



ON VOLUNTARY SOLITUDE

*Social bonds and collective conflict
in the driving professions in transport industry in France*

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SOCIAL RELATIONS IN COLLECTIVE TRANSPORT FIRMS : THE IMMOBILITY OF ANACHRONISTIC RELATIONSHIP BASED ON STRENGTH TERMS

Whether carrying passengers or freight, whether in the private or the public sector, the professional transport industry in France lives in almost permanent conflict. The main means of land transport (urban and intercity, road, rail) meet together in a tradition of spectacular social battles.

A professional environment distorted by conflict : the violence of blocking as a regular way to deal with social issues

Even though everyone may remember a certain conviviality peculiar to the major transport strikes, everyone also dreads these periods of turmoil which constitute one of the topics featuring regularly at the head of the list in France when you ask people what they worry about most. Need we say that the transport industry in France occupies a sadly privileged position where conflict is concerned : retirement schemes, pay, resting conditions, rudeness and insecurity, the transition to the 35 hours week, the repeal of the 1942 decree⁷, all these issues (but plenty of others as well, from the approach of professional elections to the despatch of the football World Cup) have provoked, or do provoke, serious disruptions, either direct or indirect, to urban or intercity travel. In this professional environment, distorted by conflict, everything happens as if the violence of the blockade were a normal way of settling things.

Managing corporate change in this professional environment is quite a challenge. And the consequences of these characteristics are serious. Numerous people have found themselves at a standstill, held hostage in a setting of chronic disruption punctuated by regular conflagrations. The operation and strategic development of companies is blocked. The competitiveness of the industry is severely jeopardised. And one repetitive interaction leads to another without anyone being able to see a way to move the situation forward.

⁷ This decree is still organising the major part of public transport industry in France

A renewed conceptual approach to facilitate the necessary change in a professional sector marked by recurrent conflict

It is therefore essential to review the analysis of the social groups at the centre of collective transport, in particular the drivers of vehicles, in order to be able to conceive and implement mechanisms which will contribute to less brutal corporate regulation. In this respect the experience of more than fifteen years of mainly psychosociological work within transport companies (urban and intercity road, rail and air transport) has enabled us to gather together much relevant material on the subject of collective conflict.

The considerations we present are based on the outside observation of professional practices in this industry. By comparing these observations with the contributions of human sciences we can produce a series of hypotheses and interpretations which tie in with previously accumulated knowledge but bring to it a slight shift in emphasis.

A better understanding of the mechanisms which link together "professionalism"², solitude and the relationship with the group, reveals ways in which we might progress towards two essential goals : improving the integration of people holding largely solitary jobs in a company (starting with vehicle drivers) and helping the professionals in these same jobs to better understand the sense and the nature of the developments taking place in their transport company.

² This concept refers to the dynamics of interactions between 1 - the quality of the feeling of a social identity and 2 - the kind of control of the technical skills involved in a job.

A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE RESISTANCE TO CHANGE IN THE SOLITARY DRIVING PROFESSIONS IN PASSENGER AND FREIGHT TRANSPORT

Whilst it is not fair to suggest that the causes of the conflict deriving from the external reality (defence of advantages acquired, material demands) are secondary, on the other hand one can nevertheless say that the psychic component of the conflict (need for reassurance, search for recognition) has so far been widely underestimated.

A certain number of professions offer those who choose them conditions of work in which solitude, an unusual relationship with the group - and in particular with the *virtual group* - together with a confrontation with conflict, become the main characteristics of the profession. Within the transport family this is particularly the case for those whose job leads them, by definition, to travel themselves in order to provide mobility for others. Among these professions, on board their bus, at the wheel of their lorry, at the head of their train, inside their cockpit, vehicle drivers can become particularly detached.

Collective transport and the individual solitude of the drivers

The bus and coach drivers of urban and intercity routes ; the train drivers on the railways (which includes the national railways, the underground drivers, tram drivers and the express drivers on the Île de France) ; pilots and engineering officers flying for airlines (technical air crew) : these people seem to be marked by conditions of work characterised by solitude which paradoxically seems to be sought as much as tolerated, and with which they maintain a difficult and complex relationship. The significance of that relationship is not immediately apparent.

In summary, a surprising collusion between institutions and vehicle drivers, through its very negative effects, seems to emphasise what would appear to be a deep-seated unease among professional driving staff. The way the organisations of transport institutions work transforms the solitude of drivers into isolation ; this isolation is in turn accentuated by the withdrawn behaviour of the solitary driving professions. We can demonstrate how each party comes to terms with this paradoxical attitude. That is what we are now going to examine.

v Solitary production at the end of a service chain

If we examine a certain number of characteristics common to the professional circles defined above, different objective elements are quickly highlighted in the partially solitary production situation of a service being provided. Being generally cited as the source of problems of communication between these staff and the remainder of the company, these elements³ already have a diagnostic value : the physical separation of the work stations, the geographic dispersal and lack of shared time, the brevity of dealings with colleagues or customers, the loss of the team experience, the accentuation of the burden of technical and financial constraints, the technological evolution of operating patterns, etc.

Basically these various evolutions converge in one and the same paradoxical effect : some of the main players in the transport production chain are, or feel, virtually rejected by their company. This statement is sometimes denied, disputed or contested. For the driving professions there are however numerous elements which may lead to a feeling of solitude at work, to the point where they give rise to this curious social phenomenon : even though they are individualists and at least independent, drivers and pilots complain (seriously) that they never see their bosses ...

Now as he familiarises himself with these professional circles, the external observer finds himself faced with the supposition of a paradoxical adaptation on the part of the institutions and their driving personnel : ultimately is this situation suffered or sought?

In fact the solitude of these non-sedentary workers, combined with the operating conditions of transport, is sufficiently obvious as to be familiar to all the players in the system. It is also clear that this situation is regularly the subject of unanimous comment : everyone (managers, close colleagues, unions, drivers and pilots, occupational medical specialists, journalists) stresses the harshness of a life of work largely cut off from other people, which is at the same time accompanied by major stress due to the existence of real responsibilities, often difficult to handle both from the point of view of safety of travel and as regards commercial relations or the controlling of conflict situations involving the public.

