

**TEMPORARY AGENCY WORKERS IN THE FRENCH
CAR INDUSTRY: WORKING UNDER A NEW VARIANT
OF 'DESPOTISM' IN THE LABOUR PROCESS**

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at any other university.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of how the use of temporary agency work in French car plants modifies the experience and mechanisms of labour control in the labour process. Over the last decade, car manufacturers in France have made extensive use of this form of employment, despite regulations which restrict the use of agency labour to exceptional circumstances. Legal challenges aimed at reclassifying temporary agency contracts into permanent employment contracts have revealed that some agency workers have accumulated many years of employment as an agency worker with user-company. The presence of significant proportions of agency workers on assembly lines for long periods of time has implications for the labour-capital relation on the shopfloor. Precarious working conditions for low-skilled workers are assumed to affect the capacity of workers to negotiate relations on the shop-floor. The thesis employs a conceptual framework based upon Burawoy's (1985) theory of production politics to examine the specific way in which the triadic relationship between the temporary agency worker, temporary employment agency and user-organisation modifies the factory regime within which temporary agency workers labour. Starting from an analysis of the macro- and meso-level development of the post-war French state and of the key economic sectors that constitute the "politics of production", the thesis focuses on the PSA Peugeot-Citroën plant in Aulnay-sous-Bois as a case study, and combines interview data with other qualitative (textual) data. The research finds that temporary agency workers in the car sector respond to their employment situation in a more complex way than studies of coercion and consent in the labour process suggest. Employment insecurity and the "duality of control" which flows from the triadic relationship upon which the temporary agency contract rests gives rise to a factory regime more conducive to compliance/coercion than consent. However, the "traces of consent" identified by the research illustrate the complex nature of hegemony and despotism in the labour process. Drawing on the findings of the empirical data in the context of France, the thesis develops the concept of hegemonic despotism by examining how hegemonic despotism is expressed across a variety of employment contexts. The thesis identifies a tension between adverse conditions of employment and hegemonic practices, such as the formal adhesion to "soft" models of HRM, alongside the recasting of norms of employment to fit the requirements of contemporary capital accumulation.

ABBREVIATIONS

ANPE	Agence Nationale de l'Emploi
CAP	Certificat d'aptitude professionnel
CCFA	Confédération des Constructeurs Français des Automobiles
CGT	Confédération Générale du Travail
CFTC	Confédération Françaises des Travailleurs Chrétiens
CFDT	Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail
CIETT	International Confederation of Private Employment Agencies
CSL	Confédération syndicale libre
CNPF	Confédération nationale des patrons de français
CPE	Contrat de première embauche
DATAR	Délégation à l'aménagement du territoire
FASTT	Fonds d'action social du travail temporaire
FAF-TT	Fonds d'assurance formation du travail temporaire
EPL	Employment Protection Legislation
LPA	Labour Process Analysis
LPT	Labour Process Theory
MEDEF	Mouvement des entreprises en France
OB	Organisational Behaviour
OP	Ouvrier professionnel
OS	Ouvrier spécialisé
PRISME	Professionnels de l'intérim, services et métiers de l'emploi
RPR	Rassemblement pour la République
SIA	Syndicat Indépendent de l'automobile
SUD	Fédération des Syndicats Solidaires, Unitaires et Démocratiques
UIMM	Union des industries et métiers de la métallurgie)
UMP	Union pour un Mouvement Populaire
UNETT	Union Nationale des Entreprise du Travail Temporaire
USI-CGT	Union Syndicale des Intérimaires-Confédération Générale du Travail

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an exploration of how the use of temporary agency work in French car plants modifies the experience and mechanisms of labour control in the labour process. The focus of the research is a PSA Peugeot-Citroën plant in Aulnay-sous-Bois, a northern suburb of Paris, which is currently threatened with closure. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was widespread concern in the French labour movement, and in French society as a whole, over the numbers of agency workers in car assembly plants and in supplier firms. PSA, in particular, was repeatedly criticised for its “excessive” use of agency labour.¹ The company responded by entering into an agreement with temporary employment agencies setting out responsibilities towards temporary agency workers. PSA also reduced the maximum number of months of a temporary agency contract to below the legal maximum. Yet the company, in keeping with employment trends in the sector, has continued to maintain high numbers of agency workers amongst its production line workforce, in what is widely perceived to be an evident disregard for labour legislation (Belkacem et al., 2011). The presence of large numbers of agency workers allows car manufacturers to shed a large section of the workforce in response to market pressures without having to engage in lengthy negotiations around redeployment and redundancy packages. France still maintains strong protective legislation regarding dismissal for economic reasons. In addition, the legislative framework provides the space for workers collective organisations to press forward with demands to increase compensation for redundancies. In recent years, high profile militant struggles against factory closures have resulted in substantially better redundancy terms, the most notable being the occupations of the Continentale tyre factory and of New Fabris, a sub-contractor of PSA and Renault (where the workforce threatened to blow up the factory). The outcome of these mass redundancies contrasts with the simultaneous lay-off of large numbers of agency workers, who received no compensation beyond the statutory 10% “end of assignment” bonus. The crisis that hit the

¹ In a search of French newspaper articles on “temporary agency worker” (*intérimaire*) and the auto sector (*secteur automobile*) on the Factiva news archive search engine between 1995 and 2005, PSA was most cited. The articles were overwhelmingly related to the excessive use of agency labour over and beyond that permitted by French legislation.

automobile sector² in 2008 has been illuminating in a number of respects. First it illustrated the extent to which the sector relies on agency workers to adjust its workforce with ease when faced with perturbations produced by the market. In 2007, agency workers filled 282,000 full-time equivalent posts in the French automobile sector, constituting just under 10% of the total workforce (in contrast to 3.6% for all economic sectors). This figure fell to 263,000 in 2008 (DARES, 2009). The loss of so many temporary agency jobs in the sector within such a short period also highlighted the lack of protection accorded to a significant proportion of production line workers, a consequence of a labour resource strategy which transfers risks back to some of its lower-skilled workers, thus undermining the protective measures of post-war labour laws.

In this respect, the example of the Aulnay plant was enlightening. Over the course of the research, the numbers of agency workers at the Aulnay plant declined; the ending of the night shift, for example lead to the loss of 600 temporary agency workers. The future of the plant itself was also called into question in June 2011 when a leaked memo sent to the CGT branch at the site claimed that the PSA group was planning to close Aulnay once the production of the C3 model ends in 2014. This was confirmed by management in July 2012, despite being vigorously denied over the course of the previous year. The closure of the plant is a part of a restructuring plan that entails the loss of 8,000 jobs. At Aulnay, it is 3,300 jobs that are under threat (as well as thousands of jobs which depend on the plant). The 300 temporary agency workers that make up this number will be excluded from the negotiated settlement between state, labour and capital aimed at alleviating the effects of the closure through financial compensation, redeployment and training – regardless of the number of working years accumulated at the plant. This is just one aspect of how the temporary agency contract undermines the rights and protections normally associated with the employment relationship.

Such disparity in “quality” of employment between temporary agency workers and permanent workers is an important and appropriate subject for research on this group of workers, which this thesis contributes to. Yet there are further dimensions of the temporary agency employment relationship within the context of auto manufacturing which have been overlooked in

² The automobile sector is made up of vehicle assembly and suppliers. Until 2008, it was classified separately for the purposes of government statistics (Code C29).

contemporary literature. Whilst research on temporary agency work has identified the negative consequences of agency work for lower-skilled occupations, there has been little sustained engagement with the triadic relationship embodied in the temporary agency contract from the perspective of theories of control in the workplace. This is surprising, given the encroachment of agency labour across a wide range of sectors and occupations, including those that have served as the empirical grounding of labour process analysis. Temporary agency work has been growing across EU15 countries since the 1990s and, more recently, in new member states (Arrowsmith, 2009). It is a distinct form of atypical employment, characterised, by the time-limited (temporary) nature of the employment contract, and by the three-way (triadic) employment relationship between agency worker, temporary employment agency and user-organisation, in contrast to the standard bilateral employment relationship upon which core employment legislation is based. Traditionally associated with “peripheral” employment and sections of the workforce said to have “marginal labour market attachment”, the expansion of agency work into sectors and occupations not normally associated with this form of employment has led to an increased interest in agency work within academic and policy circles. There has been a particular interest within Anglo-Saxon literature with a growing number of agency workers amongst professional occupations. Research has focused upon motivations for choosing agency work above permanent employment, and the consequences of the agency contract on job satisfaction, organisational commitment and other themes common to theories of organisational behaviour (Albert and Bradley, 1998; Guest, 2004; Tailby, 2005; Kirkpatrick and Hocque, 2006; Connelly et al., 2011).

The focus of research on agency work varies depending upon country context. In France, where agency work is overwhelmingly low skilled, research situates agency work within a wider context of the degradation of work in general, and debates around “workplace suffering” following a number of workplace suicides (Sciences Humaines, 2005; Lefresne, 2006; Thébaud-Mony, 2007). Agency work is rarely perceived by French researchers as a positive career choice (Barbier, 2005), despite the attempts of the temporary employment agency sector to present agency work as an attractive and acceptable form of work. Differences in the literature on agency work partly reflect national variations in conventions concerning employment norms. In

France, “flexibility” – of which agency work is one form – is a widely contested concept, seen as synonymous with *précarité*, a term which is rooted in a rejection of employment models outside of the standard employment relationship, with little concession given to the idea that flexible employment is driven by the needs of employees to balance work and personal life – a common rationale in the Anglo-Saxon literature.³ Differences also reflect national variations in the occupational and sectoral composition of agency work. Whilst low and semi-skilled occupations dominate agency work in the EU, there are more likely to be white-collar and higher-skilled agency workers the UK. At the other end of the spectrum, the agency workforce in France and Spain is typified by the young, male manual worker (Arrowsmith 2009; Vosko, 2009). In France, it is the auto sector, a sector traditionally associated with the “male breadwinner” model of standard employment upon which post-war labour legislation has been based, that has the highest number of agency workers. Much of the French literature on temporary agency work has revolved around the contextualisation and critique of processes seen to encapsulate the gradual rolling back of workers’ gains. French approaches to agency labour are influenced, not only by a strong attachment to post-war employment norms, but also by an historical opposition to the activities of temporary employment agencies. Through most of the last century, temporary employment agencies were viewed as “*marchands d’hommes*” (traders in human labour). Whilst there is a wide body of sociological literature critiquing the spread of *précarité*, there has been a lack of focused empirical or theoretical engagement with the impact of agency work on workplace behaviour and experiences. Quantitative studies have examined indicators of “job quality” and the trajectories and motivations of agency workers, but, there is little qualitative research on agency workers. This is all the more surprising given the large numbers of temporary agency workers that have passed through the factory gates of major car manufacturers since the late 1990s. French *sociologie du travail* is rich in in-depth qualitative research on the working lives of workers in major car assembly plants, yet there has been no

³ The amalgamation of distinct forms of flexible employment practices within the concept flexibility is a barrier to comparative analysis of national responses to flexibility. Numerical flexibility (the use of temporary workers to respond more efficiently to market signals) can be opposed by, for example, trade unions which consider it undermines job security. Working time flexibility, on the other hand, may be viewed as a way of combining employment with caring obligations, and has been promoted in the UK and elsewhere as an important right for women in the workplace (see Hegewisch, 2009).

attempt to unravel the implications of the temporary agency contract on theories of labour control.

The restructuring and introduction of new forms of work organisation and labour management that have characterised the sector in recent decades have promoted the extensive use of agency labour to the extent that agency labour is “structurally embedded” within the labour sourcing strategies of auto manufacturers. According to government data, until the late 1990s the rate of agency labour, (in relation to total workforce) stood at around 3-5%. This grew rapidly in the following years so that rates of agency workers were consistently higher than 8%, reaching over 10% at times (Gorgeu and Mathieu, 2011, p. 79). However, these figures, conceal the high rates of agency labour amongst production workers, and within specific plants. This is not only a French phenomenon – similar trends are observable in Italy and Spain, and agency labour is increasing in German car plants (Banyuls and Hapeiter, 2010). Given the importance of the auto sector for these national economies, and its historic influence on national employment models, industrial technology and workplace practices (Grimshaw and Lehndorff, 2010, p. 28), this gap in research is problematic. From a theoretical perspective, labour process analysis has failed to address the implications of agency labour in the European auto sector for theories of labour control, remaining instead in a framework that prioritises the experience of core workers.

The research presented here contributes to the literature on temporary agency work by addressing this gap. It employs a conceptual framework that draws upon Burawoy’s (1985) theory of the politics of production, to examine how the triadic relationship alters the political apparatus of production governing temporary agency work, specifically in French car plants. The thesis draws upon literature that has identified the significance of the employment contract in governing the control of labour in the labour process (Steinberg, 2003; Nichols et al., 2004), and recent literature which has reappraised Gottfried’s (1992) concept of duality of control through the lens of Burawoy’s theory (Degiuli and Kollmeyer, 2007, Zhang, 2010).

This introductory chapter presents an overview of this thesis. The first section briefly discusses the growth of temporary agency work in Europe within the context of a European employment

policy agenda that promotes the flexibilisation of European labour markets. The chapter then explores the relevance of examining temporary agency work in the French automobile sector before introducing the conceptual framework which is applied to the thesis. The final part of the chapter sets out the aims and objectives of the research and the structure of the thesis.

1. Neoliberalism, labour market flexibility and the growth of agency work in Europe

Labour market flexibility has long been a key component of the European Commission's Employment Strategy. Jacques Delors (1993) White Paper on "Growth, Competitiveness, Employment: The Challenges and Way Forward into the 21st Century", promoted numerical flexibility and labour market deregulation as key components in driving employment growth. This was further legitimised by the OECD 1994 Job Study which focused on removing institutional barriers to jobs growth (Gold, 2009, p. 20). European countries have followed these policy prescriptions to varying degrees, typically through legislation weakening employment protection legislation (EPL). France is one of the countries that, due to popular opposition to proposed reforms to labour legislation, has maintained relatively high levels of EPL. However, outside of the standard employment relationship which remains covered by an extensive range of statutory protection, the French employment landscape has undergone extensive changes in the past two decades in the direction of flexible (precarious) working arrangements. The growth of temporary agency work in France has been replicated across a number of EU states, a phenomenon which the International Confederation of Private Employment Agencies (CIETT), the international trade body of employment agencies, attributes to the progressive liberalisation of labour markets and a combined move towards deregulation and regulation of agency work (CIETT, 2011). Deregulation has lifted some of the restrictions on agency work and the activities of employment agencies, whilst regulation has established a legal framework for agency work in countries where there was, until recently, no legal recognition of agency labour.

Although the lack of robust data complicates cross-national comparisons, estimates of the extent of agency labour suggest that in the last decade, agency work has accounted for between 0.2% and 5% of total employment in European countries (Vosko, 2009). In 2010, France had one of the highest rates of agency work in the EU (3%). The sectoral distribution of agency work

varies considerably, with Sweden and the UK having a higher proportions of agency labour in services sectors. However, in the UK, it is likely that official statistics do not capture the number of migrant agency workers in agricultural and small scale manufacturing (such as food processing) that accompanied the entry of the A8 accessions states into the EU in 2004 (May and Markova, 2010). The UK is also one of the few countries where agency labour has a presence in the public sector. In some countries restrictions on the use of agency labour in the public sector have not yet been deregulated, which the temporary employment industry sees as a barrier to flexibility (CIETT, 2012).

2. The growth of temporary agency work in car manufacturing

France presents an interesting case for examining the spread of agency work. One of the explanations for the use of agency labour resides in the strength of protections accorded to workers on standard contracts and the obstacles that employers face in shedding labour. Employers are said to turn to agency labour as a way by-passing the strict legislation associated with standard employment contracts (although the high rates of agency labour in the UK suggest that agency work can also grow in other regulatory environments). The French context, however, is more complex in that strict employment legislation also extends to agency work. The 1972 legislation which legalised and regulated the activities of employment agencies, established a special employment relationship between agencies and agency workers, alongside a parallel commercial relationship between the agencies and the client or user-organisation. It set out the key principles governing the use of agency labour; the non-substitution of permanent workers, the use of agency work only in “exceptional” circumstances and the “temporary” nature of the employment. Over much of the last five decades, these core principles have remained largely in place. Yet despite this, France has one of highest rates of temporary agency work in the EU. More significantly, the largely sectoral nature of agency work (Kornig, 2011) means that rates of agency work in manufacturing are far higher than European averages, in particular in the auto sector. Manufacturing accounts for over 40% of the volume of agency work in France (DARES, 2010) with the automobile sector being the most prolific user, with rates of agency labour regularly reaching 10% of the total workforce, in contrast to a peak of 3.6% for all economic sectors combined (DARES, 2009).

The economic turmoil that engulfed the world economy in 2008 exposed the extent of employment insecurity of agency workers in the auto sector. In France, the number of agency contracts fell by nearly 50% in the fourth quarter of 2008. It also illustrated how the car manufacturers and suppliers have access to a “permanent pool of agency workers” (Gorgeu and Mathieu, 2009), via the mediation of temporary employment agencies, providing them with a key tool to respond rapidly to fluctuations in product markets (Larbi and Lecroux, 2008). In 2010, following state intervention (a scrappage scheme) to stimulate demand for the domestic vehicle market, there was an increase in the numbers of agency workers working in the sector. When the effects of the scrappage scheme declined, thousands of agency workers were left without employment.

The growth in agency labour in the auto sector has occurred alongside a steady decline in the number of permanent posts as employers have adjusted human resource strategies to fit in with the dominant mantra of flexibility. On one level it is not surprising that the auto sector, traditionally at the forefront of industrial “innovation” and change in the organisation of work and industrial relations, and exposed to intense competition, has been at the forefront of aligning its workforce more efficiently to the market. At the same time, in France, the sector has been a model of the social compromise of the *Trente Glorieuses* (post-war boom) and the accompanying guarantee of stable ongoing employment and protective collective bargaining. Added to this is the external regulatory environment in which agency work is highly regulated, with limitations on the duration of contracts and strict stipulations concerning the circumstances in which it is permitted. Yet the extensive use of agency labour in the sector over the past decade points to practices which go well beyond the legal boundaries, allowing agency labour to be used as a “standard human resource strategy” (Viprey, 2002), which has had the effect of structurally embedding agency labour within the auto sector (Gorgeu and Mathieu, 2011).

This development has wide-reaching implications for local labour markets dependent upon the auto industry for employment. Automobile clusters determine the local employment landscape in regions such as the Ile-de-France and Franche-Comté. Beaud and Pialoux’s (1999) and Durand and Hatzfeld’s (2002) studies of the iconic PSA Peugeot-Citroën plant at Sochaux have

documented the profound changes in the organisation of work at the plant, including the introduction of agency labour. These studies illustrate how the human resource strategies of car manufacturers and suppliers influence the labour market integration of young workers in these areas, in particular those who leave school with limited qualifications. These studies also examine the workplace outcomes of agency labour. In common with research in the UK car sector (Danford, 1998), there is an assumption that agency workers are subject to despotic forms of labour control, given the combination of job insecurity and the fact that the sector has undergone significant intensification of work. One of the aims of this thesis is to examine how this despotism is filtered through the triadic employment relationship and whether the agency contract generates additional elements of labour control beyond despotism.

3. Temporary agency work and labour process analysis

Much of the research on contemporary labour process in auto manufacturing has centred on the changes in regimes of labour control. Researchers within the tradition of labour process analysis (LPA) have challenged the claims of new management theories that innovations in technology and management would lead to a new experience of work characterised by job enrichment and autonomy (Durand, 2009; Stewart et al., 2009). In the place of this positive view of changes in the auto sector, they argue that car manufacturers are engaging in new forms of labour control. The discourse of participation and autonomy is a way of eliciting consent to work harder in a context where the certainties of the “Fordist” era of car production have given way to restructuring and generalised job insecurity. Burawoy’s concepts of “manufacturing consent” and “factory regimes” (Burawoy, 1979, 1985) has been employed to examine and theorise these changes in the mechanisms of labour control. Researchers identified aspects of what Burawoy referred to as “hegemonic despotism”, the factory regime that replaced the “hegemonic regime” of the post-war decade, and which is characterised by a partial return to “market despotism” due to increasing job insecurity in conditions of global competition. Within the debates around control and consent in the workplace, agency workers have been largely absent, or referred to in order to illustrate despotic workplace relations and/or management techniques to undermine union organisation (Danford, 1998; Hatzfeld, 2004). Bouquin (2006) provides one of the few examples of an account of agency workers which suggests that their experience is more

multifaceted than assumed, indicating sources of consent rooted in the agency contract. The research presented in this thesis builds upon this by reasserting Burawoy's (1985) broad framework for understanding how different configurations of coercion and consent are generated by the dynamic confluence of different factors which constitute the "political apparatus of production".

The case of agency workers focuses attention on the employment contract as a regulatory mechanism. This has been acknowledged in a body of research that has introduced the specificity of the temporary agency employment relationship as a factor in mediating workplace behaviour (Gottfried, 1992; Smith 1998; Padavic 2005), in particular through identifying a dualistic system of control within which consent is seen to play a role. Recent research by Nichols et al. (2004), and Deguili and Kollmeyer (2007) has examined the place of hegemonic practices of agencies within this dual system of control. By applying Burawoy's categories to agency work, it is possible to examine what appear to be elements of hegemony within despotism, thus suggesting a modified version of hegemonic despotism. Again, this thesis builds upon this body of work to develop a conceptual framework through which to examine the experience of agency work in French car plants and to draw conclusions regarding the factory regime under which agency workers labour.

A further body of literature is relevant to this research. Peck and Ward (2005), Peck and Theodore (2007) and Coe et al. (2010) have analysed the role of temporary employment agencies in constructing flexible labour markets, finding them much more than the neutral actors responding to market signals that neo-classical approaches to labour markets assume, and which is replicated in the public image that the temporary employment sector promotes. This literature also complements Burawoy's emphasis on going beyond the internal logic of the labour process, by bringing to the story a wide range of constitutive elements that make up the factory regime, thus adding to the conceptual scaffolding upon which this thesis rests.

3. Thesis aims

The main aim of this thesis is to explore the nature of the factory regime that shapes the working lives of temporary agency workers in car plants, and in doing so contribute to labour process analysis by better understanding the significance of employment status for configurations of consent and coercion in the labour process. The research adopts a case study methodology. Starting from the macro- and meso-level developments of the post-war French state and the key economic sectors under scrutiny, the research focuses on PSA Peugeot-Citroën and the Aulnay plant. The thesis examines the historical factors that have generated contemporary trends in human resource practices in the French auto industry. The research sets out to explain the historical development of auto manufacturing and its place with the French Gaullist state of the post-war years, and to critically examine the history of the temporary employment sector and its gradual transformation from *marchands d'hommes* to official partners to public employment services. The synergies between these two histories are important to understand the processes from which the “structural embeddedness” of agency labour in car plants emerged. The consistently high proportions of agency workers in the auto sector cannot be fully explained by traditional explanations of agency work. Although France has strict employment protection legislation⁴ which is one of the common rationales for companies turning to atypical employment contracts, it also has comprehensive legislation governing the use of agency labour aimed at restricting its use. The research draws upon work by Peck and Ward (2005), Peck and Theodore (2007) and Coe et al. (2010), with the aim of contributing to an understanding of the emergence of the temporary employment sector in the post-war French national context. Through an exploration of alliances between large agencies and the auto sector, and of state-capital relations, the thesis aims to investigate the processes through which temporary agency work has grown within a restrictive legislative framework, in a key industrial sector.

Thirdly, the research aims to explore how the status of agency worker affects the experience of work in car plants, with a view to revealing their conditions of work and to better understand the

⁴ See OECD data on employment legislation: <http://www.oecd.org/employment/employmentpoliciesanddata/oecdindicatorsofemploymentprotection.htm>

mechanisms of coercion and consent which emerge from this very distinct form of employment. In so doing, the thesis builds upon previous research that has identified worse employment outcomes for temporary agency workers in low-skilled occupations, by focusing on issues which will contribute to a deeper theoretical appraisal of agency employment. Related to this research aim is an assessment of how French trade unions have reacted to the growth of agency work in the sector, both historically and contemporaneously. The growth of agency labour presents challenges for organised labour since it fragments and weakens working class organisation. Temporary work, and agency work in particular due to the involvement of a private employment service, has been problematic for trade unions as they have tried to balance opposition to the casualisation of labour with protecting temporary workers. The triadic relationship also poses problems for unions in terms of organising and protecting the employment rights of agency workers. The growth of agency work across occupations and sectors has forced French trade unions to engage with temporary agency workers in a more consistent manner, with varying results (Bérout, 2009). The thesis examines the historical evolution of approaches to agency labour in order to contextualise the challenges faced by the French labour movement today.

Finally, the thesis aims to contribute to the recent theoretical advances in LPA which have sought to incorporate the employment contract and the triadic relationship of the temporary agency contract into Burawoy's concept of factory regimes. By analysing the data from a labour process perspective, and, specifically, drawing upon Burawoy's concept of factory regimes, the research aims to situate the employment status of the agency worker, and the conditions that flow from this status, within a framework that moves beyond the empirical description of employment outcomes to an interrogation of the theoretical significance of this contract, within the context of auto manufacturing.

4. Structure of the thesis

The next chapter locates temporary agency work both empirically and within contemporary literature, setting out how temporary agency work has been theorised as a marginal form of employment by both neo-classical and segmented labour market approaches in opposition to the

standard employment relationship. The literature focusing upon the nature of the triadic relationship in relation to labour control which is introduced at the end of this chapter is expanded upon in Chapter 3, which presents the theoretical contribution of the thesis by first setting out the significance of Burawoy for Labour Process Theory (LPT) before discussing the relevance of the concept of factory regimes as a conceptual framework for analysing temporary agency work.

Chapter 4 presents an extensive methodological discussion of aims and objectives and the philosophical paradigm guiding the research, including a reflexive account of the research process. The final chapters of the thesis, along with Chapter 3, constitute the theoretical and empirical contribution to knowledge of the thesis. The historical accounts of the temporary agency sector and the auto industry presented in Chapters 5 and 6 are not only contextual markers for the primary data; in assessing and tracing the processes that lie behind current practices in both sectors, they provide an account of the key constitutive elements of the “production politics” that are scrutinised in Chapter 7, and are further explored in the final chapter, within the conceptual framework set out in the Chapter 4. Chapter 8 summarises these findings and Chapter 9 draws upon the research presented in the thesis to develop Burawoy’s concept of hegemonic despotism and its relevance for contemporary production politics beyond the example of agency labour. The final chapter sets out the contribution of the thesis and proposes areas for further research.

CHAPTER 2

TEMPORARY AGENCY WORK IN EUROPE: AN EMERGING RESEARCH AND POLICY AGENDA

1. Introduction

The growth of agency work in Europe has generated a wide body of literature addressing different dimensions of temporary agency work. This chapter reviews this literature and identifies how the theoretical framing and empirical focus of this thesis challenges, builds upon and contributes to current perspectives on agency work. Existing literature within the fields of labour market economics and management studies tends to privilege the rationales of user organisations and the workers engaged in agency labour, whilst sociological accounts of agency work have identified outcomes of agency work for both workers and organisations. In addition to these main research foci there are two further strands of research that direct the discussion of agency labour towards new theoretical concerns by depicting staffing agencies as active agents in the spread of agency work (Coe et al., 2010), and by reappraising theories of labour control in the context of a triadic employment relationship.

The first part of the chapter briefly describes the regulatory and policy context within which agency labour has grown in the EU15 economies. There then follows a discussion of how the literature presents the rationale behind employers' decisions to use agency labour which calls attention to the varied and complex factors that influence organisational decisions, from direct organisational concerns regarding labour costs to the role of regulation and the practices of employment agencies. The next section broadens out the discussion of the literature to examine the importance of the standard employment relationship in post-war European societies and how temporary agency work is viewed in relation to long-standing employment norms. The traditional use of agency labour is contrasted with recent trends that challenge common assumptions within the literature concern the function of agency labour within labour markets. There then follows a summary of research on employment outcomes of agency labour before

moving onto the final part of the chapter, which introduces literature that takes the triadic employment relationship as a key factor in mechanisms of control in the labour process.

2. The standard employment relationship: protecting the “core”

Agency work poses challenges for employment studies because it deviates considerably from the standard employment relationship that has predominated in advanced Western economies and has served as a benchmark for labour standards in the post-war period (Campbell and Burgess, 2001). The standard employment relationship is broadly defined as full-time, indefinite employment with a single employer (Connelly and Gallagher, 2004), and is the basis upon which many of the rights accorded to workers are guaranteed. These rights begin at the workplace with the guarantee of an ongoing employment relationship, protection against unfair dismissal, rights to representation and collective bargaining and extend to welfare state support to mitigate against the risks associated with ill-health, loss of employment and old age (Campbell and Burgess, 2001; Vosko, 2009).

2.1. Advancing the position of labour in post-war employment systems

The institutional protection accorded to labour through the “contractualisation” of the employment relationship (Deakin, 2001) embodied a trade-off or compromise between labour and capital that extended beyond the wage-labour relationship in the labour process. The contract of employment is a “societal” contract that is intricately bound up with the societal-wide adoption of a comprehensive welfare state, guaranteeing the minimum material support and social rights that are the basic conditions for participation in society (Supiot, 1999, cited in Deakin, 2001). Esping-Andersen (1990) theorises this arrangement as the “decommodification” of labour. Decommodification refers to the way in which labour-capital relationship is (partially) freed from the operation of market forces. State intervention in the labour-capital relation, through employment legislation, changes the balance of power between labour and capital, whilst welfare protections minimise the dependency of workers on employers for material subsistence. This allows workers to escape the restrictions of being propelled into wage-labour dependency, and broadens the scope of workers to intervene more freely in work and social life. Protective employment regulation lessens the impact of what Davidov (2002)

refers to as the “democratic deficit” in the employment relationship: the mechanisms lodged in the employment relationship by which the employee retains control over the employee. By placing limits on the power of the employer, labour regulation becomes “the labour market equivalent to social citizenship rights” (Esping-Andersen, 1999, p. 122), providing the means by which the structural power imbalance between labour and capital (McGovern, 2004) can be, in part at least, redressed. Deakin (2003) suggests a more analytically precise way of defining the intersection between the social and the economic (production) by viewing social rights as being at the very core of labour market relationships; the employment relationship being constituted by essential social rights such as the principle of fair treatment or the expectation that health and safety will be protected (Deakin, 2003, p. 74).

The concept of “decommodification” is commonly referred to in sociological accounts of employment (Gumbrell-McGormick, 2011), and frequently employed as a heuristic device to categorise welfare and employment regimes in cross-national studies. The focus upon the institutional underpinning of the standard employment relationship and associated social protection in setting out the parameters within which labour is able to challenge the power of capital within the workplace and without (through its trade unions) has the merit of viewing employment outcomes in relation to determining/causal factors external to the workplace. Other accounts of variants of “capitalisms” focus on other dimensions of economic systems as being influential in establishing/generating different forms of employer-employee relations. Theories of production regimes (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Helen, 2004, cited in Gallie, 2007) shift the emphasis away from the national level to the meso-level, focusing on the role of employers in coordinating meso-level relations between organisations and employees (industrial relations) according to competitive (market) arrangements (liberal market economies) or non-competitive (non-market) arrangements (coordinated market economies).

How production is coordinated has wide-reaching effects on economies and societies feeding through to systems of education and training, industrial relations, job quality and job security. There is an assumption that these dimensions of employment will have better outcomes for workers in coordinated market economies (Gallie, 2007, pp. 87-88). Liberal market economies

are characterised by a polarised skill structure and orientation to emerging international competitive markets, such as services, thus leaning towards a regulatory environment conducive to hiring and firing at low cost (Gallie, 2007, p. 88). Gallie (2007) critiques this approach for taking as its point of departure the role of employers in shaping institutional structures, thereby assigning a secondary role to governments and other crucial institutions such as organised labour – or other institutional mechanisms at work in the standard employment relationship – in creating a context for improved job quality and security. Gallie (2007) prefers instead the “power resources framework”, which underpins Esping-Andersen’s theory of welfare states (see Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 16), as an analytical tool by which to explain patterns of employment policies in terms of the competing power bases within societies viewed as “distinctive types with stable, mutually reinforcing systems of social relations” (Gallie, 2007, p. 100).

Explanations for employment regimes which result in less “commodified” labour accord a central role to the mobilising power of organised labour to bring about social-democratic political outcomes (Gallie, 2009). The institutions that constitute a national socio-economic framework (labour laws, social insurance, industrial relations, systems of vocational training etc.) are the manifestation of a bargain that has been struck between labour and capital (Huws, 2010, p. 3) in the context of a particular historically constituted balance of power between the two sides of the employment relationship (Grimshaw et al. 2010, p. 28). The standard employment relationship is one such institution which embodies societal expectations of employment (Rubery, 2005) and associated social rights. It is this societal contract which is under stress due to economic pressures and the increasing lack of security associated with employment, and the growth of the temporary employment relationship as an alternative to the standard employment relationship (Supiot, 1999, p. 8; Vosko, 2000, Chapter 4, cited in Davidov, 2004).

2.2. The excluded periphery

For much of the post-war period, employment which did not fit the standard arrangement of employment was confined to peripheral sectors of the economy and to marginal groups of

workers (women, younger workers and students, older workers, migrant workers) for whom the male breadwinner model of employment did not apply (Bosch, 2004, p. 618; Lewis et al., 2006). A number of studies since the 1990s have demonstrated the association between “atypical” work and bad working conditions, as measured by a range of indicators such as low pay, job satisfaction, job and task autonomy and discretion, limited opportunity for progression and lack of representation (Letourneux, 1998; Robson et al. 1999). Feminist accounts identified the gendered nature of part-time and temporary work and the ghettoisation of women in low paid jobs of poor quality (Vosko, 2008). The preponderance of low skilled work within atypical jobs reinforces the precarious situation of labour market “outsiders” with a high risk of unemployment and lack of training (Barbier et al., 2002, p. 92; Blossfeld et al., 2008; Lloyd et al., 2008). Disadvantage also extends to higher skilled agency workers who, whilst they may be able to command a higher wage, lack the benefits of permanent workers (Hocque and Kirkpatrick, 2006).

The growth of agency work beyond the groups and occupations that have traditionally constituted agency work is viewed, therefore, as undermining the standard employment relationship (Campbell and Burgess, 2001; Kalleberg, 2000; Goudswaard and Andries, 2002), through the imposition of a tougher social contract between employers and workers (Thurow, 1996). According to this perspective, the growth of agency work signifies a reassertion of the structural imbalance between capital and labour that was modified in favour of labour by the post-war employment paradigm. Agency work is a regression to “employment at will”, or forms of employment contingent on the needs of employers (Nolan, 2004; Degiuli and Kollmeyer, 2007; Peck and Theodore, 2007).

2.3. Labour market segmentation versus efficient labour market sorting

These critical accounts of atypical employment and “bad” jobs are typically informed by dual and labour market segmentation theories (Piore, 1971; Rubery, 1978). According to labour market segmentation theorists, the concentration of certain groups in jobs “on the margins” is a result of structural inequalities within society. In other words, groups such as women and migrant workers are over-represented in agency work (Vosko, 2009) because of societal-wide

structural constraints that act as a barrier to their full labour market integration (Rubery, 1978). The secondary labour market, characterised by low-skilled work with few opportunities to progress, reinforces this “ghettoisation”. Workers experience inferior conditions of work relative to those in the primary labour market (Rubery, 1978), and are more exposed to market governance of employment (Capelli et al., 1997; Crouch, 1997; Campbell and Burgess, 2001)

In contrast, neo-classical economic theories view labour markets in isolation. According to this view agency work is the result of the actions of rational economic actors. Markets lead to an efficient allocation of labour and within this agency work is a result of the “voluntary sorting” in the labour market. This is the view taken by proponents of human capital theory (Bergström and Storrie, 2003, p. 20). Inferior jobs go to those who have not invested in qualifications and skills. Individual characteristics of workers determine their position in the labour market and differentiation in labour market outcomes reflects the efficient labour market allocation based upon levels of human capital. From this perspective, assumptions are made about the characteristics of the temporary agency workforce; the most significant being that agency workers possess marginal labour market attachment; women with children for example, or older workers in the run up to retirement, or the long-term unemployed. Agency workers may also be younger workers who need to enhance their human capital as they make the transition from education to employment. Agency work, therefore, does not necessarily lead to the ghettoisation of those with marginal labour market attachment, it can be a “stepping stone” to labour market integration. Gray (2002) found that in the UK there was some evidence of agencies assisting long-term job seekers into employment; however, Forde and Slater (2005) found that a significant number of agency workers do not make the transition into permanent work. Similarly in France, evidence for the stepping stone function of agency work is mixed (Jourdain, 2002; Papinot, 2011). Stanworth and Druker (2004) argue that the labour market integration function of agency work is not unproblematic due to the disadvantage experienced by agency workers in the long term, in particular their lack of training.

There is a growing recognition that organisations are increasingly using agency workers to substitute for permanent employees (Stanworth and Druker, 2006; Coe et al., 2010; Belkacem

et al., 2011), although traditional functions of agency labour still remain. The next section examines explanations for employers' use of agency labour.

3. Explaining the growth in temporary agency work

Explaining employers' motivations for using temporary labour constitutes a large proportion of the literature on agency work. Coe et al. (2009) group literature on agency around four main themes: 1) agency work as numerical flexibility; 2) reduction of costs associated with hiring and firing; 3) reduction of labour costs and 4) externalisation of risks associated with permanent employment. These themes are examined below, before the broader factors beyond the organisation are explored.

3.1. Flexibility, cost reduction, and externalising risks

Numerical flexibility allows organisations to make rapid adjustments to their workforce. Sectors that rely upon regular cycles of activity (for example, agriculture or tourism) have traditionally used the flexibility of a casualised workforce to manage their labour force according to seasonal cycles. In addition, employers have turned to agency work intermittently to resolve unforeseen human resource issues arising from long term absence due to sick leave or maternity leave (Houseman et al. 2003). Beyond these traditional uses of agency work, authors have identified the use of numerical flexibility in a structural way to manage the workforce (Houseman et al., 2003; Purcell et al., 2004; Mitlacher, 2007). Atkinson's (1984) model of the "flexible firm" identified how organisations divided the workforce between core or permanent workers who possess complex and firm specific skills, and peripheral workers who are low-skilled and may be engaged in non-core activities (Coe et al., 2009, p. 7). The "flexible buffer" is viewed as being symptomatic of a trend towards a structural "two-tier, core/periphery employment system" (Peck and Theodore, 2007) in which the workforce is increasingly divided between a reduced core of workers who receive the benefits of the standard employment contract, and the peripheral ring of workers who are cheaper and easily disposable (Booth et al., 2002; Forde and Slater, 2005; Elciogly, 2010).

Pollert (1998) takes issue with the core-periphery model that became prominent in debates about labour market flexibility. The “flexible firm” thesis ignores the structured prevalence of labour market vulnerability prior to the context of the competitive pressures of global competition. By presenting flexibility as a “natural” reaction to the new conditions confronting business organisation, casualisation is seen as a “viable direction to take”, thus ignoring both the role of the state in facilitating labour market deregulation, and labour market conditions, such as unemployment, in providing a supply of cheap labour (Pollert, 1998, p. 310-311). In addition, the expansion of the “periphery” into sectors and activities previously associated as the core suggests that the core-periphery model is too simplistic. Equally, in some occupations such as hospitality, temporary and part-time work has long been the norm due to the specific requirements certain sectors of economic activity such as hospitality (Lucas, 2004). Whilst both Atkinson and his critics assumed that jobs on the “periphery” were substandard and a way of reducing labour costs (McGovern et al., 2004, p. 227), other authors have stressed the heterogeneous nature of agency work (Faure-Guichard, 1999; Guest, 2004; Forde and Slater, 2005; Davidov, 2005; Kornig, 2011). However, Forde and Slater (2005) emphasise that the identification of diversity amongst agency workers and agency work should not detract from a focus on the low-skill, low-paid and insecure employment which characterises agency labour.

The advantages of a more flexible workforce lie in the ability to adapt the workforce without incurring costs associated with hiring and firing. Employers also use agency labour to bypass the “burden” of employment relations; the statutory obligations that are a further cost and impediment to flexibility (Davidov, 2004; Forde, 2006). Risks associated with permanent employees reside in the legal responsibilities towards permanent staff arising out of the obligations of standard employment regulations (Coe et al., 2010). These responsibilities cover unfair dismissal, compliance with health and safety regulations, employee benefits and training. Bypassing regulatory requirements is a further way of minimising labour costs (Gray, 2002) by transferring responsibilities to the temporary employment agency and freeing up organisations to engage in practices that they consider to be competitive (Connell and Burgess, 2002; Purcell et al., 2004). Additionally, some regulations become applicable only when the number of direct

employees reaches a legally defined threshold; agency labour therefore can keep employee numbers below that threshold (Davidov, 2004).

The reduction of direct and indirect labour costs is frequently cited as a driver for agency labour (Grimshaw et al., 2001; Gray, 2002; Forde, 2008; Koene et al., 2004; Larbi, 2008; Thommes et al., 2010). Agency workers in the EU15 receive lower than average wages (Vosko, 2009). On the hand, whilst evidence points to the lower wages of agency workers, at least for the bottom end of the labour market (Thébaud-Mony, 2000; Storrie, 2002; Arrowsmith, 2006), since the agency receives a fee for its services, it does not automatically follow that agency labour results in the reduction of fixed labour costs (Coe et al., 2009; Vosko, 2009). This has to be weighed up against the reduction employer related social costs (Forde, 2001; Ward et al., 2001), and the lack of incremental wage rises due to length of service (Erhel et al., 2009), which can result in employers paying less for more experienced older agency workers.

There are also additional advantages that underpin the trend to outsource non-core activities, such as advertising and recruitment (Coe et al., 2010). Agency work provides a low-cost way of screening prospective employees (Autor, 2001; Booth et al., 2002; Gray, 2002; Forde and Slater, 2005; Glaymann, 2005). Employment agencies “first source” workers for clients who are then able to observe performance, productivity and behaviour before making decisions about permanent hiring (Autor, 2001; Booth et al., 2002; Mitlacher, 2007). Coe et al. (2010) refer to this process as “trying them out for size” over a longer period of time than would be possible under normal probationary periods.

McGovern et al. (2004), suggest that “union busting” is a further rationale for agency work since agency workers are less likely to be unionised, whilst Peck and Theodore (2007) refer to agency labour as a mechanism for sourcing labour for jobs which are considered undesirable, such as assembly, packing and loading and other physically demanding jobs. Agency work appears to serve a variety of functions although its rapid expansion across a wide range of sectors and occupations does suggest that organisations are turning to agency labour as a means of minimising costs associated with permanent employment. From the standpoint of neo-

classical economic theory⁵, the growth of agency work is not problematic, since it reflects the rational action of the employer seeking to reduce transaction costs and the employee who is either seeking flexible employment by choice or who lacks the “human capital” necessary for secure work (Coe et al., 2010). Neo-liberalism, which dominates the political and economic landscape of Europe at regional and national levels, emphasises the employer side of this economic rationale, with organisations adopting a variety of strategies, including the use of temporary agency work, in order to enhance their competitiveness (Bergström and Storrie, 2003). The reduction of costs associated with standard employment regulations is necessary and desirable whilst the presence of temporary agency workers allows organisations to “efficiently” respond to economic shocks or changes in product markets by rapidly adjusting the workforce (Nollen, 1996).

3.2. The role of regulation

CIETT, the International Confederation of Private Employment Agencies, situates the success of its industry within a context of deregulation and liberalisation (CIETT, 2011). National governments have facilitated employers’ use of agency work through legislation removing regulatory barriers that had previously restricted the scope of services that employment intermediaries can engage in (Campbell and Burgess, 2001). Within the general trend to deregulation, inter-country variation still exists, which provides one explanation for differences in rates of agency work between countries. If, as discussed above, agency labour is a way of sidestepping regulation governing permanent employment, agency labour should be more prevalent in countries with strict employment protection legislation (Coutrot, 2000; Golsch, 2003; Mitlacher, 2007). However, recent studies have shown that this is not necessarily the case. Koene et al. (2004) found that there was no association between national legislative frameworks governing employment and rates of agency work. The country with the highest rate of agency work in the EU, the UK, is the country with the weakest employment protection legislation

⁵ In accordance with the theories of neo-classical economics, which views the market as the ultimate regulator, temporary agency work is a consequence of the market “sorting” those with “marginal labour market attachment” into peripheral forms of employment.

(EPL) amongst EU15 countries. France, with the strongest EPL, also has a high prevalence of agency work.⁶

Whilst agency work has flourished within the overarching context of liberalisation of the temporary agency sector, the relatively high proportions of agency work at opposite ends of the EPL spectrum, coupled with the expansion of agency work in the countries that lie between these “extremes”, point to a general growth of agency work regardless of the specificities of the regulatory context. Koene et al. (2004) attempt to address country variation by bringing other less tangible factors to explain higher rates of agency work into their analysis. They conclude that, beyond, the general “business imperative”, national cultures may explain differences. Lower rates may be attributable to the persistence of deeply embedded negative attitudes towards precarious forms of employment. The authors suggest that the relatively low rate of agency work in Sweden, a country that has considerably liberalised legislation governing the use of agency labour, may be due to a cultural antipathy towards agency work, in contrast to, for example, the Netherlands, where agency work is culturally more acceptable. So whilst permanent employment and the termination of permanent employment is highly regulated in Sweden, levels of agency work remain relatively low, whereas in the Netherlands and the UK, levels of agency work are higher, although there is less of an imperative to avoid regulations governing permanent employment in these countries since it is easier to terminate employment contracts.

This illustrates the difficulty in unpacking different national characteristics as explanatory factors behind employment trends. Koene et al. (2004) point out that in the example of Sweden, it is not merely cultural attitudes to agency work that have put a brake on its expansion.⁷ Strong labour unions also play an influential role in shaping the employment landscape. This influence may be both direct and indirect (i.e. influencing attitudes to precarious work). On the other hand, in France, where there is a strong tradition of hostility to agency labour and other forms of precarious employment, and a strong attachment to the post-war “norms” of employment

⁶ See CIETT, 2011, p. 23.

⁷ Since 2004, temporary agency work in Sweden has been growing significantly. See Eurofound country report: <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/studies/tn0807019s/se0807019q.htm>.

(Barbier, 2005), agency work flourishes. For Koene et al. (2004) this is due to the weakness of French unions and their corresponding inability to combat the growth of agency work. The factors which give rise to agency labour therefore are complex and are not easily explained by isolated elements of “employment regimes”.

3.3. The role of temporary employment agencies

A small group of authors have begun to examine the role of a hitherto overlooked factor in the expansion of agency work – employment agencies. As highlighted by Forde et al. (2008) and Coe et al. (2010), accounts of the growth of agency work tend to present temporary work agencies as passive agents responding to market trends, providing organisations with the flexibility to adjust their workforce on the one hand, and responding to changing employment preferences on the other. The temporary agency work sector also promotes this neutral economic vision of their business.⁸ An emerging body of research, predominantly based in the US, has challenged this notion of agencies by examining how the temporary work industry has actively engaged in practices that have transformed the structure of employment relations at local, national and international levels (Peck et al. 2005; Coe et al., 2010, Elciogly, 2010). Coe et al. (2010) note that temporary staffing agencies are rendered invisible in much of the literature even though, as profit-making entities, they are legitimate subjects for research. Building a coherent account of agency work, therefore, involves theorising the role of labour market intermediaries (Benner, 2002, cited in Coe et al., 2010), starting from an acknowledgement of the activities, practices and discourses of the industry (Peck and Theodore, 2002; Peck et al. 2005) that enable them to influence the construction of the market within which they operate. Agency labour, as a particular form of labour flexibility, has grown not only because of the choices and actions of the firms and workers that are engaged in agency labour, it is also the outcome of the business strategies of agencies which are taking on a bigger role in labour market mediation. The business strategies of the big firms have involved a process of internationalisation and diversification (Peck et al. 2005; Ward, 2004). Diversification of

⁸ See the various annual reports of CIETT (International Confederation of Private Employment Agencies), for example CIETT Annual Report 2011, and PRISME (*Professionnels de l'intérim, services et métiers de l'emploi*) which are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

activities has facilitated the “normalisation” of agency work in wider areas of the economy, thus challenging traditional employment relations norms (Coe, et al., 2010).

For Peck and Theodore (2007), the role of the temporary employment industry in the US is unambiguous. The “industrial and regulatory transformation” (Peck and Theodore, 2007, p. 183) that has taken place in the US is the outcome of processes that include lobbying, seeking out new geographical markets and strategic alliances with large user-firms. Through this, powerful multinational companies have played an essential role in the transformation of agency beyond the narrower economic rationale of “ad hoc labour substitution” to a more strategic and systematic labour market function. In the context of intense competitive pressures, such companies come to depend upon agencies as part of an overall strategy to keep down wages and reduce social costs associated with employment (Peck and Theodore, 2007, p. 189).

Coe et al., (2010) draw upon the US literature to investigate the operation of temporary work agencies in transforming agency work into a form of work that is integral to the business strategies of client (user) organisations. They place particular emphasis on the campaigning activities of CIETT which is fast going beyond its remit as an international trade body and is becoming a campaigning, “independent” labour market commentator, building upon the national trade organisations in the US and the UK which have campaigned vigorously to reshape norms and expectation of employment. The business strategies of employment agencies have led to an expansion of services, facilitated by the liberalisation of the sector which opened up the range of activities that can be carried out by employment agencies (Glaxmann, 2005; Peck and Theodore, 2007; Kinnie et al. 2008). Recent legislation in France has permitted agencies to be involved in permanent placements, whilst strategic partnerships between governments and key agencies accord a key role to agencies in the labour market integration of young workers in areas of high unemployment.

Echoing Peck and Theodore (2007), Coe et al. (2010) argue that agencies cannot, therefore, be viewed as simply being “embedded” in national labour markets. They increasingly have an “institutional place” that enables firms to engage in forms of “intermediated employment

practices” which “otherwise would be logistically and socially infeasible” (Peck et al., 2005). Therefore, research needs to broaden out from too narrow a focus on employers and/or the national regulatory context, in order to take account of the institutional space that agencies occupy. To do otherwise is to underestimate “the wider institutional context in which staffing industries operate” and is likely to result in missing the “complex and variegated ways in which distinctive staffing markets are continually produced (and reproduced) through interactions between [these] various elements” (Coe et al., 2009, pp.15-16).

4. The profile of agency workers in Europe: continuity amidst change

The expansion of agency work to a broader range of sectors and occupations has, to some extent, modified the profile of agency workers (Koene et al., 2004; Larbi, 2008). The weakening of the “job-for-life” with one employer which underpinned expectations and norms of employment has been accompanied by the emergence of skilled agency workers (McCann, 2006, p. 89). A new kind of “voluntary temp” has been identified and associated with profound changes in the organisation of work. These are the “boundaryless workers” (Guest, 2004) that have come to symbolise the new world of “portfolio” career paths (Knell, 2000). Equipped with high levels of human capital, these mobile workers employ the services of labour market intermediaries to sell their skills, operating as “free agents” actively intervening in a changing employment market (Albert and Bradley, 1998). According to this view, employment intermediaries are neutral facilitators in a labour market driven by changing preferences in supply and demand. It is an account that corresponds to the image promoted by the temporary agency industry, which emphasises the “win-win” outcome of agency working, meeting both the needs of businesses and the shifting preferences of employees for more flexible working arrangements (Reilly, 1998; CIETT, 2011). However, data on agency work contrasts with this positive image. Whilst professional agency workers have expanded the ranks of the agency workforce, the weight given to high-skilled agency workers in the recent literature does not do justice to the continued presence of enduring forms of low-skilled agency work.

Capturing the profile of temporary agency workers is hampered by the lack of robust data. Most EU countries have only recently begun to distinguish between temporary agency work and other

forms of temporary employment in Labour Force Surveys.⁹ Labour Force Surveys are also limited in their capacity to reflect forms of work that are carried out by low-skilled and, frequently, migrant workers (BERR, 2008, p. 2), and cross-country comparisons are complicated by some countries having more reliable data than others. Despite these limitations, Bergström and Storrie (2005) show that temporary agency work is still dominated by low-skilled work carried out by sectors of the labour force traditionally viewed as “disadvantaged” (women, youth, ethnic minorities, migrant workers) – a finding confirmed by national studies (Thébaude-Mony, 2001; Peunter, 2003; Pérez, 2003). Data collated by CIETT confirms the prevalence of workers with low-levels of qualifications. In most countries, the majority of agency workers have no qualifications beyond secondary school (CIETT, 2011, p. 32). On a European-wide level, three out of four agency workers have “at best finished their secondary education” (CIETT, 2011, p. 8). CIETT interprets this data as confirming the important role agency work plays in helping “low-skilled workers enter the labour market and gain valuable experience”.

Differences in skill levels between countries reflect the different sectoral distribution of agency work in Western Europe, which takes three distinct forms (Vosko, 2009, p. 397). In the first group, temporary agency work is heavily concentrated in manufacturing (Austria, France, Netherlands and Portugal). In the second group, services predominate (Spain and Sweden). In the final group (Belgium, Denmark, Finland and Italy), there is a mixed sectoral distribution. Vosko (2009) adds a further group consisting of Norway and the UK, where a relatively high proportion of agency workers are employed in the public sector.

Although, studies of the UK have identified the growth of professional and skilled agency workers, particularly in the public sector (Forde and Slater, 2005), the proposition that this confirms the rise of the high-skilled, highly motivated voluntary temporary worker (Bernhard-Oettell, 2008, p. 570) has been challenged by a number of studies. Forde and Slater (2005) situate the rise of the skilled public sector “temp” in the context of budgetary constraints within the UK public sector leading to the externalisation of sections of the workforce. Other

⁹ See Arrowsmith 2009, p. 5 for a summary of the methodological issues of national datasets.

associated factors also seem to be driving this trend. Carey (2007) and De Ruyter (2007) suggest that “push” factors arising from the deterioration of employment in the UK public sector lie behind decisions of public servants such as social workers, nurses and teachers to turn to agency work as a preferred employment option, thus accelerating the externalisation of employment relations. Authors like Forde and Slater (2005) argue that the emphasis upon high skill agency staffing by the industry diverts attention away from the growing numbers of migrant workers in the UK that are supplied to the hospitality, agriculture and food processing industries via employment intermediaries (French and Mörhke, 2006; McKay and Markova, 2008; Anderson, 2010).

Whilst a common feature across all European countries is the youthful profile of agency workers, there are significant gender differences between countries due to the sectoral distribution of agency work. Where there is a high proportion of agency workers in manufacturing, agency workers are overwhelmingly male; in Austria, France and Germany, over 70% of agency workers are men (CIETT, 2011). Vosko (2009) argues that patterns and trends in agency work suggest a deterioration in the employment situations of some male occupational groups alongside the continuing economic hardships amongst “equity-seeking” groups, such as women and workers lacking national citizenship rights (Vosko, 2009, p. 398). Whilst these latter groups continue to be significant within the “secondary” labour market, indigenous male workers are now expanding the ranks of the agency workforce, suggesting that traditional supply side explanations of agency labour do not hold. Data on the “volition” of agency workers, that is whether agency workers are choosing agency work over permanent work, reinforces the view of the constrained nature of agency work; 72% of agency workers in the EU15 countries report that they are in this form of employment due to the unavailability of permanent jobs (Vosko, 2009). This holds true regardless of gender, the figures are 73% for women compared to 70% for men (2006 data), further undermining a key “supply side” explanation that agency work is a preferred option for women combining paid employment with caring responsibilities. The 2011 CIETT report contains similar data regarding volition, although the organisation chooses to highlight in a bullet point that “[A] significant proportion of agency workers do not seek permanent employment”.

5. Assessing the “job quality” of agency workers

There is little empirical evidence of the working conditions of agency workers. An early cross-national study on the situation of agency workers was carried out in 2002 by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound). The study brought together a variety of data sources from the EU15 countries (official statistics, government reports, anecdotal evidence, reports from social partners). The study concluded that in the key indicators of job quality (occupational health and safety, incidence of workplace accidents, choice of contract, autonomy in the workplace), agency work is associated with poor quality work (Storrie, 2002). In another Eurofound study (2003), agency workers were shown to experience less stress and occupational health problems, whilst a minority of agency workers appear to conform to the free agent construct, citing freedom and independence and better work-life balance as positive aspects of agency work (Eurofound, 2003, p. 14), reflecting the “top end” of the agency labour market (Coe et al., 2010, p. 10).

Eurofound also carries out regular five-year surveys of working conditions in Europe, the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS). The dataset is relatively small (approximately 30,000 workers in each country), so the sample of agency workers is also small. However, the surveys do give an indication of the issues that face agency workers. Whilst there appears to have been little change in the conditions of agency work over the course of the three surveys carried out since 1990, there are a number of themes arising from the data. Data from the third survey (2000) showed that agency workers were the least satisfied with their working conditions. They were more exposed to jobs that involved working in a painful position; more likely to be working in jobs that involved repetitive tasks than other workers; and had less control over hours. In some dimensions of job quality, conditions appeared to have worsened over time for agency workers, for example, task autonomy and having enough time to finish tasks. Whilst intensification of pace due to external demand increased from 1995 to 2000 for workers on all types of employment contracts, there was a marked increase from 53% to 60% for agency workers. The agency contract was also shown to reduce the likelihood of being informed of workplace risks, though the perception of being at risk from occupational health hazards was lowest amongst agency workers (Paoli and Merllié 2001). Secondary analysis of

data from the Third EWCS by Nienhüser and Matiaske (2006) found that the principle of non-discrimination (parity between agency workers and workers on the standard employment contract) did not protect agency workers from direct discrimination in the workplace.

The Fourth EWCS (2005) highlighted how agency workers are actively dissatisfied with their working conditions. Agency workers also reported much higher levels of job insecurity than permanent workers, and relatively higher levels than workers on fixed-term contracts, despite in many countries being “employed” by an agency, in contrast to accounts of agency work which emphasise the positive role of agencies in facilitating labour market integration. Periods of economic stress also increase anxieties over lack of job security. In 2005, 43% of agency workers were concerned about job insecurity, compared with 10% of workers on permanent contracts and 35% of workers on fixed-term contracts. Initial findings from the Fifth EWCS, carried out in 2010, in the aftermath of the 2008 banking crisis, showed that 53% of agency workers felt anxious about job insecurity, compared with 11% of permanent workers and 39% of workers on fixed-term contracts.

Qualitative studies of agency work yield a more ambiguous picture of the world of the agency work which undermines generalised accounts of agency work as categorically “bad” (Silla et al., 2004). The literature suggests that identifying the roots of disadvantage is not straightforward. Contrasting findings may be an indication that job characteristics are more influential than employment status. Storrie (2002), for example, points out the difficulty in differentiating between factors related to agency work as a specific form of employment and those factors that are related to the jobs that agency workers do. The body of qualitative research is relatively limited in its scope and much of it focuses on examining the claims of the new world of the highly skilled “temp”. One of the earliest studies is Albert and Bradley’s (1998) comparative study of female accountants. Those on agency contracts were found to be actively choosing agency employment to gain what they perceived to be control over their work. Subsequent studies in the UK, however, suggest that positive reporting of agency work may be the result of an illusion of control or a means of escaping the deteriorating conditions of permanent employment (Druker and Stanworth, 2004; Kirkpatrick and Hocque, 2006; Carey, 2007; de

Ruyter, 2007). Research in Sweden has led to similar conclusions (Storrie, 2007). Grimshaw et al. (2003) advance the notion that the growth of agency work amongst higher skilled workers might be reasonably viewed as a form of “individualised resistance” against the degradation of professional standards, thus locating agency work within broader changes in employment in general.

On the other hand, there are other studies that do echo Albert and Bradley (1998), for example, Torka and Schyns (2007) and Tailby (2005). However, Tailby (2005) found that negative perceptions of employment in the NHS influenced positive attitudes to agency work. Carey (2007) raised the issue of whether what might be taking place is a process of deskilling or “proletarianisation” due to the lack of training and development opportunities for non-permanent staff. Such observations constitute important challenges to approaches which seek to explain the growth of agency work in terms of changing supply side preferences. Agency work is less an alluring employment option and more an alternative to the deterioration of standard employment (Grimshaw et al., 2003). Underpinning these socio-economic analytic approaches to agency work is the idea that it is “best understood when contextualised within broader trends, most notably the linked economic, political and cultural processes of globalisation and marketisation” (Carey, 2009, p. 558).

Qualitative research has drawn attention to the impact of fragmented patterns of employment on the experience of work and relationships with colleagues. Frequent job changes, multiple relationships and transitory, weak bonds with user organisations are “core components” of the agency contract (Galais and Moser, 2009). The constant change of workplace means that agency workers are unable to forge the bonds necessary for supportive workplace interactions, bonds which are important for well-being in the workplace (Storrie, 2002, p. 47). Similarly, in a Swedish study, Isaksson and Bellagh (1999) reveal the negative effects of the fragmentation of working lives that agency workers experience. Thus, the lack of a sense of collective and shared identity has led some agency workers, who have previously sought the “freedom” of agency work, back into more secure employment (Carey, 2007). In addition, agency workers are expected to frequently switch to new duties and roles and learn new firm-specific norms over a

short period of time (Druker and Stanworth, 2004). Proponents of agency work present changing working environments in a positive light, arguing that agency workers derive satisfaction from the variety and challenge of constant change (CIETT, 2000 and 2007).

On the whole there has been little research on agency work in low-skilled occupations, as the literature has tended to focus on emerging forms of agency work in professional and skilled occupations, although there have been recent qualitative studies that have attempted to capture the experience of agency workers in low-skilled jobs. In the UK, researchers have looked at low-skilled agency workers through the lens of migrant workers. May et al. (2006) carried out extensive qualitative research amongst London's migrant workforce carrying out low-skilled, low-paid work, in many instances employed on agency contracts. The authors refer to this workforce as a "reserve army of labour" that exists alongside London's highly paid professional workforce employed in the financial and other professional service sectors in an increasingly polarised and ethnically divided landscape. May et al.'s (2006) analytical framework focuses in particular on the role of the State in shaping this "migrant division of labour". Recent migrants to the UK are typically employed via temporary employment agencies despite a preference for direct employment. They face poor working conditions, low pay and lack of opportunity to progress (Anderson et al., 2006; French and Mohrke, 2006). A more recent study by McKay and Markova (2008) examined employers' use of migrant agency labour in food processing, care work and cleaning, and found that migrant agency workers were used both to cover seasonal peaks (in particular in food processing) but also as alternative to permanent staff. Research on low-skilled agency in the UK is characterised by the intersection of ethnicity and migration status, reflecting a concern for the abuse of migrant labour by activities of small, and until recently, largely unregulated, agencies operating in a similar fashion to "gang masters" (French and Mohrke, 2006).

In France, Glaymann and Grima (2008) looked at how low skilled agency workers in the Paris region responded to their position in labour market. This study is notable in that the authors reject the dichotomy between the passive "vulnerable" agency worker and the active "empowered" knowledge worker. These low-skilled agency workers, despite their lack of

“market capacities”, are able to exercise choice within the constraints of their socio-economic position. The study concluded that low-skilled agency workers are a diverse group in terms of the strategies they adopt. On the other hand, strategies are primarily framed by a desire to reach the final goal, that of permanent employment.

Despite the high levels of agency work in the car sector, there has been surprisingly little research on this group of workers working in a key economic sector. The car sector has been an important site of in-depth qualitative studies, and whilst agency workers increasingly figure in this research they have not, until recently, been the focus of specific investigations. Beaud and Pialoux’s study of the PSA plant in Sochaux (1999) included interview data from agency workers who had been recruited en masse to cope with increased demand. They were found to experience harsher conditions compared with permanent employees and to have a lack of individual or collective voice by which they could counter management prerogatives. A more recent study by Hatzfeld (2004) of the same plant concluded that agency workers were subject to tighter control and more surveillance than permanent workers. The use of agency work in the auto sector has been explained with reference to the “buffer” function (Beaud and Pialoux, 1999). As with some studies in the UK (Garrahan and Stewart, 1992; Danford, 1998), agency workers in the auto sector are discussed not only from the standpoint of how their experience compares with that of permanent workers but also as a way of illustrating the range of labour resourcing techniques that are employed to manage a potentially recalcitrant workforce (Bouquin, 2006, p. 155). More recent research by Gorgeu and Mathieu (2011) which focused on agency workers within the auto sector, has identified how temporary agency work serves an essential function in the French car sector as both an instrument of flexibility and a way of screening for permanent workers, as well as describing harsh working conditions, lack of autonomy and lack of respect in the workplace. The authors found that agency workers were engaged in a dangerous trade-off between health and employment. Gorgeu’s and Mathieu’s (2011) work is an important contribution to research on the role and consequences of agency

work in the auto sector in France. This and the other French research described above is discussed in more detail in Chapters 3 and 6.

6. The triadic employment relationship

An emerging body of research has examined the triadic employment relationship as a defining feature of agency work that has wide-ranging effects on employment outcomes for agency workers. For Vosko (2009) the precarious nature of agency work relates not only to the temporary nature of the contract, it is also explained by this triadic relationship. The traditional bilateral relations between employee and employer, with clearly defined obligations and responsibilities, is replaced by one in which employer responsibilities are not only divided with the agency, there are also characterised by an ambiguity as to where the dividing lines of responsibility lie. This is particularly the case in countries such as the UK where, due to a lack of clear legislation, the agency worker has, through case law, been denied the status of employee. In most European countries, including those that have recently legislated for a form of employment which had for a long time been illegal (for example, Greece), the formal legal employer is the agency. The agency takes on “employment-related responsibilities such as hiring and firing and dismissal as well as administrative responsibilities related to pay and benefits” (Vosko, 2009, p. 398). The agency may also take on other functions related to human resources such as interviewing, testing and screening. The user organisation remains responsible for overseeing the direct management of the labour process/task, whilst “outsourcing” other employer responsibilities and obligations (Davidov, 2004).

