



# ROUTINE HUMILIATION AND SILENT PROTESTS

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## ROUTINE HUMILIATION AND SILENT PROTESTS

The Situation of Precarious Workers on Building Sites

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## Routine Humiliation and Silent Protests

### The Situation of Precarious Workers on Building Sites

Employed long term in precarity, construction workers have to endure many forms of humiliation: lies, verbal aggression, taunts, racist nicknames or insults, and so on. This humiliation acts as both cause and effect of the inferior job status of those targeted, and serves to remind them of the threat that accompanies precarity. Although they rarely confront their employers directly, construction workers maintain an invisible resistance that takes the form of withdrawals and defections.

“Shortage of manpower” is the expression commonly used to describe the job situation in the construction sector. It is an expression used by employers that is heavily laden with undertones, which are rarely questioned by those who repeat it. We seldom hear however, that this shortage is not a new phenomenon. Francis Bouygues, for example, devoted a text to the subject back in 1964 (in Campagnac and Nouzille 1988, 498–501), and it is possible to go back even further. What is surprising, therefore, is how such a problem could be presented in this way for so long without ever being resolved. Since there is no *numerus clausus* in construction, how is it that companies have not yet found the appropriate response to what they call a shortage and made the sector more attractive (development of training programs, increased wages, improved working conditions and job security, etc.)?

When we venture into this territory, however, we hit a barrier: construction workers are only worth to companies what they are currently paying them. If companies can get away with not paying more, it is because, in the end, “we’ll always find the workers to get the work done,” to quote a human resources manager for a large corporation. This talk of shortage, then, is not so much bemoaning a real labor shortage as complaining about the workers the construction industry actually employs, by referring to an ever-absent ideal worker. Current labor policies are thus seen only as a stopgap solution, or an expedient, while waiting to find a better option. The employed workers are themselves a means to an end. They were referred to, in an interview, as “herds of immigrants” who are not the “solution” by a representative of the French Building Confederation (part of Medef—Mouvement des entreprises de France). It is possible to say then that this shortage discourse at once masks and

justifies the continuous downgrading of a whole body of workers. It casts a shroud of illegitimacy over them, which serves as fodder for everyday racist behavior.

This paper aims to describe such daily life on construction sites by examining the results of a study based principally on nine months of participant observation (as a temporary worker or intern) on major construction sites in the Île-de-France region and around fifty semi-structured interviews (mainly with workers).

An analysis will be made of the undercurrents and consequences of the precarity of certain construction workers, predominantly immigrants and temporary workers. Kept on in long-term job situations that offer no guarantees, these workers have to endure many forms of humiliation: lies, verbal aggression, taunts, racist nicknames or insults, and so on. This humiliation acts as both cause and effect of the inferior job status of those targeted, and serves as a reminder of their inferiority. The humiliation often takes the form of “segregating behavior bearing the mark of permanence,” which is racism as defined by Guillaumin (2002, 110).

The term “segregating,” however, can lead to confusion here. It can suggest that the racialized group is set aside, becoming a useless appendix to the main body of society in some way. If racist discourse makes such a claim, it is rather to justify economic exploitation and deployment of such workers. This is where the problem lies for employers in the construction industry, because it is by avoiding this involvement that the precarious workers protest their situation. Suppressed and reduced to silence on the construction sites, the only options for retaliation left open to them are withdrawal and defection (“exit,” according to Hirschman’s 1972 categories). Although they rarely confront their employers, they maintain a separate revolt that justifies acts of minor sabotage, such as definitive desertions.

By proposing to define racism as a (segregating) “behavior” that “bears a mark” (of permanence), Guillaumin refuses to confine it to either a material “infrastructure” or an ideological “superstructure.” Acknowledging, however, that she was principally interested in the “mental aspect of power relations” (Guillaumin 1992, 11), Guillaumin gives little indication of how to analyze fields, such as the workplace, where what is said is constantly linked to what is done, and of how to relate these two levels. In her article “On the concept of minority,”<sup>1</sup> however, she puts forward this sequence of

1/ In this sometimes equivocal term of “minority,” Guillaumin reveals a “constant core” of meaning: “that of a legal and customary incapacity or non-total capacity” (Guillaumin 1985, 102). She subsequently extends this

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ideas: “One of the prerequisites of the relationship that produces racism (the practice and discourse of exclusion and domination) is the material possibility (economic, coercive, etc.) of, first, controlling the relationship and, second, legitimizing it” (Guillaumin 1985, 103).

First of all, in terms of “controlling,” we will see how those who make use of construction labor operate, especially when they bring about a loyalty in their workers that does not eliminate precarity, and when they exclude people of certain origins while favoring others (relatively speaking). Second, in relation to “legitimizing,” everyone has their own idea of how people of a particular origin (or skin color) act or, at least, they know about such commonly-held ideas. In addition to the phrases used to justify such thoughts, language can be used (through insults, taunts, etc.) as a means of “calling the workers to order.” A further issue, the subversion of the relationship by the minority groups, must also be added to control, legitimization, and calling to order—even if only to say that it is fragile and incomplete—because, without it, we would not be able to envisage social change, nor understand certain dominant practices and rationalizations.

