Jeremy F. Lane & Sarah Waters

‘Work in Crisis: film fiction and theory’

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Over the past 30 years, the French workplace has entered a state of profound crisis, with a dismantling of the stable contractual relations that defined work in the post-war Fordist era and an erosion of the forms of collective representation and solidarity by which workers defined their identity and place in the world. This crisis of work reflects broad structural transformations in the economy at national and international level that have accompanied France's transition to a globalised economic order that is characterised variously as post-Fordism, neoliberalism or finance capitalism. These overarching transformations have been played out on everyday material experiences of work, producing what has been described as a generalised 'souffrance sociale,' made evident through rising levels of chronic stress, depression, distress, burn-out, absenteeism and cases of workplace suicide (Dejours 1998, 2000; Soulet 2009). The purpose of this special issue is to explore and analyse a contemporary world of work and a French workplace that is in crisis, investigating the dimensions of this crisis, as they are represented across a multidisciplinary range of forms including film, fiction, political debates and theory. Work provides a unique prism through which to look outwards towards French society as a whole, since the workplace is a space within which the imperatives of an external order are experienced on a day-to-day basis. Work is also a prism through which to look inwards towards subjective, intimate and material experiences of work and at 'la condition ouvrière vécue de l'intérieur' (Blangonnet-Auer 2011, 10). The workplace gives material and localised embodiment to otherwise abstract and distant economic forces grounding these in everyday social realities and identifiable spaces. For Saskia Sassen, the global economic order is too complex, abstract and elusive to grasp as a systemic whole. Instead, we need to examine this order from the vantage point of the 'systemic edge,' where it comes into contact with human bodies and gives rise to 'astounding elementary brutalities' (Sassen 2014, 211, 220). The workplace is therefore at the juncture between the abstract and the material and between the

rational and the experiential, and is arguably a space in which the human effects of economic transformations are most keenly felt.

If work in France today is widely seen to be in crisis, this is because recent decades have seen the dismantling of the Fordist model of work that emerged in the post-war decades, a model characterised by a society of workers in long-term, stable jobs with established routes of career advancement, who benefitted from trade union representation and collective bargaining (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999). Understanding how and why this has happened requires paying attention to a confluence of different factors, from economic developments through political or ideological shifts, to technological innovations. By the early 1970s, the Fordist regime of capitalist accumulation was running out of steam; the rate of profit was declining as workers wrested a greater share of profits for themselves and as the productivity gains achieved by rapid mechanisation of France’s manufacturing base in the 1950s and 1960s began to wane. At the level of politics and ideology, adherents of neoliberal solutions exploited this economic downturn to discredit the post-war Fordist compromise as inherently inefficient and unprofitable, arguing that unregulated markets were the natural and most efficient allocators of resources and guarantors of profitability. The gradual ascendancy of neoliberalism has profoundly modified the power relationship between employer and employee and subordinated the interests of labour to those of capital in unprecedented ways. This has given rise to a generalised deterioration of working conditions in which flexibility, insecurity, work intensification and declining social protection have become the norm (Benach et al. 2014).

Further, neoliberal ideas played a key role in promoting the globalisation of both financial flows and global trade, as the regulated currency and capital markets of the post-war decades or the kinds of industrial protectionism engaged in by French governments in those years were increasingly seen as running counter to the efficiency of unregulated markets. The reduction of trade barriers at the global level, under the aegis of the GATT, and later the WTO, and as a result of the extension of the EU’s free trade area to the former Warsaw Pact countries after 1989, greatly increased the

opportunities for French firms to offshore their manufacturing plants in search of lower wage costs. This, in turn, accelerated the deindustrialisation of France, with an attendant loss of stable, relatively well-paid, low-skill manufacturing jobs, hence rendering many French workers' employment conditions more flexible, fragile and precarious. Technological change also played a vital role here, in so far as the logistics involved in managing extended supply chains across several time zones was greatly facilitated by the development of the so-called NTICs or New Technologies of Information and Communication (Mouhoud 2016).

