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French "Coordinations" from professional trades to urban territoriality

The diversity of temporalities, which lies at the heart of the concept of flexible labour ("intermittence"), makes it difficult, in the current state of the struggles, to define the domains where co-operation between social actors is possible within the alternatives producing new organisations. Teachers, researchers and performing artists, locked in an elite status, albeit underwritten by a massive dose of precarity, have been prodded by this new reality to think about different productive territories and different forms of public power which would make alternative organisations possible.

From that angle, we will see that the city is emerging both as a principal locus for the expression of co-operation and creation, and as the most effectively enabling form of governance to see this potential realised. In this light, we will look at two actual experiences of Workers "coordinations" in French port cities, (Dunkirk and Saint Nazaire).

It is a well-known fact that one of the most notable consequences of "flexibilisation" was to render obsolete all Fordist era type employees organisations that were predicated on the workplace itself, without them being replaced by something else. And where all attempts at superseding the dichotomy between production and reproduction, and between producers (workers) and citizens, are being thwarted, as is to a large extent the case in countries where the state remains centralistic, and still dominates the institutional field, both in politics and within trade unions. This holds especially true in France.

"Coordinations" exhibit in this respect a twofold nature, cutting through the traditional professions and territoriality, and both aspects are very much interlinked. Coordinations mobilize in the first place those workers who are subjected to variable forms of employment contracts. This concerns not only casual workers, but also those engaged in information labour, and generally all people working together in production processes whose modernity lies precisely in that they cut through traditional forms of salaried work. Workers still enjoying a "strong status" are in no way excluded of these developments, and they even can take initiatives if they so wish, but only under the absolute proviso that they shed their corporatist straitjacket. Then co-operations between various forms of activities born out new forms of production are able to set themselves free from the old professional structures because they encounter in the city the support of a political motivation that also enables to widen it these forms of co-operation further. The re-territorialisation of "flexibility" within the city goes together with the demise of the industrial era categories of state-defined spaces and rigid professional categories.

We have been studying since the beginning of the eighties – that is since the begin of the splintering of working time, first in the Fordian firm, then within all forms of salaried employment – how various attempts were made to bring back something that in those days was mostly conceived as an elementary spatial solidarity that was necessary to "maintain the bond of the community" – as it already started to be called then. Bringing to the fore the importance of a social and economic relationship based on the sharing of the same life environment, and not longer just of the workplace, was started in France by Catholic social movements ¹ who organised the majority of the support initiatives towards the jobless and the precarious workers of those days. Also, some very minority sections within the CFDT² took their inspiration from the Italian struggles and started a small scale urban mobilisation of casual workers within cross-professional groups. We have studied this around the town of Caen and the Lower Normandy region. But the job-line based structure of the trade unions has been able to thwart such initiatives for a very long time, as it was able to decry their "employment bassin" approach and accuse them of undermining that essential element of the workers movement: the craft This could be seen as the continuation of community work at the parochial level, which for ages formed the backbone of the Catholic Church.³ In France, the concomitant arrival of globalisation and of the Socialist Party to power in the 80s caused the idea that productive activities can only and exclusively be linked to Fordist salaried work to linger much longer on than everywhere else. Even to-day, there are many so-called "non-representative" unions who limit themselves to mouthing the slogan "No casual labour!".

Thus it is no accident that the liberation from the ties from the twin industrial era hierarchies of the national state and of the traditional firm, was the handiwork of "coordinations" that arose in the cities most directly affected by the globalisation of capital. The re-territorialisation of the struggles in the port cities of Saint Nazaire and Dunkerque (Dunkirk) happens indeed against multinational enterprises which nowadays negotiate directly with cities. In general, the journal *Multitudes* has tended to emphasise alternatives that are based on other forms of mobility, e.g. migrants from poor countries, expatriate workers, or the immaterial circulation on the Net. However, the above mentioned re-territorialisation is also fully part of this development, as cities must organise in order to control the flows of capital which are capturing, through and thanks to them, the largest part of the new creation of value, and also, most importantly, to propose alternative uses for this circulation ⁴.

The productive city

The purely economic dimension of the externalisation practices pursued by multinational enterprises, which triggers various forms of activities in the city as a whole, profoundly alter the urban character of the city, both in its temporalities as in its circulation flows. In port cities, the multinationals' global logistics have literally torn apart the traditional, quayside-based transport activities, and forcefully inserted them in a much more extensive network of commercial and informational competences, which are spread spatially all over the city and far beyond.⁵ This local contextualisation has forced cities to negotiate directly with multinational enterprises (and vice versa), whereby cities are set in a "competition of talents" whose outcome will decide where firms will land their investments in the part of the continent of their choice. Thus, much more than individual companies and individual unions alone, much more than just individual lives, are overtaken by the production process. Now it is the social and democratic organisation of the city as a whole which is made part and parcel of the global dimension.