## METHODOLOGY

This article is based on the following fieldwork activities, carried out between 2001 and 2004 as part of a doctoral research project:

1) Twelve months of participant observation. For nine months, I worked as a temporary worker or intern on various construction sites, in various companies (general contractors and subcontractors specialized in steel reinforcement), and in various trades (laborer, formwork, steel reinforcement)<sup>2</sup>. In order to integrate the subcontracting and temporary work within an overall rationale of workforce management, it was decided that, from the outset, the construction site, and not the company, would be considered the relevant unit of investigation. Excluding a few short temporary positions, I observed six construction sites for a period of three to eight weeks each. On two of them, where I was introduced as an intern, I was known as an observer; on the others, only a few close colleagues knew of my objectives. In addition to observing the daily work organization and the practical and verbal relations between the actors on the construction site, the participant observation allowed me to collect informal conversations that supplemented the recorded interviews. Daily field notes were taken.

core by conversely classifying the majority “by the pretention, as well as a greater proximity, to: universality (in terms of ideological forms), the best availability of means to affect the real, and freedom of action as well as multiplicity of possible choices available to the individuals concerned” (ibid., 106).

2/ This is in addition to three months of training in formwork and steel reinforcement at a vocational school.

2) About fifty interviews. Some were exploratory interviews with union members (both employers' and trade unions), and public servants (Ministry of Public Works, Labor Inspection Department, Occupational Health Department, etc.). The majority of them were with workforce management employees acting at different levels: human resource managers for major corporations; site managers (foremen and construction supervisors); and, primarily, recruitment agency representatives and construction workers.

3) Secondary analysis of statistics on the construction industry (in particular the Ministry of Public Works' brochures on *Training, qualification and employment in the public buildings and works sector*) and on immigration (1999 Census data). Added to this is the primary analysis of the personnel files of a general contractor (300 employees), which enabled me to establish any discrimination against non-European immigrants.

4) Regular reading over a period of two years of informational newsletters (*Le Moniteur*, *Batiactu*, and *Cyberbtp*) about the public buildings and works sector, plus the occasional reading of various professional print publications.

Sociological literature on the construction sector is incomplete. Deemed too archaic, the sector was ignored by sociology of work researchers during "Les Trente Glorieuses"<sup>3</sup> It was not until the beginning of the 1980s, following the crisis of Fordism, that the construction sector was studied in depth. With the establishment of the Ministry of Public Works' Planning, Construction, and Architecture (PCA) Department, many researchers in France dedicated studies to the sector. These remain standard references today (for example, Campinos-Dubernet 1984, Tallard 1986, and Campagnac 1992). When these researchers moved on to other research in the second half of the 1990s, however, no one took up the mantle.

## CONTROLLING THE RELATIONSHIP: PRECARIZATION AND DISCRIMINATION

The points made here mainly concern the least qualified and/or the lowest level structural steel construction workers. This means primarily steel erectors and unskilled laborers (to establish trade criteria) and North and West African immigrants (to enlarge the definition of this criteria). The boundary between these workers, associated with social fragility (including sometimes not even having the right to be in the country in the case of illegal immigrants), and the others, who experience social fragility to a lesser degree, is nevertheless not one that is clear cut. We are accustomed to seeing only continuums in sociological research on precarious labor; not an immutable separation (Castel 1995 and, specifically in regard to productive organization, Durand 2004). The fact remains that the introduction of discrimination into this widespread precarity changes the order of things, sealing off the landscape with boundaries, breaks,

3/ Translator's note: This expression, meaning "The Glorious Thirty," refers to the period of rapid economic growth and prosperity that France experienced after WWII, from 1945-1975.

“ceilings” and other such notions demonstrating a supposedly radical discontinuity.

## ■ Precarization

In relation to both work and residence status, precarity must be distinguished from instability. It is not the actual turn-over (for example, the number of people fired or deported) that is decisive in the situation of construction workers, but rather the *threat* of dismissal or deportation.

In relation to both work and residence status, precarity must be distinguished from instability.

In relation to the residence issue, first of all, it should be noted that, even if orders for the deportation of illegal immigrants are served more frequently now, they do not appear to make a big dent in the “stock” of illegal immigrants (Brun 2005)—there were fewer than 10,000 in 2003 and 20,000 in 2005. This “stock” of probably 150,000 to 300,000 people remains sizeable and continues to be sufficiently restocked to be able to provide labor to various economic sectors, including construction. The most common experience for illegal immigrants is more fear of arrest, therefore, than of actually being deported. As for legal immigrants, most notably those with one-year residence permits, they are not entirely out of the firing line. First, the residence permit is a reversible favor and, second, a study has shown that non-renewal is not just a hypothetical case study, since roughly one out of every fifty renewal requests is denied (Thierry 2001). Admittedly, this rate is low, but the threat is not insignificant. It does not have to be carried out in massive numbers—which would turn it from a threat into a punishment—in order to be effective and to make individuals aware of the fragility of their situation and constrain their actions.

