Reading inquiry through the prism of unemployement

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Résumé : This exploratory text starts from a doctoral-unemployed experience and was triggered by the discussions within a collective of doctoral students on this particularly ambiguous status since it is situated between student, unemployed, worker, self-entrepreneur, citizen-subject of social rights or user-commuter in offices and forms. These discussions motivated the reading and commentary of a heterogeneous set of texts on unemployment, precariousness and the functioning of the institutions of the social state. This article thus focuses on the relationship between knowledge and unemployment, as embodied in the public space, in the relationship with Pôle Emploi, and in the academic literature. It articulates a threefold problematic : what is known and said publicly about unemployment ? What can we learn from the very experience of the relationship with an institution like Pôle Emploi ? How can these observations contribute to an understanding of social science inquiry and the political role of knowledge fromm precariousness ?

Mots-clés : precariousness, unemployment, Pôle Emploi, survey, social rights, institutions.

This text, which has an exploratory status, starts from a doctoral-unemployed experience and was triggered by discussions within a group of doctoral students on this ambiguous status between student, worker, entrepreneur "of ourselves", subjects of social rights, etc. These discussions motivated the reading and commentary of a heterogeneous set of texts on unemployment, precariousness and the functioning of institutions. What follows focuses on the relationship between knowledge and unemployment, as embodied in the public space, in the relationship with Pôle Emploi, and in the academic literature. It successively addresses three questions : what is known and said about unemployment in research and in the public space ? What can we learn from the very experience of dealing with an institution like Pôle Emploi ? How can these observations contribute to an understanding of social science inquiry and the political role of knowledge from the precariousness ?

1 Talking about unemployment or from unemployment ?

Most often, unemployment is considered as an economic and statistical reality, related to an opposition with work that has long masked, and still masks today, the density and variety of forms of "precariousness". "Precariousness" is here understood neither as an anthropological principle, consubstantial with the human condition, as in Judith Butler for example [1], nor as a fact of the times, linked for example to acceleration and the relationship with the future. It is rather a question of designating the experience of being subject of a relationship with institutions, in particular those which guarantee subsistence and social integration [2] : the experience of an "institution of precariousness", as a process at work within the institution, linked to the more general social function of compensation or enhancement of labor policies. This approach of precariousness as a relation to institutions does not replace economic (income, heritage, etc.), socio-economic (relation to employment) or even psychological (self-perception of one's identity or social trajectory) definitions. It just adds a dimension to it.

To avoid misunderstandings on this subject, it is important to remember that any relationship to the effects of subjectivation by institutions is not only matter of suffered the social relationship ; depending on the people and situations at stake not everything is suffered in this relationship [3].

Valuable research about "life at the counter" describes how "bureaucratic casuistry" has become a "mode of government". Without situating themselves *from precariousness*, it has opened a window on the effects of administrative relationship [4]. Nevertheless, with regard to the ANPE, which has become Pôle Emploi [5], the available work

1. Butler Judith, *Rassemblement*, Fayard, Paris, 2016

2. For Patrick Cingoliani, precarious employment is mainly characterized by two discontinuities : time worked on the one hand, incomes and associated protections on the other. This definition does not prejudge the chosen or suffered character of job precariousness, and if it is lived positively or negatively. That does not prevent the author from examining trends in forced precarity. Cf. Cingolani, Patrick, *The Exile of the Precarious*, Editions Meridiens Klincksieck, Paris, 2004.

3. « On pourrait ainsi, dans le continuum des positions sociales associées à la vie précaire, examiner les pôles opposés qui seraient constitués, d'un côté, par le (la) jeune précaire, alternant petits travaux d'exécution et périodes de chômage non ou peu diplômé(e) issu(e) d'une famille populaire, vivant dans une cité d'une région frappée par le chômage de masse et la croissance inexorable du nombre de bénéficiaires du RMI et, de l'autre, un(e) autre jeune précaire, diplômé de l'enseignement supérieur, alternant des petits boulots intellectuels et chômage (les « intellos précaires ») qui, habitant le centre-ville d'une grande agglomération, peut s'appuyer sur les ressources de ses parents et de son réseau d'entraide et dont on peut dire qu'il (elle) vit une précarité moins subie, qui peut correspondre à une période de latence sociale ou de réorientation professionnelle, en attente de trouver un emploi correspondant à sa formation ou à ses aspirations. Si le « précariat » est un concept sociologique promis à un bel avenir, tant les conditions socioéconomiques semblent pousser structurellement à son développement, il ne doit pas pour autant minimiser les fortes différences internes à ce groupe ». De la Porte, Xavier (2006), « "Bobos" et "travailleurs pauvres" : petits arrangements de la presse avec le monde social », *in Beaud, Stéphane, Joseph Confavreux, et Jade Lindgaard (dir.), La France invisible, Paris, La Découverte.*

4. Dubois, Vincent (2010), « Chapitre 10 / Politiques au guichet, politique du guichet », *in* Olivier Borraz (dir.), *Politiques publiques 2. Changer la société*, Presses de Sciences Po, Paris, p. 265-286.

