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**The Evolution of Employment Structure in France and Japan:
a comparison of national trajectories 1992-2002 in a societal perspective**

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General introduction

For some years now, assessments of labour market insecurity in all OECD countries have been characterised by a certain degree of paradox.

On the one hand, empirical assessments broadly agree that the standard stable employment contract – to which the epithet ‘Fordist’ is frequently attached - that used to characterise employment in large private and public-sector companies has been eroded in favour of a proliferation of jobs on the periphery of the labour market. Many observers have also pointed to a weakening of the distinction between internal and external labour markets and to the increasing complexity of workers’ labour market trajectories.

These developments go hand in hand with an increase in the number of different forms of employment contract and the emergence of transitional markets providing bridges between different spheres of activity (Schmid and Gazier). Each of these phenomena seem to point to a crisis in the ‘wage relationship’ that has been in place for the last half century.

Despite the undeniable increase in precariousness and flexibility, particularly over the last decade, there is little to suggest that job instability has become widespread. Several studies (Jacoby 1999, Marsden 1999, Auer and Cazes 2003, Rebick 2005, Rameau 2006, Farber 2006) have, on the contrary, emphasised the relative stability of employment relationships in all the main industrialised countries, regardless of the statistical indicators used: average seniority, turnover rate, retention rate, etc.

The aim of this paper is to show the existence of such a paradox in both France and Japan, despite the differences in the two countries’ economic trajectories in recent years. Above all, however, we will investigate this paradox in the context of the labour institutions at work in the two countries. The concomitance of the relative stability of employment relationships and the flexibilisation of those relationships will emerge as a general trend, but one that takes a particular form in each national context (Maurice, Sellier, Silvestre 1986).

Research questions

In a series of comparative studies, Nohara (1995, 1999, 2006) has shown the particular national forms taken by the interdependent relationships between labour market participation, the family and society, which he has investigated by combining two types of ‘convention’, or sets of largely implicit rules¹. On the one hand, the ‘family convention’ denotes a set of norms and practices which, in a given society and at a given moment in time, define how family ties are organised and shape gender relations in the productive and reproductive spheres. On the other hand, the ‘wage convention’ consists of a set of mechanisms regulating wages, productivity and skill.

To summarise briefly, the family convention in Japan is characterised by the relative autonomy of the family space as a locus for reproduction and consequently as a producer of domestic services, at least in the ‘nuclear family’ prototype that accounts for three fifths of Japanese households. Combined with a lack of state intervention in this area, this characteristic feature reinforces the gender division of labour within the family, which is regarded as a private space; men are responsible for earning the money required to support their families, while women’s main spheres of responsibility are management of the family budget and domestic tasks. This notion of the family tends to give rise to a certain attitude towards women’s work that is socially legitimated and often internalised by women themselves. The participation of wives and mothers in the labour market is regarded solely as

¹ The concept of ‘convention’ is used in the sense of ‘French Convention School’; Conventions represents both opportunities and constraints, for individual actors involved in economic activities. Conventions refer to values, rules and representations that influence their economic behaviour (Favereau, Lazega 2002).

a source of additional income for the family budget and not as a means for women to achieve independence.

In contrast, the family convention in France, which is inconceivable without state intervention, is based on active interaction between public policies, families and women. The family has remained a private space and produces most domestic services itself, which gives women the primary role in the management of domestic tasks. At the same time, however, it is subject to extensive intervention by the public authorities, both in its capacity as an institution involved in reproduction and as a basic economic unit. As social transfers became instrumentalized, so the state introduced incentivising policies into the family space. As a result, family life became framed by various mechanisms and arrangements, whether social (child benefits), fiscal (family quotient) or educational (childcare). Thus in exchange for state interference in the private space, women were offered assistance as mothers and protected as workers. This gave rise to the multidimensional status of French women, which enables them to fulfil several roles, albeit at the price of accepting heavy burdens both at work and at home.

As far as the ‘wage convention’ is concerned, its manifestation in France is based on a **classification system**, produced by collective bargaining, often at industry level, that embodies the notion of ‘**pay equity**’. This notion of equity is based on the matching of jobs or functions, each with their own position in the classification, to skills, defined on the basis of seniority, formal qualification and occupational experience. A convention of this kind, based on the **objectification of criteria** such as formal qualification, job rank and the principle of ‘equal pay for equal work’, is used as a referential rule that regulates the occupational space in France.

The Japanese ‘wage convention’ has been described as the ‘**social management of age**’. This principle regulates the process of acquiring occupational skills through on-the-job training and at the same time legitimates the wage system, which takes account of consumption needs over the course of the life cycle. Embedded within the occupational space in Japan, it tends to shape the organisation of the wage-earning class through the positive and negative interactions that operate between age and seniority or age and gender. As a result, age and family status play a decisive role in wage differentiation.

Like many OECD countries, both France and Japan have been – or were until the end of the 20th century - characterised by well-established internal labour markets. However, the differences in the ‘wage convention’, combined with each country’s own specific ‘family convention’, produced different national models in respect of social relations, employment relations and labour markets. Consequently, it has been possible to use the differentiation between men and women in the two countries as a factor that is revealing of the ways in which each society shapes the occupational space through the interactions between these two types of convention.

In what follows, we will be concerned to examine some of the results of this analysis from a dynamic perspective by relocating them within a time series. This particular focus on gender relations has the advantage of introducing, from the outset, factors that are component parts of **societal models** constructed on the basis of the complex interaction between work, family and society into an economic analysis of labour markets (which is often reduced simply to a quantitative examination of supply and demand). This will enable us to put into context the so-called ‘universal’ tendencies so beloved of many economists.

By adopting such a perspective, we will be able to put to the test of time the main results obtained in our earlier comparative studies of France and Japan and thereby confirm or refute our basic hypothesis. This can be summarised as follows: employment norms constructed on the basis of the interaction between the two types of ‘conventions’ create a sort of institutional routine which, without being wholly immutable, nevertheless exerts a

considerable degree of influence over the trajectories taken by actors with limited cognitive resources as changes take place.

Methods

In selecting the differentiation between men and women - and particularly female patterns of labour market participation - as our 'probe' for analysing changes in relationships to work, we will in fact be examining the evolution of the state of the French and Japanese labour markets, in the broad sense of the term, between 1992 and 2002.

Our investigation will be based on descriptive statistical analyses. Since we have adopted a macro-statistical methodology, the quality of our analyses will be determined largely by the reliability of the statistical apparatuses used. Statistical data are available for both the countries of concern to us here, and in particular national employment surveys carried out at household level. In the case of France, the data are collected during the employment survey of 70,000 households that INSEE carries out each year in March. In the case of Japan, the data are taken from the 'Shucho - Employment Status Survey' conducted every five years in October among 420,000 households by the Prime Minister's statistical office. We use data from three years - 1992, 1997 and 2002 -, which cover a period of structural crisis for the Japanese economy.

True, these surveys are not absolutely identical. The data collection methods are slightly different and the statistical categories are defined differently, reflecting differences in representation or reference systems in the two countries. However, they both attempt to capture the notions of work and inactivity in as broad a way as possible. In particular, they have the advantage of being based not on the ex-post construction of categories, as the definitions of unemployment commonly used in international comparisons are, for example, but directly on the **spontaneous statements about their positions made by the individuals surveyed**. Thus this measurement is based on the opinions of those concerned. Even though there is sometimes a risk of mixing subjective and objective elements, it has proved to be particularly well suited to analysis of the female population, where there are real difficulties in defining the boundaries between activity, inactivity and unemployment.