³ For a detailed presentation see the full study in which all the conceptual, methodological and bibliographical references will also be found.

v From solitude to isolation

However, and here is the first paradox, everything happens apparently for the same reasons in each of the professions considered (urban and intercity drivers, train drivers, airline pilots) as if the same efforts were being made, chiefly unconsciously, to gradually transform the solitude into isolation. Our psychosociological work, carried out in these three transport sectors, has allowed us to formulate parallel, and sometimes surprising, observations which reveal a repeated series of contradictions in the way the organisations work.

Undoubtedly these companies have been making continuous efforts in various directions, for the last ten years or so: updating management methods; giving the operatives in the front line a privileged role in managing production personnel; clarifying the tasks of support posts; developing the jobs of maintaining fixed installations and rolling stock and raising their status; restoring the role of the financial dimension in corporate cultures which have been marked by essentially technical values; taking an interest in the expectations of the customers and becoming increasingly aware of the environment.

While the main thrusts of the progress have been various, one has to admit that among all these objectives the transport companies have not managed to set up, formalise or implement a strategy, a practice and a dialogue which directly tackle the driving personnel who ... naturally, occupy a central place in the production of the service.

Looking at these situations from the outside and briefly sharing the working life of these operatives, in particular when accompanying them in the cab, one sees clearly how numerous opportunities for communicating (even during directly productive working hours) are not grasped, neither by one side nor the other. In general we note that in the three modes of transport, and for the same reasons, institutions reduce to a minimum the activities where drivers can congregate together: a few rare training days, a few even more rare information points. At any rate these gatherings do not allow group bonding to take place.

Two additional factors reinforce the difficulties of organisation and communication. The first derives from a fact encountered in companies in all three sectors: the centre of gravity of the corporate operation is still characterised by the weight of relations with the union organisations, privileged partners in the internal institutional dialogue. When the concerns, the expectations, the actions of the highest authorities in the companies are regularly directed *primarily* towards staff representatives, it is difficult for the immediate line managers to find their role.

Now if even the middle management and administrative framework on the ground is suffering from a lack of communication, we can imagine what it is like for the isolated staff.

Finally another general remark is about the consequences of modernisation of the technical systems in the world of transport. This is translated by a reinforcement of the centralised design and organisation tasks, with a pronounced concentration of power (standardisation, regulation, organisation, direction). Now the social repercussions of a centralised technical and taylorian system in the field of transport are well known. They tend towards an increased fragmentation of the components of the organisation. With the installation of a compartmentalised order they do not favour open and integrated relations ; consequently their effect is to reinforce the isolation of each category of operative.

v From isolation to confinement

It is therefore somewhat of a surprise to find that in the organisational and corporate functioning of the transport companies there is a constant process of reinforcement of the isolation of the driving personnel. We are all the more astonished when we realise that this process may develop with the consent, even the active participation of the principal interested parties, the drivers and pilots, and here we have the second paradox.

In fact, while the technical system and organisational functioning provide a structure which isolates the driving personnel, the same applies to the social system. We can show how the strong professional integration of the driving personnel paradoxically determines their passage from solitude to isolation, and also the slide from isolation to withdrawal.

The separation of professional families and the compartmentalisation of the working division within the transport companies ; the hold which the job has on each individual through a very specific social bond ; the regular flare-ups of corporatist squalls : these elements define a kind of predisposition to communal isolation, wherein the relegation of drivers to their solitude occurs, you might say, without any particular effort, since in some way drivers and pilots take refuge in their own idiosyncratic ways.

Increasing individualism among the youngest drivers is accentuating these phenomena. Maximisation of their free time and of their private life translates into behaviour and claims which result in a minimisation of their professional life but also of their collective life. The working regimes won through hard, long drawn-out and violent conflicts enable

people in these jobs to take up some other activity, even take a second job, the attractions of which tend to become absolutely paramount and not only in the field of remuneration.

Occurring largely unbeknown to the parties concerned, the progression from isolation to withdrawal may also be due to a weakening of the protective capacity of the peer group and to the attenuation of the role of the mediating bodies.

In the collective perception the image of a dialogue (of the deaf) at the top, between the management and the unions, with the two sides competing to see who can give least away, is one which recurs frequently. Most of the union organisations, their multiplications and their divisions, are associated above all with upping the stakes and the resultant confrontations. Apart from that the relevance of union organisations to the collective values (by definition) may meet with scepticism but also marked indifference on the part of newcomers to the profession ; increasingly individualist, the latter do not necessarily feel at home with a type of social structure whose references have become largely alien to them.

As far as management is concerned, the image which emerges is the same in the three sectors (road, rail, air). An ill-defined place in the decision-making processes ; a very uncertain emphasis on direction ; a legitimacy which is scarcely recognised among the directors or the ground staff ; more concern for technology than for managerial skills : the managerial role is all the more delicate since the drivers and pilots comprise a collection of individuals whose natural inclination is undoubtedly not to facilitate the job of the management, even though local relations are often cordial.

Now while the individual and collective problems are less and less taken care of by mediating bodies, less and less accommodated, the solitude of each individual is growing. Moreover, if you consider the group dimension of their community, the perception of a lowering of their status is undoubtedly not likely to help drivers to open up to the outside world. Whilst the sharing of their common values leads to some exclusion (to some extent inevitable) of those who do not belong to the group, it is clear that when the group feels threatened, or even attacked, the tendency to close ranks is bound to outweigh any opening up : defiant behaviour becomes more natural than attitudes of confidence. In this sense the professional group runs the risk of becoming a bit more isolated by closing in on itself.

v The hypothesis of a form of collusion

The apparently contradictory nature of the phenomenon we have just described, its duration, its stability, represent an enigma which repeatedly makes one think that there must be an explanation for this somewhat surprising observation : the transport companies and the drivers are coping with a situation which is difficult to put up with (the discomfort of solitude), without taking any real action to improve it, to the point of accepting that it goes on (even if the recent period has seen the start of a slightly different policy).

Everything happens as though the two parties were united in collusion, largely unconscious, the object of which is *not to change*, so as to preserve a situation whose advantages outweigh the disadvantages. In this hypothesis, there should still be secondary benefits (advantages) for each of the parties. These benefits, different but balanced, might help to explain the stability of the collusion. Although taking different forms for the different parties, these hypotheses, in our interpretation, are expressed on two complementary registers.

