung*) between management and works council, and aims at enhancing firm's competitiveness as well as improving work conditions.

From Automation to "Groupwork"

In the 1970s and the 1980s, technology and automation were the core of management policies regarding rationalisation and competitiveness. Management was aiming at replacing workforce through machines at every possible place on the shopfloor. At that time, "groupwork" was a union word only. It was part of the considerations arising from the project called "humanisation of work" (*Humanisierung der Arbeit*) initiated by the federal State in 1974. "Groupwork" was far from notions such as profitability and competitiveness [IG Metall, 1980; Leminisky, 1980]. It was an alternative proposal for better working conditions, through re-qualification of assembly line work, tasks enrichment and greater workers' autonomy. It gave rise to some experiences which were rapidly abandoned, as in the motor assembly department at Volkswagen in Wolfsburg [Granel, 1980].

In 1990, the publication of the MIT study on world-wide car industry [Womack *et al.*, *op. cit.*] induced a major turn in western car manufacturers rationalisation's strategy. This study strongly contributed to bring to light the "Japanese model" and to diffuse teamwork. The automation strategy was reaching its limits. Facing the emergence of very efficient Japanese competitors organised in a completely different way regarding work, production or supplier relations, western car assemblers started to re-think their rationalisation policy, inspired by the Japanese success.

At the beginning of the 1990s, German managers turned to the works councils and the IG Metall[1] to negotiate plant agreements on "groupwork", considering now "groupwork" as a key element to restore competitiveness. By doing this, they appropriated a term they have been rejecting before, and they associated "groupwork" with rationalisation and profitability. As a former alternative proposal to management projects, "groupwork" became the core of management initiatives regarding work organisation. One observes a reversed situation. Management now seeks to mobilise workers' know-how, experience and creativity to enhance firms' competitiveness. "Groupwork" marks "workers' come back" in management words and strategies. It also signals the collusion (and sometimes the confusion) between management and union projects.

Work in Groups on the Assembly Line

In 1996, management and works council at Volkswagen Hanover decided to gradually introduce "groupwork" in all departments. The negotiations' outcome conducted to implement one of the most innovative forms in the German car industry[2]. It meets what Gerst *et al.* [1995] call "self organised enhanced groupwork". Workers are called together in groups composed of ten to fifteen persons. They are collectively responsible for a portion of the line, are in charge of distributing the tasks between the different jobs. They are incited to rotate among jobs on a self-determined rhythm, so that each worker is able to occupy any job on the group's portion of the line. Each group elects a spokesman who is not paid for his function. He acts as an internal co-ordinator and represents the group outside.

Besides production, the group as a whole is responsible for material provisions, light maintenance, workplace tidiness, repairs on the product, quality control and tools, but also for planning holidays and overtime recovery. In order to be able to face those new responsibilities, groups are weekly given an hour devoted to group-meetings, during working time. Workers themselves settle the agenda, and may invite any "expert" (planning engineer, foreman, union representative) being in a position to help them on any question they decide to address. The most important instruction in a factory is still "never let the line stop". However, group-meetings cause the stopping of the lines in the middle of the day. As the works council insisted on the importance of group-meetings, management finally agreed to implement them, provided that this would not entail any production losses. As a consequence, daily productivity has been

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1 IG Metall is the German metalworkers' union.

2 On groupwork's diversity within the German car industry, see for example: Bahnmüller, Salm, 1996; Gerst *et al.*, 1995; Hollmann, Niemeyer, 1998; Jürgens, 1995 *in* Sandberg; Murakami, 1995.

enhanced, so that the time devoted for group-meetings does not provoke the fall of the number of produced vehicles. The introduction of group-meeting has then been followed by an intensification of the work on the line.

"Groupwork" between Innovation and Recurrence

This particular form of work organisation, strongly influenced by union's views, proposes compatibility between assembly line work and workers' initiative. It questions the traditional academic conception of assembly line work as an execution of simple and repetitive tasks demanding no intellectual activity [Sainseaulieu, 1998:30], as an extremely fragmented work [Friedmann, 1964], or as a manual work bound by rates and technical constraints [Verret, 1999]. By calling "group**work**" the new organisational pattern and the re-distribution of responsibilities it is based on, management and union propose a new understanding of the category of work. According to them, the new organisation would radically put an end to the former vision of production workers' labour and initiate an original one, including manual work and administrative responsibilities, execution and planning.

