

Going postal: An anthropology of postal work in France

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Nicolas Jounin's undercover immersive fieldwork takes the reader on a postal worker's route, one week before his office was reorganized—when he had only a week's seniority.

Reviewed: Nicolas Jounin, *Le caché de la Poste. Enquête sur l'organisation du travail des facteurs* (The hidden side of the post office: A study of the organization of postal workers' labor), Paris, La Découverte, 2021. 384 p., 20 €.

Recurring stories about postal workers burning their mail, hoarding it, or throwing it into the garbage and forests raise many questions about their working conditions. These incidents also call attention to the ambiguity of professional injunctions directed at workers more generally. These injunctions are central to Nicolas Jounin's immersive fieldwork at a mail distribution center of La Poste, the French postal service, where he was hired as a postal worker. His book opens with a striking image: an order received from his boss to "get rid" of his mail before returning back to the distribution center. Jounin's book revolves around the meaning of this injunction and its exemplification of the extreme "rationalization" to which postal workers are subject. He explains the successive difficulties encountered on his route (rain, speed, the number of mailboxes, mistakes, and so on) as part of an ethnography of postal work. The case of the postal service is exemplary in that it involves the rationalization of work through an algorithmic tool (the "Metod" program) that exists in similar forms in other organizations.

A narrative ethnography of postal work

Jounin introduces the reader to the world of a post office, seen through the eyes of a recently hired postal worker. His work belongs to a trend in narrative sociology that has developed considerably in recent years and which emphasizes the "power of narratives" in analyzing reality (Laé, Madec, Murard, 2016). Building on studies of postal workers by labor sociologists such as Marie Cartier (2003), Didier Demazière and Delphine Mercier (2003), and Paul Bouffartigue and Jacques Bouteiller (2020), the book asks: how and to what extent do these strategic and organizational changes transform the activities of postal workers and affect their work conditions? Yet whereas Demazière and Mercier's work was financed by La Poste and conducted in cooperation with the directors of a specific center, Jounin's is an immersive investigation that was conducted undercover: he showed up at the human resources department and was hired as a postal worker without his recruiter or his colleagues knowing who he was. He describes his on-the-job training--or rather trainings, since new postal workers are often immediately "brought into contact with multiple practices" (p. 15).

Confronted with the prescribed work rhythm, Jounin quickly realized that he was not meeting expectations: "what was most disconcerting was that even by working poorly, I could not keep up with the schedule. Since the reorganization, I began at 6:30AM, about ten minutes before the official start of my workday. I did not end until 3PM, and often as late as 4:30PM--in other words, between an hour and a half and three hours after my workday had theoretically ended. Between these two thresholds, no break, either for coffee or lunch" (p. 78). On his routes, he followed official and unofficial directives (including a unilateral decision to not ring doorbells for registered letters, as a way of saving time) to deal with backed-up stockpiles and declining quality of service. During his five-week stint as a postal worker, Jounin was also able to test La Poste's "new services" and examine the "incorporation of these 'services' into routes" (p. 201). For example, the "looking after my parents" service (as it is actually called) costs a postal worker six minutes, as a "postal worker who encounters a talkative customer is either 'drawn in' or compelled to be impolite: two ways in which a conscientious agent can be found professionally lacking" (p. 202).

Jounin tries out various distribution methods, such as "dividing [the work] of one route between two different workers" (p. 226). In this scenario, the mail is not pre-sorted and only ordinary letters, which other postal workers have prepared in

advance, are distributed. This segmentation of tasks increases the horizontal division of labor: postal workers cease to perform multiple tasks and are reduced to nothing more than mail distributors. Their workday thus becomes more physical and more grueling, through the endless repetition of similar actions. Thanks to his undeniable ethnographic and writing skills, Jounin's book reads like a novel. The reader almost feels like they have joined him on his route. These skills allow him to show, for instance, the role that a postal worker's equipment plays in a route's success, as does access to a functioning bicycle. The description of his twelfth route in chapter 14 exemplifies the interconnected problems that begin to accumulate and lead him to give up. He also mentions colleagues who engage in work stoppages: one does so "because of work, no other reason, [though] she used to love her job as a postal worker" (p. 142). For others, rancor assumes different forms: some give up, "sacrificing" their route, which is divided up into streets, making their colleagues' routes longer. Some grow detached, like those who lack a route of their own and see themselves "sort of like mercenaries, going from route to route as needed" (p. 144). And some just leave, having given up on "fill[ing] the yawning gap between rule and reality" (p. 144), returning at the official end of the workday with undistributed mail and leaving it for others to distribute the next day.