On the one hand, at the social level (the outside world), it is a matter of preserving, strengthening or developing ground gained in terms of influence or the exercise of power ; of constructing strategies (of alliance, of confrontation) in order to win new room for manoeuvre or negotiation, for gains that will then translate into financial terms or working conditions. On the other hand, on the psychic level (internal world), it is a matter of defence mechanisms against anxiety, intended to ensure a minimum of security by reducing the stress associated with the two worrying issues of defining ones individual and collective identity and then constantly rediscovering the need for learning through experience.

As far as the transport companies are concerned, three potential gains may be put forward :

Trying to maintain a favourable balance of power

The *solidarity* of the *solitary* when they are united, when it blocks the activity of all, is potentially worrying. There is no need to emphasise the power of the professional driving corps when they set themselves up as a single collective unit.⁴ This observation alone explains the concern

⁴ One example among the train drivers : "*There are 16000 of them alone. An alliance of 16,000 solitary drivers is an enormous force. When they decide to stop the whole French railway stops (...) Their power, they are so well aware of it that they both use and abuse it.*" Christine Kerdellant, *Les cheminots*, p 130, Critérium, Paris, 1991

among the companies to avoid helping any structure which would unify a population at risk, widely described in audits and studies of the corporate climate. Maintaining a favourable balance of force in the face of this potential power seems all the more complicated when the peculiar characteristics of unionisation in the transport sector (above all when compared with what one sees elsewhere) render the possibility of lasting control over the wage-earners even more illusory.

Isolating a disturbing population

In this respect, isolating a disturbing, or even dangerous⁵, population, might offer a second way of explaining the institutional attitude. From combined to single, from solitude to isolation: the stability of the collusion may also be explained by the expected gain of a policy which entails if not dividing or fragmenting, then at least not uniting. Communicating means passing on thoughts but also passing on slogans and commands, between agents who have the twofold ability to "dig their heels in" in the event of opposition and to draw other professions into the conflict.

From this point of view, not drawing the drivers out of their solitude means preventing, braking, delaying the emergence of a collective group which is threatening because it is very reactive, almost uncontrollable, and does not hesitate to take the customers hostage, thus constituting a permanent source of potential repudiation of the highest levels of management in the company. Besides, the development of a machiavellian strategy of segregation is not even necessary since drivers and pilots withdraw anyway into their individuality, as we have already mentioned before.

Not having to make the effort to change methods of organisation and management

The above explanation suggests another. To change change, to modernise negotiations in order to learn to negotiate modernisation⁶: these directions towards a renewal of dialogue between the two sides require a capacity for innovation, a break with the traditional roles playing games, a questioning of established certainties.

⁵ Louis Chevallier, *Classes laborieuse et classes dangereuses à Paris pendant la première moitié du XIXème siècle*, Paris, Plon, 1958

⁶ Vincent Merle, *Négocier la modernisation, moderniser la négociation ?* B Brunhes Consultants, Paris, 1991

In these conditions, collusion in order *not to* change avoids the stressful work of having to imagine the - objectively - very complex evolution of the existing method of socio-technical organisation. It also offers the advantage of preserving existing approaches and seats of power. Avoiding to change methods of organisation and management thus allows to continue making the exercise of power rely on simple respect for extremely detailed regulations applying to everyone, in all places and in all circumstances.

In this respect, if you now examine the gains which the drivers might expect from the perpetuation of a situation which in many respects is unsatisfactory, a first line of thought becomes immediately apparent.

Preserving the negotiating conditions

A same concern runs through all the types of transport : how to preserve advantageous negotiating conditions, in particular with regard to the progression of technical developments.

«The work of driving trains leads to almost permanent solitude. The solitude of the driver's cab, the solitude of the working hours which fall outside the patterns of the majority of wage-earners etc. (...) Drivers accept these constraints of the job. They would like ways to be found to compensate for them.»⁷

This observation, an expression of the realism of drivers, is broadly confirmed by another, additional one. As far as you can understand them from the outside⁸, the union strategies in the face of modifications to their working conditions all centre on one thing : negotiating compensation, in the context of well accepted technical modernisation, even though there is still some ambivalence on occasion (in particular concerning the consequences in terms of qualifications and jobs).

The quest for compensation appears when you look at the historic perspective. This clearly reveals that if fresh demands arise from technical progress, then others, at least equally harsh, are attenuated or even disappear altogether, to the benefit of the drivers.

If we continue with the example of the train drivers, the actions involved in driving have been reduced and considerably simplified as the eras of Traction have succeeded one another : the steam era, the arrival of the single phase 25,000 volts, the era of the V.A.C.M.A.⁹, the era of the ground-to-train radio. Undoubtedly the driver is faced with problems of a

⁷ *Audit Traction*, SNCF, January 1988

⁸ Jean-François Révah, *La solitude de l'agent de conduite de la SNCF ou un train peut en cacher un autre*, Trans/formation, 1992

⁹ Vigilance with control of back-up support

different nature, in particular in his training : someone wisely said that the elimination of second drivers often leads to the progressive disappearance of a productive job which was effectively used for training purposes.¹⁰

However the transformation of the job is indisputably tending towards increased simplification. Whether it be the comfort of the cab, the hand movements of driving, dealing with incidents on the line, means of communication - in the absence of his solitude, this is a positive break which, in most cases, affects the working conditions of the driver of electrical engines. In this sense, whilst the numerous automated functions on board control the driver, they also assist him in equal measure. Equivalent analyses can be produced for other means of transport¹¹ : the conclusion is always this desire to highlight anything which might justify remuneration or compensation.

Consolidating the means of a specific social promotion

A second factor which might explain the realism of the drivers, and their contribution to maintaining a form of collusion, is linked to the more general question of their social status.

Whilst you might agree that recruitment today has moved on, it is nonetheless true that the transport professions continue in many cases to offer a social promotion network of relatively easy access (including the case of flying crew) requiring strong willpower but ultimately a fairly lightweight background to start with, and also offering significant advantages : a stimulating level of pay, an attractive timetabling system, a status which virtually guarantees a job, exceptional terms for retirement, the positive status of a public service job, worthwhile social recognition and image etc.