The introduction of "groupwork" however maintains a recurrent rationalisation policy and cost reduction strategy by intensifying production work and enhancing rates. The outcome of the negotiations on group-meetings shows that the production volume is intangible. According to this point, "groupwork" only represents an adaptation of traditional rationalisation strategies.

Consequently, "groupwork" contains a tension between two poles. On the one hand, the re-distribution of responsibilities breaks with former forms of work organisation: for the first time, management is giving workers the right to decide on certain points, and is socialising the decision-making process. On the other hand, the impossible negotiation on production volume and the continuous rise in rates reiterate usual forms of rationalisation.

"Groupwork", Group and Work in Workers' View

What do workers think about this new organisation, which is regarded as a success by the union, supported by management, and considered by the two parties as an innovation? How do they themselves analyse "groupwork"? In their opinion, does "groupwork" re-found the category of work? Do they develop a new vision of factory workers since the introduction of "groupwork"?

I tried to answer those questions by conducting interviews with production workers and asking them what they themselves think about "groupwork"[3]. By doing this, I was not seeking to collect information from workers' side that could validate or not my own hypothesis, but I was willing to get access to workers' opinion and statements on "groupwork". I considered workers as real interview partners, as interlocutors.

In the following lines, I will focus on workers' understanding of "groupwork" by identifying the meaning workers give to "groupwork" only from their own statements. This is a specific anthropological enquiry framework, which material only consists of workers' words and assertions.

I could resume workers' propositions with an apparently absurd sentence: everything has changed, everything is exactly as it used to be. In each of the 29 interviews I conducted, workers' declarations on "groupwork" are built on paradoxical affirmations such as "*it is better... but it has not changed anything*" or "*it is new... but we could already do that before*". Workers' quotations are organised as a network of successive oppositions, separations and connections. By using simple words, that can be banal or surprising, workers dismantle and deny "groupwork's" mechanisms and principles. They not only have their own vision of "groupwork", but also their own idea of work and the role of factory workers.

Two cleavages organise workers' point of view. Workers dissociate "groupwork" from the period prior to the new organisation. They sometimes underlie a fracture at the beginning of a new period, they also compare the new organisation with the time before its implementation to soften "groupwork's" innovative character... and they also point to a fundamental continuity. More importantly, contrary to the combination that "groupwork" contains, workers do distinguish group and work and analyse these two words separately. These two cleavages can cross or part, and require the collection of successive clues from the anthropologist as well as from the reader.

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[3] I spent 7 weeks at Volkswagen in Hanover, in September and October 1998. This time has been devoted to many commented visits of different departments of the plants, to interviews with middle managers, engineers, foremen, unions representatives, and with production workers. The interviews with the workers were strictly confidential. They took place within the factory, during working time, and lasted an average of two hours. They were based on a precise questionnaire. These interviews have been recorded and then transcripted word for word. Céline Bocquillon has helped with the transcription.

Work and Group-Meetings: "we do more every day, nothing has changed"

> We've been working the hours in advance for the group-meetings. The times we need for group-meetings, we've been working them in advance.[4]

This first quotation indicates, on the one hand that the substance of *group-meetings* has got nothing to do with *work*, and on the other hand, that meetings, or more precisely, their duration has a particular relationship to work. Meeting hours result from work, they have been earned by work.

> We work the entire week to get this group-meeting, because we have a little bit faster tempo because of that *[...]*. For this group-meeting, the 12 cars that get lost, we build them during the week after, so that it's not given to us in that sense, we're working for it.

> For the time we've been loosing today *[for the group-meeting]*, we do a bit more every day, nothing has changed, in my opinion, nothing has changed.