Model-driven work

The book considers a paradox, a point of confusion, and an oversight, which resulted in an aberration. The paradox is captured by the following quote: "while directors, when they are reorganizing, often emphasize that nothing less than the company's 'survival' is at stake, it remains constantly in the black" (p. 40). The point of confusion concerns the term "letter": there are simple letters (stamped envelopes that can easily slide into mailboxes) as well as registered and tracked letters (which require contact and take more time) and small packages consisting of objects sent as letters (which require the mailbox to be opened so that they can be put inside). The oversight consists in the fact that the volume of mail has been declining, even though the number of addresses is on the rise. It also pertains to the rising number of recipients, so that on any given mail route, more mailboxes must be served--a form of productivity that is "invisible to La Poste's management, as it has no monetary consequences" (p. 39). The aberration is due to the timeframes dictated by the organizer's tool. These timeframes correspond neither to the actual time it takes Jounin, a new postal worker, to complete

his route, as he lags understandably and excusably behind the timeframe expected by his employer. Nor does it correspond to the time it takes the worker who has primarily responsibility for a route--raising doubts about the tool's reliability as a diagnostic mechanism. Jounin emphasizes the discrepancy between the standard time in which La Poste expects a route to be completed (which must be brief and efficient) and the actual time required--though Jounin never managed to complete it in the time assigned by the algorithm that dictates the timeframe.

Jounin considers the three factors that determine a postal worker's route through "model-based requirements" (*prescription par modélisation*, p. 181): determining volume (to assess workload); mapping surroundings (to evaluate the real world's complexity and specificity); and setting norms and rhythms (in relation to national standards). Yet this model, which simplifies and even disregards reality, is far from neutral: "its failure to take into account climate, topography, volume, and the appearance of mailboxes could be seen less harmful neglect than as a considered decision" (p. 128). Some workers rebel against the reorganization of their workday, while others resign themselves and get used to finishing late. As the "organizer" explains to Jounin: "if you can't manage, it's up to you to do better" (p. 101). Since failure can only be the fault of human beings, who must "see themselves as the weakest link in an elegant process" (p. 102), dysfunction can only be individual. The result: postal workers lose it.

It matters little that they never actually achieve this optimal timeframe, as it never seems to be never verified or rectified. But it does upend the sense of obligation between the company and the employee: because the model's estimates are always less than the legal workday, postal workers always find themselves in the theoretical position of owing La Poste additional work. The algorithm makes postal workers indebted, because they owe the company time--even before they have begun their route. It "preemptively discredits any attempt to challenge the itineraries of new routes [and] any denunciation of excess labor" (p. 104).

Time as an adjustment variable

In this study, "it is postal workers' time that is the adjustment variable" (p. 282). Neither the claim about "postal workers' productivity" (Demazière, Mercier, 2003) nor the heterogeneity of effective work time are new, but their implications for different

classes of workers vary. Whereas the "return from one's [route] marks the end of the workday"--a system known in French as *fini-parti* (when work is done--*fini*--even before the workday is over, postal workers can leave--*partir*)--for civil servants employed in ongoing public sector work, the status of being a contract worker, subject to set working hours, does not allow for techniques of "anticipatory quantification of work," unless the employer persists in not compensating workers for the totality of their workday. The organizational dysfunction noted by Jounin consists in the discrepancy "between a production goal (distribute each day that day's mail), an organizational technique (average theoretical timeframes determined by modeling), and a legal system that determines how people work (the *fini-parti* system allowed for by civil servants' status) (p. 284-285) in that it gradually contributes to "undermining the individual's interiorization of a form of discipline commonly known as 'professional conscience'" (p. 287). Jounin also observes a dehumanization of human resources in the postal services: "regardless of the time spent outside, whether it be the second or the seventh hour, La Poste views postal workers as uniform machines, always moving at the same speed. The company surpasses [Frederick Winslow] Taylor in reducing human beings to their mechanical functions" (p. 247). Yet even if this use of science leads one executive to invoke Taylorism to justify the postal service's reorganization, the reader cannot help wondering if these imaginary exchanges do not weaken the power of Jounin's ethnography--particularly since Taylor himself acknowledged the ambivalent character of the rationalization of labor:

In my opinion, the greatest profit that workers gain from the system is that of having constant work. A factory that uses the scientific method is much more likely to keep business going during a crisis period than a poorly organized factory (Taylor, cited in Martinache, 2013).