In this context we can better understand why the issue of solitude has not been, and is still not, the subject of direct complaint. Serious negotiations based (entirely or in part) on the issue of solitude, seem a lot more realistic in the eyes of operatives who, whilst aware of the irreversibility of technical progress, are not short-sighted when it comes to suggesting various kinds of compensation : financial ; working conditions ; even psychological ones.

¹⁰ M Jongeryk, *L'évolution de la formation Traction à la SNCF*, 1988, unpublished

¹¹ A Gras, C Moricot, SL Poirot-Delpech, V Scardigli, *Le pilote, le contrôleur et l'automate*, Éditions de l'Iris, 1990 ; *Travailleurs du transport et changements technologiques : : résultats de recherches en sciences humaines*, Colloque de Versailles, Juin 1982 ; Alain Coulon, Serge Richiardi, Jean-François Révah, *Contre le zapping : : la perlaboration !* Transport Public, N°870, Avril 1989

3. Seeing oneself in a positive trans-generational light

In this sense a third element catches our attention. In fact the solitude of non-sedentary jobs, combined with the conditions of transport operations, whilst not necessarily chosen on entry into the profession, is sufficiently obvious as to be impossible to ignore. This leads us to suppose that drivers and crews know full well what to expect and that these somewhat special working conditions are not displeasing to them. Now, from this point of view, a heroic dimension to their solitude might nowadays offer drivers a way of restoring their self-image which, as we shall see (in the next section) is becoming dangerously blurred.

How can they claim to be the glorious heirs to Mermoz, to the steam train drivers, to the tram drivers of a bygone era, to the swashbuckling truck drivers of yesteryear, when technical and social progress has considerably improved living and working conditions? Solitude and the capacity to cope with this condition beyond the norm, might precisely constitute a strong feature of a professionalism claimed by those who exercise these solitary professions in passenger and goods transport. And then a kind of complicity might arise to laud the solitude and isolation which one might be able to bear with all the more courage because it creates a precious link to their predecessors in these harsh professions.

It is striking to note that in the three sectors considered (road, rail, air) the same causes, we might say, seem to produce the same effects. In the end, we can formulate the supposition that the gains expected and obtained from maintaining a form of collusion are actually quite well balanced, as the summary table below shows :

<i>For the institutions</i>	<i>For the drivers</i>
Trying to maintain a favourable balance of power	Preserving the negotiating conditions
Isolating a disturbing population	Consolidating the means for specific social promotion
Not having to try and change methods of organisation and management	Seeing oneself in a positive trans-generational light

Solitude, group and conflict

Pursuing the analysis of a topic which is complex, to say the least, we also propose to substitute the question of solitude with that of relations with the group. This slight deviation of the analysis, from the relationship with solitude to the relationship with the group, may prove very fruitful in managing the social change in the professional transport industries.

Our interpretation rests on the fact that it does not seem possible to accumulate weighty characteristics with impunity. A feeling of uncertain identity is aggravated by the threats which hang over major identifying points of reference, both for the professional groups in driving occupations and for the people who compose these communities. In the following pages we shall discover that it is possible to affirm that the main problem of solitary occupations is not their solitude but rather their absence of relationship to the group. This nuance in the understanding of the situation may prove directly relevant in the management of transport companies.

v An identity constructed on increasingly contradictory elements

Like other professional communities which are deeply rooted in the economic and social structure of the country, there is a wealth of elements which make up the drivers' collective identity but these elements are not always coherent. They have been formed in the course of their tumultuous trans-generational history but the course of that history is not set in stone. To some extent built up by the drivers themselves and to some extent imposed on them by others (the institutions, other professional groups within the transport industry, passengers, media ...), the image which drivers and pilots experience reveals perceptions and feelings which can be grouped together around the two poles of what appears to be an ambivalence. On the one hand the positive aspects underline the glorious heritage of the first train drivers, tram drivers, aviators, drivers ; on the other hand the negative aspects mark a break with the positive tradition of the history of the group.

Now the evolution of the global context, the pursuit of technological modernisation, the modification of certain working practices in the transport industries may have exacerbated this ambivalence. It would seem that today some of the major identifying characteristics of these professional groups are under threat, as are those of the people who make up the groups. The resultant destabilisation undoubtedly helps to maintain a climate of conflict, in which the reasonableness of their claims is no longer the only thing at stake. Therefore it is necessary to enter into the problem as a whole in order to find the means to understand and to act.

The blurring of the identifying characteristics of drivers : heroes ?

The social pictures drawn of drivers and pilots depict a very black-and-white image of the profession and those who exercise it. The positive aspects of the collective identity of train drivers, tram drivers, pilots and road drivers associate them with the legendary aspects of this professional body. It is interesting to note the presence of a series of identical characteristics (a kind of paradigm of positive values) among the drivers of the different kinds of transport, even if in the popular imagination some of these professions are more the stuff of dreams than others.

❖ Control of technical power

The responsibility, autonomy and power to make decisions which drivers and pilots have vis-à-vis machines and increasingly complex technology indisputably go hand in hand with exceptional prestige, in a process where the power of the technical object is imbued in those who are able to master it. By a kind of metonymy, the mastery of the technical power therefore constitutes an essential symbolic characteristic of all these professional bodies, even if the prestige remains directly proportional to the size of the machine

❖ Control of risk and resistance to stress

The drivers of these machines confront genuinely agonising situations, risks and hazards which may have fatal consequences for the passengers or the goods they are carrying, for the machines and for themselves. Weather conditions, technical incidents, physical and mental fatigue, all these are difficulties which may arise unexpectedly and to which an appropriate response must be found the moment they appear. Coolness, courage, decisiveness : these qualities are necessary and they are admirable.

❖ Control of relations with time and space

The difficulty of a life 'out of synch', irregular hours, the ability to get on the road at any time regardless of tiredness, plus the advantage of considerable periods off duty : these factors are not confined to the drivers of vehicles. However, when associated with the preceding point and with an unusual degree of familiarity with the country (the scale of distance and journeys), they reinforce a positive image of adventure and freedom. Resistance to the contradictory pressures of time also helps to the image of those subject to them : driving and flying crews know how to get going and keep to timetables and yet they are not in control of all

the parameters of all the sequences of their journeys, and this increases the mental stress.