6.1. Fragmentation, complexity and ambiguity

As a result of the division of responsibilities between agency and user organisation, agency workers are subject to a two-way fragmentation which hinders collective action and solidarity. First, agency workers are separated from the permanent workers they work alongside since they do not share the same employer. Because wages and benefits are the responsibility of the agency, agency workers do not receive the same pay as permanent workers (typically lower, although in some cases they may receive more), and they are denied the package of rights and benefits associated with the permanent employment contract (Davidov, 2004). The triangular

relationship, therefore, creates obstacles to worker representation and collective bargaining, since legal and managerial responsibilities are divided between two different entities (Peck and Theodore, 2003; Kalleberg, 2000). Furthermore, whilst there will be an overlap between the kinds of concerns that could be subject to negotiation and bargaining, there will also be issues that are not shared, for example, compensation between assignments (Davidov, 2004). Second, agency workers are isolated from other agency workers, who form the natural constituency for collective bargaining. This second layer of fragmentation hinders collective organisation and employee voice, undermining the ability of agency workers to combat low pay and bad conditions, thus reinforcing their precarious status. The structure of the triadic relationship, therefore, operates against the process of employer-employee workplace negotiation – a key feature of the standard employment relationship (Cheng, 2010, p.81). There are instances of collective organisation and representation, albeit bedevilled by the obstacles associated with organising a temporary workforce, scattered across various sites. Where collective bargaining occurs, it is normally with the agency, the site of the longer-term stable relationship (Davidov, 2004), as is the case in Sweden and France (Storrie, 2004).

The situation is further complicated by the complexity and ambiguity of the triadic relationship that renders the agency worker vulnerable in the face of two “employers”. It is not always clear in legal frameworks what responsibilities can be expected to lie with the agency. In the formal legal sense, in most European countries, the employment relationship is between the agency worker and the agency, whilst the “work relation” is between the employee and user organisation (Gonos, 1997). The coordination of work (managerial control) takes place at the site of labour, whilst the employment relationship – the contractual relationship by which social and economic risk is alleviated through social insurance, holiday pay etc. – is transferred to the agency (Deakin, 2001) and the agency worker lacks the security and full range of social rights available under the standard employment contract. However, this division is not straightforward. Where strong protective legislation is in place, for example in France, certain employer, for example, health and safety, responsibilities are transferred to the user organisation (Davidov, 2004). Where there is ambiguity over responsibility, as the case in the UK, risk tends to fall on the shoulders of the agency workers (Deakin, 2001).

6.2. Redefining models of workplace behaviour and attitudes

Employment and organisational studies are also concerned with how the employment relationship functions within sites of work through the behaviour of individuals who relinquish their autonomy to the control of managers. The theories that have been developed to understand the dynamics of the relationship between worker and employer/management are based upon the assumption of a two-way relationship between employing organisation and employee in a single site. The growth of agency work has led to a reappraisal and/or reworking of these theories.

A key question that organisational behaviour research seeks to answer is what factors contribute to optimal function in the workplace (De Cuyper et al. 2011, p. 5). From the human relations movement to contemporary human resource management, enhancing output is a core goal (Thompson, 1983, p. 15). The field of organisational behaviour (OB) has incorporated approaches from psychology to examine what kind of workplace behaviour and attitudes generate positive employment outcomes that can enhance performance/productivity and what organisations can do to cultivate such behaviours and attitudes. Essential constructs in OB are the psychological contract, organisational commitment and organisational citizenship behaviour, which describe the affective bond that the worker has towards the employing organisation. These constructs assume a dyadic employer and employee relationship and the mutual obligations and expectations that flow from this within the framework of the standard employment relationship (Connelly et al. 2011) and are not readily transferable to a tripartite relation whereby the agency worker “simultaneously fulfils obligations to more than one employer through the same act and behaviour” (Gallagher and McLean Parks, 2001). The absence of mutual expectations and obligations leads to a rupture in the “psychological contract” and organisational commitment is undermined by the existence of two potential recipients or loci of commitment – the agency and the user organisation (Gallois, 2000; Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2006, Gallagher and Sverke, 2005, p. 192; Lacroux and Larbi, 2008). Connelly et al. (2011) found that agency workers could engage in either productive or contra-productive behaviour depending on the direction of commitment and that this tended to be influenced by whether or not their employment status corresponded to preferences. Those who sought permanent employment were more likely to engage in productive behaviour towards the user,

by excelling in the workplace as a strategy to increase their chances of permanent employment (De Cuyper, 2011).

In a subsequent study Connelly et al., (2011), identified “spill-over” effects in which positive feelings towards user organisations could spill-over to the agency that placed them there, indicating the complexity that can arise from multiple affiliations (Galais and Moser, 2009). Drawing upon social exchange theory, Connelly et al. (2011) go on to show that perceptions of social justice (or lack thereof) affect workplace commitment and productivity. The authors argue that employers therefore should build upon this, seeking ways to enhance feelings of social justice amongst agency workers by, for example, ensuring parity of treatment, pay and conditions (Chambel and Sobral, 2011). A number of studies on work in the auto sector in France have referred to the way in which aspirations for permanent employment can influence the behaviour of agency workers (Gorgeu and Mathieu, 1998; Beaud and Pialoux, 1999; Bouqin, 2006). However, these studies discuss this from a different theoretical perspective; one in which “motivation” to perform is rooted in the basic inequality of the labour-capital relationship, and the specifically insecure nature of agency labour. Thus agency workers are subject to intense exploitation that obliges them to work harder (Larbi, 2008). Expression of commitment to the agency may also flow from a sense of dependency on the agency for the next assignment (Davidov, 2004).

By focusing on the behaviour of workers within the organisational setting, OB approaches fail to take into account the nature of work and the employment relationship within the wider context of societal inequality (Thompson, 1983, p. 13). Managerial attempts to engineer behaviour in the workplace, even when this entails improving the organisational environment of the workplace setting and other means of enhancing the subjective experience of labour in the production process, are not simply the product of a neutral or benign process of organisational efficiency. At the heart of managerial control lies the essential nature of the capitalist labour process, by which labour power is transformed into a product that embodies use value and exchange value. The pressure upon agency workers to be motivated and work hard is, therefore more usefully understood with reference to theories that view the function of management as

being fundamentally one of transforming potential labour (labour power) into realised labour. This brings forth workplace interactions which can be understood less as “affective ties” of loyalty and commitment to the employer and more as a complex and changing set of behaviours (consent, compliance and resistance) through which the worker carves out his/her positionality within an unequal social relationship.

6.3. Regulating labour through the triadic relationship

An emerging strand of research locates the experience of agency workers in the labour process conceived of as a site of control (and resistance) as management endeavours to elicit consent to work from its workforce. This research draws upon labour process analysis (LPA) which is examined in more detail in Chapter 3. This body of literature examines the way traditional conceptualisations of control are challenged by the triadic relationship and the presence of multiple sites of work that define the working lives of agency workers. One of the first attempts to theorise the “triangular relationship” with reference to labour control and regulation was Gottfried’s (1992) account of US agency workers in clerical positions. From her observations of the intake process of five temporary employment agencies, Gottfried reappraised theories of control based upon “industrial models” (Burawoy, 1985; Edwards, 1990) in order to capture what she referred to as the “institutional space” that spans multiple locations – since for temporary agency workers “management of production and management of labour reside in separate organisational domains” (Gottfried, 1992, p. 447). New strategies of control emerge from this fragmented employment relationship, strategies which extend beyond the site of production. The outcome is a dualistic system of control, a concept that captures both the two distinct structures of management and the different roles of each in regulating and managing agency work, and the two levels of control that operate at the site of the agency, resulting in a “flexible frontier of control”. Bureaucratic control refers to the way agencies rationalise jobs by setting out the tasks, competencies and responsibilities of the assignment. Decentralised control is the process by which agencies indirectly control agency the agency worker by “decentering regulation and dispersing responsibility to control to individual workers” (Gottfried, 1992, p. 446). Self-disciplinary pressure arises from the continuous need to gain access to paid employment via the temporary employment agency. The agency also cedes, by way of the

contract with the client organisation, management (control) over the labour of the agency workers, resulting in a dual, overlapping system of sanctions. The agency worker must then acquiesce simultaneously in the rules and procedures of the agency as well as those of the client organisation.

This points to an intensification of control in the labour process arising out of the triadic relationship and the pressures associated with labour market vulnerability linked with the lack of a permanent contract. This compels agency workers to accept working conditions that they are unable to influence and which are likely to be inferior to those of permanent co-workers. Vosko (2000) observed this process of acquiescence in her study of “temps” in Canada:

In registering with a temporary help agency, temporary help workers surrender their right to choose both their worksite and their direct employer....They also yield their right to select freely their place within the division of labour, because in signing an employment agreement with the agency, the temporary help workers forfeit their ability to choose their preferred type of work.

(Vosko, 2000, p. 19, cited in Coe et al., 2010)

However, Gottfried (1992) argues that even in this disadvantageous context, consent can be relevant. Both employment agencies and user organisations tap into the future aspirations of agency workers to encourage workplace behaviours of consent and compliance, engaging in discourses that correspond to aspirations, so that flexibility/job insecurity becomes a key dimension of labour regulation. Smith's (1998) study of temporary agency workers – again in the US – sets out to explain why workers “consent to labour under conditions of marginality and disadvantage with which those jobs are typically associated” (Smith, 1998, p. 411) She also identifies flexibility as a mechanism for control in the context of participatory workplace settings. The temporary agency employment contract “conditions participation and compliance of workers in positions that are formally organised as non-permanent” (Smith, 1998, p. 414). Dispersed control embodies self-discipline stemming from the perception by agency workers that assignments function as a screening mechanism for permanent recruitment. Their desire for

a “real job” led them to engage in “deep self-discipline that well served a production system based on individual initiative, decision-making and responsibility”. The agency worker is, therefore, under pressure to present her/himself as a “reliable contingent” worker (Peck and Theodore, 2001) who has to deliver an error-free performance in the belief that this will increase their chances of obtaining a permanent job. For Smith, this was a “powerful tool of control over temp workers and served to cement their acceptance of their marginalised labour market status” (Smith, 1998, p.424).

Gottfried (1992) also described how agencies project an image of being a placement service, which resonates well with the aspirations of the agency worker, calling attention to what Collinson (1987) refers to as the reciprocal and voluntary nature of temporary work, which serves as “an ideological mechanism for obscuring the reality of low pay and lack of job mobility and carrying the contradictory message of worker self reliance and attachment to the firm” (Gottfried, 1992, p. 451). More recent research has developed the theme of ideological control further. Degiuli and Kollmeyer (2007) draw upon both Gramsci’s theories of hegemony and Burawoy’s theory of hegemonic despotism to present an account of how temporary work agencies are engaged in actively constructing their own narratives to render agency work socially acceptable. Their starting point is the acknowledgement that “economic systems must develop certain capacities to align the actions of individual workers with the specific goals of their employers” (Degiuli and Kollmeyer, 2007, p. 497) and that “labour control regimes” are those “historically contingent but fairly enduring methods by which management exerts control and imposes discipline over its workers” (Degiuli and Kollmeyer, 2007, p. 498). Theories of control, by placing greater emphasis on how organisations elicit consent from, rather than control over, their workforce, have sought to explain how cooperation is ideologically constructed in the workplace (Friedman, 1977; Burawoy, 1979; Burawoy, 1985).

Deguili and Kollmeyer (2007) describe the strategies used by the sector to cultivate similar affective ties between agency workers and agencies. The authors identify three organisational practices of labour control. First, agencies seek to normalise the insecurity of flexible working by presenting it as a fact of contemporary economic systems. Employment agencies thereby

become the “ideological intermediaries” of neo-liberalism. Second, the “myth” of the permanent post encourages agency workers to exert more effort for the client organisation. Third, hegemony is reinforced by coercion due to an employment contract that exposes temporary agency workers to the practice of “hire and fire”, thus diminishing the likelihood that agency workers will complain about working conditions or seek union representation. The authors associate this with a labour control regime characterised by aspects of “market despotism” typical of early capitalism (Burawoy, 1985). However, ideological power is prominent in the organisational practices of labour control within the temporary work sector, although it is unclear from this study how far these practices succeed in establishing hegemonic control over agency workers. The US studies carried out by Gottfried (1992) and Smith (1998) suggest that practices aimed at rhetorically aligning agencies’ goals with those of the temps can be successful. It is not clear whether this is applicable to a different national context where labour has a stronger institutional role, although Deguili and Kollmeyer (2007) propose that is the case.

7. Conclusion

In reviewing the literature on temporary agency work, this chapter has discussed how the growth of agency work has generated a reappraisal of traditional approaches to its labour market function. Temporary agency work has traditionally been viewed as a marginal form of labour destined for those sections of the labour force with weak labour market attachment, or sections of the working class whose societal position reinforces their exclusion from the core workforce. Depending upon the theoretical approach taken, it has been viewed either as a deviation and regression from the post-war standard employment relationships that protects labour from the unmediated and unfettered market, or as an outcome of efficient market sorting of less qualified or less attached workers into less well-protected employment. The growth of temporary agency work has undermined all these approaches, leading to two divergent strands of research; one that espouses fears of the extension of precarious forms of employment in the context of competitive pressures to externalise risks, reduce costs and enhance numerical flexibility, and another which views the expansion of agency work within professional occupations as a reflection of changing occupational trajectories within modern flexible organisations. This latter strand of research fails to take into account that whilst there has been a growth in skilled,

professional agency work, the overwhelming majority of agency workers remain in low-skilled occupations. Although quantitative evidence demonstrates the prevalence of low-wages and low levels of job quality, qualitative evidence has, until recently, focused upon the new phenomenon of the high skilled temporary agency workers. In particular, there has been a lack of research focus on agency workers in manufacturing industries where the standard employment relationship has underpinned the “male breadwinner” model of the post war years, such as in car manufacturing plants, particularly in a country such as France, where agency labour constitutes a large proportion of the workforce.

This gap has begun to be filled by recent research on agency work in low-skilled occupations, particularly in the UK where research has focused on migrant workers. Gorgeu and Mathieu’s (2011) study provides a further contribution to the body of literature on agency work by assessing its impact on occupational health in the context of repetitive and intense assembly line work. These studies contrast sharply with the qualitative research assessing agency workers’ rationale behind employment choices and/or the impact of agency work on organisational and employment outcomes which dominates much of the research of the last decade. Additionally, Gorgeu and Mathieu’s (2011) work builds upon a tradition of French research that has followed the changes in the organisation of work in the automobile sector and in particular the consequences of lean production upon work and labour force management. Whilst this literature has identified the increasing reliance upon agency labour within the sector, there has not been a focused engagement with the consequences of the triadic relationship on workplace dynamics and experience, nor with the theoretical implications of changing employment relations in a core sector of the French economy.

The research discussed in the final section above provides a starting point for interrogating how temporary agency work alters the relationship between capital and labour. By focusing on the triadic relationship, the importance of the specific contractual nature of the agency employment relationship is brought to the fore. The vulnerability lodged in the temporary employment contract is combined with the distinct feature of the division of employment responsibilities (Vosko, 2009) conceptualised by those working within the LPA perspective as dual control

(Gottfried, 1992; Smith, 1998). This prioritisation of the agency employment contract as a mechanism of labour regulation (Smith, 1998) is significant as it takes the study of the agency labour process away from an emphasis on the micro-dynamics of workplace interactions between management and labour (Nichols et al., 2004), which is a feature of much of the literature within LPA.

Agency work by its very nature demands an attention to factors external to the workplace since it spans multiple locations (Gottfried, 1992) and incorporates an employment relation which is separate from the immediate labour process. To capture the dimensions of labour control in relation to agency work requires a framework that incorporates the complexity of the triadic relationship. Deguili and Kollmeyer (2007), by examining agency work through the analytical lens of Burawoy's (1985) theories of labour control, point to how contemporary agency work incorporates aspects of both market despotism and hegemony. This theoretical path can be further developed by considering how the employment contract is a central part of the range of "institutions which regulate and shape struggles in the workplace" (Burawoy, 1985, p. 123). The next chapter examines how LPA theorises work and employment through its primary focus on the transformation of indeterminate labour power into productive labour via management control, and how Burawoy's (1985) theory of production politics provides a relevant analytical framework for examining the labour control regime of agency work.

CHAPTER 3

VARIETIES OF FACTORY REGIMES

1. Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed the literature on temporary agency work, setting out contrasting explanations for temporary agency work and how the literature has responded to the growth in agency work. The chapter ended by presenting recent literature which has examined more closely how the triadic employment relationship reconfigures the relationship between capital and labour, and the mechanisms of labour control which operate therein. This literature, situated within labour process analysis with its assertion of the control imperative in capitalist labour process (Gottfried, 1994, p. 105), sought to understand how control and consent operated under the conditions of a temporary agency contract, characterised not only by job insecurity but also by the presence of a third party in the employment relationship. Subsequent literature (Degiuli and Kollmeyer, 2007; Zhang, 2008) turned to Burawoy's concept of factory regimes in order to understand how the temporary agency contract modifies the wage-labour relationship. In doing so, it directed attention to the significance of the employment contract, with the standard employment relationship being a key element of the factory regime that dominated the industrial labour process in the post-war decades, acting as a "positive source of control, consent and loyalty" (Smith, 1998, p. 414). This body of literature has contributed to the research on temporary agency work that has focused on the impact of the agency contract for agency workers by delving deeper into the "black box" of the labour process, examining the mechanisms and sources of control (and consent) that affect employment outcomes, by adopting a labour process perspective. It also contributes to labour process analysis (LPA) by applying these concepts to a non-standard form of employment. It is this theoretical contribution which this thesis builds upon, by examining more thoroughly in this chapter the literature introduced in Chapter Two.

This first part of this chapter summarises the main debates that propelled the trajectory of LPA in the 1970s and 1980s.

2. Theorising the labour process under advanced capitalism

Labour process theory (LPT) is concerned with the nature, forms and dynamics of the capitalist labour process. Originally a Marxist-derived analysis of the nature of work, LPT assumes that the control imperative is a consistent feature of the labour process under capitalism (Thompson and Vincent, 2010, p. 47). This proceeds from the status of labour as a commodity of a special kind, characterised by its indeterminacy (Littler and Salaman, 1982). Labour, or to be precise, labour power, is not a fixed entity. The amount of labour power exerted on the shop-floor is the outcome of negotiations and interactions within the social relations that constitute the labour process. Converting labour power (the potential to work) into labour (actual work effort) lies at the heart of the “structured antagonism” (Edwards, 1990) that defines this social relation. From this assumption, it follows that LPT is concerned with the mechanisms by which on the one hand, internal management structures attempt to resolve the indeterminacy of labour by increasing the amount of labour expended during the working day, and, on the other hand, the related issue of the degree to which workers acquiesce in management projects to draw out labour effort. Central to these questions is the issue of control in the labour process; how do management systems steer the process of production to meet the accumulation requirements of the organisation, and the extent to which workers respond? Debates within LPT over the past three decades have revolved around understanding the factors that generate different forms of control, from “traditional” methods of direct coercion to “normative control” which cultivates consent through shared values and an emotional attachment to the firm (Sturdy et al, 2010, p. 116) and, for those within labour process analysis (LPA) working from an explicitly Marxist perspective, interpreting the significance of workers’ responses to management strategies for theories of class consciousness and struggle.

It was Braverman’s (1974) seminal work “Labour and Monopoly Capitalism” that prompted this debate by arguing that Taylorism was deepening the fragmentation and deskilling of labour, thus weakening the capacity of workers to retain some form of control over production. For Braverman, scientific management is the principal means by which capital appropriates knowledge of the labour process and thus control over the worker. According to this perspective, deskilling and fragmentation of production represents an inexorable drive towards

what Marx refers to as the real subordination of labour as opposed to the formal subordination of labour. Under capitalism, labour is only formally subordinated since whilst the ownership of the means of production is in the hands of the capitalist, the worker retains some degree of control over his or her labour. The struggle on the “shop floor” represents the attempts of the capitalists to undermine the degree to which labour imposes itself within the production process. Prior to scientific management it was possible to identify significant areas of production where labour retained control over labour (Little and Salaman, 1982, p. 255). Braverman’s contention that twentieth century methods of work organisation were qualitatively undermining the ability of the worker to resist management “diktat” has been extensively challenged; few authors within the labour process tradition hold the view that managerial regimes operate only on the basis of coercion. However, Braverman’s intervention was significant in that it aimed to redirect industrial sociology towards structural features of the labour process at a time when there was a trend towards overlooking the centrality of labour and the workplace as the site of fundamental societal division, exploitation and identity for the working class. Neo-marxists and critical theorists such as Marcuse were gaining influence and were looking elsewhere for sources of oppression (e.g. gender and race), whilst micro-studies of workers, such as Goldthorpe et al.’s (1969) *The Affluent Worker*, were proposing new sociological explanations for differentiation within the working class which were at odds with traditional Marxist theories of class identity. However, whilst reasserting the continued relevance of the workplace and the structural antagonism between capital and labour within the labour process, Braverman overlooked the significance of workers’ agency (Thompson and Vincent, 2010, p. 49). Braverman’s generalised view of capitalist development as one in which real (as opposed to formal) subordination of labour is achieved over time by capital’s appropriation of workers’ knowledge through deskilling, failed to take account of two interrelated outcomes of capitalist production: variations in forms of control in the workplace, and variations in responses to control. A focus upon one form of control fails to take account of how capitalism is a social system as well as a mode of production, the institutions and structures of which influence relations in production (i.e the set of relations between human subjects as they transform raw material in the labour process) and vice versa: “[the] external environment alters relations-in-production and relations-in-production might, through political action, alter external and internal social

relations” (Warde, 1989, p. 50). Despite these analytical shortcomings, Braverman was important in reorienting studies of work within a Marxist framework and establishing labour process theory as a major body of thought within the sociology of work. Braverman can also be credited with sparking a fundamental debate over forms of control within contemporary capitalist organisations.

2.1. The emergence of agency – Burawoy’s politics of production

Burawoy was one of the key theorists who challenged Braverman’s one-sided analysis of the labour process. Implicit in Burawoy’s (1985) ontology is the acknowledgement of the role of the subjective agency of social actors in the (re)construction of both the relations of production (the social relations which define capitalism as an economic system) and the relations in production. The dynamic relationship between social actors reacting within, to, and upon social structures drives social change and the emergence of social phenomena and institutions which are time- and space-bound (Coe et al., 2008, p. 284). The labour process takes place within the societal and institutional contexts that have emerged in a particular historical time and geographical space, so that the analysis of work and organisations has to move outside of the workplace in order to account for the constitutive factors of factory regimes at any one time. Rather than confining analysis to the “internal logic of the labour process” (i.e. the relations in production expressed as negotiations/conflict around consent, coercion and resistance) it is necessary to “look over the factory gates” to understand the changing organisation of work within the trajectory of the broader dynamics of capitalism (Peck, 1990).

Historically constituted national configurations of capitalism and their expressions at the meso- and micro-levels are the products of myriad, context-specific social (inter)actions. While these interactions share fundamental features associated with the capitalist mode of production, they lead to different forms of labour control as exercised through management techniques. Burawoy’s theory of the politics of production encapsulates this philosophical approach, and reinforces the dialectical method which guides the Marxist understanding of social systems and social change. This approach permits causality or causal mechanisms to flow in both directions in what is a relationship of contradictory interdependence. The contradiction and conflict that

characterise the process of production influence the broader context, which in turn shapes and regulates the labour process.

A key issue for labour process analysis is, therefore, the articulation of a range of causal phenomena that both maintain capitalism and explain local outcomes (Thompson and Vincent, 2010, p. 51) such as high rates of temporary agency work in a country or sector. Since the labour process does not exist in a vacuum and non-work social institutions play a key role in sustaining the social relations of capitalist production (Little and Salaman, 1982; Hyman, 1987), there is a need to examine the “complex web of influences, actions and feedback mechanisms” (Sturgeon et al, 2008, p. 297) of capitalist economies in general, and of workplace relations in particular. The analytical distinction between the labour process conceived as a particular organisation of tasks, and the “political apparatuses of production” which constitute the mode of regulation of the labour process (Burawoy, 1985, p. 125), is a solid basis upon which to do this. Political apparatuses of production are made up of various social institutions which directly and indirectly regulate the relationship between employer and worker. Furthermore, the process of capitalist production itself is a formative element of the political apparatuses of production through the struggles of collective labour that transcend the factory gates and burst onto the political level:

[Thus] the historical development of the process of production must be seen in terms of the changing forms of labor process, apparatuses of production and their interrelationship. With this formulation, we can examine how the labour process on the one side and the production apparatuses on the other generate, first, ideological effects – that is, shape interests – and second, political effects – that is, determine the realisation of those interests through struggles. In turn we can observe how actual or anticipated struggles reshape the labour process and its regulative apparatuses.

(Burawoy, 1984, p. 7, cited in Hyman, p. 36)

The concept of production regimes is the analytical anchoring of the abstract notion that the process of production has “two political moments”, first, the political and ideological effects of the organisation of work (labour process); and second, the political and ideological apparatuses of production within which production takes place (Burawoy, 1985, p. 8). The changing and varied forms of managerial control within the labour process are an outcome of these political apparatuses of production, which define the parameters of interaction between capital and labour in the workplace. This insight is not unique to Burawoy or to Marxism, as illustrated by a large body of literature examining the factors that shape contemporary labour markets and work (Gallie, 2007; Tangian, 2007; Grimshaw and Lehndorff, 2010). Institutional accounts of labour and the governance of economic action contend that the “strategies pursued by collective actors are [thus] shaped by their institutional embeddedness” and “the exact structure of these arrangements develops through path-dependent processes that are historically unique for each society” (Steinberg, 2003, p. 453). Grimshaw and Lehndorff (2010) refer to the way anchors of “job quality” interact and lead to different outcomes. (Grimshaw and Lehndorff, 2010, p. 31). Fleetwood (2011) calls attention to the work of various strands of “socio-economists” who see the need for an “integrated approach” to labour markets, citing Beynon et al.’s (2002) call for an “integrated and iterative analysis between the macro and micro and the external and the internal labour market systems” (Fleetwood, 2011, p. 16) by bringing together various elements of the employment relationship and connecting them to historical processes in order to situate and explain the mechanisms of contemporary labour process.

By insisting on “the interconnected nature of labour markets, institutions, organisations and other phenomena” (Beynon et al., 2002, p. 26) Fleetwood argues that these approaches go a considerable way towards overcoming what Rubery and Grimshaw (2003) refer to as “artificial separation between employment systems and production regimes” (Rubery and Grimshaw, p. 51). In a similar vein, Thompson and Vincent (2010) bemoan the lack of conceptual “connective tissue” between labour process and broader political economy within workplace case studies, limiting their contextual framing to one aspect of context such as conditions of competition within a sector or the institutional conditions of labour markets or employment regimes (Thompson and Vincent, 2010, p. 56). Different conceptual schemes do generate knowledge

about work and employment, but they cannot be fully apprehended in isolation since they “correspond to different constellations of entities and causal forces interacting” so that “embeddedness” is multiple in nature (Thompson and Vincent, 2010, p. 63).

This thesis returns to Burawoy’s conceptual account of labour process to respond to these limitations. Burawoy does not simply bring together the “socio-economic institutions” and the wage-capital relationship or embed the latter in the former. He first analytically separates the labour process and political apparatuses of production in order to unravel the processes by which regimes of production and labour discipline are constructed outside of the labour process and then reconstitutes them in dialectical unity in the concept of factory regimes. The political apparatuses of production regulate the struggle that emerges from capitalist labour process (production politics). However, production politics too “sets limits on and precipitates interventions by the state”, although the effects are not necessarily observable and the primacy of one direction of determination over the other are difficult to ascertain, though Burawoy views this dynamic interaction as being ultimately conditioned by the substratum of relations of production (Burawoy, 1985, p. 139). Burawoy’s analysis of the transition to different forms of factory regimes, multi-levelled and multi-directional in its exposition of causal mechanisms, reflects an ontology not dissimilar to that of critical realism, the philosophical approach guiding this thesis (which is discussed in Chapter 4).

2.2. The political apparatuses of production as refracted class struggle

The factory regime typical of the post-war period is the outcome of what is commonly referred to as a “compromise” between capital and labour, which has been the basis of modern western democracies. The consequence of a confluence of diverse influences, this compromise is seen as an example of how, in certain contexts, economic and social concessions to labour can favour capital accumulation. For example, higher wages and the redistribution of wealth through state welfare can resolve some problems of under-consumption. “Social compromise” also finds its corollary in the workplace through the security of long-term employment, structures of the internal labour market and strong institutions of worker representation, which combine to secure and maintain higher wages and to improve labour conditions. However, the emergence of what

appears as mutually beneficial organisational structures and rules within the workplace, does not negate the fundamental antagonism between labour and capital. Transitions towards accommodation in employment relations cannot be dissociated from the formative and constitutive effect of that antagonistic relationship on tendencies towards accommodation. History has yielded critical moments where the centrality of social relations in production in driving social change has been starkly revealed. Post-war labour relations in France, in particular forms of *cogestion*, were designed directly to defuse the revolutionary potential of factory occupations that accompanied the liberation in Paris and Toulouse in 1944 (Cobb, 2009, pp. 277-279). At an ideological level, a similar process occurred in the aftermath of World War One. The incorporation of workers' rights and minimum labour standards into treaties ratified at the Paris Peace Conference and the subsequent establishment of the ILO was as a reaction to the dangers posed to capitalist economies by the spread of revolutionary ideas inspired by the Russian Revolution (Kaufman, 2004, p. 552). These examples illustrate how different forms of state intervention that serve to regulate the labour process are themselves the outcome of a struggle over the labour process. Whilst there is no direct "reading off" from the class struggle at work to wider society (Thompson and Vincent, 2010, p.≠), state politics, like other societal phenomena, is only "relatively autonomous" (Thompson and Vincent, 2010, p. 50) from production politics, echoing Burawoy's conception of the interconnected relationships at play:

State politics do not hang from the clouds; it rises from the ground, when the ground trembles, so does it..... Thus the strike waves in the United States during the 1930s and in Sweden, France, Italy and England in the late 1960s and early 1970s all led to attempts by the state to reconstruct factory apparatuses.

(Burawoy, 1985, p. 139)

The transition to forms of co-operation described by Burawoy (1979), Friedman (1977) and Edwards (1979), is an outcome of antagonistic class relations in the labour process that "decisively shapes working class struggles" (Burawoy, 1985, p. 7) on the one hand, and the refracted image of those struggles in the political sphere on the other. The state intervenes directly and indirectly to regulate relations in the labour process. Labour legislation has a direct

impact on the arbitrary exercise of power by management – although the implementation of legislation is mediated by the presence or lack of other institutions such as unions, which also redefine spheres of interaction in the workplace. Welfare state institutions have an indirect influence upon the relationship between workers and employers. The guarantee of minimal income levels, access to health services and education, social protection from risk and other social rights which are associated with standard employment contracts, substantially alters the relationship between labour and capital by guaranteeing the material reproduction of labour outside this relationship. This weakens the dependency of labour on value-producing activity for material existence. Both forms of intervention undermine the market governance of the labour-capital relationship. Esping-Andersen's (1990) "decommodification of labour" thesis also associates employment outcomes with the degree to which state intervention through welfare and employment legislation frees labour from market forces. However, Esping-Andersen's framework is commonly associated with notions of "decent work" and "quality of work" (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Rubery et al., 1999), whereas Burawoy's concept delves deep into the labour-capital relationship. As Bouquin (2011) argues, domination and subordination at work lie not in the practices and rules which enforce management control, but rather in the nature of the exchange; the domination *of* work rather than domination *at* work (Bouquin, 2011, p. 62). For Burawoy, the signification of state intervention lies not so much in incremental improvements in work quality, but rather in the way the political apparatuses of production that emerged in the twentieth century had the effect of "break[ing] the ties binding the reproduction of labour power to productive activity in the workplace" (Burawoy, 1985, p. 125), thereby altering the balance of power in the workplace. This is the fundamental explanatory factor in the transition to a different form of factory regime, in which coercion alone can no longer achieve corporate objectives:

Although many have pointed to the development of [these] social and political rights, few have explored their ramifications in the regulation of production. Now management can no longer rely entirely on the economic whip of the market. Nor can it impose an arbitrary despotism. Workers must be *persuaded* to cooperate with management.

(Burawoy, 1985, p. 126)

2.3. From despotism to hegemony

Post-war labour relations, therefore, should be understood through a broad and expansive lens which detects the interconnections between state, market, politics and ideology. The “anarchy of the market” which means that workers were “free” to work or starve were modified to labour’s advantage (Nichols et al., 2004, p. 664), hence the emergence of a “managerial ideology” seeking to mute workers’ critique of existing workplace relations (Padavic, 2005, p. 113). The adoption of forms of management inspired by theories of human relations and organisational behaviour are thus viewed as mechanisms for legitimising management authority – the “human face” of management¹⁰. Secure employment and the possibility to progress within the organisation through clearly defined career ladders which underpinned an “industrial elite” (Smith, 1998, p. 412), were part of the structures and practices of hegemonic domination through which workers interests were perceived to be tied to the employing organisation.

Whilst the central problem of capitalist production remained the same, i.e. resolving the indeterminacy of labour in favour of capital, the external environment – the social and political institutions which influence the process of capitalist accumulation – changed. For Marx, the despotic coercion of labour was the typical form of factory regulation under capitalism, so typical there was no need to analytically separate the political apparatuses of production from the labour process (Burawoy, 1985, p. 123). The replacement of despotism by more subtle forms of control over the labour process revealed the historically contingent nature of the factory regime described by Marx, and its replacement by a regime that required employers to elicit consent from the workforce (Burawoy, 1979; Friedman, 1977). By locating the sources of post-war management changes in control strategies in contingent and historically bound compromises, (the outcome of struggles which, though forged in the workplace, found their

¹⁰ Bendix (1956) identifies the rhetorical nature of human relations management: the US National Association of Manufacturers exposed “two-way communication” (as opposed to top down orders to the workforce). This operated as employers relaying “facts” to the workforce in order to promote cooperation, whilst the communication from the workforce is designated as “information” for management which is then used to eliminate misunderstandings (Bendix, 1956, p. 326, cited in Thompson and McHugh, 1990).

political expression in the institutions of governance external to the workplace) it is possible to see how the working class presses its demands on capital at both factory and state levels. Labour, therefore, is an active agent reacting to and transforming production politics, via its position in the workplace and its external political and cultural organisations. This can take the form of both formal and informal workplace cultures, with the latter, through the emergence of informal countercultures of opposition and resistance (Taylor and Bain, 2003) potentially precipitating the former. Paradoxically it is the ability of the working class, through its representatives, to diffuse its power at various key sites of economic and social interaction that makes necessary the strategies of management control which seek to incorporate labour, in order to minimise disruption to production and gain consent to practices aimed at enhancing productivity.

The hegemonic regime identified in the factory that provided the empirical data for *Manufacturing Consent* exemplified a “soft” control which was then theorised as being typical of the post-war period. No longer able to rely purely on coercion, persuading the workforce to perform to higher standards and improve output, involves cultivating an environment in which the interests of employer and employee are perceived as coinciding, or at the very least as being dependent on each other. The hegemonic regime, therefore, relies on the perception that the workplace can be a site for mutual gains achieved through higher wages (negotiated via strong trade unions) and job security, thereby obscuring the social relations of exploitation which are hidden beneath the employment relationship. This can also be viewed as a “trade-off” between performance and job security, a compromise rather than a coordination of interests. It is, however, a compromise that informs workers’ orientations to work (Padavic, 2005, p. 112). The internal labour market means that long-term material interests are identified as resting with the firm, and modified workers’ orientations to their employer. The ideological component of control is strengthened by the perception that “we” now means “we the firm”, not “we the workers” (Edwards, 1979, p. 148). The standard employment relationship was an essential element of this narrative which realigns workers’ allegiances and perceived interests, and was particularly observable in large organisations where workers’ strength was concentrated and in those sectors characterised by monopoly capitalism.

The hegemonic regime, therefore, was not all-encompassing (Padavic, 2005, p. 113). Outside of the core, typically white, male workforce which Burawoy observed in his research, there existed groups of workers who were excluded from the benefits accorded to the “industrial elite” (Rubery, 1978; Grimshaw et al., 2001). It is also important to note that the nurturing of cooperative management strategies does not exclude conflict, since conflict and antagonism are constant features of labour-capital relations even when they are suppressed or cloaked in hegemonic discourse. The automobile sector, viewed as typical of the kind of factory regime that Burawoy described, has been certainly not been immune to labour-capital tensions and coercive forms of management (Linhart, 1978; Thornett, 1998; Durand, 2004). It is necessary, therefore, to make a distinction between the aims of management strategies and their actual success on the ground, as well as taking into account local contexts on factory regimes.

2.4. The marginalisation of labour and the re-emergence of despotism in the labour process

Temporary agency work has flourished within the political and ideological context of neo-liberalism, an essential element of which has been the undermining of the role of the state in regulating the labour-capital exchange. Neo-liberalism has also overseen capitalist restructuring and relocation, and in some countries, persistent unemployment and welfare state retrenchment. The increased exposure of labour to highly competitive, global markets, through deregulation of financial, product and labour markets, has been accompanied by a shifting balance of power between labour and capital in the workplace (Grimshaw et al., 2001, p. 29), resulting in shifting relations in production. Macro-economic trends, in particular the financialisation of productive capital, are seen as the main drivers of changing forms of factory regimes in which hegemonic forms of control are increasingly supplemented or replaced by despotic forms of control. For Burawoy, hegemonic despotism arose from the contradictions of a hegemonic regime which placed constraints upon capital accumulation in the context of increased competitive pressures. Labour was unable to resist unfavourable transformations in work due to its weakening under

the structures of hegemony in the workplace (Burawoy, 1985, p. 149).¹¹ The new conditions of accumulation strengthened the market governance of labour relations, resulting in a trend towards the (re)commodification of labour (Rutherford, 2004, p. 431). The new political apparatus of production was primarily defined by labour's collective vulnerability to capital mobility: "The fear of being fired is replaced by the fear of capital flight, plant closure, transfer of operations and plant disinvestment" (Burawoy, 1985, p. 150). The result is a regime where consent and coercion coexist through new mechanisms of internal production politics, with an accompanying shift to new managerial forms commonly associated with "post-Fordism". This represents a partial return to labour vulnerability, since although welfare states are under strain, minimum material support is still provided. On the other hand, the guarantees associated with the standard employment relationship are severely weakened (Smith, 1998, p. 414) and forms of contingent work, such as temporary agency work, which have expanded beyond the "periphery" as discussed in the last chapter, is one of the components of the restructuring of workplace relations (Burawoy, 1985, p. 265; Padavic, 2005, p. 113). Whilst research has identified this process at work across economy sectors, the auto sector has served to highlight profound changes in the organisation of work. On a global level, this sector has undergone significant restructuring altering the mechanism by which management aligns worker behaviour to corporate goals. The interests of labour and capital are perceived to be "coordinated" in a radically different way. In the context of intense global pressures, survival of the firm has come to be associated with workers ceding to management demands to intensify labour and reorganise production (Nichols et al., 2004). Future job security is therefore perceived to be dependent upon the relative profitability of the organisation, in order to avoid de-localisation, centralisation and plant closure. Burawoy (1985) observed the emergence of this new form of factory regime, predicated on the marginalisation of labour and the reassertion of management's

¹¹ Burawoy, like many other scholars engaging with what we now refer to as globalisation, makes an error similar in form to that of Braverman, in that there is a one-sided emphasis on the role of transnational capital in reshaping employment. In a departure from the methodology of the comparative and rounded approach to the transition to the hegemonic regimes in western economies, Burawoy ignores the role of government in facilitating the movement of capital. The inability of the working class to resist worsening conditions of employment is said to be located in the neutralising effects of the hegemonic regime on class consciousness (Burawoy, 1985). This conclusion flows from a major flaw contained within *The Politics of Production*: that the working class lacks any organisational space for oppositional tendencies within the workplace due to the incorporating effects in hegemony. The defeated struggles of the working class to defend the gains of the post-war years and the associated problem of political leadership does not figure in this account.

“right to manage”. However, the weakening and marginalisation of labour in those industries where it had a tradition of strength was accompanied by new trends in management, introduced primarily in the auto sector and said to be aimed at generating “participation” and “autonomy” in the workplace, through teamwork and continuous improvement or total quality management (Appelbaum et al., 2000). These changes, associated with the “post-Fordist” paradigm, purport to engage with the skills of the labour force by enhancing autonomy and discretion, thereby eliciting personal motivation and internal sources of self-discipline, whilst improved quality and productivity provides the organisation with a better chance of surviving in the global market. The organisation of work, therefore, is reconfigured towards a new form of hegemony, accompanied by the despotism of an unregulated market, which was not anticipated by Burawoy. Subsequent authors have evoked this reworked version of hegemonic despotism in the auto sector to dispel the claims of the proponents of new management techniques. The next section examines how well the concept of hegemonic despotism corresponds to the labour process within car manufacturing and whether this concept can be applied to the temporary agency workers who in a number of European countries, such as France, Italy and the UK, make up an increasingly significant proportion of workers on the assembly line.

3. Hegemonic despotism: constructing hegemonic practices under new conditions of capital accumulation

Because employment security is no longer guaranteed by the permanent employment contract in the face of relocation, centralisation and plant closure, the pressure to ensure that the organisation can compete in a global market has become a powerful rhetorical tool to elicit cooperation with management productivity and efficiency strategies which have been implemented under the general umbrella of “lean production”. Proponents of lean production argue that new management techniques associated with “lean” enhance the experience of work so that concepts such as “mutual gains” (Womack et al., 1990) and “shared destiny” (Oliver and Wilkinson, 1992, p. 85, quoted in Stewart, 1998) are, therefore, reformulated ideological props of the hegemonic regime. Workers are said to embrace company values and exhortations to work harder, all but eliminating the need for coercion, whilst the “post-Fordist” firm values the skills of a flexible and polyvalent modern worker who is brought into shop-floor decision-

making structures through decentralised command chains, teamwork and quality control/continuous improvement. These claims have been extensively challenged by theorists in the LPA tradition, who have drawn upon the concept of factory regimes, and in particular the concept of hegemonic despotism, to expose the reality behind the rhetoric.

3.1. Labouring under hegemonic despotism in car plants

Sallaz argues that the US auto sector is “an ideal typical example of hegemonic despotism” (Sallaz, 2004, p. 691), with hegemonic domination based upon what appears to be a compelling argument regarding risks associated with losing competitive advantage, combined with a discourse of participation, empowerment and job satisfaction. The “flattened”, vertical structures that are associated in particular with teamwork (Vallas, 2003) disperse power throughout the organisation and facilitate the internalisation of company goals and promote a culture of autonomous self-discipline (or self-subordination – Garrahan and Stewart, 1992, p. 36), which represents the soft hegemonic side of labour control (Graham, 1995; Nichols et al., 2004). Despotism is therefore located in the reduction in the labour force as a result of restructuring and the constant fear of further reductions or even factory closures. Internally, despotism is reinforced by the marginalisation of unions, circumvention of collective bargaining and the weakening of the standard employment relationship through increased job insecurity and casualisation of sections of the labour force. The reduced capacity of labour to resist the intensification of work reinforces a managerial ideology which seeks alternative sources of labour representation and participation (Garrahan and Stewart, 1992).

Empirical research has drawn attention to the negative consequences of contemporary working practices for workers on the shop-floor. Intensification of work (Delbridge et al., 1992; Garrahan and Stewart, 1992), increased surveillance and tighter control (Hatzfeld, 2004) and scant evidence of employee empowerment (Danford, 1998) all suggest that the rhetoric of an enhanced working environment corresponds little to reality. For Durand (2004), writing about the French auto industry, the socio-technical tools through which lean production, just-in-time and total quality management are implemented, play a fundamental role in securing acceptance of management goals, the means by which “subordinate workers are persuaded to share the

firm's objectives": "[W]ho can be opposed to quality? Who can object to being able to react immediately to the market? Who can be hostile to reductions in costs (and therefore in increases in productivity) to ensure the survival of the firm?" (Durand, 2004, p. 9). From this perspective workers lose their independent, collective voice and become "locked" into the goals of the firm (Oliver et al., 1998, p.249).

On the other hand, Durand (2004) does concede that within the diversity of situations that constitute workplace settings, there is room for benefits to workers, including autonomy (Durand and Hatzfeld, 2002, p.32), although a continuity with the controlling aspects of Taylorism undermines the optimistic accounts of autonomy, creativity and commitment. The implementation of total quality management may also have contradictory effects on workplace practices. Diffused structures of quality control, such as quality circles, are viewed as a mechanism through which direct control is replaced by constant monitoring by peers and team leaders, and presented as crucial in the context of new customer supplier relationships (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992; Edwards, et al., 1998). Participation in quality control represents the contemporary version of "making out" or "playing the game", thus generating commitment and subordination to the valorisation process (Durand and Stewart, 1998, p. 146). Whilst this is an example of workers being complicit in changes that intensify work effort (Stewart et al., 2004), it also points to the complex and contradictory ways in which workers engage in activities which, within the constraints of the wage-labour relationship and drawing upon their internal resources, enable them to construct their own workplace identities (Burawoy, 1979; Padavic, 2005, p. 112) as a way of enhancing their experience of what is, at heart, an exploitative relationship. Durand (2003) refers to this process as one of "paradoxical consent" in situations of constraint born out of generalised insecurity of employment. Resistance and opposition to management are channelled towards individual adaptation through which workers accept their position within the workplace and try to avoid the negative aspects of work.¹² In the absence of a successful challenge to management-driven processes of change, workers will draw upon their

¹² All of these examples point to the drive to escape the alienating experience of the labour process under capitalism. Brook (2009) views this "daily struggle to secure a dignified sense of self" (Brook, 2009, p. 29) as indicative of the active resistance of workers to the commodification of their labour. It is, however, a struggle that can never be won since, as Brook (2009) makes clear, alienation is an inevitable and essential aspect of the labour-capital relationship, within which labour is transformed into an activity external to the worker.

individual resources which can range from the active engagement described above to hidden individual acts of resistance or “misbehaviour” (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1999).

It should also be acknowledged that ideological appeals to change do not always succeed in winning over the hearts and minds of the workforce. Local historical legacies can have a determining impact upon the way in which change is perceived and the subsequent manifestation of hegemonic despotism. In Danford’s (1998) study, resistance to change was rooted in the long history of militancy at the plant, leading management to bring in “temps”, in order to overcome resistance to change in a plant that had a strong tradition of workplace militancy. Local settings can give rise to a variety of outcomes, from the incorporation of workers, via their unions, in management goals (Danford, 2000; Vidal, 2003) to a more nuanced negotiated repositioning of power (Stewart et al., p.63) and resistance to change (Danford, 1998). Managers also acknowledge the numerous ways in which labour can intervene on its own behalf in the labour process, hence the constant need to find (new) ways of undermining or bypassing a potentially recalcitrant workforce (Graham, 1998, p. 12; Danford, 1998).

3.2. Agency workers as part of the regime of hegemonic despotism

The introduction of temporary labour is one of the means by which management can undermine long-established positions of organised labour strength. As Danford (1998) illustrates, workplace restructuring is frequently an opportunity to reverse a history of troublesome labour relations. Bringing in a temporary workforce lacking in the resources and capacities of the collective strength of a long-standing core workforce can be part of that strategy. In France, local labour markets provide car plants with a steady flow of young workers on agency contracts (Beaud and Pialoux, 1999; Hatzfeld, 2004; Bouquin, 2006), which can serve a number of labour control functions. Agency workers are frequently referred to as “peripheral ring” or “buffer” (Christensen, 1989; Byoung et al., 2004) to protect core workers, not only from economic risks, but also from the hardest jobs (Beaud and Pialoux, 1999). On the other hand, their precarious working lives are a manifestation of the fate that awaits workers who do not perform sufficiently to improve the profitability of their firm (Nichols et al., 2004; Sallaz, 2004). Agency workers can also be incorporated into labour forces in order to nurture pro-

management attitudes, as management screens agency workers to identify those who demonstrate behaviours and attitudes that correspond to company objectives (Danford, 1998). Bouquin's (2006) research in France arrived at similar conclusions to Danford (1998); recruitment in French car plants was carried out exclusively through the medium of agency contracts, and used as a powerful management tool to socially engineer a specific kind of worker (Bouquin, 2006, p. 155).

The introduction of agency workers can serve a similar function to the establishment of greenfield sites and a "green" workforce in order to cultivate an environment conducive to the forms of management control that form the ideological basis of contemporary management (Garrahan and Stewart, 1992), reducing the likelihood of labour-management conflict that undermines the key ideological message of participation and empowerment. Lack of local employment opportunities can provide a backdrop for consent, facilitating the generation of a "new regime of subordination" premised on the marginalisation of trade unions (Garrahan and Stewart, 1992; Durand, 2004).

Nichols et al. (2004) and Sallaz (2004) make an explicit reference to the role of agency work in reinforcing the regime of hegemonic despotism within the core workforce. Whilst unions have been historically hostile to the presence of casualised forms of employment (Gumbrell and McCormick, 2011), unions and the workers they represent may reluctantly "accept" agency workers as a necessary encroachment on the standard employment relationship to ensure the viability of the firm. Discourses which conjure up the need to reduce the core workforce for the sake of future survival, therefore, appear to align the interests of core workers with management, so long as it is "credible" – agency labour will increase the firm's chance of survival – and "consequential" – core workers depend upon the survival of the firm to maintain living standards (Sallaz, 2004).

3.3. The employment contract as a component of factory regimes

Agency workers, therefore, are part of the repertoire of strategies used by management to shape workplace relations according to the priorities of the firm; the introduction of temporary workers strengthens capital in relation to labour by undermining union organisation and dividing the workforce. This is a recurrent theme in accounts of the flexibilisation of labour (Paugam, 2000; Barbieri, 2009; Standing, 2011). It is also a recurrent theme within LPA and accounts of control in the car sector (Danford, 1998; Bouquin, 2005; Pulignano et al., 2008). However, past and recent literature on the labour process has not adequately engaged with how the temporary agency employment contract defines features of labour control, beyond the assumption that precarious contracts are likely to be characterised by despotic control. This is despite the recognition that a key trend over the past three decades has been a rise in contract differentiation with workers doing the same job, in the same organisation but on different employment contracts (Smith, 2010, p. 277). Nichols et al. (2004) puts this absence down to an exclusive focus upon the dynamics of shop-floor relations within the context of a regime of hegemonic despotism in which the standard employment relation is assumed. Material support and contract type hardly figure in the literature cited above, despite Burawoy's insistence on the significance of indirect and direct forms of state intervention in the construction of factory regimes. Admittedly, Burawoy too pays little attention to the nature of the employment contract, referring instead to generic labour legislation, however the analytical framework outlined in *The Politics of Production* points to the role of a range of social relations in determining factory regimes (Nichols et al., 2004), including the employment relationship. This is an unfortunate lapse. Wage-labour occurs within institutional contexts that delineate conceptions of rights and control, such as the legal institutions that define the employment relationship and which bound the construction of factory regimes, thereby constituting "the ways labour relations can be conceived and the feasible strategies by which capitalists can subordinate workers" (Steinberg, 2003, p. 446).

Agency work cannot simply be reduced to a despotic relationship arising from labour market insecurity. The nature of the triadic relationship that frames agency work needs to be incorporated more fully into the narrative of hegemony and coercion, as played out in the

regime of hegemonic despotism. Since many contemporary theorists claim that volition needs to be present in the labour process alongside coercion (Hyman, 1987, p. 40) and that cooperative human resource management is an important mechanism in obscuring the coercive and exploitative basis of work, then it is necessary to look closer at how this operates within the context of agency work. The expressions of hegemonic despotism described in the literature on the automobile sector, regardless of its success or otherwise in obscuring exploitation and diminishing labour conflict, are based upon constructs that are not applicable to temporary agency workers. Whilst workers with permanent employment contracts are more likely to link their job security to the survival of the firm, this is a less likely scenario for agency workers, for whom insecurity is omnipresent regardless of the profitability or viability of the firm for which they work. All the more so given that the firm's survival strategy in a period of crisis is likely to involve the shedding of the peripheral workforce. Similarly it is doubtful that the organisational practices associated with lean production and identified as characteristic of hegemonic domination contained within hegemonic despotism (team working, decentralised control, and participation) will elicit the same response from a section of the workforce that has a time-limited association with the firm (Deguili and Kollmeyer, 2007). Danford (1998) hints at this when he observes that teamwork is experienced differently by different parts of the workforce.

This raises questions regarding the sources and the range of workplace behaviours in the context of agency work. If it is unlikely that the sources of consent identified above apply to agency workers in the automobile sector, and that agency workers lack the same opportunity to oppose their conditions of work, does the contractual status of agency work represent a (partial) return to market despotism? If this is the case, how does this correspond to management techniques that seek to mobilise the productive capacities of the workforce through a discourse of empowerment and participation? Even if management disregards some purported benefits of new management techniques and focuses on the core principles of lean production, which emphasise a skilled, well-trained and motivated workforce (Stewart, 1998, p. 219), this still sits uneasily in a sector that has been recruiting increasing numbers of agency workers.

Degiuli and Kollmeyer (2007) argue that there is little scope for co-operation and consent for agency workers within LPA. Agency workers reside outside of the complex constructions which attempt to capture the contradictions of hegemonic despotism. There is an assumption that agency workers are less likely to be subject to the complex and contradictory interplay of coercion/compliance, consent and resistance. Their experience of work in a contemporary automobile factory seems to correspond more to the market despotism evoked by Braverman (1979), characterised by deskilling and subordination due to the precarious, dependent and low skilled nature of the work they carry out in the sector. This narrative corresponds to the experience of temporary agency workers in Beaud and Pialoux's (1999) study of PSA Peugeot-Citroën in France.

By not focusing in any great depth on the nature and location of agency work within the overall theory of factory regimes and the concept of hegemonic despotism in particular, there has been a failure to capture how the unique status of the triangular employment contract modifies the factory regime which shapes the experience of agency workers. The singular focus upon unmediated control through coercion in the temporary employment agency contract leads to a lack of consideration of more nuanced and complex employment outcomes. This goes against the main thrust of the debates in LPA over the past three decades, which have sought to account for workers' agency, in terms of both consent and resistance, in a variety of production contexts. Whilst the space for resistance on the one hand, and active consent to, and engagement with, management goals on the other, may be more constrained for agency workers than for permanent workers, it is a space nonetheless. If "games" are the means by which workers endure subordination to the labour process (Burawoy, 1979), then what kinds of resources do agency workers draw upon in to order endure their subordination to the labour process?

4. Hegemony and despotism in the triadic relationship

Burawoy provides some insight into this question in one of the rare references to agency work in *The Politics of Production*, tucked away in the concluding chapter. Here Burawoy, situating agency work within hegemonic despotism, describes the split nature of a labour process that is

mediated by an employment agency and which obscures the relationship between agency worker and agency:

The growth of part time-work and temporary work, particularly among women, orchestrated by specialised agencies, enhances the separation of relations of production from relations in production, mystifying the former while effectively subordinating workers to the latter. On one side relations of production often revolve around the temporary work agency. The worker relates to her employer as an individual, receiving assignments by telephone and driving to them in an automobile. Unions are barred and fellow employees unknown. Moreover the worker is sucked into this oppressive isolation not only by her material circumstances but also in the name of enhanced autonomy, greater “freedom” to balance domestic work and low-paid wage labour. On the other side, she moves from one set of relations in production to another, unless she should prove herself “worthy” of a permanent job.

(Burawoy, 1985, p. 264-265)

This account of agency work is one of intense subordination of an atomised and vulnerable workforce. The agency worker cedes without struggle to the whims of management. Despotism is facilitated by the spatial separation of relations *of* production from relations *in* production, upon which is based the fragmentation and isolation of the workforce. Little else is said about how this split or dual management structure alters the nature of labour control and discipline. It is left to subsequent authors to take up where *The Politics of Production* left off.

4.1. Duality of control and hegemony in conditions of vulnerability

Gottfried's (1992) ethnographic study of female clerical temps in the US serve as a basis for her elaboration of the concept of duality of control. Duality of control describes the double layer of management that the agency worker faces in the employment relationship. Agency and user-organisation engage in an overlapping system of sanctions imposed by and between them upon

the agency worker (Gottfried, 1992, p. 448). Furthermore, her observations of the micro-level control mechanisms at work in employment agencies leads her to conclude that the spatial separation of agency workers from their employers (the agency) obliges agencies to disperse labour control downward to agency workers, who very soon understand the need to cultivate self-disciplinary behaviours to meet the exacting standards required of them. The discontinuities that characterise the working time of the agency worker (assignments being interrupted by periods of unemployment) further reinforce the responsibilities of the agency worker, who is compelled to maintain a relationship with the agency outside of periods of wage labour. Agency workers, therefore, exist on the margins between wage- and non-wage work, since flexibility which “is a feature of THS [temporary help services] work....must be sustained by, and, between, both the firm and the client” (Gottfried, 1992, p. 448). This dependency means that the agency worker must acquiesce simultaneously to the direct supervision of work at the point of production and to the organisation norms of the agency if they wish to secure future opportunities.

The cultivation of ideological control lies with the agency. For Gottfried (1992) the user organisation has a limited range of control strategies that it can employ over the agency worker, although user organisations do expect a worker whose “conduct and demeanour conforms to extant organisational norms” (Gottfried, 1992, p. 449). The narrative of the “ideal worker”, however, begins during the intake process; it is the agency that sets out the standards and behaviours which, if fulfilled, could lead to permanent employment. The agency engages in discourses that tap into the aspirations for permanent work as a means of drawing out appropriate behaviours and attitudes, which are reinforced by the insecurity inherent in the employment relationship and which oblige the agency worker to present him/herself as “reliably contingent” (Peck and Theodore, 2001, p. 486) in order to access future assignments. Thus, the process of the internalisation of control generates a sense of “deep self-discipline” within a “mistake-free” performance environment (Smith, 1998), located in the dependency on the agency, which acts as the gatekeeper to waged work. Within a restricted and constrained space, agency workers whose aspirations are shaped by the structure of opportunity in local labour markets construct their occupational trajectories around the goal of permanent employment,

engaging in strategies to get themselves noticed by future employers whilst simultaneously presenting themselves as “good temps” to the agency (Smith, 1998).

Degiuli and Kollmeyer (2007) add a further dimension to the hegemonic practices that agencies engage in. Temporary employment agencies seek to normalise precarious forms of work through a rhetoric aimed at countering the widespread negative associations with agency work. Through vigorous marketing campaigns, agencies have attempted to rebrand agency work to fit in with the “new world of work” in which job stability is no longer a feature. Agency work, therefore, can be a path for motivated individuals to progress in the labour market under these new conditions whilst enjoying the freedoms of flexible work (Degiuli and Kollmeyer, 2007, p. 505). A form of work associated with the historical relic of “employment at will” (Campbell and Burgess, 2001) turns into its opposite by being presented as the future of work. The agency plays a central role, therefore, in constructing new norms of employment which amount to “normalised insecurity” (Peck and Theodore, 2007, p. 172). This constitutes the hegemonic element in an employment relationship rooted in the restoration of market despotism and which is the basis of the acquiescence of workers confronted with bad working conditions. The temporary work agency is, therefore, an active institutional agency in the construction of flexible labour markets (Peck and Theodore, 2001; Ward, 2005).

However it is not clear if whether attempts to normalise agency work have any purchase on agency workers, or on wider society in general, particularly in national contexts that are traditionally hostile to precarious forms of employment. The capacity to change attitudes will depend upon the weight of culturally specific assumptions regarding employment relationships, as well as sectoral norms, and the willingness of core workers to accept an expanding peripheral ring of workers within the workplace. Demographic characteristics of agency workers can also influence the effectiveness of hegemonic discourse; young workers are frequently more susceptible to the idea that agency labour is an inevitable part of the employment landscape (Beaud and Pialoux, 1999). Thus the nature of labour as a commodity that is “idiosyncratic and spatially differentiated” (Storper and Walker, 1983) creates opportunities for capital as well as obstacles.

It is difficult to know if agency workers internalise those ideological practices that seek to construct a coordination of interests obscuring the despotism that is lodged within labour market vulnerability and the inequality of the triangular relationship. Surface appearances that indicate active consent can conceal deeper feelings of discontent, particularly when reality does not correspond to aspirations. Smith's (1998) study of agency workers in a computer components manufacturing company revealed how, whilst agency workers expressed a positive, conscientious attitude to work, they kept resentments to themselves (Smith, 1998, p. 421), reflecting the "muted resentment" that has been identified as a feature of vulnerability in the workplace (Thompson, 1983). However, in the case of temporary agency work, the lines of power are obscured by confusion over who the employer is (Smith, 1998).

On the other hand, it is not unreasonable to assume that for ideological hegemony to be sustained, there needs to some correspondence to reality. If agency work is presented as a stepping stone to permanent work, and a permanent contract becomes increasingly elusive as the succession of agency contracts does not yield the desired outcome, the perceived benefits associated with "making out" may be undermined. Enthusiastic participation may then be replaced by compliance under the yoke of vulnerability and dependency, as the effects of the duality of control in disciplining a workforce into accepting inferior conditions of work becomes transparent.

4.2. Internal sources of consent

There is some correspondence between these themes and what is known about the situation of agency workers in the auto sector. The examples presented in earlier sections of this chapter (see section 3.2 in this chapter) suggest that auto companies do indeed draw upon the aspirations of agency workers for permanent contracts. On the one hand, car manufacturers can forge their future pliant workforce by screening agency workers for those who "displayed malleability, strong performance and pro-company attitudes" Danford (1998). On the other hand, they benefit from the temporary workforce as it stands, as agency workers try to prove themselves worthy of a permanent contract by exceeding what is expected of them. Bouquin (2006) describes how agency workers engage in strategies to secure permanent employment

with the user firm, and he explicitly links management control to the aspirations of workers on agency contracts to obtain a permanent contract, thus suggesting a positive, albeit constrained, response to their contractual situation. The eager participation described is similar to the situation observed by US researchers where agency workers display commitment to their tasks and colleagues despite the lack of reciprocal positive behaviours (Hodson, 1996; Heckscher, 1995).

Padavic (2005) argues that such behaviours cannot simply be attributed to instrumental motives arising from dependency on the agency or the user firm. Agency workers (and other contingent workers) may be exhibiting emotions of loyalty and consent which stem from a deep psychological need to frame identity and self-respect around notions of the “good worker”, thereby overcoming negative stereotypes associated with being “just a temp” (Hensen, 1996). Agency workers, like other workers, need to find meaning in their subordination to the labour process. As a consequence, their subjective incentives may coincide with the ideological messages promoted by temporary work agencies. By a process of “identity-management” as a means to address the “spoiled identity” that accompanies non-permanent work, a managerial ideology that restricts opposition to existing employment relations is reaffirmed. Strategies of “making out” can therefore reinforce or reproduce the social relations that sustain precarious work (Burawoy, 1979).

Taken together, there is a tension in these accounts of hegemonic labour control in the agency work relationship. On one side, there is the notion that hegemonic practices operate to elicit positive signifiers of consent in the labour process from agency workers, whereby the experience of work is enhanced by drawing upon individual aspirations and internal resources. By masking the exploitative despotism that flows from increased exposure to market governance, the experience of work can be perceived as positive. On the other side, there is the concern that, in conditions of labour market vulnerability and precarious, fragmented employment, hegemony does not prompt consent but instead promotes the silent submission of an atomised labour force (Burawoy, 1985, p. 265).

This tension is a thread that runs through LPA over the relative weights of consent, compliance and resistance in the wage relationship, and over the significance of different control strategies for class consciousness and subsequent responses. Hyman (1987) argues that “[u]nless supervision is close and uninterrupted, the conversion of labour power into productive labour must entail (in part, at least) the labourer’s ‘voluntary’ initiative” (Hyman, 1987, p. 40). Here the need for some form of cooperation is, at least partly, a consequence of the practicalities of the labour process that place responsibility on the worker to interact with the tools put at his/her disposal. Therefore, some element of workers’ discretion needs to be factored into the analysis of labour process since it can never be eliminated (Cressey and MacInnes, 1975, pp. 24-6). Capital is, therefore, faced with a contradiction. There needs to be some disciplinary form of control to limit the discretion that might be turned against its interests. At the same time, capital needs to harness some element of volition given there will always be some quantity of discretion in production. Over-reliance on coercion can have negative feedback effects and create new areas of conflict leading to “institutionalised low-trust” (Fox, 1974) that can undermine the firm’s objectives. So whilst the condition of the agency worker appears to be similar to that of a reserve army of labour, performing deskilled work and with little space for discretion (Gottfried, 1992, p. 448; Deguili and Kollmeyer, 2007; Williams, 2009), management still has to cultivate an environment of consent and cooperation with regard to these workers. Since the user firm is engaged in the kind of hire and fire practices that have the potential to corrode commitment (Hyman, 1987, p. 41), it is all the more critical that the agency constructs a narrative that evokes a positive picture of agency work.

