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### ► To cite this version:

Bénédicte Vidaillet, Grégory Gamot. Working and resisting when one's workplace is under threat of being shut down: A Lacanian perspective. *Organization Studies*, 2015, 36 (8), pp.1-25. 10.1177/0170840615580013 . hal-01123563

**HAL Id: hal-01123563**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01123563v1>**

Submitted on 24 Apr 2015

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# **Working and resisting when one's workplace is under threat of being shut down:**

## **A Lacanian perspective**

Bénédicte Vidaillet and Grégory Gamot

Organization Studies, 2015, DOI: 10.1177/0170840615580013

### Abstract:

The case presented here shows how a set of Lacanian concepts can be useful for analysing the behaviour of the employees' representatives in a factory belonging to a large globalized and financialised corporation and threatened with closure. We identify a central characteristic of this organization (the obliteration of symbolic authority) to identify the psychic processes the employees' representatives go through as a result of this characteristic and the impact in terms of their difficulties in exerting resistance. We rest our analysis on the distinction Lacan makes between utterance and enunciation and make use of the concepts of master signifier, symbolic authority, fantasy and superego. We show that in this case the absence of symbolic authority leads the staff representatives to be taken over by the fantasy of a tyrannical and unbarred Other that has the absolute power to close down the factory at any time, and to feel guilty that they never do enough, a typical sense of guilt resulting from the superego's unfulfillable demands. This theory is also relevant for understanding the paradoxes of resistance: the staff representatives will need to reintroduce a symbolic authority so as to be able to start resisting and no longer be overwhelmed by the fantasy of an unbarred Other. We emphasize the benefits of using a Lacanian approach for understanding how discursive, psychic and emotional processes are joined in the power relations characteristic of a global capitalist corporation, and reflect on the structural conditions in which resistance is possible in contemporary organizations.

Key words: Plant closure, Lacan, symbolic, fantasy, resistance, power, enunciation, master signifier, discourse analysis

## **Working and resisting when one's workplace is under threat of being shut down: A Lacanian perspective**

The factory is completely empty. The workers have just discovered with dismay that it has been relocated overnight: the management offices, the machinery and the products have disappeared. They meet at the local coffee shop and decide to pool their small severance pay to hire a hit man and 'kill the boss'. Louise, one of the workers, finds the right man for the job, Michel, and together, they set off in search of their unscrupulous boss. But as their adventure unfolds they discover that the man they have just killed was not the person responsible but merely the executor of a decision made in a company which itself was owned by another company and so on; this leads them into an endless series of murders all over Europe. In this caustic Belgian movie, *Louise Michel*, which won awards in 2009 at the Sundance film festivals, the main theme is the difficulty in identifying where power lies, which causes considerable uncertainty and makes it almost impossible to oppose. Particularly striking is how the employees were 'anesthetized', and suddenly discover, too late, that they have been duped. Their reaction is extremely violent but the workers are not sure who to direct their anger at.

While one might smile, thinking that this is only a movie, the fact remains that an increasing number of company closures involving kidnappings of executives (*bossnapping*) and threats by employees to destroy their work tools, have, since 2008, been extensively reported by the media. The 2009 case of the Continental factory in Clairoix had a strong impact on French public opinion: During the years prior to the outbreak of violence, led by the trade union leader, the factory's unions and employees had made many concessions, accepting significant pay cuts and increased workloads, in the hope of 'saving the shop'. The eventual upsurge of violence should not conceal the long preceding process of resignation and of difficulties in resisting. Similar cases have been reported in England, New Zealand (New Zealand Herald 2009), Italy (Dow Jones International News 2009), Belgium, Cameroon (Reuters News 2009) and Gabon (Agence France Presse 2010).

Whether real or fictitious, those cases raise the following questions: Why did the workers, including their representatives, react so late? Why didn't they, prior to their late and violent reaction, resist more? Why did they struggle so much to find out who to talk to? These cases draw attention to the way in which workers respond to threats of closure and to the resistance strategies they manage or fail to put in place. This question, and more generally that of how radical reorganisations are negotiated in concrete organizational settings, has so far been little studied, and the few studies that have examined it have aimed at highlighting the rhetorical struggles and discursive tactics used by specific groups to resist plant closure (Erkama and Vaara 2010) or restructuring strategy (Spicer and Fleming 2007). These discursive approaches, which examine the rhetorical strategies and dynamics in organizational negotiations around such radical decisions, are interesting in several respects. First of all, they reveal the important role of language in the construction of power relationships. Secondly, they attribute a central role to subjectivity in the relationship between discourse, power and resistance: specific discourses produce subject positions for the actors involved and reciprocally actors employ specific discourses and resist others precisely to protect or enhance their social identity (Laine and Vaara 2007). Thirdly, they highlight the subtle dialectic relationship between power and resistance (Mumby 2005), by exploring, for example, the dialectical battle between competing groups (Laine and Vaara 2007; Erkama and Vaara 2010) or between dominant discourses of globalization and its local translation or contestation (Spicer and Fleming 2007).

However, they require clearly identified oppositional groups, founded on a particular identity, and capable of engaging, in the long term, in structured discourses and a struggle, a 'discursive resistance' (Spicer and Fleming 2007: 518), against other clearly identified stakeholders (shareholders, managers, lobbying groups, etc.) engaged in specific discourses. It is therefore difficult to apply them to the above mentioned cases, characterized by a long period of apathy preceding a final outbreak of violence, and above all a difficulty among employees and their representatives to give rise, in the long term, to a discourse of resistance – or any discourse for that matter – in an environment such that one is unsure who to address such a discourse to and therefore who to resist.

In this article, we use the case study of a French subsidiary of an American corporate group; a subsidiary that has the particularity of being under threat of closure, without the employees knowing who is behind that threat and who could implement it. We have sought to understand how the employees' representatives cope with this type of threat, and how resistance could, or could not, emerge in such a context. We contribute to the research that examines how employees cope with decisions of radical restructurings, by shedding light on cases in which it seems difficult to determine the elements or entities that are to be resisted, and in which, as a result, it is difficult to resist, a situation which might well be a characteristic of contemporary capitalism.

While the above mentioned studies draw primarily on critical discourse analysis, an approach founded on Foucault's works on the one hand (e. g. 1966, 1971) and on the use of specific methodologies in applied linguistics on the other (Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Fairclough 2003), we use Lacan's theories to explore the relation between discourse, subjectivity, power and resistance. Our study follows from recent works (see Cederström and Hoedemaekers 2010; Contu 2002, 2008; Costas and Taheri 2012; Fotaki et al. 2012; Glynos 2010; Kenny 2012; Lok and Willmott 2014; Roberts 2005; Stavrakakis 2008, 2010) that explore these relations extremely fruitfully by showing: First, that far from being internal to the subject, subjectivity forms on a linguistic basis linked to certain elements in the symbolic order that Lacan calls master signifiers, elements the subject identifies with; Second, that these identifications that emerge through the Other's discourse constitute the basis on which both subjection to power – the subjects actively desiring to construct themselves in relation to discourse and power – and the possibility for the subjects to exert resistance establish themselves, which is a consequence of the very structure of language. In this perspective, our contribution lies in helping to better understand the psychic processes that take place among the employees' representatives when they are deprived of the imposition of a master signifier and hence of a symbolic point of authority; and the impact of these processes on their difficulty to resist. To this end, we make use of the distinction Lacan makes between utterance and enunciation as well as of the concepts of fantasy and superego to show that one major consequence of this abolishment of symbolic authority is the emergence of a fantasy wherein there would exist an omnipotent force with the ability to shut the factory down overnight. Furthermore, its demands must be

satisfied without fail if one is to avoid being condemned, which makes any form of resistance difficult. Another contribution of this paper lies in showing how, despite these particularly difficult conditions, the staff representatives will eventually recover their ability to resist, by referring to symbolic authorities outside the company, which will enable them to defeat the fantasy of an almighty force they are at the mercy of.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we make a critical overview of studies dealing with radical restructuring. We show that this research on the discursive and rhetorical strategies used by the various actors to legitimize or delegitimize those structural changes, is not helpful in examining the subtlety of the psychic processes produced by a particular discursive context and which do or do not enable one to resist. We present the benefits of a Lacanian approach to subjectivity when examining such cases. We then explain the methodology employed in the study. In the case analysis, we identify a central characteristic of this organization (the obliteration of symbolic authority) to identify the psychic processes the employees' representatives go through as a result of this characteristic and the impact in terms of their difficulties in exerting resistance. In the discussion and conclusion, we emphasize the benefits of using a Lacanian approach for understanding how discursive, psychic and emotional processes are joined in the power relations characteristic of a global capitalist corporation, and reflect on the structural conditions in which resistance is possible in contemporary organizations.