Thus these two nationally representative employment surveys enable us to examine the boundaries (objectified through a socio-psychological filter) between activity, inactivity and unemployment and to trace how these boundaries are being redrawn in the two countries. Thus the criteria adopted here are based on the spontaneous responses to filtering questions used to ascertain how the interviewees define themselves at the time of the survey, independently of what they actually did during the reference period. Unlike the ILO convention, which predetermines reference period, availability for work or job search, this statistical convention, defined as describing the 'usual situation of person', can classify and quantify the various categories of people as active, unemployed or inactive (retired, students, housewives etc.)².

However, even though the statistical apparatuses are relatively comparable, there is another methodological problem: we will on several occasions make use of cross-sectional data and not the longitudinal data that are better suited to our research questions but difficult to access. Consequently, our analyses will be based solely on a comparison of curves

² In France, the question is formulated as follows: What is the current occupation of Mr./Ms... ?, followed by a choice between 'working' and 'not currently working or no longer working'; in the second case, one of the following categories must be selected: unemployed, student, serviceman/woman, retired, housewife, other inactive. In Japan, subjects are first asked: 'Do you normally do paid work?', followed by a further question: 'What do you do?'. Those who do not work have a choice between 'do household tasks, 'go to school' or 'do other things'. The question that invites subjects to declare themselves 'unemployed' appears later, after the questions: 'Would you like to work?' and 'Why?'.

reconstructed and simulated on the basis of snapshot data for various age groups, although our arguments frequently refer to the dynamic notion of life cycle or trajectory. This methodology, the major shortcoming of which is that it masks the generation effect, demands that caution be exercised in interpreting the data but does enable us to reveal the more structural characteristics of phenomena observed in each society.

The first part of the article deals with the reconfiguration of active, inactive and unemployed categories between 1992 and 2002. In the second part, we examine the diversification of atypical jobs and the problems associated with the increased precariousness of employment, particularly through the differentiation between men and women. In the third part, we will examine the changes that have taken place among the hard core of wage-earners by analysing employee stability as measured in terms of seniority and their labour market mobility. In the final part, we will re-examine the societal approach in order to investigate its ability to explain the dynamic of institutional change.

I – Broad outlines of the economically active population in France and Japan

Many researchers have already pointed to the genuine difficulty in measuring the economically active population and unemployment, as well as the relativism of these categories as country-specific social constructions. Any attempt at quantification necessarily involves bias, depending not simply on the methods employed or the purposes for which the statistics were collected but also, and above all, on the sociological state of the population (cultural attitudes, institutional norms). Although we are aware of the fact that our measurements have their own limits, we intend briefly to outline their evolution in terms of the criteria adopted in order to highlight a number of major trends.

We have already mentioned the high level of ambivalence characterising the distinctions made in Japan between activity, inactivity and unemployment, in contrast to the situation in France, where state programmes (unemployment benefit, subsidised employment contracts, basic guaranteed income etc.) certainly reflect individuals' subjective representations of their relationship to work. Indeed, comparison of the unemployment rate based on spontaneous declarations and the unemployment rate according to the ILO definition³ reveals more or less pronounced differences in both countries, particularly in Japan, where the gap between the two rates is particularly significant for women and for men in the youngest and oldest age groups. One major difference between the two counts, as Table 1 shows, results to a large extent from the inclusion or exclusion of individuals' '**availability for work**⁴', which reflects Japanese women's ambivalent behaviour with regard to job search. Moreover, many Japanese women who are reported to be inactive (almost 25%) would, nevertheless, like to work if the occasion presented itself. This large number of women, most of whom are housewives, have retained a desire to work without explicitly looking for a job or being immediately available for work.

This latent labour supply, which is not wholly comparable with the standard notion of 'hidden unemployment', certainly reflects the sociological particularity of women in Japan. From the point of view of the labour market, it is as if there is a link between various states of availability and opportunities to take up paid work. In other words, we are dealing here with a flexible reservoir of labour, since a not insignificant share of women are able to move through

³ According to the ILO definition, individuals are regarded as employed if they worked at all, even if only for an hour, during the reference week. On the other hand, they are classified as unemployed if they did not work during the same week, if they are available for work in the next two weeks and are actively seeking work.

⁴ One of the paradoxes is that many of the women who say they would like to work and look for a job feel at the same time disinclined to work immediately because of the various constraints, particularly family-related ones, to which they are subject. This type of ambivalence shows that the notion of availability is linked to the social environment as internalised by the actors themselves.

the boundaries between activity, inactivity and unemployment, depending on changes in the economic situation.

This type of phenomenon is not wholly unknown in France, but it is much more limited in scale, among both men and women. Thus the gap between the two measures of unemployment is fairly marginal. The share of the inactive population that would like to work is very small indeed. Generally speaking, there is a high level of concordance in France between the statistical definitions and the (subjective) statuses of individuals, who tend to internalise the principles underlying the government's definition of employment⁵. In Japan, on the other hand, there is a degree of statistical ambiguity, which reflects less a technical framing problem than a certain sociological ambivalence in attitudes to work.

Despite the ambivalence associated with our methodology, it is possible, by comparing three dates (1992, 1997 and 2002), to retrace labour market trajectories during the 1990s (Table 1).

In France, this period was characterised by a considerable fluctuation in economic growth, which deteriorated until 1997 and then improved as a result of the rise of the 'new economy'. This unevenness had a direct impact on the labour market. Stricken by a depressed global economy, the French economy initially lost a considerable number of jobs, which led to a sharp rise in the unemployment rate. The advent of the socialist government in 1997 changed the institutional environment, with the new government introducing measures to assist the unemployed and young people experiencing difficulty in entering the labour market. Combined with a significant upturn in the economy at the end of the 1990s, these new measures had beneficial effects on the unemployment rate. Although, as we shall see, this upturn neither halted the proliferation of atypical employment nor had any effect on hard-core unemployment, a share of the unemployed population was, nevertheless, reabsorbed during this period, against a demographic background that remained positive. Although participation and employment rates remained relatively low in France, in comparison with both the OECD average and Japan, the share of the population participating in the labour market increased overall, in both absolute and relative terms. In particular, the share of women increased continuously and the female pattern of labour supply drew increasingly close to the male model.

Japan, on the other hand, experienced a drastic change in its economic fortunes. After the collapse of the 'speculative bubbles' of the early 1990s, it got bogged down in a structural crisis that suggested that a change in growth regime could be taking place (Nohara 2002). The first signs of deterioration in the labour market became evident as early as 1992, particularly among women; this followed a long period of virtually full employment⁶, to which Japan had become accustomed. This deterioration continued throughout the 1990s, despite repeated Keynesian budget policies based on public works, especially following the Asian crisis of 1997, which plunged the country into a period of deflation. Many Japanese companies closed down factories or announced mass redundancies, while the government began to favour an active labour market policy and introduced various flexibility measures (deregulation of the laws on part-time and temporary work, introduction of fixed-term contracts over one year, liberalisation of labour placement services, individual grants for continuing training, etc.)⁷. In

⁵ Of the unemployed individuals seeking work, 89% state they are registered with the ANPE (the French National Employment Agency), compared with only 16% in Japan, where the way in which 'actively seeking a job' is defined in itself poses a difficult problem of interpretation.