5. In 1958, on the proposal of General de Gaulle, employee and employer representatives set up the French unemployment insurance scheme. It is financed by employer and employee contributions and provides a replacement income in the absence of salaried employment. Employees who have lost their jobs involuntarily can receive a replacement income called ARE (Allocation de Retour à l'Emploi). It is paid under certain conditions by Pôle emploi (since 2009 and the merger between the Agence nationale pour l'emploi (ANPE), in charge of providing support towards employment by the State, and the Association pour l'emploi dans l'industrie et le commerce (Assédic), a private law association in charge of the joint management (employers and trade unions) of unemployment benefits. Pôle Emploi currently has three main missions : 1) support for returning to work, 2) compensation for job seekers, through the return to work assistance allowance or the specific solidarity allowance, and 3) putting companies and job seekers in touch

seem to focus on the history of the institution or the experience of the staff, in the tradition of surveys in political sociology that have focused on the exercise of a form of "social magistracy"[6]. So much so that when a journal such as Esprit, in November 2014[7], chooses to tackle the problem of the visibility of unemployment in a dossier entitled "Can unemployment be told ? ", it answers this question in a way that is anything but rhetorical, by using fictions. If narration has the advantage of avoiding burdening the precarious persons with the task of telling their condition or pleading their cause, it can also, for a social science journal, represent the awareness of a lack, or of a problem of accuracy, in what common social and academic representations can offer. The question does not seem to be making any progress, since in a 1996 issue of the same journal, Didier Demazière already stated that "everybody can be struck by the contrast between the omnipresence of unemployment in the media and the absence of the unemployed people in the public arena"[8].

It is mainly through documentaries, militant newspapers, trade union literature, literary texts, and a handful of essays that it is possible to recover an experience of unemployment as a situated relationship with the institution. A case in point is the newspaper CASH[9], which grew out of the great movement of the unemployed in 1985[10] or in the archives of the struggles of the "intermittents du spectacle" (precarious workers in culture or show world) on the CIP-IDF Website[11] (intermittence being a specific unemployment insurance scheme).

In these archives, we find broad and heterogeneous perspectives, where the way of "living with institutions" such as Pôle Emploi has its full place, as can be seen in titles such as "Du côté des chômeurs" ; "Intègre-toi, tu seras protégé" ; "ANPE : Précariser, contrôler" (CASH) or "Stratégie de recherche d'emploi (STR), l'usinage sémiotique des chômeurs par Pôle Emploi et ses prestataires" (CIP-IDF)[12]. In these publications, we can find the relationship to the common thematisations of unemployment in the public space, to statistics, to sociological knowledge on employment and population flows, but only as one form of knowledge among others. What they propose is sometimes closer to the tradition of militant inquiry, which seeks to identify prospects for practical transformations from the analysis of the inside of activities and how they are experienced.

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with each other. Since 2019, Pôle Emploi can withdraw the allowances in the event of refusal of "reasonable job offers".

6. Weller, Jean-Marie (2000), « Une controverse au guichet : vers une magistrature sociale ? », *Droit et société*, *44* (1), 91-109.

7. *Esprit*, n° 11, novembre 2014.

8. Demazière, Didier (1996), « Des chômeurs sans représentation collective : une fatalité ? », *Esprit*, n° 226 (11), p. 12–32.

9. Archives Autonomies, CASH, https://archivesautonomies.org/spip.php?article309 (consulté le 2/01/2020).

10. This movement that is somewhat forgotten today, although it led to the introduction of a minimum insertion income in 1988, as a compromise or ersatz for the initial demand for a "guarantee of means of existence".

11. CIP-IDF (2009), « *De l'autre côté du guichet – Atelier 1* », http://www.cip-idf.org/article.php3?id_article=4551 (consulté le 2/01/2020).

12. CIP-IDF (2010), « *Stratégie de recherche d'emploi (STR), l'usage sémiotique des chômeurs par Pôle Emploi et ses prestataires* », http://www.cip-idf.org/article.php3?id_article=4992 (consulté le 2/01/2020).

For example, the collective discussion of unionized staff leads, in a text of the CIP-IDF entitled "On the other side of the counter", to describe the shift between practices carried out according to a managerial logic and the needs of the unemployed :

> At Pôle Emploi, we distribute those registered for social benefits, even if they are of no interest to the persons registered, because something needs to be done. The appointment must lead to an action, a measure, even if it is a CV writing course, a psychological thing, or worse an assessment in workplace, which is working for free in a company to do a sort of in situ skills assessment. What happens to the relationship with users in this context dominated by the desire to measure activity and activate "follow-ups" ? [13].

The paradox, as often seen elsewhere [14] is this : it is the staff of Pôle Emploi who, using their privileged knowledge [15], are in the situation of "crossing the counter" to put into words the experience of the unemployed themselves : as if the counter, the "small window" (le guichet) were a more general metaphor for a division between people, for the discontinuity experienced in the relationships between the "functions" of the service, and the difficulty of establishing a common intelligibility of institutions.

Beyond the attention of researchers or of media people to their voice, or beyond the capacity of trade unions and other organizations to make it audible, some concrete conditions make possible or, on the contrary, prohibit reflexivity on the experience. The very way in which interactions take place at Pôle Emploi in fact encourages ignorance and oblivion, insofar as the writing of the interaction or its result is largely at the initiative of the staff and their "back-office", who are in a position to synthesize and document it for both parties (the unemployed being offered emails of summaries in the form of a work programme), even though they do not necessarily have the same vision or the same utility.