### **Discourse, subjectivity and resistance in radical organizational restructuring**

As Erkama and Vaara have underlined (2010), critical analyses of organizational restructuring have mainly focused on how this phenomenon has been legitimized socially, politically and in the media, and as a result, developed despite its initially controversial nature (Hardy 1985; Hirsch and DeSousey 2006; Vaara and Tienari 2008). A few rare studies have looked at how strategies of resistance can form, however, among the local stakeholders (employee or consumer groups, trade unions, etc.) in order to challenge the discourses that legitimize these practices: Erkama and Vaara (2010) have studied the shutdown of the unit of the Volvo Bus Corporation in Finland and Spicer and Fleming (2007) the

restructuring strategy of an Australian public broadcaster. These studies have in common the fact that they primarily deal with the discourses of the various stakeholders, on the basis of a rhetorical analysis. Typologies of rhetorical strategies, legitimation/de-legitimation dynamics, and their linkages to more general discourses have been examined in those cases of drastic restructuring: Thus the discourse of globalization can legitimize restructurings by making change appear inevitable, but can also be challenged for example by surfacing implicitly shared values, appropriating dominant themes of globalization or recovering traditional notions of public service (Fleming and Spicer 2007). In this approach, language plays a key role in the construction of power relationships and reproduction or contestation of domination, and the use of specific discourses is part of this battle over power and hegemony (Brown and Humphreys 2006). These studies are part of a broader field of research that examines the discursive strategies that workers use to create ‘resistant spaces’ (Gabriel 1999), including in less extreme and more commonplace contexts than restructuring processes (Collinson 2002; Fleming and Sewell 2002; Fleming and Spicer 2003): discourse gets played out in, and constitutes, a world that affects workers at a daily level; and ‘the structural, political, and economic antagonisms of the workplace are medium and outcome of discursive struggles over meaning’ (Mumby 2005: 39). Central to this perspective is the view that subjectivity plays an essential but ambiguous role in the dialectic between discourse and power/resistance. Indeed, subjectivity can in turn serve – from an identity perspective – the workers in their resistance (Ezzamel et al. 2004), or be the very component through which they are subjected and rendered vulnerable to control by others.

The researchers who have studied the interplay between discourse, subjectivity and power have paid special attention to Michel Foucault’s work. Foucault studies the mechanisms through which human beings are transformed, shaped into ‘subjects’, and he argues that the subject is conceived less as a producer of discourse than as a function and effect of discourse. In this conception, each social construct creates and is created by specific discourses which function as true in it (Foucault 2004) and hence shape the subjectivities and regulate the subjects’ relation to power. Each subject has a potential for resistance whose realization depends on his/her ability to forge new discourses and to transform, undermine or oppose the dominant discourses (Foucault 1994).

Foucault's theories are an appropriate theoretical framework for examining the discursive strategies utilized by different types of actors to legitimize or, on the contrary, delegitimize decisions to implement a radical reorganization process (Laine and Vaara 2007). However, as was noted by Roberts (2005), Glynos (2010) or Stavrakakis (2008), it provides a broad analytical framework but does not help understand the subtlety of psychic processes that make a given discourse more or less likely to be invested with the gloss of symbolic authority, on the basis of which individuals construct themselves as subjects, but are also more or less capable of resisting.

Those approaches attach central importance to discourse, emphasizing its contingent and constructed character, and consequently the political character of social and organizational structures. But by reducing subjectivity to a mere linguistic structure, they conceptualize the symbolic framework of social reality as a closed circuit, fail to capture what is beyond language (Pavón-Cuéllar and Parker 2014) and neglect the role of affects in political theory and analysis (Glynos 2010; Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008).

This is why we need different approaches that are able to capture the combined centrality of both the symbolic and affective dimensions of organizational life. And in this particular regard we believe a Lacanian perspective is particularly relevant for understanding the unconscious, affective aspects of subjectivity, language and resistance. In the case studied here, this will help us better understand the difficulties facing the staff representatives in a factory threatened with closure, and the reasons why they struggle to define strategies of resistance. The Lacanian concepts of symbolic, master signifier, fantasy, of difference between the law and the superego are particularly relevant for this purpose.

## **Towards a Lacanian Approach: Subject, Other and symbolic Authority**

### **Real, symbolic, imaginary**

As Fotaki et al. (2012: 1114) recently reminded us 'psychoanalysis has much to offer organization studies, specifically in its concern with the human psyche and the constitution of subjectivity, which is indispensable for understanding the operation of social norms and power'. Several studies have, in recent years, effectively utilized the theories developed by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan to explore the links



between discourse, power and subjectivity (Costas and Taheri 2012; Kenny 2012; Roberts 2005; Stavrakakis 2008). Indeed, Lacan's definition of the subject is of great interest from this point of view.

Lacan's subject has no essence, is not independent nor self-conscious (Lacan 1961-1962, 1990), but is structured around a radical lack-of-being (*manque-à-être*). The resources available to this lacking subject to constitute his identity are of two distinct types: imaginary and symbolic. The imaginary constitutes the realm of image and fantasy. The imaginary refers to the fact that the subject initially develops through identifications with his/her counterparts – whom Lacan calls 'small others' – which enables him/her to constitute him/herself as an entity. Those identifications are based on an image (the image the other projects) and a false fantasy of unity and wholeness. Lacan initially describes this process, building on his theory of the mirror phase, which pertains to the moment when, for the first time, the child 'recognizes' himself as a 'self' by identifying with the image of himself in the mirror: an image which he initially treats as that of another, before understanding that it is his; it is an image that gives him a sense of unity even though he has not fully integrated his motor functions yet; an image in which he 'recognizes' himself although it is a partially false since it is an inverted two dimensional image (See Lacan 1966; and Roberts 2005 or Stavrakakis 2008 in the field of organization studies).

The symbolic designates the unconscious underpinning of the realms of language, law, filiation and discourse, that is what Lacan calls the big Other. The symbolic, and language in particular, is crucial for social relations and for the constitution of subjects' identity as it gives them a name and position in the social world. Language consists of a series of signifiers, that have no immediate signification in themselves in that each signifier acquires meaning in relation to the signified through its interaction with other signifiers, a potentially endless process. The subject comes into being through identification with particular signifiers supported by the Other, which 'name' him (his/her name first, and then any other signifier, such as 'a girl', 'son of', etc.) and which Lacan calls 'master signifiers' (S1). These particular signifiers define his/her place as different relatively to another. This identification with a master signifier stops, in the subject, the endless sliding of the signifiers. The master signifier, S1, serves as a 'quilting point', a nodal element that retroactively confers meaning on the subject by providing an anchor around

which a network of content (i.e. knowledge) will be elaborated. These other signifiers – that Lacan calls S2 – will be charged with the task of, so to speak, ‘fleshing out’ S1.

The subject always proves to be an irremediably lacking and barred subject, as a consequence of the big Other’s lack that fails to fully symbolize him/her. But that residue has the particularity of arousing desire in the subject and to introduce an opening in the structure. A number of researchers have emphasized that it is this irreducible kernel of the real, this ‘constitutive impossibility’ inherent to the symbolic (du Gay 1996: 71, see also Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 125-127; Contu 2002; Stavrakakis 2008, 2010), that enables the subject to free himself from the hold of the Other. It is from that place that it is possible for every subject to resist power.

### **The role of fantasy in Lacan’s work, and its implications for understanding power**

This lack in the Other (and thereby in the subject) is a source of anxiety for the subject. It is then tempting to rely on fantasy in order to sustain the illusion of wholeness.

The way fantasy is conceptualized within different psychoanalytical schools may diverge, the common agreement being that fantasy is a narrative structure that largely determines how the subject relates to the world. Lacan, however, has a particular way of theorizing fantasy. While Freud defines it as an imaginary scenario that allows the subject to fulfil an unconscious desire in a hallucinatory manner, and Melanie Klein emphasizes the importance of fantasy in the child’s psychic development, Lacan for his part is interested in the ‘logic of fantasy’ which he rigorously articulates to his central concepts of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic.

According to him, one of the key functions of fantasy (belonging to the imaginary) is to veil the lack constituted by the failure of symbolization (in the symbolic) in order to sustain the illusion of wholeness and to avoid the anxiety resulting from the emergence of the real. Fantasy is a narrative structure whose content can greatly vary, but which rests on the imaginary promise of recapturing what has been lost.