⁶ Historically, the economic objective of Japanese governments was to achieve 'full activity' rather than 'full employment', in a societal context in which the share of waged work was relatively low compare to the European norm and self-employed workers – and their corollary, family workers – held an important position in the socio-political landscape.

⁷ Special issue [Structural changes in the labor market and government policies] of Japan labor Review n°2 (2004) covers a large series of these changes.

this deflationary context – an extremely rare phenomenon in the modern world – in which economic activity literally shrank, the labour market was confronted with an unprecedented situation. Having reached a peak in 1998, the employment level began to decline for the first time in Japan's history, particularly in manufacturing industry.

At the same time as large numbers of jobs were being lost, the employment rate declined for both men and women. Despite this fall in the volume of the economically active population (aged 15-64), the activity rate increased constantly during this period. Thus it was the number of unemployed people that increased drastically (Table I). Whatever the criterion used, unemployment rose rapidly, doubling or even tripling within a few years. There was a particularly rapid rise in unemployment among men, which reflected the fact that deflation was affecting the very heart of the economy. On the other hand, the number of unemployed women (without jobs and looking for work) fluctuated much less, which suggests that women were moving silently between various states of activity and inactivity.

Table I - Evolution of boundaries between activity, inactivity and unemployment between 1992 and 2002 in France and Japan

	1992			1997			2002		
	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male
F A) Population aged between 15-64 years	3719	1871	1848	3791	1907	1884	3831	1932	1899
R B) Active population (15-64 years)	2478	1112	1366	2526	1167	1395	2647	1219	1428
A C) Employed population	2200	954	1246	2217	985	1232	2384	1079	1305
N D) Persons without employment in search of job	278	158	120	345	182	163	263	140	123
C E) Inactive population (of which those wanting to work)	1224 (37)	759 (25)	465 (12)	1229 (45)	740 (30)	489 (15)	1184 (42)	713 (26)	471 (16)
E Activity rate= B/A (%)	66.6	59.4	73.9	66.6	61.2	74.0	69.1	63.1	75.2
Employment rate=C/A (%)	59.2	51.0	67.4	58.5	51.7	65.4	62.2	55.8	68.7
Unemployment rate=D/B (%)	11.1	14.2	8.8	13.7	15.6	12.0	9.9	11.5	8.6
Unemployment rate ILO* (%)	10.1	12.8	7.9	12.3	14.2	10.8	8.9	10.1	7.9
J A) Population aged between 15-64 years	8670	4329	4341	8690	4333	4357	8555	4268	4287
P B) Active population (15-64 years)	6501	2780	3721	6661	2864	3797	6518	2819	3699
A C) Employed population	6138	2529	3609	6175	2549	3626	5965	2496	3469
N D) Persons without employment in search of job	363	251	112	486	315	171	553	323	230
P E) Inactive population (of which those wishing to work)	2168 (510)	1549 (425)	619 (85)	2028 (513)	1469 (423)	559 (90)	2038 (546)	1449 (427)	589 (119)
N Activity rate= B/A (%)	74.9	64.2	85.7	76.7	66.1	87.1	76.2	66.0	86.3
Employment rate=C/A (%)	70.8	58.4	83.1	71.1	58.8	83.2	69.7	58.5	80.9
Unemployment rate=D/B (%)	5.6	9.0	3.0	7.3	11.0	4.5	8.5	11.5	6.3
Unemployment rate ILO* (%)	2.2	2.4	2.1	3.5	3.4	3.5	5.4	5.1	5.7

Sources: 'Enquêtes sur l'emploi' de 1992,1997, 2002 INSEE, France ; 1992, 1997, 2002 Employment status surveys, management and coordination agency, Japan.

NB: * ILO unemployment rates taken from 'Enquêtes sur l'emploi' in France and the Labour Force Survey (October) in Japan.

II – The evolution of unemployment: divergences and convergences between the two countries

Between 1992 and 2002, the level of unemployment in France fluctuated depending on the economic situation and the policy measures introduced to deal with unemployment. Even though the employment rate improved despite the demographic pressures, the French economy left 8 to 10 % of the active population affected by structural unemployment, making them difficult to integrate into a working society (Freyssinet 2002).

In Japan, the deflation that afflicted the economy during the same period caused the unemployment rate to rise continuously, a phenomenon that marked a break with past trends.

Even though the average level of the Japanese unemployment rate during the 1990s (ILO definition) remained significantly lower than the EU and OECD averages (3.8% compared with 9.1% and 6.9% respectively), the year 2002, when unemployment in Japan peaked at a record 5.4%, saw its unemployment rate exceed the rates in the USA and the UK.

Table II : Unemployment rate by age and sex in 1992 and 2002

	1992 Male	Total Age (year)	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64
F	Unemployment rate (%)	8.8	22.8	21.4	11.0	7.9	6.5	5.4	5.8	6.5	9.0	5.2
	Employment rate (%)	67.4	7.9	42.7	83.0	89.5	91.0	91.9	90.8	84.7	63.4	17.2
R	1992 Female	Total Age (year)	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64
	Unemployment rate (%)	14.2	39.0	27.1	17.3	15.3	12.0	9.9	8.9	10.3	11.0	6.7
A	Employment rate (%)	51.0	4.4	39.6	67.0	65.7	68.2	69.9	67.8	59.1	41.2	14.4
	2002 Male	Total Age (year)	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64
N	Unemployment rate (%)	8.6	20.7	20.1	12.1	8.2	7.3	6.3	5.6	6.2	7.2	5.0
	Employment rate (%)	68.7	9.5	45.3	81.3	88.6	89.9	90.0	89.9	85.7	65.6	15.4
C	2002 Female	Total Age (year)	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64
	Unemployment rate (%)	11.5	34.3	25.5	13.5	13.0	10.7	9.6	8.1	9.0	7.1	4.6
E	Employment rate (%)	55.8	3.5	35.1	70.0	69.2	72.0	75.1	75.6	68.7	50.7	14.2
	1992 Male	Total Age (year)	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64
J	Unemployment rate (%)	3.0	20.5	7.2	2.1	1.4	1.2	1.0	0.8	1.0	1.8	8.5
	Employment rate (%)	83.1	18.5	73.6	95.3	97.0	97.2	97.4	97.4	96.6	93.4	72.3
A	1992 Female	Total Age (year)	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64
	Unemployment rate (%)	9.0	23.8	8.5	10.3	11.2	10.4	8.3	6.4	6.3	7.4	7.8
P	Employment rate (%)	58.4	17.3	73.4	62.1	53.6	63.2	71.1	72.7	68.5	56.9	41.1
	2002 Male	Total Age (year)	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64
A	Unemployment rate (%)	6.2	28.6	13.2	6.2	4.3	3.4	3.0	3.5	4.0	5.5	12.1
	Employment rate (%)	80.9	16.7	65.2	89.7	92.9	94.4	94.7	93.9	92.6	89.2	65.8
N	2002 Female	Total Age (year)	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64
	Unemployment rate (%)	11.5	28.6	12.0	11.1	13.5	13.0	10.2	8.9	8.9	9.5	12.6
P	Employment rate (%)	58.5	17.4	67.1	68.7	56.7	61.1	69.4	71.5	67.0	58.3	39.5

Sources: Op. cit.