❖ Devotion to institutional objectives

In order to achieve the objectives of the institutions they represent, to carry out their public service duties, to develop commercial services in the midst of an entirely competitive environment, the drivers make considerable personal sacrifices. The harshness of the working conditions, the fragmentation of their personal life : numerous damaging factors and wear and tear at work are perceived as barely compensated by certain advantages of these somewhat singular occupations. In this respect, whilst it exists within a certain ambivalence, the central role of these professional groups in the functioning of the organisations nonetheless helps to feed the collective narcissism of those who are at the interface of these strong images in the transport companies.

❖ Control of relationships based on strength terms and capacity for collective mobilisation

Through a capacity for collective action, the effective solidarity of these professional groups has been translated into winning and then keeping high levels of pay (above all for the "*employees*" as pilots like to remind us) and by a relatively high standard of living (whether it be in their private lives or their working lives) in comparison with their colleagues in other jobs in the companies. Exercising a profession which requires an accumulation of skills and experience, drivers and pilots are capable of forming a compact group, through which they benefit from a very positive image and positive symbolic recognition.

The blurring of the identifying characteristics of the drivers of machines : heroes *or* robots?

However, in a kind of painful contradiction, most of the elements which have just been mentioned can also be completely turned around : constraint as opposed to freedom ; dispossession and impotence as opposed to omnipotence. At that point you move away from the pioneers of transport and towards, far less majestic, a role of caretaker of all kinds of machines and robots. In symmetrical relation to the previous headings, we can highlight a series of five negative aspects of the collective identity of train drivers, tram drivers, pilots and road drivers.

❖ **Loss of technical complexity and automation**

The take-over by engineers and IT specialists, together with the increasing back-up offered by automation, are modifying the nature of the skills used on board the different vehicles (lorries, buses, locomotives, planes). In collective representation, whilst this continuous transition expresses the pursuit of technical progress, it is also associated with a loss of technical complexity, devalued qualifications, indeed the automation of occupations which are becoming increasingly monotonous and repetitive (in particular with the increase in the demand for travel, which translates into the acceleration of the rhythm of the turn-around).

❖ **The pressure of procedure and vulnerability on the job**

When the subject of the loss of technical complexity is mentioned by driving personnel, it is readily accompanied by an insistence on the importance of check lists and written procedures (translated into extreme brevity, even poverty, of technical dialogue) which modify and sometimes restrict the field of competence of drivers and pilots. By the same token the autonomy of drivers and pilots is all the more reduced since any breach, any deviation, is directly penalised.

Besides, the ability to do the job is regularly reassessed. A succession of technical and medical checks is actually likely to lead to the loss of a job, under continuous supervision. Whilst this element is part of the risk and hence of the prestige, it nonetheless renders those subject to it more vulnerable - and when they lose, they lose everything, insofar as the job often corresponds to a kind of vocation (so its not just a job that's at stake). This characteristic is thus linked, in this case negatively, to the fact that social status in the group is directly dependent on holding down the job.

❖ **Solitude, isolation and exclusion**

The odd hours, the changing timetables and workplaces, both counterparts to an out-of-the-ordinary relationship in time and space, constitute desocialising factors. The relationship with the institution and with other members thereof is often confined to contact with the « pigeonhole ». There is no longer any collective life.

Even in the case of the airlines, the crew is not a real team : set up, for safety's sake, for a transient period, the small group (likewise for reasons of safety) lives under the sign of « mutual respectful supervision ». The importance of a certain distrust, of routine and of procedures, counteracts responsibility and individual initiative within what appears to be a fictitious group.

Solitude, which is probably chosen when one enters and does not leave this occupation, turns into isolation, in particular owing to the gradual breaking down of the life of the crew and the life of the stop-over. The image of a hero fades, it becomes gradually impoverished.

❖ **Indifference and ingratitude from the institution and the customers**

Whether it be the transport of travellers or goods, relations between the end customer and the driver remain relatively abstract and distant, in spite of false physical proximity (in the case of urban, inter-city, road freight and air transport). We can demonstrate that the customer, at the same time as he constitutes the *raison d'être* of these institutions, often appears to the drivers and pilots in a rather more ambiguous light : grumbling, never satisfied, thieving, vandalous ; careless, suicidal ; aggressive, hooligan, delinquent. Customers and institutions don't know how to express their gratitude for the service rendered. The rarity, or more often absence of marks of external recognition offered to drivers make it more difficult to put up with a lot of the impositions and constraints peculiar to these professions.

❖ **Abuse of collective power and the division of the professional body**

The undoubted impoverishment of the life of the group (whether or not associated with growth in the size of the companies), the slide from reasoned and controlled collective action towards long and violent conflicts may have led them towards what is now increasingly seen as an abuse of power - even if, under the banner of « strike by proxy », people have been trying, since the winter of 1995, to tackle very particular issues which go far beyond the transport industry (reform of Social Security, retirement provision etc.).

Images of corporatism and the effects of caste have been consolidated, ultimately producing an unflattering portrait of professional bodies divided among themselves (in particular in the union organisations) to the point where they are permanently split. You then discover micro-societies with inegalitarian tendencies, in which for instance the particular features of the machines generate clan issues which are scarcely comprehensible to the outside world. The defence of special interests, increasingly seen as privileges, is often interpreted as indifference (even contempt) for the passenger-consumer who is held hostage, and as irresponsibility vis-à-vis companies put in jeopardy by this behaviour.

In this respect evolutions, even drifts, of occupations and professional groups in the throes of change, are accompanied by a loss of prestige and a corresponding weakening of the forms of symbolic recognition.

Finally, as the table below shows, the positive and negative aspects of the image of driving personnel are offset in a fairly well balanced pendulum scenario.

Positive aspects of image	Negative aspects of image
Control of technical power	Loss of technical complexity and automation
Control of risk and resistance to stress	Importance of procedures and vulnerability of the profession
Control of the relationship with time and space	Solitude, isolation and exclusion
Devotion to the institutional objectives	Indifference and ingratitude from the institution and the customers
Control of relationships based on strength terms and capacity for collective mobilisation	Abuse of collective power and division of the professional body

However, increasingly serious factors are threatening the marks of the collective identity. They may gradually tip the balance to the negative side. The component elements of the drivers' image are in fact under attack from strong technical, social and institutional developments.