Thus, as Žižek points out (2009), the fantasy may include an ideal, but also an obstacle to the realization of this ideal (which explains the loss), and a specific enjoyment linked to the transgression of the ideal. This obstacle, which manifests itself in the form of a ban or a threat, converts the impossibility into a 'major challenge', thus leaving the impression that it can be overcome. This conceptualization has particularly interesting implications for critical theory (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Stavrakakis 2008, 2010; Žižek 2009). Pioneer researchers in organization studies have used the potential of the Lacanian theory of fantasy to analyze with subtlety the difficulties of workers in resisting and changing the practices of power (Glynos 2008, 2010). Generally speaking, fantasy leads to favour continuity and the status quo insofar as the (false) promise of fullness promotes an ideal of possible happiness in the current symbolic order (provided minor changes are made). Another aspect of fantasy contributes to supporting the established order: it can lead subjects to make minor transgressions that provide them with additional *jouissance*, which binds them to what they transgress. This conceptualization allows for a reinterpretation of some seemingly subversive behaviours, by showing how they can, on the contrary, help stabilize practices of oppression and prevent any effective change (Contu 2008; Contu and Willmott 2006; Fleming 2010; Fleming and Spicer 2003).

Finally, fantasy can easily lead us into scapegoating processes that prevent the emergence of collective resistance: the fullness could be complete if it was not for the presence of an obstacle in the form of an 'other', which blocks its realization. Thus, in their reinterpretation of Brown and Humphreys' study (2006) of a new further education college following a merger, Lok and Willmott (2014) show that each of the groups of staff involved in the merger was captivated by fantasies, in which only a change in the other scapegoated group would allow them to recover some of their lost enjoyment. These fantasies, with the strong libidinal attachments to them, weakened any capacity to discern and explore areas of common cause and to transform the situation, which resulted in a deadlock for all groups.

### **Symbolic authority, fantasy and the superego**

According to Lacan, the role of the symbolic authority is precisely to intervene in order to prevent the subject from persistently relying on fantasy to cover over the lack in the Other and from being kept in a

state of imaginary alienation. Lacan underlines here the function of the symbolic authority, rather than its content: ‘Authority presents itself as a barred big Other providing a symbolic law that subjects must accept in order to occupy a place in the social world (...). Here we have the institution of symbolic authority/law regulating relations between the subject and the big Other, thereby limiting the extent to which fantasy veils the subject’s lack as well as that of the Other’ (Costas and Taheri 2012: 1200).

In the opposite case where the symbolic dimension of authority is obliterated, the risk is that the fantasy of an unbarred Other might emerge. This Other is then experienced as omnipresent and persecutory. This statement may seem paradoxical but it forms a key element of Lacan’s teachings: Far from increasing the freedom of the subject, the banning of symbolic authority and the concomitant non-recognition of lack brings about a heightening of fantasy, particularly in the form of an unbarred Other, compensating for the absence of law. Lacan makes a very useful distinction here between the law (i.e. the symbolic authority) and the superego (the unbarred Other): he conceives the superego, in its most fundamental dimension, as an injunction to enjoy (1999) much more than as the repressive force put forward by Freud. And he theorized that the primary function of the law was less to repress the impulses and desires of the subject than to protect him/her from the imperative of *jouissance* imposed by the superego, by hindering the subject’s access to enjoyment, which is impossible anyway.

Therefore, the obliteration of symbolic authority, instead of allowing access to a repressed enjoyment, leads on the contrary to releasing the superego’s command to enjoy, which by definition is impossible to fulfil. Replacement of the symbolic law with the superego then lays out the contours of a totalitarian universe: the subject is now subjected in his entirety to the law of the superego – the imperative of enjoyment – which he can never satisfy whatever his efforts to obey him; this results in him feeling permanently guilty that ‘he doesn’t manage’ (to be happy, fulfilled, strong, etc.) and exhausted from his constant attempts to meet the demand (Žižek 2007, 2009).

In the field of organization studies, Costas and Taheri (2012) have recently used particularly appropriately the distinction made by Lacan between symbolic authority and superego, in connection

with fantasy and the command to enjoy. They use the example of the increasingly influential ‘authentic leadership’ approach that advocates a post-heroic, non-authoritarian and even self-effacing leader figure and promotes the seductive discourses of love, harmony and completeness as a replacement for authority and hierarchy. Costas and Taheri show that it entails the risk of a return of a phantasmagorical unbarred Other who “controls followers from where he/she cannot be seen, namely ‘from behind’” (p. 1208). While authentic leadership opposes previous approaches by emphasizing non-hierarchical follower-leader relationship allowing for greater emancipation, empowerment and harmony, they build on the political significance of Lacanian theory to point how this approach to leadership is a decoy and may on the contrary lead to forms of power that are all the more pernicious as they are invisible. Our research is a continuation of those works that use the Lacanian concepts of symbolic authority, superego, and fantasy to examine the problematics of power and emancipation in organizations. However, our aim is not so much to study the implications of a particular notion of leadership in ‘ordinary’ management but rather to focus on the ‘extraordinary’ context of a threat of reorganization; Furthermore, we explore an aspect that has as yet not been studied by researchers who refer to Lacan’s works in their study of organizations, using his distinction between utterance and enunciation, to understand how the symbolic authority disintegrates.

### **Utterance, enunciation and the master-signifier**

Though it is through language that the symbolic authority can assert itself as such, it is not merely the act of speaking which establishes the symbolic order, but the act of making one’s own the place from which one speaks (see Lebrun 2009). Lacan (1990) makes the distinction between ‘utterance’ and ‘enunciation’, between what is enounced and the act of enunciating (Pavón-Cuéllar 2010): For speech to be a symbolic act, the subject who speaks must support the place from whence s/he makes the enunciation. The statement must be connected to a place of enunciation.

Indeed, in the above described operation, through which the subject constructs himself, two acts of enunciation occur successively. Firstly, it is through an act of enunciation that the subject is named, that a master signifier is imposed on him by the Other: The signifier S1 becomes singular because it is linked

to a place of enunciation (which may or may not be embodied in a person, but which, above all, is connected to a place in the symbolic order). Secondly, it is also through an act of enunciation that the subject identifies with this master signifier. The identification of an individual with a signifier, through his enunciating act, entails his alienation in language, that is to say his subjection to the structure. In this operation, S2 – collection of signifiers, utterances representing knowledge – orders itself around S1, a particular utterance in that it is connected to an act of enunciation. This is what gives consistency to the subject's reality.

Researchers such as Žižek (2009) or Lebrun (2009) build on the Lacanian theory to show that an essential characteristic of capitalism and the contemporary liberal society is to deprive us of the agency of the ordering master signifier, alone capable of 'imposing meaningful order onto the confused multiplicity of reality' (Žižek 2009: 29). This disappearance of the master signifier partly results from the obliteration of the traces of enunciation (Lebrun 2009), which leads to seemingly non-subjectivized, 'objective' statements, which usually take the form of injunctions or unquestionable assertions emanating from an unknown source (e. g. 'It is dangerous to smoke', or 'competition makes it possible to select the best'). Here, the symbolic authority has been erased and the individual is subjected to the superego injunctions commanding him to obey, to respond to the demands made on him 'for his own good'.

Our study continues this reflection in the more restricted context of organizations, and more specifically in the context of a factory threatened with closure. We first show that in this factory, the obliteration of the symbolic authority partly occurs through the circulation of floating statements which cannot be associated to any place of enunciation. This situation is thus characterized by an elimination of the imposition of a master signifier, and so by the absence of symbolic authority. The subjective consequence for the employees is twofold. First, they are taken over by the fantasy of an almighty Other who has the power to shut down the factory overnight and against whom they have no recourse. Second, and in relation to this fantasy, they feel compelled to obey the commands made to them to 'make efforts', 'to 'save the factory', to show 'good will'. It is therefore difficult to make decisions on a possible

resistance strategy in this context. However, we also show that they eventually recover their ability to resist, once they start relying on the law and language to force the management team of the factory to answer their questions, thus creating the conditions for restoring a symbolic authority.