Working for the meeting means producing during the week the vehicles that get lost because of the meeting, it means working at a higher speed. So that *work* relates to a double reference: rates and production. The meeting itself is free from production and rates, its duration however is subject of a conversion in production volume. The meeting's "container" do not escape production constraint. It is absolutely hold in this constraint and transposed into work through rates increase.

As a consequence, the implementation of group-meetings – the "content" of which refers to singular[5] principles distinct from the categories that identify work (see below) – affects the work, in the form of a raise in work's burden through rates increase (*we do a bit more*). It does not break with the absolute primacy of production in the factory: within the factory, each hour is equivalent to a certain production volume. Time is the expression of production within the factory (*nothing has changed*).

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4 Italics are extracts from the interviews conducted with Volkswagen workers. Those are the exact words and expressions used by the workers. As I precisely work on words, I chose to keep the workers' speech like I heard it, including possible language mistakes or grammatical errors.

5 I chose "singular" to translate the French "singulier", as well as "singularity" for "singularité". Even in the French version, the words "singulier" or "singularité" are not used according to their regular understanding. Singulier/singular qualifies something unique, usually statements, principles, words and categories: that are subjective proposals, which exceptional and distinctive characteristics have to be approached and identified. Singular, as well as workers' awareness, subjectivity and intellectuality belong to the specific theoretical framework and vocabulary of the anthropology of subjective singularities I decided to work with. For French versions, see Lazarus, 1996.

Some workers propose a discharge of the expression "*to work for the meetings*" and employ an unusual and surprising form, even in German: "*we are working us the meetings*"[6].

> We are working us [the meetings] in advance.
>
> We are working us the group-meeting, because we got a little bit higher tempo during the 5 days of the week, precisely to get these 60 minutes of group-meeting.

We are working us, because of its unusual form, puts *worker* in the middle of the relationship between *work* and meeting duration. On the one hand, workers do realise the demanded effort to implement group-meeting without any production loss. Rates increase signals an intensification of workers' own work. But on the other hand, workers do benefit from this additional effort and from the raise in productivity with one hour every week free of both production and rates for group-meetings. One can read *we are working us group-meetings* as: workers are working for workers. Workers then point out the originality of rates increase following upon the introduction of group-meetings, and specify it.

Workers do work more, some of them even consider they benefit from this additional work via group-meetings. In their own words, nothing indicates, this is modifying their own vision of work. They even declare that *nothing has changed*. Nevertheless the expression *working for group-meetings* suggests an essential disjunction between work and meeting: meetings are no work. This represents the first clue, the starting point. I will then first examine what workers say and think of the *group*, afterwards I will come back to their own understanding of *work*.

The Group and the Foreman:"these problems *just* happened to become ours"

> The only thing is that, if any problems happen, we don't mention it to the foreman, we do that within the group now.
>
> For the foremen, these problems are over... for 15 years, if any worker wasn't able to do a job, *[the foreman]* had to see how to handle that, how to do, it was always his concern, he doesn't have this concern anymore, these problems just happened to become ours, I would say. The foreman may have other concerns, but we have to settle these problems.

Just like a double, the group substitutes the foreman since "groupwork" has been introduced, and one word circulates from one to the other: the word *problem*. Independent from what it refers to, if *problem* is associated to *foreman* and is then transmitted, or if *problem* is associated to *group* and has to be

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[6] The original expression is: "*Wir arbeiten uns das Gruppengespräch*"

solved, it is always the same problem. There is no innovation regarding what *problem* means, just a transfer (*these problems just happen to become ours*).

> The group itself is responsible for quality, parts, duration of breakdowns, and responsible for spare parts and those kind of things.

The problems and responsibilities the groups now have to face are methodically listed. They are always technical ones and relate to the daily management of the production process.

The group can be identified as a new form of "first-line supervision"[7]. Workers now have to face the responsibility to manage daily production on the shopfloor themselves and to fulfil production goals fixed by the firm. Comparing responsibilities and goals given to the new first-line supervision with the former organisation there is no innovation. It only consists in the transfer of the supervising function formerly exercised by the foremen to groups of workers.