NB: Employment rate is calculated as follows: Employed population/population aged between 15-64 years

This macroeconomic description of unemployment relegates phenomena of a more sociological nature to the background. Certain trends can be isolated by examining Table II, which shows the unemployment and employment rates at two dates in both countries.

i) Between 1992 and 2002, the employment rate fell for men and remained stable for women in Japan, whereas it increased for both sexes in France. If the data are divided up by age, the difference between the male and female employment rates remains very pronounced in Japan, whereas the curves for the two sexes become increasingly less differentiated in France. These developments indicate that the traditional model of female labour market participation in Japan, which is characterised by discontinuity caused mainly by family events (marriage, birth of children, care of elderly parents etc.), has continued to play an important role at the beginning of the 21st century. On the other hand, the French model of female labour market participation has tended to converge towards the male model, which in both countries is relatively little affected by events in the private sphere (Daune-Richard 2003). In particular, there has been a significant increase in the employment rate for French women over the age of 40. Thus the family strategy in Japan continues to crystallise around a clearly defined division of labour between men and women, whereas in France women's labour market participation continues to be supported on a massive scale by state interventions of various kinds.

ii) As far as the unemployment curves by age are concerned, there was no great change in France over the ten-year period, whether for men or for women.

In Japan, the situation changed radically, so much so that the Japanese labour market drew closer to the European model, and more particularly to the French model. Paradoxically, the unemployment rate among Japanese women increased only slightly, except in the youngest age groups, despite the deterioration in their labour market situation. Japanese men, on the other hand, were more badly affected than women. Although the unemployment rate increased in all age groups, it was among young men and those over 50 years of age that the toll was heaviest.

- Male employees used to leave their jobs at between 55 and 60 years of age (teinen-sei or age-limit retirement system) in order to start a second and significantly less lucrative career while waiting to draw their pensions. This transition used to be organised to a greater or lesser extent by companies, but the economic crisis greatly destabilised the system. When planning mass redundancies, companies targeted this group of employees as a matter of priority. Once they become unemployed, these older workers find it difficult to re-enter the labour market and consequently experience higher levels of long-term unemployment than other groups. Unlike their counterparts in France, they are not the targets of any public policies intended to keep them out of the labour market. Some of them are therefore forced to remain in the marginalised segments of the labour market.

- Young graduates have found it increasingly difficult to obtain their first stable jobs, because many firms have put a freeze on new hires. They used to move directly from the education system into companies. This institution, which became established during the period of high growth, has not disappeared but it has been considerably disrupted and weakened by the crisis (Marsden, Nohara, Ryan 2005), which has contributed to the increase in unemployment among young people. Furthermore, a population of young people is emerging – the so-called ‘Neets’ – who can no longer be categorised in the traditional statistical apparatus since they are neither in the education system nor in regular work or unemployed. Most of the time they survive by doing casual work or remain in the parental home without integrating into the wider society (Kosugi 2004). This phenomenon, which has been evident in France since the 1980s, is generally interpreted in terms of the ‘insider/outsider’ contrast. It has become increasingly difficult for young people to gain their first foothold in a trade or profession because of the closure of internal markets. Like France, Japan was characterised by the internal market principle and this type of convergence, at least at the macro level, seems to be fairly logical. But would it not be interesting to investigate this phenomenon in greater detail at the microsocioal level?

iii) If we look now at unemployment in volume terms, Table III (in annex) depicts a number of different aspects of the phenomenon. We have already noted the relative concordance in France between the official definition of unemployment and the (self-declared) self-definition⁸.

In Japan, the volume of male unemployment doubled in ten years, passing the 2 million threshold in 2002. As we have already seen, it was young people and older workers who were most seriously affected in relative terms. However, without denying the gravity of their situation, one of the most damaging aspects of the current unemployment in Japan lies in the fact that half of the unemployed population are prime-age men (25-55). Most of them are ‘heads of family’, the pivotal figures in the traditional family model associated with the role

⁸ The only exception is observed among older workers who have stopped working but who continue to define themselves as unemployed, even though they are exempt from the need to look for work because of early retirement schemes, etc.

of breadwinner. Most of them are victims of the period of forced mobility caused by corporate bankruptcies and economic redundancies, which proliferated in the wake of the Asian crisis of 1998 and in mid-career find themselves unemployed at a time when the overall labour market situation can scarcely be described as favourable. As Table III (in annex) shows, they clearly define themselves as unemployed, since the vast majority of them declare themselves as 'being out of work'. They are the vehicles for a subjective evaluation that corresponds most closely to the (renewed)⁹ institutional norms of unemployment in Japan (Ohtake 2004). Thus they seem to be forging the archetypical figure of contemporary unemployment that resonates most strongly, since it calls into question the basis of institutional relations to work, namely the specific linkage in Japan between the family and wage conventions, while the loss of social cohesion and the increased risk of exclusion and poverty raise questions about the direction of the welfare state.

As for Japanese women, their ambivalence towards unemployment persists, although the numbers of unemployed women (as in 'without a job and looking for work') and of self-declared unemployed women are rising. The gap between the objective and self-declared situations is still considerable, which would seem to reflect the persistence to some extent of traditional female patterns of behaviour. However, the new element is that the public authorities are increasingly obliged to intervene directly in order to support women at work or wishing to work, firstly because of the 'birth rate crisis' - the birth rate has fallen below 1.3 - and secondly because of the increasing number of divorces and single-parent households - 75% of one million poor households in receipt of public assistance are single-parent households (mothers and children). Thus the state has been forced to rearrange the traditional 'family convention' and to strengthen its provision in various areas: parental leave, care facilities for young children, improvements in the legal status of part-timers, protection for lone women, etc.

III – Proliferation of atypical forms of work

The persistence of mass unemployment in France and its more recent emergence in Japan have been accompanied by a proliferation of atypical forms of work. The pressure that mass unemployment brings to bear on the labour market may be the main cause of this, with standard jobs being replaced by less well-protected and less well-paid work. However, this proliferation, which is associated in France with the problems raised by the 'break-up of employment standards', is also part of longer-term historical trends, which together constitute a shift in productive paradigm, otherwise known as the transition to the service economy.

Thus schematically, an 'old model', characterised by 'durable contractual relationships and guaranteed employment', is contrasted with a 'new model', characterised by the 'complete domination of economic laws' or, more generally, 'social insecurity'. This old model equates to the hitherto dominant 'Fordist' wage-labour nexus, which used to be strongly criticised but which provided a reference framework that gave a feeling of security. At present, it is often contrasted with the social insecurity of the new model. In this historical context, these shifts in the 'old' labour and employment standards must, it is argued, be linked in particular to reconstitutions of the 'Fordist' production norms. This break-up of production norms coincides, therefore, with a break-up of employment standards. Thus the relatively strong correspondences between levels of education and training and levels of job held, on the one hand, and pay and status, on the other hand, are tending to weaken as a result, in particular, of the increasing heterogeneity of both statuses and pay arising out of the demands employers now make of employees in respect of competences.

⁹ It should not be forgotten that Japan experience mass unemployment in-between the two world wars, and then again just after the Second World War, even though it was not always reflected in the official unemployment figures. Consequently, mass unemployment is in no sense a new phenomenon in Japanese society.