While staff know in advance that they must move people between administrative categories to assign them to statutes and activities, the unemployed testimonies as documented by CIP-IDF show that it is not always clear to them what will count and be of consequence in the interview. Ignorance and oblivion linked to the one-sided nature of the interview script and its recording can then be compounded by legitimate misunderstandings, for example when the status of the interlocutor as counsellor, manager or controller is not made explicit, with procedures moving the unemployed person from interaction with counsellors to interactions with managers and controllers, and from situations of support to situations of evaluation or punishment.

13. CIP-IDF (2009), *Op. Cit.*

14. Guiselin, Gaël ; Rossigneux, Aude, *Confessions d'une taupe à Pôle emploi*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 2010. Voir aussi Bergeron, Marion, *183 jours dans la barbarie ordinaire : en CDD chez Pôle emploi*, Paris, Plon, 2010.

15. It is worth remembering that french Service Public, despite this name and the rhetoric of state communication, have an irreducible part of secrecy, well identified from the earliest works of Max Weber. This is reinforced by the growth of management systems and techniques in terms of "back-office". There is a structural asymmetry with the "users" which concerns as much the exact content of the process of their administrative compliance – reprocessing of their responses to a form, for example – as their possibility for negociating formalities – such as the importance of an interview compared to the written information. See below on "right to information" and "right to be a strategist".

Despite these misunderstandings, staff testimony shows that the relationship between the unemployed and Pôle Emploi is a source of truth about procedures, even if this knowledge often has to be expressed outside the course of interactions with the institution and beyond its perimeter. It is therefore understandable that the unemployed have been able to inspire researchers and build relationships with them between activism and theory.

From his first book on precariousness, Patrick Cingoliani found in it a questioning of the sociology of work and poverty, leading to a redefinition of the method of investigation, in favour of the biography of atypical itineraries [16]. CASH and unemployed movement inspired the Marxist theorist Roland Simon in his attempt to rethink the cycles of social struggles beyond the centrality of salaried work [17]. The CIP-IDF invited Maurizio Lazzarato to workshops, while the latter used struggles to support a theoretical re-elaboration around politics as experimentation [18].

In these few examples, the potential of the human sciences to arm the critical arguments of social struggles is identified and explained, but it is also and above all the reverse movement which is taking place : theorists pursue and extend the knowledge of the unemployed established by the unemployed themselves.

From the point of view of the social sciences, the risk is then to return a little quickly to the Marxist idea of the cognitive privilege of the dominated over the understanding of social structures [19]. For us, this idea deserves to be considered. It should not be normative *a priori*, but be used as a good departure. It is then a question of looking at the relationship to the institutions of unemployment and more generally of precariousness as spaces of possibility or of exclusion of knowledge and its formulation. Situations of precariousness are those where one can experience, elaborate, express or think an awareness of institutions, or on the contrary where one is deprived of the freedom to think and speak them out.

Insofar as institutional situations, through their formalized norms of discourse and behaviors, produce and reproduce society, they give rise to categories that can sometimes be codified and abstract – the false partition of the statuses of "worker" or "unemployed" [20] – and sometimes be activated and densified through practices aiming at compliance. In the very course of this elaboration, institutions often require a movement of understanding of these categories, of which they recognize with varying degrees of ease what they require in terms of adjustment efforts.

As Didier Demazière has demonstrated, when the long-term unemployed meet their social advisers, they are called upon to speak not only of their personal difficulties in having the "right position" with an employer, but of their place in regard to work

16. Cingolani, Patrick, *L'exil du précaire*, Éditions Méridiens Klincksieck, Paris, 2004.

17. Simon, Roland, *Fondements critiques d'une théorie de la révolution. Au-delà de l'affirmation du prolétariat*, Senonevero, Marseille, 2001. Disponible sur : https://libcom.org/library/fondements-critiques-d\%E2\%80\%99une-th\%C3\%A9orie-de-la-r\%C3\%A9volution-roland-simon (consulté le 2/01/2020).

18. Lazzarato, Maurizio ; Corsani, Antonella, *Intermittents et précaires*, *Éditions Amsterdam*, *Paris,* 2008.

19. This hypothesis formulated in particular by Lukàcs in *History and class consciousness* is worked by Paulo Freire and in many feminist studies, including the works of Dorothy Smith cited below.

20. De la Porte, Xavier (2006), *Op. Cit.*

positions and Pôle Emploi. The fact that social advisers can recognize a "global employment problem" rather than a simple adjustment problem is necessary for them to be able to "save face", to exist and to be recognized in and by the institution [21].

Too often, the official discourse used by Pôle Emploi staff does not admit the inability of the "agency" to offer decent jobs [22]. As the repressive model of workfare becomes more commonplace, it also seems to exclude the possibility that some people may find themselves in a situation where they are unable to return to work, or that others may have a legitimate right to a period without work, particularly for self-training (such as doctoral students at the end of their thesis). While some experts [23] more or less acknowledge that unemployment of certain categories of population – young and senior in particular – is part of a political and systemic mode of employment regulation, the unemployed are asked to ignore it and make their "employability" a question of personal motivation.