In relation to the work issue, our analysis will be confined to temporary work. Between 30% and 60% of the paid workers on the construction sites observed were temporary workers including, most notably, three quarters of the subcontracted steel erectors and nearly all of the unskilled labor force. There is a false paradox couched within the illegal, yet routine, practices of temporary recruitment agencies. On one hand, these companies arrange it so these jobs do not have official start and end dates. This means that they can fire the temporary worker at any time, and they do not hesitate to do. On the other hand, however, many temporary workers are employed for long periods of time—sometimes even for years in constant work—with the same recruitment agency, in the same client company, or with the same foreman. These temporary workers

are vital to companies because they are more reliable, but they can still be fired at any time. They are subjugated by the hope of holding on to a position that is relatively favorable, even for precarious work.

Who controls the situation within this framework? As far as residence permits are concerned, the legislators, namely the Department of the Interior and its offices, are initially the ones in control. In relation to the workplace, it is the policies of large corporations who control the framework. These corporations resort to the outsourcing of labor and, with their demands and the low prices they negotiate, force the middlemen into illegal practices. The question is who is managing this two-fold precarity of both residence and work on a daily basis? Who is responsible for developing the “comparative advantage” that this precarity bestows on a certain labor category? Who does the hiring and firing? The recruitment agency representatives do but, on the construction site, so do the construction supervisors, the foremen, the team supervisors, and even some permanent skilled workers who are entrusted with overseeing the temporary workers. The decentralization of labor management thus delegates part of the control of the situation—the most visible part—to middlemen who hold quite low positions in the productive organization. On a day-to-day basis, temporary workers deal with their supervisors and their recruitment agency representatives; they rarely have access to the higher decision-makers and the policies that determine the various forms of employment. On the one hand, by allowing the threat of job losses to become a daily concern, the growth in temporary work makes the discipline even tougher. On the other hand, it consolidates the coercive power of first-line supervisors, thus concentrating the humiliation and anger at this lower level.

## ■ Discrimination

It is not possible here to show the relation between these two *a priori* opposed rationales of precarity (which serves to create a one-against-all competition) and discrimination (which values some and denigrates others). It appears that the fluctuation between the two finds its source in the daily routine of construction sites, particularly in the production failures caused by excessive precarity and, consequently, in the compensatory mechanisms it appeals to (Jounin 2006). Three sources of discrimination will be examined in this article.

The first stems from migration policies, which favor immigrants of certain origins in France (Europeans—even before the revival of



European institutions in the 1980s) and disfavor others (Africans). While these are State policies, they have been adopted in company policies. They are structured around a division of labor groups, between the relatively stabilized “core” and the precarious “peripherals.” The ideal “core” worker would be highly qualified and multi-skilled, hired by the contractor under a permanent contract and connected to a foreman. For the most part, however, the situation is more ambiguous. The “peripheral” workers are typified by low-skilled positions, temporary workers, and subcontractors, each having no direct link to a manager. This division has repercussions on the type of social profile workers are expected to have. “Core” workers have to have a relatively stable social existence that guarantees their reliability. French and European workers are favored in France, as they have freedom of settlement. However, the “peripheral” workers’ social and legal vulnerability is much sought-after by employers, which explains the significant presence of illegal and precarious residency workers—North and West African immigrants thus “benefit” from this predilection of employers.

The second source stems from the indirect discrimination inherent in employee referral schemes. This recruitment method is used and promoted by all employers in the construction sector, from general contractors to subcontractors to recruitment agencies. Companies expect it to save them time in the hiring process and to provide them with employees who are more reliable. While discrimination is, therefore, not the mission of this recruitment method, it favors ethnic groups that are already present in the company, since the friends and relatives of a Portuguese (Algerian, Malian, etc.) employee are most likely to also be Portuguese (Algerian, Malian, etc.). Employee referral schemes would not exist if they were not in the interests of the companies, but that does not mean that employees get nothing out of it. By referring their friends and relatives and sometimes getting them hired, they become aware of the (relative) control and respect they have within the organization of labor.

The third source is direct discrimination, which might just as well be called “racist management.” Middlemen employers’ managers, most notably Parisian recruitment agency representatives in the case of France, have adopted a racist ranking that makes the Portuguese<sup>4</sup> the “construction kings” (formworkers and team supervisors), the North Africans the all too often “vindictive” steel erectors, and the Malians the undisputed specialists (or slaves) of the

4/ I use the ethnic categorization currently in place on construction sites. Any white person, for example, who speaks Portuguese and French with a Portuguese accent is considered to be Portuguese. Whether this person has French nationality or not is irrelevant.

hardest jobs (jack-hammering and cleaning). These representations are circulated even among the agency representatives, who do not adhere to them, but have to be familiar with them in order, on occasion, to meet a client's racist demands.