## **Methods**

### **Unique case study and research opportunity**

We develop our argument by drawing on material collected from an intensive case study (Yin 1984) of the only French subsidiary of the American group Ronman<sup>i</sup> founded in the 1970s by Jon Ronman Sr and which since then has become one of the world leaders in industrial chemistry. In early 2009 the local press announced the potential shutting down of the French plant. Since 2008, in France, cases of serious organizational conflicts resulting from announcements of the closing down of factories were heavily covered by the press. One of the initial goals of our research was therefore to perform a longitudinal examination of this plant, so as to be able to highlight the process that led – or did not lead – to the mobilization of the employees, and possibly to violent acts. This case study provided an exceptional research opportunity and we regard it as somewhat exemplary of situations where employees live under the threat of their workplace getting closed down. It can be considered as ‘a revealing case’ (Erkama and Vaara 2010).

There is a research tradition of single case studies to examine the reactions of workers in situations of organizational change (Delbridge 1995; Erkama and Vaara 2010; Ezzamel et al. 2001; Laine and Vaara 2007; Spicer and Fleming 2007), even though few have been cases of factory closure. Single cases are also used in organizational research inspired by psychodynamic theories (Arnaud 2012), whether it is aimed at understanding how people engage with powerful discourses (Kenny 2012), or react in situations of organizational change (Vince 2002), downsizing (Kets de Vries and Balazs 1997) or sudden and traumatic transformations (Gabriel 2012).

Our study was conducted in the French subsidiary of the American group Ronman. At the time of our study, the factory, specialized in pigment manufacturing, employed 273 people and accounted for 1% of the group's global turnover, within a segment representing 12% of this turnover. Established in 1967 in Nordville<sup>ii</sup>, it is one of the largest industrial factories in the region. In 1992, it was bought up by an English group which sold it, in 1999, to Ronman, which was trying to develop in Europe. These buyouts resulted in a period of regular restructuring, leading to substantial staff reductions – from 650 employees in the mid 1990s to 273 in 2009 (plus approximately one hundred sub-contractors). The plant was managed by an executive committee operating under the control of a European management team, itself controlled by the American management team of the business unit concerned; the latter being affiliated to the executive committee of the group.

As for the Ronman group itself, it was founded by Jon Ronman Sr., who in the 1970s had started a company manufacturing plastic ware. The latter diversified in the field of chemistry and in time became a global leader in the sector, with a turnover of over\$ 10 billion at the time of our study<sup>iii</sup>. The Group employs 12,000 employees and operates in thirty countries and in 80 industrial plants, most of which have been acquired since the late 1990s through takeovers. It is structured into five distinct business units, themselves divided by geographic areas. The group is listed on the New York Stock Exchange. It has a diffuse shareholder base and no shareholder holds more than 4% of the shares; it is owned by almost 300 institutional investors (investment management companies, pension funds, insurance companies, banks, hedge funds, etc.).

### **Data collection and analysis**

We consulted with the staff representative body in order to gain access to this factory. Our research proposal was discussed and voted on by the Works Council (WC) and the Workplace Health and Safety Committee (WHSC)<sup>iv</sup>. The elected bodies and representatives of the plant's staff were able to provide us with a large amount of confidential text data relative to the organization, data which they are legally entitled to obtain (financial and accounting data, announcements and memoranda from the management



team, etc.). As a result, we decided to concentrate our research on the members of those bodies because they are representative of the employees and of their diversity, and, above all, are at the centre of potential movements of resistance or mobilization. Those representatives are given an important role in situations of radical restructuring. They are officially authorized to negotiate with the management (about the number of jobs to be eliminated, the terms of departure, etc.) and may use ‘a wide repertoire of strategies of organized workplace resistance’ involving other employees (workplace strikes, but also wildcat strikes or ‘go-slows’) as highlighted by Spicer and Böhm (2007: 1669).

The research presented here followed a highly inductive process, with a constant back and forth movement between the data and the theory (Miles and Huberman 1984). We have drawn on extensive empirical material and data and have used a Lacanian interpretation of these data to identify a central characteristic of this organization (the obliteration of symbolic authority), to identify the psychic processes the employees’ representatives go through as a result of this characteristic and the impact in terms of their difficulties in exerting resistance. We have relied on several data sources. We first collected all the documentary material related to the potential shutdown, as well as to the general context in which the factory operated: data about the group, the factory, its activity, its reorganizations, the relations between the management team and staff representative bodies. This includes minutes of meetings of the Works Council held in the last six years, reports of activity of the group for the last six years, memoranda, announcements by the trade union organizations and by the management team since 2004, articles published in the local, national and international press since the early 1980s, reports prepared by the organization's accountants between 2008 and 2009, and other confidential data given to us by different organizational members (including emails).

Second, material has been generated from one interview with the occupational physician of the plant and 27 qualitative interviews of 45 minutes to 2 hours with 19 members of the WC and of the WHSC, including repeat interviews with key informants throughout the study period (13 months). These 19 individuals (all of whom were voluntary participants) represent 72% of the WC or WHSC. We were not able to interview all the members: 3 were not willing to be interviewed, one was on sick leave, and three

had work schedules that made it difficult for them to be available. The sample comprises members of the three trade unions operating in the factory, and contains 13 men / 6 women; 7 supervisors / 12 workers; working either during the day or at night, in each department of the enterprise (manufacturing, planning, laboratory, purchase department, dispatching, maintenance, administration), with lengths of service ranging 6 to 30 years. Anonymity was promised to all interviewees. We encouraged them to describe their organization, how they felt in it, what were for them the important moments and how they experienced them (the interviewees took it upon themselves to talk about past reorganizations and about the announcement of the plant possibly shutting down in January 2009), how they envisaged the future, what their plans were. Specific questions also focused on negotiation and resistance tactics. A high degree of flexibility was retained to allow the conversation to flow in unpredictable directions. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

Whilst the fact that we only interviewed the staff representatives is coherent with our research purposes, it may have created interactional dynamics, leading to the reproduction of particular kinds of discourse in interviews. We also wanted to interview some members of the management team, in order, particularly, to better understand the context and the decision to possibly shut down the plant. They refused, however, which is in keeping with the complaints made by the respondents that the management team 'never responds', and can be interpreted as a symptom consistent with our analysis: the factory's management team refuses to take responsibility for a discourse associated with a place of enunciation.

Our analysis combines various kinds of empirical material. All transcripts were analyzed so as to bring out the main themes, organized around three topics: the description of the main characteristics of the organization and of the main events that have marked its history (the threat to shut it down in particular); what pertains to emotions, affects, and the psychological state of the individuals; and what was related to the individual or collective resistance, or difficulty to resist. Out of the 560 transcribed pages, only a few excerpts are presented here, when they are representative of statements made by other interviewees (the interviewees are identified as R1, R2, etc.). We have also used the minutes of the WC meetings comprising representatives of the staff and of the employers (minutes validated by both parties).

The data analysis and use of psychoanalytic theory was iterative, involving going back and forth between theory and empirical material. Our Lacanian approach has enabled us to pay particular attention, in the analysis of discourses, to both structure and meaning (meaning being what generally attracts the attention of researchers in 'classic' qualitative analyses), including: repetitions, particular grammatical constructions, the use of the passive voice, etc. (Pavón-Cuéllar and Parker 2014). Thus we observed a repetition of identical sentences in the different interviews and in some meeting reports, such as for example: "*We're always told that 'the plant can be closed down overnight'*". The structure of this sentence (passive voice, the position of the subject, fixity of the statement) led us to interpret it as a statement of fantasy. We also paid particularly attention in the analysis, to anything referring to the difference between utterance and enunciation.

One last stage consisted in presenting the results of our analysis to the people interviewed. Only 13 respondents were able to attend, because of differences in working schedules.

## **Case analysis**

### **An organization in which the employees do not know who's in charge, who speaks and from where**

***Who is in charge?*** Ronman's takeover of the factory in 1999 has led to an almost constant process of reorganizations (one each year) related to the increasing automation and computerization of the production process, the outsourcing of certain functions, the reorganization of jobs, the introduction of versatility, the establishment of a Resource Planning Enterprise which resulted in the purchasing, selling and invoicing functions being moved to and centralized in England. All these measures were justified by the necessity to 'remain competitive'. The redundancy plans, characterized by calls for voluntary redundancy and large severance payments, allowed for a permanent staff reduction while the production remained stable. The respondents all describe an organization that has undergone so many changes in

the last ten years that they don't recognize it anymore: an organization in which the work posts, the processes and teams have been constantly modified; in which they have lost a lot – loss of what had been previously negotiated (reduction of profit sharing bonuses, the calling into question of the 35-hour work week, etc.), loss of competences and knowledge (departure of the oldest employees, outsourcing of some functions); and in which their colleagues ‘disappear’, one after another. Entire departments have been eliminated, which in some cases becomes apparent in physical disappearance through the destruction of buildings (their traces hidden by lawn).