The unemployed thus experience multiple situations of deviation or discrepancy, between the values expressed by the institution and the prescribed behaviours (invocation of the autonomy of the unemployed but tight management and threats of punishment), tensions between several prescribed behaviours (sometimes the demand for simple compliance with procedures, sometimes signs of voluntarism), or between these required behaviours and the resources that really make them possible (emphasis on job search but financing of controller positions to the detriment of counselling). As feminist struggles and research have emphasized [24], these deviations constitute a form of domination in their own right. In this regard, they are an obstacle but can also define a privileged position of knowledge. It is such experiences that have enabled CASH or the CIP-IDF to uncover the tensions and contradictions that exist between unemployment as a dense experience of precariousness grappling with the institution, and its media, academic and political treatment as a lack of employment [25]. In the wake of these collective movements and publications, we can understand the institution of the precariousness of the unemployed in the gap with respect to the standards set by Pôle Emploi, redoubled by the indifference or refusal of the institution to take them into account.

21. They thus integrate or relegate to the outside the efforts of adjustments that they make necessary to give them their credibility. Demazière, Didier (1996), « Des réponses langagières à l'exclusion. Les interactions entre chômeurs de longue durée et agents de l'ANPE », *Mots,* n° 46 (1), p. 6-29.

22. Unemployed workers' unions regularly report on the large number of illegal jobs or duplicates, which artificially inflate the numbers of available jobs.

23. Supiot, Alain ; Baamonde, María Emilia Casas, *Au-delà de l'emploi (vol. 2)*, Flammarion, Paris, 2016.

24. We can find a defense of standpoint theory and situated knowledge in the work of Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock, or Carol Gilligan.

25. This circulation and perpetual variation of categories linked to precariousness is particularly salient in the work of Cyprien Tasset. The category of "precarious intellectuals", according to the people and groups by which it is supported, articulates facts of experience and / or facts of structure, and sometimes accounts for a reality already there, sometimes has a dimension more programmatic. Tasset, Cyprien (2018), « Se catégoriser comme "intello précaire" ». *Politiques de communication* (1), 95-124.

2 The institutional production of a cleaved subjectivity

Some philosophical works have highlighted how certain experiences of injustice (which replaces the question of injustice with that of harm) [26] or of an intersubjective concern (the practice of *care,* which substitutes the maintenance of human relations for abstract and impartial equality) [27], although foreign to the dominant models of rationality and morality, could be vectors of legitimate forms of knowledge. Beyond their diversity, they invite us to consider how institutions produce forms of subjectivity as their shadow, and how these forms of subjectivity can potentially, in turn, capture themselves to shed a sharp light on institutional routines and what they leave out.

Indeed, if we follow Béatrice Hibou, deviations from norms are consubstantial with them and become more intense as they proliferate. Far from any idealistic perspective of managerial automation, the strengthening of formalities implies the strengthening of informalities :

> Precisely because they are the product of abstract operations, formalities can rarely be strictly, directly and accurately applied, and they inevitably carry within them inadequacies and discrepancies. This calls for adaptations and inventions [...] It also gives rise to a perpetual movement of endless refinements and improvements, but at the same time also to game around these imperfections, as the use of the categories "other", "not available" or "errors and omissions" illustrates [28].

Nevertheless, the adjustment made necessary by the incompatibility between different formalities may be left to the unemployed. The irreducibility of informalities may be excluded and lead to guilt or discouragement in the realization of their rights [29]

To illustrate this point, we can show how Pôle Emploi, in different situations, covers almost all the recognition problems associated with "harm" by the philosopher Emmanuel Renault [30] : for example, an unemployed person limited to his ability to fill in forms or use an interface, and who is denied an exit from technical rationality by a discussion of the ambiguities or dilemmas encountered in these procedures ("devaluing recognition") ; an unemployed person requalified as a fraudulent person following an error for which he is attributed sole responsibility ("disqualification") ; an unemployed person to whom a communication medium is sent that promotes the

26. Renault, Emmanuel, *L'expérience de l'injustice : reconnaissance et clinique de l'injustice*, La Découverte, Paris, 2013.

27. Gilligan, Carol ; Laugier, Sandra, *Une voix différente : pour une éthique du « care »*, Flammarion, Paris, 2008.

28. Hibou, Béatrice, *La bureaucratisation néolibérale*, La Découverte, Paris, 2016.

29. As such, the digitization of public services seems to be accompanied by a redoubling of the denial of informality, which is however consubstantial with computerized management. The promises of optimization then turn into additional obstacles to carrying out public service work and getting social rights. A ce titre, la numérisation des services publics semble s'accompagner d'un redoublement du déni des informalités, pourtant consubstantiel à la gestion informatisée. Les promesses d'optimisation se retournent alors en obstacles supplémentaires à la réalisation du travail de service public et à l'obtention de droits sociaux. France Inter (2019), « Pôle Emploi dématérialisé : le casse-tête des travailleurs précaires », 2/11/2019, https://www.franceinter.fr/amp/pole-emploi-dematerialise-le-casse-tete-des-travailleurs-precaires?utm_source=sendinblue\&utm_campaign=Lettre_info_MNCP_ (consulté le 02/04/2020).

30. *Ibid.*

"typical job seeker's day" (Figure 1), and whose biological and psychological autonomy is then denied by this transposition of "human capital" theories [31] into the public sector ("stigmatization") ; the unemployed person's difficulty in bringing together several subjectivities that are in tension or contradictory, that become floating or radically opposed ("unsatisfactory recognition"), as in the case of the unemployed doctoral student who becomes at the same time student, teacher, researcher, citizen, user, "self-entrepreneur", and who has to modulate his or her postures according to institutions and moments [32].