## JUSTIFICATION AND RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF THE RELATIONSHIP: RACIST DISCOURSE AND DAILY HUMILIATION

### ■ Greater Cautiousness in Doctrinal Racism

Once we move beyond the everyday management rankings to examine the levels of justification, the racism becomes more discreet. It has to at least strike a compromise with an official anti-racist stance. This is what the recruitment manager for a large corporation expressed when he was obliged to participate in a survey (in partnership with government institutions)<sup>5</sup> on discrimination:

You have to try to understand why, perhaps, a Portuguese worker does the job better than a North African. It's not easy to... Well, the sociologists will explain it to us. (...) I think people from North Africa don't think the same way that, for example, the Portuguese or people from Eastern Europe do. (...) People from the islands, and all that, have problems adjusting to the lifestyle we have in France today, especially on our construction sites, where there's quite a lot of pressure. (...) So it's true that the Portuguese are very reactive, very, very sharp, even if they make some mistakes, but they react very, very quickly. They get a move on. Without thinking too much. We could say that North Africans are the opposite. Perhaps they think too much before doing something. (...) I know sociologists don't really like this kind of position. But I can't just erase everything I've seen as a site manager either, though... (...) But I don't deny either that maybe we don't know, the French or... maybe they don't know how to manage these people well.

When forced to explain the racially-based disparities of employee success in his corporation, this manager admitted to nothing more than the inappropriate "management" of "differences," differences supposedly ensuing from globalizing and fixed "cultures." Without stepping outside the scope of racism, therefore, he adopts a defensive position, which slightly differs from the calm and cheerful advocacy of the segregation exposed fifteen years earlier in the profession's leading publication. Indeed, in the introduction of one of the rare studies devoted to construction workers, and more specifically

5/ This survey is, in fact, a compromise between the objectives of the building company (to understand problems related to the recruitment and retention of young workers) and those of the government institutions (to study the forms of the "insertion of young foreigners and young workers of foreign origin").

to immigrant employees, *Le Moniteur des Travaux Publics et du Bâtiment* (4511, May 11, 1990, 30–37) announced a racist division of labor:

[Company management] does not focus on equality between employees (regardless of nationality or skin color) but, rather, on differences in levels of skill and ambition, which go hand in hand.

The entire article, which is based on testimonies from executives, supports this vision of a “together and unequal” model, the reverse of the famous “separate but equal” doctrine of American segregation. It claims to be just as harmonious however:

“The company executives we interviewed appeared fairly dispassionate and spoke of a “suitable cohabitation.” One executive described “a pleasant atmosphere, good worksite morale, and not a single dismissal for fighting.” He added: “The Europeans take advantage of their hierarchical situation in relation to the North Africans, but the North Africans are okay with it, as if it were the ordinary scheme of things for everyone!” A second executive accused the media of creating “too much hype about racism in France. There’s so much,” he said, “that it’s encouraging the French to become racist. The reality is completely different on our worksites—there is a good atmosphere and our workforce is good quality and well suited to its various jobs. I do regret the fact, though, that more North Africans haven’t made it into supervisory positions. One of the reasons for that is their own behavior. Their training is a bit limited and they often show little ambition. Having said that, we need them. They’ve got the hard jobs, which young French workers often try out and then abandon in favor of the industrial sector!”

The rationalized and reasoned doctrinal legitimization of the hierarchizing of origins is, however, only a marginal form of the discursive racist behaviors that can be observed in the construction sector. On site, references to origin take the form of abuse, humiliations and jokes, which need no theoretical elaboration to reach their target. These references fall, more broadly, within the range of reprimands directed by those higher up in the hierarchy towards the precarious workers below them.

## ■ Conditions and Effects of “Murder by Words”

On the construction site, I think things are incredibly blunt and incredibly real. When someone feels like yelling, he yells. At least, there’s a kind of freedom amongst workmates, team supervisors, foremen, and construction supervisors... There isn’t really any hierarchy anymore, I think. Everybody talks with everybody (Construction supervisor).

At work, they often tell you: “If you’re not happy, there’s the door. Go back to your own country.” I’ve seen people go back home, and they’ve

never come back here to France. They were disgusted by the violence, the verbal violence (Precarious worker).

The difference between these two interview excerpts, one with a supervisor and the other with an unskilled precarious laborer (who had just obtained his residence permit), would already seem to suggest that what is often called “verbal violence” is not uniformly violent or, at least, that the way in which it is perceived cannot be separated from a person’s rank. Depending on the power—power, in this case, being the capacity to influence the situation of other employees—of the person who exercises it, the “verbal violence” either does or does not include an element of threat towards the person targeted, which adds to the effectiveness of the words. This point is essential in attempting to understand why workers perceive some of their superiors’ comments as being particularly violent.

For example, when a foreman responded to a worker who had encountered a problem completing his given job: “Well, if you can’t get it done, go back home, what do you want me to say?” Or when another told his workers: “You’ve got to work fast, or it wasn’t worth getting out of bed this morning!”

There were no insults, no invectives, and possibly even no raised voices. They could even be taken as simple exhortations at work had the workers in question not been temporary workers, and had the foreman actually been able to send them “back home” that day. It is easier, then, to understand the anger of some workers who were forced to put up with such comments, which would have been relatively harmless were it not for the immediate threat that they carried.