As well as the foreman used to be one in the former period, the group is a decision-taking authority.

> We can decide our work ourselves, we don't have to ask the foreman before: are we allowed to transfer this job here? But we simply do it, it's a resolution of the group and that's it, of course it has to be voted, so that it's really a resolution of the group, it's written in the group's book, but without this resolution it doesn't work.

Before the introduction of "groupwork", *to have to*, *to ask*, *to be allowed to* identify the relationship with the foreman, that was characterised by submission and subordination. *Group*, on the other hand, is referred to *decide*, *do*, *resolution*. *To decide* is not completely hold in what has to be decided, but also concerns the decision about how to decide. It means that the group itself determines the principles of its decision-making process. The *vote* and the *resolution of the group* identify a singular decision-making pattern based on the examination of different opinions.

> Yes, we are a group now, and now... we have to manage, now we have to build cars properly on our own, well, before if anything happened, we spoke to the foreman, and now it's within the group and during group-meetings, we discuss about it, and also when we can do it, we correct it, when we have problems, but we can't fix everything, we try.

The group is a debating place (*we discuss*). Workers speak and exchange within the group. There is no unique solution but several conceivable solutions

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[7] Under "first-line supervision", I understand the responsibility the foreman had to face before, that is distributing men and tasks among the jobs, controlling work's execution, providing material, planning holidays and training... so that the qualitative and quantitative production program fixed by management can be properly carried out [Labit, 1998]. There are still foremen in the factory, but their role and function have undergone major changes within the ten past years.

to the problems that the group has to settle. *Discussion* testifies the variety of possible solutions, the diverse opinions and refers to the determination to explore them.

In accordance with the transfer of the role and function of the foremen to the groups, the group is a decision-taking authority. The singular form of the decision-making, however, differs from the way the foreman used to decide before: the group is a deliberative authority. Workers actually oppose *group* to *foreman* and show the specificity of the worker-group relationship based on discussion, contrasting with the worker-foreman relationship based on commandment. The previous system was a hierarchical one, the foreman was the only one who could give his opinion, workers were formally in charge of executing his orders, there was no interlocution. Within the new system, workers can speak, and talk to each other, they are responsible for determining the rules about how to manage the production on the shopfloor. *Discussion* is the word specifying the originality of the new form of first-line supervision.

To discuss, *to find a solution*: the meeting represents the support as well as the necessary condition for the new first-line supervision to fulfil its obligations.

> If we have a problem, we can expose it properly during group-meeting, discuss, find a solution *[...]*, I find it great.

> *[During group-meetings]* we talk about issues, we don't have time to talk about otherwise. During the breaks, we just switch off during the breaks, we read, or we bring a book or anything else. We don't feel like talking about work... and we do this here, during group-meetings we can do that, during the work itself, we don't succeed *[in talking]* either, it's loud out there, and we always have something to do, and if 5 persons gather together and talk about anything, a supervisor comes to say: "don't you have anything else to do!" so that during group-meetings, we have the opportunity to settle those things, it's important.

The group-meeting is the only occasion to talk and solve problems that the group now has to face. The new first-line supervision is the "content" of group-meetings. So that we have already solved a part of the enigma, namely specify the substance of group-meetings: devoted to discussion and decision, the group-meeting is the place of the new first-line supervision.

The Group on the Line: "we are forced to support our colleagues"

> I find it good, because groupwork, actually it means the works have to be accomplished within the group and not by each individual. Before, it was this idea: "I go to work now, I do my work and it's OK". Think another way means that the works should be accomplished within the group.

Before, *doing the work* is referred to *I*, in a *vis-à-vis*. About the accomplished work, an explanation just had to be given to oneself – and formally to the

foreman – but nobody was forced to give any explanation to the other workers. "Groupwork" has modified the rules, the group is now the frame and the "judge" of work (*the works have to be accomplished within the group*), this has to be taken into account (*think another way*).

> Within groupwork, everyone should try, not to work for himself but for the group. Everyone should be willing to help the others, or in my opinion, help the one that is not really fit anymore, whose productivity is reduced. *[...]* We can't think each one only for himself, but we have to think for the whole... If one of us doesn't accept it, it's back to the old relationship.