It should be noted that within this perspective of the inevitability of cooperative forms of labour control, the balance between despotic and hegemonic methods of control will vary depending on a variety of influences, including the nature of the work. High-skilled occupations are more likely to be associated with high levels of task autonomy, whereas routine, operative work on the assembly line can be carried out with little discretionary involvement on the part of labour (Parent-Thirion et al, 2007). Whereas permanent workers in a similar situation can adjust to coercive methods of labour control over time and can find different ways to express opposition to the “invisible chains” that bind them to the tight flows of production (Thompson and

Ackroyd, 1999), this possibility is not open to agency workers, due to the transitional nature of the contract and a dual pressure to perform well. It appears then that the discussion has gone full circle, back to Braverman's vision of a deskilled and an increasingly subordinated workforce. There are hints of this in Burawoy's short account of agency work, with despotism seeming to overwhelm hegemony. Whilst there is a general insistence that the labour process must involve the two sides of labour control, this "must be understood in terms of the specific combinations of force and consent that elicit co-operation in the pursuit of profit" (Hyman, 1987, p. 41). If that balance tips too far towards coercive relations, the element of hegemony may become so irrelevant that, to all intent and purposes, it ceases to exist. If this is the case, the concept of a hegemonic despotism begins to lose its theoretical validity when applied to temporary agency work.

5. Manufacturing regimes of despotism

Having examined the nature of factory regimes and discussed the concept of hegemonic despotism in relation to agency work, questions remain as to where agency work fits within the analytical framework of factory regimes. It is still unclear whether hegemonic despotism adequately captures the complex structures of management of agency work and the highly insecure nature of the working lives of agency workers that affects orientations to work. Even if hegemonic despotism is an appropriate framework, the various influences upon workplace relations (i.e. political apparatuses of production) do not wholly correspond to those of the workers on standard contracts who work alongside agency workers, frequently carrying out the same tasks. The coexistence of different forms of management regimes in a single capitalist unit stemming from labour segmentation was observed by Zhang (2006) in his study of factory regimes in China's automobile plants. Driven by market reform and globalisation, "lean and dual" labour-management relations characterise those factories that continue to provide high levels of security and benefits for the core workforce, alongside a growing peripheral workforce made up of temporary agency workers drawn from rural areas. Despotic labour control characterises labour-management relations for this latter group of workers, whilst core workers

enjoy the protections of a hegemonic regime, resulting in what Zhang (2006) calls a “hybrid” factory regime.

The example of China’s auto sector also illustrates how capital nurtures different forms of factory regimes by taking advantage of the structural divisions that exist within labour markets. The Californian agribusiness in the US described by Burawoy (1985) is a similar example of a highly exploitative factory regime forged out of social inequality and oppression. US agricultural labour in the 1980s lacked a vital element of state support since it was not covered by national labour legislation (Burawoy, 1985, p. 127). In addition, the labour force tended to be made up of illegal immigrants; the state played no role in the physical/material sustenance of their labour power. Non-citizenship and the fear of being “discovered” by the state further reinforced dependence upon the employer. A defining feature of the political apparatus of production in this instance is the lack of citizenship rights which is the basis for despotic labour relations. Similar forms of labour process have been identified recently in the UK; illegal migrants, dependent upon gang masters, are forced to labour in highly intensive and potentially dangerous conditions¹³. Despotic forms of dependency can also exist within the realms of legality. Again, migrant workers are a particularly vulnerable section of the labour force who may find themselves dependent upon employers or employment agencies for work, visas and housing. In post-war France, the use of a migrant workforce in the French car industry is a further illustration of the coexistence of different forms of labour process. Through the state-administered “foreign workers recruitment scheme”, migrant workers from French colonies were employed to resolve the shortage of labour in key economic sectors, under strict conditions of employment. Employment and residence in France were contingent upon employment with a specific company and mobility was severely restricted. As a result, the regime of labour control for these migrants differed considerably to that of the French workers with whom they worked alongside.

¹³ In 2004, 18 cockle pickers died after becoming trapped in rising tides in Morcambe Bay in the UK. All were undocumented migrant workers from China whose work in the UK was organised by illegal gangmasters. The incident prompted changes to legislation governing the operation of gangmasters (Gangmasters licencing Act 2004).

The composition of available labour and the role that the state plays in defining the employment relationship for certain groups of workers can present opportunities to capital, demonstrating the highly contingent nature of factory regimes and the significance of the politics of production. Both are examples of the weight of history (in this case, the long history of colonialism) in generating the conditions for a labour process based upon intense exploitation, and the multiplicity of ways in which state intervention (or lack thereof) sets the parameters of factory regimes. In the example of migrant workers in California, the state is both absent and present. Absent from its role as regulator of the wage-labour relation and present in its coercive role of policing migration, thus making possible despotic forms of labour regulation. In the example of the foreign workers recruitment scheme, state institutional action directly facilitates the despotic relationship between employer and migrant workers by reducing the “mobility power” of labour (Smith, 2010), and, as a result, its bargaining power in the labour process. The foreign workers recruitment scheme, by curtailing labour mobility, negated the “free” labour market and created a relationship of dependency similar to indentured labour.

For Burawoy, the example of migrants in Californian agribusiness was an “anomaly” resulting from the success of Californian agribusiness in establishing a “relationship to the state reminiscent of early capitalism” (Burawoy, 1985, p. 127). Urban enterprise zones are similar examples of despotism within global capitalism. Yet, whilst these examples of highly coercive forms of labour exist on the margins of the modern capitalist labour process, i.e. outside of the dominant forms of labour process/labour control under which core workers labour, this does not mean they are not an integral part of the process of capital accumulation. Furthermore, between “extreme” and dominant forms of labour control there exists a growing section of workers for whom the capacity to optimise their position in the labour market is severely curtailed. Whilst they are “free” in the formal sense of labour market exchange, they are less “free” in relation to core workers.¹⁴ As labour market segmentation accounts have described, precarious and low-

¹⁴ Steinberg draws upon capitalist world system approaches in his critique arguing that Burawoy overlooks the fact that there is no simple dichotomy between free and unfree labour; the legal concepts and the practices they precipitate are historical products, the outcome of struggle over legally defined relations and practices including gender and race as well as class. (Steinberg, 2003, p. 450). Paradoxically, given the notion of the (re)commodification of labour, the concept of “unfree labour” denotes the restriction on the capacity of workers to “freely” commodify their labour power due to state-imposed restrictions, such as work permit systems (Miles, 1987, cited in Andersen and Ruhs, 2011).

wage dependent forms of labour are facilitated by the historical and structural legacy of gender and race oppression¹⁵ (Rubery et al., 1999). Burawoy overlooks the differentiated forms of labour in advanced capitalism which give rise to a range of labour control techniques that mediate the process of capital accumulations and which are compatible with capitalism in its advanced stage (Steinberg, 2003, p. 451). A mix of labour control strategies can develop in any one period, not merely as exceptions to dominant forms of factory regimes, but also as integral to the expansion of capital.

The point here is to illustrate the different facets of regimes of labour control within any one era of capitalism, and the intersection between specific forms of labour control and the wider socio-economic contexts that constitute the politics of production in particular sectors and governing particular groups of workers. The case of the migrant workers in France and of the illegal immigrants working in the Californian agribusiness illustrates how legal institutions, for example, can be employed to “provide capitalists with solutions to problems of labour discipline otherwise not available” by constructing “legal frameworks of unfreedom to subordinate labour” (Steinberg, 2003, p. 446).

6. Towards a new variant of hegemonic despotism?

As ideal types, categories of factory regimes are not always easily transposable to concrete instances of the labour process. The form and degree of state intervention, as well as the relative strengths of the main actors in industrial relations systems, lead to country-specific generic forms of factory regimes. The differentiation of control regimes is an outcome of national difference, sectoral contexts and priorities, so that, for example, the private sector may veer more towards coercion than the public sector, (Burawoy, 1985, p. 127). Exposure to global competition, state-capital relations, the availability of local labour markets and the composition of available labour: all these factors influence labour control strategies, and the capacity of labour to respond. The position of the firm and the nature of supplier and customer relations within supply chains also influence management strategies and pressure to intensify labour

¹⁵ According to Andersen and Ruhs (2011), the role played by legal systems in formalising the position of migrant workers in labour markets and hence, their experience of intense exploitation, needs to be further considered in research on migrant agency workers.

(Pulignano, 2002; Taylor, 2010). At an abstract level, all forms of the capitalist labour process are conditioned by the social relation between those who possess the means of production and those who possess only their labour power. However, whilst the indeterminacy of labour creates the imperative to control, it does not dictate how that control is expressed (Thompson, 1990). Thus the social phenomena that emerge from the building blocks of the capitalist social system do not correspond to any predefined path. Categorisations of social phenomena such as “modes of production” or “factory regimes” can never capture the totality of the phenomenon and the full range of potential outcomes. As a result it is always necessary to reappraise existing theories in the light of emerging phenomena.

For Burawoy, the decisive factor in the transition from despotic labour control regimes to hegemonic regimes was the unity/separation of the reproduction of labour power from capitalist production in the form of the welfare state and state protection from despotic labour relations – relations which had threatened the productive capacity of labour in the long term. However, within the overall context of the hegemonic regime it was possible to identify variations resulting from various factors such as levels and type of state interventions, industrial relations systems, skills, technology, competition, with variations that were detectable at the international and intra-national levels. Within contemporary capitalist labour process, Burawoy argued that vulnerability to capital mobility is the greatest determinant of regimes of labour control (Burawoy, 1985, p. 127). This explanation of current forms of labour control needs to be expanded. One of the weaknesses of this account is that it prefigures explanations of globalisation that deny the capacity of the state and political actors to resist the “ineluctable” forces of transnational capital and that also play down the role of state politics in facilitating the mobility of capital (Ohmae, 1995). The political apparatus of production from which labour vulnerability has emerged resides in the political choices made at the state level to liberalise and deregulate markets, and in the inability of the key institutions of national industrial relations systems to adapt to the new economic situation. Burawoy expresses a similar fatalism in his contention that the defeats suffered by labour in key western economies since the early 1980s are rooted in the success of the hegemonic regime in neutralising workers’ opposition by a process of incorporation in the workplace (Burawoy, 1985). On the contrary, the 1980s was a

time of intense struggle across national capitalisms as labour fought to defend negotiating positions, wages and conditions, and to resist casualisation. The rise of precarious forms of work needs to be situated within the defeats of these struggles (more profound in some countries than others) and a subsequent redrawing of the balance of power between labour and capital at local and national levels.

As well as the threats associated with capital mobility, labour is faced with the consequences of its own mobility within regional economies. Whilst labour mobility offers opportunities for individual workers, for labour collectively the effect has been to increase access to cheaper and more malleable labour at a time when the institutions of the hegemonic regime have been severely weakened. Control strategies are also determined by what Smith (2006) refers to as “mobility indeterminacy”. Where labour is easily substituted, as in low skilled routine work, labour mobility works to the advantage of employers, frequently facilitated by employment intermediaries who act as go-betweens for firms seeking to bypass the restrictions of local labour markets (French and Mörhke, 2006; Anderson and Ruhs, 2011).

Agency labour drawn from local labour markets can also serve to alleviate the constraints on capital presented by a core workforce. The choice of management to embark on this form of human resource (and labour control) strategy will depend upon a combination of the factors outlined above. Capturing the complex structures of the management and labour control regime of agency workers in French car plants requires a close examination of these various factors. Chapter 4 sets out the methodology adopted for the research and the operationalisation of the concepts that have been introduced and discussed in this chapter, in order to achieve the aims and objectives set out in Chapter 1.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH PARADIGM AND METHODOLOGY

1. Introduction

Since all social scientists approach their subject via explicit and implicit assumptions about the nature of the social world (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Mason, 1996), it is important to make clear from the outset the philosophical paradigm that frames the research process. The methodological framework that I adopt is informed by critical realism, a philosophical approach that recognises an objective reality that exists independently of our knowledge of it. At the same time, critical realism acknowledges how prevailing discourses and theoretical constructs influence our knowledge of reality. Critical realism, therefore, simultaneously rejects empiricist claims to direct and unmediated access to the world through our sensory experiences, and social constructivist claims that social reality is made up of our discourses and constructs. Critical realism is utilised in this thesis as a philosophical under-labourer that is ontologically and epistemologically compatible with Marx and Engels' (1976) dialectical materialist approach to the social world. Like dialectical materialism, critical realism considers structural and agential dimensions of social reality to be in a dialectical, multi-directional relationship (Sayer, 1992, p. 142), most comprehensively expressed by Archer's (1995) Morphogenetic-Morphostatic approach, and transcending the positivist-interpretivist divide within social science (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000, p. 3). Brown (2002, p. 19) argues that within Marx and Engels' body of work it is possible to detect concepts that critical realism articulates in a similar way: the distinction between thought and mind-independent reality; the notions of tendencies and emergence; and the practical side of knowledge. Not all Marxists accept this view, however. Roberts (1999), for example, rejects the idea that Marx implicitly used a critical realist framework, asserting instead that critical realism severs the link between theory and practice, whilst conceding too much ground to Kantian critiques of Humean causality (Brown, Fleetwood and Roberts, 2002, p.12). From this perspective, critical realism is said to prioritise abstractions and "contemplation" over empirical, sensory experience. However, the view taken in this thesis is that critical realism's focus upon theoretical constructs to apprehend

unobservable structures that give rise to observable empirical outcomes is compatible with the Marxist distinction between “surface appearance” and “essence”, expressed by Marx in his critique of Smith’s and Ricardo’s theories of surplus value (Marx, 1969 – see Pratten 1993, p. 414) and his contention that all “science would be superfluous if the form of appearance of things directly coincided with their essence” (Marx, 1981, p. 956).

The first part of this chapter discusses how the stratified ontology of critical realism resonates with Marxism at a philosophical level, as a powerful alternative to the ontology and epistemology behind positivist and interpretivist approaches. The chapter then briefly outlines the place of critical realism within broader debates around structure and agency. The supplemental relationship of critical realism to the Marxist dialectical method is then presented as the basis for the research strategy and choice of methodology, before setting out the research strategy and design employed in this research. The final part of the chapter is a reflexive account of the research process.

2. The research paradigm: ontological and epistemological perspectives

2.1. Critical realism: transcending the positivist/interpretivist divide

Social scientists are commonly faced with two opposing ways of viewing the world and acquiring knowledge of that world:

“either the world is objectively and unproblematically available....or it is not knowable objectively at all; and in the place of claims to objectivity, we find only the idea that what is known is merely the product of discourse”

(Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000, p. 4)

Critical realism rejects this polarised view, adopting in its place a dualist ontology, which recognises an objective world that exists outside of our knowledge and our perception of it, with the important caveat that our understanding of the world is mediated by socially constructed concepts and discursive acts, and that these constitute an important aspect of the social world (Fleetwood, 2005). Within organisational studies, critical realism has challenged the post-

structuralist/postmodern and linguistic/cultural turn that became fashionable in the 1980s and has since gained prominence (Fleetwood and Ackroyd, 2004). The appeal of critical realism lies in its simultaneous critique of positivism's (false) claims to neutrality in accessing an unproblematised social world, and social constructivism's ontological prioritisation of "Verstehen" – the "world of lived reality and situation specific meanings that constitute the general object of investigation" (Schwandt, 1994. p.118). Both approaches conflate ontology and epistemology. For positivism, there is a correspondence between what we observe and the social world. For constructivism, our meanings and interpretation determine the "content and boundaries" of the world and, it follows, the nature of the world. Critical realism, in contrast, argues that there is a deeper social world that lies beyond these two forms of surface appearance (objective observations and interpretations/meanings). In other words, reality and our descriptions of reality are not in perfect correspondence, though our descriptions constitute an aspect of reality. As an example, class is a contested concept depending on whether priority is given to reality at the level of what we can easily observe (our impressions) or to some deeper dimension of reality from which class emerges (the social relations of production). Thus, definitions of class based on observation and subjective identification (e.g. Weberian approaches to class), may define class with reference to lifestyle and market position. Marxists, on the other hand, understand class in terms of the position of individuals in relation to the process of production. These social relations are not directly observable at the level of experience, though their effects are experienced by social actors engaged in these relations.

Interpretivist approaches reject the idea that material and social phenomena possess essential properties outside of our perceptions of them, and instead argue that all that we can know about an object and an event is how it appears to us. Critical realism, on the other hand, accepts the positivist claim that the object of knowledge – the "thing" being studied – possesses properties irrespective of our comprehension of them. It is the task of science to reveal these properties. Unlike positivism, however, critical realism recognises that our attempts to gain knowledge of reality are mediated through how our belief systems lead us to express these objects (Chalmers, 1978, p. 114). Therefore, critical realism acknowledges the interpretive influence of the researcher and rejects the notion of value-free social science that positivism proposes

researchers should aim for. Since social scientists are a part of the social world that they study, they cannot escape their own individual standpoint. As a result, observation can never be truly neutral. Instead, access to the world is mediated by our conceptions of the world (Fleetwood, 2005).

The recognition that observations and perceptions form only part of the social world flows from critical realism's stratified ontology (Bhaskar, 1978). A stratified ontology leads to an epistemological focus on different layers or domains of reality – the empirical (experiences and perceptions), the actual (events and actions) and the deep (structures, mechanisms and power relations). In his critique of critical realism, Brown (2013) argues that by separating reality into different layers, critical realism is unable to integrate localised phenomenon into a system-wide account of that phenomenon, instead it remains isolated in its separate domain. In response, Fleetwood (2013) argues that analytically separating social domains is not the same as treating them as isolated spheres of reality. Rather it is by recognising the distinction between what we observe (e.g. a strike) and the deep structures and mechanisms that produce the things we observe (e.g. extraction of surplus value, alienation) that it is possible to understand the underlying conditions by which human behaviour is possible and probable (Callinicos, 1985; Pratten, 1993). The absence of conflict (e.g. strike action) does not mean that the structures and mechanisms that give rise to that conflict are not there, or that, to use this example, the antagonism between labour and capital has been resolved. The realm of the deep, as a discrete analytical unit, is important for critical realism since it is from this realm of “enduring structures” that “generative mechanisms” emerge, which may or may not be felt at the level of experience. This is a process of abstraction similar to that employed by Marx (Pratten, 1993). Although Marx never systematically explained his dialectical method, it can be inferred from the way in which the various levels of abstraction at which Marx operates capture both the “moment” of social phenomena and the historical evolution of those phenomena as products of “intersecting and overlapping contradictions arising out of the past and arching towards the future” (Ollman, 2003, p. 164).

2.2. Structure and agency: interconnected and analytically separate

Critical realism's account of the relationship between "enduring structures" and the interactions of social actors/agents within these structures provides a compelling response to the debate around the nature of structure and agency that has divided social science and competing accounts of Marxist theory. It does so in a way that is compatible with and enriches those Marxist accounts that have attempted to overcome the undialectical polarity of structure and agency presented by deterministic and voluntarist versions of Marxism¹⁶. Archer (1995, cited in Parker 2000) cogently sets out the complex relationship between structure and agency within which human social interaction gives rise to social structures, which in turn influence the social interaction of humans, in what is a "sophisticated" development from Giddens (1976, cited in Parker, 2000) and Bourdieu's (1977; 1981, cited in Parker, 2000) ontological perspectives on the interplay between structure and agency (Fleetwood, 2013). Giddens' (1976) structuration theory sees structure and agency as intertwined in a complex feedback loop whereby agency shapes structures that shape social agents and so on *ad infinitum*, so that both dimensions of social reality are simultaneously constitutive of each other. Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" is an explanation of how social structures are the outcome of patterns of behaviour repeated over time. Individuals appropriate the "legacy of history" which engenders an understanding of the behaviours required (habitus) for maintaining their position within society (Bourdieu, 1981, p. 305). In Bourdieu's account, structures – the outcome of historical patterns of behaviour – primarily constrain agency by positioning humans according to their access to resources, whilst also enabling social agents to pursue interests. Although agency is a key element of historical social evolution for Bourdieu, his concept of habitus leans heavily in the direction of the reproduction of elite power within society as both dominant and dominated reproduce persistent and enduring social structures (Parker, 2000).

In all three approaches, structure and agency are interdependent dimensions of the social world, however these approaches part company over the nature of the relationship and the conceptual tools employed to understand this relationship. Archer (1995, cited in Parker, 2000) proposes

¹⁶ See Callinicos (1985, pp. 9-10) for a summary of the positions of "deterministic" Marxists such as Althusser who view history as a "process without subject or goals" and "voluntaristic" versions of Marxism who view history as driven by human agency (Callinicos, 1985, pp. 9-10).

analytical dualism as a way of investigating these two interdependent categories of social reality. This is necessary since, although it is agents that construct structures through social interaction, agents at any particular historical time are interacting within and upon structures that pre-exist them. Archer's model, therefore, takes account of the antecedent structures that historically precede social actors. Giddens (1976), on the other hand, refers to the "duality" of structure and agency in the sense that the two categories can only be conceived of in relation to the other, thus failing to integrate the past fully into accounts of contemporary social action. Archer's "historicism" and "analytical dualism" capture Marx's contention that the circumstances in which humans make their history are inherited from the past. In addition, Archer develops a more complex and deeper way of understanding how human agents and structures interact and integrate and, in so doing, resolves the tension in structure and agency (Fleetwood, 2013). Although prior human agency has constructed the structures that frame contemporary social action, they have an objective existence that is analytically separate from social interaction (Mutch, 2004). At any one time in history, human action can reproduce or transform these social structures that prior action has given rise to. The reproduction or transformation of structures is driven by the social positioning of agents as collective agents (e.g. class or gender), and as reflexive actors who possess powers to actualise or block generative mechanisms (Archer, 1995, pp. 174-76, cited in Parker, 2000) depending on how they perceive or interpret their interests.

This Morphogenetic-Morphostatic (M-M) approach is Archer's (1995, 1998) contribution to Bhaskar's (1978) Transformational Model of Social Agency. Grounded in a stratified ontology, it rejects the deterministic approach of structural Marxism by viewing social reproduction and change as the outcome of particular combinations of phenomena, processes and practices in social life that have the potential to give rise to new emergent properties (Carter and New, 2004, p. 7). The dialectic relationship between action/agency and its products in the form of enduring structures captures the concept of praxis that is implicit within Marx's writings. For Marx, social life is "essentially practical" and the acts of social agents that shape and change the world are conditioned by the ability of human beings to reflect upon the consequences of intentional

action¹⁷. Furthermore, action not only has the potential to reproduce, shape and transform social structures, it also changes social agents, a process described within the context of Marx's discussion of the transformative impact of labour on the worker (Pratten, 1993, p. 417). This opens up the possibility of a transformed consciousness through the combined effects of action and reflexivity. Social action, however, is framed by the constraining and enabling function of socio-economic structures, expressed by Marx in his famous dictum that "[M]en make history, but they do not make it just as they please: they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past." (Marx, 1979). Archer (1995) expresses a similar dialectical and historical approach in her understanding of the way the past interacts with the present through the social structures that have been historically constituted by the actions of previous generations of social agents.

2.3. Critical realism and research strategy

From an epistemological perspective, critical realism can be viewed as a philosophy of social science that informs the theory and method of social science rather than prescribing methods for analysing the social world (Yeung, 1997). Although directing the researcher to seek out underlying structures and mechanisms that give rise to phenomena, as well as describing those phenomena, critical realism does not provide a methodological blueprint for research. The lack of clarity over methodological choices has been cited as a major flaw of critical realism (see Yeung, 1997). However, by drawing attention to the combined importance of antecedent social structures that constrain and enable social actors, the events that arise from emergent properties and the way in which they are experienced and responded to by individuals, critical realism is able to draw upon the traditions of both positivism and interpretivism for selected insights and techniques (Sayer, 1992, pp. 36-55). For critical realism, methodological choices are determined by the nature of the research problem or issue to be addressed (McEvoy and Richards, 2006). Critical realism, therefore, can lend itself to a plurality of methods, the integration of which can overcome the limitations of single-focus methodologies associated, in particular, with positivist approaches. Positivist approaches to employment and labour economics can generate

¹⁷ See Marx (1845), *Theses on Feuerbach*, which include the oft-cited materialist critique of philosophy: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."

knowledge about various facets of employment (wages, types of employment, characteristics of workers) whilst interpretivist approaches can inform about organisational practices and cultures at the local level (Prasad and Prasad, 2002). The constructs and conceptualisations that individuals employ to make sense of wage labour represent a valid dimension of reality (Kirkpatrick and Hocque, 2006; De Ruyter, 2007; Carey, 2007), although their conceptualisations may be incorrect, or only partially correct (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000, p. 11). For example, employees may perceive that the employment relationship is unequal and hierarchical, but lack a deeper knowledge of the structures that generate that relationship.

The triangulation of different methods permits the social researcher to gain a knowledge of different domains of a stratified social reality. The intransitive domain, the domain of the deep which cannot be observed, is revealed through theoretical abstractions that serve to explain social phenomena. Theory abstracted from the empirical domain is the lens through which critical realism accesses the realm of the deep, providing an explanation of the structures from which social phenomena emerge. These theoretical models constitute “truth-like” theories which serve as a bridge to the intransitive dimension (Bhaskar, 1993, pp. 399-340, cited in Curry, 2002, p. 126). The validity of “truth-like” claims about reality relies upon “analytical generalisations” through a process of retroductive inference, similar to the notion of “abductive inspiration” (Risjord et al., 2002) which seeks explanation rather than prediction. The ideas generated about a phenomenon provide the basis for a conceptual framework that can best explain the phenomenon (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 77) as theory is refined by iteratively moving between observations and lived experience and propositions about underlying structures. Analytical generalisation, therefore, is premised upon the explanatory power of theory, and it is through the observable domains that theories about the deep, intransitive domain of reality are maintained and developed. This can be applied to Marx’s explanation of the workings of the capitalist system, observed at the empirical level as the condition of the working lives of the English proletariat in the 19th century. Marx’s critique of the slogan of “a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work”¹⁸ was rooted in his theoretical abstractions, which revealed

¹⁸ Marx argued strongly against those who raised this slogan since it ignored the fundamental inequity of wage labour by which surplus value was abstracted at the point of production. See Marx (1875), *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

the social relations from which profit and capital accumulation emerge, thereby revealing the unobservable structure necessary for the observable phenomenon through retroductive inference. Critical realism's use of theoretical constructs to apprehend unobservable structures that give rise to observable empirical outcomes is compatible, therefore, with the Marxist distinction between "surface appearance" and "essence". Essence for Marx refers to the nature of phenomena, made knowable through the use of theoretical abstractions (e.g. the operation of the law of value as an ultimate explanation of the accumulation of capital, rather than classical economic's focus on price and wages as phenomena that can be observed).

3. Research strategy and design

The research strategy employed in this research is premised upon the search for explanation through a deep understanding of the various dimensions that feed into and constitute the phenomenon of agency work in French car plants. The research design that flows from this aims to combine data from a number of different sources, including the incorporation of quantitative data sources with qualitative data in the research design. Historical analysis of textual and numerical sources forms the basis of an "analytically structured account of the material, structural and political forces and dynamics" within which the phenomenon is embedded, thus allowing for an exploration of associated generative mechanisms (Reed, 2005, p. 1636). The main unit of analysis is agency work in the French car sector examined at various interconnected dimensions and levels. It includes an exemplifying case (Bryman, 2008) which aims to illustrate the phenomena of agency work in a localised setting in order to provide an additional explanatory facet. The research design combines interview data with other sources of qualitative (textual) data, and descriptive, quantitative data, to explore changes in patterns of agency work over time. Through a combination of contextual descriptive analysis, documentary data and the perceptions and meanings of social agents as derived from interview data, different data collection techniques address the different (and interconnected) levels of exploration, interrogation and analysis (Creswell, 2003; Yin, 2003).

The research also includes a post-hoc semi-ethnographic dimension by which I was able to observe events that provided insight into the research setting. In Section 4 below, I discuss the

processes by which I came to extend my range of data sources. Barriers encountered in accessing the potential data sources that had been identified early on in the research process led me to adopt Glaser's (1998) approach: "all is data". The research design evolved through a process of elimination and identification of opportunities as doors opened and closed, presenting me with difficult choices to make. One of the outcomes of this was the decision to make use of any data that I was presented with to pursue my research aims, with the recognition that the data collected would vary in quality and usefulness. Thus field notes from observations and events became more prominent than originally envisaged, both in relation to data collection and theory development. Ethical considerations were taken into account when using less formal sources of data collection. For example on one occasion I was invited to be present during an emotive casework meeting. Although I was permitted to take notes at the meeting, I was mindful that I was witnessing a worker in a highly stressed and agitated state. I was allowed to participate in this meeting as I was perceived to be a "concerned observer" and "on the side" of the workforce. It was assumed, therefore, that I would treat the information to which I had access with sensitivity, and an awareness of the vulnerable situation of such workers.

A further issue associated with the use of observational data relates to its integration in the data analysis stage. Combining different sources of data collection and data analysis, whilst generating information-rich data, poses problems in terms of how to integrate different types of data within the overall analysis of the thesis. The data from field notes are treated as complementary data to further contextualise the research setting, with the caveat that it represents a partial view of the setting.

3.1. Case selection and data collection

The identification and selection of the exemplar case was based upon the criteria of relevance (Stake, 1994) and practicality. My starting point was that any of the major automobile plants in France would be relevant and appropriate for the research, given the widespread use of agency work throughout the sector. Each one would yield both general and unique aspects of agency work. For reasons of geography, it was preferable to choose a site relatively easy to reach from the UK, either in Paris or northern France. Having made relatively early contact with a union

representative at the Toyota factory in Valenciennes, it was expected that this would be the site for a case study. Unfortunately attempts to organise interviews with workers at the plant – through email contact and visits to Valenciennes – proved unfruitful. As a result, the focus of the study moved to PSA Peugeot-Citroën, specifically to the plant situated at Aulnay-sur-Bois, in the northern suburbs of Paris. However, due to problems of accessing sufficient numbers of interview participants, in particular, agency workers at the Aulnay plant, the thesis draws upon a wider range of interview respondents. The reflexive account in Section 4 of this chapter presents a more detailed discussion of access issues and difficulties.

Primary data collection began in December 2009 when the first contact was made with a local union representative in the south of France. Interviews were then carried out over a period of 18 months, a time scale which reflects the barriers encountered in gaining access to willing participants. The interviews and field visits to the Peugeot plant took place between September 2010 and June 2011.

3.1.1 Interviews

Interviews took place with key informants and agency workers. My overall approach to the interviews was one of a guided conversation facilitated by a checklist of topics and questions to be covered, although the specific application of this approach differed according to the type and purpose of the interview. I had expected that unanticipated themes would emerge from the interviews. As a result, I did not want to restrict interviews by ascribing too many pre-determined categories to the interview schedule (Patton, 1990). The aim was to draw out a range of relevant themes, including unexpected ones (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000).

At the outset of the research, it was proposed to interview between 15-20 agency workers as well as a number of key informants, using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive/purposeful sampling, selected on the basis of how useful respondents are for the pursuit of the inquiry (McEvoy and Richards, 2006, p. 67), is a common sampling strategy in qualitative research. The aim is to select cases that will provide a rich source of information relevant to the research inquiry (Patton, 1990). Snowball sampling involves using contacts and

informants to identify appropriate cases, again a common sampling strategy in qualitative research. It is also referred to as a “opportunistic” sampling, in that researchers take advantage of situations as they arise during the data collection phase of the research (Kemper et al., 2003, p. 283)

The final number of interviews carried out did not meet original expectations. A variety of attempts were made to increase the number of interviews, including a web questionnaire survey through which it was hoped to filter potential interview participants, and a dedicated blog aimed at stimulating an online chatboard type discussion amongst agency workers¹⁹. A flyer containing details of the blog was distributed directly to Peugeot workers during one of the visits to the plant, and union contacts agreed to distribute the flyer inside the plant. Prior to this, a flyer with details of the research and a call for interview respondents from the target population was distributed via union contacts. None of these strategies worked – the agency workers that were interviewed were introduced directly by key informants. The final sample of interviewees, therefore, did not correspond to that expected at the outset of the research, both in relation to composition and to numbers. This had a significant impact on both the nature and the quality of the interview data.

Much of the interview data came from respondents who were originally perceived as key informants. Key informants are people who can provide crucial information about the phenomena, target population and local context. They can be experts on the phenomena being researched, either formally through their official roles, or informally given their immersion in research settings. They may also have insight into the wider social, national and political context. Whereas individual respondents describe their personal feelings and opinions, key informants are more likely to provide information (Kumar et al., 1993). They can also act as local gatekeepers or as a bridge to individual respondents, and therefore, play an important role in the research process. Two types of key informants were interviewed. Those that are immersed in the local setting (local union representatives), and “national experts” (national union officials) who provided broader contextual information on agency work. During the course of the data

¹⁹ <http://interimsecteurauto.wordpress.com/>

collection, the role of the first group became blurred between key informant and respondent due to their in-depth knowledge of agency work in the auto sector, particularly those who had direct experience of agency work through their personal work biographies.

The interview tool for key informants reflected the purpose of the interviews – to obtain both contextual information and informed perspectives on a variety of dimensions of agency work in car plants, given differing degrees of familiarity with the phenomenon. The interview guide was unstructured although there was a checklist of topics to be covered, acknowledging the need to both explore the specialised knowledge of key informants and to target specific aspects of that knowledge. However, the structure of the interviews differed according to the type of key informant and the location of the interview. Interviews held in cafés with local union representatives were more like conversations, whereas those with national officials, taking place in an office or by telephone, felt more structured, with the interviewee rarely straying from the questions asked. In two instances, where interviews took place during the occupation of an agency, it was not appropriate to record the interviews.

Individual respondents are underrepresented in this research. Given this was the target population for the research, this has implications for the research. Whilst a large number of interviews does not guarantee a better quality dataset, it is more likely to include a wider range and variation of experiences, views and perceptions (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000, p. 19) which will enhance interpretation and analysis. Whilst the methodological approach adopted does not demand representativeness, a greater number of individual respondents would have presented a larger corpus of data from which to compare, contrast and analyse the different experiences of agency workers.

Contact with individual respondents was made in the first instance through local informants. The preferred strategy was to obtain contact details of respondents to arrange interviews directly with individual agency workers in a convenient and neutral location. However, one of the informants was not prepared to facilitate direct contact and retained control over access to respondents and locations of interviews, including participating in one of the interviews. This

posed a problem for conducting the interview given the perceived knowledge advantage of the key informant who regularly interrupted the interview. The different circumstances in which the interviews took place is taken account in the interpretation and analysis, by drawing attention to the way the interview data may have been compromised by the setting and form. All individual respondents were assured anonymity through the use of pseudonyms. This was important given the assumption, based upon intuition and a reading of the literature, that those on precarious employment contracts are vulnerable to victimisation should they choose to speak negatively about employers or agencies. Respondents were informed of the purposes of the research at the start of the interviews and the possibility of withdrawing. Interviews with respondents were recorded, transcribed and translated. Where an interview took place outside the plant, notes were also taken, given the levels of noise.

Type of Interview	Workplace/ location	Mode and location of interview
Key informants/Respondents		
Patrice, CGT union rep, ex-agency worker	Ford, Bordeaux	Individual interview, café
Eddie, CGT union rep, ex-agency worker	Toyota, Valenciennes	Individual interview, café
Halim, SUD union rep	PSA, Aulnay	Individual and group interviews, Café
Pierre, CGT union rep	PSA, Aulnay	Individual interview, café
Victor, CGT union rep, ex-agency worker	PSA, Mulhouse	Individual interview, café
Gilles, SUD national official (organising in the auto sector)	SUD national HQ	Individual interview, office
Paul, CFDT national official (organising in auto sector)	CFDT national HQ	Individual interview, telephone
Dominique, USI-CGT official (organising agency workers)	USI-CGT offices	Individual and group interview, during union action
Sandra, USI-CGT (organising agency workers)	USI-CGT offices	Individual interview, during union action
Occupational physician specialising in agency work	Seine-et-Marne	Individual interview, telephone
Individual respondents (respondents who were agency workers at the time of the interview or in the previous 3 months)		
Daniel	Toyota, Valenciennes	Individual interview, café
Léa	PSA, Aulnay	In café (with union rep)
Amina	PSA, Aulnay	Outside plant (with fellow agency worker)
Elodie	Toyota, Valenciennes	Individual interview, telephone

All interviews were transcribed and translated by the researcher. Carrying out qualitative research in a foreign language and setting presents researchers with a number of issues. Xian (2008) presents a persuasive critique of the tendency of researchers to view the translation of data as a uniquely technical exercise, whilst Temple and Young (2004) argue that translation issues are rarely present in cross-cultural research. There is, however, a small body of literature that discusses the significance of linguistic and cultural barriers in the translation process (Brislin, 1973; Harkness, 2003; Douglas and Craig, 2007, cited in Xian, 2008) and suggests various techniques (for example, back translations and multiple translators) to ensure an accurate transmission of meaning. Xian (2008) argues this is not an adequate response to the problems posed by translation in qualitative research. The process of translation is “a (re)construction of the social reality of a culture in a different language, in which the translator interacts with the data, actively interpreting social concepts and meaning” (Xian, 2008, p. 233). Translation is always difficult, since there is a tension between the formal correspondence between two sets of words or phrases and the need to transmit an idea. With qualitative interview data, the focus on meanings 10vey questionnaires or structured interview schedules in order to verify that all respondents are responding to the same questions. Instead, two interviews were selected and translated by an accomplished translator of academic books. This translator has also published non-fiction work which has relied in large part on the translation from French into English of eye-witness accounts of historical events, therefore, ensuring a sensitivity to the need to maintain authenticity in the process of translation. These translations were then compared with the original translations, and inconsistencies were discussed with reference to the original French transcription. Having lived in France for ten years (from 1992 to 2002), I consider my level of French fluency to be sufficient to carry out qualitative research in French. Collaborative discussion with another bi-lingual academic over the best terminology to convey meaning in translated texts provided further confirmation of the quality of translations (Brislin et al. 1973, p. 46). Furthermore, the translation of interview transcripts, and the attention to detail therein, provided a further opportunity to become familiar with the data (Temple and Young, 2004, p. 168).

3.1.2 Documentary data

Documentary data provide both an important contextual layer to the research objectives and a further lens through which to understand the phenomena. Appropriate documents can constitute an expression or representation, or textual trace of facets of a phenomena, either in a literal sense (factual evidence) or in an interpretive sense (Mason, 1996, pp. 72-73). A number of sources of textual data are included in this thesis.

Archived newspaper articles provided an important source of data regarding the growing discussion around the use of agency labour in the auto sector, providing colour to the quantitative data documenting the increasing use of agency workers by manufacturers. Documents and missions statements from the organisations representing temporary employment agencies (PRISME and CIETT) were accessed to provide further contextual and analytical information. Similarly, documents from Peugeot PSA and the UIMM (*Union des Industries des Métiers de la Metallurgie*) and the MEDEF (*Mouvement des Entreprises de France*) also provide an appropriate source of data given the emphasis on the political apparatus of production as outlined in Chapter 3.

There are methodological issues to be considered when accessing documentary data. Scott's (1990) fourfold criteria for assessing the quality of documentary data is widely cited in the literature. The first is authenticity – is the document genuine? The second is credibility – does it contain bias and distortion? The third is representation – are the documents sampled representative of other relevant documents? Fourthly, does the document express clear meaning (Scott, 1990, p. 30). The documents accessed in this thesis fit the criteria of authenticity as their authorship is verifiable – the documents are organisational documents in the public domain. With regards to credibility, identifying bias or distortion is part of the analysis. Documents from employment agencies and unions are understood to be written for a distinctive purpose; they are not neutral documents. Understanding the context in which they are written and their purpose is part of a process of data analysis which attempts to uncover an underlying reality that needs to be accessed (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004, p. 54, cited in Bryman, 2008). This involves looking for meaning in bias by revealing who the intended reader is and what message the author hopes

to transmit or what reality they want to portray. This also addresses the fourth criteria – meaning. With regards to the third criteria – representativeness – this also depended on the category of data.

3.1.3 Official statistics

Official statistics serve as complementary data which are easily accessible and can cover long periods, allowing for the identification of social trends at an aggregate level. For the critical realist researcher, however, government statistics are used with the acknowledgement that they are a relatively static, one dimensional form of data that needs to be combined with other sources to enhance interpretation. Government statistics can also be unreliable and prone to data gaps (Gill, 1993). The relatively recent inclusion of agency work in government statistics in most EU countries, coupled with the transient nature of the employment contract hindered the mapping of trends. Likewise, differences in the quality and rigour of national datasets creates problems for comparative analysis (Arrowsmith, 2009). France is one of the countries with relatively reliable data on agency work (Arrowsmith, 2009). Temporary work agencies are legally bound to submit monthly declarations to the government agency, UNEDIC (*Union nationale interprofessionnelle pour l'emploi dans l'industrie et le commerce*) which are the basis of monthly reports on agency work statistics, compiled by DARES (*Direction de l'animation de la recherche, des études et des statistiques*). However, for the purposes of cross-national comparison of the extent and profile of agency work across Europe, methodological considerations need to be taken into account. Whilst definitions of agency work in EU member states are converging (Arrowsmith, 2009, p. 18), it is only in recent years that agency work has figured as a separate category, reflecting the traditional focus on core, full-time, regular employment in national labour force statistics (Greenwood, 1999). Labour force statistics continue to be a weak source of data on agency work, and tend to under-represent low-skilled or agency work which has a high proportion of migrant workers (Ford and Slater, 2005). With this caveat in mind, cross-national comparisons of labour statistics are considered to have some

degree of comparability due to EU endeavours to ensure the harmonisation of concepts and definitions.²⁰

Despite the technical limitations of official datasets, and the social bias inherent in statistics that reflect the assumptions, concepts and priorities of governments and policy makers, they can usefully serve to describe aspects of a phenomenon at a national and international level. Official statistics can serve both a descriptive and analytical function; providing significant complementary contextual data, and, through the mapping of the evolution of agency work in the agency work in the car sector, allow for a more analytical interpretation of trends when discussed with reference to other key socio-economic and legislative developments. Through the identification of sector level trends in human resource strategies, such data add a further dimension to the triangulation of multiple data sources. This approach to official statistics chimes well with Olsen's (2005) proposition that social statistics are not to be treated as facts that speak for themselves, but rather interpreted and analysed in a critical and reflexive way, preferably in conjunction with other forms of data.

3.1.4 Observations

During field visits, a number of opportunities arose to directly observe social and physical spaces relevant to the research. On one occasion, the observation was participant (taking part in an action against a temporary employment agency), with my participation being that of an "interested outsider". Such observations were recorded in field notes, and, though limited in scope, constitute a further, unexpected, dimension to the research. Observations are included in the data since events and instances witnessed will inevitably affect the analysis and interpretation of data, and provide an alternative way of viewing the world of the car worker, potential issues facing agency workers and union responses to agency work. Thus, making clear the influence of connections between observations and analysis and interpretation enhances the validity of the research findings. At a basic level of analysis, observations can capture different dimensions of the context and thus enrich the narrative of the analysis, bringing the reader closer to the world being investigated.

²⁰ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_SDDS/en/lfsq_esms.htm#comparability

Methodological issues associated with the practice of observing in qualitative research are well documented. Whilst advanced as a way of directly accessing “naturalistic” environments, what is observed, recorded and interpreted is determined not only by the researcher’s research interest, but also by the researchers’ autobiography and worldview (Atkinson, 1992, p. 9). As such it is a highly subjective practice, both in terms of what is recorded and how the observation is translated into a field note, even when recording seemingly factual data about physical environments. “Selective perception” (bias in the researchers’ perception of what is significant and what is not) is particularly problematic in the recording and interpretation of observations (Johnson and Turner, 2003, p. 315). No grand claims to privileged access to knowledge are made from observational data. The recorded observations were opportunistic rather than structured, and offer merely a snapshot of dimensions of the phenomenon from which limited inferences can be made, primarily in relation to other data.

3.2 Data analysis

In qualitative research, data collection and analysis is not strictly separated, and accordingly, aspects of data analysis are referred to in the presentation of data collection above. Whilst the data sources are mixed, the data analysis follows an overarching logic of the identification of themes and patterns, and connections. Thematic analysis is a way of capturing significant information about data in relation to the research aims (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82), and can be both theoretically and data driven. It is compatible with a number of philosophical and theoretical concerns, including a critical realist outlook which acknowledges the significance of both social context and individual meanings assigned to experience. As Braun and Clarke (2006) put it, thematic analysis of data is a method that can work “both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of “reality” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 81). The process of coding data according to themes and sub-themes involves a process of moving from description of data to “theoretical redescription” (Danermark et al., 2002, pp. 109-110), as the data is organised into tentative concepts which are then interrogated through retroductive analysis.

In both early and later stages of analysis, data was read and re-read in order to identify emerging, tentative themes and to become familiar with the data. Initial, tentative analysis

occurred during the transcription process as ideas and memos were noted for future reference. The interviews were transcribed into French using a dedicated transcription computer programme (ExpressScribe). Transcription is an effective way of getting “to feel the data”. It prompts reflections on the interview process which enables the researcher to “relive” the interview, jogging the memory and opening doors to a deeper understanding of the responses which may not have been captured at the time. Transcription, therefore, provided the context for an initial formulation of ideas and the tentative identification of themes, which were recorded as notes attached to segments of the data. Further identification of themes was carried out first manually by reading through the transcripts and then by attaching codes to data segments within TAMS Analyzer, an open source qualitative analysis software, similar to NVivo. This facilitated the organisation of the data, the mapping of themes, and the efficient retrieval of data for analysis.²¹

Documents and newspaper articles were analysed using a similar process of identification of themes, although treated as separate types of data, and therefore analysed separately, before the process of making appropriate and theoretically valid connections between the different types of data sources. The management of lengthy documentary data entailed first the manual identification of extracts according to their relevance to the research. As with observational data, this demands an element of trust in the skills of the researcher, and transparency in relation to the researchers philosophical and theoretical priorities. Extracts were organised according to the category of data (newspaper, union documents, industry and agency documents) and with reference to the function of data: persuading, expressing or informing (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000).

²¹ Sobh and Perry (2005) argue that qualitative data analysis software is not appropriate for a realist philosophical paradigm that “emphasises relationships, connections and creativity” since it may result in a decrease in the researchers sensitivity. Computer programmes, it is argued, are only suitable for “subjective” research that is concerned only with the properties of the text (Sobh and Perry, 2005, p. 1206). However, this is too prescriptive an approach to methods and techniques employed in critical realist informed research, based upon the assumption that the technology determines what the researcher sees. The use of data analysis software, in combination with the manual organisation and reading of data, does not in and of itself, preclude the researchers’ intellectual creativity in making connections and interpretations beyond the text.

The recording of observations and other field notes served to complement the analysis of the main data, by providing contextual information and the possibility of alternative interpretations.

3.3 Triangulation, multiple data sources and retrodution

Since critical realism holds that our knowledge of the world is fallible, and that the aim of research is to present a “truth-like” explanatory account of a phenomenon, criteria for evaluating critical research revolves around notions of “completeness” and “theoretical generalisation”. For research informed by critical realism, the use of multiple types of data can bring bring the researcher closer to the nature of a phenomenon through an examination of its various dimensions (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, p. 9; McEvoy and Richards, 2006, p. 72) and the triangulation of these different sources and/or methods of data collection. For Olsen (2004), triangulation is not aimed merely at validation of the research but also, and more significantly, at a deepening and widening of understanding²². This contrasts with positivist approaches to validity which insist upon rigorous codification of research procedures. Qualitative research, on the other hand, lacks operationally defined tests of validity or “truth” (Eisner, 1991, p. 53). Although there are a variety of terms within qualitative research methodologies that act as substitute markers for validity and reliability – for example, trustworthiness, authenticity, credibility, dependability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 43) – there is no clear consensus as to what validity means or entails (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). Replicating such codification in qualitative research is not necessarily desirable, since it relies upon positivist epistemological assumptions (Bryman and Burgess, 1994, cited in Bryman, 2008, p. 538).

For critical realist approaches, the “worth” of the research is established through an emphasis on depth and extent of research aimed at building a more rounded, more complete and more compelling picture and explanation of social life. Some of the methods employed by critical realism for evaluating research are shared with interpretivist research methodologies. For example, from Creswell’s eight strategies for verifying the “accuracy” of research (Creswell,

²² Olsen (2004) points out that the use of multiple data sources to describe social phenomena has a long history, giving the example of the extensive analysis carried out by Lenin for his 1889 work *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*. This entailed a detailed attention to quantitative datasets and a critique of the discursive practices which concealed the true nature of capitalist social relations. The result was a critical account of bourgeois political economy resulting from the methodological triangulation of discourse analysis and survey data.

2003, p. 196), it is possible to discern three strategies which can apply to a critical realist perspective. The first is the use of different data sources. Secondly, clarifying (rather than neutralising) researcher bias through self-reflection (reflexivity) “creates an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with readers”. Thirdly, Creswell suggests presenting discrepant information that runs counter to themes – or to assumptions built upon from the literature or theory (Creswell, 2003). Problematising theory in this way can result in a deeper probing of theory, identifying and resolving shortcomings. Taken together, the aim is to build a coherent picture of the phenomenon, the interpretation of which can be held up against the various data sources and the theoretical framework that guides the research.

McEvoy and Richards (2006) present a critical realist approach to triangulation which incorporates corroboration and completeness with retroduction. Confirmation through corroboration occurs at all levels of data analysis including theoretical corroboration, through the process of retroductive abstraction. Completeness, whilst not an easy goal to achieve in social science research, is sought through an analysis of different aspects of the phenomenon (McEvoy and Richards, 2006, p. 72). In its broadest sense, triangulation is the combining of more than one set of insights (Downward and Mearman, 2006, p. 79), capturing as much of reality as possible in order to increase the persuasiveness of the evidence presented and enhance the accuracy and representativeness of the data (Denzin and Lincoln, 1989, p. 82).

How these multiple sources are analysed and interpreted also influences the cogency of the account. Qualitative research methodologies tend to emphasise the need to overcome researcher bias so that the data “speaks” and overrides the theoretical preconceptions of the researcher. Patton (1990) talks about “emphatic neutrality”, or empathy towards those encountered, demonstrated by a neutral stance to findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) similarly argue for neutrality; findings of a study should be shaped by respondents, rather than researcher bias or motivation. For Strauss and Corbin (1990), qualitative research involves the ability to recognise and avoid bias. I argue that whilst it is important to acknowledge and make clear the political standpoint of the researcher, it is undesirable (and impossible) to totally eliminate “bias” from the research process. The findings of this thesis are shaped both by the data and by the

interpretation given to that data. That interpretation is based upon the philosophical, theoretical and political positions that have been discussed in this and previous chapters. This approach to research is informed by an appreciation of critical realism's emancipatory goal (Wilson and Green, 2004). Taking into account that readers need to be reassured that data is not simply manipulated to fit the arguments (Porter, 1993), the combination of multiple sources, analysed critically according to the logic of theoretical retroduction, seeks to provide a compelling account of agency work in French car plants and the underlying structures from which specific regimes of labour control arise.

3.4 Ethics

Informed consent was sought from the research participants. The consent form included a brief summary of the research and a clause explaining that respondents could withdraw from the study at any point up to the submission of the thesis. For consistency, the same consent form was used for all interview participants. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity by the use of pseudonyms throughout the written stages of the research (transcription, written thesis, published articles). There are also informal ethical considerations beyond the formal dimensions of research ethics. The choice of research subject was driven by personal/political sympathies regarding the situation of agency workers, as well as academic concerns. As discussed in Chapter 2, the precarious nature of the employment contract places agency workers in low-skilled jobs in a vulnerable position. This has implications for the welfare of potential research participants, and is likely to have had an impact on the willingness of temporary agency workers to participate in the research. The difficulties associated with researching vulnerable workers in the "conflictual" setting of the workplace (Fantasie, 1988) and the persistent concern for workers encountered during the research is explored in the reflexive account below (section 4).

3.5 Limitations

The reflexive narrative below discusses the limitations of the research in more detail. Here, I signpost the main issues affecting the quality of the research. Weaknesses and limitations of the study stem mainly from the difficulty in accessing appropriate research participants. The original aim of the study was to directly access the voices of agency workers working in the car

sector. The research would have clearly benefitted from more interviews from agency workers, since a key aim of the research is to understand the social dynamics between agency worker, employment agency and user firm. Since some of the union officials had previous experience of agency work in the sector, I was able to gain some direct insight into this dimension of the study. Yet the data obtained from these interviews lacked the depth that was required to adequately reflect the experiences of agency workers. These were retrospective accounts, filtered through the lens of their current position as lay union officials. Problems of access to agency workers in the French car sector have been identified in a recent study by Gorgeu and Mathieu (2011). The authors, both experienced qualitative researchers of the French car sector since the 1990s, carried out a focused follow-up study of agency workers who had responded to 2003 national SUMER survey on occupational health and safety²³. They note that many of the agency workers who had indicated that they would be prepared to participate in a face-to-face interview, responded negatively when subsequently contacted. Given the small number of interviewees (eight), the authors were obliged to supplement these interviews with those of permanent workers who had spent a period of time in the past on agency contracts. Similar problems are also highlighted in Farcy (2008). This illustrates the difficulties in accessing this group of precarious workers. This problem and possible explanations of the difficulties encountered are discussed further below.

4. Reflecting on the research process

In this section I discuss in more detail the methodological issues associated with carrying out qualitative research, by describing critical points in the research process which determined the direction of data collection. Reflexivity in qualitative research is widely acknowledged as an important dimension of the research process (Mason, 1996), and lends to the transparency of the research (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). The degree of reflexivity and the specific role of reflexivity in research varies, from an acknowledgment of the situated position of the researcher, to the notion that the inter-subjectivity of the researcher imposes and transforms the world under investigation (Finlay, 2002). Notwithstanding these differences, qualitative

²³ SUMER is the annual Medical Survey of Exposure to Professional Risks (*Surveillance médicale des expositions aux risques professionnels*)

researchers tend to be keenly aware of their active role in identifying, selecting, collecting and analysing data, and of the social process of researching a world of active social agents. Reflexivity is an acknowledgement that the researcher is not a neutral observer/collector of data in the research process (Mason, 1996). The way a researcher interprets and acts upon guidelines for qualitative research is influenced, not only by the ontological and epistemological standpoint of the researcher, but also by any implicit or explicit political partisanship. All research bears the personal stamp of the researcher as the methodology which guides the research is filtered through a “personal lens that is situated in a specific sociopolitical and historical moment” (Creswell, 2003, p.182). An equally important and often overlooked aspect of the social practice of research is the personality of the researcher, whose interpersonal skills, and even degrees of doggedness in the pursuit of research aims, can influence the ease or difficulty in gaining access to the research site (Feldman et al., 2003).

4.1 Gaining access to interview participants

Gaining access to agency workers willing to participate in the research was a major issue throughout the research, and one which was never satisfactorily resolved. The interview data was to be made up primarily of agency workers, supplemented by interviews of local and national union officials, and, if possible, representatives from car manufacturers and temporary employment agencies. As expected, attempts to solicit interviews from these two latter sources (via email, formal letters, telephone calls and visits to agencies) were unsuccessful.²⁴ I had not anticipated the scale of difficulty in finding agency workers and union officials willing to cooperate in the research. On reflection, expectations regarding access to potential interview participants were based upon my own personal history and experience. I assumed that workers in precarious, “bad” jobs would want to participate in a study which sought to “reveal” their experiences at work and provide a “voice” for a marginalised section of workers. This assumption flowed from my own political standpoint and history of union activity in which articulating and conveying realities of exploitation and oppression were a “natural” compulsion.

²⁴ An attempt to arrange an interview with Head of Communications at PSA-Aulnay was unwittingly “scuppered” by the SUD union official who contacted the person concerned on my behalf prior to my introductory telephone call. This meant that my request for an interview was treated as “suspect” due to my association with a militant trade union

I therefore expected that those who lived intense levels of exploitation would enthusiastically agree to participate in the research.

The problems I experienced in finding interview participants amongst the agency worker population illustrate the difficulty in carrying out this kind of study “from the outside”. The best known and arguably richest studies of work and labour control regimes in the auto sector are in-depth ethnographic studies carried out by male researchers working for long periods alongside car workers in factories (Linhart, 1978; Beynon, 1948; Thornett, 1998; Beaud and Pialoux, 1999; Durand and Hatzfeld, 2002). Other studies have entailed forging strong relationships with key informants who become important gatekeepers to the world of the car worker (Stewart, 1998b; Bouquin, 2006). The inability to cultivate strong relationships with key contacts in the sector hindered the process of data collection. Yet beyond this, it became apparent that the very nature of agency work, in the context of intensive manufacturing labour, is a barrier. Lack of integration and vulnerability in the workplace works against reliance on local lay officials to mediate access. Fantasia (1988) points out how the conflictual nature of the workplace problematises studying the world of labour through the accounts of workers. Where labour relations are marked by distrust and hostility the field can constitute sensitive zones which are difficult to access from the outside.

Initial steps to make contact with relevant actors were made through contacts in the UK, through which I was able to request an interview with a *délégué syndicale* (trade union representative) at the Ford Aquitaine plant in Bordeaux. The interview served two purposes. First, to provide interview data from the perspective of a trade unionist and lay official, and second, to investigate further avenues for field work. The interview was shaped by other, contextual factors. Taking place in December 2009, it was at the height of the economic crisis, which was disproportionately hitting the automobile sector. Job losses in the sector were significant and large numbers of agency workers were being laid off. This necessarily shaped the interview, and subsequent interviews.

From this interview, I was introduced to two union (CGT) contacts working in the automotive complex in Nord-Pas-de-Calais: one in the Toyota factory in Valenciennes and one in the Peugeot plant at Sevel-Nord. One of these contacts, Eddie, a union rep at Toyota, agreed to be interviewed and potentially to introduce me to agency workers. This second interview served a similar purpose to the first interview: data collection and negotiation over access. Eddie was able to provide me with the contact details of just three agency workers. This was disappointing. Further inquiry as to the possibility of enlarging the scope of potential interviewees was met negatively: my research requirements were low on the list of priorities of a busy union activist who was also heavily involved in upcoming regional elections. Further contact with Eddie was sporadic and inconsistent, and was met without much enthusiasm, on his part.

This highlighted a further ethical issue with which I had to grapple throughout my attempts to solicit cooperation from union activists and agency workers: how far to go in pushing forward my research needs. In other words, how much of a nuisance should I make of myself to impose my agenda on social actors with other pressing priorities. Feldman et al. (2003, p. 33) refer to the importance of *chutzpah* in qualitative research or having the audacity necessary to get the information sought. “Chutzpah” is an intensely personal trait that cannot be acquired from methodology textbooks. Getting the balance right between eliciting cooperation and being troublesome and pushy is difficult; excessive “chutzpah” may not be an ethically desirable characteristic in qualitative research, even if being “audacious” achieves research goals. This issue also highlights the role of the researcher’s socio-biographical history in the research process, the significance of which is contingent upon the nature of the social world under investigation.²⁵ In a study such as this one, whilst tenacity and audacity were appropriate at some points in the research, so too was a sensitivity to the complex and busy lives of those who were being solicited.

²⁵ On the other hand, the degree of “pushiness” can depend upon who is being interviewed. Given the acknowledgement of the political nature social researcher, consideration of the social position of the potential interview subject can affect the methods employed to gain access to interview data. Those in a position of social and political power may be treated less sensitively than those in a position of social vulnerability.

Following a further identification of potential sites of research, I made contact with Rachid, a union rep (SUD) at the Peugeot plant in Aulnay, in the northern suburbs of Paris, who agreed to meet me and set up interviews with agency workers. After the disappointment at Toyota, I was careful to explain my research and the need to carry out one-to-one interviews with agency workers. Rachid suggested that it would be possible to proceed as requested. In preparation for my visit to the site, I carried out web-based research on the history of the plant and the local labour market. However, the field visit did not progress as anticipated. Despite a number of email exchanges setting out the parameters of the visit, Rachid did not mediate appropriate access to agency workers at the plant. The sense that the visit would not go as planned was evident from the outset, when I was introduced to agency workers as “a journalist”. I corrected this several times, yet Rachid continued to refer to me as a journalist as he approached agency workers coming off their shift to see if they would “talk” to me. A few were prepared to chat to me before boarding company coaches laid on to transport workers to and from surrounding towns. The noise of hundreds of workers piling through the factory gate did not facilitate communication. Rachid was busy chatting to the many workers who approached to greet him with a handshake. It was only after the final coaches began to leave that it became clear that only one “formal” interview was going to take place and that Rachid would be accompanying us. The interview, with a young female agency worker (Léa), took place in a café in a local shopping centre. It was not an ideal situation. The café was noisy and the presence of Rachid may have compromised her responses. Rachid was reticent to provide contact details of other agency workers. Instead, he phoned the national office of SUD to arrange an interview the next day with an official whose remit was organising agency workers. This was appreciated as it provided appropriate data, but I was still lacking direct access to the experience of agency workers.

Rachid was unable to see me for the rest of the week so a further visit was arranged. I expressed my disappointment at not being able to interview agency workers as planned and stressed that this was an imperative part of my study. However, the second visit was barely more successful than the first. Instead of agency workers, Rachid decided that I could speak to young workers on apprenticeship contracts (*Contrats de Professionnalisation*, or *Contrats-Pros*). *Contrats-pros*

were presented as being “like” agency workers in that they are on temporary contracts, arranged via an employment agency and linked to an apprenticeship. These contracts are also subsidised by the state and viewed by some in the trade union movement as a form of cheap labour. The data from the *contrats-pros* is informative and has been integrated into the data analysis, but it is not data from typical agency workers. However, it was difficult to get across my specific interest in the temporary agency work contract, which lay in part in the importance of the triadic nature of the employment contract for the theoretical contribution of the thesis.

This relates to a further problem I encountered – that of feeling uncomfortable and out of place as an “academic” in a factory environment. I dealt with this discomfort by spontaneously emphasising my other “hat” – a trade unionist and a political activist. This became an important way of relating to and creating a positive relationship with union gatekeepers whom I knew were members or sympathisers of left political organisations. I also felt a need to express my empathy for workers labouring under difficult conditions, not “neutral empathy” (Patton, 1990) but rather empathy arising from partisanship and a sense of social outrage at intensely exploitative working conditions. I was also acutely aware of the status of academics amongst sections of the French left and labour movement: often dismissed as “petits intellos”, roughly translated as a “jumped-up intellectual”, someone who knows little about the real world of the worker. As a result, I found myself frequently asserting my own working class credentials in order to “fit in” and to cultivate a “comradely”, “fraternal” relationship.

Partisanship can play a key role in field access (Fantasia, 1988). However, this is complicated in the context of France, where union affiliation is political and core union activists are likely to identify with different competing political organisations. Whilst knowledge of these divisions is useful, it hindered the field work in that I was anxious to avoid alienating my contacts, and was sensitive to the repercussions of saying “the wrong thing”. The intense hostility to other unions expressed by one of the union representatives (Rachid) took me by surprise. The use of strong derogatory language in reference to CGT activists at the plant (e.g. “fascists”, “bosses union”) was awkward to deal with for a number of reasons. First, on a personal/political level, I objected to the use of such terms within the labour movement. Second, given I wanted to interview CGT

officials, the lack of cooperation, indeed hostility exhibited by Rachid (Rachid even lightly chastised me for wanting to take a leaflet from the CGT officials outside of the plant) created a further layer of complexity which demanded creative thinking in negotiating access. It is notable, too, that when I mentioned to Rachid that I wanted to interview other unions he seemed unhappy and suggested that it would not be possible. This may have contributed to a severing of links. During the course of my second stay in Paris, Rachid stopped replying to emails and did not respond to my telephone messages. I also had the impression that I was beginning to get in the way, with my persistent requests for help (distribution of flyers requesting research participants, contact details of agency workers).

Bad relations between unions in France is to be expected, although the main line of hostility is traditionally between the “militant” pole which includes the CGT and SUD, and the “reformist” pole which includes the CFDT (Pernot, 2005). However, factors external to plant politics and national industrial relations shaped Rachid’s perception of the CGT. Rachid is a fellow traveller of the recently formed Nouveau Parti Anti-Capitalist (NPA), whilst two of the CGT reps at the plant are members of the Trotskyist organisation Lutte Ouvrière (LO). LO, imbued with an “economistic”, “workerist” view of revolutionary politics (to use the jargon of the far left), is commonly perceived as ignoring the specific issues faced by immigrant communities within the French working class. Thus, on the question of the “*foulard*” (islamic headscarf), a long-standing issue which has divided the French left, and which was a live issue at the time of the interviews, LO emphasises the need to oppose the wearing of the headscarf as a symbol of women’s oppression. The leading CGT activists at the plant, because of their affiliation to LO, are therefore seen by Rachid as unable to relate to the largely North African workforce.

Paradoxically, Rachid’s interview itself revealed a negative attitude to the largely immigrant workforce at the plant, associating a lack of class consciousness with the fact that many of the (older) workers were first generation North African immigrants. My experience with Rachid highlights a further issue of qualitative research. Whilst qualitative research aims to access the interpretations and perceptions that individuals construct from their experiences, researchers also have to be aware that the “knowledge” they aim to reveal is partial, and some accounts may

be more “distorted” (consciously or otherwise) than others (Gaskell, 2000, p. 44). The social dynamics and interactions that occur in the field also inform the researcher as to the relative “trustworthiness” of the various accounts of a social phenomenon, thus influencing the way the researcher “reads” the data. This further illustrates the agential role of the researcher in identifying “good” and “bad” interviewees.