*As the company was restructured, for example, we have a guy here for 6 months, he starts to get trained on a building and then, overnight, he leaves Ronman and we have to train a new guy. Respondent 1 (R1)*

*[In this universe], there is no particular reason to be here rather than there, and even if we are here now, we might very well be there tomorrow. (R12)*

One essential aspect of this organization is that the respondents are tormented by the question of ‘*who’s in charge*’ or even ‘*whether there is someone in charge at all*’. Who has the power? The shareholders? The American executives? The European management team? The managers of the factory? The employees themselves? This interview excerpt illustrates this ambiguity:

*Now, I wonder if there's still a pilot in the plane. In the past, the manager of the plant was far less tied to the results of the group, he had much more autonomy. Now, everything is governed by the group and so we've lost autonomy. (...) But at the top (at the executive level of the group), there isn't really a pilot either. There might be one, there is one for sure, but we don't know for sure. (R9)*

The American top management is presented by the factory's management team as one that can decide about the future of the plant (that is to say, they can decide to shut down the plant or on the contrary to make massive investments), but when the secretary of the WC tells the management team that he wishes ‘*Scott Andrew (the director of the American business division) came to Nordville to talk directly with*

*the staff, the management team (of the plant) [...] agreed [...] reminding us, however, that the future of the plant is in our hands” or “when the director, Scott Andrew, comes...every time – let me show you what he does...he says ‘Nordville, the future’s in your hands’” [ he makes a V with his arms moving outwards]. (R17)*

Thus, the employees are supposed to possess the power to keep the factory open, to ensure that it survives, and yet they describe themselves as ‘*pawns*’ that are ‘*constantly moved from one spot to another, and in the end, they are the ones that get kicked out first*’ (R7). As for the factory’s management team, ‘*in the past*’ (i.e. When the plant had not yet been bought by the American group), it had a certain degree of autonomy and real power, but there is now constant ambiguity about how much room for manoeuvre it actually has. The same person sometimes presents the director of the plant as a ‘*puppet in the hands of the Americans*’ (which he himself admits when he says during a WC meeting “*You know, they can call me tomorrow and tell me ‘we’re closing Nordville’*”) or as a leader trying to ‘*save the site*’. Most interviewees mention an episode that had a strong impact on them: When the director suffered a breakdown:

*He broke down in the middle of a Works Council’s meeting (...). The unions realized that he was in a state of mental and physical collapse. (R10)*

Thus, there is a constant play around the question of who has the power and where it is exercised from.

***Questioning around the enunciation.*** The interviews clearly show that in this factory, the employees have for several years lived under the threat of it being shut down, without, however, being able to identify who would be able to make that decision, on which criteria that decision would be based and when it would be implemented.

The factory has for the last few years been in chronic deficit, which has fuelled the rumours that the plant might be shut down. However, a closer analysis reveals that this situation of non-profitability is mostly due to decisions made by the American executive committee (e. g. keeping production levels below capacity, or intra-group transfer costs below market rates, which penalizes the factory) and to

declining prices on the European market. Thus, the financial situation of the French factory is largely due to factors which neither the factory's management team nor its employees have any real influence over. As for the aspects which they can influence, they have been widely explored as part of the constant reorganization processes. All these elements have, for years, led the employees to question the veracity of this 'non-profitability', which they end up associating with the desire of the group's executives to maintain a constant pressure on them.

The beginning of the year 2009 marked a radical turning point. On January 14<sup>th</sup>, during a meeting supposedly meant to be a routine information meeting, the factory's managers read, in French, a memorandum presented by them as emanating from the American top management, announcing that *'the group has been forced to make radical decisions: drastic cost reduction; reduction of production levels in all factories; permanent shutting down of the European sites (including potentially Nordville, given its costs) because the question of excess capacity in Europe is more than ever relevant. (...) There remains a high level of uncertainty concerning Nordville's situation'*<sup>vi</sup>. So far, the shutting down of only one factory has been announced: that of the English factory, which is the oldest of this branch of activity.

The questioning around the announcement of the possible shutting down of the factory is particularly strong. Indeed, by reading the *'memorandum from the group's top management team'* during an *'information meeting'* the Nordville's managers present themselves as information relays and not as the authors of the statement. Yet, it later transpired that this *'memorandum'* had been written by the French managers (which explains why it was read in French), was based on general information sent by the group to the European subsidiaries, and that the emphasis placed on Nordville and on the high probability of its being shut down emanated directly from the managers of this factory. The confusion concerning the author of the statement therefore leads to a 'floating' statement which cannot be associated to any place of enunciation.

Another event is characteristic of this questioning around the enunciation. The WC secretary discovered, in April 2009 on the internal IT network, a document describing the *'workforce scheduled for 2012'*.

The list of posts shows a forecast of 186 posts in 2012 against 273 in 2009. How can one have such good visibility of how many posts there will be three years from now, when the management team constantly reiterates the impossibility of predicting the future, and given the fact that the possibility of the factory shutting down was announced in January? In a meeting, the WC asked the management team to explain the meaning of this table and the latter replied that this table had been removed from the network and that sanctions would be taken against the person who put it back on it. A statement was therefore produced and then removed, without the staff being able to find out who and where it came from. So this statement too became a floating statement, all the more so as it had disappeared.

*We are never sure of what we are undergoing, of what it means. You see, there was that document we found on the network, which announced the number of posts predicted for 2012, but then it disappeared. So you can't even prove anything; that's what's terrible. You start to wonder if you were dreaming. (R14)*

**Nobody answers.** In every interview the same complaint is made: ‘*Nobody answers*’. This sentence must be understood in the double sense of ‘answer to’, i.e. answering the questions which the employees ask and answering to/being accountable for the decisions made:

*The problem is that we never get an answer. We ask questions, and we ask again, but nobody ever answers them; we don't even know who would be able to answer them. Nobody answers for anything anymore. It's as if there were an authority, but an authority...how should I put it, an invisible authority. Nobody knows where it is. In the past we could confront it when we didn't agree, but now, we don't even know who to talk to. (R6)*

Firstly, people don’t know who to address their questions to. The interviewees describe how their organization was, in the past, structured along a clear, progressive and vertical hierarchical line, in which the top level had strong technical know-how and could provide answers to the encountered problems. They compare it to the present organization, which is characterized by a flat structure with ‘*a gap between the field and the managers*’; the managers are not trained for the profession but are trained for

management, are barely and randomly present, which gives the employees the feeling that they are left to their own devices.

*As there are fewer and fewer staff, there are times when it takes us forever to get information.*

*It takes us ten phone calls to get an answer to a simple question (...) In fact we don't know who does what anymore. (R8)*

*There's no one to be found. They all disappear. We don't see them anymore. (R18)*

Secondly, finding who to address the question to provides no guarantee that the question will be answered, quite the contrary, as this interviewee's remark reveals:

*It's getting worse and worse, when we ask them questions, they answer nothing (...). It feels like we're talking but what we say gets blown out the windows, it feels like our words get scattered by the wind... (R7)*

Finally, when an answer is given, it can have no truth value in that the utterances produced constantly contradict one another. Each utterance is null and void like and likely to be cancelled out by another utterance, the origin and timing of which cannot be anticipated. It is a statement that does not bind the speaker and which as a result has no weight and creates an uncertain world, in constant danger of collapse. For instance, the plant's management team keep talking, during information meetings, about a production objective of 45,000 tons (interpreted by the employees as an indicator of the difficulties of the factory), but then a team manager announces during a team meeting that the objective is 65,000 tons.

*We're constantly in the dark. Nothing's ever clear (R1)*

*They announce projects, tell us about things we have to do. They say it's imperative, vital. And three months down the line it's no longer the case, the project is abandoned ... it falls through.*

*(R5)*

So let us summarize what has been highlighted in this section. We show that the situation in this factory is characterized by an obliteration of symbolic authority, which occurs partly because it is impossible to attach statements to places of enunciation. Statements circulate in the factory, but traces of their



enunciation have been deleted, which prevents the imposition of a master signifier. No one seems 'accountable for anything', there is complete opacity as to who is likely to make decisions about the future of the site or about the respective powers of the group's Board of Directors, of the European management team, and of the factory's management team . The way language is used in this case, does not make it possible to impose order onto a confused, multiple and inconsistent reality. There is no 'quilting point' to capture it; it is a reality that is constantly shifting, one in which nothing seems to hold true.