The group initiates a new relationship among workers on the line. It is no more an individualistic relationship only referring to oneself (*work for himself*) but an open relationship including the other workers and their abilities (*help the one whose productivity is reduced, think for the whole*). This new attitude has to be shared by everybody, its original character specifically happens upon its sharing out (*if one of us doesn't accept it, it's back to the old relationship*). It is however a fragile arrangement dependent on each worker's willingness to submit to common rules and to take care of the others (*everyone should be willing*).

> Well I find it good that we work in the group and that everyone has to participate, and that there are not some persons anymore who can stay in the background as they used to do, because they found an easier job or anything else.

To have to participate is a new principle "groupwork" has inaugurated. It demands every worker of the group to contribute and to co-operate on the line. The group marks the end of reserved job, and leads to a more egalitarian treatment of workers. Workers consider this as positive.

Not being able to stay in the background anymore, having to participate, think for the whole... the group is not only an authority that is deliberating and deciding rules applicable to everyone, but also a control authority, supervising the execution of its decisions on the line. Beside *discussion*, the new first-line supervision can be distinguished from the old one by two other essential issues. On the one hand, the application of group decisions on the line does depend in the end on the commitment of each individual worker. Opposite to the foreman, the group has no formal sanction power towards its members[8]. On the other hand, even if the group actually represents management on the shopfloor, and even if it has to meet production goals, the group bases its collective rules on a concern for other workers. Egalitarian treatment concerning job distribution, mutual aid, support, and the implementation of the new first-line supervision is built on a certain solidarity compatible with the firm's objectives.

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[8] However, the group has informal sanction means at its disposal, such as refusing to give holidays at the period asked by the one that doesn't commit to collective rules. Not all groups use those informal sanctions (see note 8).

Workers declare that the singular relationship based on a mutual aid duty begins with "groupwork". As a consequence we should deduce that the group founds an original solidarity and generates a new idea of workers' collective. But, a certain amount of other quotations deny the novelty of the new organisation concerning this point and a few other ones.

We have always been doing this: "it's exactly as it used to be"

> We've always been doing this! Yes, I work on a line where actually nobody never said "it's my job, I do my work, and the rest can manage", and I've never had this attitude. When someone just started, and had difficulties on his job, I helped him as much as I could, I always cared, does he pull through or not? And on our line, it's always been like that, if somebody had an emergency, the other helped, it was always like this, one did this, the other did this also, it was one and the same... actually it didn't change so many things.

The idea this worker has of the relationship among workers on the line has not changed (*this attitude*). Mutual aid and support specify this relationship according to which doing the work is not an individualistic concern one has for the individual job he has been put on (*it's my job, I do my work*), but a larger concern one has for the others and for the work the others have to perform (*one did this, the other did this also*).

> As we work, we also worked like that before, that one supports another. Let's say, there were colleagues that did a work and didn't look to the right or to the left, and there were also other ones that worked in collaboration, you can do your work on your own for yourself, you can work together in collaboration.

There is a possible multiplicity of the relationship to the others at work. *Work* can refer to *one's own* in an individual relation, or *work* can refer to *together* and *collaboration*, in a relation that takes the other workers on the line into account. However, this multiplicity is still valid today, as the use of the present tense testifies it in the last part of the quotation (*you can... you can...*). As a consequence, workers' relationship on the line is not determined by and subordinated to an organisational framework, it is independent.

Workers' solidarity identified by *support*, *mutual aid* and *collaboration* on the line is not induced by the introduction of "groupwork" but pre-exists it. And despite the group, it is still possible to escape group's pressure[9].

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[9] Groups can be ruled along very different lines. Some groups have introduced no collective rules. Some other are governed by rules that strictly apply to every members. Another kind of group introduced collective rules but apply them considering each individual situation. For example, if a worker wants to stay on the same job whereas the others rotate among jobs, this can be allowed by the group, either temporary or for a long period of time.