The collective transport product has evolved considerably in a relatively short period. Even a few years ago the service rendered and the product sold by a transport company consisted basically of ensuring carriage from point A to point B, in conditions of maximum safety and minimum service, essentially intended to assuage certain sources of stress associated with different aspects of the journey (claustrophobia ; mental destabilisation caused by travelling ; consequences of a certain degree of promiscuity in a confined space).

Nowadays the service sold by a transport company is far more complex, whatever the method of travel. What distinguishes the different companies - and this distinction has become vital in an increasingly competitive context, is no longer the transport itself, but also everything which takes place before, during, after and around the journey.

From that point on, the view of the transport companies is modified and this change of focus is accompanied by a renewal of values within the corresponding social groups : the professional technical culture is being assaulted by the demands of a diversified service to be provided and sold. Here is an element of strong destabilisation of a professional body which up to now has upheld a dominant value which, whilst still a priority, nonetheless now has to make way for a series of new values.

The increasingly commonplace nature of travel and transport thus goes hand in hand with a reduction in the prestige of driving and flying personnel. As in other professions, feminisation, which is occurring in all sectors (land and air, passenger and goods), by ceasing to be the exception, is also indicative of the disappearance of old clichés... which are still positive in a world which has as yet evolved little on this point.

Only some of the components of the hero figure live on today (in particular the power associated with the performances of the different machines). The image of the driving personnel now passed down by others is increasingly highlighting the unfavourable aspects of the ambivalence. The marks of external recognition are being considerably modified.

In parallel with this the identifying characteristics are being distorted. The reliability of technical systems and the safety of travel are both increasing, the risks are diminishing. Thus for example, even if dramas occur to remind us that dangers exist, rail and air transport are becoming commonplace, whilst remaining extremely reliable modes of transport. The basic driving occupations are being modified. These new values, mentioned just above, which are gradually emerging, translate into the development of skills derived from other technologies and other roles than mere driving : the commercial responsibility of drivers (reception, information management) ; a security role associated with increasing insecurity (urban violence) ; etc.

Relations between driving and flying personnel and other professional bodies are also changing, since together they now constitute the inseparable links in a service chain. In order for the chain to function well, it is necessary for each of the links to accommodate the reasoning and constraints of the others, just as they must all understand that the weakest link can cause all the others to fail.

The conditions for the driving personnel to exercise their power over the rest of the company have been pushed a long way ; they are no longer so easy. The prestige is diminishing and the pay differential with the other professional categories in French society seems to be shrinking in the eyes of the driving personnel.

The image of drivers is becoming blurred, even in their own eyes. This is a major destabilising factor and a factor in a loss of confidence whose consequences have to be imagined in order to better understand the processes of integration for these personnel in the institutions and to better identify what means of communication or management will be most appropriate.

In fact there are two aspects to the integration of drivers and flying crew into the institutions : the first is the dimension of the integration of the individual within his peer group and then within the institution ; the second is a group dimension, the integration of the community of drivers into their company and into society. Now the phenomena which have just been described impact on both these dimensions.

v Driver, solitude, group and institution

Our contention is that the functioning described hitherto, and its regular repetition, have the dangerous consequence of systematically bringing the driver face to face with the dark side of identity, group, institution and finally solitude. This unusual concentration of handicaps largely accounts for the serious difficulties represented both in the inner world (need for reassurance) and the external one (readiness for conflict).

A peculiar relationship with collective life

It has been seen that some solitude, peculiar to the driving professions, was unavoidable, even necessary. In these occupations the subject has a particular relationship with the collectivity in the sense that the group (together) is on the one hand always fragmentary and on the other rarely together. Moreover, the situation described in our analyses (from solitude to isolation, from isolation to withdrawal) highlights this dangerous constant in the transport industry : groups organised *by* the institutions are very limited.

This then leads to another paradox : apart from a few rare training and information days, the drivers encounter a positive relationship with the group only in two types of activity, the common feature of which is its not being controlled by the institutions.

First of all, it is clear that union life plays a decisive role for many drivers and flying crew. But not all the drivers are involved in this activity, except when there is agitation or conflict. Apart from that, in union life, the aims pursued by the militant groups are to push the Company into taking on board claims which do not necessarily tie in with current institutional thinking.

In this respect, in general terms and somewhat up to the point of a caricature in France, the rigidity, immobility, even intransigence of corporate management is met and echoed by the inflexibility, the increasing internal aggressiveness and even unrealism of the union organisations. Apart from blocking institutional dialogue within the companies, this behaviour evidently pushes the basic personnel towards the least controllable side of the groups.

Secondly all the observers in the professional transport industry have for a long time noted the strong involvement of drivers in local and municipal life and associations etc. - in other words *outside* the companies which employ them. Undoubtedly, as with other professional bodies characterised by the same parameters, it is the peculiar working regimes of the drivers which to some extent explain this inclination to devote *their own* time to more *collective* causes outside the transport companies. But this explanation is certainly not enough. It is in the need for a positive involvement, acknowledged within the corresponding established groups, that one must find the most powerful motivation for involving oneself in group activities - the search for a role to contain their anxieties finds here a socially useful solution.

A dangerous way of functioning

However the institutions are not content to leave the way free for a richer but not very controllable life, inside or outside the companies. Everything happens as if they were deliberately pushing the drivers towards the most dubious face of the group.

We have already noted that when the professional groups turn in on themselves, this encourages attitudes of contempt to the detriment of any opening up towards the outside. We should now add that claims, defence, opposition, whilst useful in themselves, ultimately and probably unbeknown to the parties concerned, turn into movements in which the feeling of persecution holds a dominant position. From then on, the border with the archaic and tumultuous, even paranoid aspect of the functioning of groups, becomes very fragile ; the risks of going off the rails increase, the phenomenon of gangs, mobs and packs may occur all the more.

Largely left to themselves (when clocking on or off, during breaks or whilst waiting for their colleagues to take on), considered at best as simple operatives and often as agents threatening the established order of things, drivers do not receive from their professional environment the signals which would encourage them to enter into the difficult engagement with reality and to give up the comfort of their illusions and the attractions of the fantasy of omnipotence.

At any rate, the collective activities to which drivers and flying crews have access may easily fall under the aegis of the troubled face of group life. Thus they do not really allow them either to consolidate their identity and readiness for personal change or help the organisations to adapt or develop. In other words, far from encouraging the delicate contact with reality, the behaviour described rather contributes to the rejection of the people who suffer it, in the realm of the affective and the irrational.