### **The psychic consequences for Ronman's employees' representatives**

What are the psychological consequences of this absence of symbolic authority for the employee representatives? In this section, we show that this leads to a heightening of the fantasy of an unbarred and persecutory Other, who possesses the power to shut the factory down overnight and the commands of whom the employees are supposed to obey. This generates in them a feeling of guilt because regardless of the efforts they make, they are not able to satisfy those demands; it makes it difficult to engage in a strategy of resistance.

*The fantasy: 'the plant can be closed down overnight'*. As we have seen, the Lacanian theory underlines that the role of the symbolic authority and of the law is to prevent the subject from trying to cover over the lack in the Other – which is a source of anxiety – by relying on fantasy, which serves to maintain an illusion of wholeness in /of the Other (and therefore in the subject). This theory enables us to shed light on what happens in this case, where the symbolic authority is obliterated: it confronts the subject with a senseless real and provokes an overflow in the imaginary, bringing about a heightening of fantasy, particularly in the form of an unbarred Other experienced as omnipotent and persecutory, and compensating for the absence of law.

The existence of this fantasy can be observed in an important statement made during all the interviews – which gives an indication of how often it is made in the plant: “*We're always told that 'the plant can be closed down overnight'*”. This sentence is characteristic of the way in which the fantasy is expressed: it is an imaginary scenario, an ordered, and often dramatized, scene in which the subject stands aside

but is present as a spectator (Freud, 1969). Building on this Freudian conception, Lacan (1966-67) laid emphasis on the linguistic component of fantasy: it is often expressed in a single sentence and is generally associated with an impersonal grammatical construction such as the passive voice, which expresses the particular position of the subject, at once outside the scene and affected by it.

We systematically asked the interviewees to tell us by *whom* they 'are always told'; and *who* can close the plant? And what does 'always' mean? (Since when?). No one can answer precisely. In this fantasmatic scenario, which repeats itself constantly and circulates through the factory, the subjects put an almighty Other into play; an Other capable of shutting the factory down overnight, and whose threatening shadow seems to constantly hover over their heads. This prevents them from being confronted with a traumatic reality in which it is clear that no one possesses infallible power.

***A persecutory Other.*** This Other who has the power to close down the factory at any time, but cannot be identified, is then extremely pervasive and persecutory. It is a manipulating Other, alternately described as a '*puppeteer*', '*a chess player*' moving his '*pawns*', or an almighty lord who has '*power over the life and death of his subjects*' :

*We're mere pawns. We know we're just numbers. (R2)*

*It's all done, the goose is cooked; it's all over actually. (...). We don't count, we're a negligible factor. (R5)*

*To be a pawn means you're manipulated. To me it felt like: 'We're gonna put you here. When we decide it's time, we'll tell you where we're putting you' (...). It feels like there's no organization, that they just do what they fancy doing. (R13)*

*We're pawns, just pawns. It's like they're lords in the Middle Ages who have the right of life or death over people. They think 'and what about this guy...right, it's his turn'. That's exactly it. (R 15)*

There is an Other who operates backstage; he's invisible and what is visible to the employees is thought to be artificially staged:

*There's what we are shown, and there's what happens backstage. (R 19)*

An Other who has the extraordinary power to set up a factory, close it down and set it up again whenever and wherever he wishes, acting outside the law:

*We've seen situations in which the factory announced there would be 'no retrenchment' and then two days later the factory's shut down. There're examples like that everywhere. There are companies that make investments one day and close down the next. Investing a few millions doesn't mean you can't close down a factory and set it up somewhere else (...). They can shut down the plant and then start it again in Italy, England or wherever. (R 4)*

**Efforts and guilt.** By making a distinction between the law/symbolic authority and the superego, Lacan draws attention to the fact that the obliteration of symbolic authority subjects the individual to the law of the superego. This law consists primarily of an imperative to enjoy – which the subjects can never satisfy whatever their efforts to obey it. They find themselves subjected to fierce super-egoistic figures ordering them to freely choose what, in all cases, is actually imposed (Žižek 2002, 2007). Žižek emphasizes the devastating consequences of this posture for the individual, who feels terribly guilty that s/he is 'failing', or in other words that s/he is not able to satisfy a demand which is by nature impossible to fulfil: to satisfy an Other that structurally cannot be satisfied.

In the context examined here, the employees feel compelled to fulfil the injunctions to '*make efforts*', '*to save the factory*', to show '*good will*'. They wonder if they are responsible for its future: Their efforts might help prevent the closure of the plant. Many of them feel vested with the mission to '*keep the plant going*' at all costs. Thus an electro-mechanic – who comes to the plant at night when equipment on the production line has broken down and needs repairing urgently – compares himself and one of his team-workers to MacGyver; he is given an impossible mission which he accomplishes brilliantly by doing miracles with a piece of string. It is thanks to him that the plant is still going and has not been shut down: '*Got to keep things running*'. This statement can be perceived as typical of a super-egoistic injunction: There is no respite for the subject, who is expected to put himself at the service of the Other.

The employees frequently hear '*the future of the factory is in your hands*'; this means that nothing is impossible as long as they make the necessary efforts to achieve it. The typical speech of the managers to the workers is '*sacrifices need to be made*'<sup>vii</sup>. This future is said to depend on these efforts. This cause and effect relationship is mentioned regularly by the management team, but the content of the effort required varies: It can be related to the organization of labour (adapt vacation dates to the production necessities, work with fewer staff), the indicators of quality, the costs (reduce the costs of production and maintenance despite the fact that the production equipment is aging), or the salaries, bonuses and incentives. The necessity of '*making efforts*' is systematically justified by the uncertainty weighing on the factory, in a potentially endless process, since the management team '*does not have the elements of information needed to either reassure the staff, or to announce that the plant is going to be shut down*'<sup>viii</sup>.

After it was announced, in January 2009, that the factory might be shut down, the demand for efforts was accentuated. Thus, the mandatory annual negotiations which took place shortly after the announcement was made, caused the workers' representatives – after consultation with the employees – to consider accepting the demands made by the management team: a wage freeze for the year 2009 after several years of wage moderation, reduction of bonuses, the non-payment of one work day, and the non-payment of some stand-by hours. To these demands the management added a '*demonstration of commitment*' section requiring employee versatility with no wage compensation, a revision of the 35-hour week regime, and an increase in mobility. The demand is explicit: the workers and their representatives must '*demonstrate*' their intention to participate in the recovery of the plant. And yet, the wage bill only represents 10% of the factory's expenses.

The extract below, drawn from the minutes of WC meeting, provides a good illustration of the position in which the employees and their representatives are placed: described as being responsible for their future – the decision to close the plant or keep it open depending on their efforts – they are ordered to show their intention to participate in the recovery of the plant. The superego's command is formidable here. However, no effort can '*ensure that the plant will survive*':

*The factory's director confirms that 'what will make the difference, will be the strong signs that Nordville and its representatives send to the group's top management, signs such as, for example, in these early days of 2009, the agreements reached during the mandatory annual negotiations'. John X. [a staff representative] is questioning the fact that the wage freeze associated with the freeze on profit-sharing this year can really have an effect on the sustainability of the factory. (...) the management answers that it can give no guarantee as to the long term survival of the factory. ix*

In this context, the interviewees feel responsible for the dire situation the company is in. The feeling of guilt is strong and is expressed in almost every interview: a sense of guilt for not being able to 'save the factory' with any certainty; a sense of guilt for undertaking actions that may be ill perceived by management and employees:

*When I went back for lunch to the staff canteen, some people said to me: 'if the factory closes down it will be your fault'. (R8)*

*Every time there was a meeting, we were told our future was in our hands. It made us feel guilty enough to think 'Oops...' (...). They [the management team of the factory] did often tell us 'yes but it's up to you change things'; but then we'd ask ourselves 'Okay, but what exactly can we do?' We heard that a lot. And then we thought 'Damn, we didn't do much, did we?' (R15)*

Many employees feel consumed by this sense of guilt: 'it gnaws at us', 'it torments us', 'it worries me sick', 'it feels like gangrene'.