4.1.1 Chasing the elusive interview

The second visit to the Aulnay plant coincided with the 2010 social movement against changes to public sector pensions. A strike wave was occurring in the public sector and some parts of the private sector with a strong history of militant trade unionism. I took the opportunity to attend a national demonstration that took place during my stay in Paris, which I participated in. At the end of the demo, I approached a small contingent behind a CGT PSA-Aulnay banner and was introduced to Patrice, a *délégué syndicale*. I explained my research and took his contact details. This chance encounter provided me with another potential door into PSA at Aulnay – one that I feared had been cut off by Rachid. Fantasia (1988) in his discussion of the “chaotic” nature of qualitative research, refers to the role of serendipity in opening doorways to research sites. Evidently researchers cannot rely on serendipity in the research process. However, where attempts at purposive sampling fail, chance encounters can be an important lifeline in salvaging failed attempts to gain access (as was the case with Fantasia’s research). For my research, this meeting allowed me to gain some further data and better understand the obstacles to researching agency workers. Patrice was more reliable than Rachid in that he did not raise my hopes in obtaining interview data from agency workers. He assumed that it would be difficult to arrange interviews, his workplace elections were coming up and he did not have the time to seek out participants. In addition, he did not think agency workers were particularly open to being interviewed. Once they finished their shift, they wanted to get on with their life and not think about the plant. However, he promised to distribute a flyer with information about my research.

Serendipity also brought me into contact with a CGT representative (Vincent) at the Peugeot plant in Mulhouse, in the north-east of France, not far from the iconic Peugeot Sochaux plant. A chance link to an article on a social networking site alerted me to the fact that we shared a

mutual acquaintance. After a series of email exchanges in which I explained my research and the difficulties encountered, he informed me of positive responses from five agency workers and five *contrats-Pros*. My subsequent experience in Mulhouse was, however, the “straw that broke the camels’ back” in terms of my attempt to obtain data-rich interviews with agency workers in car plants. The result of my week-long visit to Mulhouse was two interviews with Vincent. Interviews arranged over the phone with the young workers did not take place. One young man who I phoned after waiting fifteen minutes at the designated location, assured me that he was five minutes away, yet did not materialise. One young woman who I had spoken to more than once to confirm that she was still happy to be interviewed, did not turn up at the designated time and place. Two young men, who had requested to be interviewed together, appeared to treat the situation as a joke and were uncooperative. The remaining workers did not reply to my phone calls. During this time, Vincent was mediating between myself and his co-workers, cajoling them to contact me when they did not reply to my emails. This intervention did not succeed and may have even created a gulf between Vincent and his young colleagues, who, as the week went on, were keeping out of his way. Vincent expressed anger towards them due to what he perceived to be a lack of seriousness on their part. This was a further unexpected turn in the research process. I had, it seems, unwittingly been the cause of a deterioration (hopefully temporary) in relations between a union representative and a group of young workers. Whilst this study was not a deep ethnographic study in which the researcher is emerged in the social world under investigation, and thereby, intervening in and/or acting upon that world, my very limited intervention into the research setting created an effect which left behind unanticipated negative traces.

I was similarly ill-at-ease with Vincent’s evident discomfort with the way things had turned out given that I had insisted that I would only travel to Mulhouse on the basis of guaranteed data in the form of interviews with agency workers (my time and finances were running out). We discussed at length the possible reasons for their uncooperative behaviour. He surmised that the problem was a generational one. He had noticed a change over his years at Mulhouse, with many young workers he encountered appearing to lack the seriousness, responsibility and, ultimately, class solidarity of previous generations. This is one subjective opinion based upon

the experience of a long standing union activist – investigating such perceptions would constitute another research project. However, this experience in the field does raise questions regarding the way agency workers view themselves as part of a collectivity in the labour process. The harsh working conditions that are physically draining (the union representatives that I interviewed who had just come off shifts were visibly tired during the interviews) may be one explanation. A combination of lack of integration in the plant, the decline of trade unionism and associated lower levels of class consciousness may also be an explanatory factor in my lack of success in gaining access to this key source of data.

4.2 The pursuit of public sociology and preserving integrity

The political standpoint of the researcher, or more specifically, the partisanship involved when researching labour from a Marxist perspective, has re-emerged in recent years. Martinez Lucio and Stewart (2011) contrast a research agenda that seeks to break down barriers between researchers and researched and is concerned with expressing in a “critical, sociological way, the active voices of the marginalised *and* their collective views” (Martinez Lucio and Stewart, 2011, p. 338, italics in original) with research which depoliticises new management practices and ends up reinforcing the “hegemonic moment in the isolation of critical voices” (Martinez Lucio and Stewart, 2011, p. 332). This echoes Burawoy’s (2005) pronouncement on the need for “public sociology”, a return to the “original passion for social justice, economic equality.... or simply a better world” (whatever the perspectives of individual sociologists of what constitutes a better world), and a turn away from the narrow pursuit of “academic credentials” (Burawoy, 2004, p. 260). Partisanship does not compromise the search for “truth” or “truth-like” representations of the world, however, it does direct the researcher to a particular area of research and frames the interpretation of that research. At the same time, the academic process of pursuing methodologically rigorous research should not lead the researcher to “stand aside, neutral and indifferent, from the struggles in which the future of the world is at stake” (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 11), however small and local the research may be.

Ironically, the difficulties encountered during this research threatened to undermine the pursuit of public sociology and turn my attention to the less laudable concern of the pursuit of academic

credentials. As time went on, I became more anxious about the lack of interview data. As a result, my motivation in gaining access to the world of the agency worker appeared to change. However high-minded the motivation of the researcher, the instrumental dimension of research cannot be ignored. Research is undertaken for a variety of reasons beyond the intellectual and the political; for example, the achievement of a qualification or career progression, as Burawoy (2005) notes. This leads to pressure to fulfil research objectives in timely fashion, deemed appropriate by research funders. As research goals were undermined by barriers to access, I recognised that there was a danger that instrumental motivations could supplant the pursuit of public sociology. However, this emerged more in the form of reflexions on the research process, so that the original motivating aims to engage in some form of “public sociology” did not disappear.

4.3 Research in a foreign language

Conducting research in a foreign language affects various dimensions of the research: quality of the data; interpretation of the data; relationship between researcher and interviewee. French is not my native language; however, having lived and worked in France for ten years during the 1990s, my level of French is of a high conversational standard, and my grasp of the French cultural and political context is strong. At times, the stressful and noisy situations in which interviews were carried out (outside the factory gate), had a negative affect my ability to communicate freely. On transcribing interviews, whilst language errors were detected, only on a few occasions did this lead to a misunderstanding between me and the interviewee, and these misunderstandings were overcome at the time. It was interesting to note that, where interviews took place in a formal setting, for example in an office (or even over the phone), where I felt more in control of the situation, the language flowed more fluently.

My previous immersion in French trade union and political culture was a significant advantage in the interviews. A number of phrases and terms used by the interviewees were very colloquial and required a working knowledge of the language used by French workers. My biographical background meant that I was able to understand the context of key terms such as *touché*

(meaning the amount of salary/income you receive), *les gars* (lads), *la boîte* (workplace), *au self* (canteen).

Another issue that arose from being a foreign researcher was the assumption from trade union officials that they needed to explain the “landscape” to me – for example, the legislation surrounding agency work or the divisions between the unions. This was not new knowledge for me. However, I felt that in order to extract further information it was necessary to permit the sense that they had a “knowledge advantage” (Meardi, 2000, cited in Connelly, 2010).

Cultural issues were at times problematic despite my personal history. I was particularly exercised over the use of the formal “*vous*” or the familiar “*tu*” when addressing contacts and interviewees. Given my acknowledged lack of neutrality, my desire to establish comradely bonds with those I was interviewing, and my dislike of the formal *vous* form, I had wanted to use the *tu* form. On the whole this worked, given I was operating in a labour movement setting where this is a normal form of address amongst “comrades”. As one of the union representatives said “yes, of course, it’s normal in trade unions to address one another with ‘*tu*’”. However, it did not necessarily work with the younger workers. On reflection, the fact that they did not know me and that I was older than them, a foreigner and either an academic or a journalist, meant that it is likely that they would have felt more comfortable had I used the “*vous*” form.²⁶ There was an unspoken sense, particularly for one agency worker, that the informal address was not the correct way of communicating.

This chapter has set out the ontological and epistemological perspectives which frame the methodology applied to this research. The research strategy, design and methods that flow from this have been described and the limitations of the research outlined. The reflective account of the research has further detailed issues arising from the research process. The main, and significant limitation, of this research is the absence of a comprehensive set of in-depth interviews from agency workers. On the other hand, this in itself constitutes part of the data

²⁶ I was reminded of the story of an acquaintance working in a French university. As a UK ex-pat, he tried hard to break down such a hierarchical and socially conservative form of address. Yet try as he might, the French students refused to address him informally. This issue can also be very explosive. For example, those in authority can use the *tu* form over their social “inferiors” and expect to be addressed back with *vous*. Struggles have broken out over this in workplaces, and, more recently, in relations between police and ethnic minority youth in the suburbs, when the youth have demanded that they be addressed with the *vous* form.

from which analytical conclusions can be drawn, taking into account the experience of the research process described above. This not insignificant gap in the data was filled by drawing upon other sources of data through which to propose an explanatory account of the labour regime of agency work in the French auto sector. By bringing together diverse sources of data, each expressing different dimensions and perspectives of the phenomenon, this thesis provides some, though not all, of the pieces of the theoretical jigsaw that has been set out in previous chapters.

CHAPTER 5

THE TEMPORARY EMPLOYMENT SECTOR IN FRANCE FROM *MARCHANDS D'HOMMES* TO PRIVILEGED PARTNERS

1. Introduction

France has a long history of agency work. Since its emergence in the post war period, the sector has grown substantially, demonstrating a resilience within different economic and political environments. The history of agency work in France is one in which the sector has not only survived within a hostile environment (Belkacem et al., 2011), but has also reached a point where the sector is now recognised as a partner with the state that mediates access to work for workers on the margins of the labour market. One of the explanations for the high levels of agency work in France in comparison with other EU15 and EU27 countries is the relative rigidity of French labour laws. High levels of temporary agency work are frequently associated with strong employment protection legislation (EPL)²⁷, yet since 1972 France has also had strict legislation governing temporary agency work the aim of which is to combat the use of agency work as a means of circumventing labour laws. Despite this, the temporary employment sector has been able to progressively expand from being a provider of temporary help – the original function of the sector – to being a facilitator of “maximum flexibility” (Beau, 2004). Moreover, in recent years, the sector has been able to successfully embed itself as a formal partner of the state in facilitating the labour market insertion of “difficult to place” unemployed persons. The 2005 law on “social cohesion” (*Loi de cohésion sociale*) overturned the state monopoly on employment placement and officially acknowledged the role of temporary employment agencies in labour market allocation. The story of the temporary employment sector that emerged in France in the post-war years, tainted with the image of *marchands d'homme* (traders in human labour), is a compelling illustration of Peck and Theodore’s (2007) thesis that employment agencies actively construct their position in the labour market. In the space of fifty

²⁷ In 2008, on a scale of 0 to 6, France was rated 2.6 in terms of strictness of Employment Protection Legislation for permanent employers, compared with a EU15 average of 2.2, and 1.2 for the UK. Countries with higher levels of EPL strictness were Germany, Netherlands, Luxemburg, Portugal and Sweden. <http://www.oecd.org/employment/employmentpoliciesanddata/oecdindicatorsofemploymentprotection.htm>.

years, agency work has gone from being a stigmatised form of employment to an officially recognised labour market intermediary.

The aim of this chapter is to set out and examine the processes that have brought this about, taking as its starting point the assumption that the actions of social actors that drive, resist, respond and react to trends in employment, are shaped by cultural and institutional factors which are rooted in historical processes. The way in which the contemporary pressures of the globalised economy are expressed across nation states is a consequence of the combination and interaction of the myriad and, at times, contradictory forces which both constitute and change local contexts. What follows is a summary and analysis of the historical processes that underpin the evolution of agency work and temporary employment agencies in the French context and a presentation of the key characteristics of agency work. The first part of the chapter describes the emergence of temporary agency work in the post-war years and the strategies embarked upon by the larger agencies to ensure the survival of the sector in a social and political environment that was inimical to non-standard employment. The second part of the chapter examines the path to the 1972 law that legalised agency work, with a focus on the debates that led to the specific French response to the triadic relationship which constitutes the agency work contract. The chapter then looks at the way in which the major temporary employment agencies have vigorously and systematically carved out their position within the labour market as indispensable intermediaries, and then summarises the composition of agency work in France. The final part of the chapter is an overview of the evolution of union responses to the growth of agency work over time.

2. From “*marchands d’hommes*” to legalisation: Temporary employment agencies in post-war France

2.1 Supplying labour during post-war reconstruction and economic boom

Agency work in its modern form emerged in France in the 1950s²⁸ in a period of post-war reconstruction and economic boom. These were also the formative years of the French version

²⁸ Employment agencies were present in France in the 1920s, however these were very small in number and they covered highly specialised occupations (Belkacem et al., 2011, p. 21).

of the “social compromise” that modified the state-labour-capital nexus within advanced capitalist societies. The *Trente Glorieuses* (Golden Age) which spanned the three decades following the Second World War established the institutional place of labour within a socio-economic context in which the state played a central *dirigiste* role. A series of legislative reforms on union recognition, participation on tripartite committees overseeing the running of an emerging welfare state and the establishment of works councils at plant level cemented the role of organised labour within this model of social partnership (Crouch, 1993, pp. 178-187). The subsequent evolution of French industrial relations in the run up to the events of 1968 was one of accommodation and contestation, reflecting the tensions that arose from a highly politicised labour movement whose power was keenly felt at national level, though less so at workplace level (Jefferys, 2003). The post-war Gaullist state strove to present itself as an arbiter between capital and labour, exhibiting corporatist tendencies that sought to incorporate the non-Communist inspired unions by treating them as partners in constructing the post-war welfare state (Goetschy, 1998). The intervention of the state in a wide range of areas of social and economic life occurred at a time when some sections of the capitalist class had seen their position delegitimised as a result of their collaboration during the Occupation (Jefferys, 2003; Cobb, 2009). This provided an additional rationale for the nationalisation of key sectors of economy, including the punitive nationalisation of some companies (e.g. Renault). Economic *étatisme*, the French version of the post-war Keynesian consensus, was firmly rooted in a commitment to the market – an important ideological marker given the growing influence of the Communist Party – and was a model fraught with contradiction. That France had the highest numbers of agency workers in Europe in the 1950s and 1960s (Caire, 1973) illustrates the disjointed way in which the “Fordist compromise” extended its reach.

Temporary employment agencies were making their mark on French employment relations at a time when the standard employment contract, the *Contrat de Durée Indeterminée* (CDI), was becoming the benchmark for employment. Through the gradual extension of the Labour Code throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the arbitrary power of the employer was being curtailed, particularly in large firms where strong union representation was able to enforce the implementation of statutory employment rights. The “decommodification” of labour was further

entrenched by the development of welfare rights, many associated with employment status (Belkacem et al. 2011, p. 24).²⁹ Temporary agency work, as a deviation from this trend towards secure, protected employment, was met with deeply entrenched hostility, not only because it undermined the gains of the labour movement, but also because of an historical aversion to the supply of labour for a fee which was prohibited in France in the nineteenth century. Employment agencies were commonly viewed as socially regressive businesses engaged in disreputable activities. Despite this, the limited data that exists suggest that it was a thriving industry. Two early studies on agency work raise the alarm about the “spectacular growth” of the sector. The first, by Guilbert (1970), viewed the rise in agency work as a labour force strategy that sought to avoid the obligations of the standard employment contract:

The more the state seeks to safeguard stable employment, the more employers are trapped in rigid rules, the more they will favour the development of temporary work, precisely to escape this rigidity.

(Guilbert, 1970, p. 101)

The second study, by Guy Caire, published in 1973, entitled *Les nouveaux marchands d'hommes ? Études de travail intérimaires* (“The new traders in men? Studies in agency work”), estimated that in the five year period between 1957 and 1962, the number of agency workers had increased from 6,000 to 33,616. Two years later there were 66,393 agency workers (Caire, 1973, p. 45). The themes raised in these early studies are similar to those in the literature on agency work today. The authors question the correspondence between the claims of temporary employment agencies (freedom to choose when to work; facilitating the labour market integration of women with children), and the reality of agency work.³⁰ Caire (1973) also

²⁹ France is seen as an example of a corporatist or continental welfare state regime, whereby employment status is fundamental to the provision of benefits and the social redistribution of wealth is narrow rather than universal (Esping-Andersen, 1995).

³⁰ Despite the claims of the industry that agency work offered workers a way of training whilst earning, the evidence suggested that jobs allocated to agency workers provided little opportunity for advancement (Caire, 1973, p. 26). The rhetoric of choice which was omnipresent in the publicity campaigns was similarly compromised by a survey which found that nearly half of agency workers were not agency workers by design (Caire, 1973, p. 96). The profile of agency workers (under 35, without children, a high proportion of male workers) also belied the common perception promoted by the industry that it served a demographic that was not suited to regular employment relations, such as women with children, or those with health issues. (Caire, 1973, p. 26; Guilbert. 1970 p. 184).

suggests that agency work allowed companies to avoid having to accept workplace committees since it artificially reduced the numbers of employees (p. 56). The securing of representative rights in the workplace encouraged the use of agency work, in the absence of regulatory restrictions.

2.2 “A room and a telephone”: Temporary employment agencies in the 1950s and 1960s

Whilst the absence of reliable data prior to 1972 obscures the extent of agency work in the 1950s and 1960s, the early studies provide some indication of the sector in its early stages of development. Caire puts the number of temporary employment agencies in 1956 at seven. The following year saw a ten-fold increase in the number of agencies. By 1962, this had risen to 170 (Caire, 1973, p. 45), and the sector continued to grow rapidly throughout the 1960s with large numbers of small companies existing alongside a smaller number of nationally-implemented companies. The lack of regulation meant that there was little risk involved in setting up an employment agency. Start-up costs were minimal, all that was needed was “a room and a telephone” (Belkacem et al., 2011, p. 24), whilst the demand for employment services in a tight labour market guaranteed a good return (Grunelius, 2004). For Le Tourneur (1969), such businesses were “driven almost exclusively during this period by financial gain”. From this perspective, employment agencies are little more than the “unproductive hawkers” described by Peck and Theodore (2002) whose sole activity is to act as an interface between employers and workers, in return for a fee.

Lack of regulation had the effect of perpetuating the bad image of the sector. The smaller companies in particular were seen as perpetrators of reprehensible activities. As a result, the larger, more strategically-inclined agencies sought to distance themselves from smaller ones in order to present themselves as reputable businesses with a legitimate place and positive function in the labour market (Pialoux, 1979). The creation of the public employment agency, the *Agence Nationale de l'Emploi* (ANPE) in 1967 had also worried the sector. A state monopoly on employment placements could compromise the position of temporary employment agencies by placing their activities outside of the law. The arguments employed by some of the larger agencies during the parliamentary debates in the year preceding the 1972 legislation illustrate

both the polarisation of the sector and the image that the larger companies wanted to convey. The following extract from the *Journal Officiel* encapsulates the concerns of the big players at this time and their desire to put an end to the “wild west” free-for-all situation that threatened the sector:

The functioning and use of temporary work has been seriously hindered by the absence of an adequate legal status. This situation....has allowed firms of all kinds to open agencies in an anarchic way during recent years and to run them in a questionable manner. It is well known that the growth of the profession attracts those who seek to make a quick profit rather than engage in a natural vocation.

(Head of a temporary employment agency, *Journal Officiel*, National Assembly 14th

December, 1971, p. 6723)

The prevalence of disreputable agencies engaging in unsavoury activities contrasted with the evolving mores of the time, particularly as the sector expanded into economic areas with strong union implantation, such as in manufacturing, where the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) was strong, or in larger retail concerns, where the *Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail* (CFDT) had a significant presence. There is anecdotal evidence from the period that confirms the negative image of the sector.³¹ An article in *Nouvel Observateur* from 1966 refers to the use of agency workers to break strikes or to replace strikers, and cases of agency workers not being paid for the work carried out (Kornig, 2003). The larger companies, conscious of the potential market possibilities of the sector and fearing that their activities could be prohibited, established a representative body (SNETT) to promote the interests of agencies and present agency work as an acceptable form of employment.

2.3 The 1969 agreement between Manpower and the CGT

It is impossible to explain the development and legalisation of agency work in France without reference to the role played by Manpower France in propelling the strategic aim of acceptability

³¹ The literature on the history of the sector contains numerous anecdotes about the “cowboy-like” activities of some of the small agents, such as holding onto salaries or changing the terms of the verbal contract between the agency workers and the agency. (Guibert, 1970; Caire, 1973)

in a country which eschewed these *marchands d'hommes*. The evolution of the sector and its regulatory environment owes much to the business strategy of Manpower.³² The success of Manpower's success in the US had been due in no small part to the company's sectoral spread. By expanding beyond the sector's traditional area of administrative and office work into manufacturing, Manpower US was able to sustain an impressive rate of growth in the post-war years. The founder of Manpower France, Michaël Grunelius, calculated that the market potential of supplying agency labour to French manufacturing was three times that of office work. Highly automated industries, such as the car sector, could be particularly lucrative, given the reported problems of absenteeism that threatened the integrity of the production line (Grunelius, 2004, p. 48). At the same time, Grunelius was aware of the challenges associated with importing atypical employment practices into economic sectors with a tradition of workers' struggle and organisation:

As long as we dispatch only typists, secretaries, and accountants, professions which are not associated with working-class bastions, we will be left in peace. If, on the other hand, we penetrate their principal domains, for example, that of the "legendary" steelworkers, they will, no doubt, make life hard for us.

(Grunelius, 2004, p. 48)

Despite such reservations, *Manpower Industrie* was launched in 1960. Manpower engaged the services of a legal expert, Professor Carmerlynk, to formulate a new type of employment relationship which could be acceptable to unions and set the sector on the path to legalisation. However, trade unions were, as Grunelius predicted, unsettled by the incursion into manufacturing, and Manpower became a target for militant action against agency work. During the events of May 1968, a poster appeared depicting two symbols of capitalism, Publicis (an advertising agency) and Manpower (Grunelius, 2004, p. 74) and the offices of Manpower Industrie were occupied. Prior to this, offices of agencies had been targeted by graffiti campaigns and, at times, the smashing of windows. Faced with the possibility of an outright ban

³² Michaël Grunelius has recorded his legacy in his autobiography (2004) which is rich in detailed information on the early days of temporary employment agencies. However, it does have the feel of a vanity project and should be read with this in mind. Grunelius insists on the determining role of his farsightedness and business acumen in pushing forward the sector. Whether Grunelius is an astute businessman or a manipulating CEO will depend on the point of view of the reader.

in the post-1968 settlement, Manpower sought out a union federation that would agree to enter into negotiations, as part of a strategy to strengthen the case for legalisation. It was in this context that Manpower entered into secret negotiations with the CGT, the outcome of which was an agreement in 1969 which served as a basis for subsequent legislation. The aim of the agreement was to “to bring together, for the temporary workers of Manpower France, the benefits and guarantees which are due to them taking into account their situation as temporary workers”.³³ According to Grunelius, the CGT signed the agreement after stormy negotiations. There is little discussion in the historical accounts about why the CGT decided to sanction agency work by signing the agreement. Despite a principled opposition to agency work, the unions’ negotiators claim to have been acting in the best interests of agency workers. The section of the CGT that dealt with agency labour saw a chance to improve the situation of agency workers by giving Manpower the legitimacy it sought. One of the negotiators described the process:

I felt naked. We didn’t have trade unionists, no organisation, no bargaining power. I knew it, he [Grunelius] knew it. So. We discussed, for whole mornings, we talked. And then one day, I understood. This agreement, they needed it: it was a question of the image of the brand, recognition. So in fact we did have something to bargain with, even if it wasn’t the normal kind of bargaining power.

(Tartakowsky, 1985, p.19).

For its part, Manpower was engaging in a judicious business strategy. On the one hand, it hoped to establish its position within the temporary employment sector since agency workers would be more likely to sign with an agency that offered enhanced employment rights. On the other hand, it wanted to enhance the credibility of the entire sector and improve its chances of persuading the government to embark on the legalisation of the sector. Manpower achieved both these goals. By establishing minimum standards, the company was able to distance itself further from other companies and present itself as a good employer, thus increasing its market share at the expense of BIS, the other major player. Two years later the legislation that would guarantee the

³³ See Annex 2 in Grunelius (2003, p. 250).

survival of the sector was passed. As a result of acting on its own, however, Manpower was expelled from SNETT, which expressed its discontent that:

the CGT concluded an agreement which was limited and which served as a public relations launching pad for Manpower, although the principles upon which the agreement was based are a result of the work carried out by SNETT's commissions.

(Caire, 1973, p.42)

In response, Manpower set up a rival organisation, NORMATT, an acronym for the professional association “for the normalisation and the promotion of temporary work”, a mission statement and acronym that encapsulates a public relations strategy aimed at winning the hearts and minds of French public opinion. The tensions that existed within the sector are indicative of the heightened competitive environment with the temporary employment market. This was a time of both expansion and “creative destruction”, as smaller companies floundered and mergers and acquisitions led to the concentration of the sector.

That the CGT signed the agreement was also controversial, reflecting an ongoing tension between opposing agency work on principle, and the perceived need to respond to the lack of regulation that exposed agency workers to abusive practices. Two other unions, the CFDT and Force Ouvrière (FO), declined to negotiate on the issue, considering that to do so would give credibility to working arrangements that were unacceptable to the labour movement. Though the CGT was able to obtain employment rights, such as union recognition, holidays and access to training for Manpower's agency workers, and promote itself as *the* union for agency workers, it also underwrote the survival of the agency work sector by setting it on the path to legalisation.

3. The legalisation of employment agencies and the regulation of agency work

The law of 3rd January 1972 ushered in a new phase in the history of agency work in France. The creation of an employment contract specific to agency work redefined the employment relationship for a small but growing segment of the labour force. The strict codification of the employment relationship necessitated the resolution of various complexities arising out of

temporary agency work before the law could be passed. In addition, the business activities of temporary employment agencies needed to be reconciled with French law on the supply of workers to a third party (Vigneau, 2008, p. 86). These issues were controversial, as illustrated by the extensive debate that took place across the media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television) between opponents and proponents of agency work. The temporary employment sector was a major contributor to the debate and engaged in a well-resourced campaign of lobbying to combat the widespread negative image (Caire, 1973; Grunelius, 2003).

3.1 Debating the triangular relationship

A report commissioned by the National Assembly drew attention to the problem of whether it was the agency or the user organisation who was the employer, given both exhibited features which could be attributed to the role of employer as specified in the Labour Code. There is no international consensus on this; for some countries the agency is the employer, for others, the user organisation.³⁴ In France, the designation of the employer in the triangular relationship is complicated by the concept of subordination, which has played a central role in French employment law since 1848 when complex hierarchical structures were replaced with a bilateral relationship based upon clear lines of authority (Centre d'étude de l'emploi, 2008, p. 14), and which is a defining feature of the employer-employee relationship. The employment contract is defined as a "convention by which a person engages to put their employment/activity at the disposition of another person, under the subordination of this person, in return for remuneration" (Pélissier et al., 2006). Subordination means in practice that the employer has the legal authority to "give instructions to the worker, to control their execution [of the work] and to sanction non-performance" (Havard et al., 2009, p. 260). Thus, the employer is formally granted disciplinary and managerial power over the worker. In return, the employee receives not only a salary, but also insurance against social risks and the guarantee of ongoing employment. Since subordination refers to the execution of work and occurs at the point of production, there is a strong case for the user-organisation to be designated the employer, as was argued in a German court case in 1970 (Caire, 1973, p. 96). The agency worker is obliged to observe the rules of the

³⁴ In the UK and Ireland, there is no clearly defined employer in the agency contract. Case law has failed to settle this issue (see for example the *Dacas* case in 2004).

user organisation, and to respect the hierarchical organisation of the workplace. The problem was expressed by the Rapporteur who presented the report to the Senate:

On the one hand, there is the temporary work agency, which is not the employer *de facto* but would like to be *de jure*; on the other, a business which is *de facto* employer but does not want to be *de jure*; in between there is worker, who is employed by a firm for which he does not work and is not employed by the firm for which he is working.³⁵

An additional problem was that neither solution to the “employer problem” resolved the issue of the legitimacy of the activities of temporary employment agencies:

Either the temporary employment agency is the employer of the temporary worker, and in this case, the activity of this company consists solely of hiring out the workforce to other companies, “trading” which is forbidden by the law, if not by jurisprudence. Or the employer of the temporary worker is the user firm and, in this case, the activity of the temporary employment agency consists solely of placing the workforce in other companies, a “placement” activity for which the state has a monopoly in the eyes of the law, if not in fact.³⁶

The 1972 law adopted the former solution. This required a new type of employment contract and the writing of new legislation governing the activities of employment agencies. The legislature drew upon the work of Camerlynk who proposed a new employment contract specific to agency work, the *contrat de mission* or assignment contract (Caire, 1973; Grunelius, 2004).

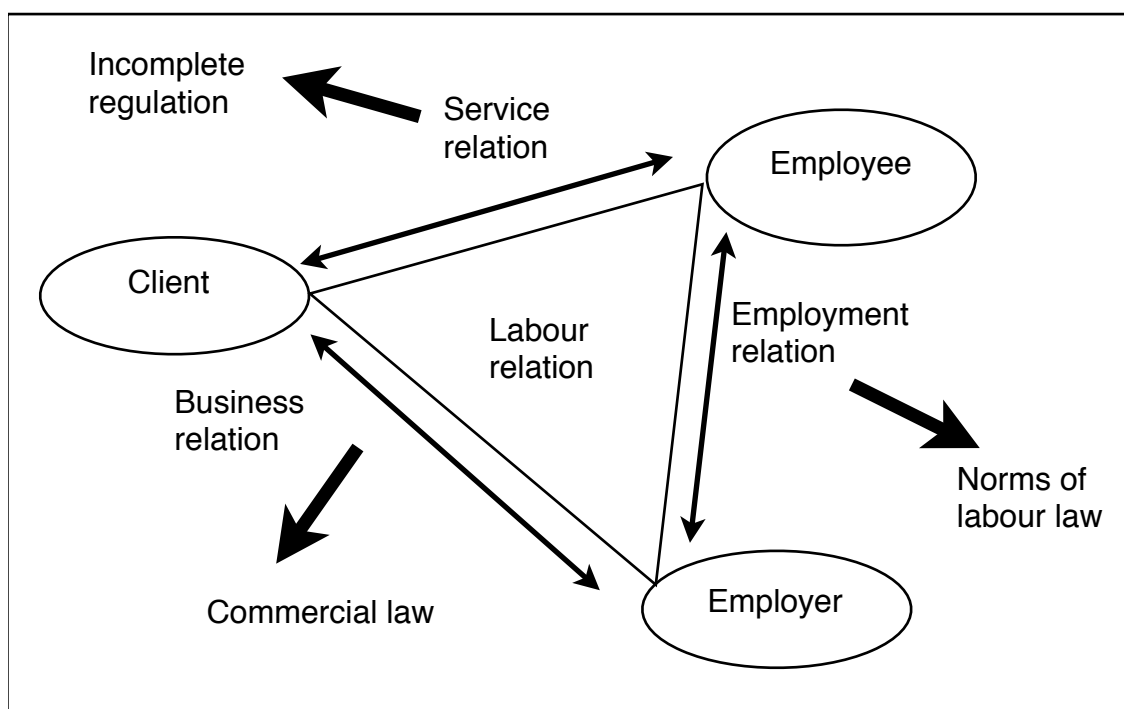
³⁵ Projet de loi sur le travail temporaire. Rapport de M. Gravier au nom de la commission des affaires sociales du Sénat, 291, 1970-1971 cited in Caire, 1971, p. 98.

³⁶ Cited in Caire, 1973, pp. 96-97.

3.2 The “*contrat de mission*” and the “*contrat commercial*”

The legislation articulated the agency/agency worker/user-organisation nexus around two simultaneous and synchronised contracts. The assignment contract between the agency and the agency worker is a unique form of employment contract that exists only so long as there is a commercial contract between the agency and the user organisation. Thus, the commercial contract preempts the employment contract (Vigneau, 2008, p. 92). Whilst the status of employer lies with the agency, there is a *de facto* recognition that the agency is not the sole bearer of employment rights and responsibilities in relation to agency workers. Commercial contracts differ from employment contracts in that both parties are considered equal. In the employment contract, there is both a *de jure* and *de facto* relationship of power (Havard et al., 2009, p. 261). The former is embodied in the concept of subordination, the latter is implicitly acknowledged by the statutory obligations put in place to protect the worker from the arbitrary power of the employer. In the case of agency work, managerial power is effectively transferred from the employer (the agency) to the user organisation, since the agency is not in a position to exercise control over the labour process. The result is a dual relationship of subordination, with both agency and user organisation having a hierarchical claim over the agency worker. There is no clear regulatory frame of reference for the relation between the agency worker and the user organisation, although it is essentially a service relation rather than an employment relation. Figure 1, adapted from Havard et al. (2009) illustrates the elements of the triadic relation which constitutes the agency contract in French labour law.

Figure 1 The triadic relations of the agency work contract



The distinction between the employer and the user of the agency worker is fundamental to the legal assignation of responsibilities of each of the parties in the triadic relationship. Whilst there is no juridical basis to what is *de facto* a “joint-employer” relationship³⁷, the 1972 law does make provision for the “employer-like” obligations of the user organisation to the agency worker. The rights of the agency worker flow from the different relations that are embodied within the agency work contract: the legal status of an employee; the integration into a specific work community; and the precarious employee/work relationship (Vigneau, 2008, p. 94). The status of employee gives rise to a number of collective and individual rights. Payment of wages, social security contributions, payment of leave entitlement and training provision all lie with the agency. The user-organisation assumes responsibilities and rights associated with the employer at the point of production: organisation of work carried out; elaboration of tasks; working time and breaks; provision of equipment to be used; health and safety requirements; provision of common facilities. The working conditions of the agency worker must comply with those set

³⁷ The existence of a joint-employer relationship is recognised in the US on condition that it can be shown that employer responsibilities are divided between the two parties. Where there is legal ambiguity with regards to the employee status of agency workers, as has been the case in the UK and in Ireland, individual cases of long service at the same workplace can lead to the user-firm being designated the employer (Sobczak et al., 2008, p. 23).

out in relevant legislation, as well as those flowing from collective agreements in the sector concerned. Union representation is complicated by the division in rights and responsibilities. The agency, as the legal employer, is the reference point for the representation of agency workers. Though agency workers have no formal right to representation at the user-organisation, they are included in the head count of employees for the purposes of calculating the composition of statutory workplace committees – the works councils (*comités d'entreprise*) and the workplace delegates (*délégués du personnel*). In addition they can submit grievances to the workers representative body in the user organisation.

The precarious nature of the agency work contract is recognised by the *prime de precarité*, formally known as the *prime de fin du contrat* (end of contract bonus), which is calculated at 10% of the overall salary over the period of the assignment. French legislation also has provisions to ensure parity of pay and conditions between agency workers and comparable permanent employees of the user-organisation. However, income levels of agency workers tend to be lower than those of permanent workers due to periods of unemployment between assignments and the lack of seniority-related pay increases (Erhel et al., 2009). Agency workers are also disadvantaged in that they do not automatically receive the 13th month bonus that many French workers receive, nor do they receive any profit-related bonuses that employees of the user-organisation are paid.

3.3 Regulating the temporary employment sector

As well as establishing the legal parameters of the employment relationship, the 1972 legislation also regulated the business activities of temporary employment agencies, which were legally defined in the following terms:

a temporary employment agency is any moral or physical person whose exclusive activity involves placing employees (whom it hires on the basis of agreed qualifications and pays accordingly) at the temporary disposal of users.

(L.124-1 of the Labour Code)

Agencies are subject to strict regulations which define the scope of their activities. The 1972 legislation reinforced the state monopoly on permanent job placements by excluding such activity from the remit of temporary employment agencies. This meant that temporary employment agencies were not to be involved in the practice of pre-selection and screening, and the business of supplying temporary workers to organisations became the sole responsibility of duly registered employment agencies. The three broad conditions under which temporary agency work was permitted (these have since been modified) were:

- To temporarily replace an absent employee;
- To allow organisations to function during exceptional peaks in activity;
- To carry out duties that are by nature temporary.

(Article 2 Law no. 72-1, Journal Officiel, 5th January, 1972, pp. 141-144.)

The principle that agency work should be of a limited (temporary) duration was established by two key elements of the Labour Code, as amended in 1972. Agency work “can have neither as an aim nor as its effect to permanently fill a job related to the normal and permanent activity of a company” (Art. L. 124-2, Labour Code). The same article of the Labour Code refers expressly to “tasks”, thereby establishing the requirement to justify the use of agency work with reference to clearly defined objectives. The temporary nature of agency work is further reinforced by

limiting the renewal of agency contracts for any given post. In general, agency contracts are limited to eighteen months and can be renewed only once, under strict conditions. By associating contracts with specific posts, user-organisations are (in theory) unable to assign successive agency workers to the same post. Legislation also sets out the specific circumstances under which the agency work contract is prohibited: to replace striking workers; for occupations deemed dangerous; and in the six months following redundancies of permanent employees. The rationale behind these measures is to avoid temporary agency work being used by organisations to avoid the higher costs of the permanent contract. Prior to 1972, some employment agencies had candidly underlined this advantage for clients in their promotional campaigns (Guilbert, 1970, p. 94).

4. Temporary employment agencies: from pariah to partner

Given these clearly defined restrictions on agency work and a societal consensus that sees the standard employment relationship as a benchmark for employment norms, why is it that the temporary employment sector has found France such a fertile ground for expansion? Any explanation for this must take into account a confluence of different factors. The origins of the sector coincided with a shortage of labour faced with the demands of post-war reconstruction. The subsequent history of its evolution is one of different types of socio-economic and political conjunctions, which have favoured the growth of the sector, despite a hostile regulatory environment. Beyond favourable contingent factors, such as the post-war labour shortage or the shift towards flexibility amongst political and economic elites in the 1980s, the major agencies have actively sought to shape labour market trends in parts of the economy. The following historical analysis illustrates an agential process by which employment agencies have self-consciously constructed their market through a systematic campaign of public relations and political lobbying, which facilitating access to business opportunities at different economic conjunctures.

4.1. The role of lobbying and public relations in the temporary employment sector

The big players in the temporary employment sector have sought to influence opinion and legislation. The experience of setting up employment agencies at the very moment that labour

was advancing its social and economic and employment-based rights, required the creation of effective tools to combat the bad image of the sector. Thus, from the beginning, public relations campaigns and gaining the ear of political elites has been a major part of the business strategy pursued by the representatives of temporary employment agencies. Beyond the advertising campaigns of individual agencies to present agency work in a positive light – commonly focusing on the freedom accorded by agency work – there has been rigorous engagement with debates on employment policy, with the sector proposing solutions to employment issues that would have the effect of reinforcing its position in the allocation of labour. The early manifestations of this were the study groups set up in the 1960s to provide empirical evidence of the positive role of agency work (Caire, 1973). In addition, since the 1960s the sector has developed mechanisms of self-regulation and codes of conduct, prefiguring contemporary concerns with corporate social responsibility. This has occurred at the international level as well. CIETT, the international body of temporary employment agencies was set up in Paris in 1967, a location which denotes the historical importance of the French sector within Europe. CIETT is now based in Brussels, as is Eurociett, its European arm, which plays an important role in representing the sector in negotiations with European social partners. Tensions exist between the national bodies represented in Eurociett; for example, REC (Recruitment and Employment Confederation) which represents the UK sector, has historically not been in favour of the kind of “flexicurity” practices Eurociett has been prepared to negotiate around. REC was opposed to the EU Directive on equal treatment of agency workers³⁸, a directive which was modelled on the French (and Belgian) legislation and was supported by Eurociett with the proviso that it would include the lifting of “unjustified restrictions” on agency work.

The sector has a comprehensive strategy to guarantee the sector a presence in the national debate around employment policy and relations, despite the relatively small weight of the sector in the economy. The most recent Code of Practice of PRISME (the current name of the organisation representing employment agencies in France) starts from the premise that temporary employment agencies “represent a modern answer to reconcile the requirement of labour flexibility for user companies and the need for work security for employees”, and that the

³⁸ <http://www.rec.uk.com/press/news/721>

services of employment agencies “provide workers with an opportunity for employment security, enhanced occupational status and a stepping stone function whilst reconciling employee aspirations and employers needs for a flexible workforce”. This perception of the role of agency work in the contemporary labour market has been promoted by the sector since the 1980s. The discourse of flexibility was skilfully employed at a time when management and business elites were presenting the post-war wage-labour relation as an impediment to France’s competitiveness in the global market, and promoting the need for workplace flexibility.

In the early 1980s, temporary employment agencies were again faced with prohibition when the Left won the presidential and parliamentary elections. During the 1981 election campaign, the Parti Socialiste (PS) promised to ban temporary employment agencies and to provide the ANPE with sufficient resources to effectively implement the formal state monopoly on employment services, including temporary placements.³⁹ As in 1968, expressions of hostility to agency work were palpable. During the election period, activists carried out a fly-posting campaign, covering agencies with posters proclaiming “outlawed!” in anticipation of a ban. Again Manpower led the sector’s opposition by meeting Jean Auroux, the minister responsible for labour issues, in order to plead the case for employment agencies. The then two organisations that represented agencies (UNETT and PROMATT) together with the employers’ organisation, the CNPF, lobbied hard against the proposals. Finally, rather than banning employment agencies, the Ordonnance no. 82-131, significantly modified the conditions under which employers could use agency work, and pledged to reinforce state surveillance of agency work, taking as its premise that temporary agency work played a “harmful role” if used as a substitution for permanent work (Grunelius, 2003, p.110). Restrictions – coupled with a decline in overall employment – led to a decrease in the number of agency workers and assignments. Between 1982 and 1984, the number of agency workers fell from 124, 651 to 102,514. At the same time the number of registered agencies fell from 1518 in 1980 to 763 in 1984, as smaller agencies found themselves struggling to survive in the new regulatory environment (Grunelius, 2003).

³⁹ *Changer la vie, programme commun de la gauche*, Flammarion, 1972, p. 66.

4.2. From ad hoc substitution to structural flexibility

The larger agencies were able to benefit from this “creative destruction” by consolidating their position through a series of mergers and acquisitions and consolidating their relationships with large clients, such as automobile construction companies, with long term accounts and through price wars to undercut the prices of rivals. The best-placed agencies were able to capitalise on the contradiction that lies at the heart of agency work regulation. The legislation not only restricted agency work, it also deepened the institutionalisation of agency work, by creating an environment for national negotiations between unions and agencies. In 1984, UNETT and PROMATT held a press conference on the experience of the sector since the 1982 Act, the aim of which was to reaffirm the place of temporary agency work: “The ruling of 5th February 1982 was a heavy loss for the profession, but it was also the confirmation of its economic utility and its role in the labour market, as well as the consolidation of the status of agency workers and the unblocking of social dialogue” (Grunelius, 2003, p. 113).

In 1986-88, during the period of *Cohabitation* between Mitterrand’s presidency and Chirac’s RPR centre-right government, the approach to agency work became more “pragmatic” and less “ideological”. The consolidation of the larger agencies placed them in a good position to redefine their relationship with business clients in such a way that would cement their role as indispensable mediators in labour allocation for sectors particularly susceptible to the challenges of highly competitive globalised markets. Although agencies continued to offer the traditional *ad hoc substitution* function of covering for existing employees or managing exceptional peaks in activities, a process of internal restructuring facilitated the development of specialised functions adapted to different economic sectors and heralded the changing economic role of the sector (Peck and Theodore, 2007). In the post-recession recovery in the latter part of the 1980s, a more concentrated agency work sector was able to respond to the flexible labour force demands of user-organisations, presenting agency work as the human resource equivalent of just-in-time. In the 1990s, agency work experienced even more rapid growth (see below) and firmly established itself as some sectors began to incorporate agency work as a strategic part of human resource management (Erhel et al., 2009, p. 40). Belkacem et al. (2011) view the concentration of the sector as being unique to France. In 1997, the 10 top agencies accounted

for 71% of sector turnover. By 2004, four companies made up 70% (Adecco, Manpower, Vedior-Bis and ADIA), with Adecco and Manpower alone constituting 46% of turnover (CIETT data, cited in Michon and Belkacem, 2011, p. 44). Another striking feature of the temporary employment sector in France is the way in which it has been able to deepen its influence whilst constituting a small (though growing) proportion of employment. Political lobbying and strategic alliances have successfully promoted the role employment agencies play in contemporary French labour markets.

4.2.1 The *forums du travail temporaire*

One of the mechanisms the industry has used to influence government and employers has been the regular forums that have brought together heads of employment agencies, government ministers, academics and representatives of EUROCIETT. The CFDT has also participated in these forums. They have been an important arena for the sector to promote its vision of employment and the central role of the temporary employment agencies within that vision:

As you know, temporary work⁴⁰ is an important actor in the economy, essential in its role of regulator of business needs, but it also plays a social role given its action in favour of training and labour market integration and its role in fighting unemployment.

(President of SETT, *Forum du Travail Temporaire*, 1999)

At the first forum in 1999, the president of CIETT remarked he was struck by how “more and more young people often regret that their parents were directed towards a permanent job early in their career”. This anecdotal observation was a significant rebuke to the labour movement which is portrayed as clinging on to anachronistic employment norms (i.e. the standard employment relationship) which, the sector argues, no longer correspond to the aspirations of new generations of employees.

A number of themes have emerged in the Forums between 1999 and 2007, illustrating both continuity and change in the strategies of temporary employment agencies, with the role of job-

⁴⁰ In France, the term *travail temporaire* (temporary work) usually refers to agency work. Other forms of temporary work, such as fixed-term contracts and training contracts have other designations, such as CDD (*Contrat du durée déterminée*).

matching and replacement becoming less of a priority as new functions emerge: labour market integration of young workers; combatting long term unemployment; and the cultivation of “professional pathways” through training and development. The forums also illustrate the changing relationship with government. The first forum was held under a Socialist government, and was attended by a representative of the Ministry of Employment and Professional Training, who raised concerns that agency work be restricted to providing employees to cover absences or to meet temporary peaks in demand. This was, unsurprisingly, not well received – it also reflected the contradictory position of a Socialist government wedded ideologically to the defence of employment norms, whilst permitting the presence and growth of atypical employment. There was also a robust exchange between heads of employment agencies and the representative of the ANPE, with one delegate suggested that social benefits were a disincentive for the employed to find work, which deprived agencies of potential candidates. The ANPE representative replied that it was up to agencies to ensure that agency work was an attractive option. This led to vociferous protestation from the floor which one of the speakers described as a “lynching”. In the second forum, in 2001, a representative of employment agencies advised the government against plans to provide a minimum income to students, which the French state “could ill afford”, and which would, again, deprive the sector of potential candidates from the student body; it was the role of the temporary employment sector to provide students with income through part-time work. These interventions are interesting in that they demonstrate the relationship between social benefits and the availability of (cheap) labour – a relationship which is fundamental to Burawoy’s politics of production.

By the 2005 Forum, the agency work sector had undergone profound changes that would further embed its structural role in employment policy. In the same year, the centre-right UMP (Sarkozy’s *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*) government had passed the Law on Social Cohesion which had extended the range of activities of temporary employment agencies to include recruitment services and employment placements, and had reinforced the partnership between employment agencies and the ANPE. There were also changes in the conditions under which agency work could take place. For the first time, the rationale for agency work was determined by the “needs” of the worker. Certain categories of the labour force – those deemed

in need of training or help with labour market integration – were considered appropriate candidates for employment agencies to assist in finding employment. This marked a significant turning point in the evolution of the regulatory framework of agency work, and corresponded to the themes raised at the forums. The transformation of the temporary work sector since its origins in the 1950s and the 1960s was acknowledged by the Vice-President of SETT:

Twenty years ago we were considered as creators of precariousness. Today we are actors in the employment market. This transformation of our image opens up many possibilities for change. Similarly, from the point of view of job-seekers, we are going to be able to take charge of a much larger population, made up of all those seeking work. Our image is transformed and valorised by the social cohesion plan.

(Forum du Travail Temporaire, 2005, p. 14).

The Forum acknowledged the significance of the changes to the 1972 legislation in making employment agencies the “principle vectors of training” for young people – a move which represents a huge market for the sector, as does the outsourcing of ANPE functions to employment agencies.

The reports of the forums offer an insight into how the interests of employment agencies have converged with business and political elites to influence significant reforms to labour law and labour market institutions. The challenges posed by promoting numerical flexibility in a country strongly attached to the standard employment relationship constituted a significant part of the discussions that took place, at times taking on the form of a quasi-sociological debate of the nature of work and the recognition that the US “model” was incompatible with French employment relations. The representatives of the sector were confident of their role: “Our profession invented flexibility. We need to propose new forms of employment. The labour market lacks ideas.” *(Forum du Travail Temporaire, 2005, p. 25)*

The presence of academics at the forums further legitimises the kinds of solutions proposed during the discussion, all of which were underpinned by a consensus that employment agencies are integral to the efficient functioning of labour markets. The task of “influencing legislation and attitudes” was seen as an ongoing one, in particular in relation to removing barriers to

agency labour in the public sector as well as the continued need to address cultural barriers (*Forum du Travail Temporaire*, 2007). The significance of the success of the sector lies in how it is able to offer flexible “solutions” to organisations in a national context still characterised by “labour market rigidity” (according to dominant neo-liberal approaches to employment policy). Attempts by French governments to fundamentally reduce the protection accorded by the CDI have been met with fierce opposition by French workers and youth, most notably during the 2006 movement against proposals to make it easier to sack young workers (*Contrat de première embauche*).

5. The growth of temporary agency work

The fear expressed in 1972 by trade unions (and the left political parties) that the legalisation of agency work would serve to legitimise it as a form of employment appear to have been borne out. Despite the restrictions that accompanied legalisation, agency work has experienced an exponential long-term growth. It is generally acknowledged that agency work has been used in circumstances that not only stretch the interpretation of the legal framework, but also in instances that are clearly beyond the legal framework (Erhel et al. 2009; Belkacem et al., 2011). The extensive body of legislation over the course of the past forty years, encompassing both liberalising tendencies alongside protective measures for agency workers, has been accompanied by a steady growth in agency work, punctuated briefly in 1982 when the Socialist governments’ restrictive legislation led to a drop of 17% in rates of agency labour.⁴¹

Thus, despite a strong cultural and political attachment to the standard employment relationship arising from deeply embedded social expectations regarding employment norms (Rubery, 2005), there has been little in the way of obstacles to the long-term growth of agency work in France. In 1975, there were 100,000 agency workers working on a daily basis (Caire, 1973). By 2007, this had grown to 650,000. Agency work now accounts for over 3% of employees (DARES, 2011). According to most accounts of the activities of employment agencies, in the 1950s and 1960s, services were provided predominantly for clerical and administrative posts,

⁴¹ Between 1982 and 1984, the number of agency workers dropped from 124 651 to 102 541. By 1986, the numbers had increased to 128 451.

which were more likely to be held by women (Vigneau, 2008, p. 86; Erhel et al., 2009; Belkacem et al., 2011). However, Caire (1973) points out that key industrial sectors were also calling upon the services of temporary employment agencies. Pialoux (1979) cites a study by Manpower in 1968 in which 62% of agency workers were found to be working in manufacturing jobs and 31.9% carrying out office work, although this is likely to be specific to Manpower, which had taken the strategic decision to move into manufacturing. Whilst it is difficult to arrive at a precise profile of agency work during the 1970s, there is some evidence to suggest that the 1970s was the “industrial stage” of agency work (Broda, 1978), as companies sought out human resource strategies aimed at fulfilling a range of functions dealing with the interrelated dimensions of labour costs and labour control (Germe, 1978). It is not possible that this was due in some part to the advances of labour made in the 1968 period since according to Germe (1978), those sectors that had the most comprehensive collective agreements were those that most used agency work. Reforms that undermined the market element of the labour-capital relationship, such as restrictions on the sacking of workers, statutory rights to employment-based training, the monthly payment of salaries (which guaranteed the payment of sick leave and holiday pay), increased the incentive of employers to circumvent the Labour Code; a strategy facilitated by the activities of key employment agencies. As unemployment grew during the 1970s, agencies were able to adapt their business model from one which supplied labour in the context of a tight labour market, to one which claimed to offer a “pathway” into employment for young disadvantaged workers. Pialoux (1979) describes this process occurring in the northern suburbs of Paris, which experienced a rapid concentration of agencies in industrial zones. Additionally, Pialoux drew attention to how young unqualified workers in the Parisian region had long been compelled to access employment via agencies:

In the Paris region, the use of temporary employment agencies (ETT) became, from the 1960s onwards, one of the most common and most “normal” means of obtaining work for youth from the least qualified sections of the working class.

(Pialoux, 1979, p. 32)

This suggests a form of dualism within the labour market, arising from the labour market disadvantage associated with lack of skill, which rendered such workers dependent upon

agencies for access to (precarious) employment. It also highlights the failure of the ANPE to provide an alternative to private employment agencies.⁴²

5.1. Overall trends over the last two decades

Since 1997, agency work has been the fastest growing form of temporary employment in France. The most significant period of growth occurred in the latter half of the 1990s. In 1995, there were 292,000 agency workers. By 2000, this had more than doubled and barring the fall in agency work due to the economic downturn of 2002, growth continued until 2009 when agency workers bore the brunt of the economic crisis that unfolded in 2008. In 2010, the volume of agency work partially recovered although the volume of agency work is still below 2008 levels. Figures 2 and 3 present the volume growth and the rate of growth since 1990 respectively. Figure 3 shows that there have been four periods of negative growth over the past twenty years. Agency work is highly sensitive to economic changes, far more so than other forms of temporary employment (Segal and Sullivan, 1997), confirming its function as a tool of flexibility in sectors of the economy which are particularly susceptible to economic fluctuations. Figure 4 demonstrates the relationship between the rate of growth of GDP and the rate of growth of agency work: there is a notable correspondence between the two sets of data.

Since 2009, agency work has driven the recovery in employment in France (Trésor-Éco, 2011). Peck and Theodore (2007) identified a similar movement in the 2001 US recession when the sector was able to shed “one fifth of its arm’s-length workforce in the space of a few months” (p. 172), a description similar to the haemorrhaging of agency work in French manufacturing (particularly in car manufacturing) over the 2008/2009 period, and which illustrates precisely the function of temporary agency work under contemporary conditions of accumulation. Peck and Theodore’s (2007) work is a useful explanation of changes in the nature of employment relations in the US, which may anticipate trends in France, despite the very different regulatory and socio-economic contexts. In the 2001 recession in the US, the share of temporary agency work within overall job loss was 25.7%. In earlier recessions, this figure was

⁴² The ANPE is notoriously ineffective in carrying out its remit to provide labour allocation services. Neither jobseekers nor employers are reported as being satisfied with the ANPE. One of the demands CGT and the CFDT over the decades has been to provide the ANPE with sufficient resources as a prerequisite for their demand for a state monopoly on all types of employment placements.

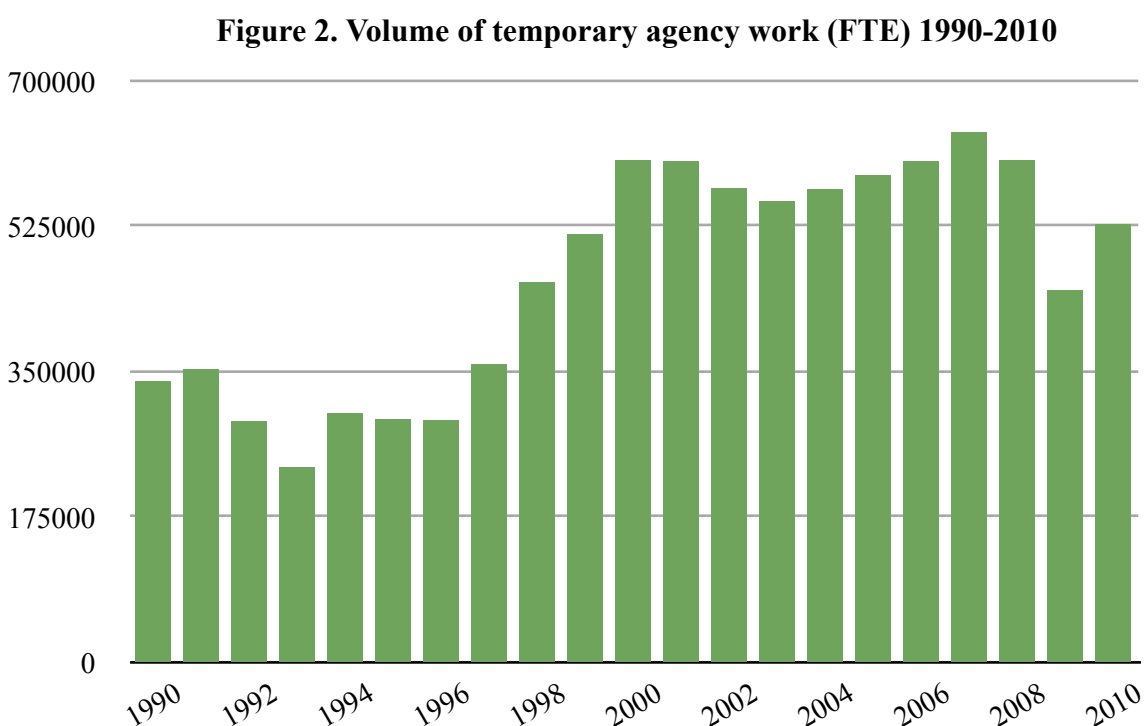
lower: 7.4% in 1990 and averaging 2.6% for 1973, 1980 and 1981. In the recovery following the 1990 and 2001 recessions the decline in aggregate employment was accompanied by a robust growth in temporary employment. When net employment began to register positive figures, temporary agency work was a large proportion of job gains. Agency work had thus become a “central feature of an elongated process of workforce adjustment, as employers add[ed] workers employed on temporary contracts whilst continuing to shed permanent employees” (Peck and Theodore, 2007, p.178), thereby entrenching the role of the temporary employment sector in economic restructuring and creating the context of a “jobless recovery” which, the authors argue, undermines sustained employment growth. There has been a similar movement in France with agency work falling at far higher rates compared with overall employment. The rate of decline in agency work was far higher than in previous recessions, especially in manufacturing, indicating the increased weight of agency work in sectors sensitive to economic cycles. By the end of 2009, when employment growth was still stagnating, agency work was growing rapidly (Belkacem et al., 2011, p.10). For PRISME and CIETT, this is illustrative not only of the important role that the sector plays as an early indicator of employment trends, but also of the sector’s influence on the hiring decisions of firms: “without agency work, employment would simply have stagnated” (Prisme, 2010). This claim is based upon a comparison of rates of job loss during the 1993 and 2008 recessions, in relation to the percentage decline in GDP. In 1993, a 0.9% drop in GDP led to a fall in salaried employment of 2.4%. In 2008, the reduction in GDP was nearly three times higher, yet employment fell by only 2% due to the increased weight of temporary agency employment.

A further interpretation is that temporary employment agencies have succeeded in establishing their active, institutional role in the labour market:

The very availability of just-in-time employment practices can contribute indirectly to the joblessness of a recovery. Just-in-time employment lets firms wait and see that a recovery is robust before hiring, yet still expand production on short notice by hiring temps and using overtime. It allows them to lay off workers and delay hiring to a greater extent.

(Schreft and Singh, 2003, p. 65, cited in Peck and Theodore, 2007, p. 181)

Such “just-in-time employment practices” rely upon the existence of a comprehensive network of local agencies able to respond rapidly to the needs of the organisation, a requirement that the French temporary employment sector easily fulfils with 1,200 agencies and 6,400 branches (Ciett, 2012) located in local labour markets that make extensive use of agency work. This tendency is particularly pronounced in the manufacturing sector, where the drop and rise in jobs over the 2008-2010 period is amplified when compared with other sectors (Figure 7).

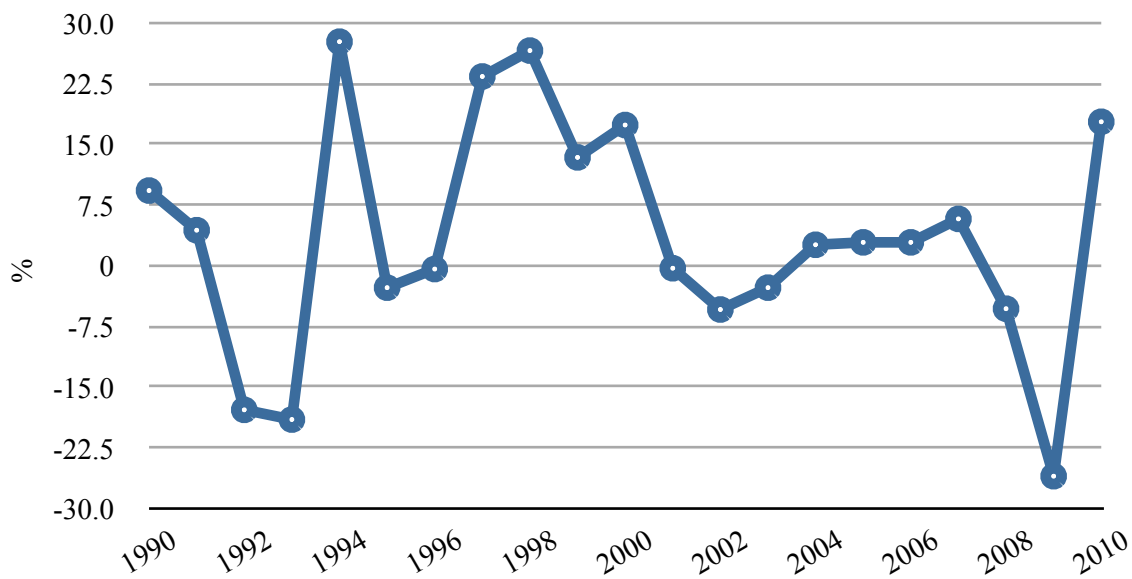


Source: DARES (based on monthly reports from temporary work agencies).

The FTE (équivalent emplois temps pleins) are calculated with reference to the number of days worked (not hours).