To dwell on this specific subjective cleavage, one could consider, at a first level, that the position of the doctoral unemployed (or the unemployed doctoral student) is a blurring of the roles associated with two institutions, the university and Pôle Emploi. But it is also interesting to note that within each of these two major institutions, he is already likely to experience subjective-identity cleavages. He is in fact both recognized as having a structural social position to which rights are attached "on principle" – right to education, autonomy of research activity – at the same time as it is required to continually demonstrate its conformity to objectives – productivity, conformity to objectives, voluntarism. Within each of the two institutions, at the University as well as at Pôle Emploi, the public logic of social rights thus already interpenetrates with the logic of the salaried employment contract (whose philosophy is that of a free passage to heteronomy), while that of public service is composed with the calculation of productivity or individual performance.

The unemployed doctoral student is not recognised as a person actively working to find a job – whereas he or she contributes free of charge (or even by paying, through registration fees, travel to conferences, etc.) to the scientific activity of an otherwise valued laboratory, and to teaching without a stable status, the status of student preventing to acknowledge the reality of an activity oriented towards socially and economically valued production (on the research side as well as on the teaching side) and which, like any work, includes a part of learning and self-training. The latest reforms in the spirit of workfare reinforcing the obligation to accept "reasonable job offers" – often far removed from one's competence – therefore constitute a denial and an institutionalized disregard of this dual situation of work and training.

31. "The precariousness of employment, the changing conditions of" employability ", a fragmented, discontinuous temporality, ultimately make self-production a necessary job, constantly renewed. But self-production has lost its autonomy. She no longer has the development and recreation of the person as her goal, but the enhancement of her human capital on the job market. Gorz, André (2001), « La personne devient une entreprise », *Revue du MAUSS* (2), p. 61-66.

32. Emmanuel Renault mentions a third type of recognition problem, staggered recognition. The notion may seem a euphemism : it concerns the misrecognition and invisibility of people inside institutions, but also outside them. It therefore applies to all those to whom they do not recognize a legitimate social function, a wrong that is likely to affect certain situations of prostitution, drug addiction, migration or delinquency : all of these are figures of radical precariousness that sheds light on the institution of precariousness, and provides the prototype of its dominant representations as an accumulation of economic, social and institutional violence.