### **Resisting: difficulties and solution**

The processes described here, cause a difficulty, among the staff representatives, in resisting the endless demands and the blackmail they are subjected to. This is evidenced for example by the mandatory annual negotiations. The interviews show that they are very sensitive to the way their action is perceived: fear of being 'frowned upon' (particularly by the group's management team), questioning about how a refusal

to make the expected efforts *'would be perceived'*, the belief that *'the group expects strong gestures from us'*. The fear that they might lead to the shutting down of the plant result in the actions being carried out hesitantly: What can we put in place without it having any negative effects on the plant? The staff representatives end up believing that the shutting down of the plant would have something to do with their actions:

*They (the plant's management) have said I don't know how many times 'Go ahead, timing's good. You go on strike, and the plant will be closed'. We had a discussion with the American boss, he said to us: 'you do that now and you're dead'. (R5)*

However, our study lasted 13 months, which allowed us the time to observe, through the analysis of the WC reports, the trade union memoranda and the interviews with the staff representatives, what might be a recent attempt by the latter to reintroduce a symbolic authority in their relation with the management, particularly by relying on the law. Towards the end of 2009, the WC, tired of never obtaining any answers from the management concerning the factory's situation, and making use of the rights the law provides, initiated a right of notification procedure<sup>x</sup> so as to obtain the opinion of an independent certified accountant on the situation of the factory, and to summon the management of the factory to answer questions that had been unanswered for a long time (concerning the financial commitments of the group, the situation of other European factories, etc.).

The goal was to force the local management team to be clear about the questions they could answer and those they actually had no answer to, to take responsibility for what they claimed and to turn to their superiors (European or American) for answers to questions they could not answer. This process amounts to associating statements to places of enunciation to reintroduce a master signifier on the basis of which the reality in which the staff representatives found themselves could be stabilized. This then enabled them to contest the situation described by the factory's management and the reasons put forward to explain that situation: More specifically they contested the claim that *'their efforts'* could have an impact on the financial situation of the factory, by arguing that the latter's deficit was a consequence of the group's overall strategy; and they then rejected the management's new demands for concessions.

Then, the WC decided to sue the management for obstructing the functioning of the WC. Work with the labour inspectorate and with a lawyer's firm was conducted to show that the plant's management team did not respect the rights of the WC (by not informing them of the factory's situation for instance). One last element is that: When one of the staff representatives participated in the European Works Council, he now made a written report of it which the plant's director – who also participated in the Council – must sign, so that '*indisputable traces of what was said*' could be kept. Writing down what was said and signing it helped to re-associate the statement to the act of stating (i.e. to enunciation).

The goal seemed to be to position the staff representatives in relation to the local management team, to reintroduce a symbolic authority, which the law, the words of the external experts or of the institution (the court of law, the labour inspectorate, etc.) represent. The aim was to create a structured relationship between two, clearly identified, groups – a relationship governed by laws that existed prior to the implementation of this relationship and to reintroduce a place of enunciation. A shift gradually took place from the idea of impotence to that of an action that had become necessary in order to push the management, '*to be clear*', so as to move out of an unbearable uncertainty. An interviewee remarked that '*we prefer to know, even that the plant is going to be shut down, than not to know*'.

Thus, it seems that the WC's attempt to reintroduce a symbolic authority has led to the re-emergence of the ability to act. The interviews also showed a decrease, over time, of anxiety and of their sense of guilt. In the last interviews, almost no one made the statement '*The plant can be closed down overnight*', indicating that the fantasy of an almighty Other who could manifest himself at any time was no longer active.

## **Discussion**

### **A Lacanian contribution to understanding how power is exercised in contemporary capitalist organizations**

The case presented here shows how a set of Lacanian concepts can be useful for analysing the behaviour of the employees' representatives in a factory belonging to a large globalized and financialised corporation and threatened with closure. We rest our analysis, in particular, on the difference between statement and enunciation, the definition of master signifier and its role in the construction of a symbolic authority, the function Lacan attributes to fantasy, and finally the difference between symbolic authority and superego.

The Lacanian approach we have used has helped us highlight that at Ronman's, it is impossible to associate the statements produced to the place where they were made, which leads to 'floating' statements. A consequence of the obliteration of the traces of enunciation is to prevent the imposition of a master signifier. The role of the master signifier is to provide a point around which the subjects' reality can be structured, which enables them to explore the limits of this reality, with its possibilities and impossibilities, and to bear its 'fundamentally disappointing' nature: It is disappointing partly because language, by means of which the subjects try to capture this reality, is structurally incapable of grasping it whole, since no enunciated word, no signifier can signify itself (another way of saying that the Other is itself still barred, defined by a lack). The imposition of a master signifier allows for the institution of symbolic authority/law regulating relations between the subject and the Other. However, in the absence of symbolic authority the subject is not able to deal with the lack in the Other, and is at risk of being totally trapped in the imaginary dimension, which, through fantasy, maintains the illusion of an unbarred Other.

In the context described here, the employees deprived of the imposition of a master signifier and of the protection of a symbolic authority, are faced with an extremely distressing reality which is in danger of collapsing at any time. They are then taken over by the fantasy of an almighty Other that has the power to shut the factory down overnight and pulls the strings behind the scenes. This fantasy is evidenced by the statement "*We're always told that 'the plant can be closed down overnight'*", typical of the passive voice in which is written fantasy, an imaginary scenario in which the subject is placed in the position of a spectator viewing a scene that concerns him. This Other no longer embodies the law (which would



imply that He is also barred) but the superego which the individual is subjected to in the form of injunctions requiring him/her to '*make efforts to save the factory*', to '*keep it going*' and to '*show goodwill*'.

Those injunctions, conveyed in the discourses given by management to the staff representatives, make it difficult for the latter to resist the endless demands presented to them as choices they are entirely free to make or not make. Thus, as underlined by Žižek (2007), one characteristic of the superego is to ask for the impossible (in this case, to save the factory), which can only fill the subject with guilt the moment his/her performance is found lacking. This Lacanian theory as a whole seems particularly helpful for understanding why the staff representatives have so much trouble taking action and defining a strategy of resistance in a context in which their factory seems to be at risk of closure. It shows with accuracy how the symbolic, imaginary and affective dimensions of organizational life are articulated and the part played by discursive, psychological and emotional processes in power relations, thereby moving beyond the limits of conventional approaches to discourse analysis (Pavón-Cuéllar and Parker 2014).

More specifically, this research contributes to the Lacanian theory in the field of organization studies at several levels. First, it is a continuation of the research studies that have shown how relevant Lacan's conceptualization of fantasy was to understanding the problematic of subjection to power and in particular the origin of workers' difficulties in resisting or changing practices of power. Thus it has been shown that fantasy could lead to: ideologically adhering to certain discourses (Stavrakakis 2008, 2010); favouring continuity and status quo (Glynos 2008, 2010); imagining oneself as being subversive while actually reinforcing the established order (Contu 2008; Contu and Willmott 2006; Fleming 2010; Fleming and Spicer 2003); or blocking the capacity for collective resistance by scapegoating other groups affected by changes (Lok and Willmott 2014). In the case studied here, the fantasy that develops around an almighty Other who pulls the strings behind the scenes paralyzes the workers' representatives when they are faced with a threat of plant closure.

Second, the observations made in this case are in line with and complete those made by other researchers using Lacan's work to highlight one characteristic of postmodernity: the abolition of symbolic authority be it in society (McGowan 2003; Lebrun 2009; Salecl 1998; Verhaeghe 2000; Žižek 2007) or in organizations (Costas and Taheri 2012). This abolition has serious consequences in that, instead of leading to greater autonomy, it is accompanied, as in the case described here, by the rise of the persecutory fantasy of 'an absolute big Other with irrevocable authority' (Verhaeghe 2000: 138), fantasy by means of which the subject desperately attempts to compensate for this disintegration of symbolic authority, and by the unleashing of the superego. Thus, Žižek emphasizes that postmodern subjectivity "involves a 'direct superegoisation' of the imaginary Ideal, caused by the lack of appropriate symbolic prohibitions" (2007: 497). The paradox then lies in the fact that belonging to a seemingly more permissive society does not relieve the subjects. On the contrary, they find themselves at the mercy of a more cruel superego which announces that complete and ultimate enjoyment is possible, and orders them to enjoy without respite. Some contemporary issues such as widespread cynicism, political apathy, pandemic depression, or loss of meaning, have been analyzed as symptoms of this phenomenon (McGowan 2003; Melman 2002).