Thus during the observation period (1992-2002), the prevalence of atypical employment forms (part-time working¹⁰, agency work, subsidised training courses and jobs) increased significantly in both countries. In France, it rose from 19% of all waged jobs in 1992 to 26% in 2002 and in Japan from 21% in 1992 to 31% in 2002. There are other similarities between the two countries in this regard, in addition to these quantitative increases. Thus atypical employment forms are concentrated at the two extremes of employees' working lives, that is they mainly affect young people entering the labour market for the first time and older workers close to retirement: employment insecurity among young workers in Japan is rapidly increasing to the level that has been observed in France for a long time. Furthermore, employment forms (agency work, subsidised jobs) are becoming increasingly diversified in both countries, while in both countries part-time employment remains an almost exclusively female province. Whatever forms they take, all these types of employment relationships often place workers repeatedly in precarious situations.

At the same time, new or persisting differences between the two countries can also be observed.

Thus in France, agency work still mainly concerns men in manufacturing industry and construction, whereas in Japan it is concentrated mainly women in clerical occupations¹¹. Women in France are more affected by fixed-term jobs, which have become feminised over the last decade, particularly subsidised jobs, which do not exist in Japan. In Japan, fixed-term contracts are used in the same way by both genders, and as it happens they are concentrated among those workers seeking to establish themselves for the first time in the labour market. The use of part-time work is more strongly differentiated according to the phase of women's life cycle in Japan than in France.

With the exception of part-time work, the rates of precarious employment are converging for men and women in France, in contrast to Japan, where women continue to be disadvantaged. As the service economy develops, a two-stage levelling-out process is emerging in France, with the most highly skilled women benefiting from relatively more advantageous situations than previously (Fournier 1997), while the least skilled men are seeing their relative positions worsen. This tendency is illustrated clearly by employees in retailing and personal services. These sectors have the highest levels of precarious employment and low pay and their expansion echoes the general trend towards increasing precariousness that characterises the current evolution of the labour market. The entry of men, if only in small numbers, into such occupations is an indication of the general deterioration in the labour market, which has forced the least advantaged workers to take jobs from which they have hitherto been relatively protected. Thus the narrowing of the gap between male and female rates of precarious employment is occurring at the cost of a widespread increase in these employment rates and the relatively more pronounced deterioration in the position of male workers.

In contrast, the massive increase in the number of precarious jobs (not including part-time work) in Japan has affected women much more than men. In 1992, 7.8% of male wage-earners were in precarious jobs, compared with 10.2% of women. By 2002, these shares had risen to 12.5% and 19.8% respectively. As in France, it is in retailing and personal services that employment growth has been most rapid. This expansion of the service sector continues to attract the least advantaged women to the least highly valued jobs (Sato, Sano 2005).

¹⁰ However, part-time work cannot always be regarded as involuntary or as precarious, since it may involve either permanent or fixed-term contracts.

¹¹ New legislation replacing the previous stricter regulations (a nominative list of authorised occupations) has recently liberalised temporary agency work in all sectors of the economy. It is too early to say what new trends will emerge as a result.

Furthermore, Japanese women are benefiting less than their French counterparts from the shift in the employment structure in favour of ‘graduates’, which has led to an increase in the number of skilled workers, particularly for managerial staff¹². For their part, men, who are less concentrated in specific segments of the skill spectrum, are benefiting from a more diverse range of employment opportunities¹³ -, although the relative positions of the least well qualified among them have deteriorated, echoing the decline of employment in manufacturing industry, in which they used to work in massive numbers.

More than any other single phenomenon, it is part-time work that best symbolises the transition to the service economy, reflecting the need for labour flexibility in order to cope with volatile demand (Gadrey 1998). This largely feminised form of work expanded considerably in both countries during the 1990s. In 1992, 17.2% of female wage-earners were working part-time in France, compared with 28.5% in Japan. In 2002, these figures had risen to 23.9% in France and 32.9% in Japan. The dynamic of part-time work seems in all countries to be linked to demand, i.e. to employers’ strategies, rather than to the labour supply, as is clear from another USA-Japan comparison (Houseman, Osawa 2003)¹⁴.

In France, nevertheless, there is a certain degree of ambiguity as to its status. Although mass unemployment has forced many women to choose this form of work ‘for want of anything better’, it seems neither to constitute an employment norm for them nor always to reflect their preferences. The various public support measures and legal regulations that protect working mothers in France also enable them to make judicious use of it. In the public services or in non-market sectors, for example, the use of voluntary and reversible part-time work may very well reflect the choices of individuals anxious to reconcile family responsibilities and career.

On the other hand, the development of part-time work in Japan largely concerns housewives whose availability for paid work is limited. For the most fragile segment of the female workforce, part-time work has become one of the ways of gaining access to or remaining in the labour market. Thus sectors such as retailing or certain types of services use part-time work in order to manage both organisational flexibility and wage costs. In this case, part-time work, which is comparable rather to one of the forms of precarious employment, clearly becomes an enforced ‘choice’¹⁵, particularly since the occupational situation of part-timers in Japan turns out to be rather poor and fragile compared with the position in France, where various pieces of labour legislation explicitly protect women in part-time employment. Thus for example, the hourly pay rate of female part-timers in Japan is almost 30% lower than that of women on open-ended contracts, compared with a considerable smaller difference of 10% in France (Hori, Nohara 2006). Furthermore, Japanese part-timers have virtually no right

¹² This said, however, there is more and more a net distinction between Japanese women: one group of “university-graduated” women who have greater possibility of making a career and another group of marginalized female workers. Such gap is clearly enlarging in Japan too (Hori 1999).

¹³ The construction and public works sectors, which are much larger in quantitative terms in Japan than in France, have played a particular role in absorbing potential redundant people because of the Keynesian reflationary policies based on public expenditure that have been implemented by successive governments.

¹⁴ However, various elements of social and fiscal policy have the important effect of pushing women into part-time work in Japan. In particular, one must refer to a) income tax measure: a wife’s earnings are considered as a secondary income and are completely exempt from tax up to a limit of 1.03 million yen. This threshold encourages wives to keep their earnings - i.e. their labour supply - within this limit, and to b) social security measure: wives and mothers whose annual earnings are lower than 1.3 million yen are exempted from social security contributions. Nevertheless, their status as “dependants” allows them to benefit from the social protection enjoyed by their husbands.

¹⁵ Since it is internalised by housewives on the basis of social norms (family obligations: care of children or elderly parents), this notion of ‘enforced’ choice is fairly ambiguous.

either to paid holidays or to bonuses, whereas most part-timers in France are in principle treated exactly the same as employees open-ended contracts.

Thus even though the status of part-time work tends in both Japan and France to be inferior to that of full-time work on open-ended contracts, this inferior status is based on fairly different principles in both countries (Gadrey, Jany-Catrice, Ribault 1999).