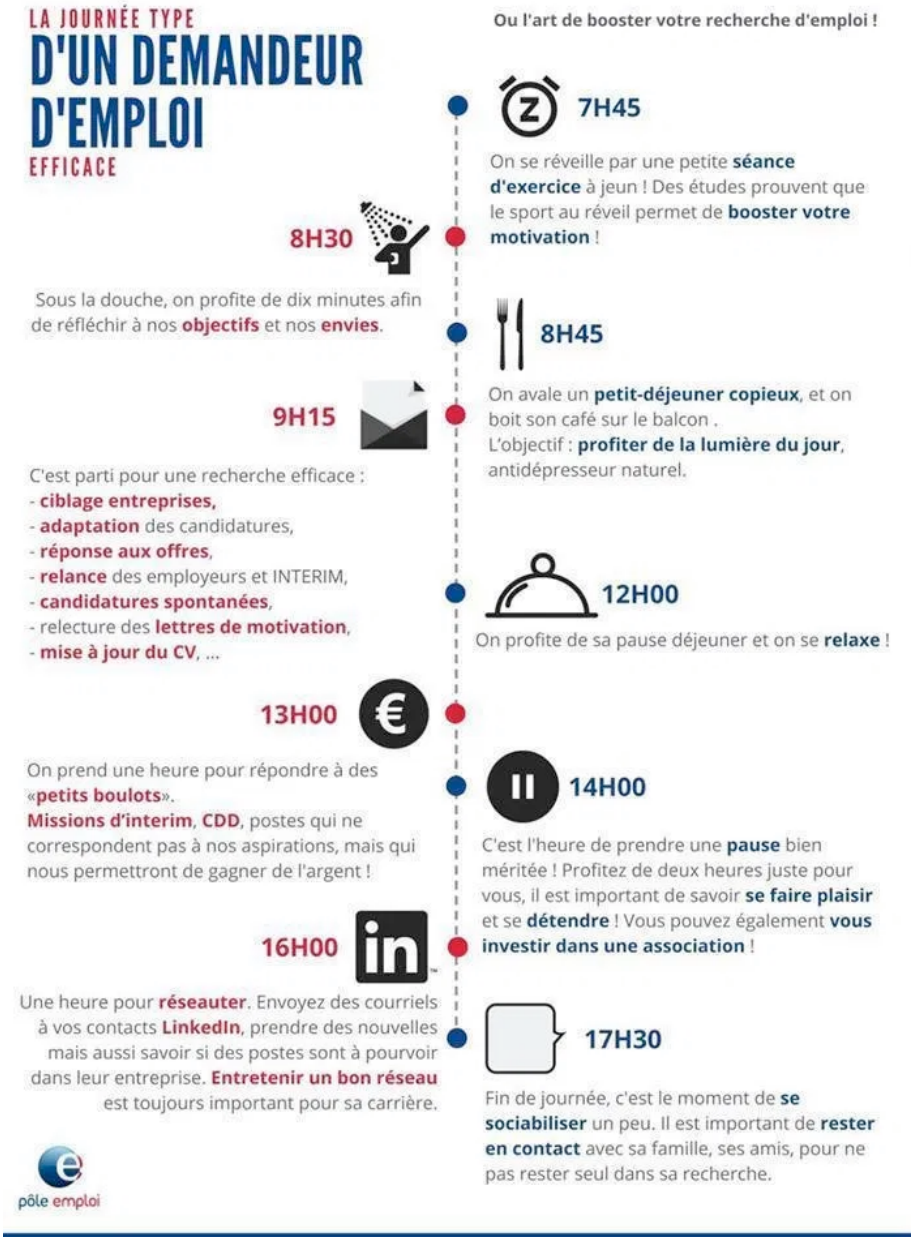


Figure 1 – The ideal day for the effective unemployed according to Pôle Emploi

Indifference to this type of deviation is not a one-off dysfunction of the institutions. According to Béatrice Hibou, it is rather a common logic that links "the coupling of the'functional division of labour', to the'substitution of technical responsibility for moral responsibility' and the'constant concern for efficiency"' :

> The state bureaucracy certainly plays a special role as a public power and a tool that allows the very concrete denial of all differences ; It offers the effective and generalized capacity to reject those who do not fit into pre-established categories considered normal [...] The main specificity of the present moment is that this production of indifference is less legitimized and reinforced by the State, its administrations and institutions, than by rules, techniques and norms that are diffuse throughout society [...] The use of indicators, norms and all these depersonalized procedures, presented as neutral and objective, distances and creates homogeneity. But, in doing so, this use makes the "bureaucrats" lose the meaning of their actions and the sensitivity to and comprehension of specific cases disappear [33].

3 Founding academic knowledge from the other side of the desk

The contributions of criticism of bureaucratic formalism and analysis of recognition situations should not make us forget that too often researchers discuss this dialectic between institution and subjectivity as if it did not involve them themselves. It is well known that the construction of sociology is partly linked to the development of the State's investigative powers. In her book "Il faut s'adapter", Barbara Stiegler notes that in the wake of the New Deal, John Dewey's theory of inquiry appears as a backlash to the strengthening of the administrative powers of the American state [34]. When institutions in modern democracies divide private and public life, when they produce social roles and the individualization of people as citizens, they proceed by divisions that are not based on any single, transcendent and definitive value that would allow the principles to be founded and their exact extension to be defined [35]. In this respect, uncertainty, even strangeness, or the violence of gaps and discrepanciees becomes constitutive of relations with institutions. It is this stubborn reality that makes it partly necessary to do inquiry.

Going further in this perspective, it is possible to identify the moments when this relationship to institutions in the construction of academic knowledge takes the form of a productive contradiction. A diagonal then opens up between the already mentioned phenomenon of precarious individuals who constitute knowledge-sharing collectives and become close to researchers, and researchers who review their practices based on their own experience of institutions. Several types of ethnographic work have thus

33. Hibou, Béatrice, *Op. Cit.*

34. The contributions of criticism of bureaucratic formalism and analysis of recognition situations should not make us forget that too often researchers discuss this dialectic between institution and subjectivity as if it did not involve them themselves. It is well known that the construction of sociology is partly linked to the development of the State's investigative powers. Stiegler, Barbara, *Il faut s'adapter. Sur un nouvel impératif politique*, Gallimard, Paris, 2019.

35. Hibou, Béatrice, *Op. Cit.*

attempted to shed light in their own way on the relationship to the institutions of the social state. Without referring to questions of precariousness, these works present us in turn with the production of gaps such as the normal functioning of institutions, and the relationship to what escapes them as their practical foundation, which they may or may not agree to recognize. They allow us to reflect on a genealogy of the social sciences based on the experience of precariousness, and in particular on the production of cleavages in subjectivity.

Two authors can be called on to support this perspective. Both give particular content to linking the relationship to institutions to the production of knowledge. The first case is offered to us by Dorothy Smith, a feminist theorist who, through the formula of "institutional ethnography", proposes to establish a "sociology for people". Her path is rooted in feminist struggles. She has participated, along with other theorists such as Nancy Hartsock and Hilary Rose, in establishing a social thought rooted in the position of women (women standpoint) – defining this position as an effect of institutional subjectivation, rather than as a fixed identity. This position invites not only drawing attention to gender inequalities, or phenomena such as domestic work, but, while building on these observations, questioning the practice of research itself. It is in fact the assumed and apparently paradoxical project of "developing a sociology that takes care not to objectify what it describes" :

> I learned from theo women's movement to begin in my own experience and to start there in finding the voice that asserted the buried woman. [. . .] The two subjectivities, home and university, could not be blended. They ran on separate tracks with distinct phenomenal organization. Memory, attention, reasoning, and response were organized quite differently. Remembering a dental appointment for one of the children wasn't part of my academic consciousness, and if I wasn't careful to find some way of re- minding myself that didn't depend on memory, I might have well forgot it. My experiences uncovered radical differences between horne and academy in how they were situated, and how they situated me, in the society [36].