Such technological developments also played a role in the increasing automation of those manufacturing plants that did remain on French soil, in a process that itself, of course, further reduced the stock of manufacturing jobs. As the economist El Mouhoub Mouhoud has argued, the automation of French manufacturing plant in the 1980s and 90s typically went hand in hand with the introduction of so-called 'Japanese' management techniques such as total quality management and just-in-time production, as French companies sought to improve their productivity and hence competitiveness in an increasingly globalised marketplace (Mouhoud 2016, 51–52). The material 'précarisation' of unemployment suffered by those who lost or could no longer find jobs in manufacturing was thus mirrored by the kind of psychological 'précarisation' suffered by those who did remain in permanent employment. Quality-management techniques and just-in-time production demand much more of workers in terms of the intensity of work and the extent to which they must invest their personal intellect and affects in their labours. One of the tenets of total quality management is that every employee should view their co-workers in neighbouring departments as *clients* to whom a top quality service must be delivered. Thus, all workers in all departments, not only sales but also production or service departments, are enjoined to internalise a kind of market logic into every aspect of their working lives, with corresponding impact on incidences of stress and burn-out. Further, increasing recourse to ISO 9000, the international standard for quality assurance, as a prerequisite demanded by all major corporations of their suppliers, itself involves the implementation of more extensive apparatuses of audit and

evaluation of each workers' every task. Again these processes rely on the development of sophisticated digital technologies. Such technologies are vital to managing stock levels and production processes in plants producing more diversified project ranges 'just in time,' i.e. in response to rapidly changing customer demand. They are also essential to fostering, capturing and auditing the more intangible skills now demanded of workers (Moulier Boutang 2010,157–59).

The imperative for individual workers to internalise ever more directly the logic of the market was also driven by changes in corporate governance and international accounting standards through the 1980s and 1990s. The increasing hegemony of the notion of 'shareholder value,' in part in response to the increased power of pension funds, who demanded guaranteed rates of return on their investments, was reflected in the adoption of so-called 'fair value' accounting standards, a shift in corporate governance such that share price and dividend payments came to dominate over all other measures of a company's performance (Aglietta and Rebérioux 2004, 151–86). Once again, these developments were facilitated by the evolution of computing technologies, while provoking both material and more psychological forms of 'précarisation.' One of the easiest ways of improving share price and increasing dividends is to reduce wage costs, either by shedding labour or by outsourcing peripheral, service functions, hence destroying previously stable jobs or transforming them into flexible forms of agency work. Meanwhile, those workers still on company payrolls found that 'fair value' accounting methods meant their departments or sections had been transformed into 'cost centres' and that individual workers were now directly responsible for their own centre's annual 'profit' or 'loss.' As Michel Aglietta and Antoine Rebérioux (2004, 37) point out, these new forms of corporate governance relied on the widespread adoption of NTICs to manage 'ces entités plus complexes, dans la mesure où […] les NTIC se caractérisent précisément par leur double capacité à créer des réseaux et à faciliter les contrôles du niveau central sur les entités inférieures.' Changes in management practice, with the shift to more networked organisational structures, alongside new forms of corporate governance and accounting standards have thus worked together with the

reliance on new forms of digital technology to diminish stocks of stable employment and to render those jobs that still do exist ever more stressful.

More recent technological developments, notably the Internet and smartphone technology, have raised the spectre of the emergence of a digital economy based on even more exploitative and precarious forms of labour, of the wholesale 'ubérisation' of the French labour market (Foulon 2015). As exemplified by Uber, the combination of Internet and smartphone technology has enabled certain web companies to act as intermediaries between customers and workers, charging the latter a significant commission for use of their Internet platforms, without providing them with any of the traditional protections and welfare rights guaranteed to employees under the terms of the French Labour Code. Uber are by no means the only firm to operate in this manner. However, the fact that they have entered a market that was traditionally highly regulated in France, with the number of licensed taxi drivers and their fares being subject to strict state regulation, means their presence has highlighted the challenges these new forms of digital employment pose to the French social model. Not only do Uber drivers lack the social protections afforded to salaried employees in France, but they and Uber contribute little in the way of 'cotisations' to the social security system (Renier 2015, 72). Further, studies have shown that the number of Parisian workers operating as private taxi drivers for companies such as Uber is highest among those from the formerly industrialised and working class *quartiers* of the city (Renier 2016, 43). There is thus an observable correlation between the processes behind deindustrialisation discussed in the paragraphs above and the emergence of the digital economy in France.[1] All of this raises the question of how trades unions and the French government should respond to this emerging situation. As Sandrine Foulon (2015, 56) argues, whether they should 'essayer de faire entrer les travailleurs ubérisés dans les habits du salariat ou leur tailler un costume sur mesure avec nouveau statut' has yet to be resolved.