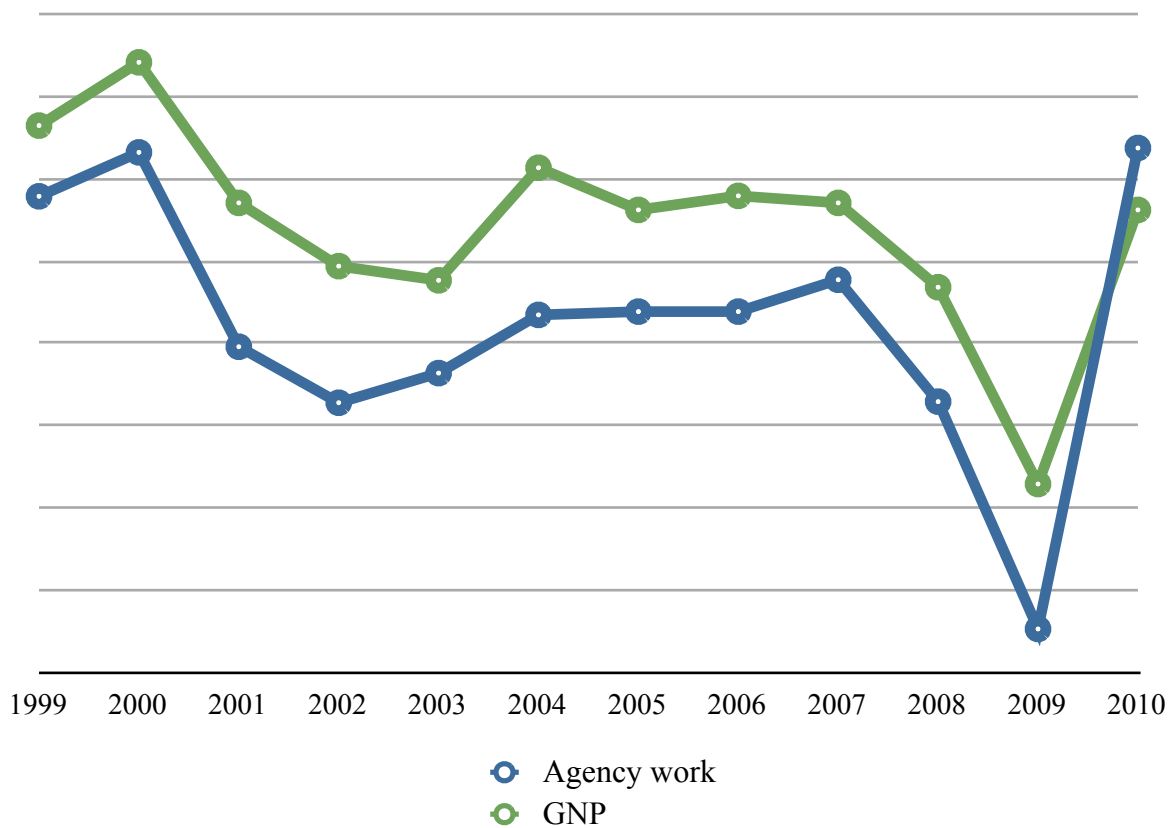
Salaried employment accounts for approximately 65% of the active population

Figure 3. Rate of growth of temporary agency work 1990-2010



Source: Dares

Figure 4. Rate of growth (%) of agency work compared with GNP 1999-2010

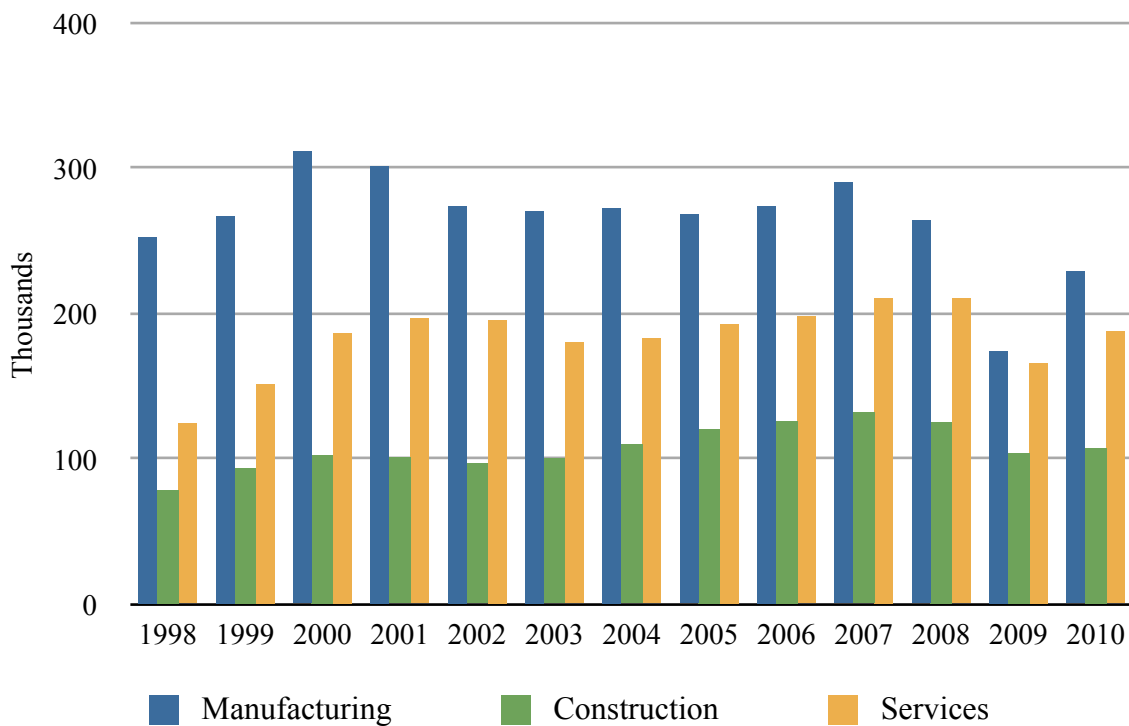


Source: DARES, INSEE (adapted from PRISME, 2010)

5.2. Sectoral trends

Figures 5 and 6 show the sectoral distribution of temporary agency work over time. Manufacturing accounts for the highest proportion of agency work (Figure 5). The structural position of agency labour in manufacturing emerged in the 1990s. Between 1992 and 2002, permanent jobs in manufacturing declined by 7.5% whilst agency work increased threefold (DARES, 2005). Official (government) reports of this change in the composition of labour in French manufacturing share the assumption of the temporary employment sector that agency work reduces the impact of permanent job losses. At its peak in 2000, the volume of agency work in manufacturing was 311,600, representing 52% of all agency workers (Figure 5). Despite a subsequent decline, the sector continues to dominate the sectorial distribution of agency work, making up 44% of all agency workers in 2010. In 2009, this had dropped to 38% (approximately 229,100 agency workers FTE), however, 70% of new agency contracts in 2010 were in manufacturing. These data conceal the highly uneven distribution of agency work between those sectors of activity that make up the broader manufacturing sector. The automobile industry (car assembly and suppliers) is the industry which makes by far the most extensive use of agency workers, measured as proportion of all employees (Table 1), registering a peak of 13.6% in the first quarter of 2002. Before 2008, agency work represented 9.7% of the total workforce, compared with 3.6% for all sectors combined. In the early to mid-1990's the rate of agency labour in the automobile industry had ranged from 3% to 5%. However the establishment of close alliances between automobile plants and employment agencies encouraged the growth of agency labour in the second half of the 1990s (Gorgeu and Mathieu, 2011, p. 81).

Figure 5. Volume of Temporary Agency Work (FTE) by sector



Source: DARES

Figure 6. Sectoral composition of temporary agency work (1999-2010)

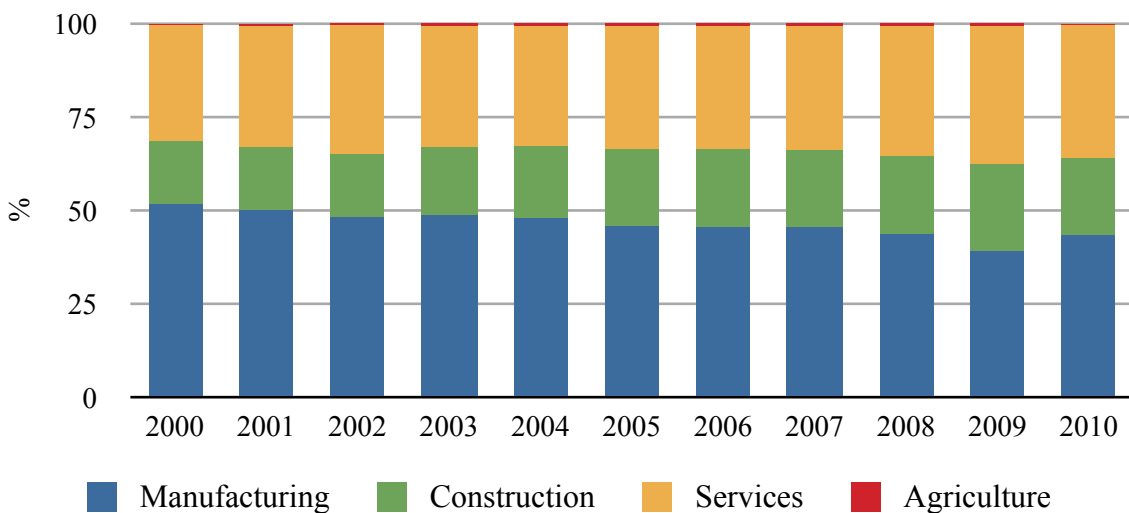
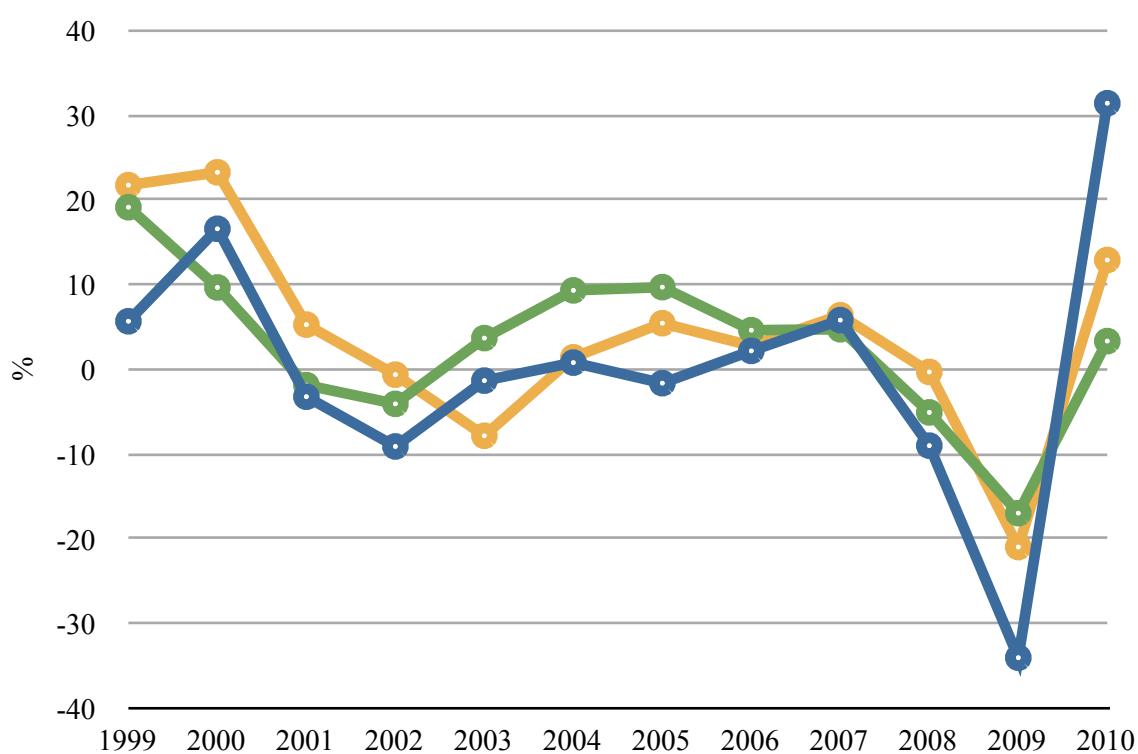


Figure 7. Rate of growth (%) of agency work by sector (1999-2010)



Source: DARES, INSEE

Table 1. Temporary agency work as a % of total employment

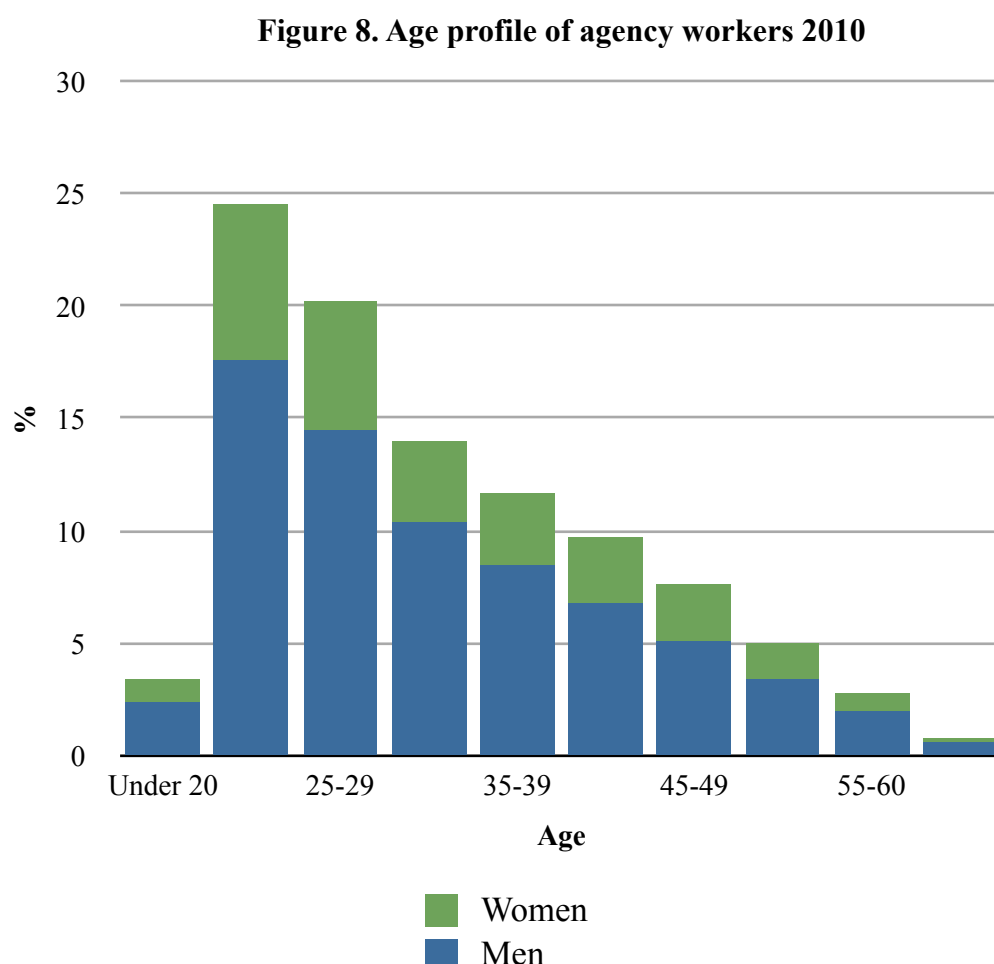
	All	Manufacturing	Construction	Services	Automobile Industry
1998	2.9	6.1	6.6	1.2	8.5
1999	3.3	6.6	7.8	1.5	9.5
2000	4.1	8.0	8.7	2.0	11.9
2001	3.6	7.6	8.3	2.0	11.4
2002	3.4	6.5	7.3	1.7	10.4
2003	3.2	6.4	7.6	1.5	11.0
2004	3.2	6.6	8.1	1.5	10.3
2005	3.3	6.7	8.6	1.6	9.6
2006	3.3	7.0	8.8	1.6	8.7
2007	3.6	7.5	8.8	1.7	9.7
2008	3.4	7.3	8.1	1.6	8.4
2009	2.6	5.0	7.1	1.3	4.7
2010	3.0	6.7	7.5	1.5	7.1

Source: DARES

There is a break in the data series from 2008 onwards. Prior to 2008, the automobile sector was classified as a sector in its own right. Since then changes to the classification of sectors of activity have resulted in a combined category of the fabrication of “transport materials” (C4) including, for example, naval construction, however it is accepted that this sector of activity is made up overwhelmingly of the old automobile industry category and is therefore acceptable data.

5.3. The characteristics of temporary agency workers

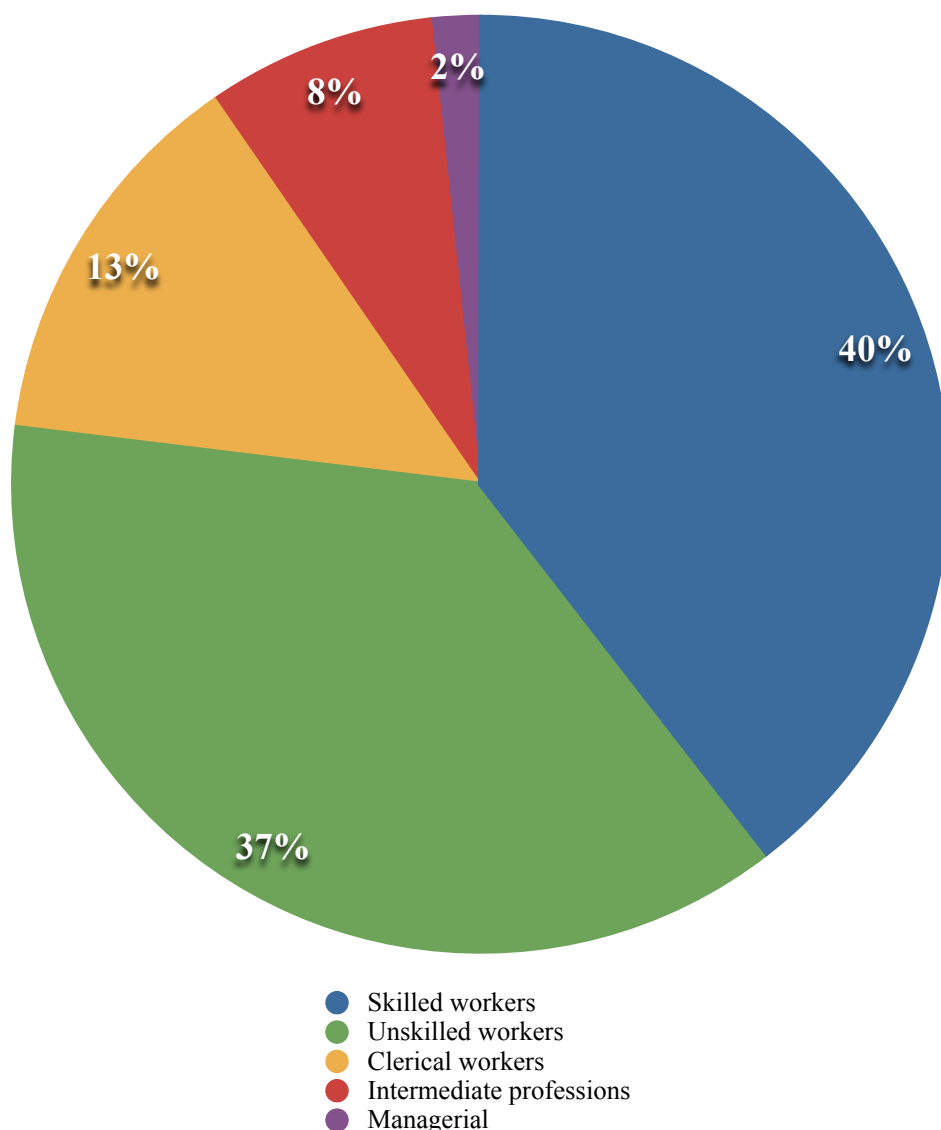
Agency workers in France are predominantly male. Whilst men make up 42% of total employment⁴³, they account for 72% of agency workers (DARES, 2010). In the 1960s women made up, by a small margin, the majority of agency workers (Caire, 1973). Since then the trend of agency work, in particular its growth in manufacturing has increased the proportion of men within the agency workforce. The agency workforce is also younger than the salaried labour force as a whole. 27.9% of agency workers are under 25 years of age (Figure 8) compared with 8.9% for total employment. On the other hand, over the past decade there has been a steady increase in the proportion of over 25 year olds. Since 2000, the proportion of agency workers who are under 25 has decreased from 36.4% to 27.9% (Prisme, 2010).



Source: DARES

⁴³ Labour Force Survey by sex and age. See OECD statistics portal: <http://www.oecd.org/els/employmentpoliciesanddata/keyemploymentstatistics.htm>

Figure 9. Occupational composition of temporary agency workforce



Source: DARES

Agency workers are primarily semi-skilled or unskilled workers. Figure 9 shows the distribution of agency work according to broad occupational category. 77% are “ouvriers” (workers), of which 40% are skilled workers. The occupational profile of agency workers has changed over the past decade, with the proportion of unskilled workers decreasing by 10% since 2000 (Prisme, 2010). The percentage of professional agency workers (cadres) has increased during this period from 0.9% to over 1.7% and intermediate professions from 4.7% to 7.9%. Whilst the 2010 Prisme report has made much of this trend in agency work, the overall profile has not significantly changed over the past decade. Thus, the profile of agency workers diverges from that commonly portrayed by the temporary help industry. It is the case that there has been an

increase in the diversification of “types” of agency workers such as those identified by Faure-Guichard (2000) and Jourdain (2002): those seeking permanent employment (*l'intérim d'insertion*); those between jobs (*l'intérim de transition*); permanent agency workers (*emploi permanent*); those seeking an extra source of income (e.g. students); and those who found themselves unable to escape low-skilled, agency work. However, the data indicate that semi and low-skilled manual workers continue to dominate, even though the temporary employment sector promotes, in addition to the labour market integration function of agency work, the idea of the “boundaryless” knowledge worker, in particular through its current emphasis on training portfolios. Agency workers in the first two categories above tend to have a positive view of agency work since it provides them with the experience and confidence in the labour market that will increase their chance of finding permanent employment. The third category resembles the boundaryless worker who chooses to create his/her own “pathways” in order to successfully navigate the labour market. In recent years, the temporary employment sector has sought to cultivate “permanent” agency workers by emphasising how improvements to the rights accorded to agency workers can provide a secure framework for individual career path, thus responding to the twin demands of flexibility and security.

However, it is the last category that makes up a significant proportion of the agency workforce, for want of a permanent alternative. Temporary agency employment is therefore largely involuntary. This indicates that despite a legislative framework aimed at protecting workers from job insecurity, for an increasing number of young workers, job insecurity is a daily reality. The final section of this chapter examines how trade unions have responded to this encroachment upon the standard employment relationship.

6. Unions: from opposition to “real politik”

The responses of trade unions to agency work are conditioned by their (changing) ideological positions and their position within national industrial relations systems. The French system of industrial relations is one of frequent contestation marked by industrial conflict and legal interventionism rather than collective bargaining, and a union movement which has historically been ideologically strong whilst being organisationally weak (Crouch, 1993; Goetschy, 1998, p. 357; Visser, 2001). Modern French history has been marked by key events which strengthened

the position of organised labour in negotiating and regulating labour-capital relations through national institutions governing labour relations and social welfare. The most far reaching reforms have occurred following mass movements of general strike action, for example 1936 and 1968 and, to a lesser extent, 1945. After 1968, trade unions increased their legal and institutional recognition at the local level. Similarly, the victory of Socialist François Mitterrand in the 1981 presidential election and the subsequent election of a left government made up of Socialists and Communists (Union of the Left) reinforced the position of unions through the 1982 Auroux Laws. French industrial relations are characterised by a comprehensive system of national collective agreements which cover 90% of all employees. Labour legislation is normally the outcome of national negotiations between social partners. French trade unionism has been described as “state-centred weakness” (Sellier and Sylvestre, 1986, cited in Goetschy, 1998, p. 360) due to the interventionist role of the state in according individual employment rights, associated with the contractual status of employment as codified in the Labour Code, and the extensive coverage accorded by the collective agreements regardless of trade union presence. This reduced the need to join a trade union, hence the low level of trade union membership – under 8%.⁴⁴ However, trade unions are influential not only through the formal mechanisms of industrial relations and social partnership but also in their ability to mobilise workers in mass demonstrations and strikes.

The five union confederations that have been designated as “representative” at national level are divided along ideological and confessional lines. Historically, there have been two main divisions. One strand is the CGT and FO, which emerged out of the militant syndicalism of the early French labour movement. The other strand is the CFDT and the *Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens* (CFTC) which has its roots in social Catholicism. The fifth representative trade union, the *Confédération générale des cadres* (CGC), organises professional groups of employees (*cadres*). Smaller union confederations have emerged as a result of splits from the major confederations – the *Union nationale des syndicats autonomes* (UNSA), the *Fédération syndicale unitaire* (FSU) and the *Union syndicale – Solidaires* (SUD), a federal grouping of radical independent unions which emerged from a series of splits in the

⁴⁴ See OECD Statistics: http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=UN_DEN

late 1980s and the 1990s, mainly from the CFDT. With a relatively strong presence in rail, postal (La Poste), telecommunications (France Télécom) and rail services (SNCF), SUD has also been growing in the health and education sectors, and in services such as cleaning where they have been active in fighting for the rights of workers on precarious employment contracts. Contemporary accounts of union divisions in France have evolved from viewing the CFDT/CFTC/CGC as the “reformist” wing of trade unions in opposition to the “revolutionary” wing represented by CGT/FO, and more recently SUD. Pernot (2005) considers that “radical” (protest oriented) is a more appropriate designation of the CGT and FO, although Sainsaulieu (1999) placed FO in a separate intermediary position. Categorising trade unions, however, conceals the fluidity of union confederations (Pernot, 2005) and of rank and file activists in reaction to the local dynamics of the trade union and class struggle.

6.1. Union strategies: opposition, negotiation and acceptance

During the 1970s, the three main confederations (CGT, CFDT and FO) refused to engage with the organisations representing the agency work sector. They had been opposed to the 1972 law viewing it as providing legitimacy to a regressive form of employment. The decision of the CGT to sign an agreement with Manpower did not affect its overall stance toward legalisation. This was not surprising since, outside of the team negotiating with Manpower, the agreement was met with astonishment by the trade union movement, including within the ranks of the CGT, especially since the text of the agreement contained within it an acknowledgement of supply side explanations of agency work. Manpower correctly considered the agreement to be a major coup: “The most important French union confederation found that agency work provided a service to workers. This was a big deal” (Grunelius, 2003, p. 83). In return, there was a “guarantee” that agency workers would not be used to replace permanent workers, and the negotiating team expected that the CGT would become the natural home for agency workers looking to unionisation.

The French labour movement in general (with the exception of unions organised along professional lines such as the CFTC) considered that where temporary employment was appropriate, it was the role of the state to allocate labour through the ANPE. Throughout the

1970s, the three main unions continued to use a pejorative vocabulary to describe agencies and their activities, adopting terms such as *négriers* (slave-traders), and *officines* (shady agencies). Although agency workers themselves were not the target of their opposition, there has been little attempt until recently to unionise agency workers, partly because trade unions have been most concerned with their core constituency of permanent workers (Bérout, 2009) and partly due to the difficulties associated with organising agency workers, in particular the fragmented and transitory nature of their employment (Grollier, 2010). Bérout (2009) has also argued that, where trade unions have been opposed to agency work, they have tended to refer to the negative effects of precarious work on permanent workers and union organisation, first in terms of weakening their core membership, and then through a reluctant acceptance of agency work as the *quid pro quo* of restructuring (the “buffer” effect).

The evolution of the position of trade unions towards agency work has followed the contours of political developments of the mainstream left parties, as well as the ideological evolution of the unions themselves. The left victory in 1981 produced a shock wave throughout France and an expectation within the labour movement and the left not felt since 1968 (Bergounioux and Grunberg, 2005). Mitterrand’s victory in the first round of the elections, and the mobilisation of the right in response,⁴⁵ prompted the Communist Party to call for Mitterrand’s victory in the second round, thus restoring the Union of the Left (*Union de la Gauche*) between the Socialists and the Communist Party which had broken down in 1977, and which had led to a corresponding tension between the CFDT and the CGT. Mitterrand’s programme was a far reaching Keynesian inspired program of reforms aimed at creating jobs, redistributing wealth, improving workers conditions (for example, by introducing a fifth week of annual leave). The Left also promised to prohibit the activities of temporary employment agencies. However, by the mid-1980s the government had abandoned its program of reforms in favour of a more monetarist inspired policy, and, as early as 1982, had already watered down its proposal to prohibit agency work. The departure of the Communist Party from the government in 1984 influenced the Communist-dominated CGT’s position towards the Socialist Party and the government. Whilst the CP was in government, the CGT’s opposition to the 1982 legislation

⁴⁵ The right, alarmed at the prospect of a Socialist victory, organised demonstrations between the first and second round of the presidential elections.

had been muted; whilst opposing agency work, it recognised the positive elements in the legislation. The CFDT, on the other hand, enthusiastically supported the legislation. The ideological shift of the CFDT away from its radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s, and a return to the “social regulation” politics of its origins resulted in a focus on negotiation. By 1979, the CFDT was already supporting the idea of “limited agency work” (Caire, 1993, p. 92). Both the CFDT and the FO participated in the tripartite negotiations which preceded the 1982 legislation.

During the 1980s the institutionalisation of agency work was reinforced via a series of collective agreements. The 1982 legislation established a framework for the social partners to negotiate collective conventions to improve employment-based benefits associated with agency work, such as enhanced access to complementary health insurance and funds for professional training and development. This process reflected the evolution of union strategy towards negotiation, including the CGT for a brief period during the Union of the Left. In 1982, all the social partners were encouraged by the government to negotiate an agreement on social protection and training. The CFDT’s position, in particular, had evolved from opposition and refusal to negotiate with temporary employment agencies to the acceptance of a discourse which recognised the role of “flexibility” in combatting unemployment. Whilst Mitterrand had been elected on a programme that promised to restore full employment, by the mid-1980s unemployment was growing. The government’s U-turn in 1983, which the CFDT supported, replaced an employment policy which promoted job creation through state intervention with a focus upon organisational competitiveness and profitability, one component of which was flexibility. With regards to agency labour, three years after the tightening of restrictions on its use, the government relaxed laws on the duration of agency contracts where businesses could show they needed longer term contracts to cope with production of goods for export. During the *cohabitation* with the RPR government following the 1986 legislative elections, labour market flexibility was pursued “with a vengeance” according to one author (Daley, 1993, p. 19). In the first year of the Chirac government (1986-7), a ruling was passed to remove some of the restrictions on agency work.

During this period, there was a growing acceptance that temporary agency work should be allowed to provide solutions for organisations that went beyond ad hoc substitutionism. An

agreement in 1990 signed by the CFDT and the CFTC further underpinned the function of agency work as a legitimate tool of flexibility, allowing companies to respond appropriately to the requirements of a globalised economy, with the caveat that agency workers should not replace permanent employees. This period was, therefore, an important one in the history of agency work, not only because of the (partial) unblocking of social dialogue (Caire, 1993, p. 121), but also because it heralded the gradual acceptance of a form of employment that deviated from the employment norm and which had been met with vigorous opposition just over a decade before.

The CFDT has since combined a strategy of negotiation at the national level with a critique of *precarité* in its publications. The pursuit of improved “flexicurity” and an active engagement with the temporary employment sector (e.g. its presence at the *Forums du Travail Temporaire*) has been traditionally favoured above mobilisation strategies. The CFDT has participated in the negotiations that have led to (formal) improvements in the conditions of agency work; training has been a major preoccupation, seen by the CFDT as an important component of “flexicurity” since it is said to reduce the risk of periods of unemployment. The evolution of the CFDT’s strategy has its roots in its “recentrage” of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when it abandoned the goal of social transformation in favour of negotiating with social partners, adopting a model of engagement with employers (Heery, 2004). Whilst maintaining the centrality of the standard employment relationship, the CFDT sees temporary agency work as necessary both for user-organisations (who need to manage their workforce in such a way as to maintain competitiveness) and for young workers in need of assistance in accessing jobs.

The CGT has maintained its principled opposition to agency work. Whilst it was party to the 1982 negotiations that led to the *Fonds d’action social du travail temporaire* (FASTT) and the *Fonds d’assurance formation du travail temporaire* (FAF-TT), it has kept its distance from collective negotiations with the sector. For example, it did not sign the latest collective agreement on training (2010). The CGT was also heavily critical of the 2005 agreement to extend the use of agencies, and was the only representative union not to sign, claiming it would aggravate job insecurity.⁴⁶ The union has struggled with the tension between a position that

⁴⁶ See Eurofound <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2005/11/inbrief/fr0511101n.htm>

formally seeks to abolish agency labour but which also campaigns to improve the conditions of agency workers. The danger of this latter strategy is that it risks “institutionalising” agency work, and, if it succeeds in improving the conditions of agency workers, makes abolition more unfeasible. In recent years this contradiction appears to have been resolved within the ranks of the CGT in recent years as it has become more active in campaigning for the rights of agency workers, alongside its continued ideological denunciation.

SUD maintains a similar opposition to agency work. Like the CGT, the union’s literature contains repeated calls for the transformation of agency contracts into permanent contracts. As a relatively small and non-representative union, and given its critique of the “bureaucratism” and “institutionalisation” of the main unions, SUD’s strategy is focused more at the local and workplace level combining immediate demands for improvement with more general denunciations of agency labour, reflecting its roots in radical, protest oriented trade unionism (Connelly, 2012). The limited weight of Sud means that much of its strategy has revolved around using propaganda against agency work to distinguish itself from the other unions, and where, possible, building social movement type support for workers in precarious employment conditions (for example, cleaners employed by external sub-contractors).

6.2. Union mobilisation

The long term decline of French trade union membership⁴⁷ has obliged French unions to address their “crisis” of membership (Bouffartique, 2005). The low level of trade union membership in France has not been treated as a major problem in an IR context in which legitimacy derives from workplace elections. However, the rise in independent representatives, and a questioning of the legitimacy of the role of “representative” trade unions in the tripartite social model, given their loss of membership, has obliged unions to address this problem. The unionisation of agency workers presents a challenge to unions for a number of reasons, not least the vulnerability that arises from the contingent nature of the contract, regardless of the formal rights to union representation. The discontinuity of employment and the episodic absence of income is a brake on union members (Cingolani, 2005). There are also objective factors flowing from the agency contract which hinder unionisation. The dichotomy between the employment relation with the agency, and the work relation with the user-organisation creates a contractual and physical separation between the various elements of the wage-labour relationship which is a key reference point for union mobilisation and collective action. At a grass-roots level, unions have tended to focus on the effects of *precarité* on the collective consciousness of the working class in terms of general propaganda, rather than mobilising agency workers to defend their specific interests (Bérout, 2009). However, as with other European unions, French unions have been slow to develop organisational and mobilisation practices targeting constituencies beyond the traditional core worker (Bérout, 2009; Gumbrell-McCormick, 2011). Historically, unionisation has been a contentious issue, due to the concern that mobilising agency workers around demands to improve their conditions will inevitably lead to agency work becoming a legitimate and normal form of employment, thus undermining attempts to challenge the very principle of agency work. A 1990 article in the CGT’s *Le Peuple* attempted to square the circle thus:

⁴⁷ In 1970, union density stood at 22%. This had dropped to 9.8% in 1990 and 7.6% in 2008 (OECD Statistics, http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=UN_DEN). Mouriaux (1998) and Andolfatto (2002) see this as a resulting from a combination of external structural factors, such as unemployment and changes in the profile of the working class, and the crisis of the grand narratives that have inspired trade unionisms in the past.

... did we not have a tendency at times to fear that the demands raised by the workers concerned [agency workers] are in contradiction with our fundamental objectives, and as a result were we not timid? We should be confident. If we discuss with workers starting from their needs, of course the issues that will emerge will be about immediate problems relating to their situation. But one essential issue will necessarily arise: that of their contract, their capacity to organise their lives, to control, the right to have plans, the use of their skills, never being paid, etc. What will emerge will be strong convergences with other workers which we need to highlight.

(*Le Peuple*, no, 1320, 1990, p. 5, cited in Kornig, 2003)

This quote is an example of an attempt to find common cause between agency workers and permanent workers, starting from the experience of the agency worker. However, the CGT has prioritised the general ideological struggle against *precarité* over mobilising agency workers. One of the problems lies in the nature of the French industrial relations system. Where competitive unionism exists alongside institutional support for unions, mobilising support for workplace elections becomes a priority (Connelly, 2012). Since agency workers do not vote in the elections at the user-organisation, and are considered less likely to vote in elections at employment agencies due to their distance from their legal employer, addressing their issues becomes less of a priority.

Most unions deal with this by organising agency workers within their “services” federations. The CGT, however, was the first union to organise agency workers through a relatively autonomous national trade organisation, the *Union Syndicale de l'Intérim-CGT* (USI-CGT). SUD has recently followed suit by establishing Sud Intérim in 2011, and has succeeded in establishing a base in Manpower. The lack of coordination between the unions at the employment agencies and unions at the user-organisation compounds the problems of mobilisation. Union representation at the employment agencies is difficult due to the small number of employee representatives and the geographical dispersion of agency workers amongst large number of client organisations. Research has identified the difficulties in

combining agency work with official trade union activity. Agency workers who are trade union representatives face numerous obstacles, not least being able to maintain a presence at user-organisations. It is estimated that trade union density of agency workers is below 1% (Belkacem et al., 2011). The USI-CGT claim to have at least 800 agency workers. The *Fédération des Services-CFDT*, with a membership of between 1000 and 15000 members is unable to give a breakdown of agency workers and permanent employers of employment agencies. The low number of agency workers in SUD can be inferred from a breakdown of delegates at its 2008 conference. Out of 270 delegates, only one was an agency worker (Bérout et al, 2011, p. 59)

The contradiction between organising agency workers in their own union federation and opposing agency work is reflected in the conflicting demands that can arise. Although, the CGT is opposed to agency work and demands that all agency contracts are transformed into permanent contracts, the USI-CGT has developed autonomous demands which concretely address their situation as agency workers. For example, the USI-CGT calls for the retention of employee status in between agency contracts, in order to improve the security of agency workers, by classifying them as agency employees between contracts (Grollier, 2010, p. 28), as has been the case, until recently, in Germany. The increased interest shown by the CGT in proposing solutions within the framework of the temporary agency contract is perhaps reflective of the acceptance that agency work is not going to disappear, in the absence of a radical political challenge. Of the representative unions, the CGT has been the most open to new forms of union organising, inspired by innovative trends in other countries, such as community unionism.⁴⁸ The CGT has been the most active of the larger, representative unions in campaigning at a grass-roots level against the misuse of agency work. The most high profile movement was the strike of *sans-papiers*, undocumented migrant workers who, whilst legally able to work in France are deprived of citizenship rights and, therefore, vulnerable to abusive practices. SUD has also been actively engaging in mobilising strategies to attract new generations of workers amongst the precarious workforce and has some success in *La Poste* and amongst cleaners. One of the

⁴⁸ Community unionism is a new model of trade unionism aimed at overcoming the fragmentation of the working class and mobilising marginalised workers (see Wills and Simms, 2004). Recently, there have been attempts in France to emulate community unionism, particularly within SUD and some local organisations of the CGT (Bérout, 2009).

features of this new focus on workers in precarious employment has been to draw in active support from social movement organisations (Denis, 2005; Bérout, 2009).

There have been some rare attempts to overcome the fragmentation of agency workers in the auto sector, by creating a geographically-based structure to bring together agency workers rotating between suppliers and assembly plants within a given industrial zone. In the early 2000s at Renault Trucks, the CGT engaged in a combined strategy of organising agency workers geographically, in order to bring together multiple sites of work, using survey as a way of engaging and mobilising agency workers, organising demonstrations at agencies (*manifestations*) and legal challenges. Whilst this action led to the successful reconversion of agency contracts into permanent posts, there was little gain in terms of increased membership (Bérout, 2009). Mobilising activities such as these rely on the presence of committed activists (Darlington, 2008) and a local network that can support stunts such as occupations of agencies. In the case of Renault Trucks, the presence of young, militant ex-agency workers was a crucial factor.

7. Conclusion

This chapter has presented the history, evolution and incremental institutionalisation of agency work in France. It has illustrated that the temporary help industry has been a key agent in carving out the transition from the origins of employment agencies as *marchands d'hommes* to a situation today where employment agencies are privileged partners in the institutional mechanisms which frame labour market policy, with an increasing emphasis on combatting unemployment and facilitating labour insertion of lower-skilled workers. This does not mean that agency work is no longer contested. There is still an ideological battle, enjoined by sporadic industrial contestation, played out over the weakening of the standard employment relationship. Agency work is still perceived by the defenders of the post-war compromise to be a particularly pernicious form of flexibility which allows employers to “hire and fire” at will.

Temporary employment agencies have made themselves indispensable labour market actors in the twenty-first century France. The relevance of the sector's representative bodies in this story is evident in the historical evolution of the sector, from pushing forward an agenda to save the

sector from illegality to the present day partnerships between Prisme and local public employment agencies.⁴⁹ In the next chapter, this is examined at the meso level (automobile sector) with the aim of illustrating how the intersection of temporary employment agencies and automobile manufacturers has transformed the regime (or regimes) of labour control in the car industry.

49 In September, 2011, PRISME signed an agreement with regional employment agency of Basse-Normandie and FAF-TT to increase the access of youth and jobseekers to professional contracts and agency work development contracts.

CHAPTER 6

FACTORY REGIMES, LABOUR SEGMENTATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF AGENCY LABOUR IN FRENCH CAR MANUFACTURING

1. Introduction

Auto manufacturing occupies an important place in modern industrial history, playing a pivotal role in the changes that have taken place, from the introduction of new technologies to new forms of work organisation that have taken place in the sector in recent decades. Druker, writing in 1946, referred to the sector as the “industry of industries” due to its position as a catalyst for change. More recently, Bouquin (2006) referred to the sector as a “quintessential example of capitalist rationality”. Auto manufacturing also has an iconic place within the history of the labour movement, exemplifying the power of large numbers of workers to disrupt the “Fordist” production process, and underpinning national models of industrial relations. The sector has been both a key component of the post-war social compromise, and an illustration of the fragility of that compromise, given the high levels of industrial action carried out by auto workers. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of the literature examining transformations in the labour process and employment relations draw heavily on the car industry (Coffey and Thornley, 2010).

The French auto sector evolved within a socio-economic context that has been characterised by strong state support, and a regional policy from which emerged the automotive regions that have transformed local employment landscapes. Labour-capital relations have also been influenced by French colonial history. In the post-war years, access to workers from French colonies in North Africa facilitated labour segmentation within car plants, providing employers with a source of highly exploitable labour. In the early 1980s, a series of militant strikes, organised largely by migrant workers in low-skilled assembly line work, improved the pay and working conditions of the lowest grades of workers in car manufacturing plants. In the case of PSA Peugeot-Citroën, the strikes led to the reconfiguration of post-war labour relations in a company that has a history of “despotic” labour relations based upon a combination of paternalism, the

promotion of “company unionism” and strict discipline to enforce management control over the labour process. The first major wave of restructuring in the auto sector took place in the mid-1980s and many of those who had lead the strikes were laid off. Since the 1980s numbers employed in auto manufacturing have fallen dramatically. In the early 1980s, there were over 300 000 workers in the sector. By 1990 this had dropped to just over 200,000, and by 2010 the auto sector employed less than 150,000 people.

Whilst temporary agency workers have been used by PSA since the 1980s (Beaud and Pialoux, 1999), this form of employment became widespread in the sector during the latter half of the 1990s, as manufacturers used agency workers to deal with increasingly volatile markets. Successive waves of restructuring have resulted in a significantly reduced core of permanent workers, and although productivity gains have increased the output of this smaller workforce, the sector has increasingly factored into its labour resource strategy, a parallel workforce of predominantly younger workers on agency contracts. This chapter examines how this modern form of labour segmentation has come to be “structurally embedded” in this key part of the French economy. The chapter examines key features of the post-war factory regime of car plants, and the forms of labour management that emerged within the context of the French post-war social model. The first part of the chapter looks at the role of the state in directing French industry towards national priorities guided by the *dirigisme* that defined state-capital relations. The chapter then explores the nature of the factory regime that characterised auto manufacturing, and forms of labour segmentation in post-war France, before discussing the emergence of agency labour in the context of the restructuring of the sector. The final part of the chapter looks at how the use of agency labour in auto manufacturing has been viewed in French society, through the lens of media coverage.

2. The political economy of automobile production

2.1. State, capital and labour

Burawoy (1985) stresses the role of the state in shaping factory regimes by framing production and labour relations within institutional mechanisms that modify labour-capital relations. In the

post-war period, the priority was to overcome the destruction of war and return shattered economies to sustainable levels of production in peace-time. As discussed in the previous chapter, the French state played a particularly pronounced role in directing investment and production, one of the first acts of the post-war government being to nationalise key sectors of the economy. The post-war government sought to mould French capitalism according to nationally-defined priorities, and to support French industry through investment and restrictions on imports. Industrial policy was complemented by a system of social dialogue that promoted an element of redistribution of wealth through the regulation of wages and the provision of social benefits (Lipietz, 1985).

In the early 1950s the *dirigiste* state steered the geographical dispersal of investment throughout the country by initiating a programme of regional development which was bolstered in 1964 by the creation of a regional development agency, DATAR (*Délégation à l'aménagement du territoire*), the aim of which was to revitalise regional economies through the delocalisation of production. With the notable exception of Peugeot's historic plant at Sochaux, the French automobile sector had traditionally been concentrated in the Paris region. In 1962, 54% of employment in the auto sector was located here. By 1975, this had dropped to 34% (Oberhauser, 1987, p. 450). Renault, as a nationalised company, was under particular pressure to decentralise production away from Paris (Oberhauser, 1987), opening up plants in Douai and Maubeuge in the North. Peugeot also expanded its geographical spread by opening up a plant in Nord-Pas-de-Calais, and opening a second plant in another part of Franche-Comté (Mulhouse). Decentralisation suited the auto industry. Rising incomes meant that more people were buying cars and Paris could not provide the land required to expand productive capacity. The employment landscapes of those regions where new plants opened were significantly altered over the decades, as changes in relationships with suppliers have generated vast auto clusters and labour markets dominated by vehicle production. The Nord-Pas-de-Calais region illustrates the changes that occurred in local economies. In the 1970s the auto sector accounted for approximately 1,000 jobs in the surround areas. By the mid-2000s this had rising to over 30 000, boosted by the opening of the Toyota plant in Valenciennes in the early 2000s.

State interventionism still plays a role in French industrial policy despite the international consensus that considers state intervention to be economically bad. The French government has responded to the crises in the French auto sector by stimulating the sale of cars manufactured in France. In the mid-1990s, finance schemes known as the *Balladurette* and the *Juppette* (named after the Prime Ministers of the day) provided cash incentives for car owners to replace their old cars, and reduced Value Added Tax on the purchase of new cars. The governments of the day openly espoused the need to protect French capital, whilst also arguing that the replacement of older, high polluting cars with “greener” models was good for the environment (Adda and Cooper, 2000). Similar measures were introduced to combat the fall in car sales in 2008 and 2009. The *prime à la caisse* (scrappage scheme) was a key element of the rescue package introduced in 2009. The government also hoped to prevent PSA Peugeot-Citroën from relocating large parts of its production to the Czech Republic. Nicholas Sarkozy, the French President at the time, used his announcement of the government’s 6.5 billion euro bailout package to urge French car manufacturers to keep production in France.⁵⁰ His discourse was very much part of the ideological tradition of appealing to the “social” function of private organisations; in addition to the primary aim of generating profit, business are also expected to serve *l’intérêt social*.⁵¹

Although successive governments have accepted the principles of market liberalisation, there is a persistent tension between French industrial policy and the liberalising trajectory of the European Commission (EC), exemplified through the lens of the auto sector. Whilst France is not alone in its protectionist and interventionist bail-out of national car manufacturers⁵², it was France that pioneered these schemes in the 1990s. The French state has also been a vocal in its

⁵⁰ L’état demande à Renault et PSA de ne pas fermer de sites en France, *Le Monde*, 7 décembre, 2008.

⁵¹ Jefferys (2010) presents a convincing analysis of the difference between Sarkozy and Thatcher. He argues that Sarkozy is a prisoner of a national tradition that is unlikely to embrace Hayek, given the weight of Rousseau’s ideas in the construction of the modern French state.

⁵² Similar schemes were implemented in other countries, including a particularly generous scheme in the US, due to the importance of the sector for broader economic performance and the need to maintain employment in geographically concentrated car plants (OECD, 2010).

opposition to the EC's trading policy⁵³ in relation to auto vehicles. For example, attempts to harmonise the technical regulations of vehicles were opposed by France (and Italy), since maintaining local standards is a way of preventing non-EC imports. McLaughlin et al. (1993) describe the state-capital relation expressed here as a "symbiotic" relationship between the state and manufacturers, where the influence of manufacturers is felt via national political representation in Brussels, beyond any direct company and associational lobbying that may take place.

The French state has also discouraged hostile takeovers of flagship manufacturers. The 2005 Breton Law (designed to prevent a hostile takeover of Renault), and other legislation making government approval necessary for takeovers in sectors deemed "sensitive", have allowed French capital to retain a strong indigenously character, unlike, for example, the UK car industry. The latter has undergone a process by which it has been transformed "from a sector where British owned firms and foreign direct investors competed against one another, to one where British firms were all either wholly owned or partially owned by foreign competitors" (Reich, 1990).⁵⁴ Admittedly, the corporate structures of Renault and PSA have undergone significant changes since the 1990s, which have changed the character of their corporate governance. The privatisation of Renault reduced the state's stake in the company to 15%. Of the floating shares which make up 62% of Renault's capital, 58% are institutional investors, 45% of which are non-French. The merger with Nissan in 1999 gave Nissan a 15% stake but no voting rights.⁵⁵ Foreign capital does not have a majority claim on Renault and the company still maintains its place as an iconic French company in the popular imagination. PSA also maintains its French character with non-French institutions accounting for a third of shares, the Peugeot family accounting for 30% and French institutional shareholders making up 22% of

⁵³ The maintenance of the "block exemption", introduced in 1985 and which continued until 2007 reflected view within Europe that the auto sector was a "special case" and, therefore, exempt from European competition rules.

⁵⁴ Reich explains this with reference to the "liberal democratic" ideology, which makes no distinction between firms "on the basis of foreign or domestic ownership" exemplified in the UK auto industry (Reich, 1990, pp. 1-2). However, he locates the ideological differences between UK and countries on the continent in the legacy of the industrial policy of fascism. In emphasising the experience of fascism, Reich ignores the significance of pre-war ideological divisions and post-war compromises that sprung from the need to create a national identity out of class polarisation.

⁵⁵ See <http://www.renault.com/en/finance/action/pages/repartition-du-capital.aspx>

shares.⁵⁶ The prevailing French character of these companies permits Sarkozy, and François Hollande (the current President) to appeal to the patriotic sensibilities of French car manufacturers. The state-capital relation is, of course, a two-way process. Like the temporary employment industry discussed in the previous chapter, the most powerful players in the auto industry exert pressure on government both individually and collectively, via their organisation *Union des industries et métiers de la métallurgie* (UIMM)

2.2. The role of the UIMM within the system of social partnership

The UIMM is an employers' organisation which covers a broad range of activities associated with engineering. Large auto manufacturers have a dominant position within the UIMM. Many of the agreements that are negotiated between the UIMM and representative unions originate from issues that have emerged within collective negotiations in the auto sector, for example, agreements on early retirement for workers in physically draining posts (*travail pénible*). Within the MEDEF (*Mouvement des entreprises en France* – the French employer's organisation) and its predecessor, the CNPF (*Confédération nationale des patrons de français*), the UIMM has traditionally held a hegemonic position. Until 2005, UIMM presidents were invariably those supported by the engineering industry (Woll, 2005). However, recently, the UIMM's position in the MEDEF has been challenged by the election of Laurence Parisot as president.⁵⁷ In addition, recent revelations concerning a financial scandal involving the unaccountable transfer of large sums of money, some of which appears to have been destined for an anti-strike fund, have damaged the reputation of the UIMM.⁵⁸

Through the MEDEF, the UIMM has been able to promote its model of tripartite capital-labour-state relations, within the constraints of a “social compromise” that is expected to safeguard

⁵⁶ See PSA Annual Report <http://www.psa-peugeot-citroen.com/fr/publications>

⁵⁷ Laurence Parisot, the current President of the MEDEF, comes from the service sector. Her election was greeted by an article in the newspaper *Le Point* entitled “MEDEF, the engineering industry no longer rules the roost”. <http://www.lepoint.fr/actualites-economie/2007-01-17/les-metallistes-ne-ont-plus-la-loi/916/0/18878>.

⁵⁸ Whilst mindful that the UIMM contributes 20% of the MEDEF's budgets, Parisot demanded that members of the UIMM who sat on bilateral bodies in the name of the MEDEF stand down. The general secretary of Renault, who represented the MEDEF on UNEDIC, was one of the first to stand down.

“l'intérêt general”.⁵⁹ The UIMM is actively engaged in societal debates around the future of work and social policy, both on its own account and through its influence within the MEDEF. In recent years, this intervention into social policy has seen the UIMM venture further away from the post-war model by promoting a break with France's “rigid” labour laws. In May 2011, the organisation announced its intention to draw up a “Manifesto for Industry” which would revolve around four key areas in need of reform: unemployment insurance, public employment services, the employment contract, and training. Measures proposed in the preparatory document included a reduction in the “generous” unemployment benefits of temporary workers and a proposal that employers should be free to adjust the working time of employees according to business cycles, with a corresponding adjustment of wages.⁶⁰

This direct intervention into policy areas is a response to the difficulties experienced by successive governments of the right in tackling head-on the protections accorded to labour in the twentieth century. The transformation of the CNPF into the MEDEF was an overtly political response to the failure of President Chirac and his Prime Minister Juppé to overhaul public sector pensions. The establishment of the MEDEF – a “movement” not a “confederation” – represented the attempt of the employers' organisation to galvanise employers around a political project of neo-liberal restructuring of labour-capital relations. In other words, they sought to succeed where the *Rassemblement pour la République* (RPR) (the predecessor of Sarkozy's *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* – UMP) had failed. The deeply-entrenched attachment within French society to a model of state-brokered social dialogue, employee representation at national and local levels and joint management of welfare, has both shaped and constrained the way in which employers' organisations have advanced their vision of twenty-first century French capitalism. The financial crisis of 2008 provided the UIMM with an opportunity to reaffirm its liberalising propositions in the context of the generalised insecurity of

⁵⁹ The documents of the UIMM make frequent reference to “l'intérêt générale”. During the 2012 presidential election campaign, the organisation countered Sarkozy's idea of a referendum on issues such as unemployment insurance, by reaffirming its commitment to social dialogue via general framework of social partnership as a “key factor of social cohesion”, whilst recommending changes to the conditions of representation of unions away from the outcome of elections to actual membership. See <http://www.usinenouvelle.com/article/l-uimm-met-en-debat-un-nouveau-pacte-social-dans-la-presidentielle.N168973>.

⁶⁰ See <http://www.lefigaro.fr/societes/2011/05/19/04015-20110519ARTFIG00680-chomage-salaires-les-idees-detonantes-de-la-metallurgie.php>.

manufacturing workers, who have been the most affected by crisis. These proposals would dramatically alter the employment relationship in favour of capital and, in turn, alter the factory regime that shapes the labour process by making the employment relationship more responsive to management priorities. Currently, it is the temporary agency contract that allows car manufacturers to overcome the “rigidity” of the standard employment relationship: a modern version of the labour segmentation of earlier decades, and one which has different advantages and functions for car manufacturers. The next section examines the nature of the labour process in French car plants and the forms of factory regime that emerged and evolved in the latter decades of the past century, creating the context for contemporary employment trends.

3. Varieties of factory regimes in French car plants

Amossée and Coutrot (2011) interpret Burawoy’s concept of “factory regime” as an institutional mechanism located between the labour process and the state, which establishes coherence between the nature of competition, the reproduction of labour power and the organisation of work. The term “coherence” masks the dissonance that is fundamental to the capitalist labour process, the expression of which varies according to national and temporal context. If coherence is defined by productivity growth with a corresponding distribution of wealth which in turn is the basis for further capital accumulation, then the factory regimes (broadly speaking) during the *Trente Glorieuses* can be characterised as “coherent”. However, economic growth under capitalism cannot be isolated from the fundamental antagonism that drives the management strategies to control labour, an antagonism that expresses itself in different forms and to different degrees, according to different contexts. The spread of Fordist production in the post-war decades did not entail a simple transposition of an American form of labour process to France, any more than lean production was a simple transposition of a so-called Japanese model of production⁶¹. The following section explores the nature of factory regimes in French car plants. The cultivation of labour segmentation in what is considered to be an iconic exemplar of

⁶¹ Japanisation refers to the idea that Japanese “best practice” can be conceptualised as a single model of production, referred to as Toyotism or lean production. Elger and Smith (1994) critique the idea that Japanese industry can be reduced to one model.

the hegemonic regime, is shown to be an important element in shaping the labour process in the car manufacturing.

3.1. Car manufacturing under Fordism: a weak hegemonic regime?

Classic theories of Fordism assume that workers trade acquiescence to the management goal of increased productivity in exchange for job security, increased wages, and an internal labour market based upon clearly defined grading structures and progression through seniority (Piore and Sabel, 1984; Jessop, 1994). Burawoy also considered this trade-off to be a key characteristic underpinning the hegemonic regime (Burawoy, 1985). It would, therefore, be expected that this would be a feature of labour relations in car plants in France, a country which is a model of a tripartite social compromise between labour, capital and the state. Yet, various ethnographies of life on the line for the French car worker reveal a factory regime characterised by low wages, high rates of absenteeism, high turnover rates, harsh management practices and few mechanisms available for progression (Linhart, 1974; Beaud and Pialoux, 1999; Durand and Hatzfeld, 2002). Bouquin (2006) argues that the distinctiveness of French Fordism lies in an industrial relations system that focuses union power at the national level at the expense of shop-floor bargaining power. Local unions took their cue from national federations, and prioritised general class-wide demands or demands which reflected class-wide concerns at a sectoral level. This was evident in 1968 when, despite militant factory occupations, the demands of car workers were those that united car workers nationally (reduction in the working week, an increase in the minimum wage and retirement at 60) with little attention to local shop floor issues, despite the militant occupations of factories. Some abstract slogans emerged reflecting local concerns; the slogan “time to live” at the Renault factories at Cléon and Flins captured the effects of a long working day which began and ended with an hour-long journey from rural areas to the factory and back. However, trade unions were less vocal around issues concerning the organisation of work (Almond, 2004, p. 11), in contrast to UK, German and Swedish counterparts (Bouquin, 2006).

Issues related to the organisation of work and job content were left to management.⁶² Instead, trade union power was concentrated at the national level, with trade unions granted an important role in overseeing the redistribution of wealth generated from higher productivity (Goetschy, 1998, p. 358). Grunberg (1986) observed a similar distinction between the UK and France in his comparative study of the Peugeot plants in Poissy (France) and Ryton (UK). At Poissy, management had virtually uncontested control over production unlike the Ryton plant where workers were able to impose far more on the labour process. Grunberg provides a further explanation for this disparity; At the Poissy plant there was a high proportion of immigrant workers; unable to access welfare benefits, they were dependent upon the plant for their material sustenance and therefore had less scope to challenge management.

The lack of voice at plant level that Bouquin (2006) describes was overcome to some degree by the events of 1968. A more confident working class felt more able to raise demands outside of the structures of national union federations. In the auto sector, numerous conflicts arose in the post-68 period, predominantly around grading structures that prevented the progression of the lowest skilled, the *ouvriers spécialisés* (OS), who made up the large proportion of the workforce. Skilled workers were classified in the category OP (*ouvrier professionnel*). Progression from OS to OP was hindered by a lack of recognition of the skills learnt on the job, so that those without the *Certificat d'aptitude professionnel* (CAP), a general skills certificate, found themselves stuck at OS level, regardless of their years of service. The pay inequality arising from the grading structure and the lack of mobility meant that it was common for workers to be carrying out similar work for significantly different wages. In contrast, the German and UK systems had a much more condensed hierarchical structure, which generated less wage disparity. In addition, the OS could only access the stability accorded by a monthly salary (*la mensualisation*)⁶³ after twenty-five years of service. Although rates of pay for the OP were low in comparison with, for example, car workers in Germany, the situation of the OS was

⁶² There were exceptions to this in the post 68-period in other sectors. Notably, the 1973 strike at the Lip watch factory in Besançon, which began as a struggle against closure and which culminated in an occupation of the factory and an attempt to impose workers self-management (*auto-gestion*).

⁶³ This had also been a demand during May 1968. In the early 1970s there were a series of agreements that accorded monthly salaries to blue collar workers who had previously been excluded from *mensualisation* which was limited to white collar staff (*employés*) and management (*cadres*).

considerably worse, given the lack of opportunity to progress. This is a version of labour segmentation within primary economic sectors that Reich et al. (1973) identified.⁶⁴ The division of labour, formalised by job stratification systems, generates different types of labour markets within the same company with different rules of entry for white collar workers and blue collar workers, and little movement between the two. Each segment operates according to its specific internal labour market (ILM). Segments are differentiated mainly by “stability characteristics” (Reich et al., 1973 p. 359) with one segment benefitting from job stability and career progression opportunities, and the other on unstable contracts, low wages and limited access to progression. In French car plants, labour segmentation was imposed by a hierarchical division between the OS and the OP which did not reflect the nature of skill acquisition on the shop floor.

3.2. Migrant labour and the struggles of the *ouvriers spécialisés*

This form of labour segmentation was reinforced by the high proportion of immigrant workers amongst the OS. Algerian workers recruited to Renault in the late 1940s and 1950s (when Algeria was still a French) were assigned to posts on the lowest levels of the grading⁶⁵ regardless of qualifications (Pitti, 2006). This resulted in an ethnic-based division of labour that prevailed for decades and enabled Renault to maintain a large low-wage labour force, subjected to intensive exploitation, and often lodged in insalubrious hostels and slum areas.⁶⁶ It was therefore possible to square the circle of low salaries/harsh work and sustained recruitment at a time when there were many other employment options available. Later, the presence of migrant labour allowed French manufacturers to postpone changes in the organisation of work aimed at

⁶⁴ Earlier theories of labour market segmentation viewed segmentation in terms of core and peripheral sectors, affected differentially by the degree of stability of product markets (Doeringer and Piore, 1971). Atkinson’s flexible firm, on the other hand, located segmentation at the firm level, according to skills and activities carried out by employees. The various models of segmentation are limited in their application due to the complex interaction between characteristics of employees and of organisations that influence organisational strategies.

⁶⁵ According to Pitti (2006), in workshops where they were mainly OS, Algerian workers were systematically recruited on the lowest levels. Where there were largely OPs the Algerian workforce were predominantly OS: “[Mahfoud C] joined Renault the 2nd November 1955, with a CAP de *fraiseur* and was nonetheless recruited on OS1, whilst comparable French workers were recruited as OP” (Pitti, 2006, p. 52).

⁶⁶ Some immigrant workers took part in rent strikes against their intolerable living conditions (see Hmed 2007).

“humanising” the factory, with one manager noting that it was cheaper to use migrant labour than it was to modernise the plants. At a time when manufacturers elsewhere – for example, in the UK and in Sweden – were experimenting with theories of job enrichment, French employers were entrenching Tayloristic discipline on car workers (Bouquin, 2006).

This division of labour between immigrant/French and OS/OP was, for a time, a major barrier to collective action. Skilled workers were not receptive to the demands of the OS to be upgraded to OP status since this was perceived to represent a downgrading of their status. The main union in the sector, the CGT, did little to overcome this division. In a classic example of the insider/outside divide, the CGT defended its core constituency, which was the predominantly white and OP. When, in the early 1970s, the OS engaged in struggles around their own demands, they were rejected as divisive. The CGT preferred to focus on demands that had the potential to unite the workforce (Bouquin, 2006, p. 85).⁶⁷

Reich et al. (1973) argue that labour segmentation functions to reproduce capitalist hegemony. By setting up a grading system based upon arbitrary divisions, and by drawing upon an immigrant workforce, manufacturers were able to undermine the collective organisation and power of labour that, in the context of a large, homogenised Taylorist factory has the potential to challenge this hegemony. Beside the advantage gained from the downward pressure on wages, this was an important mechanism of labour control. However, management strategies are open to contestation as labour learns and reacts to workplace and broader experience. The strikes that broke out in the aftermath of 1968 were born out of a period that had seen workers galvanised around slogans such as *travail égal, salaire égal*. Despite the barriers to collective action the OS were able to overcome national differences within their own ranks (Bouquin, 2006, p. 84) and execute effective strike action, illustrating that subordination to the labour process is open to challenge and resistance even though conditions for resistance are severely undermined by workplace practices and organisation.

⁶⁷ This does not mean that the CGT never fought for the rights of immigrant workers. In the 1950s, the CGT and other unions campaigned against the large disparities between Algerian and French workers in family-related benefits. The CGT also took up the cause of the *mains d'oeuvre* – who were an even lower grade to the OS – to be assimilated into the OS grades, although it maintained its opposition at this time for the OS to be assimilated into OP grades (Pitti, 2006).

An important contextual factor that contributed to the spread of strikes in the early 1980s was the presidential election of François Mitterrand in 1981, which created a sense of expectation and confidence throughout the working class. However, Mitterrand's turn away from many of his Keynesian-inspired electoral promises in the mid-1980s facilitated a process of job loss in the sector, by allowing manufacturers to employ a variety of institutional mechanisms to alleviate some of the costs associated with shedding labour. State support for restructuring was outlined in a 1984 government report that suggested that the sector cut 70,000 jobs (Dalle, 1984) in order to respond to the crisis of overproduction in the 1980s that was compromising the realisation of value through sales. The struggles of the OS also have to be set against the economic crisis that affected car manufacturing in the 1970s. The oil crisis led to a collapse in car sales in 1973 and 1974 (Loubet, 1974, p. 114). Manufacturers responded with a twin movement towards both concentration and international expansion which created the conditions for economies of scale and access to other markets.⁶⁸ At the same time, increased competition meant that manufacturers could not put off modernising production, at a time when changes to the classification system had raised the wages bill (Liepetz, 1985; Bouquin, 2006). The increasing cost of fixed capital led to a drive to increase productivity, a process reinforced by the crisis of overproduction that hit the sector in the 1980s and which generated a price war. At this point, increases in productivity were expected to be achieved mainly through the reduction of the workforce and technological advances, rather than the "Japanisation" of French car manufacturing, and the intensification of work (Durand, 2004)

The history of the OS in the French auto sector is a reminder that the subordination of labour in capitalist social relations is a tendential phenomenon, subject to the ebbs and flow of conflict within the labour process, influenced by events both internal and external to the factory. The relationship between capital and labour is antagonistic and dialectical; both sides are inexorably drawn to advancing their interests against the other. Both sides learn from the experience of conflict. In the case of French car manufacturers this learning process has at times been explicit. Pitti (2005) describes how Renault monitored different groups of workers to identify their

⁶⁸ Peugeot acquired Citroën in 1974 following its collapse (an acquisition encouraged by the French state); it then bought Chrysler Europe in 1978, making it the biggest European car manufacturer and the third biggest globally.

relative advantages and disadvantages for management priorities (Pitti, 2005).⁶⁹ Peugeot engaged in strategies to manage labour in addition to labour segmentation, relying on paternalistic forms of labour-capital relations and cultivating a system of company unionism that was more successful than in other companies. The company monitored its strategies, and reacted if they were found to have outgrown their usefulness. When Peugeot found that its policy of housing production workers together in subsidised (Peugeot-owned) tenements had the effect of strengthening the collective identity of their workers and resulting in labour conflict, the system was replaced with the provision of home loans (Hatzfeld, 2002).

The history of the OS also provides an indication of how the concept of factory regimes, which Burawoy developed according to dominant national models, needs to account for hybridised regimes at various levels. Workers in the same plant, carrying out similar work, can labour under different forms of regime – a forerunner to the segmentation that came with the turn to temporary agency work. Although temporary agency labour was present in car plants in the 1970s and 1980s, as replacement labour for absences which Grunelius (2003) describes as high in the sector, it was not until the 1990s that it became a structurally embedded form of employment differentiation.