More obvious forms of humiliation can also be observed, however, such as denigration, insults, and harassment.

On a construction site where I worked as a laborer, the construction supervisor ordered my colleague Lansana and me to move some large and very heavy French windows up several floors. The job took us forty-five minutes and it was really difficult. It was made even harder by the fact that the supervisor followed us constantly, firing the same comments at us endlessly like “Are you guys sleeping or what? I could carry that all by myself.” Hassane, another laborer and also a target of these taunts, said: “What an asshole. He always says you haven’t done anything, even when you’re working. And he never talks to you with any respect. He wouldn’t even dare look at you outside of work! But because we do the cleaning up, that’s our job, he thinks he can do whatever he wants.”

It would be a mistake to only examine verbal forms of humiliation. Silence can be just as effective in that it marks the interlocutor as non-existent.

The “verbal violence” either does or does not include an element of threat towards the person targeted.

A builder told me how he resented being ordered to work extra hours that he was not paid for. He complained to his team supervisor, who told him to go see the foreman. "I started talking to the foreman, but he wasn't even listening to me. He just walked off."

These humiliations are only made possible, and effective, by the job inferiority and precarity of their targets. In return, since their status forces them to remain humble, the humiliation functions as a reminder of their status. The link between control over the situation (maintaining precarity) and the effectiveness of the reprimand is described here by a foreman:

Here's an example. If he pisses me off tomorrow, I'll fire him. Because he's a temp. I have the power to do it. And it's a power we shouldn't have. Because he's hungry.

But you exercise this power anyway?

Everybody does.

I'm not saying they don't.

Everybody uses it, this power. (...) The terror. And you can't... It's rare to have workers that aren't afraid of their boss because they know the work. It's rare. (...) And normally, by law, temps work by contract. But who makes sure the contract is signed?

There isn't a contract.

That's right. So we aren't following the law. (...) If you come on site, you'll see I'm aggressive. (...) Because if the guy sees you're aggressive, he stays, you sit him down and then you can do whatever you want with him. If he isn't happy, if he isn't ok with it... because the problem is the temp work. The guy can't afford not to work. So, you take pleasure in attacking them, to see just how far they'll go. (...) Some of them never react, they're afraid to because they're temps. But, then, I see that the ones who are hired by the company aren't afraid of me anymore. Even if I murder them with words.

This foreman is remarkably clear-headed, or honest, when he underlines both the sought-after effect of the humiliation ("you can do whatever you want with him") and the fact that the humiliation is not sufficient in itself: it finds its condition for effectiveness in the material possibility of controlling the situation. The same words no longer humiliate the worker who is not afraid anymore, and they are not afraid anymore because the person who murders them "with words" no longer has immediate control over his fate.

## THE "NATURAL" EXTENSION OF HIERARCHICAL HUMILIATION: RACISM

The example given above about the foreman following us with his sarcastic remarks was not the only one, because my colleague Lansana received more specific taunts, like: "Which of your wives did you screw this weekend?" A little while after this, a Portuguese worker, referring to the door

we were carrying, asked Lansana: "Are you taking it all the way to Africa?" Then it was the team supervisor's turn to tell him, as we were moving the dumpster, "Get out of the dumpster's way! Don't get stuck! Anyway, if you die, there are plenty more blacks where you came from."

The examples of "purely" hierarchical humiliation provided a few paragraphs above are not included in the racism described here only because, exceptionally, one of the workers—myself—happened to be white. Normally, racism is a "natural" extension of the other types of humiliation. This is apparent, for instance, in the term "Mamadou," which is used to designate all black workers. It is less the name itself (which is not specific to construction, and may be related to colonial practices of address) than its uses in practice that are revealing. It is a racist term. It only refers to blacks, melting them down into a homogenous whole, and only really to black laborers. It is such that even skilled black workers call the black laborers "Mamadou," thus risking returning the racist signification to the expression. Such an example illustrates the connection between a fragile situation and its degrading name.

The targets of this humiliation sometimes stop putting up with it. They then risk paying the price for their rebellion, because companies are more concerned about repressing insubordination than about racism, as a foreman explains:

Basically, the laborers have to answer to the Portuguese. If they don't answer to the Portuguese, if they have a bit of an attitude, then there's little chance that they're going to get along. (...) There was a laborer that I thought was very, very good, but it didn't work out with the Portuguese up there, so I preferred to get rid of him.

Since the stable construction site workers are the ones the company relies on the most, the company takes note of their racist attitudes. It cannot afford to antagonize them all of a sudden, however, since it had shown them preference in order to relegate others. The possibility of racist humiliation is thus inscribed within the situation and extends beyond the opinions the actors may express on the subject.

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## ■ Not Humiliate? The Suspect Relaxing of the Forms

Not all of the hierarchical superiors devote themselves to the repeated humiliation of their inferiors. But the distance, even kindness, of some foremen does not always inspire gratitude in their subordinates. First of all, this is because such an attitude does nothing to remove the threat presented by the situation: the temporary worker can still be fired at any time, and is at

the mercy of his foreman's whims. Although the humiliation functions as a reminder of the superior's power, any signs of respect they may exhibit do not erase the reality of the connection, as this temporary steel erector indicated:

If you don't agree, the temp agencies have a lot of people. They'll go get someone else, look elsewhere.