This question itself could be seen as merely one element in a much broader issue regarding the effects of digital technologies on the future of salaried employment as a

whole. The prospect that advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and robot technology might destroy whole swathes of jobs, from HGV drivers to solicitors, has been much debated in France, as elsewhere. For the moment these discussions seem to have stalled, being polarised between the two camps of the 'technoenthousiastes' and the 'technosceptiques' (Filippova 2017, 69). The first camp argues that just as the replacement of the handloom with the Spinning Jenny produced more jobs than it destroyed, so AI will produce many new kinds of job. The second camp embraces a more apocalyptic vision of the future destruction of jobs. A 2016 report for the OECD opts for the more sober of these two options, estimating that AI will put 9% of all jobs in industrialised countries at risk (in Standing 2017, 105).

In describing the social effects of these economic transformations, traditional Marxist notions of exploitation and alienation have tended to be displaced by a new semantics of social suffering. Christophe Dejours's *Souffrance en France* (1998), which compared the management methods of the neoliberal workplace to the dehumanising practices of the concentration camp, attracted widespread critical and popular attention. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's notion of the 'banality of evil,' Dejours portrayed a workplace in which workers are routinely engaged by management in acts of cruelty designed to eliminate those deemed to be weak or unproductive and in which evil and immoral human behaviour has been normalised. The notion of suffering has since become a dominant metaphor for describing the subjective effects of neoliberal management practices and exposing both the physical and complex psychological and emotional effects of work (Dejours 2000; Soulet 2009). Yet, the discourse of suffering has also attracted criticism for its tendency to victimise the worker and reduce socially rooted workplace grievances to an individualised pathological condition (Clot 2015; Périlleux and Cultiaux 2009). The suffering worker is no longer figured as a collective agent engaged with others in antagonistic social relations with an employer, but is an isolated, sick and disempowered individual who is prey to a whole host of emotional and psychological ills. For some, the new medicalised discourse of suffering is an intrinsic component of a wider neoliberal agenda that seeks to depoliticise workplace grievances, obfuscate structural

transformations in the workplace and deflect critique from the systemic causes of exploitation (Périlleux and Cultiaux 2009; Cederström and Spicer 2015, Davies 2016). An employer can claim to be tolerant and sympathetic by attending to the complex human needs of workers and offering them a range of therapeutic treatments, while pursuing structural reforms unabated. This medicalised perspective on the workplace has been given representation in recent films, notably the documentary, *Ils ne mouraient pas tous, mais tous étaient frappés* (2005) where the destructive effects of work are observed not from within the workplace, but from the vantage point of the medical clinic to which workers have been referred for physical and psychological trauma and where they narrate their suffering to a therapist. Similarly, the fictional film, *Carole Matthieu* (2016), adapted from Marin Ledun's novel *Les Visages écrasés* (drawing on his experiences as a France Télécom employee), gives representation to the brutal management techniques deployed in a corporate call-centre through the eyes of a workplace physician who eventually succumbs to the traumatic experiences she witnesses and becomes a victim of intense workplace suffering.