The twin injunction to be aware, as a collective, of the social and economic strategies that globalisation renders possible, and to have the public policy capacity to make their projects realisable, gives cities a distinct starting advantage if they have a democratic mode of governance. Cities with elected members from political, economic, and social communities are able to wrest large chunks of surplus value from global firms for the benefit of their people, enterprises and territory, and so outperform local collectivities still beset by hierarchical, nation–state based structures, where the local ruling class, devoid of leverage with the various representatives of the national government, find themselves empty handed in the wake of the new mechanism of globalisation.

All ports, whether state–run or port cities, are integral part of economic mechanisms where the flows of merchandise and information have always been reversible, and volumes and trade cycles always irregular. From the onset of mass industrialisation, all had to guarantee a stable income to a necessarily mobile workforce, handling goods of great value. Such workers were employees of no firm in particular since they had to be available according to the day–to–day requirements of many separate companies. Thus, stevedores enjoyed everywhere a strong employment contract. Yet this strong contract disappeared in France's state–run harbours at the same time as Fordism came to an end (which incidentally tends to prove that the concept of "guaranteed income", just as every economic reform, must be seen relative to the production mode that underwrites it.)

In these state–run harbours with no particular linkages with the cities besides which they are, this guaranteed income came as the result of a dual monopoly, by the state and the trade–union. The trade union, here the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail: big, hierarchic, and closely linked to the French Communist Party, transl.) which savagely defended its monopoly, operated in a closed domain, which was entirely regulated by the state, then the gatekeeper of France's foreign trade. This confluence of monopolies resulted in a self–centred, non–democratic space, with massively above average wages and benefits for all parties concerned. Stevedores, but also port trust bosses and state–appointed engineers were able to pile up a whole gamut of "acquired rights" right through the "glorious thirty years" after World War Two. But they had become twice or three times as expensive as their European neighbours, and less productive to boot.

Differently from France, most harbours the world over, and more particularly in Northern Europe, are run by a local governing body. Thus a city, a (German) "Länder", or a province has sway over this source of revenue and employment before not the national government. In this other form of governance, local authorities, trade unions and business must co–operate in order to develop strategies for a common territory. Full disclosure of conflicting interests and dissensions on viewpoints are requested as this democracy is productive: a port city must be absolutely able to sort out the determining variables that lead to the economic choices on which the development of a common territory depends. And that territory must also be viewed as such by all concerned.

Whereas it is known that the form of governance common to productive territories does away with the hierarchic and centralised structure characteristic both of the state and of the enterprise of the industrial age, what must be stressed is something else that is really new: forms of co–operation that are based on something else than the previous, fossilised, antagonist relationships. In France the emergence of this type of plural territories is being particularly resisted by the "Jacobine" authority⁶ which tries to maintain its predominance

by accusing port communities of trafficking, shady deals and other forms of illicit enrichment.

We must now look at the role of certain categories of harbour workers, so not longer exclusively, stevedores, to prod and push two French cities, Saint Nazaire and Dunkerque (Dunkirk) to adopt these (other) forms of territorial governance.

Territorialised coordinations

The liquidation of the stevedores' status by the (French) Socialist Government in 1993 led as could be expected, to the sacking of half the work force, with the other half being individually re-hired by separate companies. The CGT union had accepted this transformation in the end in exchange for a guarantee that all the (current) members of the workforce's income would be maintained, something that was achieved through early retirements and inability schemes. Yet the corporatist employment enclosure was to remain, which completely bypassed the exponential growth, uptown, of casual labour in the field of logistics, something that was taking place far beyond and away from the port itself. Two coordinations took the opportunity of this shake-up to experiment with a more self-managed form of employment regulation – and to reject the CGT's monopoly at the same time. A manpower service company, with majority control by its employees, but with a participating share from the firms making use of it, was set up. This unlocked the logic of antagonistic non-communication that till then had obtained in the "ex-territorialised statist productivist system, based neither on salaried work nor on corporate capital" (sic). A new "entrepreneurial deal" was to achieve a hitherto unknown flexibility of labour in exchange for income guarantees for the workers. In their turn, workers had to strongly commit themselves to productivity increases, irrespective of employment status, whether permanent or temporary. The coordinations then abandoned the corporatist trenches altogether by involving casual workers, and even women. They started France's first professional school for the harbour trades, ditching thereby a quasi-genetic local tradition according to which work in the harbour is a "man's job" and skills can be only transmitted from fathers to sons on the quayside⁷. All these changes result in the need for permanent negotiations between the coordination run job company and the client firms – just as has been for a long time the normal way of maintaining productivity in Northern European ports. The principle here is to go after the local competitive advantages and not to rely on corporatist rents. In this way, the coordinations are managing to attract to their port-cities companies that were hitherto largely reluctant to invest in the former bureaucratized port areas, and this is likely to result in a substantial increase in economic activities and employment.