The observation just made is all the more unfortunate because its negative impact is clearly exacerbated by two complementary elements.

On the one hand relations between drivers and the institutions which employ them are very ambivalent. There is definitely a positive feeling of belonging based on elements running through the different types of transport : the wealth of the institutional past, the particular strength of the bond in the professional family, the pride in renewed technical prowess, attachment to tasks relating to public service, recognition for an occupation which gives access to significant social promotion, interest in an original institutional status and one which often offers semi-security of employment.

But the elements of persecution still tip the balance and push these professional drivers towards increased isolation. The collective law which governs the life of a traction engine driver (bus and coach drivers, trains and underground drivers, plane pilots) consists of check lists (safety routines), prohibitions (numerous safety regulations), taboos (missing signals in rail transport for instance), and threats (a visit to the « psychologist », suspension, "leaving the train" », to continue the example of the railway). Leaving no room for the least individual lapse, the legitimacy of these prohibitions and the strictness with which they are applied, are rarely contested by those who are the victim of them, which reinforces the aspect of freely accepted violence.

It is still true that in adversity, drivers and flying crew at best believe that they will not enjoy any really supportive solidarity from their institution ; at worst that they will be held directly responsible for the opprobrium directed at the companies through designating the awkward and weak "*human factor*". In general terms the institutions have proved powerless in the face of the need to offer positive projection to their members for the future.

The lack of a positive social life within companies

On the other hand, whilst some solitude of professional drivers is technically relevant (traffic safety) and financially justified (social costs), it is unhelpfully accentuated by the absence of real social life within the companies who employ them and by the confrontation with the non-transparent and most archaic face of the life of the groups. Instead of having the benefit of a job with a reassuring content, these staff are inclined towards the hardest face of solitude : the anticipation of exceptional situations (obsession with failure and the tough penalty) is very stressful because of the numerous constraints on the exercise of these occupations, both from the point of view of safety and that of security.

If we measure the progress which has been made, we also see how far there is still to go to achieve a situation in which the scientific knowledge of all the disciplines combines to *adapt the work to the person* (in reality this is the definition of ergonomics...), and not the reverse. Undoubtedly the technical contributions, as we have already said, effectively support the drivers' and pilots' work, both in terms of security and of safety. But the *physical burden* is still considerable. The constraints of posture, working rhythms, odd hours, resting conditions : these elements have a direct impact on the body of driving personnel.

Likewise, as regards the *mental burden*, the quantity of information to be handled, the lighting conditions, the ambient noise levels etc. all constitute significant factors with a sensory and nervous impact. Finally the *psychological burden*, more difficult to objectivise and quantify, in the sense that even though it is collectively shared it is more subjective, is far from negligible.

In addition, as we have already mentioned, the automatic systems have a twofold implication in the eyes of the personnel affected : they provide support but at the cost of a certain degree of isolation (security) or automation (safety) ; monitoring human failure, which is reassuring, but only to a certain degree. An example from the railways may be cited to support this comment : the first assisted monitoring systems were given a strange name, now fallen into disuse, but full of innuendo *the dead man's handle*.

Nowadays we know how to describe the psychological effects of certain work situations in terms of pain and mental suffering. The individualism which characterises drivers probably leads them to live out a painful contradiction : the more fragile their collective identity, the more their individual identity needs to be supported for the sake of reassurance ; the less strong the support, the less it protects and yet the more necessary it is to hang on to it.

At the same time it is the professional group as a whole which caters for its members' need for reassurance, whilst transforming it into a collective demand for recognition: the whole professional group manifests its distress at not being recognised by other groups. In the end, the desire for recognition, both at a personal level and as a collective entity, can generate such a strong feeling of frustration that it revives these old feelings of distress which make the solitude more trying.

In not taking every opportunity to integrate drivers into constructive institutional activities, in refraining from mobilising them in positive projects, in taking less and less account of their needs for recognition, the companies are throwing drivers and pilots back on the more aggressive side of group life, that of collective defence.

v A need for reassurance and the quest for recognition : virtual group and conflict within collective transport companies

This accumulation of negative factors seems to us to lie at the root of a *tension* peculiar to all the solitary driving professions. As a dynamic source of unconscious fantasies, this common tension in the group, which we interpret with the notion of a *virtual group*, appears to be a specific means of defence against anxiety but also the agent of continuous conflict.

| « *All together, all together, oh yeah ! oh yeah!* »

This slogan, originating from the world of transport and repeated a thousand times since the winter of '95, sounds a lot less anodyne to us than it would seem. There is no better illustration of what the problems of the virtual group might be. In our theory, the virtual group takes the shape of a largely unconscious fantasy which harks back to the physical grouping of all the peers. Potential, in other words possible but not probable in reality, it plays a consolidating role between the identifying characteristics.

In a kind of impressive stage production, the splitting of oneself into an infinity of figures gathered together at the same moment in the same space restores a feeling of narcissistic continuity and identity of the subject. In a role of mediator between oneself and the others, between the identical and the different, this multiplied and comforting figure once again guarantees the illusion of omnipotence of ones self-image. Corresponding to an interrelation between the fantasies of the person and the manner of acting of the group, the internalisation of these

multiplied external objects (the peers, these other selves) form a protective and reassuring inner group.

Leaving the internal world (of the psychological life) the virtual group finds an echo in social reality through gatherings, admittedly fragmented but nonetheless symbolic of the whole in terms of power. The demonstrations, processions, marches which actually occur in the social sphere give rise to comforting rejoicing both for the person and for the group.

An alternative solution in the face of the increasing fragility of their professionalism which renders the solitude, the isolation and the reclusion harder to bear, the fantasy of the virtual group seems to us however to carry a mental tension which might have ambiguous links with suffering and conflict : a means of defence against anxiety, it also plays the part of an agent of continuous conflict.

KEYS TO THE RENEWAL OF MANAGEMENT AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN THE TRANSPORT INDUSTRY

Through a better understanding of the factors of resistance to change, all our observations, hypotheses and interpretations open up the possibility of better detecting the most appropriate solutions. Whilst the complexity of the subject cannot be accommodated with simple recipes producing short term effects, one can already point to social and managerial practices which explicitly or implicitly take account of the relevant details of the situation.