Table IV FRANCE - Diversity of employment/work status by sex and age in %

1992 Male	Total age years	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64
Wage-earning population	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
of which full-time regular workers (open-ended contract)	89.7	16.8	68.6	87.0	91.8	93.7	95.3	95.4	95.8	94.3	91.1
of which dispatched agency workers of which temporary workers (fixed-term contract)	1.4	1.5	4.8	2.3	1.3	1.0	0.6	0.8	0.4	0.3	0.0
of which part-time workers	4.6	7.5	13.8	7.2	4.2	3.6	2.5	2.5	2.1	1.7	2.8
of which other status	1.4	1.4	1.6	1.5	1.4	0.9	0.8	0.9	1.1	3.6	5.6
of which other status	2.9	72.8	11.2	1.9	1.3	0.7	0.7	0.4	0.5	0.1	0.5
1992 Female	Total age years	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64
Wage-earning population	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
of which full-time regular workers (open-ended contract)	69.8	14.0	52.7	70.6	72.2	71.8	73.4	75.8	74.7	68.3	66.1
of which dispatched agency workers of which temporary workers (fixed-term contract)	0.9	0.4	2.4	1.4	1.0	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.1	0.00
of which part-time workers	8.1	13.4	17.2	10.1	7.1	6.9	5.6	5.8	5.5	5.8	7.2
of which other status	17.2	9.5	11.5	13.1	18.2	18.9	18.9	17.0	18.7	25.3	26.5
of which other status	4.1	62.7	16.2	4.8	1.6	1.8	1.7	1.0	0.8	0.5	0.2
2002 Male	Total age years	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64
Wage-earning population	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
of which full-time regular workers (open-ended contract)	85.4	9.6	56.9	79.1	89.0	90.8	91.0	92.2	92.8	88.8	85.6
of which dispatched agency workers of which temporary workers (fixed-term contract)	2.9	6.9	11.9	5.1	2.5	2.1	1.9	1.2	1.0	0.4	1.3
of which part-time workers	5.4	8.0	13.2	9.8	5.5	3.8	3.8	3.6	3.0	2.9	4.2
of which other status	2.7	1.6	3.4	2.3	1.7	2.3	2.5	2.1	2.6	7.1	8.6
of which other status	3.5	73.9	14.6	3.8	1.3	0.9	0.8	0.9	0.7	0.9	0.30
2002 Female	Total age years	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64
Wage-earning population	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
of which full-time regular workers (open-ended contract)	61.0	7.1	38.1	61.8	64.7	59.1	61.2	64.6	67.8	63.6	54.3
of which dispatched agency workers of which temporary workers (fixed-term contract)	1.7	3.4	6.6	2.9	1.8	1.7	1.1	1.1	0.4	0.1	0.3
of which part-time workers	9.5	11.8	23.5	14.9	9.0	8.2	7.7	6.5	6.1	6.0	8.3
of which other status	23.9	9.7	14.9	13.7	22.2	29.2	27.8	25.9	23.9	28.9	35.9
of which other status	4.0	68.1	16.9	6.7	2.4	1.8	2.2	2.0	1.8	1.4	1.2

Sources: op. cit.

Table IVa JAPAN - Diversity of employment/work status by sex and age in %

1992 Male	Total age years	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64
Wage-earning population	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
of which full-time regular workers (open-ended contract) [seiki shokuin]	91.4	65.8	82.4	95.0	97.0	96.6	96.7	96.3	95.1	89.8	59.8
of which temporary workers (fixed-term contract) [arubaito]	4.2	31.3	15.2	2.9	1.2	1.1	0.9	0.8	0.9	1.5	7.4
of which part-time workers. [pa-to]	0.8	1.3	0.6	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.6	1.4	7.3
of which other status	3.6	1.6	1.8	1.8	1.5	2.0	2.1	2.6	3.4	7.3	25.5
1992 Female	Total age years	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64
Wage-earning population	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
of which full-time regular workers (open-ended contract) [seiki shokuin]	61.3	61.3	82.9	76.7	63.6	54.1	49.2	50.8	53.0	53.2	44.5
of which temporary workers (fixed-term contract) [arubaito]	6.3	33.2	10.2	6.0	4.8	3.8	3.4	3.2	2.7	3.7	5.3
of which part-time workers[pa-to]	28.5	3.8	4.6	12.5	26.7	38.5	43.8	42.4	40.5	37.4	40.7
of which other status	3.9	1.6	2.3	4.8	4.8	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.8	5.7	9.5
2002 Male	Total age years	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64
Wage-earning population	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
of which full-time regular workers (open-ended contract) [seiki shokuin]	84.8	33.6	62.6	86.3	91.5	93.4	93.9	92.8	91.7	87.4	46.0
of which dispatched agency workers	0.7	0.8	1.3	1.1	0.9	0.5	0.8	0.4	0.3	0.3	1.0
of which temporary workers (fixed-term contract) [arubaito]	10.8	62.1	31.9	10.2	5.8	4.0	3.7	3.8	4.4	7.3	35.5
of which part-time workers. [pa-to]	1.6	2.4	1.9	1.1	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.8	1.2	2.0	10.3
of which other status	1.0	0.8	1.3	0.6	0.5	0.9	0.4	1.2	1.1	1.3	3.0
2002 female	Total age years	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64
Wage-earning population	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
of which full-time regular workers (open-ended contract) [seiki shokuin]	47.2	21.1	54.9	63.2	54.6	46.0	41.2	41.4	41.6	42.7	27.9
of which dispatched agency workers	2.4	1.2	2.3	4.6	5.0	3.0	2.0	1.3	0.9	0.8	0.6
of which temporary workers (fixed-term contract) [arubaito]	15.4	70.7	32.6	16.0	12.9	11.1	9.4	8.6	8.2	8.1	14.9
of which part-time workers. [pa-to]	32.9	6.0	8.9	14.6	25.7	37.8	45.2	46.5	47.0	46.0	52.1
of which other status	2.0	1.0	1.4	1.6	1.7	2.0	2.3	2.1	2.3	2.4	4.4

Sources: op. cit.

IV – The stable hard core

Both France and Japan have traditionally been characterised by highly structured internal labour markets, which came into being during the post-war years of strong economic growth. This is one of the reasons why the segmentation approach (Doeringer and Piore's seminal study of 1971) has resonated so widely in labour market analysis. Despite the weakening of wage-earners' position, a significant share of wage-earners is still closely attached to a single company. Thus although the analytical categories (primary market, internal market, etc.) have undeniably been destabilised, there are just as many reasons to support the argument that long-term jobs have been preserved.

Without even having explicit recourse to the neoclassical notion of human capital, it is evident that firm-specific learning processes, the results of which are not transferable, cannot take place unless workers have a guarantee that their presence in the internal market will last for some time (internal recognition and valuation) (Aoki 1988). In contrast to the Fordist organisational model, the new productive systems described by numerous authors (Boyer, Freyssenet 2000) are said to be characterised by various factors that increase economic efficiency. However, whether it is a question of team work, regulated autonomy or employee involvement, these new practices do, nevertheless, require employment relationships to have a

certain degree of ‘durability’. Furthermore, the mutual trust on which they are based cannot develop without a minimal ‘implicit’ contract based on long-term contractual ties (Marsden 1999).

As Tables IV and IVa above show, a large majority of wage-earners in both countries continue to be employed on open-ended contracts, despite considerable upheavals in labour markets. The large mass of wage-earners employed on open-ended contracts has certainly been eroded at the edges, but the ‘Fordist’ standard employment relationship is far from having disappeared, at least in statistical terms. In 2002, 85.4% of male wage-earners and 61.0% of female wage-earners in France were employed on open-ended contracts, while in Japan the regular *seiki* category accounted for 84.8% of male wage-earners, although that figure was reduced by more than a half in the case of female wage-earners. With the exception of women wage-earners in Japan, which illustrates a case of extreme differentiation of employment status, it would undoubtedly be exaggerated to conclude at this stage that ‘employment norms have been shattered’.