Jounin's decision to interact with Taylor as his sole frame of reference completely obscures the totality of the (very numerous) organizational theories that follow scientific management. The organizational theory of waste baskets--the "garbage can" theory (Cohen, March, Olsen, 1972)--clearly shows how organizations can function without goals that are shared by all and in the absence of any possibility of constantly supervising all tasks. Jounin writes: "Several factors support the view that overloaded routes have a purpose that goes beyond production: they would appear to be a deliberate attempt to demoralize employees--to destabilize them, to encourage them to remove themselves through methodically recognized inaptitude, resignation, or disciplinary dismissal following a 'freakout.'" (p. 85). Yet does this position not attribute to the postal service's management more intentionality than it in fact has?

Jounin mentions the "Metod" program, which divides each task into minutes, seconds, and even centiminutes--an almost nuclear science. The problem is that the cadences were calculated nearly twenty years ago, and no one can recall how--not even La Poste (p. 219-220). Jounin observes that no expert is currently able to understand the criteria such modeling is based. Is this evidence of premeditation rather than "the amnesia of beginnings" (Bourdieu 2012)? Or of reflection rather than a lack of competence and long-term strategic vision?

Beyond the title's clever wordplay (*caché* means "hidden" but sounds like *cachet*, or "stamp") is there something "hidden" and deliberately masked in La Poste? Or does it represent, rather, a naturalization of the work process that, in an organization that does not grasp its own history, behaves in a dysfunctional manner, following a surprising system of "trial and error" that has already been identified in the financial services industry and in the evolution of postal services (Vezinet 2012)? Does it not exemplify that kind of "vicious bureaucratic circle" that Michel Crozier (1976) might have analyzed? Rather than positing turnover as a goal imposed by management on the postal service, this mechanism for rationalizing labor could be described as a vicious circle: even as it must constantly recruit without coming across as harsh since it can no longer "cover" all routes, La Poste is confronting--now that not all routes are covered--more difficult work conditions for those who remain, which increases turnover rather than decreasing it by forcing postal workers to limit the time they spend in the profession.

The disqualification of postal workers' speech

This book's great merit is to shed light on the disqualification of the speech of postal workers, when they state that they are incapable of completing their routes in the assigned time and are not heard by their company. This disqualification, which is perhaps not unique to postal workers, is indicative of a rupture between management and employees in the large organization that is La Poste. It brings to light the hiatus that exists between technocrats, who are not physically on the ground, and frontline agents, who are in direct contact with customers and who must grapple with the difficulties inherent in mail delivery (the well-known "logistics of the last decarbonized kilometer").

Yet the author never really acknowledges the incompleteness of his approach to the phenomenon he studies. While he believes that he has presented "the point of view of management as well as that of postal workers" (p. 320), one wonders what "management" means to him. Is it the "quality postal worker" or the team leader he met (p. 320)? The history and sociology of managers has studied how immediate hierarchical superiors, such as "proximate managers" (Martin, 2013) and "middle management" (Barrier, Pillon, Quéré, 2015), are squeezed between employees above and below them. This stratum also plays the essential role of "cog" or "rubber stamp," placing them in the crossfire of contradictory injunctions (Bouffartigue, Gadea, Pochic, 2010). While the binary interpretation of the relationship between employers and postal workers that Jounin proposes is clear and appealing to the media, the fact remains that it is an opposition that does not correspond to the (more nuanced and complex) realities of post offices. These middle managers, who are also salaried and frequently drawn from the ranks of postal workers--since, until recently, La Poste allowed internal promotions--are also subordinated to management, which transmits to them the prescribed mechanisms and protocols. Can they truly be associated with the ideal type of "boss" or the owners of the means of production? While they are middling employees in a large organization, this does not automatically make them "bosses." Hence the discomfort felt by some of them, such as the recruiter, who, having contacted him, disconcerts Jounin: "For a recruitment interview, his words are unsettling, as they seem to do everything possible to present the postal worker's activity in a negative light" (p. 24). Analyzing these contradictions from a sociological perspective would have helped allay Jounin's trouble, by positing the hypothesis that the recruiter was not very comfortable with the work conditions he was proposing to the postal workers he had to recruit, but to whom he was nonetheless offering a job in a time of mass employment. This angle could, however, have been explored only in a longer work.