*But you, for example, Ernesto [the foreman] likes you? If necessary...*

Yes, I've been with Ernesto for a while... see, it's not that Ernesto likes me, it's because of my work that I've been able to fit in. You understand? Ernesto, he likes anyone who works, anyone that helps him get ahead. If you don't, he'll look for someone else. If he sees you now, sees you spending all day looking around, or hanging around, or cheating, or always coming in late, or if you're always asking him if you can get off for an appointment or whatever, or something like that, then it's over. He'll end your contract.

Furthermore, a foreman's respectful distance is not necessarily more protective than a disrespectful proximity. Based on my experience, the most aggressive verbal relationships (repeated insults) are not established between the most steady employees, nor between the steady employees and the least stable (temporary workers on very short placements), but between the steady employees and this group of temporary workers as described above, steady in actual fact but threatened by their precarity. When a temporary laborer is black, their chances of being called "Mamadou" are not any less because they have been working on the site for a longer time. In such a case, submission is even greater because the temporary worker, as precarious as their situation may be, hopes to keep their job. The temporary worker who knows their placement is coming to end does not have a lot to lose. They are frequently reminded of their situation, so that they will not think their job is safe. This also means, however, that, conversely, repeated humiliation can be used to measure integration.

This also means, however, that, conversely, repeated humiliation can be used to measure integration.

On one construction site, I worked as a laborer for a few days alongside two temporary laborers, Mamadou and Bakary, who told me they had been working there for several months. Mamadou was the most integrated—they had offered to hire him permanently, but he had refused because he hoped to get out of construction—but also the most exposed. Several skilled workers regularly called out to him in a jokey way: "Hey, cockroach!" Mamadou didn't hesitate to answer back, whether with words or by giving the finger, and kept smiling. Once, a skilled Portuguese worker took me by the shoulder and yelled out to Mamadou who was a few dozen meters ahead, "Hey! Cockroach! Here's your boss! You're not the boss, he is!" A bit later, the foreman, annoyed by a complication that had nothing to do with Mamadou and Bakary, repeated when they were next to him: "I'm so furious, I'm gonna go take out a black." Then Brice, a construction supervisor, came to urge us to work faster, and stayed to keep an eye on us. When Mamadou looked at a woman walking on the opposite side of the street for a bit too long, Brice called out to him: "Hey, Mamadou, that white woman isn't for you! Ramadan's coming up, so no more looking at

women. Or just at night. Yeah, at night you screw. Yeah, but during the day, you work. During the day, it's the white man that screws you. The white man screws you, doesn't he, Mamadou." Laughter. Then Brice turned to Bakary: "Don't laugh, Bakary, because the white man screws you, too." He continued in the same tone. Mamadou responded, and Brice finished off with: "When it comes down to it, I'm sure you've got a tiny dick." Until that point, the insults had been given and received in what at least had appeared to be a jovial manner.

It then changed, because a French skilled worker, who was tense and exasperated by a series of complications, began saying "ape" aggressively at the end of everything he said to Mamadou. Mamadou answered back, mainly with quips or obscene gestures, but he never uttered any insult equivalent to "ape" or "cockroach." This was perhaps because he knew that would be stepping outside his "rights," or because his vocabulary prevented him from answering in kind. In the locker room, as he was changing, Mamadou advised the skilled Portuguese worker to "go screw for me this weekend." "What? But if I screw for you, I won't get to screw at all." "Of course you will, you screw twice for you and twice for me." The form setter answered with a new crack I did not hear and, this time, Mamadou's face closed up. "That's not nice," he said.

If you can "take it" without making too much of a fuss, the humiliation<sup>6</sup> can be taken as the promise of a (rather relative) stability. It is therefore necessary to accept to enter into a relationship where the price of being kept on is a constant symbolic inferiority, which can sometimes prove unbearable.

I worked on one construction site where a laborer named Touré was often nicknamed "Mamadou." He put it into perspective: "It's the other guy there, I think he's from Guadeloupe. He's the one who started calling me that. Then they all started calling me that. They call all the Africans 'Mamadou.' But my name isn't Mamadou. But I answer when they call me that." In an interview six weeks later, he spoke about the transition from tolerance to confrontation: "Last week, I had a lot of things going around in my head. I was angry, I got angry, and I screamed at Max, 'You're black. Have I ever called you Mamadou? I asked you what your name was when we first started working here, and I call you by your first name.' Now, everyone on the site calls me Touré."

Yet not all of the protests from precarious workers on construction sites take such an explicit form or have such clear results. They are generally more silent and hidden.

6/ It is not possible here to tackle the issue of how verbal humiliation, especially when it uses sexist representations of sexuality (which is far from being unique to the construction industry), also affects categories (women and homosexuals) who are physically absent from the exchange.