Besides employment status, the various indicators also provide evidence to support our argument that employment relationships remain stable. By way of illustration, the resilience of employment relationships can be demonstrated by pointing to the employee retention rate, which is the mainstay of the internal labour market. Table V shows the positions to which each of three categories of male wage-earners aged 35 to 44 in 1992 (with three levels of job tenure: less than 10 years, between 10 and 19 years and more than 20 years) had moved ten years afterwards in 2002. For example, of the male employees aged 35 to 44 with 10 to 19 years’ job tenure in 1992, almost 80% in both France and Japan were in the group of employees aged between 44 and 54 with 20 to 29 years’ job tenure in 2002. This finding suggests that four fifths of this population had remained with the same company between 1992 and 2002. Calculated in this way, the retention rate for wage-earners aged between 35 and 44 and with more than 20 years’ job tenure in 1992 was 77% in France and 73% in Japan, meaning that three quarters of the population did not change employer. As for wage-earners aged 35 and 44 with less than 10 years’ job tenure in 1992, this population, considered to be relatively mobile, had a retention rate of 48% in France and 53% in Japan. Thus half of this population remained with the same employer.

According to this analysis, male employees in both France and Japan with at least 10 years’ job tenure have a very high propensity to remain with the same company. The difference is that the share of older workers (with more than 10 years’ seniority) in this population of male wage-earners aged between 35 and 44 in 1992 is considerably higher in Japan than in France. This is because in Japan, the notion of lifetime employment puts a brake on mobility even in the early years of individual careers, whereas a not insignificant share of French employees experience strategic or enforced mobility in those early years.

Furthermore, if we compare the retention rates between the two periods 1982-1992 and 1992-2002, the rates doesn’t differ greatly for each countries, which shows a relative resilience of employment system.

Table V - Men aged 34 - 44 in 1992 and their positions 10 years after in 2002

France	2002	Aged 45 – 54 with 10-19 years' tenure	Aged 45 – 54 with 20-29 years' tenure	Aged 45 – 54 with more than 30 years' tenure
1992				
	Aged 35 – 44 with less than 10 years' tenure	1283000 ---->611000 (Retention rate 47.7%)		
	Aged 35 – 44 with 10-19 years' tenure		1358000 ---->1105000 (Retention rate 81.4%)	
	Aged 35 – 44 with more than 20 years' tenure			446000 ---->341000 (Retention rate 76.7%)
Japan	2002	Aged 45 – 54 with 10-19 years' tenure	Aged 45 – 54 with 20-29 years' tenure	Aged 45 – 54 with more than 30 years' tenure
1992				
	Aged 35 – 44 with less than 10 years' tenure	1706000---->904000 (Retention rate 53.0%)		
	Aged 35 – 44 with 10-19 years' tenure		3100000---->2459000 (Retention rate 79.3%)	
	Aged 35 – 44 with more than 20 years' tenure			2242000---->1631000 (Retention rate 72.7%)

Sources: Op. cit. Nota: Calculated by author

Another indicator measured on the basis of job tenure (Table VI) provides further evidence of the longevity of employment relationships. Average job tenure among wage-earners (men+women) remained stable in Japan at around 11 years between 1992 and 2002 and actually increased from 10 to 11.2 years in France. The share of senior or experienced workers with more than 20 years' job tenure fell slightly in Japan, but still stood at 23%, whereas in France, the same population increased significantly to reach more than 20%.

However, those overall figures conceal a gender difference that varies from country to country. In Japan, the share of senior workers among men rose from 29.2% in 1992 to 31% in 2002, whereas among women it fell from 12.7% to 11.1% over the same period. These contrary trends have further accentuated the inequalities in terms of job security that existed previously between the two sexes¹⁶. In France, the share of women with more than 20 years' job tenure increased more over the ten-year period than that of men, with the result that they now have a very similar degree of stability (approximately 20%). This shows once again that a significant share of French women have the ability to resist increasing employment insecurity. This difference between Japan and France certainly reflects one of the effects of path dependency, the notion that the development of national employment systems over time depends on the past of those systems.

However, the arithmetical employment stability measured in this way does not mean that the 'reassuring' reference framework inherited from the past has remained in place. In both France and Japan, a not insignificant share of 'insiders' seem to be suffering from deteriorating working and employment conditions, with a decline in internal promotion opportunities and even reductions in pay levels. Furthermore, the alleged virtues of the new productive systems themselves have harmful effects, since they demand of every employee a high degree of adaptability and of psychological readiness. The new HRM tools that are their corollaries tend to intensify individual competition and mental pressure. Taken together, these factors seem to have created a diffuse feeling of precariousness among employees, a phenomenon that has been observed simultaneously in both Japan and France (Nomura 1998,

¹⁶ By using the cohort analysis on the basis of "Wage Structure Survey" (Japanese Ministry of labor), Farver (2006) demonstrates the same result for Japan in his recent USA-Japan comparative work.

Castel 2003). Consequently, the notion of ‘precariousness’ becomes difficult to define unequivocally: it is usually contrasted with employment on an open-ended contract which, it is argued, is being destabilised. The precariousness may concern jobs, status or work itself, with employees accepting the pre-eminence of productivist objectives in order not to lose their jobs (D’Iribarne 2002). In this last case, may precariousness not be defined as the fear of losing one’s job, even among employees on open-ended or regular seiki contracts? Conversely, should fixed-term contracts always be regarded as precarious? The question remains unresolved.

Table VI Percentage of workers by sex and tenure group

	Year	Total (in thousands)	Tenure group (%)									
			total	- 1 year	1-2 years	3-4 years	5-9 years	10-14	15-19	20-24	25-29	+ 30 years
FRANCE	2002											
	Male	11115	100 %	15.2	18.8	10.1	14.0	12.4	7.8	8.1	6.8	6.0
	Female	9450	100 %	16.5	17.7	10.1	15.9	12.5	7.9	7.5	6.5	5.3
	Total workers	20565	100 %	15.8	18.3	10.1	14.9	12.4	7.9	7.8	6.7	5.7
	1997											
	Male	10052	100 %	13.8	14.6	9.0	19.2	11.4	10.8	9.4	7.0	4.8
	Female	7970	100 %	14.4	14.4	9.6	19.6	11.8	10.9	9.2	6.0	4.1
	Total workers	18022	100 %	14.1	14.5	9.3	19.4	11.6	10.8	9.3	6.6	4.5
	1992											
	Male	9806	100 %	14.2	18.0	10.0	14.9	12.8	12.2	9.0	5.1	3.8
	Female	7290	100 %	16.0	17.9	9.8	16.2	14.1	11.7	7.6	3.9	2.9
	Total workers	17096	100 %	14.9	18.0	9.9	15.4	13.4	12.0	8.4	4.6	3.4
JAPAN	2002											
	Male	32122	100 %	9.3	10.2	10.7	16.2	12.6	10.0	11.2	8.0	11.8
	Female	20591	100 %	17.4	17.9	16.1	18.8	11.5	7.1	5.3	2.6	3.2
	Total workers	52714	100 %	12.4	13.2	12.8	17.2	12.2	8.8	8.9	5.9	8.4
	1997											
	Male	33065	100 %	9.3	9.4	9.8	18.2	12.6	9.5	9.2	8.5	13.4
	Female	21834	100 %	18.7	15.9	14.2	22.1	11.4	6.8	5.4	3.3	3.7
	Total workers	54899	100 %	13.1	12.0	11.5	19.7	12.1	8.4	7.7	6.4	9.5
	1992											
	Male	32201	100 %	9.8	12.6	8.6	15.6	13.9	8.9	8.1	7.2	13.9
	Female	22531	100 %	17.2	20.2	12.2	18.1	12.4	6.2	4.7	3.5	4.5
	Total workers	54732	100 %	12.9	15.8	10.1	16.7	13.3	7.8	6.7	5.7	10.1

Sources: Op. cit.