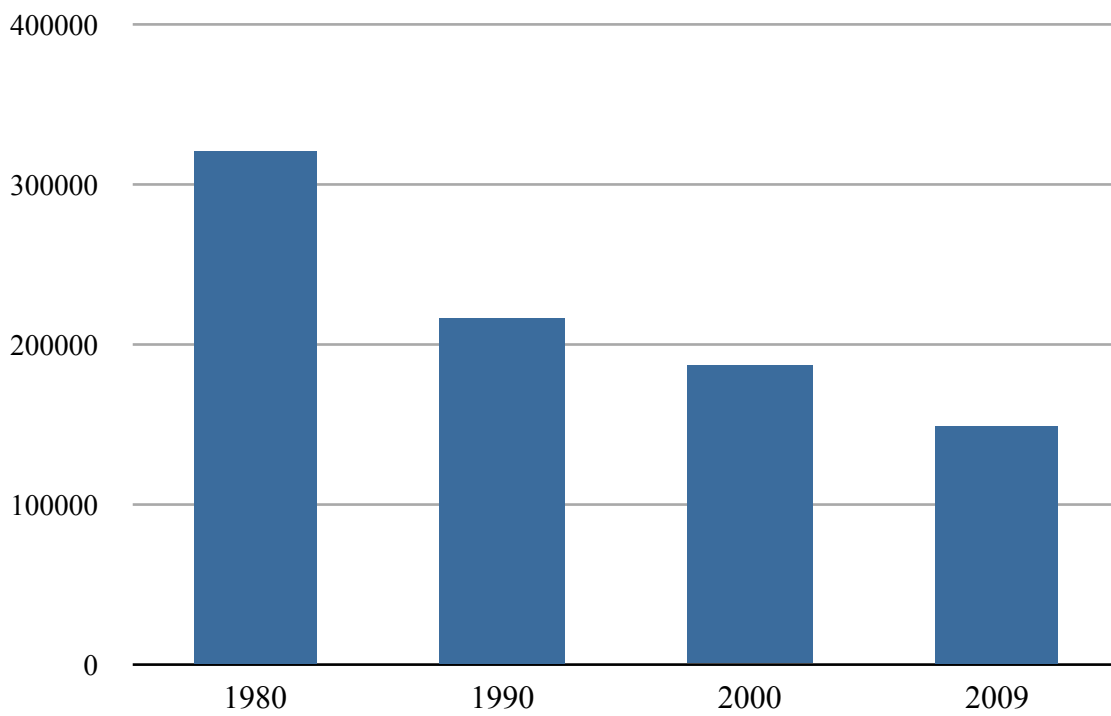
3.3. Embedding agency labour in auto manufacturing

The steady decline of core workers since the 1980s has seen direct employment in the sector decline from a peak of 350,000 in 1978 to less than 150,000 in 2010 (Figures 10 and 11). At the same time, parts of the sector, such as PSA, were beginning to turn to employment agencies in order to make up the shortfall in labour when the core workforce was not sufficient. The requirements of production in the sector corresponded to the discourse of the temporary work sector which throughout the 1990s developed services specifically for the auto manufacturers. Agency work has the added advantage that it can undercut resistance to change. Beaud and

⁶⁹ Renault's reports even detailed the tendency for some migrant workers to suffer from illnesses due to their inability to "adapt" to the climate. Hatzfeld's study of Peugeot uncovered similar classifications and associated stereotypes. The UIMM's report on "The problem of the OS" classified workers as "white" or "coloured" with the latter being less open to progression to a lack of qualifications, in contrast to studies that found that many of the immigrant workforce did in fact have qualifications over and above those demanded by their assigned positions. See Pitti (2005) and Hatzfeld (2002, p. 119).

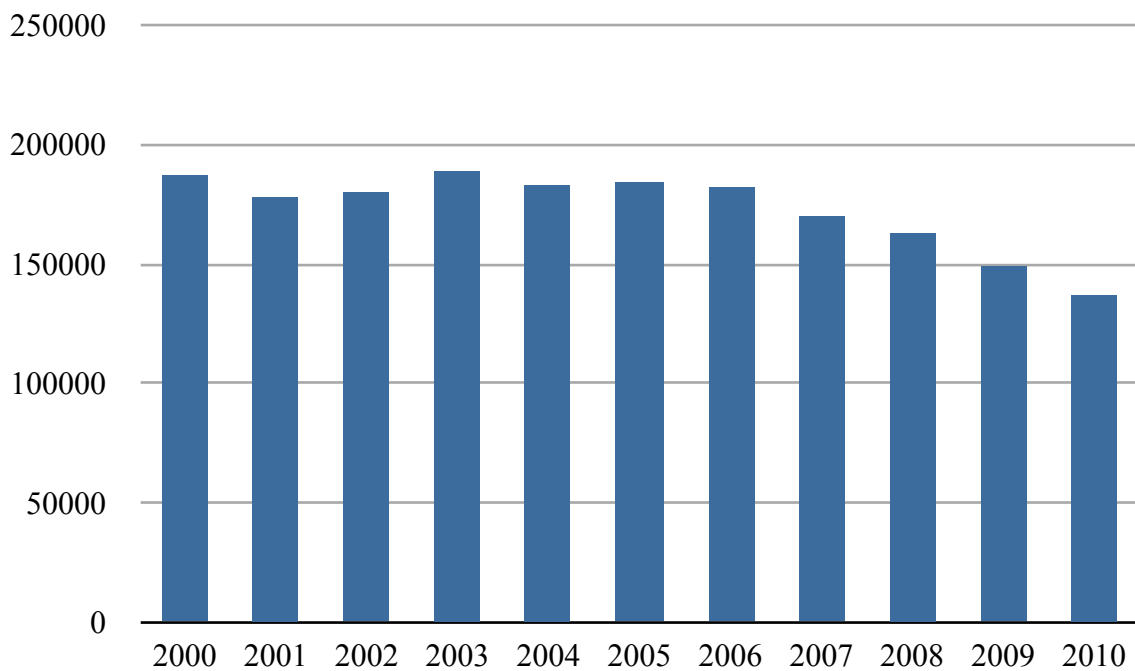
Pialoux's (1999) study explains Peugeot's large scale recruitment of young agency workers in the period 1987 to 1990 as a response to the resistance of older workers to organisational transformations (PSA was introducing its version of lean production via its *Plan Mercure* in the mid 1980s). The growth in agency labour at this time was significant, reaching 3,500 agency workers by July 1990. Peugeot led the way in the recruitment of agency workers amongst the big manufacturers, although by 2000 Renault had 4,500 agency workers (against Peugeot's 12,000), making auto-manufacturing the sector with the highest rate of agency workers as a proportion of the workforce (Eurofound, 2002).

Figure 10 Volume of auto manufacturing workforce 1980-2009



Source: CCFA Annual Reports

Figure 11 Volume of employment in auto manufacturing 2000-2010



Source: CCFA Annual Reports

From the manufacturers' point of view, agency labour is consistent with the contemporary management trends of just-in-time and lean production. If production is to be finely tuned to the cycles of product markets, then why not labour too? The temporary work sector recently highlighted a government study which found that in those sectors, such as the automobile industry, where production is organised around principles of just-in-time, agency work is a key mechanism for managing fluctuations in productive activity (PRISME, 2010). However, this approach to labour sourcing is problematic in the French context given the relative protection of workers on permanent contracts and the tight restrictions and protections which limit the use of agency labour. In the absence of a liberal legal framework governing agency labour, companies have engaged in practices that have permitted the presence of large numbers of agency workers, for long periods of time, despite the legislation. These practices have been reported both anecdotally and through legal challenges. They include altering job descriptions to get around the 18 month time limit, and interspersing agency contracts with fixed-term contracts. Agency contracts are preferable to fixed-term contracts due to the services of temporary work agencies, which reduce the risks associated with large scale flexible labour. The costs associated with agency labour (the indemnity for precarious work and agency fees) have been reduced by negotiating major contracts to supply agency labour on a large scale (Eurofound, 2002). Since the 1990s, negotiations with temporary work agencies eager to establish durable and substantial contracts have succeeded in pushing down the unit price of agency contracts (Belkacem, 2011). Contracts between large manufacturers and temporary work agencies are frequently negotiated at a national level (Glazmann, 2005), and implemented at a local level via the temporary work agencies that have opened up near plants (Pialoux and Beaud, 1999).

Therefore, despite the "end of the assignment bonus" and fees to the agency, the cost reductions associated with temporary agency work can be considerable. Although smaller companies that make up the third and second tier suppliers lack the bargaining power of the large manufacturers when negotiating with agencies, they compensate for this by paying agency workers a salary corresponding to coefficient 165, despite this grade being virtually non-existent for auto workers since the 1980s when most OS were placed on coefficient 175 (Bouquin, 2006, p. 157).

The increasing prevalence of agency work in the auto sector from the 1990s onwards indicates that researchers such as Gorgeu and Mathieu are correct in raising concerns about the structural position of agency labour within the overall employment policy of automobile companies. It is a significant development in a sector that has employed a variety of strategies to achieve the twin goals of wage limitation and labour control. A combination of factors has privileged agency work as a strategy: the presence of a strong temporary work sector responsive to the business requirements of its major clients; the lack of correspondence between employment legalisation and the business imperatives of a key economic sector exposed to a competitive global market; the lack of adequate control mechanisms to oversee the use of agency work in the sector by state or labour institutions – this is discussed further in the following chapters. The final part of this chapter examines the dissonance between the use of form of labour and societal expectations of employment in a sector associated with the post-war industrial norm of employment.

4. Temporary agency work in the auto sector: “winning hearts and minds”?

Degui and Kollmeyer (2007) argue that temporary work agencies engage in practices aimed at transforming attitudes in a national environment that is hostile to agency labour, so that attitudes are aligned with the “new culture of work”. The previous chapter examined the ways in which the temporary employment sector has attempted to “win hearts and minds” by promoting the positive role of agency work in mediating labour market interactions in a similarly hostile cultural context. Whilst agency work has become embedded within labour sourcing strategies, it is not evident that it is an accepted form of employment beyond the most enthusiastic proponents of agency labour. Attitudes to agency work may differ according to sectoral and occupational context, with the small proportion of skilled, professional agency workers establishing good relations with agencies and client organisations (Kornig, 2011). When agency work is largely viewed as a low cost replacement for permanent workers, attitudes may well continue to be negative. One of the gauges of attitudes to agency labour in the auto sector is the extensive coverage of the issue in the French print media. The national daily and local newspapers have followed developments since the 1990s. The coverage has, in large part, been negative coverage. As early as 1998 it was noted that temporary agency work was becoming “a structural component of the organisation of companies” in a sector that was simultaneously

reducing the number of workers employed on a permanent contracts.⁷⁰ Many articles in the 1990s referred to the “excessive” use of agency workers, reflecting societal expectations that agency work should be a marginal and limited form of employment. There are also references in the second half of the 1990s to the implications of agency work for job insecurity, and health and safety in the context of general coverage of issues related to employment and society (see Appendix 1).

The overall tone of newspaper coverage reflects the prevailing attachment of French society to the standard employment contract in the face of changing forms of employment and the claims of employers and temporary work agencies that flexibility is an indispensable tool for contemporary human resource management. The human cost of these practices in the auto sector is documented in the anecdotal evidence published by newspapers, in particular regional ones. The impact of the crisis on local labour markets was extensively covered in those regions heavily dependent on the car industry for employment. Newspaper interviews with agency workers revealed not only their present situation and fears for future employment but also their experience of work. Most had hoped to obtain a permanent position at some point in the future, despite long periods of successive agency contracts.⁷¹ The lack of choice open to agency workers and their dashed aspirations contrast with the discourse of employment agencies that promote agency work as corresponding to the changing employment preferences of workers, and as providing a bridge into permanent work for young people.⁷² The transformation in the employment experience for new generations of workers was expressed by one young agency worker who contrasted his experience with that of his father who had never had to use the services of an agency to access employment in the regions’ car plants. This exclusion of young workers with few qualifications from traditional pathways into employment and the extended duration of employment insecurity has been observed by researchers as a growing phenomenon in recent years (Durand, 2006, p. 30; Gorgeu and Mathieu, 2008).

⁷⁰ *Les Echos*, 20th November, 1998; *La Tribune*, 9th December, 1998; *Les Echos*, 30th December, 1998.

⁷¹ *Ouest France*, 13th November, 2008.

⁷² *Libération*, 7th April, 2006.

5. Conclusion

Gorgeu and Mathieu (1995) and Pialoux (1998) show how the large car manufacturers have employed a variety of strategies aimed at reducing labour costs. In the 1960s, the arbitrary maintenance of the OS as a low-wage section of the workforce was one such strategy, which had the additional effect of thwarting shop-floor unity. The capacity of labour to overcome the barriers of labour market segmentation and force changes to their working conditions led manufacturers to elaborate new strategies. The reduction in the workforce that accompanied lean production and the intensification of work, whilst reducing unit labour costs, generated labour conflict. In addition, the sector found itself under-resourced at times of peak production. The inability to easily dismiss workers and the costs associated with redundancies makes agency labour an attractive option. The presence of a “super-exploited” section of the labour force, which from a Marxist perspective is labour exploited beyond the “normal” standards of exploitation in any given society, retains a continuity with past forms of labour segmentation (Bouquin, 2006, p. 156) and has advantages for capital beyond the reduction of labour costs.

This chapter does raise a further issue. How is that car manufacturers have been able to comprehensively undermine the legislative framework governing agency work? This question is addressed in the final chapters of this thesis by bringing together the macro-level contextual/historical data that have been examined in this chapter and the previous chapter, with the meso and micro-level data presented in the following chapter. Paradoxically, agency work began to be embedded in the sector in the years following the Socialist government’s strengthening of plant-based unions through the Auroux Law of 1982, which might have had the potential to strengthen labour’s capacity to resist flexibilisation. The Socialist government also reinforced statutory dismissal protection in the 1990s⁷³, when agency labour was becoming embedded in the HR strategy of auto manufacturers. This liberalisation at the margins (Clasen and Clasen, 2003), occurring in the context of legal enhancements of the core, appears to be a trade-off between labour and capital, at the expense of a growing periphery of younger generations of workers. The current crisis has seen the negotiation of alternatives to redundancies (e.g. wage

⁷³ Labour Minister, Martine Aubrey overturned Chirac’s 1986 weakening of employment law, stipulating that employers have to put in place comprehensive social plans which favour redeployment and training.

and working time reductions) in order to limit the impact on permanent workers, a compromise that has excluded those on agency contracts.

Labour market “duality” (OECD, 2011) has allowed the French political and financial establishment a “get out clause” that limits the effects of its inability to successfully confront the protections accorded to the *Contrat du Durée Indeterminée*, due to the continued attachment to the post-war compromise as witnessed by the militant action taken by students and unions against the *Contrat de Première Embauche* (CPE) in 2006. However, the ability of the French labour movement to resist threats to the standard employment relationship has been undermined by the growth of agency labour, which may weaken the response of the labour movement to future attempts to modify the employment relationship, most notably the plans for a *contrat unique*, which will institutionalise flexibility for all employment contracts. The OECD has identified labour market “dualism” as a problem for France since it shifts the risks of economic shocks to “non-integrated workers”, as recent developments in the auto sector have confirmed. The proposed solution to this inequity is to better align the rights of permanent workers with those of temporary workers by simplifying redundancy laws whilst improving access to training during periods of joblessness (OECD 2011, p. 106).

Increasing job insecurity, the reduction of wages and the wider context of plant closures that are a consequent of the period opened up in 2008, indicate a deepening of features associated with hegemonic despotism (Hyman, 1987, p. 51). The current situation in the French car sector has confirmed the prescience of Burawoy’s 1985 characterisation of the new regime of hegemonic despotism. More than ever, workers in car plants have been confronted with the need to grant further concessions to capital to ensure the survival of their plants, concessions that not only concern their own working conditions, but also the fate of large numbers of agency workers. Nevertheless, such concessions are no guarantee of long-term job security; the buffering function of temporary agency work is increasingly a delusion, as the recent announcement to close a number of Peugeot plants demonstrates. Trade unions, therefore, are confronted with their failure to respond effectively to the increase in temporary agency work. Despite a number of successful challenges in the courts, manufacturers have continued to maintain high

proportions of agency workers. The consequences of this for agency workers (and permanent workers) are examined more closely in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7

EXPERIENCES OF LIFE ON THE LINE AS AN AGENCY WORKER

1. Introduction

This chapter examines how the status of the agency worker affects the experience of the labour process in car plants. The chapter first sets out the socio-economic and labour market context of the PSA Peugeot-Citroën plant in Aulnay-sous-Bois before presenting interview data from union reps and agency workers at the plant, and from union reps, officials and agency workers external to the plant. The interview data presented in this chapter is not only from the Aulnay plant. Interviews with agency workers at Toyota and union representatives from other plants are also included. These interviews provide an additional source of data from which to examine and analyse the experience and perceptions of agency work in car plants generally, and, in some instances, prove to be central to the analysis. The presentation of the Aulnay plant provides an anchor to the research by setting out a contextualised case of a car plant with a specific historical and socio-economic location.

2. PSA Peugeot-Citroën in Aulnay-sous-Bois

The Aulnay plant of PSA Peugeot-Citroën is located in the town of Aulnay-sous-Bois in the department of Seine-Saint-Denis, 20 km north of Paris. The plant is the biggest employer in the department, drawing in workers from the surrounding areas, including Paris. Seine-Saint-Denis is the most deprived department of the Ile-de-France region, whilst Aulnay-sous-Bois is one of the most deprived local areas or *communes* within Seine-Saint-Denis. The unemployment rate for the department is higher than both the Ile-de-France region and France as a whole⁷⁴. The 2010 unemployment figures were 11.3%, 8.2% and 9.4% respectively.⁷⁵ Youth unemployment (15-24 year olds), at 27.7% is higher than the national average (22%).⁷⁶ The gender composition of the local labour market differs significantly from that of France in that men account for a

⁷⁴ All statistical data for France relates to “metropolitan” France and excludes overseas territories.

⁷⁵ INSEE, localised unemployment rate. See http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/document.asp?reg_id=20&ref_id=17539

⁷⁶ Ibid.

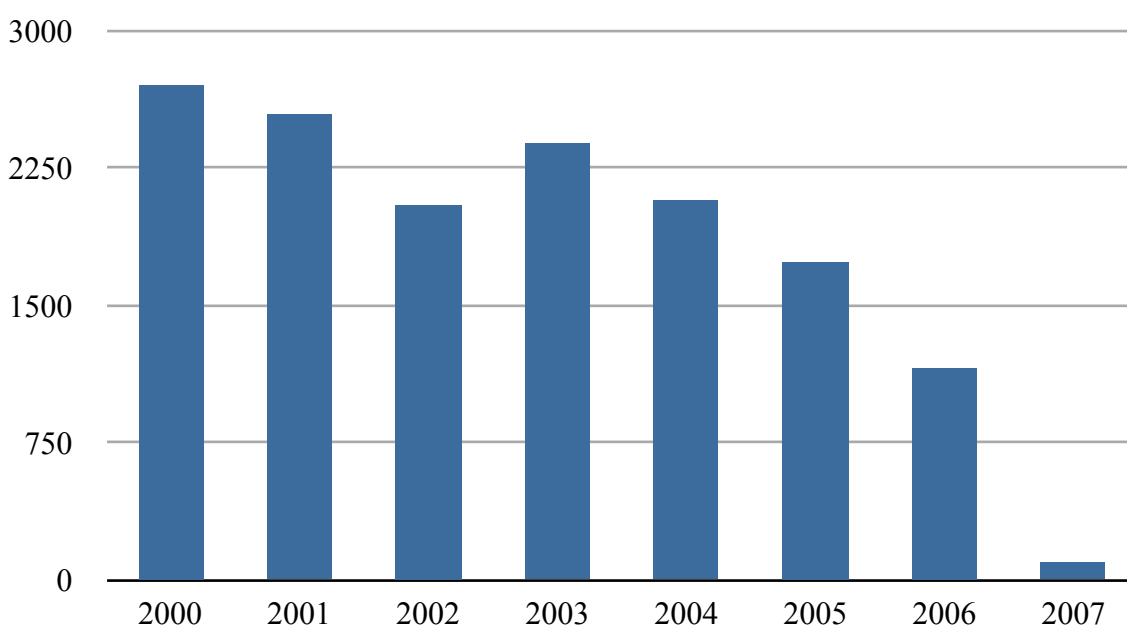
larger proportion of employees (69%, compared with 53% nationally), reflecting the weight of North African immigrants in the demographic make-up of the department, since women in this demographic group have lower rates of employment (Machado et al.). The youth labour market is characterised by a high proportion of young people leaving school without any qualifications (30% compared with 20% for the Ile-de-France) and a higher proportion of young workers classified as blue-collar workers (*ouvriers*) than other departments in the region (Pottier and Hamet, 2011). As a result, youth in Seine-Saint-Denis experience significant difficulties in school-to-work transitions. Temporary agency work is an important entry point to employment for many young people; Seine-Saint-Denis has a higher incidence of agency work than other parts of the Ile-de-France (Pottier and Hamet, 2011).

Aulnay-sous-Bois is one of the larger communes within Seine-Saint-Denis with a population of 83,000 (only Montreuil and Saint-Denis are larger). In terms of demographic and labour statistics, Aulnay-sous-Bois can be said to be a microcosm of Seine-Saint-Denis. It is classified as a ZUS – *Zone Urbaine Sensible* (Sensitive Urban Zone). These are areas that exhibit a number of indicators of social deprivation such as high unemployment and a high proportion of social housing. The Ile-de-France has a higher proportion of residents living in ZUS than for France as a whole (11% compared with 6.8%). Seine-Saint-Denis is the department with the highest proportion of residents living in ZUS (20.5%), including Aulnay-sous-Bois, which is classified as one of the of the most challenging ZUS in terms of the combination of indicators.

The auto sector is an important source of employment in Seine-Saint-Denis. The Ile-de-France has maintained its status as a major automobile region due to the presence of PSA and Renault and associated sub-contractors. The most recent data (2009) put the number of employees in the region in the auto sector at 51,500. Although this is down from 56,100 in 2006, the sector continues to be an important source of employment. The bulk of job losses have occurred in production posts, whilst employment in research and development has grown (Machado et al., 2011). Figure 12 shows the recruitment trends for PSA in the Ile-de-France between 2000 and 2007. At the beginning of the decade PSA was recruiting over 2,500 employees onto permanent contracts. This began to fall to below 2,000 recruits in the second half of the decade falling

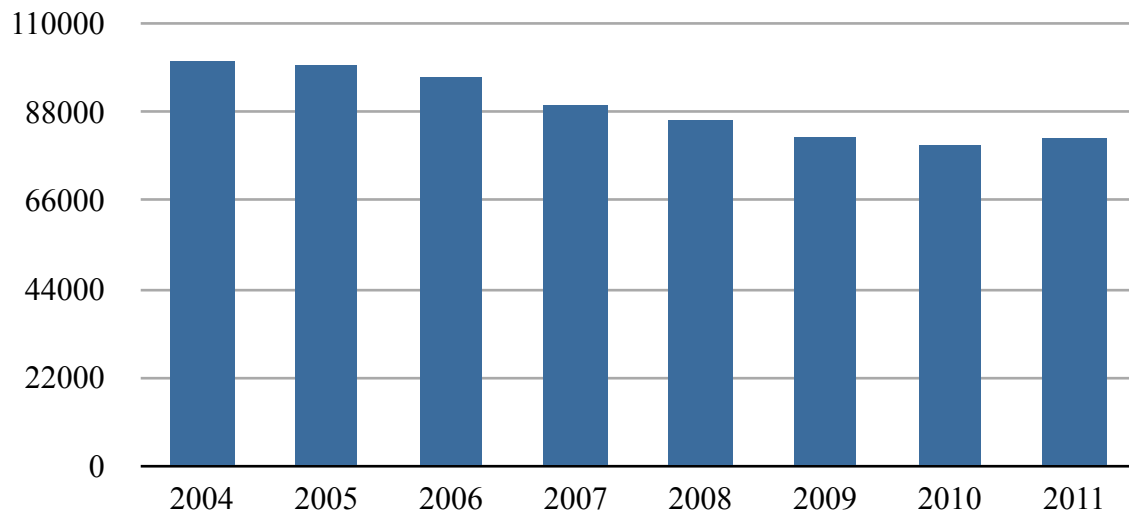
dramatically to just over 100 in 2007. Taken as a whole, total employment at PSA (directly employed staff in the whole of France) fell from just over 100,000 in 2004 to around 84,000 in 2010, a fall of 16% (Figure 13). Production workers make up most of the job decline at PSA. Production workers declined by nearly 20% between 2005 and 2010 whilst other occupational categories declined far less dramatically (Figure 14). Between 2006 and 2010 operators represented only a small proportion of all recruitment (Figures 15 and 16). The large proportion of operators recruited in 2011 was a consequence of the government bail-out. Rates of agency labour (Figure 17) have also been in overall decline since the peak at the start of the decade (which led to a union campaign against the “abuse” of agency labour - see previous chapter). However, agency labour has continued to make up a significant proportion of the workforce in relation to production line employees (where agency labour is concentrated). Between 2006 and 2008 the number of agency workers stood at 8%-11% of directly employed production workers. To these figures can be added the *contrats pros* which increased significantly after 2009 (Figure 18). The numbers of temporary agency workers at the Aulnay plant (Figure 19) have been estimated from various sources. Whilst there has been a decline in agency labour at Aulnay since the very large presence of agency workers in 2000 (1,800), the number of agency workers was regularly over 500 until 2012.

Figure 12 PSA recruitment (permanent contracts) Ile-de-France



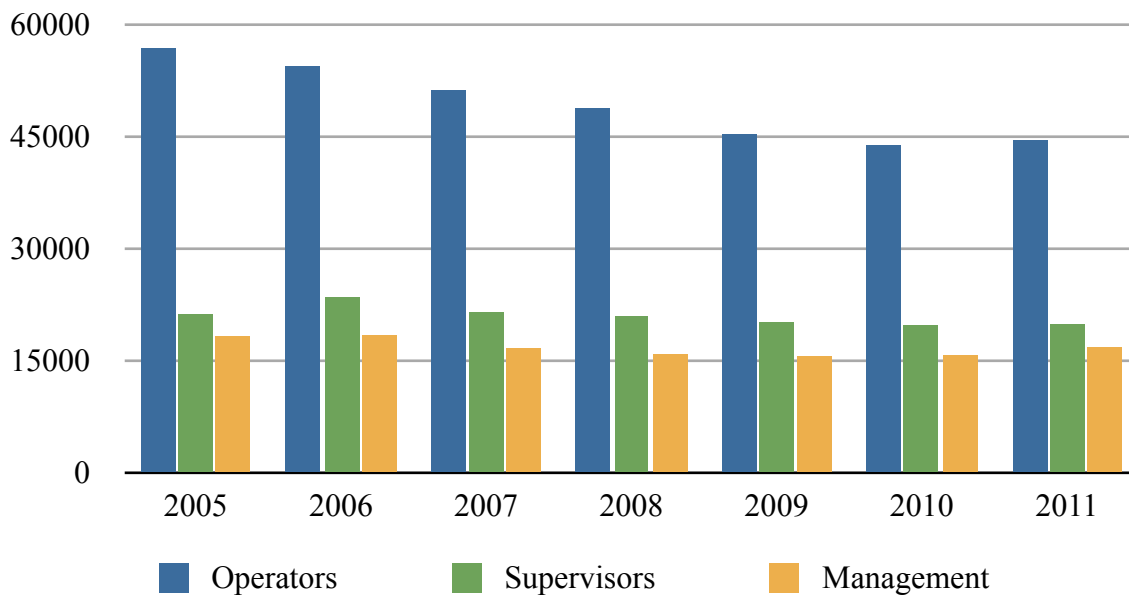
Source: PSA Annual Reports

Figure 13 Total employment PSA 2004-2011



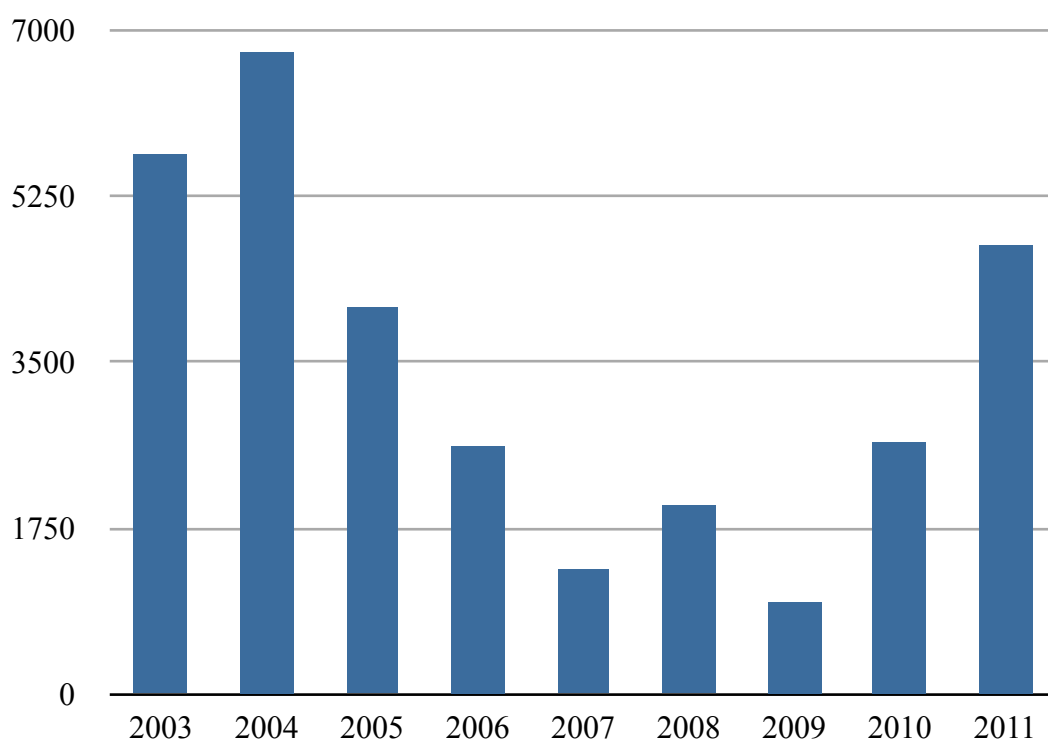
Source: PSA Annual Reports

Figure 14 Occupational breakdown of PSA employees 2005-2011



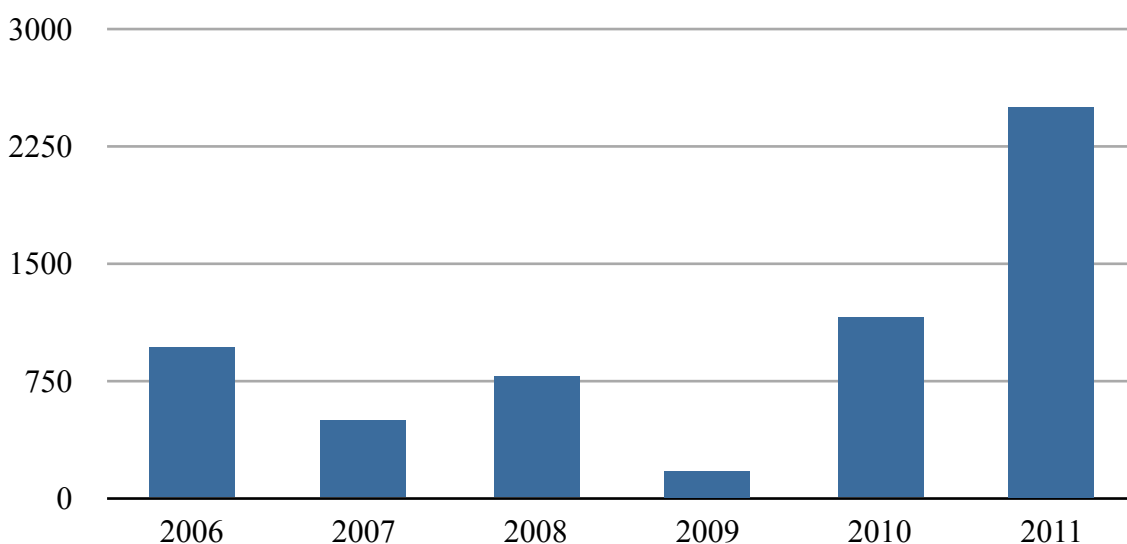
Source: PSA Annual Reports

Figure 15. PSA recruitment (permanent contracts) 2003-2011



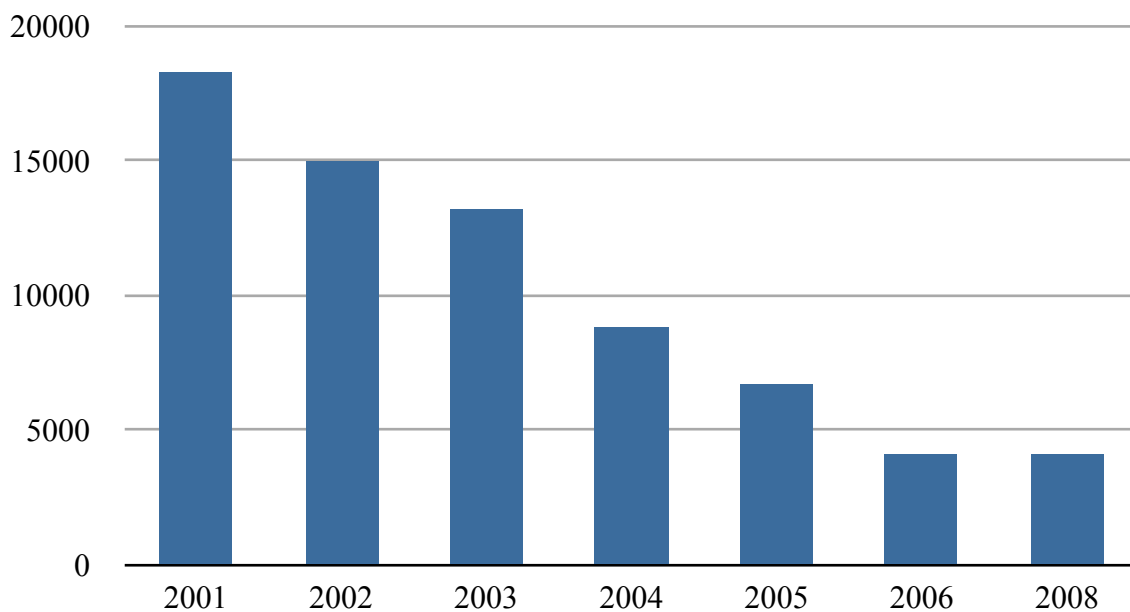
Source: PSA Annual ReportsSource: PSA Annual Reports

Figure 16. PSA recruitment (permanent contracts) of operators 2003-2011



Source: PSA Annual Reports

Figure 17. Number of Temporary Agency Workers at PSA 2001-2008

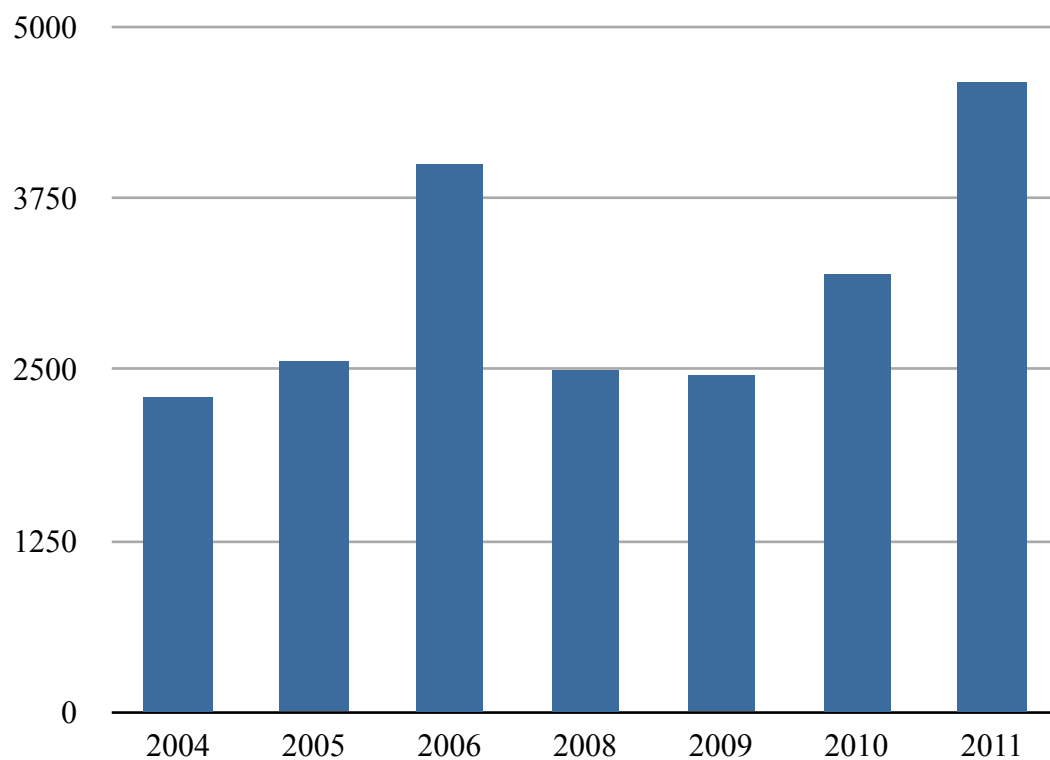


Note: 2010 and 2011 reflect hiring as a condition of bailout funds

NOTE: These figures are from PSA annual reports. Figures for agency labour no longer appear in PSA reports after 2008 (date for 2007 is also not available).

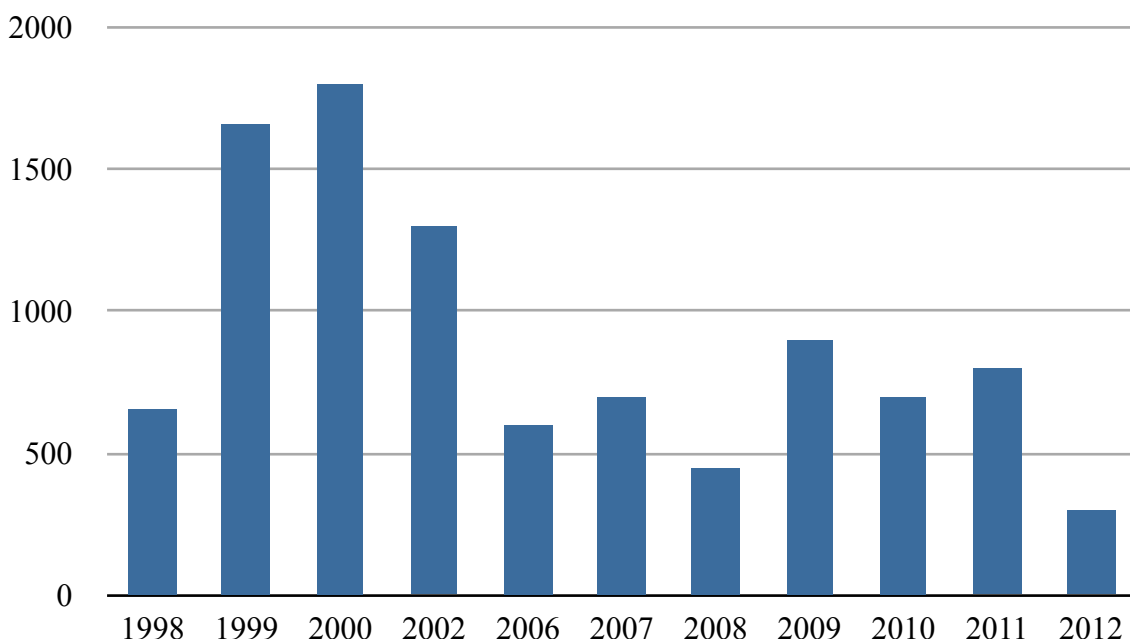
*average monthly numbers

Figure 18. Number of Contrat de professionalisation at PSA 2004-2011



Source: PSA Annual Reports

Figure 19 Estimations of numbers of agency worker at Aulnay plant



Source: These figures have been compiled from union and media sources. They do not reflect monthly variation. See Appendix 2.

At the beginning of 2012, 40% of scheduled job losses in the Ile-de-France were in auto-manufacturing (INSEE, 2012 data). Seine-Saint-Denis, and, in particular, Aulnay-sous-Bois, have been identified as areas that are exposed to the risk of economic stress due to the weight of one economic sector (the auto sector) in employment, and due to the high proportion of blue-collar workers. In Seine-Saint-Denis, 13% of manufacturing employment is in the auto sector, accounting for 4,700 jobs in 2009, the majority being in the Aulnay plant.⁷⁷ The 2008 crisis led to a big increase in the number of young people seeking employment, particularly amongst young low-skilled men. A similar trend was observable during the 2001/2002 crisis, which hit the auto sector hard. In July 2012, PSA confirmed that the Aulnay plant would close in 2014 as part of a restructuring process that will see the loss of over 6,000 jobs in France. Some sources estimate that over 13,000 jobs are threatened by the closure of Aulnay – 3,500 directly and a further 10,000 jobs that are said to depend upon the Aulnay plant.⁷⁸ The importance of the site

⁷⁷ See http://industrie-iledefrance.org/uploads/_industrie_iledefrance/fiches/cc_maquette_bois_2011.pdf

⁷⁸ This figure was quoted by the mayor of Seine-Saint-Denis in the local Aulnay magazine, *Oxygène*, no. 148, February, 2012, p. 3.

to the local community was illustrated when 2,000 marched to save the plant, filling up the main square of Aulnay-sous-Bois, a sight not seen since France won the world cup in 1998 (Oxygène, 2012).

2.1. The plant

The plant is situated on a vast terrain at the intersection of three motorways. Comprising three workshops – body assembly, painting and final assembly – it has a production capacity of 1800 cars a day. The workforce has been nearly halved over the past decade. In 2002, there were 6,900 workers, including 1,500 agency workers. Since 2010, Aulnay has faced a series of restructurations which have progressively reduced the number of agency workers. Alongside a plan of incentives to encourage voluntary severance, management closed down the night shift, ending the contracts of 500 agency workers. According to the latest (2012) figures⁷⁹ for the site, 3,300 workers are left, of whom 300 are agency workers. At the same time, management maintained obligatory Saturday working, which it had introduced in 2009. The average monthly salary of a production worker is €1,250 Euros net. Agency workers take home around between €1,000 and €1,100, a wage that is not much higher than the poverty line rate of €945.

The plant is surrounded by sub-contractors whose workflow and organisation is tied to the rhythm of the Aulnay plant. Some of these are subsidiaries of PSA. Trigo, a company that verifies the controls on cars and which is located within the plant, is a typical example of trends in the sector. Once part of PSA, it was set up in 1997 by an ex -PSA *cadre* (professional/manager), thereby transferring 1,000 PSA employees to a new employer.

Access to the plant is by car or by one of the many coaches supplied by PSA to collect workers at various points in the surrounding areas. Whilst most workers live in the suburbs, a small number of coaches bring in the minority of workers who live in Paris. The opportunity to take the coach from Paris to Aulnay provided a small but significant insight into the labour force at Aulnay. The coach for the day shift leaves Nation in the east of Paris at 13:35pm picking up workers who will not return until 10 o'clock in the evening. Apart from a relatively older profile

⁷⁹ This figure is quoted regularly in the numerous reports on the closure of the Aulnay plant.

– the average age at the plant is 35 – the workers on the coach reflected the demography of the plant, mainly North African males but also men of sub-Saharan African origin, with some workers of other ethnic origins (the plant has recently recruited new migrants from countries such as China and India) and a handful of women. The coach was a “luxury” coach with a driver in a smart uniform, in contrast to the workers; a sign forbids eating and drinking on the coach. The most surprising aspect of the journey to the Aulnay plant was the lack of conversation amongst these workers on their way to begin their working day. Apart from the odd brief conversation, the coach was silent. Some of the workers slept, others stared out of the window. The impression was of a workforce drained of any enthusiasm or energy as they began their working day.

Once at the plant, the change of shift was impressive. Hundreds of workers passed through the gates to take up the posts of those on the morning shift. For a brief period, the area outside of the gates came alive, as those who were coming off their shift exchanged information with union reps, caught up with colleagues who had been moved to other workshops, or even bought a copy of the Trotskyist weekly *Lutte Ouvrière* being sold by workers at the plant and by young members of the *Lutte Ouvrière* group being initiated into the world of the industrial working class. The younger workers were well dressed (smart casual), in contrast to the typical “look” of a traditional French worker, and in contrast to the older workers.

The morning shift begins at 06:46 and ends at 14:37 at which time the next shift begins, in order to ensure that the line keeps moving. Before the night shift was abandoned, it too began when the previous shift ended, at 22:28 finishing at 06:09. The union representatives who I interviewed described a strict regime of time-keeping at the plant. As set out in the collective agreement negotiated by the union and the metal industry employers’ organisation, the UIMM, workers on the line have two ten minute breaks, and a lunch break of 35 minutes (for some the walk to the canteen takes ten minutes, followed by long queues), with extra breaks limited to one per day. Union pressure was required to ensure that pregnant women were allowed to take more breaks (this is a legal right). Any lateness is noted and is docked from pay as appropriate, sometimes for as little as one minute.

2.2. Labour relations at Aulnay

The plant, like other plants in the PSA group, has a history of conflictual labour management that has sought to marginalise oppositional unions. This was achieved in the past by cultivating company unionism amongst the skilled and, especially, supervisory layer of workers who were pitted against the mainly migrant *ouvriers spécialisés* (OS). The OS were subjected to a harsh, largely despotic regime, and were unable to join their union of choice. The militant OS strike of 1982 temporarily broke the hold of the *Confédération syndicale libre* (precursor to the *Syndicat Indépendent de l'automobile* – SIA) within the plant, by successfully winning the right to organise freely in the plant as members of the CGT union. However, a series of lay-offs two years later returned the CSL to its dominant position. Aulnay, therefore, is still marked by the legacy of company unionism – despite an espoused change to a more consensual, social partnership model of labour relations in the late 1990s throughout the PSA group. Although there are active CGT and SUD branches at the site, SIA manages to attract the most votes in workplace elections. In the January 2011 elections, SIA won five of eleven seats on the workplace committee (*Comité d'établissement*) with 40.38% of votes. The CGT came second with three seats (28.22%), followed by the FO, SUD and CFE/CGT with one seat apiece. Similarly, in the elections for the workplace delegates (*Délégués du Personnel*), SIA got 11 seats, the CGT 8, FO and SUD 3, and the CFDT and CFE/CGC 1 (Tables 2 and 3). Whilst this represents a slight decline in SIA support from previous years (in favour of CGT, FO and SUD), SIA continues to retain significant support amongst workers at the plant.

Nonetheless, a number of small scale conflicts have broken out in recent years, including a wildcat strike in 2005 for the maintenance of salaries when management temporarily ceased production by imposing *chômage partiel*. It was this strike that led to the presence of SUD at the plant. In 2006, a hundred or so agency workers went on strike to demand that they, too, receive payment of days of “partial unemployment”. This was a successful strike that was resolved by the management of the plant transferring responsibility to the temporary employment agencies. The payment of the non-worked days by the agencies (following negotiation with the PSA management) was described as a “pyrrhic victory” in an article in the business magazine *L'Usine Nouvelle*, since the agency workers involved would no longer be

working for PSA.⁸⁰ Some agency workers also took part in an unsuccessful minority strike in 2007 when 500 workers, organised by the CGT and SUD, demanded a wage increase of €300 and the reclassification of the 700 agency contracts (out of a workforce of 4,500) into permanent contracts.

Despite this episode of unity between the CGT and SUD, relations between the unions at the plant are not good, reflecting divisions in French unions nationally, but also plant -specific dynamics (see Chapter 4), with the SUD representative displaying a vehement attitude to the CGT representatives. However, the threat over the future of the plant has led to the creation of a joint union body (*intersyndicale*), made up of all the unions – including SIA which, as the majority union, has found itself compelled to fight the closure.⁸¹

⁸⁰ “*De plus en plus d’ouvriers touchés par la pauvreté*”, L’Usine Nouvelle, 14th December, 2006.

⁸¹ Nevertheless, SIA’s seems to be maintaining its role as “company union” according to an account of the intersyndicale meeting that was held at the plant the day management announced the closure. The main SIA representative at the plant urged workers not to disrupt production or do anything that might make things even more difficult for PSA.

See http://www.rue89.com/rue89-eco/2012/07/18/psa-aulnay-les-collegues-craquent-retardement-tous-les-jours-les-pompiers?sort_by=thread&sort_order=ASC&items_per_page=50&page=2

Table 2 Works Council (Comité d'établissement) Elections 2007 and 2011

Union	2007		2011	
	%	Seats	%	Seats
SIA	44.10	6	40.38	5
CGT	27.21	4	28.22	3
CFDT	5.92	-	4.9	-
FO	7.71	-	12.02	1
CFTC	3.57	-	4.25	1
SUD	6.28	1	10.23	1
CFE/CGC	5.21	1	-	-

Source: GSEA

Table 3 Worker Representatives (Délégués de Personnel) 2007 and 2011

Union	2007		2011	
	%	Seats	%	Seats
SIA	40.63	15	37.77	11
CGT	27.80	10	29.39	8
CFDT	6.53	2	4.93	1
FO	8.22	2	12.55	3
CFTC	3.96	1	0	0
SUD	6.9	2	9.9	3
CFE/CGC	5.96	1	5.47	1

Source: GSEA

3. Union perceptions of temporary agency work in car plants

This first part of the interview data sets out how union activists and officials view the changing composition of the workforce in the auto sector and the position of agency labour within human resources strategies to manage the labour force.

The interview data from the union representatives and officials reflected the approaches and concerns of their respective national unions. The SUD and CGT interviewees expressed a strong opposition to agency labour in principle, and were vocal on the negative effects of agency labour on working conditions. The CFDT official had a more nuanced position. The CFDT frequently cloaks its demands in references to the “shared goals” of management and workers. A leaflet from 2008 raising the demand for extra break time at PSA began with the following:

The PDG of PSA wants to make the company the most competitive in Europe in 2015. The CFDT shares this goal but the PSA system of production must not be implemented to the detriment of employment and conditions of work.⁸²

The CFDT official spent some time explaining to me how he thought that companies were realising that temporary agency work brought more costs than advantages to manufacturing. As the discussion in Chapter 6 suggests, the CFDT’s focus on the *coûts cachés* (Savall and Zardet, 2003, cited in Larbi, 2008) of agency work expresses the union’s strategy of negotiation and influence in contrast to the CGT and SUD’s more combative stance. It is also a position that was espoused by Toyota for a very brief period following the opening of the Valenciennes factory, when the company CEO announced: “[I]f we want to make a car that is a good quality car and a cheap car, it’s not with agency workers that we will be able to achieve this”.⁸³ As Eddie described, such sentiments were short-lived; two years later 17% of the plants’ workers were on agency contracts.⁸⁴

⁸² Leaflet of the Fédération Générale des Mines et de la Métallurgie-CFDT (CFDT metal workers federation), dated 30th May 2008, PSA: La CFDT demande un repos hebdomadaire pour les salariés confrontés au nouveau système de production.

⁸³ Libération, Toyota: counter-inquiry on a social model
<http://www.liberation.fr/evenement/0101496832-toyota-contre-enquete-sur-un-modele-social>

⁸⁴ Ibid.

3.1. Temporary agency work as embedded flexibility

When asked about views on the evolution and trends of agency workers in the car sector, union representatives and officials identified profound changes in recruitment practices and workforce management. Their interpretation of changes and the increasing use of agency labour corresponds to trends and explanations already identified in the literature. The consensus is that agency labour is increasingly a structurally embedded form of labour, without which car plants would not be able to function. Whilst precarious employment is seen as increasing in general, for the automobile sector agency work is a “real boon” (Victor, CGT representative, PSA Mulhouse). Union interviewees interpreted the constant and large presence of agency work as an integral part of a system of production premised on the concept of lean, in the context of an uncertain market that relies upon excluding a significant proportion of the workforce from employment norms, with the aim of creating a pool of easily disposable workers. These disposable agency workers function as a key variable adjustment (*variable d’ajustement absolu*) for employers who were shedding permanent jobs while engaging in a parallel process of increasing their dependency on precarious employment:

I came here in 1981 and there were very few agency workers. Then there were the mass lay-offs in 1984. There were 7,000 workers.....they sacked 2,000.....in total there was a reduction in the workforce of 2,000. We went from 7,000 to 5,000. And a year later they began to put agency workers in their place, not straight away, but after two years we had 500, 600 agency workers, and then more. We had as many as 2,000 agency workers.

(Pierre, CGT rep, PSA Aulnay)

The use of agency work at PSA was described as being on an “industrial” scale. In the Aulnay plant, it was not unusual to have workshops where half of the workforce was agency labour. At the Mulhouse plant, Victor described his workshop, where only 6 workers out of 40 had permanent contracts – the remainder being either standard agency workers or agency workers taken on as *contrats pros*. Victor found the numbers of agency workers at his plant (2,700) incomprehensible:

It's a huge amount, the equivalent of a medium sized company, like some subcontractors who have 1,500 people. That means we could have two factories with the number of agency workers there are at Peugeot.

(Victor, CGT rep, PSA, Mulhouse)

In a sector characterised by volatility, the advantages of temporary agency work are evident in the context of a labour regulatory regime that presents barriers to shedding workers. An additional advantage is the invisibility of agency workers when their contracts come to an end:

Instead of it making the front page like when they sack 200 people at Peugeot, with a social plan, etc, redundancy pay and all that, which also means that everyone can enter into a struggle to save jobs, instead they can sack without have to tick these boxes, to bypass the unions, redundancy pay.....

(Victor, CGT rep, PSA Mulhouse)

The disposable nature of the workforce that this quote highlights is further illuminated by the use of the term “stock” by the SUD official when referring to agency labour. He was unapologetic about the use of the term, since it reflected the way management views agency labour as merely another factor of production, devoid of the human element:

And yes I do mean “stock”, in general we talk of stock when referring to commodities but now we talk of stock when referring to human beings.

He continued by contrasting the treatment of agency workers, viewed as any other input into production, with the way in which the protection accorded by the standard employment relationship obliged employers to treat their workers better. This interpretation of changing forms of employment relations encapsulates the decommodification thesis and the return to a more commodified form of labour.

3.2. Workplace outcomes and embedded flexibility

Whilst agency labour was viewed primarily as a tool allowing manufacturers to better match the workforce to production requirements, other advantages for manufacturers were identified. Again, views of how manufacturers benefit from agency labour correspond to the literature. Manufacturers are able to filter the temporary workforce in order to limit the risk of taking on the “wrong” kind of permanent employee. Agency workers can be evaluated over a long period of time to ensure they meet their organisational requirements, with recruitment to the assembly line at Aulnay being exclusively from the pool of agency labour. Those unable to keep up with the speed of the line or those who display the wrong attitude can be excluded both from future agency contracts or permanent employment. Thus, the traditional function of agency work as a mechanism for selecting permanent workers continues to operate, although now it appears that this has been extended to the selection of long-term agency workers. The SUD official referred to this as an extended “trial period” which could last for two or three years, during which time agency workers would be on their best behaviour in the hope of getting a permanent post. The consensus was, unsurprisingly, that car manufacturers benefit from a more “malleable” workforce on the shopfloor, whilst collective action is undermined by the division of the workforce. This has a generalised negative effect on workers’ conditions and negotiating power.

In addition, agency workers provide manufacturers with a constant pool of physically fit young workers, an advantage in a production process which, under conditions of lean production and intensification, can quickly lead to significant occupational health problems. Hamil, the SUD rep from the Aulnay plant, stressed how repetitive tasks at high speeds over a long period of time takes their toll on workers who after a couple of years at the plant can find themselves with chronic musculoskeletal disorders (*troubles-musculosquelettiques* or TMS). Hence the added advantage of agency workers, whose gaps in assignments and periods of unemployment can provide a space to recuperate before being taken on again. Car manufacturers can therefore make efficient use of available young and fit labour in a favourable labour market, whilst filtering out any workers who were considered physically inappropriate.

4. The role of institutional weakness in undermining “good laws”

A “temporary increase in activity” is the typical justification given by PSA for using agency labour. According to union interviewees, this bears little relation to reality, given the persistent presence of agency workers on the assembly line. The fallacy of this motive is illustrated by the use of agency workers during periods when permanent workers are laid off. Interviewees explained that the posts that are being taken by agency workers are posts that would normally be filled by workers on permanent contracts. Human resource strategy was therefore undermining the legislation by implementing “a conscious strategy of precarious employment” (CFDT official) in which the agency workforce is a substitute for permanent labour rather than a solution to temporary labour force issues. The legal challenges that have resulted in the post hoc reclassification of agency contracts are based upon proving that the non-substitution principle is not being adhered to. An additional justification used by PSA is the need to use temporary labour to deal with the extra work associated with the launch of a new model. Union spokespersons (from the CGT) have argued that management should factor such work into the organisation of work and the efficient management of human resources rather than relying on precarious labour to deal with production needs that are a regular and planned occurrence for manufacturers in the sector.

Despite the success of individual legal challenges throughout the decade, practices that undermine the legislation continue. For Pierre this is because “[T]he law is good but it is not applied”. For Patrice too, the law was a “responsible” one that was nonetheless undermined due to the lack of concrete protection accorded to agency workers. The Labour Inspectorate (*Inspectorat du travail*), the government agency responsible for ensuring labour law is adhered to, was widely viewed as being unable to tackle this “implementation gap”. All the union interviewees agreed that labour inspectors do not have the means to enforce legislation. The lack of an adequate number of workplace inspectors, combined with the large number of agency contracts that occurred on a “daily basis” in big car plants, makes it extremely difficult to monitor company practices. Since a large car assembly plant has many posts, it is relatively easy to move an agency worker from one post to another thus making it appear that agency labour is not being used on permanent posts. For Patrice, that the law being “completely violated” on

such a scale that labour inspectors were unable to keep abreast of what was going on. The SUD official considered that labour inspectors had an important role in providing useful information on labour rights but beyond that their power was “extremely limited” and “weak”.

Pierre explained that to seriously challenge PSA labour inspectors would need to start legal proceedings (*procès verbal*) against PSA on behalf of the state, and that they would most certainly lose. In any case, the Labour Inspectorate would not countenance such an action since it did not correspond to centrally-determined priorities, due to political sensitivities. This theme was raised by Halim, and by the CGT and CFDT national officials. Halim’s view was that state protection was lacking for political reasons:

The Labour Inspectorate doesn’t want to enter into these debates because for them, I imagine, a job is a job, whether it’s precarious or not. At least PSA provides jobs to people. So its a bit contradictory....when they know that for years and years Citroën has been using.....precarious jobs to produce cars when normally these jobs are permanent, an agency worker replaces an agency worker. It’s like that, labour inspectors are aware of this, we tell them this frequently. Unfortunately, they don’t want to intervene because they think that as long as Citroën supplies work, it’s work even if it’s precarious.

This was echoed by the CFDT official who explained how the priorities of work inspectors are set, and the political nature of the process:

I think this is a very political issue. You need to know how it works. First, there are very few workplace inspectors in France....they can’t do everything. What happens is they have both ministerial and regional directives that set out their priorities. So if, if for example, the misuse of agency work is not one of their priorities, there is little chance that the Labour Inspectorate will be interested. It’s as simple as that. I should add that the crisis means that the rules have been very relaxed. Before, no one was interested in the use of agency labour, so even then the

situation was difficult. The fact that companies are taking on agency labour again, even if it's not in strict accordance with the legislation, is more or less accepted by everyone in this period of crisis.

(Paul, CFDT official)

In a similar vein to temporary employment agencies, PSA promotes its role in facilitating the labour market integration of young workers. The group's 2010 annual report set out its aim to attract and integrate youth with an emphasis on its role in areas like Seine-Saint-Denis, which face particular socio-economic challenges (PSA, 2010, p. 168). This raises a further aspect of the contextual factors that permit large proportions of agency workers in car manufacturing; the big national car manufacturers have an important weight politically and economically. The presence of groups such as PSA – especially national ones in the French context – in local economies such as Seine-Saint-Denis where they are key employers – makes them powerful players, who are partners with the state in shaping local employment outcomes. The CGT has referred to the influence of PSA in the local area in its communications, suggesting in a recent leaflet on the expulsion of *sans-papiers* from a branch of the Randstad temporary employment agency at Aulnay-sous-Bois, that the decision of the *prefecture* (the local body of the Ministry of the Interior) to end the occupation in a violent manner was due to the agency's commercial relations with PSA.⁸⁵

Halim also considered that occupational health doctors were unwilling to challenge management and enforce workplace standards:

It's the occupational health doctors who validate the post under the authority of the management, they are dependent. They are doctors paid by Citroën, they're not independent....the health of employees is not their main priority.....rather it's that the work goes on....the vehicles have to get out.... in whatever way.

⁸⁵ USI-CGT leaflet dated 16th December 2009: Expulsion of undocumented migrant agency workers at Aulnay (*Expulsion des intérimaires sans-papier à Aulnay*).

Halim's opinion of occupational health doctors was harsh. In his eyes, they were an "extension of human resources" and he was quick to correct Léa when she suggested they were "under pressure". The compromised role of doctors charged with overseeing occupational health within PSA was highlighted by action taken against Dr. Margaret Moreau, an occupational health doctor at the Sochaux plant. Dr. Moreau was disciplined for raising the negative affects of lean manufacturing on the health of workers at the plant. In particular, she had questioned a PSA report (signed by all the representative unions except the CGT) on the evaluation and prevention of psycho-social risks. The treatment of Dr. Moreau was criticised by the General Secretary of the Occupational Health Professionals Union (SNPST).⁸⁶ For the occupational health doctor I interviewed, barriers to effective surveillance of workplace practices that may harm health are compounded by the agency contract, since the legal employer (the agency) has no direct power over working conditions. According to PSA's annual reports a "support and management system" has been established jointly with temporary employment agencies which:

emphasises coordination between temporary employment agencies and the Group for prevention actions and management of the health and safety of temporary employees. Management from temporary employment agencies visit the Group's facilities, and take part in the risk-observation preventive procedure and analysis of workplace incidents.

(PSA, 2011, p. 191)

According to the report, this led a reduction in the rate "lost-time incidents" from 25.1 to 8.6. However, the validity of this claim is questionable given the pressures upon agency workers to not report workplace accidents, as reported by both agency workers (see Section 7 below) and the occupational health doctor interviewed.

Weaknesses in the institutional safeguarding of labour standards hinder the role of unions in defending the principle of the standard employment relationship. At a national level, trade

⁸⁶ <http://sociologias-com.blogspot.co.uk/2010/01/le-depart-dun-medecin-du-travail-de-psa.html> accessed 26th October 2011.

unions have tended to focus on propagandistic denunciations of agency labour (this is particularly the case for the CGT, FO and SUD), combined with attempts to render their situation less precarious (particularly the CFDT). At a plant level, beyond taking individual cases to the employment tribunal, unions appear to have few resources to resist the misuse of agency labour:

Of course we can always demand or even write to management. Management will respond as it always does, [saying] that's how it is.....It's really difficult to fight against a management that sticks to its position.

(Halim, SUD rep, Aulnay)

5. Anatomy of a two-tier workforce

5.1. One plant, two systems of employment

Despite the principle of parity long enshrined in French legislation, interviewees highlighted the disadvantages arising from the separation of agency workers from the internal system of employment within the user-organisation. With regards to pay, union representatives identified two factors that undermine the parity principle. First, agency work contracts are set at the lowest salary scale with little chance of incremental progression due to the interruption of assignments. Secondly, the large contracts with agencies had facilitated this process of driving down the hourly wage rate. Temporary employment agencies are able to maintain hourly rates at a low level due to the high demand for employment, whereas in the past higher wage compensation would be a means of attracting workers to register with agencies. High unemployment, coupled with changing employment practices in the sector, has left the agency worker with little bargaining power over the question of wages. Wage inequality is exacerbated by the exclusion of agency workers from additional boosts to income such as productivity bonuses, or the “thirteenth month” of salary that many French workers are entitled to, and which exist at PSA for permanent workers. User-organisations are not legally bound to include agency workers in these schemes. The financial advantage to PSA in maintaining a significant proportion of production workers on the lowest salary scale was spelt out by Pierre (CGT rep, PSA-Citroën):

At several levels, taking on....having....its about 30% in the factories, 30% of workers who are agency workers, sometimes more, that means 30% of workers are paid the minimum, the minimum wage. If these workers were permanent, their salaries would evolve. Though it might be slow, they would at least have a salary increase. So there you have 30%....who stay on the lowest pay without moving. That's a significant economy on wages.

This, coupled with exclusion from any bonus system, means that agency workers are frequently earning between 10% and 25% less than the permanent workers they are working alongside. The maintenance of a two-tier labour force also has negative consequences for the wages of permanent workers:

It weighs on the others. As a result, the evolution of the wages of permanent workers will also slow down. It's not referred to formally, but that's the truth. At least you earn more than an agency worker; you're not on the minimum wage.

(Pierre, CGT representative, Aulnay)

The different systems governing employment presents a challenge for union representatives at the plant faced with the problems that agency workers may have. During agency assignments it is much easier for agency workers to seek out union reps at the user-organisation if they are worried about irregularities in their wages. Such queries are difficult to deal with due to the differences between pay slips:

The wage slips are not the same. The way in which they are written, that changes from one agency to another, Adia, Manpower, Adecco, Randstad, it's not the same. It's complicated for us to intervene. We can't intervene in the normal way with the company with regards to wages for these workers.