If we compare the quotations we just examined, with the ones we analysed before (third paradox), we find a coherence and a tension. All those quotations do argue that worker's relationship specified by *support* and *mutual aid* particularly characterises the actual relation among workers within the factory. But in the quotations claiming that this relationship begins with "groupwork", it is then presented as a duty and an obligation: "*we are forced to support our colleagues*". Whereas in the quotations affirming that this relationship was prior to the group, it is identified as one possible relationship among others. The distinction between obligation and possibility identifies the gap separating "groupwork" with the period before its introduction.

Before "groupwork", *support*, *mutual aid* and *collaboration* are the words of some workers. They only belong to workers, and refer to a certain solidarity intending to implement local justice on the line. As a consequence "groupwork" does not inaugurate workers' solidarity but marks its institutionalisation. So that what was previously independently determined by workers, far from hierarchical influence, becomes part of the normative framework of the new organisation. This framework consists in the affirmation and the implementation of new rules that can not be ignored.

However, if *solidarity* is a norm or a possibility, if *support* and *mutual aid* are related to *be forced to* or to *can*, it does not modify what those words mean. Even if the collaboration on the line is identified as new rule, its effective implementation still belongs essentially to each worker's attitude. According to the workers, the group does not inaugurate a new vision of what *worker* means for them, it does not initiate a new solidarity within the factory, it does not modify the vision of workers' collective.

Group-meetings and the new first-line supervision are the only elements of "groupwork" to still be considered as innovating, at this point. But the following quotations soften the originality of workers' own supervision.

> In principle it's not bad... but I think we could already do that before groupwork, the work was distributed indeed, but I learnt it like this, as I started here, we could say, you do this work, I do this other one, we could already say that... yes that's it... it's not a big difference, it's just called groupwork.

The novelty that "groupwork" initiates does not refer to an absolutely new possibility (*we could already*) but only to its name (*it's just called groupwork*). According to the old organisation, the foreman was formally in charge of distributing men and tasks among the jobs (*the work was distributed*), the implementation of the rule however offered some room for manoeuvre that the workers invested.

> We were also 8 colleagues on the line, at the beginning we were always doing each one his job, but one day we said, why not a job further every day, so that we also worked in circle, today here, tomorrow there, because the works are not the same,

> there's always one guy who can this job better, other works maybe worse, that's why we said the best is every day a job further, and we always worked in circle, you may have a worse work today, but tomorrow you may have better, so that there is always this equilibrium *(DC: When did you do this?)* Since... it was for the T2, around 1981... We did that at once, ourselves, it came from us.

Jobs are different, workers' capacities are unequal, above all the satisfaction is not the same on each job (*worse/better work*). In order to compensate for these inequalities, workers decided to implement job rotation, fifteen years before the official introduction of "*groupwork*". As a consequence, neither workers' initiatives, nor job rotation and workers' preoccupation for supervision issues intending to achieve equity on the line have been initiated by the new organisation in absolute terms.

The initiative conducing to the implementation of job rotation actually rests on the category of *equilibrium*, and intends to prevent some workers to be disadvantaged on the long run because of a particularly unpleasant and difficult job whereas others would be systematically advantaged. This initiative is based on a conception of work according to which other workers and their own feelings about their work is essential.

Regarding supervision, the innovation of "groupwork" rests on its formal implementation. Despite the clear separation between workers' and foremen's role imposed by the old organisation, some workers already felt concerned about the daily management of production, and did not exclusively leave this task to the foreman. The new organisation relies on those sporadic initiatives, extend them and give them the statute of a norm. "Groupwork" actually signifies a rupture by *formally* constituting the group as a decision-taking authority, and by granting a weekly meeting to the group, so that it is able to fulfil its supervision role.

As they do it concerning solidarity, workers limit the innovation of "groupwork" to the **rule** that management and works council decree. According to them, "groupwork's" novelty only refers to the new **organisational and normative framework**. They deny this framework the ability to have any effect on their own subjectivity. The following quotation clearly presents this point:

> But it was exactly like that before, I mean, but it used to come from us, *[...]* it didn't change anything, it's the same thing, but now it's just ordered from above and before it came from the colleagues themselves.