Observing how the companies in the transport industry work actually enables us to identify the collective practices which, if they were systematised and put in a wider context, could serve as a working basis for plans of action whereby we could meet the challenge of the corporate management of personnel deemed unpredictable and ungovernable. The diagnostic elements collected in our study allow us to identify two main approaches which could constitute effective responses to the serious dysfunctions observed.

First of all, to reduce the sources of anxiety and restrict the mob effect, it is possible to restore a positive identity to the solitary driving professions by sustaining their professionalism. Useful practices exist, the intent of which is to recognise but also to actively solicit the professionalism of drivers and pilots : breaking the isolation, bringing them out of their seclusion ; innovating in working methods ; recognising experience, offering a future.

Secondly, to modify the relationship of these people to change, fair trade-offs should and must be offered to them, where the necessary sacrifices asked of them are acceptably compensated in their eyes (and not just in material terms). The construction, together with the drivers, of a new organisational operation, more customer-oriented, seems an essential and realistic way forward despite the numerous obvious difficulties : reintegrating the drivers into the service production chain ; working through technical, financial and commercial issues ; restoring the credibility of the intermediate bodies ; renewing social dialogue.

New or old, practices already exist here and there¹², expressing intuitively and patchily an understanding of the needs of these personnel who live and work alone but know how to demonstrate team spirit in order to defend themselves as a group.

¹² About thirty precise illustrations are to be found in the detailed study.

COLLECTIVE TRANSPORT IN FRANCE : AT A TURNING POINT ?

To conclude this study, a few remarks need to be made, as a kind of forecast. In spite of the numerous debates we have been able to organise with those involved in the professional sector, it has been difficult to collect these few examples of good practice (above mentioned), which at any rate are rarely included in a global strategic vision.

This preliminary remark readily supports the often severe criticisms generally made by outside observers of the industry about the way it works - better knowledge of the companies in the industry often merely reinforces the harshness of the criticisms. But in order to deal with a situation which is by any standards worrying, another interpretation compels us to emphasise that the issues tackled in this study are misunderstood or underestimated, except where they are simply ignored, by the profession.

Paradoxically the interest aroused by the presentations we have made in the companies we have worked with for this study might also give people a fresh insight into the uneasy situation in which the leaders find themselves so that professional behaviour may move on.

The way in which our study formulates observations, hypotheses, interpretations and recommendations will directly enable many of our audience to pinpoint situations which they experience daily. The accounts recorded in our analyses, after a certain initial shock, often arouse a positive curiosity. From our approach those in the profession often realise that there is a possibility of establishing links between hitherto disparate elements, that the phenomena linked to professionalism are important and that a reassessment of the aspects not directly linked to pay is also important in motivating professional drivers and pilots.

For all that, even if the lines of action which we suggest in order to make progress are viewed fairly favourably by our audience, the latter still emphasises the rigidity of the social system which needs reforming. It is the significance of the technical and financial dimensions which today prevents the social and political aspects being revised in these companies. Repetitive actions hold sway : they have the advantage of

being familiar and providing a certain comfort. The influence of the union organisations exempts the immediate management from any role in the conduct of change, a role for which they are little fitted anyway.

Everyone seems above all to be afraid of initiating one of those conflagrations whose consequences are so disastrous for passengers and for the image of the companies. It's better to await the next conflict without taking too many initiatives, because there is no doubt that there will be one.... In the perceptions of those involved denial is always more believable than support ; the encouragement to take risks is always less credible than the pressure to conform.

In these conditions action for change to accommodate the hidden dimensions of the social pattern seems difficult to implement. On what basis could one justify this action if one is not to plunge directly into technical, commercial or financial arguments? How, with what arguments, with what figures, can one set up a policy which looks beyond the short term? The cost of stoppages, the burden of the levels of absenteeism, the onus of incapacity for work, the drop in public use, the disappearance of a potential market, the progress of the competition - all these elements are not quantifiable and hence not quantified, and therefore secondary, at the time when an operational project for collective mobilisation is being drawn up.

Paradoxically, on the managing tools of the transport production units, the most obvious indicators are the social ones : the number of notices of stoppage, the number of days of strikes, percentage of strikers, sick leave, levels of incapacity. But the dominant words remain in the realm of the contradictory : *change in the right direction, without anyone telling you what that direction is ; take risks, make use of the room for manoeuvre, don't hold back from taking initiatives, but above all don't make waves ...*

In this context, to behave as if things cannot change is in itself to choose the side, which does not only offer problems, of self-fulfilling prophesies : *you'll see, we won't really manage to change this professional behaviour which causes these conflicts which we all lament ... and so on.*

In comparison with the strength of the factors in collusion, there seems to be a limited number of trump cards : some goodwill here, including of course among the drivers ; a few innovators randomly spread among the directors, the managers, the union organisations ; a few technological advances, levers for unwanted social transformation. In short, not a lot in the face of the stability of these systems of defence against the distress, whose reciprocal bases ensure its continuation.

Henceforth two options seem to be available for the evolution of collective transport in France :

- The continuation of present attitudes, which means digging ourselves deeper into a hole where travellers and customers will ultimately get fed up and where the competition (other means of transport, foreign operators) will be the beneficiaries ;
- The emergence of a real political will, handed down at all levels in the companies, offering a strategic but balanced vision of the change needed in the industry : more quality of service for the customer ; more innovation in the operations of the company ; counterparts for the personnel to be anchored in various aspects : pay, retirement age or compensatory rest periods, but also consideration, respect, recognition for their professionalism and collective identities.

At the end of 1999 the transport industry in France experienced a brutal acceleration of its economic and financial transformation (sale and repurchase of Via-GTI). Whilst the phenomenon was not noticed by public opinion, it may nonetheless be accompanied by a social "bug" with tremendous implications. In companies whose technical performance does not manage to disguise the slowness of their corporate change, whilst the concept of the customer only emerges with difficulty, the concept of the shareholder is still to be discovered in most cases. The identity of the companies, the feeling of belonging, professionalism : these parameters of a cultural nature may return with unexpected force if the parties concerned were to feel that the new rules of the economic game were treating them as insignificant variables in the preparation of strategies.

The question arises today : will the transport industry manage to round the turning point ?