The crisis of work is also political as workplace transformations have been facilitated by state-led policies of liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation that have sought to emancipate capital from regulatory and territorial constraints. The Fordist labour model has been transformed by a new ideologically driven management model ('le modèle managérial moderne français') which was arguably imposed with greater zeal and intensity than elsewhere (Linhart 2015, 58). Transformations to the workplace were underpinned by a 'nouvel esprit du capitalisme' which denounced a stagnant, corporatist model of labour relations and recuperated a critical discourse from May 1968 in order to reinvent a management model that appealed to values of autonomy, flexibility and creativity (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999). The new management model was supported by a political consensus on the Left and the Right about the need to reform work as an urgent moral and national imperative. Political leaders denounced what they saw as an inflexible and protected workforce that refused to accept change and that was preventing France from achieving its rank as a leading globalising economy: 'Dénigrer le rapport au

travail des travailleurs français semble, depuis bientôt trente ans, une constante *chez* nombre de responsables politiques.' Public sector workers were the target of particular vitriol and were accused of basking in 'acquis démesurés' or 'privilèges exorbitants' and of refusing to given up the rights and comforts of their protected status in the national interest (Linhart 2015, 51). On the Right, political leaders such as Nicolas Sarkozy, inspired by a network of right-wing clubs and think-tanks that crystallised during the 1990s, placed work at the centre of his presidential campaign, launching a crusade to restore moral values to France: 'La crise du travail est d'abord une crise morale.' His ambition was to reinvigorate 'la valeur travail' and to appeal to hard-working, productive and conscientious citizens epitomised by the image of 'la France qui se lève tôt' (Carzon 2007). In a similar vein, centrist president Emmanuel Macron announced that a reform of work would be a priority of his term in office, with plans to extend the terms of the El Khomri law in order to allow employers to reach independent agreements on working conditions, including salary levels, and relieving them of some of the obligations defined under the *Code du travail*. Yet, the reform of work is also a battleground for the Left since the Socialists' embrace of neoliberal economics under the Jospin presidency.
It was François Hollande's government that introduced a highly controversial reform of the *Code du travail* in the form of the El Khomri law. These political developments have by no means gone uncontested, as the mass nationwide protests against the El Khomri law and the *Nuit Debout* movement have demonstrated.

Finally, the crisis is cultural, as work no longer acts as a locus for collective identity and as the notion of social class is displaced by increasingly individualised and atomised subjectivities. As recent scholarship shows, work and the workplace is a space in which subjective identity is formed and where the individual derives values, belonging and a sense of place in the world. Beyond a simple transaction of wage labour, work implicates the whole self and engages intimate human qualities of intelligence, affect and creativity. Work can offer the potential for individual fulfilment and emancipation, but conversely, it can also encroach on complex and fragile processes of subjectivisation (Dejours 1998; Linhart 2015).

For Vincent De Gaulejac and Fabienne Hanique (2015), the contemporary workplace reflects a 'capitalisme parodoxant' that subjects workers to contradictory injunctions and demands and that literally drives them mad. On the one hand, workers are exhorted to be themselves and to bring their personality, thoughts and emotions to the workplace. On the other hand, these attributes are not freely given, but subject to rigorous prescriptions and controls that regulate every aspect of human expression and social exchange. These contradictory tendencies are reflected in the dynamics of recent French workplace regulation. Whereas a neoliberal management model has been imposed with particular rigour and force in France, measures to protect the mental health and well-being of workers have also gone furthest, with laws that often exceed the requirements of European directives on workplace safety. Hence, a law on 'harcèlement moral' was introduced in 2002 which protects the worker from bullying and forms of harassment, violence and intimidation that might endanger the dignity, physical and mental health of the employee. It was under the terms of this law that Paris prosecutors announced in July 2016 that the former chief executive of France Télécom and six other executives may face criminal charges in relation to 35 suicides by employees at the company in 2008 and 2009 (Waters and Chan 2016). Similarly, employers are obliged to evaluate the 'risques psychosociaux' of all workplace changes and policies in order to safeguard the mental health of employees. The French government set up a commission of experts on psychosocial risks in the workplace which submitted a report to the Minister of Work and Social Relations in March 2008. A parliamentary commission on workplace suffering was created in 2009 to investigate the nature and causes of suffering across French workplaces with its goal being to 'réhumaniser le monde du travail' (cited by Clot 2015,19). While French workers may find themselves on a short-term contract or CDD, with no trade union representation and limited social protection, their mental health and well-being is protected by an arsenal of legislation and they can avail themselves of a range of therapeutic interventions, from counselling to yoga, that may help assuage the distress arising from insecure working conditions.