This does not mean however that workers do not take care of these new rules. They expose those rules' mechanism with a remarkable analytical precision and a detailed examination that show the attention workers have for these rules. They assume the new prerogatives: they meet, deliberate and decide. They are pretty satisfied, one of them even declares "*it's great*". Very few of them wish to come back to the old organisation. But neither solidarity and justice on the line,

nor their own vision of *worker*, or their own idea of *work* (see below) have been affected by the new organisation.

"It's called 'groupwork', but in the end we work exactly as we used to do before"

> *[Groupwork]* is a good thing, a very good thing, yes because people are more required, but the work, the work on the product is the same, the indirect tasks, this has become much more interesting what we have to organise ourselves, the indirect things.
>
> Those from the top can say "now it's groupwork" or not, the only thing that comes on top of this are group-meetings, but actually... I know what is always told about groupwork... but in fact it's just this word, in the end the work remains the same, if it's written groupwork on it or not, it's actually... nevertheless it remains because we have our rates, our time instructions, our work.
>
> It's just like before, it's called precisely groupwork but in the end we work as we also used to work before, without 'first worker', but the work progress and all this, it has not changed a lot, it's called groupwork, but if you look carefully, it's the same thing as before.

These quotations illuminate the fundamental distinction between *work* and "groupwork". "Groupwork" is referred to organisational tasks, to group-meetings, to a change in the hierarchy on the shopfloor (*without 'first worker'*), that is to the new first-line supervision. Workers do not consider "groupwork" as *work*, and according to them "groupwork" has no effect on *work*. Therefore, the expression "groupwork" is even inadequate and designated as a simple appellation (*it's just this word*), or rejected as strange to workers' vocabulary (*those from the top can say "now it's groupwork"*). The work is said to be the same. *Product*, *rates*, *work progress* (decided by planning engineers, work progress contains the description of the tasks and the time given to accomplish them) identify, regarding work, what remains unchanged in spite of the new organisation. Those are issues on which workers still do not have any influence. We have already seen, from the first paradox, that the new first-line supervision did not lead to any fundamental modification concerning time as the expression of production within the factory. We should note that the foreman has *never* been responsible for rates and for the speed of the line. As a consequence, it is not amazing that the new first-line supervision, only based on the transfer of the role of the foreman to the group, does not lead to change this point.

Even if *work* appears in a list, near *rates*, *time instructions* and *work progress*, it is not reduced to those terms.

> I had to do my work, I can do it in a group or I can do it like before in an established rule *[...]* it hasn't changed a lot until now.

> In my opinion, it's the same work, the same thing. For me it's exactly like before. I also have to do my work, in *groupwork* or differently.

To have to do one's work like before splits with the new normative framework that has been implemented by management and works council, and with the advent of the group as a decision-taking authority. The foreman can decree arbitrary instructions, workers can deliberate about the best way to do the work before taking any decision, this is of no influence regarding the statement *I have to do my work*. *To have to do one's work like before* proposes a subjectivation of the category of work supplanting concrete changes that occurred within the factory: rise in rates, job rotation, questioned hierarchy, new organisation but also the rule (*in a group... in an established rule*). This distance from the rule is probably the most significant element. All along their remarks and even in those ones, workers actually identify "*groupwork*" as a new set of rules.

In those quotations, *to have to* only refers to *I*, as a self-requisition concerning work, absolutely heterogeneous and independent from the new formal rules in force within the factory. *To have to do one's work* is conjugated in singular, it does not found any collective or group. It irreducibly identifies a subjective and essential attitude for workers in the factory. *To have to do one's work* specifies an unvarying form of workers' awareness, which principles and categories are strange to organisational modifications that occurred in the plant.

The category of work refers to multiple conceptions and leads to very different statements, depending on which quotation we examine. None of these statements however is affected by the transfer of the foreman's responsibility regarding daily management of the production to the group and by the implementation of a weekly group-meeting. Contrary to what management and works council argue, "*groupwork*" does not renew the singular terms of the category of work thought by the workers.