From this experience, Dorothy Smith first developed a theory of writing as a founding institutional mediation, which separates an "experiential regime" from an "institutional regime" in the life of institutions, and shapes of subjectivity [37]. Her theory is also a methodology. It draws attention to the way in which institutions then make themselves capable of integration and guilty of exclusion, and how they choose to modulate what can be "taken into account" according to the interests they have defined for themselves. In the same movement, Dorothy Smith encourages an interest in the intersubjective relations of daily life and the networks of texts that control the institutional relations that shape their course in order to grasp them.

She points to the fact that all research must start with the "practical knowledge" that individuals have developed in their activities, by adjusting the methods of data collection according to a concern for depth and quality of dialogical thinking, so

36. Smith, Dorothy, *L'ethnographie institutionnelle. Une sociologie pour les gens*, Economica, Paris, 2018, p. 59-60.

37. Smith, Dorothy, *Op. Cit.,* p. 33.

as to "preserve and restore the concrete circumstances of the local realities being investigated"[38]. The attention to the subjective cleavage produced by the institutions reinforce a practice of inquiry which takes advantage of situated knowledge, and which lends particular interest to the movements induced by the different forms of writing this knowledge – which they are administrative or academic.

The second case of the importance of the subjective divide produced by institutions for the definition of academic knowledge is that of David Graeber, known both as an activist within the Occupy movement and as an anthropologist for his work on the emergence of the economy and state. In his book *Bureaucracy : The Utopia of Rules*, he states that "For anyone who has ever been a refugee, or for that matter had to fill out the forty-page application required to get one's daughter considered for admission by a London music school, the idea that bureaucracy has anything to do with rationality, let alone efficiency, might seem odd"[39]. In support of the systemic dysfunctional nature of the institutional rules, he explains how to seek state medical aid for his mother who suffered a series of heart attacks, he tried to transfer his savings in order to respect the maximum threshold necessary to get the aid : "technically, I suppose it was a fraud, but a fraud of a particular type since the state employs thousands of social workers to explain with precision to the citizens how to commit it"[40].

David Graeber then tells the travels back and forth between departments, signing forms that contradict each other, omissions and errors of staff, and failures on his part to obtain this assistance and the administrative mandate he needs to alleviate the difficulties his mother. These kinds of administrative difficulties are familiar and are often mocked by those who don't have to suffer their consequences [41]. But the situation of a woman close to death shows the seriousness of their potential consequences. What matters here are the consequences of this experience on the anthropologist's awareness of his own situation :

> "At the time, I found this experience extremely disconcerting. Having spent much of my life leading a fairly bohemian student existence comparatively insulated from this sort of thing, I found myself asking my friends : is this what ordinary life, for most people, is really like ? Running around feeling like an idiot all day ? [...] Bureaucracies public and private appear—for whatever historical reasons—to be organized in such a way as to guarantee that a significant proportion of actors will not be able to perform their tasks as expected. It's in this sense that I've said one can fairly say that bureaucracies are utopian forms of organization. After all, is this not what we always say of utopians : that they have a naïve faith in the perfectibility of human nature and refuse to deal with humans as they actually are ? Which is, are we not also told, what leads them to set impossible standards and then blame the individuals for not

38. Smith, Dorothy, *Op. Cit*, p. 39.
39. Graeber, David, *Bureaucratie : L'utopie des règles*, Editions Les liens qui libèrent, 2015, p. 52.
40. *Ibid*, p. 57.
41. David Graeber also returns largely by their instrumentalization by the neo-liberal discourse, while demonstrating that neo-liberalism tends to increase bureaucratic violence (Graeber, David, *Ibid.)*.

> living up to them ?41 But in fact all bureaucracies do this, insofar as they set demands they insist are reasonable, and then, on discovering that they are not reasonable (since a significant number of people will always be unable to perform as expected), conclude that the problem is not with the demands themselves but with the individual inadequacy of each particular human being who fails to live up to them" [42].

We see in the book how of the personal tale of deviation from routines and institutional norms, suffered again and again, leads to a theory that proposes to reverse the dominant points of view respectively associated with management and with imaginary ; this defines, with an anthropological method, the possibility of noticing the uncanny aspect of our "bureaucratic societies" and a re-legitimization of the social imaginary and the political projects that would try to transform them.

4 Re-reading the inquiry from unemployment : the reclaim of latent knowledge

These anecdotes are particularly interesting because of their very anecdotal form, which makes them fragile from the point of formal justice or of academic validity [43]. Significantly, they involve an interference between private and public, and they problematize the division between the psychological and the sociological, as well as between the singular and the structural. From this point of view, the relevance of these anecdotes lies in the way they reveal the place where the relationship to institutions acts on subjectivity, revealing different modalities of the relationship between power and knowledge. By pointing to the production of deviations from procedural and institutional norms, they raise the question of the affective-cognitive resources at stake, and more generally of the means required to understand what institutions require in order to function, sometimes without saying so – but also what they are willing or unwilling to accept in return.

The productivity of the approach, in both cases, consists in being able to get rid of the framing of situations by the institution in terms (procedural efficiency) to study how the game of the institution can only result in deviations (tensions between behaviour explicitly prescribed and behaviour actually expected, for Smith), leave a "rest" (the body), or hide a requirement (the cognitive work required by the institution, and its psychic cost). Everything that results from the rules of the institution is then experienced subjectively as fault, or even is directly imputed to individuals. Their effort of elicitation and reflexivity is hindered or prevented : it is endogenous to the current activity of people who seek to understand the combination of rules, norms and implicit without having the means, because they are already experiencing the effects of what they are just trying to understand.