Problematizing the circumstances of the inquiry

Jounin remained in his "role" as a postal worker for five weeks. Simply from reading it, we do not learn why he gave up this role. Did his physical endurance reach a breaking point? Did he saturate his field and end his investigation? Was he, more pragmatically, "otherwise occupied"? At the end of the book, he returns to the scene of

his inquiry, a year after the reorganization, and observes that "the reorganization's effects had petered out." Yet in what capacity did he return to the scene? As a sociologist, announcing his book project? As a former colleague? As a union member? Of these matters, once again, the reader remains ignorant.

This unclarified position--since we do not really know from what standpoint Jounin is speaking, nor why he chose to be hired by La Poste--us implicit in the newspaper *Libération's* usage of the term "gonzo sociology" in a review from February 24, 2021. This term alludes to a kind of journalism that is ultra-subjective ("gonzo journalism") and to a type of pornography in which actors film themselves ("gonzo pornography"). In this context, what does "gonzo sociology" mean?

- Is this a subjective sociology, in the sense that it is biased, partisan, or written with an activist intent? The subtitle, which refers to something that La Poste has hidden (*caché*), implies the idea of an unveiling.

- Is it a "hard" sociology," in the sense that it gives free rein--or an extra pedal stroke--to the "sociological imagination" (Mills, 2015), juxtaposing elements of reality with imagined dialogue? While there exists a school that seeks to do sociology in and through narration (Artières, Laé, 2011), Jounin does not align himself with it in his book. But because his sociological imagination leads him to push his narrative explanation quite far (Geertz, 1996)--even comparing himself to a "gorilla" [bodyguard?] in his fictitious exchanges with Taylor--readers will wonder if the narrative does not, at times, become deliberately "hard" and wonder about the use and anticipated effects, in these instances, of provocation.

- Or is it hastily executed sociology, relying on a single and necessarily specific distribution center? The singularity of the distribution center in which Jounin chose to immerse himself is enigmatic. First, its temporality is puzzling: he arrives just in time to "experience" a reorganization. Was this pure chance or was it planned? Anticipating an immersion on a "before and after" basis in relation to a reorganization is very interesting, but this temporal game should be integrated into the analysis as well as the ethnography. Equally puzzling is the perfect timing of what Jounin manages to observe: in addition to witnessing a reorganization, he has the "luck" of seeing, during his five weeks of immersive fieldwork, a labor inspector on the premises. How many postal workers ever see a labor inspector? This convergence of temporalities (Kosellek, 1997) raises several questions. At the "Nanteuil," distribution center under consideration, the labor inspectorate requested the times at which shifts begin and end since, under the current system of enumeration, it is impossible to verify that overtime

exists (since routes cannot be completed in the time assigned) and, on the other, that workers are paid for it (that overtime is not a charitable donation offered to the company in exchange for the great pleasure of working there). Jounin explains that the end of *fini-parti* results in compensation for overtime calculated in terms of specific hours, whereas previously this was not the case. In his own case study, this is no doubt plausible--and perhaps even likely. But elsewhere? Is overtime by contract-workers systematically compensated at other sites? This is far from certain, and the connection between the status of contract workers and the payment of overtime needs, in my view, to be relativized.

The hypothesis of a field constructed prior to the inquiry to witness particular events--a reorganization, which occurs every two years, on average, and a labor inspection, which is even rarer, as postal workers can go for years without experiencing one--over a very brief period of time is not, however, problematic as such. To the contrary, it even provides a way out of the charge of "gonzo sociology," in the sense that distinct and pre-researched terrain) indicates how access to the field was prepared. As the book *Observer le travail* recommends, "in any case, reflexivity is appropriate, as the means through which ethnography detaches itself from its material while ensuring that it does not extract itself from the terrain it analyzes and trying to understand how the conditions of the inquiry bear on the construction of materials" (Arborio, *et al.*, 2008, p. 12). Because he is an astute observer, Jounin has written a study that is already very precise. Had he been careful, by employing greater reflexivity, to extract himself from his terrain--and had he presented its conditions as well as its biases-- the quality of his sociological work would have been in no way diminished; to the contrary, it would be even stronger.

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