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Reconsidering work and labour market through the case of French artisanship

Communication à la 12^{ème} conférence de l'ESA (European Sociological Association) – Prague, Août 2015

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I will introduce myself and tell you what I'm going to talk about in few minutes but first, let's begin by requesting our imagination.

Please imagine a person... but not anybody... I'm asking you to imagine a handicraft working person. To say it differently, I'm asking you to imagine a manual trade working person. Visualize that person. Ok?

How many of you thought about a man?

How many of you thought about a person working manually in a deep loneliness?

How many of you thought about a person working alone manually in a tiny workshop?

Were you referring to a specific manual trade? What was it then?

My name is Samia Ait Tkassit and, at the beginning of my research on artisanship in France, I asked myself "How far from reality is this romantic image?"

I spent nearly 5 years full-time work with a 3 years research funding within the Regional Chamber of Trades and Crafts of Rhône-Alpes – which is the second most important region in France economically speaking – to carry out my study on artisanship that still remains subject to doubt as far as its definition and sustainability are concerned.

To characterise it, I based my work on employment statistics produced within the consular network in Rhône-Alpes and entrepreneurship data that I processed. Together with qualitative material collected in butcheries and mechanic businesses through observations and interviews conducted in France and Morocco. I won't talk about Morocco today.

In today's talk, I'd like to give you an overview of French artisanship considering work and labour Market in Rhône-Alpes, not only because that's my research field but also and mostly because I think that studying this object leads to ask many sociological questions, such as what about work force autonomy? How do they work without prescriptions? Does the formal/informal theoretical key that leads to apprehend work and organisation really makes sense in artisanship? How the individual patterns of work are embedded in the collective ones?

The aim here is to tell you more about what specifies labour work in manual trades, knowing that artisanship remains minor in sociological research tradition focused on work and employment and also that there's a lack of studies related to this field in sociology in France in spite of a recent regain of interest in it

This presentation is divided into two parts.

First, I will define French artisanship and expose in a concise way the difficulties that fed my questioning about this research object. Then I'll give you a quick overview about labour market and work through my research field. I'd like to underline here that these focuses really helped to precise the research object nature and its dynamics in Rhône-alpes.

Definition - VISUALS - Let's use some visual to see how polymorphous, artisanship in France is!

The difficulty to set a definition that describes all artisanship seems to be related to the heterogeneity of the 500 trades that it includes.

In France, artisanship units are defined according to two administrative criteria based a law: the first one is the little size of the unit; the second one is the activities listed by a decree. Artisanship, as a French economical sector, includes a majority of small businesses with fewer than 10 employees in nearly 500 different trades.

- I can be satisfied by this definition because these criteria say nothing sociologically speaking about artisanship. They are not exclusive to it.
- Also, these criteria have an administrative nature and we don't have to forget it. Craft businesses are legally established according to the size and the activity but there's no presumption about the artisan status of the business owner. There's no automatic legal relationship between being an artisanship unit owner and being a craftsman. In France this introduce some trouble in the definition because the word "artisanat" that refers to the whole units and people of the sector, refers in its legal use only to a little category of business owners. I will be back to that status of craftsman in few seconds.
- The third observation about the administrative criteria that define artisanship units concerns their size. The size is no more a cut and dry restrictive criterion. The units can go bigger and remains considered as an artisanship unit if the owner is a craftsman. Doing that, the French legislator gives to the craftsman status a kind of superiority that introduces a trouble in artisanship definition and disturbs the two administrative criteria's weight and stability.

Craftsman status is related to qualifications certified by a vocational degree or a 6 years experience being registered by the French consular network as a manual trade owner. Craftsmen must actively participate to their unit activity.

In brief, in artisanship organisations, work is essentially related to manual skills while the capital is maintained at its lower level essentially for legal reasons constructed by the French legislator and the craftsmen themselves. So let's focus on the labour.

Labour market and work - Labour market and work are two keys that help to unpack the polymorphous research object which is artisanship.

At the beginning of my study, a huge work force movement leads me to ask questions about employment in artisanship. According to statistics, thousands of workers are in movement (138,673 entrance situations and 143,953 exit movements, apprenticeship isn't count)

Why do they move? Where do these people go? Do they stay in crafts sector? Do they set up their own businesses? Does their movement related to their contractual situation? Maybe it's about precariousness? Does this movement dangerous for the sector sustainability?

The research shows that work contractual modalities in Rhône-alpes artisanship units are close to what it used to be in the other productive sectors in France: Long term contracts represent 78% of the work force situations knowing that apprenticeship represents a significant part of contract in comparison with what it represents in the industrial field.

(In 2009, 12% in artisanship and 1.4% in the industrial field all activities taken into account).

In a long term perspective, Rhône-alpes artisanship offers stable employment situations to its work force that spends in average about 7 years inside their employer unit. This seniority average of 7 years working is long enough to attenuate the drama of the movement statement but it doesn't make it disappear.

Artisanship work force moves but its movement is not symptomatic of an employment dysfunction but a way of functioning!

What I can say about crafts labour market in few points is that:

- There's no restriction that regulate the entrance into it;
- The work force entrance occurs at any qualification level: at a low level of skills like in the case of apprenticeship but also at a very high level like when skilled ex-artisans are employed by others in their crafts units.
- If I simplify: Work force seems to move because workers are enough assured to find the same contractual work conditions in another artisanship unit, and also because they need to move to build their employability.

The qualitative material collected in butcheries confirms these statements. The research reveals the craft business as an incubator of skills.

There's an injunction of autonomy which appears like a compromise that suits the artisanship owners because, even if they give a high value to know-how transmission through apprenticeship, they consider the time spent on managing work force as wasted.

The injunction of autonomy suits the workers because they get – day by day and step by step – more autonomy. This is more complicated than that in reality. Crafts workers have to learn the professional norms of work first, then they can use their expertise to make rules as their work goes if they got a local legitimacy to do so!! In fact, even if they get very high qualified quickly, there's a kind of linearity inside the local work group which refers to a talent and seniority hierarchy that is difficult to disturb. Movement appears as a way to take benefits from the skills acquired elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, let's say that the main finding here is that artisanship labour market is supported by two forces: cohesion and elasticity. Cohesion is built by professional socialization. The research shows that even if there's an important rotation rate of work force, enough new workers integrate artisanship and stay enough time to learn the necessary skills to practice their job and also, there's enough people highly qualified that work on transferring their know-how to the new generation of workers. This permanent change provides artisanship a kind of stability. Elasticity which is the second force refers to the artisanship absorption capacity. It contributes to make crafts a possible solution against the rise of unemployment.

These cohesion and elasticity reveal Rhône-alpes artisanship labour market as an open and dynamic social category which is articulate around qualifications and experience.