## SUBVERT THE RELATIONSHIP? A SILENT RESISTANCE

Admittedly, when it comes to organized protest, the construction industry has lagged behind for decades—in May, 1968, few construction sites closed compared to factories. Yet the weakness of collective (organized and expressed) protest, which is reserved for the few stable salaried employees, should not mask the frequency of individual revolts and defections. The absence of a collective voice about oppression in the workplace does not mean there is a lack of verbalization in the exchanges between individuals.

Their resistance is expressed to their superiors and employers essentially through actions—flight, theft, “sabotage,” betrayal, and so on.

It is not that precarious workers “adhere” to the status given to them, but rather that their distance only appears in discourse destined for their peers and not for those they identify as being dominant.<sup>7</sup> Their resistance is expressed to their superiors and employers essentially through actions—flight, theft, “sabotage,” betrayal, and so on—which occurred without any explanation.

### ■ Absences, Delays, and Sabotage

On the construction sites observed, there were few days when all the workers were present. Not only were most of the registered absences unplanned—so the supervisors had not been able to plan around them—but there seemed to be more of them among the temporary employees, even though they had less of a chance than the permanent employees of obtaining paid leave. This observation is partly based on my own impression and partly on statistics, scattered throughout the files of different employers and sectors (temporary workers are not included among salaried construction workers), and cannot be substantiated with objective data. It nevertheless contributes to the body of evidence of the constant drain of workers. Mainly, the evidence for this comes from the concern shown by employers.

From a more qualitative point of view, the description of the circumstances of certain absences may be informative.

On a site where I worked in the winter, two steel erectors in particular were often absent. The foreman did not fire them, however, because they knew the job and because one had been working with him for a year and a half and the other for a few months. They were part of his “team.”

One of the workers, Qualid, was intermittently absent. His absences were always unplanned and were sometimes for two or three days in a row.

7/ These reflections are inspired by the distinction Scott (1990) makes between “public” and “hidden transcripts.” Here, I have chosen to overlook any limitations on data in the “hidden transcripts,” which may have resulted from the fear of “stoolpigeons.”

There were not two weeks that went by without him being absent. He said he was weakened by the cold and growing fatigue. Each time, he decided not to come at the last minute, when it was time to go to the site. He came back to work out of financial necessity. "If I had money, the first thing I'd do is quit construction."

Aïssa, the second steel erector, had two accidents in two weeks. Both times he hit himself above the eye with his pliers. He took a week off after the first accident. After the second, he came back the next day, but he disappeared again two weeks later. Another erector who was quite close to Aïssa told me: "He's resting a bit. Two weeks maybe. He said: 'I can't take it anymore.'"

When Aïssa was injured the second time, Karim, the team supervisor and a temporary worker, commented: "He may have done it on purpose, you never know." This suspicion may seem shocking but Karim even said of his own accidents: "I'm the one who caused them." He explained that he had had (minor) accidents on purpose in order to get a short break from work, especially when he could not take the pressure from a supervisor anymore.

Absenteeism, which sometimes turns into desertion when the worker decides not to come back, is not necessarily meant to be a form of protest. It is a protest, however, in the sense that the individual puts his physical and mental health above production requirements, and that his absence negatively affects this production. When the worker is present, though, he can prolong this form of protest by slowing down his work, or "stealing" breaks by escaping the watchful eyes of his supervisors. In the field of the sociology of work, this has long been identified as "restriction of output" (Roy 2006, 37–69). While the gain is minimal—just a handful of minutes snatched here and there—it also provides psychological pleasure: the feeling of autonomy found in transgression.

In addition to work slowdowns, the fact that workers have no interest in their work can lead to theft or "sabotage." The justification for being on the "take" for small items of construction site property (hammers, pliers, hardhats, safety boots, tape measures, pencils, etc.) is that these are seen as (meager) compensation for the low salaries and difficult work. This discourse can also serve as authorization for more serious thefts—heavier materials (pneumatic drills, chain saws, etc.) frequently disappear. As for "acts of sabotage," few actions are intended as such. They are, rather, deliberately botched work, dodging quality and safety rules deemed too restrictive, an incorrectly adjusted level, missing or badly installed steel, the rough handling of shared tools, and so on. Again, the discourse, especially that of the least integrated workers on the site, exonerates or even praises "ill will" and disgust shown towards a job well done. Many workers who feel oppressed by their employment and work conditions convey this with the sentence, "It's not a career." This causes them to deny their own know-how and excludes the desire to invest this experience in

their work. The “sabotage” not only consists of deliberate defects guided by bad intentions, but also of everyday failures that happen within the framework of an organization where the workers have no control, and have given up all hope of having any. They sometimes justify this attitude by calling into question the destination of the production, not only because it profits a boss who exploits them, but also because it profits an oppressive country: “Why should I do good work? It’s for France.” This is the vengeful counterpart of another frequently expressed rationalization of their condition: “The French say immigrants are taking their jobs, but all we’re taking is shit.”