One of the most striking symptoms of these forms of 'souffrance au travail' has been the proliferation, over at least the last two decades, of representations of the contemporary world of work, in fictional feature films and documentaries, in novels, reportages and *témoignages*. Many of the articles in this special number focus on particular aspects of this output. In their contribution, Christophe Dejours and Antoine Duarte identify a range of documentaries and feature films that they believe have contributed to the theme of 'la souffrance au travail' taking centre-stage in social and political debates in France today. They argue that the emergence of this theme can be attributed to a range of factors, from films and documentaries to worker protests in May 1968, the so-called 'tournant gestionnaire' that sought to control and capture the subversive energies of 1968, and developments in the discipline of 'la psychodynamique du travail' that Dejours himself has pioneered. Tracing these factors allows the authors to show how and why the theme of 'souffrance au travail' has become what they term 'le révélateur privilégié' of contemporary social changes in France. Jeremy Lane develops a more theoretical perspective, drawing on Gilles Deleuze's concepts of *moule* and *modulation* to examine forms of workplace regulation in both the post-war and post-1990s context. He focuses on a representative sample of changes in management practice and the legal regulation of work since the 1990s—the so-called 'compétences' agenda, the 2013 'loi sur la sécurisation de l'emploi,' the 2016 'loi El Khomri' and the Ordonnances signed by Macron in September 2017. As he shows, these changes are informed by a shared impulse to force workers to internalise the logic of the market entirely, constantly adapting or 'modulating' their professional identities and aptitudes in accordance with changing market conditions, abandoning the fixed identity, the 'moule,' of the Fordist worker as they do so. Yet such measures cannot be attributed purely to a malevolent neoliberalism but are the products of a more dialectical process in which legitimate protests at the failings of the French postwar model have been exploited to de-regulate the labour market, in the face of a variety of opposing proposals that seek to re-regulate that market in different, more progressive ways. In Jackie Clarke's article, a recent literary trend, the 'récit de filiation,' is examined. These distinctive texts are

typically interpreted as memorials to the passing of industrial labour and the working class. Clarke questions this interpretation to suggest instead that such texts tell us as much, if not more about the contemporary crisis in work in France, as they do about some lost age of industrial working class identity. Sarah Waters' piece focuses on how the contradictory dynamics of freedom and control that characterise contemporary capitalism are played out on lived experiences of work in the context of the liberalisation of French postal services. France's oldest and largest public service company, La Poste followed a particular model of liberalisation that sought to preserve a public service tradition while transforming it into a source of profit. The article investigates how the impact of liberalisation and the introduction of new methods of employee regulation, control and surveillance generated unprecedented levels of workplace stress which resulted in a 'wave of suicides' at the company. The focus of Anne Mulhall's piece is the literature of the office which is examined from the perspective of two recent narratives. She explores how these texts articulate bodily human agency and new forms of refusal. Audrey Evrard's article examines the representation of a closing factory in Luc Decaster's documentary *Rêve d'usine* (2003). As she shows, factory closure has become a recognisable trope of much recent French social documentary. She examines how Decaster adapts this trope not to represent the effacement of the workers he films but rather their continuing, 'spectral' presence, that affords them a modicum of agency and some hope of securing economic and social justice. These different contributions represent a selection of the papers that were presented at a conference, entitled 'Work Stories,' held at the Institute of Modern Languages Research on the 15 and 16 April 2016 and that was organised by the guest editors. The contributions approach the contemporary crisis in work in France from a variety of perspectives—literary, filmic, historical, political, psychological and theoretical. While the contributors cannot collectively claim to have exhausted this urgent topic, they do hope to have at least offered some sense of the variety of issues it has raised and the diversity of academic analyses it has generated.

Note

1. For a more detailed analysis of the emergence of the digital economy in developed nations, the economic and political issues it raises, see Scholz (2017)

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