In the field of organization studies, we have already explored the works of Costas and Taheri (2012) who have exploited this aspect of the Lacanian theory to show that the increasingly influential 'authentic leadership' approach that advocates a non-authoritarian and self-effacing leader figure entails the paradoxical risk of a return of a phantasmagorical unbarred Other. Those authors base their work on an analysis of managerial and academic literature and emphasize that further studies should be conducted to investigate how those principles operate in 'real life'; and the study presented here precisely makes use of real data to show how the disintegration of symbolic authority occurs in the very specific context of a threat of factory closure and affects the subjectivity and capacity for action of the employees' representatives. Here, the disintegration is not linked to the implementation of a new conception of leadership, but to the highly specific structure of a globalized and financialised capitalist corporation with a multiple and large shareholder base and several head offices (by country, in local, European and American business units, etc.). This may help to explain, in some of the cases of factory closure

presented in the introduction, the staff's and union's period of apathy and their difficulty in organizing their action in this context. More generally, what has been observed in this case might well be representative of the evolution of global capitalism, with organisations in which it is difficult to identify a centre of power, which can generate a sense of impotence and create the paradoxical impression of being at the mercy of a many-headed hydra against which it would be futile to fight (the fantasy of an unbarred Other).

A third point is that we make a specific contribution to this line of research by using an aspect of Lacanian theory that had not yet been integrated in organization studies and occurs upstream of the processes described above. It is the distinction Lacan makes between 'utterance' and 'enunciation', as well as the manner in which the relation between utterance and enunciation allows for the imposition of a master signifier, which then promotes the institution of symbolic authority and enables the subject to bear the fundamentally disappointing nature of the symbolic. This theory is very important for also understanding, conversely, how that symbolic authority can be abolished. In Ronman's case, we have shown the impossibility to associate the statements produced to the place where they were made, which prevented the imposition of a master signifier; we have also shown the consequences this may have on the workers' representatives ability to resist. Thus, we explore, in an organizational context, what other researchers have described as an essential characteristic of contemporary capitalism (Žižek 2009, Lebrun 2009) that deprives us of the agency of the ordering master signifier. This disappearance of the master signifier partly results from the obliteration of the traces of enunciation. We believe our analysis contributes to a better understanding of subjective processes, which largely precede the phenomena of submission and apathy.

### **The structural conditions for resistance**

The distinction between utterance and enunciation is also very useful for analysing the conditions in which resistance is possible in organizations. Lacan's theory sheds light on the dialectic between power and resistance (Mumby 2005) in a particularly subtle manner: resistance is a consequence of the symbolic (Stavrakakis 2008; Jones and Spicer 2005). Indeed, 'the most radical dimension of Lacanian

theory lies not in recognizing' [that the Lacanian subject is divided, crossed-out, identical to a lack in a signifying chain] 'but in realizing that the big Other, the symbolic order itself, is also barré, crossed-out, by a fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack' (Zizek 1989: 122; cf. Stavrakakis 2008: 1042).

It is this structural impossibility in the Other that explains the ultimate failure of power structures to fully determine the subjects: a space of freedom opens to them and enables them to resist. But for this impossibility to be revealed, the subject first has to be alienated by the symbolic Other. We show in this case that the staff representatives start resisting by undertaking an action that may seem very simple. They force the management team of the site to be accountable for something. They compel their leadership to make a statement and to assume responsibility for this statement: utterances are associated with a place of enunciation. The potential closure of the factory then no longer appears as a transcendent fact that came out of nowhere, but as a process associated with a place of enunciation, borne by a subject who must accept what speaking means. It is then from the difference between the subject of the utterance and the subject of enunciation that the fact arises that the Other is barred; and it is from that moment on that the words uttered by the management can be challenged and resistance can emerge.

For this purpose, the staff representatives rely initially on parties operating within institutional frameworks (judge, certified accountant, labour inspectorate...), which are products of history and of French law. The 'cunning' of the staff representatives therefore consisted in seeking symbolic structures outside the organization within which they could refer to an instituting discourse. They lean on a point of authority from outside the company so as to prompt the re-emergence, within it, of another authority, which they will then be able to challenge. They need to re-create the fiction of a local leadership with some degree of power so as to be able to undermine it. In doing so, they re-politicize the organization and thus obliterate the fantasy of a globalized corporation not trapped in national political and historical logics and therefore with the excessive power to close down a factory whenever and however they wish.

This must be put into perspective with the results of studies that have examined strategies of resistance in organizations undergoing radical changes, and have studied the rhetorical struggles and discursive tactics used by specific groups (Erkama and Vaara 2010; Spicer and Fleming 2007). The Ronman case helps to highlight that one of the essential stages for resistance lies upstream of this process: such discourses require the existence of a symbolic framework structuring the existence of and relationships between groups, which is not self-evident. The individuals studied here cannot start resisting until they have managed to determine who to address their discourses to. What matters is less the production of utterances than the structure that allows this production. In this respect, Lacan's theory is particularly relevant, in that it takes this structural element into account.

## **Conclusion**

The solution found by the staff representatives could be deemed rather modest. Indeed, the particularity of the situation in which they found themselves resides in their sensing the inconsistency of the Other, in their finding out that 'the big Other does not exist'; and rather than inventing an act taking this discovery into account, they on the contrary, attempt to reconstruct a symbolic point of authority (see Stavrakakis 2008). Admittedly, this point of support has enabled them to feel better and to resist in the context of a classic power relation, while preventing them from inventing more radical solutions. In this regard, the solution they have chosen may be likened to what Žižek calls 'acts of losers' (2007: 472), in his comments on the movie *Brassed Off*. In this film, miners are confronted with the announced closure of their mine, which threatens their identity and their sense of belonging to a community; they focus on keeping their brass band alive at all costs, an effort which turns into a symbolic challenge when they decide to take part in a national music competition. Though the mine is, indeed, closed down, and while in this regard the miners do 'lose', they are successful in reasserting their belonging to the community they have managed to keep alive. Their act is the act of losers even though those involved recover some degree of dignity.

Žižek (2009) opposes this form of resistance to more radical ones. Whereas the solution found by Ronman's staff representatives enables them to preserve the organization, those other, more radical, solutions cause the organization or the social structure to explode. This perspective brings to the fore the radicalism of the 'real act' that has the particularity of being constituted in relation to the lack of the Other, while not necessitating the Other's guarantee or permission, and is hence presented as truly liberating. The violence associated with it is entirely outside the law. This is how one could describe the spectacular violence observed since 2008, and particularly since 2009, when factories get shut down, in France and abroad. The movie *Louise Michel* illustrates, in its own way, a type of 'real act' with its associated radical violence: What needs to be done is to 'kill the boss', but as the ultimate decision maker cannot be found anywhere, the two main characters of the movie kill all those who, at some time or other, have claimed to personify a symbolic point of authority when relaying decisions affecting the workers of the factory. This spectacular violence largely differs from the symbolic, codified and 'framed' violence that characterizes conventional resistance (protests, demonstrations, strikes, etc.), which forms in reference to the Other and is found in the case presented here.

However, as underlined by Stavrakakis, 'one should be very careful in order to avoid the 'speculative leftist', quasi-religious, idealization of some kind of radical act of total social refoundation', which is but the resurgence of 'the old fantasy of a total and miraculous social refoundation through a single apocalyptic cut' (2010: 90). In the face of such a miraculous act, every local and partial struggle seems very bland and to be lacking in ambition. But Lacan himself stressed how revolutionary aspirations and radical acts may end up instituting a new order of subjection and reproducing the most violent aspects of the system they are supposed to destroy. In the case of Ronman, the simple fact of compelling the local management team to take responsibility for an utterance is in no way revolutionary but may be much more effective: it reintroduces a space in which one can deal effectively and productively with the uncertainties and limits of a small but real change, a space in which succumbing to blackmail is no longer the only possibility for the staff representatives and in which they can own responsibility for a refusal. A re-politicized space.

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<sup>i</sup> The name of the town, of the group and of the participants to this study have been modified in order to ensure confidentiality.

<sup>ii</sup> The name of the town have been modified in order to ensure confidentiality.

<sup>iii</sup> The exact amount is not provided in order to protect the anonymity of the group.

<sup>iv</sup> These two bodies, authorized by French law, comprise staff elected members, with the exception of their president who is a member of the management team (generally assisted by Human Resources Director). The WC must be informed and consulted for all the decision concerning the organization's activities. The WHSC deals specifically with problems related to working condition. The WC secretary has an essential role in that it is him who, with the executive team, decides on the agenda of problems to be addressed and negotiated. In the case studied here, most members of those bodies also belong to unions, which is quiet.

<sup>v</sup> WC report of 12 February 2009.

<sup>vi</sup> Memorandum of 14 January 2009.

<sup>vii</sup> WC report of 2 February 2009.

<sup>viii</sup> Quoted from a member of manager, WC report of 27 March 2008.

<sup>ix</sup> WC report, 2 February 2009.

<sup>x</sup> When worrying facts emerge concerning the future of a company, French law authorizes the WC to use the services of a certified accountant in order to assess the real situation of the company.