In any event, the increased stability has been accompanied by different forms of labour market flexibility in the two countries. In Japan, women’s mobility is used as one of the key mechanisms for creating numerical flexibility. Thus mobility, measured by the share of wage-earners with less than two years’ job tenure, has remained constantly high among women (higher than in France), while it has declined among men over ten years, despite the sharp increase in redundancies after 1998. This situation reflects both the predominance of enforced mobility and the virtual absence of strategic mobility in Japan. France, on the other hand, is increasingly characterised by dichotomous mobility, with one type made up of recurrent transitions between unemployment and precarious jobs and the other representing the strategic mobility of graduates eager to obtain the best possible salary quickly by changing employer. In this case, therefore, the labour market in France is fulfilling its regulatory role to a greater extent than in Japan.

Conclusion

The French and Japanese labour markets have undergone significant changes in the past decade. These changes revolve around a twofold phenomenon. On the one hand, internal

labour markets, long regarded as a dominant organisational form in both countries, have been destabilised. On the other hand, the barriers between the various categories or types of market have crumbled; this is reflected in uncertainty as to the boundaries between them and increasingly frequent movements from one to the other among enlarged fringe groups in the working population.

Against a background of growing demands for flexibility and mass unemployment, changes in ways of managing and organising work are, it is argued, one of the decisive factors in this blurring of boundaries and the destabilisation of the 'Fordist employment norms'. To put it another way, globalisation is increasingly subjecting the 'wage convention' in each country to similar pressures by changing the rules of the game (new classification systems, functional flexibility, pay individualisation etc.).

Nevertheless, despite the burden of mass unemployment and the undeniable increase in atypical forms of work, a high share of wage-earners have retained their employment status, the exception being female wage-earners in Japan. The 'employment norm' based on open-ended contracts seems still to be playing a pivotal role in the wage-work society, even though it is combined with increasingly complex work situations (subcontracting, outsourcing, delegation of work etc.). Moreover, actual work situations are becoming increasingly complex in an environment in which each country's 'wage convention' is reacting – in different ways depending on the societal context – to destabilising phenomena emanating from outside.

Greater consideration has to be given to supply-side effects when advancing the general diagnosis that employment norms are becoming more flexible and precarious, essentially as a result of a change of productive regime. In particular, taking account of gender relations, which are social constructs based on the linkage between work, family and society, makes it possible to inject greater complexity into the debate on the transformation of the labour market. This is on the whole the case since the 'family convention' is itself being transformed radically in both France and Japan, as we have just observed, a process being driven by socio-demographic phenomena, some of them shared, others specific to each society. Is the transition to the service society not in fact bringing into play societal principles that are deeply embedded in gender relations? If this proves to be true, the various notions such as 'availability', 'precariousness' or even 'employment norm' will have to be interpreted or re-interpreted in the light of the societal contexts specific to each society, which are themselves being redefined.

Thus the combination of two types of 'convention', constructed at a given time and in a given societal context, seems to constitute a sort of societal 'motor function' that controls the restructuring of jobs in response to external shocks, guiding the process along the paths mapped out by a society's past. And in return, these conventions themselves evolve gradually in accordance with the paths actually taken.

This dialectic is based essentially on the reflexive action of actors who are subjected to and, at the same time, interpret the conventions in force. A convention is never replicated unchanged in its original form. Thus the notion of 'convention', as it is incorporated into societal analysis, enables us to conceptualise both the stability of social structures and their evolution over time. A convention is not set in stone and cannot therefore impress itself on the actors as an immutable norm; equally, it cannot simply be revoked at any moment and thus it does not function like a commercial contract regulating short-lived transactions.

It can be reconstituted through local arrangements negotiated by the actors in response to changes in the world; at the same time, the process of renewal is going on continuously, drawing in particular on a range of possible choices that is limited by the very nature of the cognitive resources that the actors accumulate in the course of their socialisation and apprenticeship within society. Thus it is as if a convention creates a sort of dependent

pathway that combines institutional routines and the creation of new routines that meet new needs as they arise. In this case, Japan, which saw the emergence of mass unemployment 15 years after it appeared in France, is undertaking a series of experiments with a view to creating new institutions. This will inevitably lead to changes of varying magnitude in the wage and family conventions.

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Annexe

Tableau III: Unemployed persons by age and sex in 1992 and 2002 (in thousands)

1992 Male		Total	Age	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64
	Occupied population	12459		156	912	1748	1885	1899	1983	1603	1150	885	238
	Unemployed (seeking un job)	1198		46	249	216	161	133	114	98	80	88	13
	Unemployed 'auto-declared'	1273		41	236	215	170	140	119	102	88	126	36
1992 Female		Total	Age	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64
F	Occupied population	9538		83	839	1428	1409	1451	1506	1183	809	608	222
R	Unemployed (seeking un job)	1583		53	312	299	255	198	166	116	93	75	16
A	Unemployed 'auto-declared'	1525		43	297	292	226	171	147	101	87	106	55
2002 Male		Total	Age	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64
C	Occupied population	13052		184	873	1509	1849	1908	1868	1821	1761	1088	191
E	Unemployed (seeking un job)	1233		48	219	207	165	150	126	108	116	84	10
	Unemployed 'auto-declared'	1430		44	215	216	183	163	142	124	134	160	49
2002 Female		Total	Age	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64
	Occupied population	10787		65	665	1312	1462	1567	1617	1596	1451	864	188
	Unemployed (seeking un job)	1404		34	228	204	219	187	172	141	144	66	9
	Unemployed 'auto-declared'	1525		31	215	208	212	192	173	139	154	147	54
1992 Male		Total	Age	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64
	Occupied population	36089		909	3567	3958	3811	4024	5301	4354	4056	3639	2470
	Unemployed (seeking un job)	1124		235	275	85	56	47	51	36	41	68	230
	Unemployed 'auto-declared'	345		10	46	38	32	31	33	24	25	35	71
1992 Female		Total	Age	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64
J	Occupied population	25290		810	3445	2530	2069	2581	3844	3265	2932	2307	1507
A	Unemployed (seeking un job)	2506		253	320	289	262	301	347	225	197	185	127
P	Unemployed 'auto-declared'	232		8	54	42	21	17	20	18	17	21	14
2002 Male		Total	Age	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64
N	Occupied population	34689		613	2652	4264	4437	3918	3705	3827	4889	3798	2586
	Unemployed (seeking un job)	2303		246	405	284	199	137	115	138	202	221	356
	Unemployed 'auto-declared'	1394		24	109	180	169	120	110	136	190	194	162
2002 Female		Total	Age	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49	50 - 54	55 - 59	60 - 64
	Occupied population	24958		608	2621	3192	2666	2503	2690	2906	3563	2561	1648
	Unemployed (seeking un job)	3231		244	357	397	415	373	305	284	349	270	237
	Unemployed 'auto-declared'	810		12	92	131	105	76	69	76	108	89	52