This transition from closed shop stevedores union to the "Coordination of harbour workers and associated trades" has led to an unlocking of the perception in other domains as well. The violence of the reaction of the hitherto monopolistic institutions, whereby the CGT resorted to physical assault while the authorities refused for long time to acknowledge the representativity of the coordinations, despite it speaking for the majority of the workers in the harbour, goes quite some way to show how profound the change has been. This was also because the public stance taken by the coordination was putting to shame not only the port bosses, but the city council and the town government as well, regarding their economic strategies – or the lack thereof. The new approach taken by the coordination accelerates the mutation of the city leadership into dynamic entrepreneurs who henceforth are

attempting to harness the local potential for projects that go entirely beyond the ambit of the traditional nation state. This goes to the extent of Dunkirk now profiling itself as a "Flemish pole", meaning that it feels closer to Antwerp than to Paris. And that it now wishes to partake much more actively in European commercial flows which were neglected in "hexagonal thought"⁸ and which were tapped much more successfully by the Rhine region. This brings us to the relationship between port cities and multinational enterprises. Dunkirk is now cooperating more and more with Belgian firms who are massively investing in port installations and termini, linked to transportation networks wholly different from the steelworks⁹ and other parts of the French territory. In another premiere in France, distribution affiliates of American and Asian companies are now setting foot in Dunkirk, something they never had done before, choosing to invest in more economically mature port cities in the rest of Europe. One should be aware that territory is not the same as home turf. On the contrary, both harbours have shed this Gallic localism in which the central state confined them now that they engage in building up an economic pole based on a network of co-operations at the European, and even global, level. The kind of spatial autism characteristic of the old statist structures enforces that the city and the workers coordination now also need to integrate in federal organisations in order to continue their emancipation. The coordinations are also at the source of a more citizen-oriented approach to relationships, no longer exclusively based on work, but encompassing all productive activities of the city. This phenomenon has led to the emergence in Europe of complex metropolitan territories – and this not only in the geographical sense – as each city engages in various forms of cooperation in accordance with the type of material and immaterial production it wants to undertake. The city thus enables its citizen to be part of poles of complexity rather than of monolithic excellence.

However, a sociological analysis of the coordinations also shows their limits, as the re-territorialisation process is still essentially borne by workers in one, albeit dominant, economic field. Hence, this does not exhaust by far all the potentialities that are represented by the "constitutive" diversity of intermittence. One should also note that academics and cultural workers, whose locus of employment is still largely directed by the central state, keep largely aloof from these developments, contrasting their purportedly universal mission to the "parochial" character of these movements. Yet the efforts of the coordination have led an increasing number of citizens and local politicians to engage with the transformation of the local conditions of existence, and this development, now taking a political character, in turns comes to include other creative activities in the city, even though these are still mostly limited, due to the lingering influence of the old statist institutions, to the so-called informal sector. Thus the emergence of the city as a truly common territory transforms it progressively into an alternative seat of governance, be it more in complement than in opposition to existing national or federal structures – which remain essential to the multitudes in the matter of large-scale "depth investments. Such a pragmatic approach avoids the fallacy of portraying this evolution as a stand alone alternative, since overreaching, centralised institutions are still needed, was it only for a fair redistribution of resources¹⁰.

But all being said, there is one thing that port cities show us: the city is a central arena of alter-globalisation, because it is a focal point of direct confrontation with the business strategies of global firms. We must invest in the city in order not to leave, in the most material sense, globalisation in the sole hands of capital.

- ¹ This could be seen as the continuation of community work at the parochial level, which for ages formed the backbone of the Catholic Church.
- ² French trade union, Catholic in former times, now oriented towards negotiation.
[Translator's note]
- ³ cf. T.Baudouin et al., *Mouvements de chomeurs et de précaires en France, la revendication d'un revenu garanti*, Paris: Mire, 1989 ("The movement of jobless and precarious workers in France: the demand for a guaranteed income"), and earlier: T.Baudouin & M.Collin: *Le contournement des forteresses ouvrières. Précarité et syndicalisme*, Paris: Meridien–Klincksieck, 1983. ("Routing around the fortresses of the working class. Precarity and trade unionism")
- ⁴ See on this *Ville et Mondialisation* ("Globalisation and the City")
- ⁵ Also in *Multitudes* 6, Arnaud Le Marchand's article "Travail intermittent et production de la ville post–fordiste" ("Flexible labour and the production of the post–Fordist city")
- ⁶ From the "Jacobins" of the French Revolution, who were the stalwarts of a centralistic, and state–centred political and economic order, [Translator's note].
- ⁷ These tenets were still being aired in a recent round of negotiations regarding ... state of the art container technology.
- ⁸ The "hexagon" being the geometric symbol of France, [Translator's note].
- ⁹ In Northern France and Lorraine [Translators note]
- ¹⁰ See especially the March 2002 (8) issue of *Multitudes* on guaranteed income.

Published 2004–09–06

Original in French

Translation by Patrice Riemens

Contribution by Multitudes

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