Resolution

Workers propose an original idea of "groupwork" that questions the specific title of this new organisation. Their points of view actually demand an alternative name that would better account for the field and the limits of the new organisation. But we will first come back to workers' propositions and systematically and separately resume what group, on the one hand, and work, on the other hand, mean for them.

Concerning the group, workers' words are clear. The group is the new name of supervision on the shopfloor. It is an executive and decision-taking authority, but also a deliberative one. Compared to the old supervision, deliberation is the only novelty. Group-meeting can not be dissociated from the

new first-line supervision, it is its necessary condition as well as an essential tool for its implementation. Otherwise, it consists only on a transfer of responsibilities. This transfer has affected neither workers' solidarity nor the will to install a certain justice on the line, although the group formally represents management on the shopfloor. The innovation of this new form of production management strictly locates in its normative statute decreed by management and works council. Long before these two parties decide to officially grant the supervision to workers called together in groups, some workers already cared for those questions, sometimes in a remarkable way, and went so far as to negotiate with the foreman the implementation of job rotation.

As for the word *work*, it relies on multiple conceptions that we should consider separately. These conceptions have in common that they are not affected by the institutionalisation of the group. However they do not add up, and do not merge. *Work* is no concept but a 'problematic word': "*a word about which there is a conflict of statements, that is a conflict of thesis and arguments. Each statement supports a distinct order of the real. The statement can be materialised or at stake, it is however essentially identified as an intellectuality, that means as a thesis, a principle*" [Lazarus, 1998: 12]. In workers' statements, four different conceptions have to be distinguished. If they evoke the group, the mutual aid on the line, and their own preoccupation about production management, *work* refers to the concrete job to which each worker is appointed and to the tasks one has to accomplish on this job (*the works are not the same, do the works in the group, you do this work, I do this other one*). *Work* actually fits in a concrete and objective vision. On the second hand, if workers declare that they "*work the hours for group-meetings in advance*", *work* is specified by rates (*we have a little bit faster tempo*). The time identifies and characterises the relationship between work and production. In this case, *work* is referred to the objective dimension of production, and to the subjective operation according to which time expresses production within the factory. The statement "*the work is the same*" proposes another different conception of *work*. According to this conception, *work* refers to an instruction workers have no influence on, and just have to implement, that is an external principle (*time instructions, work progress, product*). Finally, when they argue "*I have to do my work like before*", workers develop a subjective and internal proposition, a self-requisition, independent from any external reference.

Beyond the words and specific categories identifying them, *work* and *group* can be distinguished, owing to the conclusion that one is a problematic word, and the other refers to an external norm that belongs to an organisational framework.

The analysis of the paradoxical propositions of the workers about "groupwork" validates the statement "*workers think*", which argues that thinking is irreducible to nothing else than itself and can not be determined by

management attitude, concrete changes or norms [Lazarus, 1996: 67]. The end of the investigation actually leads to discover essential and subjective categories (*support, mutual aid, to have to do one's work*) that are thought and developed without referring to the new organisational framework, or to the concrete and objective changes that came from it. The disjunction between workers' subjectivity and forms of organisation however does not lead to condemn "groupwork" as such. But it invalidates the position some sociologists adopt by proposing a dialectical analysis of these new forms of organisation and by arguing they affect workers' consciousness, either in a positive way [Kuhlmann, Schumann, 2000] or in a negative one [Moldaschl, 1994].

Based on the analysis of workers' statements, I propose to adopt the appellation "team production"[10]. This term indeed helps us to avoid any confusion about the renewing of the meaning of workers' collective or not, and about the eventual changes concerning the category of work, as we showed that none of them have been questioned by the new organisation. With "team production", the new organisational framework only refers to the management of production by teams, on the shopfloor – that is the exact extent to which workers limit it.

[10] Team production here has to be distinguished with the way Appelbaum and Batt [1994] use this term. For Appelbaum and Batt, "team production" refers to a particular production system as a whole including work organisation but also relationship with suppliers for example, whereas here it only characterises a specific form of management of production on the shopfloor.

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