In cases where they overcome these difficulties, we find that their behaviour is often consistent with these institutions not as they give themselves but as they function in reality, that is, as an arrangement of multiple networks of rules, norms, routines and

42. *Ibid*, p. 60-61.

43. Boltanski, Luc,*L'amour et la justice comme compétences : trois essais de sociologie de l'action*, Éditions Métailié, Paris, 1990.

sanctions. While these certainly require a myriad of adjustments on both sides of the desk, the experiences are different depending on whether one is an "agent" trying to "do his job" or a "user" whose (over)life or that of someone close to him depends on his ability to understand and "make the procedures work".

This success of these theories therefore depends on the possibility of drawing a more realistic description, which until then remained unnoticed or inexpressible, and which therefore involves as much local knowledge of a particular procedure as a point of view, which in the best of scenarios, can serve as a starting point to shed light on the social whole in which it fits. From this point of view, the experiences mentioned bay these two authors function in their texts are almost "primitive scenes" of their theoretical and methodological course. They mark a change of point of view on institutions and a self-transformation of the point of view, which constitutes them as potential members of a larger collective. This "public" is less a voluntarist collective that seizes itself [44] than the very possibility of an emancipation from a subjective cleavage.

In this case, the investigation is no longer a movement towards a field from which new knowledge can be produced, but the recovery of displacement and extension of experiences that are already shareable, and the understanding of what makes them confused and delicate to express within the institutional separations and subjective cleavages they have undergone. These experiences are then made explicit as knowledge about the institution, but especially from the gaps inherent in living with institutions. They are defended even within this particular institution that is the university. Their lessons are extended beyond a specific situation, moving from a situated experience to a more systematic theory of inquiry, institutions or bureaucracy.

These anecdotes thus become the matrix of a conception of inquiry that identifies the extent to which institutions exclude the recognition of the latent knowledge on which they nevertheless rely and on which their legitimacy depends. They invite us to question the subjectivation by institutions as a limited but important source of intelligibility for understanding precariousness, as it is produced in employment agencies but also in all institutions where managerial logics are at stake, including the academia.

5 Founding rights from the margins

The thought on the gaps in life with the institutions does not only follow a movement in favor of the production of academic knowledge. It goes back on the ways in which groups choose to defend the interests and the rights of "users" of administrations and social services. The collective work produced by philosophers, researchers and social workers, *Travail social –Osons affirmer de nouveaux droits* [45] illustrates this point.

44. This success of these theories therefore depends on the possibility of drawing a more realistic description, which until then remained unnoticed or inexpressible, and which therefore involves as much local knowledge of a particular procedure as a point of view, which in the best of scenarios, can serve as a starting point to shed light on the social whole in which it fits. Dewey John, *Le public et ses problèmes*, Gallimard, Paris, 2010.

45. Daadouch, Christophe ; Cornu, Véronique (dir.) (2019), *Travail social. Osons affirmer de nouveaux droits*, Chronique sociale.

The aim of the book is not to have new regulations, but rather to give reality to existing social rights, based on the experience of situations where they are too often defeated. It claims rights suchs as the right to benefit from an allowance without having to adhere to a "project" framed by the institution in ignorance of singular situations (as the logic of workfare dictates), the right to refuse that "equity" (formal equality of treatment) be used as arguments for refusing necessary assistance ; the right of the user not to be "put at the centre", if, as the managerial newspeak says, it is in fact a question of imposing on him a restricted version of his own autonomy, and of avoiding responding to the needs that he would choose to formulate for and by himself ; his right not to be fully knowledgeable of one's own situation and to tell it in one's own way ; the right to what are "embarrassing rights" from the perspective of procedural efficiency, which are nevertheless in the law, such as the explicit reminder of possible recourses or the presence of a third person during interviews ; the "right to the counter" which redefines it as "reception and listening" rather than the mere sorting out of people [46] ; the right to be a strategist (to want to make the most of one's rights) and to create collective spaces to pool these strategies.

These are all ways of recognizing the fallibility of the institution in order to make it more demanding rather than focusing its shortcomings on those it encounters. Such perspectives recognize the latent knowledge of people who live with or through the institutions of the welfare state. They create a space where their political potential is considered seriously, including in its conflictuality. It is this potential which is also embodied in a certain social genealogy of academic theories, which sees researchers, rather than identifying themselves as guarantors of the authority and effectiveness of standards, and without pretending to mix the statutes, recognizing in their own experiences the clues of what is happening on the other side of the counter, and doing justice to it. This observation calls for a redefinition of the inquiry from the subjective cleavages produced by institutional procedures and standards. At the same time, it leads to a re-description of these institutions and the knowledge they generate or demand without making room for them, and of the specific precariousness they produce. This precariousness concerns the possibility of benefiting from them without suffering from their demands. It engages another vision of the role of institutions, preferring to the history of compromise with industrial interests the emancipatory dimension of social rights, that which consists in supporting existences without governing them so much.

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46. Except from the point of view of the procedure and the profiling of the user, his "file" circulating very well from the support or to the control

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