Accessing employment rights, be they to do with reward, conditions or representation, therefore, is immediately compromised by the introduction of a third party – the employment agency – in the employment relationship. So it was, in the months following the 2008 crisis,

that agency workers were excluded from state-funded protection from loss of income during “unemployed days”. This “outsider” status is exacerbated by the difficulties posed by being part of a union structure external to the plant. Speaking about their experiences at Toyota, both Daniel and Elodie considered that unions at the plant did not defend the interests of agency workers. For Daniel, it was because their role was “first and foremost to deal with permanent workers”. For Elodie, it was due to the agency workers being “independent from the union” since agency workers “had to go with the union at their agency”.

5.2. “Disposable” versus “protected” workforce

Employment insecurity is an overarching feature of the agency contract that underpins the division of the workforce, and which has far reaching consequences on how agency workers experience life on the line. Within the plant, the recurrent ending of agency contracts is highly visible due to the large numbers of agency workers whose contracts end at any one time. Both union representatives at Aulnay pointed to the simultaneous ending of hundreds of agency contracts, through the reorganisation of production lines or shifts. The insecurity of employment experienced by agency workers creates a *de facto* hierarchy between agency worker and permanent worker, premised not only on the fear of job loss, but also on the internalisation by the permanent workforce of the function of agency workers in the plant’s survival. Whilst the union representatives at the Aulnay plant did not refer explicitly to the role of agency workers in protecting permanent workers from exposure to unemployment, other representatives, who used to be agency workers, were more open on this point. Eddie explained how permanent workers could feel more secure where agency workers were present:

In the minds of permanent workers, when there are agency workers, at the end of the day, they are protected. They feel protected. As long as there are agency workers, their employment is guaranteed. When there aren’t any more, there isn’t this defence, so if there are other problems, it will certainly be the permanent employees who are hit.

(Eddie, CGT representative, Toyota)

For Victor, this was a rationale used by management to justify the existence of a two-tiered workforce:

At the end of the day, the argument of the bosses is that, okay, there are a number of precarious contracts that allow us to maintain fixed employment. So today, what they are saying is that we if take 10,000 and we give them all permanent contracts, tomorrow when we reduce our activity, we are obliged to sack workers. But, at the end of the day, we say, that is we the CGT, and in the broad political sense as well, we say that every time that an agency worker leaves, that too is a sacking, nothing less.

(Victor, CGT rep, PSA, Mulhouse)

The CFDT official also raised the issue of protection and buffering when asked about divisions between agency workers and permanent workers. His approach differed in that he considered the response of permanent workers to their relatively cushioned status was a natural “human” reaction:

Generally relations are good. However, in a way which is a bit egotistical but also human and understandable, when there is a reduction in the activity of the company, the permanent workers are not going to protest that the agency workers’ contracts are finished. I think that this relatively normal. In a way they are happy that they have the social plan. So I think the division exists mainly at this level.

(CFDT official)

This extract displays an acceptance of the need to maintain an agency workforce in order to enhance the competitiveness of the company, which in turn is said to save jobs, reflecting, of course, the CFDT’s approach to agency work.

5.3. Division of labour and work effort

Agency workers can act as a buffer in others ways, beyond their supposed function in safeguarding permanent jobs. All interviewees from plants referred to an informal hierarchy on the shopfloor that relegates agency workers to the posts which are seen to be more punishing than others (“dirty jobs”). The following quote reveals this hierarchy in explicit terms:

There is a difference, of course, because they [agency workers] are not permanent. But in terms of typical relations, evidently for some the difference is that they [permanent workers] make the most of having agency workers or contrats-pros taking the most difficult posts, the most punishing posts which permanent workers are rarely given....They are always under pressure....because they are poodles for those with a permanent contract who have an interest in shoving these posts onto the agency workers.....if they don't want to work there, if they have a bad back, or whatever.

(Victor, CGT rep, PSA, Mulhouse)

So the existence of a two-tier employment system can generate a collusion of perceived interests on the shopfloor. Permanent workers may, inadvertently or not, find themselves in a position of power in relation to agency workers, which they can use to their own advantage. For all of the interviewees who had experience of life on the shopfloor, the relegation of agency workers to the worst posts was an important factor in defining the experience of work, one which was rooted in their insecure status and which had the potential to create tension and resentment. Léa and Amina, agency workers at Aulnay, expressed strong resentment that agency workers were typically given the hardest posts and expected to work harder than permanent workers. They also implied that the posts they were given should have been assigned to men, but that, because they were agency workers, their gender was not considered in the allocation of posts:

The posts are too, too, too hard for agency workers....or we could say for women. Normally the posts that they give to women, they are posts....these are posts for men.

(Léa, agency worker, PSA, Aulnay)

Amina, in particular, was said to have been given an “extremely difficult post”. When she was moved to another post following a workplace accident, her post was given to two permanent workers. The absurdity of the situation was illustrated by Léa’s laughter at the idea that Amina, a woman in her early 50s, physically small and slight, could be put to work for months on such a post. Halim confirmed that this was common practice, whilst the CFDT official considered that being given the most difficult and “thankless jobs” was the most “flagrant” aspect of how agency workers were treated in comparison to permanent workers – although perhaps he also thought that the role of permanent workers in perpetuating this division of labour flowed from a natural sentiment of self-interest, given his perception of buffering as described above. Although permanent workers were seen to play a role in avoiding harsh work at the expense of agency workers, this is rooted in the marginally greater power that relative job security accords the permanent workforce, as well as the social ties that are formed on the shopfloor, which reinforce the informal hierarchies:

It’s true, a permanent worker cannot say no, but his supervisor, he’ll try to say, okay we’ll put an agency worker on your post because it’s hard. Because with an agency worker, he’s not going to complain, because he’s only there for a certain time, one month, two, three months.

(Halim, SUD rep, PSA-Citroën)

All the agency workers complained about the speed of the line and the difficulty in keeping up with it. Halim and Léa’s explanation of Léa’s accident rested on this:

Léa:the car had left [my area] before I had finished my operations and I ran to catch up with it and I fell.

Halim: It's like what I was saying to you before [in the car on the way to the interview]....It's the line, the car advances, it advances, and then you have to run behind it.

Int: So it's because of the speed of the line?

Halim: The speed, yes.

Léa: Yes, I fell over, I fell on my stomach.

The experience of Amina and Léa is not limited to agency workers. Brahim, a worker on a fixed-term contract, interviewed at the factory gates, felt that all those on temporary contracts were relegated to the worst jobs. It is also not an inevitable experience throughout the sector. Daniel, speaking about his experience at Toyota, felt that working in a small team facilitated good relations and that, as a result, he was not treated any differently from his co-workers in terms of job allocation. On the other hand, he did not think that his experience was typical of that of other agency workers at the plant:

I think that on other lines, the agency workers....they are given the most difficult posts, so that the long term workers can take it easy. They don't hesitate to do that.

(Daniel, ex-agency worker, Toyota)

This quote illustrates the underlying perception that permanent workers use the presence of agency workers to make their work at the plant more bearable. The fact that Daniel, despite his more positive experience, recognised this, indicates that in comparing their position to permanent workers, agency workers are all too aware of the differential treatment that acts to their disadvantage on the shopfloor. This differential treatment may also be expressed in the social interactions that accompany work on the production line:

I think that as an agency worker, if I make a mistake, I'll be shouted at. But a permanent worker, if he makes a mistake that makes no difference: I've made a

mistake so what, what do you want me to do about it? I think that for them, there is a difference between an agency worker and a permanent worker.

(Daniel, ex-agency worker, Toyota)

In addition to the actual jobs being harder, agency workers also felt they had to be seen to work harder, as expressed most vividly by Amina: “we worked, as we say, like dogs”. One of the factors in maintaining a high intensity of work was the successive use of short contracts at the Aulnay plant:

They don’t do eighteen months. They do contracts of two months, three months, you see. And then they are always able to put pressure on the workers. They never do long contracts; never eighteen months in one go.

(Pierre, CGT representative, PSA-Citroën)

The PSA charter, signed after the spate of legal cases, reduced the maximum contract to eleven months. Having been taken to task over long contracts, the company changed its policy to shorter ones – the lawyer representing PSA admitted they should have been “cleverer” and made the contracts shorter. Thus, PSA’s reaction to the legal challenges was to worsen the conditions of insecurity of agency workers.

The fragility of their employment relationship gives rise to a labour regime that is overwhelmingly weighted in favour of the employer, able to mobilise the agency workforce through fear of job loss, a feature which marks out the experience of agency workers from that of the permanent workforce. The short duration of contracts is exacerbated by a lack of alternative in the local area, thereby intensifying the pressure on agency workers to perform better to avoid being “viewed badly” and “to no longer have a job”. The threat of job loss can be explicit, as illustrated by Amina’s experience:

....we signed a two-month contract and then I was told, if you haven't done all the operations, we won't renew the contract.

Unlike permanent workers, agency workers do not have access to the institutional space provided for by the standard employment relationship, which gives some room for negotiation. An agency worker "cannot defend himself like others, because he is scared of being noticed, he is scared he will be sacked" (Patrice, CGT rep, Ford, ex-agency worker). This leads to a further division in terms of work effort on the shopfloor, with agency workers "always doing more work than others" and having "to give more".

5.4. Workplace relations

These shopfloor differences can affect workplace relations. Interviewees had different perceptions of daily interactions and workplace solidarity, reflecting the second-hand nature of some of the accounts (those from union representatives) as well as the complex, dynamic and changing nature of social interaction on the shopfloor. Whilst Léa considered that relations were forged or not regardless of contract status, she agreed with Halim when he insisted that permanent workers rarely expressed solidarity with agency workers. Léa did express strong feelings about the differential treatment between permanent and agency workers, and how permanent workers could transfer blame to agency workers when errors were made. However, this did not appear to translate into hostility to this "privileged" section of the workforce but rather produced intense frustration with the situation of agency workers, for which she was quick to blame PSA.

Workplace divisions at Aulnay were said to revolve around divisions of ethnicity, which are entwined with perceptions of hierarchy at the plant. Despite the ethnic make-up of the plant, "management and supervisors are white", "you need to be called 'Bernard' to get on" (Brahim, Aulnay, PSA). Elodie and Daniel had more to say about the relations between different sections of the workforce. Elodie felt that agency workers were not totally respected by other workers and that in order to gain respect they had to work doubly hard. This theme of respect was important to Elodie, not having respect at work lead to a "bad atmosphere". Daniel, who was

more positive about his relations with his colleagues, felt that because he was a hard worker he had good workplace relations. He also thought that on the larger production lines of forty or fifty workers, agency workers could easily find themselves teased by the permanent workers. Although his experience was a good one – “we regain our strength by depending on each other” – he felt that agency workers were unable to deal openly with issues with fellow workers in the way that other workers could:

My team...we got on okay. There's only a few of us, and we are straight with each other. Sometimes there can be problems and generally, an agency worker he'll keep quiet, even if he's not happy. He'll take it but he won't say anything. Someone who is permanent, if someone makes a remark and he doesn't like it, he'll get worked up.

Elodie thought that the lack of respect on the shopfloor could translate into an assumption amongst (some) permanent workers that agency workers did not work as well as they did – this was similar to Léa and Amina's complaint about the assumption that mistakes are due to agency workers – despite the fact that they worked hard for fear of losing their job. The allocation of the worst jobs to agency workers was viewed as a source of tension, although agency workers may feel obliged to conceal their antagonisms to “keep things sweet”.

The complexity and contradictory nature of relations is most apparent in relation to the “buffer” function of agency. Whilst agency workers are said to protect permanent workers from the worst jobs, the pressure that leads agency workers to work harder raises the benchmark for permanent workers:

Because they give us, the agency workers, the hardest posts, and the more we work, the more they add operations. But once we have finished our contract, the permanent worker takes over....and at that moment it's harder for the permanent worker because he'll say he can't do it, and they'll say to him there was an agency worker before you who was able to do it, so you can do it.

(Léa, agency worker, PSA Aulnay)

6. Agency workers as the “ideal” worker

The interview extracts above illustrate some of the ways in which an insecure employment relationship can modify behaviour. In workplace relations the agency worker may feel unable to confront problems and issues that arise in his or her daily interactions with co-workers and supervisors. Unable to counter a division of labour that sees the most difficult jobs going to the agency workforce, the agency worker has, in the words of Leila “no choice” but to “submit” to whatever is demanded of him/her, without complaining, a theme taken up by Patrice:

The agency worker, being precarious, and being able to be sacked from one day to the next, doesn't contest management policy. He doesn't defend himself like others, because he is scared of being noticed, he is scared that he will be sacked the next day so he doesn't say anything, he does the overtime, he does what he's told. That too is the feature of agency workers, and for the boss/employer (patrons), it's an advantage, he knows that he has someone who will not question things, who will do what he is told.

(Patrice, CGT rep, Ford, ex-agency worker)

Halim also stressed how the agency worker has to submit to management demands:

....the agency worker doesn't have a choice, he puts up with it, but doesn't say anything, he says absolutely nothing. You see, he puts up with the pressure, he has to run....and afterwards two workers have to replace him, it's automatic, it's normal, you see, it's a situation that is almost normal.

Being a “good” agency worker extends beyond the technical capacity to do the job well and keep up with the speed of the line, and encompasses behavioural traits in the workplace that are requested by the user organisation. Aptitude for the work includes “being good workers, who don't question things”. Thus, agency workers have a “tendency to accept things”. This creates a

workforce that is “malleable and compliant”, with which the employer “could do what they wanted”. For example, being ready to work overtime and to work even when ill. Those who do not conform to this ideal could be filtered out either through the non-renewal of contracts or the reduced likelihood of a permanent job. Victor provided an example of a young agency worker who, despite being familiar with all the different posts and capable of his work, was not considered for a permanent post due to what Victor described as “a few instances of lateness”.

6.1. Consent through aspiration or coercion through job insecurity?

The examples of working harder and accepting the worst jobs without complaint discussed above all feed into this construction of the type of ideal worker that job insecurity facilitates. However, whilst Amina and Léa’s experience was, at this point in their time at PSA, perceived in wholly negative terms, Daniel reflected upon his enthusiasm at the beginning of his assignment at Toyota. He described how he had worked hard to prove himself in the hope that his effort would be rewarded with a permanent contract. He displayed a consent to work hard in exchange for the vague possibility of permanent employment. These two very different approaches to work effort, one driven by coercion through fear, the other by consent through aspirations lead to similar production outcomes, and both are rooted in employment insecurity.

Striving to please can arise from contradictory inner sources. On the one hand, agency workers are responding to a process characterised by compulsion, coercion and constraints associated with job insecurity. On the other hand, it is possible to draw upon positive resources rooted in the aspiration to obtain a permanent post, or at the very least, for Daniel, to retain his agency contract for as long as possible. This was more evident in the interviews with Daniel and Elodie. Toyota differed from PSA in that agency contracts could be up to 18 months. This offered at least some security, according to Eddie, the CGT rep at Toyota, since it provided a “guarantee” that if “I don’t make any mistakes, at least I’ll have the assurance of a year’s wage”. Even though agency workers are not explicitly led to believe that an agency contract can lead to permanent work, agency workers may grasp the hope of such as a way of providing meaning to their work, as Daniel did when he presented himself as an “enthusiastic worker”. Although this possibility could also be used as a warning:

I think that for agency workers, they [the company] make it known that to be absent, that can go against us, if in the future there are permanent vacancies. They say, they make it known, that the less we are absent, the better it ... we can hope for something. They play on that. They say.....not to put us under heavy manners, but to say watch out.

(Daniel, ex-agency worker, Toyota)

The experience of Daniel, and even Elodie for a time when she still harboured hope of a permanent post, contrasted with that of Léa and Amina whose orientation to work at PSA was expressed solely in terms of constraint and coercion. Neither expressed any aspiration for permanent employment at the plant – both were happy to leave, although they were both outraged at the circumstances of their departure. It is notable that the *contrats pros*, who had also been enthusiastic at the beginning of what they thought could be a career with PSA – on condition they worked hard and displayed an aptitude to learn – were similarly angered by their experience at Aulnay and more than ready to leave.

6.2. Projecting the right image

Regardless of the individual factors driving “appropriate” workplace behaviour, agency workers can be seen to engage in strategies aimed at generating a variety of outcomes, some of which are interrelated. Léa was not prepared to engage in the “games” associated with being the ideal worker and which involved projecting a certain image on the shopfloor, behaviour she had observed in others at the Aulnay plant. Over and above being a hard worker, keeping your head down and not complaining, it was also important to be friendly with the right kind of people in the plant. In short, being an ideal worker means getting on with the boss and not being seen as being too friendly with union activists. Léa thought that being friendly with the supervisors was part of the general culture at the plant if you wanted to get on. This was confirmed by Brahim, a young worker who spoke to me briefly outside the factory gates. He thought that establishing the right sort of social network, for example, team leaders and supervisors, counted for a lot if you wanted to get a permanent position, as did maintaining good relations, keeping calm and avoiding arguments. A similar pressure to be “amenable” to those in positions of influence was

identified by Emilie and Daniel. Daniel experienced this as an internalisation of the need to keep quiet:

Generally, my reflex....even if I don't agree, a boss who is not.. a boss who is wrong....I'm not going to tell him.

(Daniel, ex-agency worker, Toyota)

So projecting the image of an ideal worker entails simultaneously positive and negative workplace behaviour, since doing what is expected also entails not doing what you may otherwise do in a "normal" employment relationship. Patrice, recalling his time as an agency worker, spoke of the need to keep quiet about union sympathies:

I remember the time when we were agency workers, we said nothing, even with regards to the unions, we didn't show our support. We were....we made out as if we didn't think about such things.

There was a time when management openly said that we must not hang out with the unions. Even in the recruitment interview, they put these questions to the agency worker. What do you think of unions? What do you think of strikes? And obviously, you can't say what you think. You have to say that You don't agree ... you had to lie.

This revelation that it is necessary to "lie" in order to say what the agency and the user organisation wants to hear suggests that the agency worker status creates an employment relationship within which the worker is obliged to suppress important dimensions of their personality/character or the "self", over what can be a long period of time, and instead construct an image that is amenable to the agency and the user-organisation, thereby engaging in a form of behavioural compliance in order to get on. Daniel did not feel confident in displaying his agreement with the CGT representative who worked alongside him: "I wasn't going to tell everyone in the factory....you didn't.... I kept it to myself". For Elodie, it was fine to hang out

with union members (those considered oppositional) so long as agency workers didn't join or take part in action. However, clearly for some agency workers, their employment status is an important factor in determining their behaviour towards unions, as illustrated by the example of an agency worker at the Poissy PSA plant who dared not even take leaflets from unions.⁸⁷

The need to conform to a particular type of worker was repellent to Leila: "you can't be a hypocrite like that". Although she recognised that once you got where you wanted to be you could change, "be yourself", it was not something she could do. Emilie too, did not want to conceal her "nature" in order to get a permanent job:

It's not in my nature. If I am hired I want it to be on the basis of my work, the quality of my work. I don't want to be hired because I'm nice, because I do overtime..... I want to be hired quite simply because of my work, just as I said earlier about respect. I want to be hired out of respect, because I work well, because I am at my post, because I am never absent, lots of things like that. I don't want to be hired because I am nice to the boss, because I say yes to the boss. That's why I didn't think I would be taken on permanently.

Daniel, on the other hand, demonstrated that he was willing to "play the game" and go against his normal reflex or instinct in his daily social interactions on the shopfloor. Although he did display discomfort at having to always maintain smooth relationships regardless of what was said or done. Being amenable and projecting a certain image was part of a strategy that he thought all agency workers engaged in to enhance their chances of permanent employment:

An agency worker will try to get himself noticed, to chat to everyone, just in order to make himself stand out. Why? Because if he stands out, he'll get a permanent contract.

(Daniel, agency worker, Toyota)

⁸⁷ Liberation, 26th April, 2003, Auto sector: agency workers fight back in succession
<http://www.liberation.fr/economie/0101472149-automobile-les-interimaires-se-rebiffent-en-serie>

So on the one hand there is this requirement to not stand out, to hide what is really on the mind of the agency worker, to keep quiet, keep out of trouble and keep one's head down, "to not make any demands for two or three years with the promise of a permanent post two years later" (SUD official), to keep quiet and "accept the difficult working conditions of the factory in the hope of being taken on permanently" (Eddie, CGT representative, Toyota). On the other hand, the agency worker has the objective of "finding a way of getting taken on permanently", and that means getting on with people, being liked and "getting noticed". Daniel explained how he hung about after his shift, chatting to people, to ensure that others knew who he was. His strategy, besides being a good worker was to create the kind of social network that Brahim had said was, necessary in order to get on.

7. Dual control in the triadic relationship

It is possible to identify examples of Gottfried's thesis of duality of power within the interview data. The interviews reflect the pressure that comes from having to submit to two levels of subordination. Agencies play a role in selecting those workers that fit in with what is expected by the client – the user-organisation. Léa explained how agencies warn agency workers "not to discuss with union representatives", echoing the experience of Patrice. The importance of agencies in accessing future job opportunities reinforces the control of agencies over agency workers, preventing them from raising problems either with the agency or with the manufacturer. As Léa put it, "their objective is that we work", suggesting a narrow and despotic approach to the employment relationship that leaves out of the equation the agency of the worker in negotiating his/her experience of work. This is possible due to the insecurity of labour and the dual pressure that arises from the unequal triadic relationship:

After all, agency workers know that if you disagree with something, if you start to say, "yes but....that's not okay"....the next day you can easily no longer have a job with the agency. So you see the climate....it's for that reason that the bosses can really profit from all that because clearly they end up with workers who won't say anything.

(Patrice, CGT rep, ex-agency worker, Ford)

The commercial relationship between agencies and manufacturers exerts a pressure on the agency to ensure the “quality” of the employees that they are sending to their clients, particularly in the context of competition between the big players in the temporary employment sector for the big contracts:

The temp agency, which wants to keep its contract with Ford or with Renault, so the big companies, these are big contracts, they have the rights to dozens of agency workers, it’s a big contract, so clearly for them, they are looking to find “trustworthy” agency workers.

(Patrice, CGT rep, Ford, ex-agency worker)

So agencies expect their agency workers to carry at the assignment according to the contract and not worry about such things as employment rights or unions:

No, they don’t talk to you at all about things like that. For them, an agency worker it’s....work....you do it....you say nothing that’s it, you graft and you’re paid, that’s all. As we say in France, you get on with it or you’re finished....you do as you’re told....and even if you are ill....if you’re not okay you carry on, you carry on....you don’t start complaining.

(Elodie, ex-agency worker, Toyota)

Both Daniel and Elodie remarked that if absence levels were not good, that would create problems, to the extent that the agency wouldn’t “risk giving you an assignment”. Therefore job insecurity is compounded by the duality of power within the agency worker-agency-user-organisation nexus. If an agency worker strays from the expected path, s/he can effectively be “blacklisted” by the agency. Interviewees used the terms *grillé* and *fiché* interchangeably to describe a process of registering those who did not correspond to the expectation laid down by agencies and manufacturers – a process similar to blacklisting in the UK. This was the

experience of both Leila and Emilie. Leila refused to give in to pressure not to declare a workplace accident, something that both agencies and car manufacturers were said to encourage. She claimed that, as a result, her contract was not renewed and she did not expect to find future work with the same employment agency, nor with PSA. Halim explained further:

Halim: If you have a problem, for example, a workplace accident that is registered, you have to change your agency. Return to PSA? Impossible.

Int: So in this situation, the workplace accident is noted.

Halim: She'll never return to PSA.

Léa (laughing): I am blacklisted.

Halim: She's blacklisted, she'll never come back, even if she changes her employment agency.

Patrice confirmed from his own experience that problems in the workplace led to problems with the agency:

In itself, it's not so bad when you are an agency worker, sacked from a place. You'll get taken on elsewhere, excepted that you are blacklisted. You are no longer recruited by that agency and you are seen as someone who will dig about, even though all you are trying to do is get your legal rights respected.

Elodie found that taking strike action resulted in doors being closed to her with her agency:

I am still with the agency, I can still contact them. But the problem is, they don't want to give me any work, because I was part of the strike committee. They are scared to give me work.

For Daniel, the need to maintain good relations with the agency also made it difficult to refuse to accept assignments that were offered: “you are more or less obliged to accept all that they propose, you don’t have much choice” and “If I say I am on holiday, it’s finished....they won’t call me anymore”. The triadic relationship, therefore, creates a powerful combination of pressures emanating from the combined pressure of the agency and the car manufacturer, which leaves the agency worker with little space to negotiate to have his/her employment-related needs taken into account.

8. Disillusion, misbehaviour and resistance

The pressure to be an “ideal worker” is not necessarily sustainable over the long term. Several factors can undermine the aspirational consent or constrained compliance to exhibit workplace behaviours solicited by manufacturers and the agencies that supply their temporary labour. The combination of job insecurity over a long period of time coupled with the reality of harsh work under coercive conditions can lead to disillusion and anger. For Léa and Amina, this was rooted in their sense of injustice over how agency workers were treated and, for Léa, a general culture of oppressive work relations at Aulnay. For the *contrat pros*, their disillusion with PSA was equally palpable in the light of their experience at the plant. In addition to their dashed hopes of permanent work, they particularly objected to their lack of training. Despite receiving government subsidies and exemption from social security payments, PSA had not kept to the terms of the contract, which stipulated the provision of a tutor and 280 hours of formal training. They thought that in reality they represented for PSA “*cheap agency workers*”, rather than apprentices, and were told not to complain when they raised any objections. Their perception of PSA was very negative: “they make promises but nothing happens”; “it’s a big, big disappointment”. Moraud found it shocking that a big company could act in such a way, whilst Erwan considered that such a company “should be improving things”. For Cyril, PSA was able to present itself as a company taking on young people in the area when, in fact, the company was “abusing” them; it was like the “middle ages”, or as Mourad put it, “intellectual slavery, they think we are fools”.

The disillusion and anger, rooted in a deep sense of social injustice, expressed by Mourad, Cyril and Erwan was particularly intense given the expectations and aspirations associated with the *contrat de professionalisation*, which set them apart from the normal agency workers. The contract, between their agency and PSA, had, in their eyes, been broken by PSA, leading them to challenge PSA, with the help of the SUD union. They felt that they had nothing to lose either because they no longer wanted employment at Aulnay, or because permanent employment was evidently not on the cards.

Similar themes of “getting to the end of the line” and “having nothing to lose” underscore the paths taken by Léa and by Elodie, and also lie beneath the surface of those examples in the press coverage of agency workers taking on auto companies once their long-term insecure relationship with one company comes to an end. Pierre confirmed that agency workers were more likely to go to tribunals in this kind of circumstance:

It's necessary after all that workers at some point come to us to put together a legal case.....it's not easy....generally they do it at the end of their contract, because their contract is ended. They know they are not going to stay, their contract is not going to be renewed. At that point, with a bit of luck they will take it to a tribunal.

Léa's behaviour, however, was mainly rooted in a strong sense of social injustice combined with an apparent lack of concern for the negative consequences that would inevitably arise from making a stand. Two instances of Léa's subversive behaviour came up in the interview: refusing to cede to pressure to conceal her workplace accident, and taking part in strike action. Both Léa and Elodie were strike leaders – a rarity amongst the agency workforce. Elodie's indignation at the lack of equality between agency workers and permanent workers, and her sense of marginalisation and exclusion despite being at the Toyota plant for four years, compelled her to join a strike when the opportunity arose. She expressed little regret at no longer being at the plant, although she professed a positive attitude to the work itself, and had once harboured hopes of a permanent contract. Léa on the other hand felt that there was no future at the plant,

even for those on permanent contracts. There was “no evolution” for those on the production line.

8.1. Winning respect through collective action

Elodie’s experience of taking part in strike action contrasted starkly with her experience of agency work, which made her feel like an outsider despite being at the plant for four years. She was the first agency worker to go on strike, although by the end of the strike, which lasted eleven days, she had brought a dozen agency workers with her: “not really a lot but it really represented the discontent because Toyota seriously exploits agency workers”. Her experience of the strike and of being on the strike committee was a good one:

[It was] an fantastic experience, a huge experience. I learnt about myself. I learnt about the law, texts that we don’t all know. I got to know people who I now see regularly, people who I didn’t meet before, because I didn’t work on the same line. I even learnt to respect myself and to respect others.

Here Elodie is expressing a number of deep-seated needs for self-development, social interaction on equal footing, self-respect and respect from others – needs that had been left unfilled by her experience as an agency worker. This extract encapsulates the desire to escape the alienation of life on the line and the exacerbation of that alienation that comes with the agency contract. Daniel had sought to overcome the alienating efforts of work by attempting to actively carve out his future at that plant. Léa, for her part, armed with qualifications and previous employment experience as a technician in a lab, drew upon her plans to seek her future elsewhere, thus engaging in a strategy that would inevitably lead to her exit from Aulnay. All three, in their different ways, and drawing upon different individual resources, attempted to escape the passivity that their situation threatened to impose upon them.

8.2. Individual resistance: misbehaviour and exit

These examples show that even within the constraints of insecurity, there is space for agency. Victor also provided a contrast to the overall narrative of control by describing the ways in

which young agency workers in his workshop display behaviours outside of the framework of the ideal worker, which he interpreted as a generation effect:

When I arrived, I was an agency worker before being taken on permanently. I worked Saturdays, I never took sick leave. Today we see agency workers who go on sick leave and bruise easily.

Victor's interpreted this as a lack of class consciousness in the younger generation which resulted in individual rebellion (in the form of lateness or taking sick leave) rather than dealing with the reality of work through collective class mechanisms. He explained how basic concepts which were second nature to his generation of workers (he is in his 40s), such as class or unions, were foreign to younger workers:

Most of the youth here, there are lots of youth from difficult areas. There is a natural revolt which isn't collective or anything like that. It's like with the unions....most of them don't know what a union is....or why they don't like the CGT or the other unions. Class consciousness today....there's a real problem. Even if we start with things which are not very complicated....immediate demands they will not say.....we're exploited....that there are those who are exploiters....we're not there today. Its funny....class struggle? They'll say "what class? First or second?" [laughs] It's tragic.

Halim's perspective on the youth at Aulnay was altogether different. He, too, identified a generational difference, but with opposite results. For Halim, it was the older generation of workers who lacked collective class consciousness, which he explained with reference to their North African origins. Halim thought that they lacked the class collective identity that defined the French working class. Their sons and daughters, however, who make up the younger (and precarious) workers at the plant, were more "French" and therefore more influenced by the French tradition of class struggle. They were unable to express this, however, due to their precarious status: "they are ready to fight....their parents work calmly....are exploited but they

would never accept the same conditions as their parents”. Halim’s interpretation of the lack of militancy of the older generation is a curious one, given the history of struggle which saw the overwhelmingly North African OS engage in militant strikes and occupations. An alternative interpretation is that years of hard and repetitive work at the factory may have crushed the spirit of the older workers, many of whom, according to Halim, were looking to retire and to return to their countries of origin.

The lack of options for engaging in collective resistance, however, as described by Halim, can lead to individual expressions of resistance, one of which was raised by Halim and Léa – that of leaving the plant. For Pierre, this was more a common strategy in the 1990s when Aulnay management, after looking further afield for young production line workers (for example, as far as Lille), turned to youth from the deprived areas surrounding the plant:

In the 80s and 90s, there were lots of agency workers who did not stay, they arrived, they stayed three days and then were off. Moreover, it was the youth....it was funny because they arrived in the workshops, the production workshops (they are very big), so they arrived....skateboarding was in fashion. So they arrived with their skateboards and stuff....the young workers they went up and down the workshops on their skateboards with their radios [laughs]. They had big radios....but it wasn’t the done thing in the factory....the bosses let them know, so they said “goodbye I’m off, it’s a prison here”.

(Pierre, CGT, Aulnay)

Pierre considered that this was no longer an option given the rise in unemployment. So although exit may be tempting as a strategy, it is frequently not an option. On the other hand, Léa and Halim insisted that agency workers were not interested in permanent posts at Aulnay. However, a quote from an agency worker at Aulnay in an article in the newspaper *Libération* from 2006 highlights how labour market constraints generate contradictory orientations to their precarious employment situation: “A permanent contract scares me. I don’t want to spend my life at

Peugeot”.⁸⁸ However, when offered a permanent contract, the agency worker in the article accepted it (although a subsequent recruitment freeze resulted in the offer being rescinded). Similarly, Brahim recognised that although he found the work hard (and getting harder) and demoralising, it was necessary to have a job. The lack of alternatives reinforces this contradiction, as illustrated by a quote from an agency worker in another article on Aulnay from 2010: “This factory is the only place where we can hope to work”.⁸⁹

For the many agency workers for whom leaving the plant is not an option, keeping within the parameters of behaviour expected of them rather than workplace resistance will be their preferred strategy. The lack of an outlet to express discontent, combined with a lack of perspective, can result in desperate actions. Victor described an incident at his plant involving an agency worker attacking a co-worker with a knife. This is an extreme and rare example of an agency worker “going over the edge”, and needs to be viewed in the context of the society-wide discussion of “workplace suffering” which has been acknowledged as an issue facing French society. The background to this debate is a series of workplace suicides, including five at the Mulhouse plant. One suicide was of an engineer at Renault research centre at Guyancourt, others have been employees of France Telecom, thus involving a broad spectrum of contracts, occupations and sectors, and are largely explained by the intensification of work and a reorganisation of the labour process which has undermined past gains. For Victor, such acts represent a failure of trade unions and political parties, with reactions against workplace suffering become more violent as workers become less collective.

The final part of this chapter discusses the barriers to collective representation and mobilisation from the perspective of both agency workers and union actors.

⁸⁸ Libération, 27th July, 2006, PSA accused of going over the agency work limit. <http://www.liberation.fr/economie/010155978-psa-accuse-de-depasser-les-bornes-de-l-interim>

⁸⁹ Le Parisien, 30th September, 2010, The PSA at Aulnay reduces its workforce. <http://www.leparisien.fr/seine-saint-denis-93/l-usine-psa-d-aulnay-reduit-ses-effectifs-30-09-2010-1088576.php>

9. Barriers to collective representation and mobilisation

Union reps and officials spoke at length about the difficulties in representing, organising and mobilising agency workers. As the data above demonstrates, there are numerous barriers to the trade union organisation of agency workers: fear arising from job insecurity; the need to sustain the image of the “ideal worker”; the separation of the employer from the workplace; fragmentation and isolation of agency workers from fellow legally defined employees. The union activists were also acutely aware of the consequences of a two-tier workforce on the capacity of the core workforce to mount an effective defence of all workers in a given plant.

Pierre explained that unions can engage in two types of action with regards to agency work: taking legal action against misuse of the temporary agency or organising agency workers on the ground. It is the former that has been the main focus of activity of the CGT, and which has had some degree of success though without seriously undermining the sector’s ability to use agency workers on a large scale. This strategy also relies upon agency workers being willing to put themselves forward to take on the company. As discussed above, this normally occurs when long standing agency workers feel that the implicit promise of ongoing employment is broken when agency contracts have not been renewed and agency workers are left with no financial compensation beyond the 10% precarious employment bonus, despite having worked for the company for years. Organising agency workers on the ground has proved less successful.

Lack of job security was considered by the CFDT official to be the “most important brake on the unionisation of agency workers”. Léa’s views on this, discussed above, were shared by Daniel and Elodie who underlined the problems associated with joining a union as an agency worker:

In my opinion, an agency worker who joins a union, he’s not going to stay around for long, they’ll do whatever they can to kick him out.

(Daniel)

I must be the only one. I wanted to be an example, but an agency worker who joins a union will be very badly viewed.

(Elodie)

As Léa, Elodie and Patrice explained, employment agencies also play a disciplining role that reduces the likelihood of agency workers mobilising and taken action. Both Elodie and Patrice experienced negative reactions from employment agencies when they went outside of their remit to get on with the job and keep their head down. Elodie described how she suffered victimisation at both the plant and the agency. This further impinges on the ability of agency workers to take action, since even if they have reached a point where they no longer see a future in the plant, they may still need to maintain good relations with their agency. In the past, this has been the basis upon which the CFDT has criticised the tactic of the CGT in encouraging agency workers to launch a legal struggle against PSA for the reclassification of agency contracts. The CFDT claimed that the CGT was sacrificing agency workers who, although they might receive a financial settlement associated with a normal redundancy package, end up unable to find employment because “they are definitively blacklisted”.⁹⁰ The fear of being blacklisted appears to be a well-founded one. Both interview data and newspaper articles illustrate the potential of discriminatory action against agency workers, and the negative affect upon the ability of agency workers to mobilise. A mobilisation at the PSA plant at Poissy in 2003 organised by the CGT against the ending of 500 agency contracts mobilised only a “handful” of agency workers, one of whom was sought out by the manager of his employment agency during the strike and told to leave the factory.⁹¹

A further brake on union mobilisation is the formal separation of agency workers from co-workers. Agency workers are not part of the same union structure as permanent workers and they are not necessarily organised alongside fellow agency workers. This is a significant organisational problem. Even if agency workers make links in the sector in which they are

⁹⁰ Libération, 26th April, 2003, Automobile: agency workers protest
<http://www.liberation.fr/economie/0101472149-automobile-les-interimaires-se-rebiffent-en-serie>

⁹¹ Libération, 11th October, 2003, PSA: Few agency workers take action
<http://www.liberation.fr/economie/0101457139-psa-les-interimaires-peu-mobilises>

working – as did Léa and Elodie – there is no guarantee that they will continue to be working in the same sector when their contract ends. Pierre spoke of the difficulty in following up the problems of agency workers given they are not unionised within the plant. This involved having to track down the union representatives at the employment agencies, who were more likely to be based at headquarters rather than in small, local branches. As a result, despite the auto sector being one where there is good plant level union representation (at least in the big plants), agency workers working in the sector are left isolated.

The existence of a two-tier workforce, and the lack of correspondence between union structures and the temporary agency contract can leave agency workers feeling that the disadvantages associated with their employment status extends to union representation at the plant:

Int: Do you think that unions defend the interests of agency workers:

Élodie: I would say yes and no. That's to say during the strike, yes since they wanted the same thing for everyone, including agency workers. But the rest of the time I would say no, because us agency workers, we're are independent of the union, we have to be with the union at our agency, so we have to....the agency and a union, that's rare.

Daniel also found that unions in the plant were mainly interested in defending permanent workers, which was “understandable” since “that's what they were there to do”. Union representatives could be a source of information but beyond that they did not really defend agency workers.

Barriers to unionisation can have a broader impact on the development of class consciousness. Union organisation can create networks of solidarity that bring together workers around a common identity. In France, the expression of broad class solidarity is particularly felt when union confederations call on their members to display their collective strength on the streets at times when important social issues are being negotiated. At the time of one of the field visits there was a national movement of one day strikes and demonstrations in defence of pensions.

The CGT and SUD branches of the Aulnay plant attended a series of demonstrations that took place in Paris. The size of the union contingents from Aulnay was small, suggesting weak support from all sections of the workforce, and mobilising support from amongst agency workers was unlikely, since, as Halim pointed out, that would mean taking part in strike action, even for the weekend demonstrations (organised to include non-strikers), given the obligatory Saturday working. The SUD official considered that the status of agency worker and the inability to unionise, hindered collective consciousness:

Of course, there are agency workers who come on the demonstrations but it is a small number because they are less conscious, less political, less unionised by nature. When you fear for your job....when you can be sacked from one day to the next....when you have a precarious status, you find it harder to fight than if you have a regular job....the kind of job that existed for thirty years after the second world war.

The SUD official had few examples of concrete action in the auto sector to mobilise and campaign around agency labour, beyond demanding that agency workers be given permanent contracts. This is due to SUD's lack of implantation in the sector. Instead, he pointed to examples of how SUD is adapting to agency labour in other sectors, namely through direct action in the form of the occupation of agencies supplying labour to the construction industry. This was, he thought, a sign that the union was adapting to the new conditions of precarious working.

The CFDT official had few examples from the automobile sector. The most important work unions could do, from his point of view, was to provide agency workers with information about their rights and the importance of trade unions, something that was done in other sectors and was beginning to take place in the auto sector:

I have one example, it's in the west of Paris, it's an area where the automobile sector is concentrated and there is a company....It's not only the CFDT, its other

unions too. Also with the local government we try to do something globally for agency workers. There are training sessions for agency workers when they are not working at user-firms. This work has meant we can progress....we can bring them together, to see them, to explain what trade unions are, what they do and to offer them better conditions. So they can be in training instead of being unemployed. I think it's an interesting initiative.

(CFDT official)

The CFDT's main policy towards agency workers has been to work at improving conditions for agency workers, hence its willingness to sign agreements with large car manufacturers such as PSA and with employment agencies. The most recent set of agreements have been centred on rendering agency labour less precarious by offering agency workers the chance to train in between missions. In the interview, the CFDT official made frequent references to how agency labour was a false economy for companies due to the negative impact of having to constantly take on and train new workers. He felt that companies were beginning to realise this and that some were responding by supporting the initiatives such as training to improve the quality of the agency workforce. He also thought that there was a consensus amongst unions that this was a correct strategy faced with the reality of agency work:

All the French unions are, I would say, for once relatively in agreement and consider that agency workers are after all second class employees who pay for the security of others and that, therefore, we need to do all we can to make their work less precarious. We know very well that we can't get them all taken on as permanent employees. On the other hand there are ways.....of making their situation less precarious.

This is consistent with the CFDT approach to flexibility, which emphasises the role of *flexicurity* in improving the position of agency workers. The CFDT sees good quality flexible employment as a way of promoting jobs growth and accepts the argument of PSA management that ending agency labour would result in job losses. In 2006, when the CGT tried to challenge

PSA on the “principle” of using agency labour during the launch of new models, a PSA spokesperson suggested that “the CGT would be responsible for a policy of delocalisation”. The CDFT echoed this argument:

“In certain workshops, in certain plants, the use of agency labour is not justified. To go from that to demand a radical change in general recruitment policy.... The auto sector is a sector characterised by fluctuating activity, if all the agency workers had been recruited, as the CGT wanted, we would certainly be faced today with social plans.”

Whilst the CFDT’s “realist” approach to agency labour contrasts strongly with the unambiguous opposition to agency labour from the CGT (and SUD), the CGT has found itself adapting to a situation which it has been unable to influence in any fundamental way. The recent signing of an agreement guaranteeing access to training for agency workers at PSA signals the CGT’s acknowledgement of the enduring presence of agency work in the sector and, therefore, the need to lessen the impact of precarious employment. At the same time, the CGT has continued to be involved in militant actions against temporary employment agencies, although like SUD this has tended to be in other sectors of the economy and involving migrant workers. For the CGT, the construction industry has been an important site of militant action. During the field work, USI-CGT organised an occupation of a small temporary employment agency in Paris. The union was acting to highlight the abusive practices in relation to the employment of migrant workers on building sites. For the CGT official organising the action, it was important that the union put itself “on the front line” to protect agency workers who were not able to defend themselves. The occupation was carried out by USI-CGT officials, one of whom (Sandra) expressed her fears that agency work has “serious consequences for future labour rights, representing a regression in relation to the rights and conditions of work that her generation had benefitted from”. Her resentment of the manager of the employment agency was palpable. The action, as with other similar actions carried out by the CGT and by SUD, illustrates the contradiction that these unions face, combining a strategic and militant opposition to agency labour with the need to respond to the immediate defence of agency workers who are denied

their statutory rights. It would appear that the choice of strategy depends upon the sector, with the CGT in the auto sector focusing its resources on legal challenges.

10. Conclusion

Much of the data in this chapter reflects common assumptions regarding the constraints faced by agency workers in the auto sector that define their experience of work. Disadvantaged by their insecure employment status, agency workers find themselves subject to a harsher regime, taking on the worst jobs and compromised in terms of their interactions with management and employers. Manufacturers, using agency workers primarily as a tool to rapidly and easily adjust their workforce, benefit from agency labour in a variety of ways that enhance management control over the labour process. The employment insecurity associated with the temporary contract exposes agency workers to the market and represents a (re)commodification of the employment relationship. However, this is compounded by the nature of the temporary agency contract, which revolves around the triadic relationship. Duality of control is evident in the interview data from agency workers and from union representatives who have experience of agency work. This duality of control reinforces the construction of the “ideal worker” as perceived by the auto manufacturers – a malleable workforce that is unable to contest the harsh working conditions, as described by those on the ground. The temporary employment agency acts as a transmission belt for the requirement of its clients, which includes not only the technical capacity to carry out the work, but also behavioural traits. The need to maintain relations with the agency constrains agency workers further.

However, within these constraints, there is room for consent to labour under bad conditions, although the forces leading to consent are complex and can exist alongside compliance. The examples of Léa and of Élodie also illustrate the possibility of individual and collective resistance, although the consequence of acts of “resistance” appear to be largely negative. It appeared that the willingness to accept exit from the plants encouraged their departure from the norm of the “ideal worker.”

The data also provide further evidence for the embeddedness of agency labour in the sector in the descriptions from long standing auto workers who have noted the changes over the last decade or so. Institutional weaknesses have been suggested as an explanation for the disregard for the legislative boundaries of agency work use, not only in terms of the lack of resources, but also the implicit political choices that have facilitated the human resource strategies of car manufacturers. Alongside these institutional lapses is the inability of unions to systematically confront a process that has seen the replacement of a reduced “core” with a “peripheral ring” of agency workers. The union representatives and officials, whilst expressive in terms of the negative consequence of agency work, had little to propose beyond legal challenges (for the CGT) and improving conditions of agency workers (for the CFDT). In the absence of a mobilising capacity amongst the temporary agency workers and faced with the reluctance of permanent workers to seriously struggle against precarious employment practices, the legal option does offer some, limited advance. At the time of the interviews, the SUD representative was in the process of mounting a case for the *contrats pros* by identifying the non-implementation of clauses in the contracts, thus using the opportunities available to mount a challenge, a strategy similar to the CGT. From this data, the challenges to mobilising agency workers do appear to be too great to offer any long-term perspective beyond providing information and/or training. Whilst there were examples of collective action amongst agency workers, including from the interviewees presented here, there was little evidence of long-term strategies to mobilise agency workers along the lines of the innovative practices discussed in Chapter 5.

The data presented here have also introduced areas for further discussion in relation to the theoretical framework elaborated in Chapter 3, which the next chapter covers in more detail.

CHAPTER 8

AGENCY LABOUR AND NEW FORMS OF HEGEMONIC DESPOTISM

1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis was to explore the nature of the factory regime which shapes the working lives of temporary agency workers working in French car plants, by examining the historical processes from which contemporary practices of labour sourcing have emerged, and by researching the experience of agency workers in car factories. Starting from Burawoy's (1985) *The Politics of Production*, the thesis established a conceptual framework to examine how the political apparatus of production that governs the experience of agency work is the outcome of the tendencies and counter-tendencies that emerged within a temporal and geo-spatial context (Nichols, 2004). The thesis also established both the relevance of "production politics" and "factory regimes" for contemporary LPA and the need to reassert the significance of external factors, such as the employment contract, in the constitution of factory regimes. Chapter 5 examined the emergence of temporary agency work in post-war France as a form of employment which ran counter to norms of employment that were beginning to take shape within the French model of social compromise under the *Trente Glorieuses*. Chapter 6 provided an historical overview of the French auto industry in order to establish the specificity of the factory regime that broadly characterised post-war car production in France, as a distinct form of hegemonic regime, shaped in no small part by colonial ties that provided a source of cheap, super-exploited labour. The militant strikes throughout the sector in the early 1980s which succeeded in transforming the conditions of the *ouvriers spécialisés* (OS) occurred when the sector was on the cusp of responding to the challenges of an increasingly globalised market through restructuring and automation/robotisation. The subsequent shedding of labour was accompanied by an intensification of work and by a gradual turn to agency labour as a pivotal tool for responding to a volatile market.

These two chapters provided the historical and contemporary grounding of the data presented in Chapter 7, which examined the workplace outcomes of the increasingly structural position of agency labour in car plants. Although the flexibility to shed labour at will was shown to be a major influence in changing recruitment practices, a further advantage, from the perspective of

manufacturers, is the effect of agency workers on labour-capital dynamics in the workplace. Whilst not necessarily part of a coherent strategy to shift the balance of power towards capital, the logic of capitalist production to reduce labour costs has, nonetheless, had this effect (Hyman, 1987, p. 36). The data presented in Chapter 7 illustrated the overall despotic nature of the labour-capital relation. However, significantly, it also identified the possibility of consent, as well as the variegated responses that can flow from despotism. This chapter discusses how these findings complement, challenge and build upon theoretical approaches to coercion and consent in the labour process within contemporary forms of factory regimes.

2. From flexibility to labour control

In the first part of the previous chapter, union representatives and officials gave their interpretations of the growth of agency work in the auto sector. The union representatives in particular described how the presence of agency labour in some of the tougher workshops is indicative of a division of labour within assembly plants. Whilst official statistics paint an alarming picture – from the viewpoint of longstanding norms of permanent employment – of the rate of agency work in the sector, the description of even higher proportions of agency workers on the most demanding production lines illustrates how temporary agency work has become an “essential cog in the wheel” of production (Gorgeu and Mathieu, 2011, p. 80). Both Victor and Halim claimed that the plants they worked in could not function without the existence of the agency workers. This places the sector’s use of agency labour at odds with French legislation which explicitly refers to the “exceptional” nature of agency work. Union representatives emphasised how agency workers provided not only a flexible workforce for manufacturers, but also a means of selecting appropriate permanent workers, as identified by Gorgeu and Mathieu (2011). This “filtering” function, operating in the context of employment, generated advantages relating to labour control, a positive “externality” for management of the main driver of agency labour.

Elsewhere in the EU, the growth of agency work has been stimulated by significant changes in the regulatory environment. In France, growth occurred despite the absence of fundamental change to a restrictive legislative framework; the first major change to regulations concerning

employment agencies being the 2005 legislation. Steady growth of agency work has altered the composition of the agency workforce, from what is assumed to have been a predominantly female, clerical workforce in the 1950s and 1960s to a predominantly male, blue collar workforce (Vigneau, 2008, p. 85). The demographic composition of agency labour, and the extent of agency labour in the auto sector, is indicative of the largely involuntary nature of agency work, since the literature associates positive volition with women and professional occupations, rather than occupations traditionally associated with the “male breadwinner” model. Within the auto sector, the first significant wave of agency labour, occurring in the late 1990s, came after a process of restructuring and mass redundancies. Globally the industry has been marked by internal reorganisation and the implementation of lean production which has been accompanied by externalisation via both outsourcing and the restructuring of the value chain (Banyuls and Haipeter, 2010, p. 58), allowing car manufacturers to transfer entire workforces to a new employer, including those which remain at the plant, such as Trigo at Aulnay, thus transferring employer responsibilities. Agency labour is a way of incorporating the transfer of employer responsibilities into core productive activities. It is an attractive option in this highly internationalised and competitive industry – one that has undergone numerous crisis of profitability over the last four decades – in a context where the formal process of dismissal is complex and costly. These costs are not only financial and bureaucratic, they are also political. Large-scale redundancies very quickly become highly political, including at a national level, attracting the mobilisation of labour and political movements beyond the enterprise. Although the scale of job losses amongst agency workers in the auto sector in the 2008/9 also attracted much attention, the loss of temporary employment continues to generate less reaction than the loss of permanent jobs. Crucially, it does not engender sustained collective action to save jobs.

The use of temporary agency work reasserts the right of management to define labour force requirements at will. Labour – “flexible” according to the discourse of management, “disposable” (*des kleenex*) according to the discourse of trade unions – is reduced to “stock”, little different from any other factor of production. Embodied in the standard employment model is the “human” element of labour that sets it apart from other commodities. An outcome of historical, political processes shaped by a combination of macro- and micro-histories as

organised labour asserted itself economically and politically, the standard employment relationship obliges employers to treat employees as something other than just another factor of production. It does this by imposing social obligations towards the workforce, in particular through the alleviation of the risks associated with unemployment by guaranteeing secure employment and providing compensation should job loss occur. Agency labour obviates many of these obligations, so that “*lay-offs cost nothing*”, rendering the agency workers invisible as far as the reduction of the workforce is concerned.

The relative invisibility accorded to the shedding of agency labour obscures the reality of mass job losses for large numbers of workers. This is reflected in a terminology which differentiates the non-renewal of agency contracts from economic redundancies. The latter is *licenciement économique* – which entails complicated negotiations around the *plan social*; the former is merely the *non-renouvellement du contrat de mission*, which entails no negotiation and little compensation beyond the 10% precarious employment bonus. The *licenciement économique* sets in process a whole series of mechanisms through which labour asserts itself as a “commodity of a special kind” (Marx, 1969). The *non-renouvellement du contrat* is of concern only to the temporary employment worker – and his/her temporary work agency.

Given the regulation governing the use of agency labour, the rationale behind car manufacturers’ use of agency labour is only one part of the story. As discussed in Chapter 5, the history of the temporary employment agency in France has been a controversial one. Yet the opposition to agency labour expressed formally through legislation, and informally in the form of a widespread cultural rejection of agency labour, has not been a barrier to its sustained growth. Rather, the 1972 legislation, the first in Europe with the explicit aim of containing and limiting agency work, was the beginning, not only of its institutionalisation, but also of the right of employers to “bend the rules” (Beaud, 2004). The new legislation in January 2005 which formally established the role of agency work within the French employment landscape and permitted the use of agency work as a form of pre-hiring, was in fact the formalisation of what Belkacem et al. (2011) describe as a “slow revolution”, a practice which had been widely acknowledged for some time (Glazmann, 2005). Such “bending of the rules” (or rather, flagrant

disregard for the rules) by the car manufacturers has been widely acknowledged and tolerated by regulatory agencies.

As Pierre, the CGT union representative, and others pointed out, “*the law is good but it is not applied*”. The situation in the French auto sector contrasts with that of the German auto sector, where a strict legislative framework, is complemented by strong plant-based institutionalised trade union power, has prevented employers from introducing agency work on a large scale (Huw, 2010). The relative weakness of plant-based trade unionism in France has left unions incapable of sustained resistance to agency labour. This situation is compounded by an historic tendency of the unions to focus on the core workforce, and, at times, to view agency labour as a way of protecting the permanent workforce. In addition, weaknesses in the institutional mechanisms in place to protect employment standards have contributed to an observable “implementation gap” with regards to employment legislation. Although the Labour Inspectorate had some success in general workplace issues, agency labour appeared to be a blind spot – a situation compounded by the lack of resources on the ground. In addition, the identification of a system of priority-setting which accorded little weight to agency labour hints at the role of political factors. There was the suggestion that the low priority accorded to dealing with the misuse of agency labour was a consequence of political choices related to the problem of high youth unemployment; temporary agency work is tolerated since it is considered to be one of the ways of combatting unemployment.

Government policy has moved increasingly towards the temporary employment agency sector’s vision of its role as a key intermediary in 21st century labour markets. This trend has been promoted by the sector through years of well-targeted lobbying. The history of the temporary employment sector in France is an impressive path from pariah to privileged partner of public employment services. Early on in its history, major players, in particular Manpower which took its cue from the US experience, were able to identify market opportunities in areas such as car manufacturing, hitherto overlooked by the sector. In the late 1990s, when the auto industry was undergoing profound structural changes, temporary employment agencies were able to offer manufacturers cost-efficient means of adapting their workforce, stimulated by price wars and the economies of scale that came with large centralised contracts. Thus, Gorgeu and Mathieu

(1998) could describe temporary agency work in the auto industry at this time as a *spécialité à la française*.⁹²

Strong, strategic, alliances between these two important economic actors have been facilitated by the political priority accorded to combatting the persistence of youth unemployment that has blighted the employment landscape over the past two decades. Getting young people, particularly those in the *zones urbaines sensibles*, into employment, has largely overridden concerns over the type or “quality” of employment on offer. As a result, car manufacturers have succeeded in moving the goal posts of employment practices in the auto sector, with temporary employment agencies providing the means to embed agency work firmly within their human resource strategies. In doing so the sector has increasingly taken on elements of “neo-liberal enterprise” (Appay and Coffey, 2010, p. 41), within a national context that still retains many checks on capital associated with the standard employment relationship. This is an outcome of a confluence of factors starting from the need to adapt to a new model of accumulation in which labour is required to be a more pliable input into production. An aggressive and powerful temporary employment sector has facilitated this, itself aided by a combination of state action and inaction.

Bouquin makes a valid point in highlighting the continuity between the current form of two-tier workforce resulting from agency labour and the large numbers of immigrants who made up the *ouvriers spécialisés* (OS) in the past (Bouquin, 2006, p. 156). There, too, the state played an important role in facilitating access to cheap foreign labour. The state also facilitated the *retour au pays* when, in the aftermath of the militant strikes in PSA and Renault plants in the early 1980s to improve their conditions and wages, immigrant workers were considered too illiterate to be able to cope with the demands of an automated production process.⁹³ The mass lay-offs that took place in the 1980s and 1990s, which were accompanied by an increasing use of agency

⁹² UK studies on the car industry at this time also indicate the use of agency labour, but it appears to have been used more as a conscious strategy to create a “green” or entirely new workforce in order to facilitate new forms of work organisation in particular plants (Danford, 1988; Smith and Elger, 1998).

⁹³ News archive of proposals for redundancies in 1990 shows a PSA spokesperson explaining the incompatibility of “illiterate” and “untrainable” production workers at Aulnay with new production norms which are centred around automation and robotisation.
<http://www.ina.fr/economie-et-societe/vie-sociale/video/PAC02005808/aulnay-plan-social-a-citroen.fr.html>

labour, were also underpinned by government support. The Socialist government – the election of which had emboldened the OS to take strike action – underscored the plans of the big manufacturers to “streamline” their workforce. The government proposed shedding thousands of jobs in order to make the sector more competitive, and was prepared to facilitate this process through subsidies and by mediating between the companies and the trade unions. The trajectory taken by car manufacturers, presented as the inevitable outcome of economic conditions, cannot be separated from political choices which have smoothed the way for new forms of labour sourcing by auto manufacturing.

The reassertion of “employment-at-will” for a significant proportion of auto workers has consequences for the playing out of the structural tensions/contradictions that lie at the heart of the labour process. It is generally assumed there is an association between job insecurity and bad working conditions. Esping-Andersen’s (1990) concepts of commodification and decommodification capture the idea that labour which is exposed to the market will be subject to worse working conditions than labour which is protected from the market, job quality being associated with the degree of exposure. Burawoy (1985) took a deeper analytical leap in demonstrating that the freeing up of labour from the despotism of the market was reflected in the labour process as a particular configuration of coercion and consent. Where Esping-Andersen saw improvements in job quality, Burawoy saw the ability of labour to resist the arbitrary control of management in the labour process, resulting in a different type of factory regime. Whilst a key advantage of agency labour lies in providing car manufacturers with the capacity to easily adjust their workforce by availing themselves of a pool of labour – similar to a reserve army of labour though all the more efficiently filtered through the services of employment agencies – this function cannot be dissociated from its effect on the mechanisms of labour control. Indeed workforce size itself is an element of managing production, in particular with respect to the consequences upon levels of work intensification.

3. The place of agency work within a regime of hegemonic despotism

Whilst the focus of the research presented here is on agency labour, interviewees spoke at length about labouring in car plants in general. There was an overall narrative of a labour process

marked by years of restructuring, job loss and intensification of work. The discourse used to describe work at the factory corresponds little to the image promoted on the web sites and in the mission statements of companies such as PSA, which has been recognised for its “ethical” practices.⁹⁴ The journey to the Aulnay site on the company coach was illuminating in this respect. The atmosphere on the coach suggested a labour force drained of life, filled instead with a silent and weary resignation as the workers began their hour-long journey that would take them to eight hours of repetitive work on the line, only to repeat it again the next day. It is striking that a labour process that was described as harsh and pressurised two decades ago is now described as being even more intensive as productivity gains accompany a steady and significant reduction in the labour force (Durand, 1990; Corouge and Pialoux, 2011). Whilst some of the gains in productivity are due to technological developments, the accounts given in Chapter 7, which describe the increase in the speed of the line, the inability to “breathe” before the next car arrives, illustrate how work on the line has become increasingly intensified.

Burawoy’s identification of the key features of factory regimes under hegemonic despotism is largely borne out in this research. A climate of constant restructuring and job loss, and the ever implicit threat of delocalisation have created the context in which workers appear to have accepted the need to “sacrifice”, or at least see themselves unable to put up any collective resistance to the degradation of work. The global reach (in production terms) of a company such as PSA, reinforces the threat of delocalisation. The 2008 crisis intensified the generalised insecurity so that in the words of Victor, “*we are all agency workers in our heads*”. As a result, despite the formal guarantees accorded by the permanent contract, market despotism is not altogether absent, though there is a perception that the vulnerability of permanent workers is partly alleviated by the presence of agency workers.

Burawoy briefly described the transitory and atomised nature of temporary agency work which results in the deepening of the subordination of workers, tempered by the illusion of freedom (Burawoy, 1985, p. 264-265). What Burawoy did not envisage was the way in which temporary

⁹⁴ In 2003, PSA Peugeot-Citroën was named France’s most ethical company by the national observatory of ethical values (*Observatoire des valeurs éthiques*) and in 2009 received a diversity commendation from the government in recognition of good practice in HRM, which included a 2004 agreement on diversity and social cohesion. The latest (2010) Ethical Charter consists of key values to which the group and its employees should adhere. This includes respect for the law and non discrimination, and respect for health and safety.

agency labour could become a key element in the arsenal of hegemony. Sallaz's (2004) observation of how agency labour is both an implicit threat to permanent workers and a protection against closure has been borne out by this research, with agency workers considered simultaneously as a buffer to protect permanent worker from redundancy and from the worst jobs, and perceived also as an essential element in the long-term survival of the plant. The management of PSA openly argue that without agency labour, relocation is a real possibility: in 2003, amidst the criticism of the auto sector on the question, the head of Human Resources at PSA argued that "agency work constitutes a flexibility necessary to the development of our activities, and on a wider level, the maintenance of employment in France".⁹⁵ Yet this neither corresponds to the role of agency work established by legislation nor the normative values within the context of French society as a whole. It does, on the other hand correspond to dominant economic theories, reflected in the discourse and policy agendas of political elites that seek to end remaining examples of "labour market rigidities". The gradual encroachment upon long standing national employment norms does not, however, reflect the inevitable consequences of globalisation as some have argued (Ohmae, 1995). Institutions are not powerless to prevent flexible employment practices, rather they have facilitated this process, within the context of France's prevailing adherence to post-war employment norms.

This justification for maintaining large numbers of production workers on precarious contracts seems to have been accepted by core workers. It is not difficult to see how a labour force that has experienced the halving of its numbers, as is the case with the Aulnay plant, may be tempted to accept the transfer of risk to those on agency contracts. It is a rationale that is also accepted by some of the unions. The CFDT official expressed this most clearly in that he thought that, although agency work is a problem for the labour movement, it is inevitable given contemporary conditions of global competition. Durand (2004) wrote of the internalisation of changes in the labour process that have been associated with lean production such as just-in-time and forced cooperation; this finds an echo in Victor's description of the "progress circles" at PSA. Despite his contention that French workers are not very participative, they end up bound by a situation over which they feel they have little control. Similarly, the "inevitability"

⁹⁵ *Le Monde*, 23rd September 2003: PSA attempts to make the use of agency work in its factories unexceptional (*PSA tente de normaliser l'usage de l'intérim dans ses usines*).

of agency labour not only becomes a given, but also forms a *de facto* hierarchical division of labour which sees agency labour relegated to the bottom, thereby reinforcing mechanisms for eliciting consent. Stewart et al.'s (2004) contention that lean production represented a new mode of cultural control and compliance can be extended to agency labour, both as an element of lean production (the expression of JIT within labour force management), and itself a distinct form of control and compliance.

Permanent workers can actively perpetuate the disadvantage lodged within the agency contract. This is a contemporary form of “game playing” which sees workers attempting to alleviate their alienating experience (albeit marginally) by diffusing the worst aspects of labour process to agency workers. As well as being able to transfer risk and avoid the worst jobs, there is also the potential for permanent workers to engage in other types of “games” and “making out” (Burawoy, 1979) as a means of better enduring their subordination (Stewart et al., 2009, p. 148). Agency workers can find themselves the butt of jokes, or worse, the focus of anger, without the resources to respond in kind. Yet, agency labour plays a contradictory role when it provides a means of cushioning the experience of core workers. As well as transferring risk and some of the worst aspects of labour process, interviewees described how agency workers raise the benchmark for productivity since they are compelled to work so much harder than permanent workers. Agency labour exerts a downward pressure on the conditions of all workers in the plant by undermining the conditions for collective action due to the division of the workforce (Bouquin, 2006 p. 147). Thus the role of the agency worker as a buffer, whilst seeming to advance the interests of permanent workers, obscures the general interests of the workforce. By accepting agency labour, and by engaging in “games” which contribute to the inequitable division of labour on the shopfloor, core workers unwittingly contribute to the reinforcement and reproduction of the social relations which underpin their exploitation (Burawoy, 1985).

4. From consent to resistance? Expanding the repertoire of workplace behaviour

Agency labour, therefore, functions within the regime of hegemonic despotism to elicit “consent” to sacrifice (Sallaz, 2004). At the same time, agency workers are also subject to a

factory regime which constrains their range of actions within the workplace, and yet may also provide space for both consent and resistance. Studies in the auto industry discussed in previous chapters have assumed that the range of action available to agency workers is severely curtailed by their insecure status (Bouquin, 2006; Beaud and Pialoux, 1999). Other French authors writing about agency work in general assume that agency labour is subject to *surexploitation* – exploitation over and above social norms and excessive domination (Glazmann, 2006; Paugam, 2000). Whilst the interview data does confirm that agency workers are subject to a high degree of coercion to perform, it is possible to detect elements of consent which correspond to the kind of behaviours described by Gottfried (1992) and Smith (1998).