### ■ A Spiral of Disloyalties

Whether it evokes the inertia of human material that gives up because of the treatment inflicted upon it, or whether it is the more positive manifestation of the existence of an intentionality that implements its strategies, the resistance of construction workers is notably reflected in the discourse of their employers. The most exposed of these employers are the recruitment agency representatives. In an interview, one representative said: “I’d rather be selling soap. At least then I’d know what the value of the merchandise was.” The recruitment agencies take care of the administrative work, prepare official documents, search out clients, test the temporary workers, and negotiate with them. In short, they use all their know-how, but this alone is not sufficient to provide a perfectly assured response to the question: Is the temp reliable? Temporary workers can be crafty and invent qualifications they do not have. They do so hoping that, when they arrive on site and their incompetence becomes apparent the foreman would rather train them than fire them simply because they are there.

This is assuming that the temporary workers show up on the construction site. When the agreement is made with the agency, the temporary workers simply have to promise that they will go to and remain on the site. The representatives are crippled with the fear that this promise will not be kept:

Construction workers can be a bit temperamental, you know. These jobs can be a bit hard, with the cold and all that, so (...) they take their bags and leave the construction site. You see, they don’t realize that they were sent by a company, they don’t care about all that. If there’s a problem, if they don’t like the work, or the site is too far away, or the foreman made some remark, you see, well, then they take their bags and run. So we have to go looking, find them or someone else, tell the client we’re sorry. Anyway, it’s not an easy job. (...) I know a lot of sales representatives who sell, I don’t know, wine, clothes, it’s not like that at all (Representative, 25 years’ experience).

What this representative does not say is that these impromptu defections are legally made possible by the lack of a “fixed-term” contract, which makes it possible for recruitment agencies to fire the temporary workers just as suddenly (and more frequently). The discourse of agencies describes the actions of temporary workers as independent of their own good practice. This reinforces more culturally-based interpretations about “construction workers” and even “foreigners.” The reasons are more mundane however: the temporary worker has found a better-paid placement with another agency, or he “cracked” under the difficulty of the working conditions, or maybe he feels the placement the agency offered will not be as interesting as they said, or even that it will not actually be given to him. The agencies criticize temporary workers for lying and “disloyalty,” but they do the same just as often, and even claim it is necessary business practice. This creates a sort of “spiral of disloyalties,” which can be seen, for instance, when agency representatives send more temporary workers than necessary to a placement, and the surplus get sent home again. This encourages the temporary workers to say that they will go and then to not show up if they find something better or if they suspect they will not be taken on. This, in turn, serves to constantly reinforce the phenomenon in that even more temporary workers have to be sent and an even greater percentage of temporary workers will leave the agencies in the lurch, and so on. A representative justified these practices as follows:

Because when I call in four people, two actually come. And sometimes no one shows up. (...) Then, you have temps that don't show up on the construction site, and haven't let us know beforehand. They don't even have the decency to... (...) Well, that's construction. Eighty percent of them are foreigners, after all, so they don't always have their manners with them. No, but it's true. No, no, I'm not being racist, I'm Arabic (Representative, ten years' experience).

The temporary worker does not come back and gives no explanation. They resist by simply and quietly refusing (perhaps only temporarily) the position assigned to them. No altercation, no dialogue, just evasion. Faced with this silent resistance, the representative is free to form their own interpretation. It is clear in the representative's last sentence above, in the denial it contains and in the contradiction it underlines, that the majority discourse is one that is based on a power relationship, not on any concrete majority identity.<sup>8</sup> It is possible, then, to be doubly in the minority, both a woman and of

8/ Cf. the idea of Guillaumin according to which it is easier to empirically characterize minorities than majorities. The majority would be defined rather as “the abstract place of the possession of all rights and possibilities” (Guillaumin 1985, 107).

North African origin, and still adopt the reificatory representations to which occupying a position of power leads.

## CONCLUSION

"Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game, that is, the space instituted by others, characterize the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations," writes Certeau (1990, 35).<sup>9</sup> By studying the forms of protest used by minority groups, not those that leave their mark in political leaflets, speeches, protest manifestoes, or political platforms, but rather those that choose the path of defection, we will find one of the sources of social change (Moulier Boutang 1998). Although minorities do not overturn the established order, their "tactics," which challenge through circumvention, force those who rule and profit from the order to make adjustments.

We will also be able to understand certain rationalizations of the majority. As essentialist, and thus erroneous, as they may be, they are not forged in absolute autonomy but are based in part on the actions, particularly protest actions, of the minorities. Thus, when the master writes that the black man is a lazy creature inclined to acts of thieving, we can read between the lines the underground struggle led by the slaves, who snatched a bit of time and a few goods from their owner. The majority discourse testifies both to the sudden emergence of the reality of the minorities, and to the attempt to imprison this reality in circular and reificatory representations (Guillaumin 2002, 147–9). It only allows the actions of the minorities to appear at the cost of its own mutation: the resistance becomes inaptitude, carelessness, and deceit. While this discourse attempts to perfect its control of minority groups by freezing their image, however, the fact is the never-ending history of struggle and compromise goes on.

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9/ Translator's note: This translation of the original is taken from Certeau, M. de. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Randall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 18.

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