4.1 Transitory traces of consent within market despotism

Although this research focuses on PSA, the discourse of Daniel and Elodie, in contrast to that of Léa and Amina, and the secondhand accounts of Pierre and Halim, all provide evidence of how consent can operate in the context of a regime marked by coercion through labour market vulnerability. The discourse of the *contrats pros* at PSA is also illuminating. Whilst these young workers are not strictly agency workers in that they are seconded from their agency during their apprenticeship, they are still subject to insecurity and, in the absence of permanent employment at the end of their training, will need to rely upon the employment agency to negotiate access to future employment. Their positive orientations to their work at the beginning of their contracts were influenced by the sense that they were learning a trade – although, as pointed out by Victor, if PSA was not going to recruit them at the end of their contract, their training would be of limited use. Whilst it is not possible to make a direct correspondence between their experience and that of agency workers, it is possible to connect their experience with that of Daniel, whose desire for a “proper job” drove his willingness to engage in workplace behaviours associated with the “ideal worker”.

The nature of the interviews with Léa and Amina was such that it was not possible to probe further into their first days as agency workers at Aulnay, and their discourse did not go beyond negative descriptions of life as an agency worker at the plant. Given the theoretical focus on consent as well as compliance and coercion, it is the data from the Toyota plant which is more

pertinent. Both Daniel and Elodie spoke in ways that suggested that they had a strong perception of what constituted a “good” worker and that they had a need for “good” work to be acknowledged, in particular through respect in the workplace. This differs from Durand’s findings that place the younger generation at odds with the older generation which still holds to the idea of dignity in work (Durand, 2006, p. 265), but is similar to Padavic’s (2005) identification of a deep-seated need for agency workers to sustain a sense of dignity and self-respect in a work context which accords them the status of “outsiders”. Léa and Amina were faced with negative assumptions about their ability to do the job, despite being given harder posts than permanent workers. The agency workers in Padavic’s study continued to display commitment to their tasks and their colleagues despite the lack of reciprocal behaviour. When Daniel and Elodie found that respect and recognition of their work was not forthcoming, they attributed this to their status as agency workers. The hierarchical division of labour and inequality of treatment eventually undermined their willingness to approach their work in a positive way that indicated their consent.

It may be that for Padavic’s agency workers, the observed positive orientation to their work concealed negative sentiments, which Thompson (1983) refers to as muted resentment; unable to break from the need to display a positive attitude to work due to their vulnerability, agency workers can feel obliged to maintain an image of the conscientious worker, as was the case for Daniel. The compulsion to conceal attitudes which do not fit in with the image of a good worker, and also to engage in practices to get noticed in order to improve the (slim) chances of permanent employment, is thus transformed from being an expression of consent (enthusiastic participation) to compliance (resentment) under the coercion of the market.

4.2 The variegated effects of eroded aspirations and disillusion

In Smith’s (1998) research, “enthusiastic participation” was maintained by agency workers over time, although she does suggest that this may have been a mask concealing dissatisfaction with their situation. As Linhart and Linhart (1985, cited in Calderón, 2008) point out, it is possible for workers to work hard and simultaneously oppose their situation. The data presented here, however, reveals how time erodes the enthusiasm and commitment to perform if there is a

dissonance between expectations, aspirations and perceptions of justice, and the reality of their situation. When Daniel described his attempts to stand out, to get noticed by overachieving and exceeding expectations, he displayed a frustration that it was necessary to work so hard in order to give himself the best chance possible to get a permanent post. The need to be constantly on trial whilst the goal of permanent employment becomes increasingly elusive erodes the consent that is rooted in future, long-term aspirations. This undermines the operation of “soft” hegemonic mechanisms which elicit consent by tapping into the desire for a permanent post. This does not mean that there is a sudden qualitative shift from consent to work through to coercive compliance to labour, rather there is the co-presence of forms of constrained adhesion and submission which contain the seeds of “latent resistance” (Bouquin, 2006, p. 128). When compliance becomes the dominant orientation to work, the outcome may not differ in terms of productivity and workplace behaviour to that which flows from a more positive orientation – although this may depend upon the technical and intellectual nature of the work. Importantly, coercive compliance has the potential to tip over into acts of “misbehaviour” or more formal forms of resistance to the labour process.

In Daniel’s case, the outward image of the ideal worker concealed his internal reaction to his lack of job stability. On one level his active participation continued to be rooted in aspirations for permanent employment despite his awareness of how unlikely an outcome this was. He continued to engage in strategies that might lead to this right up to the end of his contract, displaying a form of cognitive dissonance in simultaneously grasping the highly insecure nature of his employment situation, the lack of opportunities open to him, whilst clinging on to the idea that he could have some control over his future by proving himself on the shopfloor and by cultivating good relations. This contrasts with Léa and Elodie who, drawing upon their deep-seated sense of injustice, combined with a readiness to accept the inevitable consequences of their action, asserted themselves in opposition to the user-organisation and, in turn, the employment agency. Elodie started from a similar point to Daniel, eager to get on, with a similar work ethic that facilitated an orientation to work corresponding to that expected by the two other parties in the triadic relationship. However, at some point she found that being a “good worker” was no longer sufficient to maintain her positive orientation to work. Like Daniel, she

emphasised the need for respect at work and expected respect to be accorded in relation to how she performed. The lack of respect was experienced as an assault on her dignity which she ultimately resolved through taking part in collective strike action. Elodie's response to disillusion and loss of aspiration, different to that of Daniel, may well have been conditioned by her individual biography. Coming from a family of union activists, she considered trade unions to be a natural tool for combatting workplace injustice. The way in which agency workers interpret their situation and frame their response depends upon a variety of factors, including personal biographies and the resources that they can draw upon. These resources are not only material – for example, their ability to sustain themselves should they be exposed to unemployment as a result of their actions – but also the internal resources they have accumulated from past and present social relations (family, education, work). Elodie and Léa, in different ways, drew upon a variety of resources that supported their choice to counter corporate demands, which resulted in their exit from their respective workplaces.

4.3 The relationship between resistance and exit in conditions of labour market vulnerability

Literature on temporary agency workers in the auto sector highlights the constraints they face in asserting themselves in opposition to management (Beaud and Pialoux, 1999; Bouquin, 2006; Gorgeu and Mathieu, 2011). Acts of resistance for agency workers as a whole are far less common than compliance, as agency workers are likely to accommodate to what is expected of them (Gottfried, 1992; Smith 1998), although Farcy (2008) is able to point to some rare examples of micro-resistance where the organisation of work permitted individual acts of “misbehaviour” to be undetected. Elodie and Léa were unusual in taking part in collective acts of resistance, aware that such action could, either directly or indirectly, cost them their jobs. Elodie knew that the path she was taking would not be looked upon favourably and she left Toyota due to implicit acts of victimisation following strike action. Léa's action in refusing to conceal her workplace accident led to her contract not being renewed. In one respect, this can be viewed as a modified version of the “exit strategy” (Edward and Scullion, 1982, cited in Smith, 2006). Farcy (2008) notes that exit can be a strategy for agency workers in low-wage, harsh or dangerous work where there is little respect or dignity for the agency workers. Perrin (2004)

sees this strategy as an individual action to redress the agency worker's lost dignity in the workplace. Léa and Halim suggested that this was feature of life at Aulnay for many young workers, given the conditions of work at the plant, although the desire to exit is not easily fulfilled. Being a low paid temp is "better than nothing" for many agency workers (Farcy, 2008, p. 163), since whilst contemporary European capitalism does not currently literally compel the worker to "work or starve", there is still a compulsion to work in order to maintain a socially acceptable minimum level of consumption, as well as non-material needs such as dignity and self-respect. Hence, the co-existence of negative attitudes to the working environment and action to keep the Aulnay plant open.⁹⁶

In contrast to the rhetoric of the temporary employment sector, low-skilled agency workers lack the mobility power that Smith (2006) views as a potential bargaining tool in the wage relationship. The ability to quit (in contrast to slave and feudal forms of labour), is a factor in the bargaining power of the employee (mobility-effort bargaining), particularly in contexts of high turnover or where professional employees have sought-after skills. The French auto sector has, in the past experienced retention problems due to the nature of the work. Pierre, CGT union representative, described how the Aulnay management brought in workers from as far away as Lille (220 km from Paris) as a substitute for the young workers of the *banlieues* of the north Parisian suburbs who were considered inappropriate and unlikely to respond to the demands of life on the shopfloor.⁹⁷ The presence of large numbers of employment agencies specialising in the auto sector has helped resolve this by providing a revolving pool of young workers with little risk to the manufacturer as agencies take on the role of selecting appropriate candidates. These young agency workers have little mobility bargaining power; the combination of high local youth unemployment and low qualifications significantly reduces their chances of employment elsewhere.

⁹⁶ Workers at the Aulnay plant illustrate this well. In interviews they have described their contradictory relationship with the plant. Whilst heavily critical of the work regime at Aulnay, they depend on the plant for their livelihoods, recognising that there is little on offer for them once the plant closes. See <http://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/220712/psa-aulnay-la-bombe-retardement-de-la-cite-des-3000>

⁹⁷ In a recent article on the Aulnay closure, workers (presumably members of the CGT) spoke of how the in the early 2000's the two main CGT reps at the plant put pressure on management to recruit local workers. See: <http://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/110712/des-salaries-daulnay-va-etre-le-cauchemar-de-psa-et-du-gouvernement>

In such a context, exit in the traditional sense has little effect in terms of disrupting the labour process, and is seen as a strategy of last resort in dichotomous opposition to “voice”, where dissatisfaction is expressed to management (Hirschman, 1970). However, in these examples, the willingness of Léa and Elodie to contemplate exit was a significant factor in propelling them to take action, in contrast to Daniel whose immediate concern was to maintain his job. This difference is located in part in their different biographies. Léa, with higher levels of qualifications, felt marginally more secure in her chances of employment, whilst Elodie’s status as a lone mother of young children, coupled with her frustration at her length of time as a “precarious worker” in the same plant, influenced her decision to make a stand.

5. Duality of control and the construction of hegemony within market despotism

Gottfried’s (1992) concept of duality of control encapsulates the double layer of management that is embodied in the triadic relationship. Duality of control operates first through the intake process whereby the agency selects appropriate workers and set out the behavioural parameters within which agency workers are expected to remain. The agency cultivates the image of an ideal worker whose “conduct and demeanour conforms to extant organisational norms” (Gottfried, 1992, p. 449) and elicits consent from the agency worker by presenting agency work as a path to permanent employment. In the data presented in the previous chapter, agencies do not appear to have proposed this as likely outcome, though agency workers can nurture this aspiration in spite of experience suggesting it is unlikely. More significant is the need to avoid the non-renewal of the agency contract and maintain good relations with the agency, the gatekeeper to future assignments. Thus the agency is able to set out the “rules of the game” which are expected to be adhered to in order to secure future income. In Gottfried’s (1992) account, the underlying rules related to how to interact with supervisors (e.g. not pestering them with foolish questions). Here, the most important rules are to work, keep your head down, and keep away from the unions. Thus, the agency acts as a transmission belt for the requirements of the user-organisation. This was most notable in relation to unions where “keeping away from unions” is presented as essential to maintaining good relations with the agency and the user-organisation.

Agencies can react negatively when agency workers step outside of the norms of expected behaviour. When Léa and Elodie did not conform, they were *classées/fichées*, struck off the list of reliable temps and, effectively, blacklisted. Duality of control is also expressed in expectations of “reliability”. Agency workers can feel pressurised to take whatever assignment is offer to them, however inconvenient, further illustrated by a CGT press release condemning the “harassment” of a single mother who was unable to work on the night shift at a PSA plant⁹⁸. Daniel considered that it was not possible to turn down a mission or to make holiday plans, for fear that he would not be viewed as reliable, and as a result, lose out on future assignments, conforming to Peck and Theodore’s (2001) “reliably contingent” agency worker. The rhetoric of choice, therefore, seems hollow in the light of the experience of agency workers. Neo-liberal discourse, reflected in national and European policy orientations, makes much of the freedom and choice that is generated by market mechanisms. This is also reflected in the discursive practices of the temporary employment sector. “Choice” operates here on various levels. Agency work is promoted as responding to “choice” as expressed in the market with the growth of the sector driven by demand for and supply of temporary labour. Furthermore, agency work is said to offer the freedom and liberty to choose when and for whom to work. Neo-liberal discourse, however, encounters difficulties within the French context, which, despite having experienced incremental reforms inspired by neo-liberalism, is still characterised by its opposition to neo-liberalism at both the discursive level (Jefferys, 2010), and concretely, as evidenced by the mass strikes and mobilisations that have taken place over the past two decades.

The temporary employment sector, therefore, has been obliged to engage in supplementary forms of discursive practices to legitimise the use of agency labour, for example, the “good practice” charter agreed between the major agencies and PSA in response to criticisms of agency work in the auto sector. The concentration of agency work in lower-skilled occupations is not easily associated with “freedom” and “choice” through agency work, and has also obliged the sector to promote the role of agency labour as an indispensable mechanism in facilitating the labour market integration of young workers. Successful industry lobbying has played a role in

⁹⁸ REF to CGT leaflet

legislative change that has modified the 1972 legislation. The process of extending the role of the sector to take on more employment services has been facilitated by neo-liberal policy prescriptions at EU and national level which aim to reduce the role of the state in the allocation of goods and services, by replacing the underfunded and inefficient French public employment service with private, for-profit organisations (employment agencies). One of the less publicised consequences of the EU Directive on Temporary Agency Work is the further deregulation of the sector and the removal of restrictions on agency work.

The hegemonic dimension of “normalising” agency labour amongst young workers relies on a lack of credible employment alternatives which reinforce the perception that assistance is needed in accessing employment, thereby creating a “new culture of work” (Degiuli and Kollmeyer, 2007), different to that of previous generations of car workers. The ideological shift in conceptions of the school-to-work transition is reinforced by the closure of direct entry to employment at PSA, as described by interview participants. In turn, it is the large agencies that facilitate access to flexible labour to PSA and the surrounding factories which supply the assembly plants, by providing a pool of appropriate labour at a competitive price. Thus, employment agencies and auto manufacturers contribute to the emergence and reinforcement of a local youth labour market in which temporary employment is increasingly the norm. The auto sector is an important source of employment for young workers in Aulnay-sous-Bois and in the Seine-Saint-Denis department. The high proportions of youth in the department who leave school with no qualifications could, in previous generations, have hoped to embark on long-term employment in a workplace such as the Aulnay plant. Today, access to employment is increasingly mediated by the specialist agencies which have emerged over the course of the last two decades, as illustrated by high levels of (manual) agency labour amongst the young workers in the area (Pottier and Hamet, 2011). The involvement of employment agencies in training and labour market insertion of those who are least qualified will deepen this process.

Although precarious work may be increasingly the norm for young people, in particular for those who rely on the auto sector for employment, this does not necessarily translate into a positive internalisation of this form of employment. France is still a country that is characterised

by a deep-seated cultural hostility to the “normalised insecurity” that the temporary employment sector is attempting to construct (Peck and Theodore, 2007). Numerous attempts to overhaul labour legislation have met with intense and active opposition, in which youth have also played an important role (e.g. the strikes and occupations against the CPE – First Employment Contract). So whilst young workers at the Aulnay plant may be accustomed to the lack of job security that has been encroaching on the sector since the 1990s (Beaud and Pialoux, 1999), this does not necessarily equate with a normative acceptance of agency work, particularly when the phase of transition to permanent work is increasingly extended into the future. Brahim, for example, contrasted his situation with that of his father’s generation, for whom secure work was taken as a given. Rather than a positive acceptance (consent) to the “new culture of work”, the data point more towards compliance due to an inability to counter the constraints of new labour market conditions. Deguili and Kollmeyer (2007), who describe the ideological cultivation of precarious employment as a norm by employment agencies through practices aimed at recasting expectations of employment, hint that the success of such practices is not a given. The research presented here suggests that temporary employment agencies have been more successful in influencing governments than in winning over the hearts and minds of French workers, despite an environment that is critical of agency work in some quarters (Vigneau, 2008, p. 86), as illustrated by the approach of the CFDT.

The traces of consent discussed above can be viewed as agency workers confronting constraints by playing the rules of the game, as laid down by the agency and the user-firm, with the aim of overcoming those constraints. A similar observation is applicable to the *contrats pros*. Consensual behaviour is also facilitated by the perceptions of the “good worker” which Padavic (2005) describes as being a residual element of Fordism. Attention, therefore, turns to how labour – as a special kind of commodity – will inevitably assert its agency. Despite the constraints of the labour process, workers will be found attempting to react to and engage with their work context. The range of workplace behaviours in which workers engage encompasses consent, compliance and resistance. Where consent is observed, it is not necessarily an indicator of hegemonic influence. It can arise from internal sources of “self-discipline” as well as discipline cultivated by the temporary employment agency. Consent can be both a way of

achieving material security and employment (adopting stances required by agencies and user-organisations) and a way of achieving a sense of meaning or dignity at work by adopting self-imposed standards of work.

For Padavic (2005), the need to frame identity and self respect around perceptions of being a “good worker” was associated with overcoming the stereotype of being “just a temp” (Hensen, 1996). In the interviews, the negative connotations associated with being “just a temp” coloured the way in which agency workers viewed social relations within the workplace, from being blamed for mistakes, to assumptions about the quality of their work, to being subject to potentially unpleasant banter, without the capacity to respond. Overcoming the treatment that results from negative stereotypes requires agency workers to go that extra mile, to overachieve in order to gain respect. Whilst this may not go as far as representing “loyalty”, as suggested by Padavic (2005), it can result in a (temporary) correspondence with the goals of the user-organisation. In trying to overcome what Padavic refers to as the “spoiled identity” imposed upon them by their status as agency labour, through taking control of their own “identity management”, agency workers can also contribute to the reproduction of the social relations that perpetuate a form of labour that is marginalised in terms of employment rights.

This is not to fall into post-structuralist or Foucauldian concepts which focus on subjective identity as the primary unit of interest in social research. Nor does it suggest that the working class is bound to reproduce capitalist social relations, which Burawoy implies in his reflection on the transition from the hegemonic regime to hegemonic despotism (located in the incorporation of workers under the hegemonic regime, and the subsequent inability of organised labour to resist the neo-liberal assault on labour standards⁹⁹). The compulsion to frame “identities” in response to the “spoiled identity” of the temp can also result in instances of “misbehaviour” that can undermine those social relations, as the examples of Léa and Elodie illustrate. Both took part in strike action and Léa refused to conceal her work accident. Personal processes (reactions to situations and events) can be both individual and collective since collective action depends upon how situations are perceived by individuals (Martinez-Lucio and

⁹⁹ See foreword to the Chinese edition of *Manufacturing Consent* available on the authors’ website <http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/Biography/Thirty%20Years.pdf> Accessed 19th March 2012.

Stewart, 1997). The disillusion and resentment that was expressed in the interview data, including that of Daniel, reflects a realisation that there is a conflict, rather than a correspondence, between organisational and individual goals. This opens the door to a different set of behaviours within the workplace, which can include individual and collective resistance.

The individual strategies that agency workers engage in, encouraged by an employment contract which isolates agency workers from both co-workers (at the user-organisation) and co-employees (employed by the agency), are bound up in the tensions that arise from the structural antagonism of a labour process that is a collective endeavour. The “identities” adopted to pursue individual goals are not incompatible with collective action (Martinez Lucio and Stewart, 1997), as the trajectories taken by Léa and Élodie illustrate. The lack of respect and dignity at work and the requirement to keep your head down and work without questioning management authority was ultimately viewed as an assault on their “identities”, which they were expected to conceal behind the image of the “ideal worker”.

Yet, participating in collective action is difficult for agency workers. As expected, the interview data draws out the many barriers to union mobilisation. Those who are willing to engage in collective forms of resistance find themselves at risk of unemployment, thus depriving trade unions of a new generation of potential activists (Bérout, 2009). Beyond the barriers which are associated with job insecurity and the duality of control, temporary agency workers have also have had to contend with a lack of consistent support from the labour movement. The historical opposition to temporary employment agencies adopted by trade unions, although rooted in a “progressive” defence of the standard employment relationship, had the effect of turning the attention of trade unions away from the mobilisation and defence of agency workers within the framework of the agency contract. Trade unions have since modified their approach. The CFDT’s “*recentrage*” of the late 1970s was the basis upon which it accommodated to the emerging neo-liberal consensus around “flexibility” and the acceptance of temporary agency work as a legitimate form of employment. The CGT, whilst maintaining its fundamental opposition to agency labour, has attempted carve out a position that simultaneously provides a

platform for the concerns of agency workers, through the USI-CGT. SUD, as a new, radical, protest-oriented trade union, has a position similar to the CGT.

Over the last decade, there has been increasing interest in the need to find new ways of engaging with workers on precarious contracts. The obstacles presented by the triadic relationship of agency work have proved to be difficult to overcome. The organisational structures of trade unions do not facilitate the mobilisation of a workforce that is fragmented across different sites of work, that moves from one workplace to another and is formally separate from the permanent workers they work alongside. Attempts to overcome this by organising workers according to geographical territories have demonstrated the potential of new methods of organisation and mobilisation, but success has been limited and contingent upon local factors such as the presence of dynamic, young activists and a local social movement network. At the PSA plant, despite instances of collective action by agency workers in the past, levels of unionisation remain low. The union representatives described their attempts to combat *precarité* at the plant, mainly through communication (leaflets), but also, where possible, through supporting agency workers where problems arose, and through the legal challenges where they had a chance of demonstrating misuse. The high proportions of agency workers at the plant illustrates the limited impact they are able to have.

6. New forms of hegemonic practices under conditions of market despotism

The extensive use of agency labour has consequences that extend beyond the ability to alter the size of the workforce in response to market conditions. Agency workers labour under a modified political apparatus of production, based not only on the removal of the standard employment relationship, but also upon the duality of control which emerges from a triadic employment relationship. The factory regime under which permanent workers labour is also influenced by the presence of agency workers, who act both as a buffer and a reminder of how much worse their conditions could be, as well as a force for establishing higher benchmarks for productive activity. More significantly, both empirically and theoretically, the data presented here suggests that the range of workplace behaviours of agency workers cannot be reduced to passivity and subjugation under the yoke of despotism. There is also room for consent and

resistance, though the former may be short-lived before it turns into compliance, and the latter may be followed by exit (forced or “voluntary”) with both forms of behaviour determined by the insecure nature of the contract, and influenced by the duality of control that lies within the triadic relationship.

Despite the overwhelmingly coercive nature of work as described by interviewees, and confirmed by other sources, the factory regime that frames the labour process of agency workers does contain room for what can be described as forms of hegemonic practices, albeit to a lesser degree and of a different kind, to those experienced by permanent co-workers. Burawoy suggested that labour control under the hegemonic regime rested upon the notion of a shared prosperity between workers and the employing organisation, given that market coercion was blunted by progressive reforms (welfare and employment rights). Under new conditions of mobile capital, this gave way to a new form of hegemony premised upon the “mutual consideration” of plant profitability (Sallaz, 2004). For agency workers, on the other hand, the threat of job loss is an omnipresent feature of their working lives. High levels of productivity are not associated with increasing the profitability of the workplace but with the immediate task of maintaining employment tomorrow. In this sense, the market despotism that comes from the reestablishing of the right of employers to dismiss unsatisfactory workers (Degiuli and Kollmeyer, 2009) creates a “coordination of interests” only in a very loose sense. However loose it may be, it still indicates that consent can emerge even within highly coercive factory regimes. This appears to be less to do with the success of the hegemonic practices of employment agencies and more to do with personal orientations to work and the aspirations of agency workers to access permanent posts, even if conditions suggest that this outcome is unlikely. On the other hand, the agencies set out the rules expected in order to maintain good relations with their clients (the user-organisations) and, implicitly, the agencies themselves. Duality of control, therefore, can operate through a combination of aspiration and fear of loss of income, illustrated in the positive examples of wanting to work well (getting noticed) and negative examples of keeping quiet (keeping one’s head down). Over time, the persistence of job insecurity and lack of progression creates the context for the prevalence of compliance over consent. Similarly, there are instances where agency workers are prepared to step out of the

constraints imposed by their contractual situation and assert their labour rights. Although the nature of the temporary agency contract leaves the agency worker unprotected against job loss and exposed to a dual system of labour control, labour is still capable of asserting itself.

The presence of temporary agency workers within auto plants also constitutes an important element of the ideological basis of compromise in the face of management restructuring, as the remaining core of permanent workers are marginally less exposed to job loss. In addition, permanent workers are protected from the worst jobs, illustrating how the “buffering” function of the agency workforce operates at different levels. The description of workplace relations in which agency workers feel less able to partake in workplace rituals of banter and jokes, provides a further illustration of how the hierarchical division of the workforce according to employment status creates opportunities for some sections of the workforce to engage in what Thompson and Ackroyd (1993) refer to as “irresponsible autonomy”, whilst others experience more constraints in their workplace interactions. However, as the current threat to the Aulnay plant demonstrates, flexible labour is no guarantee of job security, as the cracks in the “peripheral ring” that is meant to protect permanent workers are exposed. This poses the possibility of overcoming divisions based upon employment status, as both agency and core workers face the threat of job loss in a local context such as Aulnay where a large assembly plant dominates the employment landscape. Yet there is nothing inevitable about a united resistance to lay-offs and closures, and the opposite effect can occur with workers throughout the sector accepting worse conditions for fear of meeting the same fate of those at Aulnay, providing the context for a reconfiguration of hegemonic despotism within the sector.¹⁰⁰

Beyond the theoretical considerations of the nature of the factory regime and the identification of different forms of workers’ agency, there is also the immediate issue of the challenges posed to the labour movement in directing those instances of workers’ agency – where they correspond to the concerns of collective labour – into collective mobilisation and action. The current period opened up by the crisis of 2008 leaves agency workers in the auto sector more

¹⁰⁰ At the PSA plant in Sevel Nord, the decision of management to produce the K-Zero vehicle was predicated upon the acceptance of a competitiveness agreement which included clauses such as a wage freeze for two years. See <http://www.humanite.fr/social-eco/psa-linsupportable-chantage-de-la-direction-aux-salaries-de-sevelnord-501105?x>

vulnerable than ever. The first group of workers to pay the price of the crisis, they have since found themselves subject to an intense period of “yo-yo” employment. Agency workers are likely to continue to play a central role in providing manufacturers with a convenient and risk-free form of flexible labour, despite the persistence of key elements of post-war employment norms and the promise of the new Socialist government to tax the excessive use of temporary labour.

The research presented here has provided further evidence of the process by which car manufacturers have been able to override the legislative framework that governs temporary agency work, itself designed to protect the standard employment relationship and prevent the use of agency labour as a way of escaping labour market “rigidity”. An essential part of this process has been the successful emergence of the temporary employment sector within the key period of French socio-economic history which set in motion the post-war social model. Also essential is the history of the French auto sector, a sector marked by conflictual labour relations and which, in the post-war years, for a significant section of the workforce, bore only a limited resemblance to Burawoy’s hegemonic regime, despite its key position within the French economy and labour movement. The use of cheap and over-exploited immigrant labour in a labour regime characterised by the lack of full citizenship rights, can be viewed as a forerunner to contemporary forms of segmentation which are based upon the denial of full employment rights in a socio-economic context that has reinforced the vulnerability of labour to market despotism. In new conditions of accumulation (globalisation) the alliance between the temporary employment sector and the auto industry, facilitated by the (in)action of the state, generated the conditions for this new form of segmentation and the reconfiguration of labour control that emerged.

The next chapter extends the discussion on changing forms of factory/production regimes and and the new forms of consent, compliance and resistance that arise from these regimes by examining how Burawoy’s concept of hegemonic despotism can be applied beyond this case study to broader developments in the labour process. It takes as its starting point the extension of agency labour and other forms of precarious work within an emerging socio-economic

context that appears to be increasingly unfavourable to the position of labour within the labour process, and broadens the discussion out to general emerging tendencies within European workplaces. This extended theoretical contribution supplements the empirical data presented in previous chapters.

CHAPTER 9

HEGEMONY AND DESPOTISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

1. Introduction

The expansion of temporary agency work into occupational arenas in which permanent employment contracts were previously the norm has taken place within an overall context of change that has significantly undermined the post-war settlements that underpinned the influence of labour within the workplace and, also, society as a whole. The combined pressures of diminished protection, the risks associated with job loss, and the internal squeeze on labour as organisations exhort employees to “work harder with less” (McGovern et al., 2007) is a general feature of workplace relations for many employees within contemporary capitalism in advanced economies. As capital seeks a “qualitative intensification” of labour (Thompson, 2010), Burawoy’s concept of hegemonic despotism, a seemingly paradoxical production regime that combines hegemony and despotism (Vallas and Hill, 2012, p. 175), appears to be more relevant than ever as workers experience labour regimes of tighter internal controls in the context of exposure to external economic risk. In France, the UK, and elsewhere, research has pointed to the intensification of work, often imposed by workplace bullying and “management by terror” (Beale and Hoele, 2013; Carter et al., 2011; Coutrot, 2006; Palpacuer and Seignour, 2012; Taylor et al., 2010; Thompson, 2010). At the same time, prevailing managerial discourse continues to emphasise humanistic values and “soft” HRM (Thompson, 2011). This dissonance between workplace realities and the professed aims of normative models of HRM indicates a tension between the different dimensions of labour control within contemporary labour processes. On the one hand there is an appeal to workplace commitment based upon normative assumptions regarding employment relations and “decent” work. On the other hand, those elements of employment associated with “decent work”, such as permanent employment, discretion and autonomy, are being undermined as more authoritarian forms of labour control, that bear little resemblance to text book norms, take hold. The growth of contingent and precarious forms of employment had already begun to undermine scholarly assumptions regarding a future of high performance work systems, employee involvement and commitment, given their association with long term employment. The situation of significant proportions of

agency workers, stuck in low-paid work with little prospect of permanent work, and subject to authoritarian control regimes provides a glimpse of the impact of job insecurity within a context of crisis and welfare state retrenchment.

Changes in the provision of welfare entitlements to those not in employment have resulted in a reinforcement of market discipline on labour within Europe. In many countries, reductions in unemployment benefits have been accompanied by sanctions for those not considered to be doing enough to secure employment (Eurofound, 2010), providing governments and employing organisations with a powerful mechanism to propel workers to take up whatever jobs are available, however low-paid and lacking in job quality. The recent body of literature on workplace tyranny and “management by terror” suggests that despotism as a feature of the labour process extends beyond the contingent workforce and that the global financial crisis has intensified this development (Thompson, 2011; 2013). Taking the growth of agency labour and other forms of contingent employment as a starting point, this chapter discusses the factors which define contemporary production regimes for broader groups of workers. The first part of the chapter contextualises the development of temporary agency work by situating it within the general development of employment and work within Europe. It then sets out political and economic processes which frame hegemonic despotism. The chapter then introduces a conceptual matrix which attempts to capture the complex variety of labour process under contemporary conditions of capitalist accumulation. It does so by both building upon the research presented in previous chapters and the recent literature on work in the 21st century outlined in the first part of the chapter.

2. Labouring under conditions of employment insecurity

The previous chapter referred to the challenges that confront workers faced with an economic system that appears less able or willing to provide secure employment for large sections of workers. The ability to provide for oneself and for one’s family – both in the present and in the future – is an important component of modern democracies. For much of the last century, European workers were, in large part, able to conceive of a future in which they and their children could prosper (relatively speaking), giving them a stake in capitalist social relations,

within which the exploitation of the capitalist labour process was partially obscured (Burawoy, 1985). The economic crisis has shaken the prospects for whole swathes of workers in Europe, whilst also encouraging those voices promoting further deregulation of the labour market as a way of creating jobs. Temporary employment agencies, as powerful resource-rich entities, have been able to respond to new conditions by envisaging future pathways to flexible employment in which they play a key role in ensuring the supply of flexible labour. As set out by Peck and Theodore (2002), agencies play an active part in the construction of a flexible (insecure) labour market. Previous chapters have discussed how the French temporary employment sector has carved out its role historically, placing it in a good position to take advantage of the current context, and to further promote its activities in uncertain labour markets. In the UK, employment agencies have used the “Swedish derogation” to establish new forms of employment that are more insecure than the traditional agency contract, in order to bypass the additional costs of agency labour arising from the implementation of the EU Directive on Agency Work. Agencies are able to set up a permanent contract with agency workers, thereby waiving their right to the protections accorded by the 2011 UK Agency Work Regulations (AWR). Whilst permanent, these contracts do not provide employment security in any real sense since the average minimum working hours can be set as low as four hours a week. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the full force of the duality of control inherent in the agency contract is being felt by agency workers forced to sign the new contracts under threat of losing their jobs (Purcell, 2013). Agency contracts also make up a large number of UK workers on “zero hours” contracts, which tie workers to an employer without a corresponding promise of work, and in some cases deny them the right to employment elsewhere. These contracts are used in a wide range of sectors (e.g. retail, food processing and higher education).¹⁰¹ Other European countries, such as Austria, Ireland and Sweden, have also seen a significant rise in these contracts (Eurofound, 2010). Working time, a long-contested frontier of control within the labour-capital relationship (Taylor et al., 2010), has been ceded in its entirety to management in the zero hours or on-call contract, with workers obliged to work “unsociable” hours whether they want to or not (Eurofound, 2010). Management is able to limit wage labour strictly to that required at any

¹⁰¹ See Unison Factsheet on zero hours contracts: <https://www.unison.org.uk/upload/sharepoint/Briefings%20and%20Circulars/Zero%20Hours%20Factsheet.pdf>

given time whilst enforcing behavioural compliance through their direct control over future hours.

Germany, often held up as a model of economic success combined with institutionally embedded social partnership (Greer, 2008), has also experienced a dramatic degradation of work and pay over the past decade. The 2003 Hartz reforms, aimed at creating employment through “active” labour market policies and labour market deregulation, led to an explosion of “mini-jobs” and the erosion of pay in the service sector (Hassel, 2011). A decade later, nearly a quarter of German employees (23%) are in low-wage employment (earning less than €9.15 an hour).¹⁰² Although manufacturing workers in Germany have continued to be relatively protected compared with workers in other sectors, in particular those in part-time insecure employment, recent concessions agreed by auto workers’ unions indicate that the pay and conditions of core workers are increasingly under threat. In both Germany and France, the economic crisis of 2008 has intensified the process of concession bargaining within car manufacturing, with the threat of relocation and plant closures undermining the capacity of unions to defend the terms and conditions of workers. Shortly after the PSA’s restructuring and plant closures became public, Renault forced unions to agree to a new employment contract (*l’accord du compétitivité*). The contract included a 6.5% increase in working time and a wage freeze.¹⁰³ Unions at the General Motors Strasbourg plant accepted an agreement in which they ceded six days of annual leave and their bonus in addition to a wage freeze and the loss of 200 jobs.¹⁰⁴ In Germany, unions at General Motors agreed to a pay freeze and the closure of one of their plants in return for safeguarding the jobs of 20,000 workers.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² The study was carried out by the Institute for Work, Skills and Training at the University of Duisburg-Essen. See <http://www.theguardian.com/money/2012/oct/26/real-cost-labour-reforms-germany>.

¹⁰³ “Renault: l’accord du compétitivité signé par trois syndicats” (Renault: the competitiveness agreement signed by three unions), *Le Monde*, 13th March, 2013.
http://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2013/03/13/renault-l-accord-de-competitivite-signe-mercredi-par-trois-syndicats_1847007_3234.html

¹⁰⁴ “A Strasbourg, “regrets” et “ambiance malsaine” pour les anciens de GM” (At Strasbourg, “regrets” and “bad feeling” for ex-GM workers), *Libération*, 5th March, 2013.
http://www.liberation.fr/economie/2013/03/05/a-strasbourg-regrets-et-ambiance-malsaine-pour-les-anciens-de-gm_886542

¹⁰⁵ Automotive News Europe, 28th February, 2013, “GM guarantees Opel jobs after unions agree to factory closure, pay freeze”.
<http://europe.autonews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20130228/ANE/130229890/gm-guarantees-opel-jobs-after-unions-agree-to-factory-closure-pay#axzz2cirIRYQ7>.

The ability of capital to hold labour to ransom in this way lies in the insecurity that Burawoy identified as an outcome of globalised capital's ability to relocate elsewhere, and points to the expansion of employment insecurity beyond those on temporary contracts (Broughton et al., 2010). In this sense, the concept of precarity can be generalised to the wider working population. The impact of neoliberal globalisation upon the the ability of workers to access secure and stable working futures and maintain post-war gains has been extensively discussed since the 1990s (Bourdieu, 1998; Beck, 1992; and Paugam, 2000). The extent of the precarity has been recently critiqued by Doogan (2009) who argues that employment insecurity has been exaggerated. Instead, the precarious nature of employment exists more as a mental state that is manufactured as an ineluctable fact of globalisation, and which negatively affects the confidence of workers. Doogan (2009) correctly draw attention to the political choices that underpin economic outcomes (as opposed to the workings of inevitable economic forces). He also correctly identifies the continued prevalence of permanent employment. However, he underestimates how the growth of contingent work, and the existence of, for example, agency workers working alongside workers on permanent contracts, doing the same work but on very different pay and conditions, can act as a brake upon workers' collective action. Such working arrangements can also undermine normative assumptions concerning conditions of employment and the confidence of workers on the shopfloor. Whilst Doogan makes some salient points in his critique of those who lament the "inevitability" of current trends, he underestimates how the end of employment for life, coupled with the focus on the responsibility of individuals to maintain and develop their "employability" across the lifecourse, can impact upon employees' experience of job insecurity. When jobs growth is driven by contingent work and the phenomenon of underemployment¹⁰⁶, those who have survived redundancy may well feel fragile in relation to the labour market (Taylor, 2012). The fear of job loss expressed by UK public sector workers in a recent study (Gallie et al., 2012) illustrates the pressures faced by segments of the "core" labour force. This fear is likely to be exacerbated by welfare regimes that sanction rather than protect the unemployed – an effect of the disciplinary element of active labour market policies put into place by EU states (Eurofound, 2010).

¹⁰⁶See <http://www.euractiv.com/socialeurope/europes-growing-army-underemploy-news-512315>

3. The tightening of the chain in the contemporary workplace

Whilst job insecurity is directly experienced by temporary agency workers and other contingent workers, it is not confined to these groups of workers. In the current context, in particular, its effects are felt throughout the labour market, and, in sphere of control over the labour process, employment insecurity facilitates the ability of management to tighten control over their workforce. Anecdotal and academic evidence in France, the UK, and elsewhere points to an intensification of management control across a broad range of occupational profiles (Felstead et al., 2007). In France, the telecommunications sector is a dramatic example of how changes in the organisation of work have created a context of workplace suffering that has had tragic consequences in the form of high numbers of suicides. Extensive restructuring and downsizing of France Telecom (60,000 jobs lost between 1998 and 2008) has transformed the working conditions of what was a well-protected public sector workforce. Palpacuer and Seignour (2012) document the decades-long process of organisational change that transformed this major state company into a share-holder driven multinational. As a result, the organisational culture and practice of France Telecom (FT) is now one of “social violence” hidden beneath benign management rhetoric. According to the study, half of the 32 suicides that took place at FT between 2008 and 2009 can be directly linked to “organisational bullying” in the context of new forms of management and pressure to work harder, an association that has been identified in other research (Fevre et al., 2012). The gradual change in the status of FT, from nationalised company to a profit-driven privatised financial concern, had the effect of altering employee orientations to their work and to management, in an organisational context perceived to be centred on the “exclusively finance driven project” of top management (Palpacuer and Seignour, 2012, p. 161), resulting in intensified and tightened managerial control. In the French postal sector too, oppressive working conditions have been identified as a factor behind two suicides in 2012, within a broader context of a reduced labour force (a loss of 24% between 2002 and 2011) and the extensive use of agency labour (Lefebvre, 2008), combined with increasing workflows.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2012/10/articles/fr1210011i.htm>

Berribi-Hoffman's (2012) study of French IT professionals in multinational companies, working under a variety of employment/consultancy contracts, identified a relationship of domination enforced by perceptions of insecurity, which left employees unable to challenge heavy workloads. Thus the consequences of lean production, described in this thesis in the context of the auto sector, make themselves felt in other parts of the economy. In Carter et al.'s (2011, 2013) study of UK tax processing, the deskilling of previously skilled clerical work has facilitated work intensification and micro-management through performance monitoring, supplemented by measures aimed at ensuring compliance to targets (e.g. the display of individual results on whiteboards). Here, the shift from "indirect normative" control to "direct performative control" is framed by the principles of New Performance Management (NPM) through which the organisation of work has been realigned to mirror private sector business models in a quest for "efficiency" and "value for money". Technological innovation, which once offered the promise of skill enhancement and autonomy (Guiliano, 2008, cited in Carter et al., 2011), has instead been employed to impose routinised, standardised and repetitive work that is closely monitored and controlled (Carter et al., 2011). Diminishing control via management strategies to regulate and audit performance through targets and client/customer feedback (Carter et al, 2013; Taylor et al., 2010; Thompson 2011) has been accompanied by bullying as a form of management control (Palpacuer and Seignour, 2012; Beale and Hoele, 2013). The frontier of control has shifted considerably in favour of management. As a result, the range of permissible workplace behaviours is being reassessed, with hitherto "legitimate" behaviour now categorised as deviant. Thus, sickness absence, once a point of refuge for workers, and even tolerated as a guard against more damaging forms of workplace disruption (Edwards and Scullion, 1982), has become an unwelcome cost to be minimised (Taylor et al., 2010). The principle of lean – aggressively implemented within the labour process and resulted in a reduced core workforce – has rendered workplace attendance an area of contestation to be resolved through coercion rather than consensus.

Similar processes are occurring elsewhere in Europe where the public sector is under pressure to replicate the private sector model of cost-cutting. The case of the French postal sector, as cited above, is one such example. Other parts of the French public sector, such as education, are also

facing strains due to the combined effects of workforce reduction and increased workloads (Mongourdin-Denoix, 2013). In Austrian hospitals, the outsourcing of “secondary” non-medical services and the reduction of labour costs has been found to lead to lower wages and a deterioration in working conditions.¹⁰⁸ It is in the UK, however, that the encroachment of models associated with the competitive private sector has gone furthest, with the private sector taking on more responsibility in the direct delivery of public services, often through temporary employment agencies. In the sphere of adult social care, the results of this process are currently most visible in terms of public debate, first and foremost concerning the quality of service delivery, but increasingly with regards to the nature and quality of employment within the sector. In this example, employment insecurity is linked to the precarious employment status, rather than the ebbs and flows of a consumer product market. The nature of this work, taking place within the homes of service users, would appear on the surface to encourage the autonomy and discretion of skilled carers. Yet here too, autonomy is undermined by pressures associated with “efficiency savings”, with low-paid care workers under pressure to finish caring tasks in the limited time accorded to them (Pennycock, 2013). Both the nature of the employment contract and the isolated nature of the work are barriers to challenging bad employment practice and the effect of these practices on the care provided.¹⁰⁹ Belanger and Edwards (2013) note that whilst the labour process involved in providing individual care differs considerably from that of a worker in a factory or a call centre, the broader context of a neo-liberal economy undergoing further restructuring in the post-2008 period makes its presence felt. The control of working time is driven by cost-cutting imperatives as local government reduces the funds available for the delivery of the service.

Similar examples of negative workplace experiences related to job insecurity, staff cuts and pressure from workplace reorganisation have been identified in other national contexts, such as Ireland (Russell and McGinnity, 2013), presenting a very real challenge for significant sections of Europe’s labour force (Eurofound, 2013). The Fifth Danish Work Environment Cohort Study

¹⁰⁸ Qualitative case study carried out by the Working Life Research Centre (FORBA). For an English summary of the research see <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco/2012/06/AT12060211.htm>

¹⁰⁹ Some care workers feel unable to give their names when reporting on their employment conditions in the national press, see for example, guardian.com/society/2013/jun/13/care-firms-law-on-pay

(Milling and Nielsen, 2011), which highlights the rise in bullying in Danish workplaces, indicates that this is occurring across very different EU states. These examples of European labour processes have more in common with “hard” models of HRM that view labour as a “factor of production” to be utilised as appropriate to organisational ends (Legge, 1995, cited in Taylor, 2012) than the “soft” version of HRM that has been in vogue with academics and practitioners. On the other hand, there is a continued reliance upon organisational discourses that present organisational change in a positive light. Surveillance of workers’ performance is couched in the euphemisms of efficiency, quality, feedback and customer care (Taylor, 2012), in an attempt to obscure practices which are, for McGovern et al. (2007), at the opposite pole to the ideas which are purported to be at the root of human resource management (McGovern et al., 2007, p. 143). The adoption of charters, such as PSA’s Corporate Social Responsibility agreement (see Chapter 8), which incorporate a “socially responsible” approach to labour standards, is a further example of the gap between discourse and practice. The tension between the hegemonic and despotic dimensions of organisational practices appears to have deepened since Burawoy first identified hegemonic despotism. The next section of this chapter looks at the factors driving this by setting out the broader socio-economic developments that have transformed the experience of the labour process within contemporary workplaces.

4. Back to the future? The contours of contemporary production politics

Although many of the features of hegemonic despotism established by Burawoy are relevant to contemporary accounts of the labour process, there are key differences in the politics of production within which wage labour takes place in today’s advanced capitalist states. One major difference is the spread of precarious work and the subsequent precariousness that characterises the working lives of new generations of workers in a wide range of industries, as discussed in section 2 above. Burawoy’s production regimes focused upon core workers in key industries labouring under the relative protection of full-time jobs. Exposure to the market was rooted in the expansion of opportunities available to capital in the global economy, and the rhetoric of “relative profitability” faced with global competition. As far as agency workers were concerned, their labour process was characterised by a despotism born of direct vulnerability to the market, combined with the construction of a narrative of freedom aimed at galvanising the

adhesion of a largely female temporary agency workforce to low-paid work. The nature and composition of temporary agency work has since changed as it has spread from a peripheral form of work, confined to those with “marginal labour market attachment”, to become a form of work that is integral to contemporary capitalism, drawing in a workforce who would prefer – and need – to be employed permanently. Agency work is, however, only one form of precarious employment. Precarious forms of work are fast becoming a defining element of contemporary European production politics, particularly for young workers, expressed in terms such as “generation précaire” in France, “generation 700 euros” in Greece, or “Generation Praktikum” in Austria (Gouglas, 2013). The extent of precarious work has grown considerably since the economic crisis, leading to Greek commentators to coining a new version of their phrase: “generation 300 euros” (Gouglas, 2013). Whilst there may no longer be a clear cut distinction between those on open-ended contracts and those in fixed-term positions in terms of employment security (Broughton et al., 2010), the emergence of new forms of employment, such as zero hour or on-call contracts, exacerbates the experience of employment insecurity. Such developments, which point to far-reaching changes in labour markets, are at one with the European Commission’s job strategy, which promotes flexibility as a key part of employment growth (European Commission, 2006).

Within the workplace, precarious forms of employment considerably alter relations with management. Under the hegemonic regime, the “internal state” of collective bargaining and the institutionalisation of worker-management relations within the company played a large role in explaining what Burawoy saw as the willingness of workers to cooperate, and the replacement of coercion over consensus in the labour process. Whilst the political apparatus of production included external factors, most notably the social wage embodied in the welfare state, Burawoy was particularly interested in “in-plant” sources of co-operation and, ultimately, the reproduction of relations of exploitation within the plant. For Burawoy, the internal labour market fostered positive attitudes towards the company and, via formal structures of negotiation, went some way to sealing off employees from external competitive pressures; costs were absorbed elsewhere, for example, by the customer (Roy, 1980). Subsequent developments in capitalist political economy undermined the “internal” state, exposing

workforces to external risk, as the costs of capitalist competition were directed back towards the workforce, ushering in the new regime of hegemonic despotism. Burawoy's identification of hegemonic despotism as a new type of production regime, arising out of the contradictions of the hegemonic regime, captures many of the features that are now commonly associated with neoliberalism. However, prescient as his analysis was, it was unable to foresee the full unravelling of production politics into the twenty-first century.

The consent fostered by the internal state was framed by an external political apparatus of production which took the form of direct and indirect state intervention in the wage-capital relationship and the reproduction of labour power. This fundamental element of the hegemonic regime is no longer guaranteed under contemporary conditions of capitalism. The return of labour's dependency on wage-labour for its subsistence provides capital with a ready supply of cheap labour as workers have no choice but to take on employment that, in previous decades, would have been confined to marginalised groups within the labour market. Employment regulation has been relaxed in order to facilitate numerical flexibilisation, including in France which is still culturally attached to labour rights.¹¹⁰ The restructuring of the welfare state over the past three decades and the weakening of formal protections accorded to labour has accelerated since 2008, to the extent that in some EU countries, non-participation in paid work for those without personal sources of income now brings with it the danger of destitution in some EU countries. The aim of state intervention into the labour-capital relationship is now more likely to be directed towards easing the regulatory environment in order to promote job creation. Delteil and Dieuaide (2010) detect a renewal of state intervention in France since 2008. However, this takes the form of "tailor[ing] institutional frameworks of social dialogue as closely as possible to the new economic constraints experienced by firms (organisational flexibility, management restructuring, control of labour costs)", rather than attempting to "balance" these firm-level interests with those of workers. Instead, they argue, social dialogue is a management-led political game, the outcome of which is guaranteed to serve management interests. On the other hand, there has been renewed legislation initiated by the European

¹¹⁰ Whilst earlier attempts to weaken employment protection legislation were met with strong resistance, the 2008 changes to the Labour Code made it easier to break the employment contract.

Directives aimed at protecting the growing numbers on atypical contracts. This has had the affect of embedding and normalising precarious employment relations within labour markets, whilst appearing to have had less success in protecting workers – as the experience of the UK has shown. Indeed, the example of agency work in the French auto sector illustrates how legislation does not necessarily translate into practice. Direct and indirect state intervention in the labour-capital relationship, therefore, has been significantly modified in the direction of the re-commodification of labour.

A further dimension of contemporary production politics is the growing role of financial institutions in the economy. For Thompson (2011), financialisation is the determining factor behind recent changes in the labour process. The increased penetration of financial actors in the governance of organisations has modified the role of management within the labour process, as power has shifted away from internal organisational processes to the realm of the circulation of capital. For Thompson (2011), this means it no longer makes sense for labour process analysis to understand labour control strategies as rooted in the indeterminacy of labour power. It is instead necessary to turn to the valorisation process in the circuit of capital as the determining factor compelling managers to deviate from HRM models. Managers no longer have a discretionary decision-making role within organisations, having become more tied to the priorities of shareholders and investors, who demand short-term dividends. This creates a “disconnect between employer objectives at the level of the firm and the shift to the imperative of the investor and shareholder value” (Clarke, 2009, p. 784). Álvarez Peralta (2012) also argues that financialisation in France has been accompanied by the transition from a managerial to a shareholder form of management, whereby corporate governance criteria are no longer set by internal controls. Delteil and Dieuaide (2010) trace this process within French industry and examine the effect of prioritising shareholder value on HR policies and labour management relations. This distancing between those “responsible for company strategy” and local managers “without strategic power” was for Contrepois (2011) a major factor in explaining the decision to close the Molex automobile supplies plant in southern France. The lack of consultation, despite this being a requirement of French labour law, and the lack of an economic rationale for the closure of the site, reflected the power of the multinational corporation to take globally strategic

decisions driven by shareholder concerns, irrespective of a national context that formally required adherence to local standards.

It is possible to acknowledge the primordial role of financialisation in diverting organisations to short-term profit-making goals without dispensing with the continued relevance of the dynamics of the labour process. Ultimately, the imperative to generate more profit relies, in a global sense, upon the productivity of workers producing surplus value. There is a continuity in the role of managers as custodians of capital, albeit under new conditions which may well include, as Thompson (2011) argues, less discretionary power. Nonetheless, “shareholder capitalism” has been an important factor behind the reorganisation of capitalist units in order to generate more profit within tighter timeframes at various levels of the value chain (Thompson, 2013). The associated complex chain of relationships arising from subsidiaries and outsourced activities, and the innovative structures in place to avoid tax liabilities by key multinational companies, mirror the complexity of “atypical” employment relations that blur employer responsibilities. The major companies at the top of the supply chain transfer costs to those lower down the chain. Inevitably, these costs are absorbed by the workers, who, as the case of the auto supply chain illustrates, are likely to be low paid agency workers (Pulignano, 2002; Taylor 2010).

A further dimension of the political economy of contemporary capitalism is formed by the changing contours of the working class and the impact of this upon its collective identity. Within the realm of employment relations, outsourcing and precarious forms of employment act as a barrier to collective organisation and action (Bouffartigue, 2008). The decline of collectivity in terms of union membership across a number of Europe countries (Jeffreys, 2011) has undermined the temporal links that bind the class and which constitute collective experience and memory (McBride and Martínez Lucio, 2011). This weakening of class power feeds back into the labour process and employment norms, reinforcing the very processes from which it emerges. Standing’s (2011) book, *The Precariat*, a provocative academic response to changes in the working class and in employment relations, sets out a quasi-dystopian future in which the mass of the working class is reduced to, and defined by, increasingly fragmented and precarious forms of employment, fundamentally undermining the ability of the working class to

collectively influence society. The loss of working class collectivity as a result of changes in employment relations and the rise in precarious work should not, however, be overstated. Working class collectivity is not based solely on traditional occupational or workplace identities; it is also located in working class communities and new emerging forms of struggle (McBride and Martínez Lucio, 2011). Unions have recognised this by moving beyond their traditional core constituency and have taken steps to take on board changes in the composition of the working class. For example, by finding ways of integrating workers on precarious employment contracts and by responding to different forms of collectivity (e.g. by working class communities or migrant workers) in order to forge anew trade union consciousness and action (Wills and Simms, 2004; Denis, 2009). At the same time, the reduced role of organised labour organisation within workplace negotiations has been said to have sparked militant, radical forms of action, such as the spate of “bossnappings” in France, seen by many as a legitimate form of action as expectations of employment norms are dashed (Gall, 2011). This suggests that collective working class action is not off the agenda – although it may take on a variety of new (or earlier) forms. That said, the new realities of a class in flux, as it adjusts to its altered position in relation to capital, constitute an important element of the emerging political apparatus of production of western capitalism in the first half of the twenty-first century.

The general political and ideological apparatus of production that has been emerging within European economies can be summarised thus:

1. Increasing precarisation of employment. This affects younger workers, in particular, who are often employed on an expanding variety of temporary contracts, frequently mediated through agencies that facilitate access to labour on an *ad hoc* basis. However, job insecurity is no longer confined to contingent workers.
2. The withdrawal of state protection for labour, in the form of both direct and indirect intervention into wage-labour relationship. This is resulting in the re-commodification of labour.

3. Financialisation of capitalist economies and the consequences of this for organisational strategies and labour management/human resource policies.

4. A weakening of the traditional forms of working class collective organisation and action, which is undermining the position of labour in relation to capital.

However, new forms of organisation and action are emerging.

These developments have been widely documented by economists, sociologists, political and social scientists. Although the specific configurations of production regimes vary according to different contexts, it is possible to identify in a general sense how these elements of the political apparatus of production weigh upon contemporary forms of labour process – just as Burawoy identified the key trends that constituted the weakening of the hegemonic regime. The components of the political apparatus that are emerging to different degrees within specific historical, institutional and political relations can be said to be reinforcing the despotic element of the capitalist labour process. How, therefore, is the hegemonic dimension constituted within contemporary forms of hegemonic despotism?

5. Conceptualising contemporary forms of hegemonic despotism

This thesis has discussed how the temporary agency contract facilitates the emergence of despotic forms of labour management, and how consent might be elicited under such a labour regime. If workplace despotism is becoming more prevalent in general, as suggested above, then the question of how consent operates within the broader labour process becomes pertinent. Or to put it another way, what form might consent take today and how does it differ from consent to work under the hegemonic regime or under the early period of hegemonic despotism which Burawoy did not examine to any great extent? The matrix below suggests four categories of consent which can be said to be operating under the general conditions of contemporary capital accumulation. Whilst embedded within the overall conditions of hegemonic despotism, each category relates to a different configuration of hegemony and despotism, drawn from both the research in this thesis and the recent literature identified above.

Figure 20. A conceptual matrix of hegemonic despotism in the 21st century

HEGEMONY	
Compromised consent	Aspirational consent
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Control of labour through hegemonic practices continues to play a key role in organisational discourse and culture.- Perceptions of a “coordination of interest” and commitment to company goals are undermined by organisational practices aimed at eliciting ever increasing performance, and reduce the space for negotiation in the organisation of work.- Hegemony is undermined by acknowledgement of the influence of (distant) shareholders on managerial priorities.- High-skilled employees continue to have relatively high degrees of autonomy over their work. This is a key source of consent to high performance.- Consent to work is accompanied by a negative internal response (e.g. cynicism) to management directives and organisational goals.- Although relatively protected in the labour market, job loss is a concern.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Consent to work is predicated upon perceptions of investing in future employment opportunities.- Hegemony operates outside and within the labour process around institutionally-grounded discourses of flexibility, employability and individual responsibility to navigate a dynamic and competitive globalised labour market.- Changed norms of employment affect the way newer cohorts of workers respond to “bad jobs” and their susceptibility to hegemonic discourses regarding the new world of work.- Insecure and low-paid work is perceived as an unavoidable (and enduring) stage in the transition from school to work, and the transition to financial independence.- Aspirational consent is time-bound. Hegemony is undermined by the inability to move into “good jobs”.
Defensive consent	Constrained consent
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Control of labour is increasingly based upon fear of job loss.- “Coordination of interests” takes on a defensive form as workers concede to management strategies to downsize and radically alter terms and conditions of employment.- Intensification of work and, in some cases, de-skilling, reflects the ability of management to introduce coercive elements of control, based upon the fear of job loss.- The reduction of the core workforce and the expansion of temporary employment contracts constitutes a further aspect of the politics of production allowing workers with the perception of risk being transferred to the contingent workforce, whilst simultaneously reconciling permanent workers to their relatively safer position.- Coercive control becomes more prominent as recurrent waves of redundancies undermine the perception that jobs can be saved by constant restructuring and intensification of work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Consent is based upon fear of job loss and, in many cases, insecure employment contracts.- Attempts to elicit positive consent to work beyond the dependency of workers on wage labour are either non-existent or of marginal interest to workers. The labour process is experienced overwhelmingly as coercive.- Workers possess few resources to either negotiate their working conditions or manage their experience of the labour process.- The unequal nature of the labour process is starkly revealed as workers are reduced to disposable factors of production. The disposable nature of labour is increasingly facilitated by temporary employment agencies.- For those on agency contracts labour control is no longer defined solely by the management-worker relationship on the shop-floor. As with hegemony, coercive labour control is located both within and without the labour process. This duality of control is heightened by the role of temporary employment agencies in providing future employment opportunities.

DESPOTISM

This conceptual matrix sets out four ways in which consent to work operates under different configurations of hegemony and despotism. The concept of hegemonic despotism presented here is one in which hegemony and despotism co-exist in dynamic tension, as the forces which underpin coercive forms of labour control are strengthened. The nature of consent within each of these quadrants is influenced at the macro-level by the broader socio-economic context of neo-liberalism and financialisation, alongside the ideological and against the distributive policies of the post-war welfare state. It is also influenced by the resources available to workers, and their different locations in respect to the trajectory of their working lives.

Consent expresses the extent to which workers feel they have a stake in cooperating within the labour process (“mutual gains” or “coordination of interests”). It is also influenced by the capacity of labour to assert its power in the labour process, thereby permitting some degree of autonomous space within the alienating experience of wage labour. Under the hegemonic regime, these two elements were, in theory, unproblematic since there was political and material incorporation of workers into the post-war capitalist labour process and the democratic state in which it was embedded. Under hegemonic despotism, hegemony relies largely upon the capacity of political and financial elites to present neoliberalism as the “only game in town”. It is, therefore, a fragile hegemony which rests upon the absence of coherent counter-narrative. Hegemony is further undermined by the re-assertion of coercive forms of labour control, which rest upon fear of job loss and a weakening of the role of organised labour in labour process outcomes. Due to the fragile nature of contemporary forms of hegemony, successful attempts to present organisational and managerial objectives in terms of mutual aims are likely to be enduring. Hegemonic claims need to have at least a veneer of credibility. When credibility is undermined, the labour process may be increasingly experienced as a coercive, despotic regime. Thus defensive and aspiration consent can become constrained consent.

This conceptual matrix does not cover all instances of contemporary labour process. Outside these four categories of hegemonic despotism, there are the minority whose rewards and position in the labour market constitute the basis of a strong material interest in the capitalist labour process. These include highly skilled, professional agency workers whose relationship

with employment agencies is based upon reciprocal gains. At the other end of the scale, there are those for who the labour process can only be described as despotic, due to their marginal position at a societal level, as well as at the level of the labour market, for example, migrant workers without citizenship rights.

Compromised consent

Compromised consent describes a labour process in which the organisational discourse aimed at eliciting consent is undermined by the reality of management practice. Employees may be skilled and enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy and task discretion and/or they may be working in an environment which promotes participation at a discursive level. Managerial imperatives to intensify the labour process, which may also impact upon autonomy, have a corrosive effect upon orientations to work and upon organisational commitment which may influence consent to managerial goals. Consent to high performance can be maintained via positive orientations to professional skilled work. However, this is accompanied by a cynical attitude to the practices of HRM and managers, particularly in the context of organisational change perceived to impact negatively upon workers. Whilst highly skilled workers may have a stronger position in the labour market, economic uncertainty is a barrier to challenging management, either individually or collectively. This is the key source of despotism within a labour process that requires some degree of autonomy from employees, and which espouses contradictory logics of normative human resource practices on the one hand, and market imperatives on the other.

Defensive consent

Defensive consent most resembles the hegemonic despotism described within labour process literature. It is the outcome of decades of defeats of the collective gains of the labour movement. Whilst formal employment protections continue to exist, rounds of restructuring and redundancies have created a context of intense insecurity, weakening the position of labour within the employment relationship. Management has been able to redirect the discourse of mutual gains towards the need to safeguard organisational survival and, therefore, jobs. In the public sector, the intrusion of private sector discourses around efficiency savings and value for

money have been strengthened by the broader context of austerity. It is on this basis that increased management control and/or de-skilling has altered the relative degrees of hegemony and despotism. Since there appears to be no mechanism for challenging the new norms of employment and work, and in the context of adverse labour market conditions, consent becomes the only “viable” option. The ability to offload risk and worse job roles onto more vulnerable workers can also constitute both a mechanism for alleviating the worst aspects of the labour process, and a rationale for consent by avoiding even worse conditions of employment.

Aspirational consent

Aspirational consent is largely confined to younger workers entering the labour market under very different conditions to those of previous generations. These workers enter the labour market having been exposed to a discourse of individualism, flexibility, employability and portfolio careers. Early transitions from education to the labour market are marked by insecure, temporary employment, often accessed via temporary employment agencies. Increasingly young workers are expected to take on temporary, unpaid work. Although the insecure nature of work is typical of a despotic regime of labour, it is not necessarily experienced as such. Hegemonic narratives operating outside of the labour process, via school, universities, careers services and labour market intermediaries, present insecure work as a crucial resource in building a credible career portfolio. Lack of autonomy within the labour process is compensated for by a feeling of playing an active role in constructing future employment paths. Temporary employment agencies play a key role in this by presenting employment agencies as indispensable allies and in normalising employment insecurity and “bad”, low-paid work. Precarity is rationalised in terms of employability and the labour market becomes a terrain on which individual freedom can be sought - if young workers are prepared to take part in the game. This may also include consenting to undesirable social relations within the labour process. Aspirational consent is a temporary state. For some, for example, interns in well-placed positions and backed up by personal (familial) financial resources, aspirations are likely to be realised. For the majority, lack of movement to a better position within the labour market undermines aspirational consent and transforms their experience of the labour process into one in which consent is more likely to resemble the compliance of constrained consent.

Constrained consent

Constrained consent exists where lack of resources, choice and adverse labour market conditions combine to create a labour process within which despotism prevails over hegemony. Those typically labouring under such conditions will be in low-skilled and/or insecure employment, often working in outsourced activities within the supply chain. The lack of options and the limited material support outside of the employment relationship means that management can maximise control over the workforce and leave little space for negotiation. Increasingly, labour control also takes place outside of the workplace due to role of temporary employment agencies in mediating access to employment for low-skilled “disposable” workforces. Unlike aspirational consent, exploitation is experienced in a visceral way since it is a means to an immediate end (material sustenance) rather than to future goals. Consent may be outwardly expressed, particularly for those on temporary contracts under greater pressure to conform to the perceptions of the “ideal worker”. However, this conceals an internal acknowledgement of the conflictual relationship with the labour process. Within constrained consent outward submission and covert resistance can co-exist. These constraints are expressed in a even more coercive form under new and emerging forms of contracts, such as zero hours.

Temporary agency work: between aspiration and constrained consent

Most temporary agency workers will be located in the last quadrant - constrained consent - although some may be temporarily located under aspirational consent. It is possible that an individual agency worker may be simultaneously in both (keeping their head down whilst trying to get noticed). The triadic relationship exerts different pressures towards hegemony and despotism within each of these quadrants. Under aspirational consent, employment agencies play a key role in framing the way agency workers respond to new norms of flexible and insecure employment. Under constrained consent, employment agencies constitute one side of the duality of control that agency workers experience. Both situations are rooted in insecure employment contracts, access to which is dependent upon their relationship with employment agencies. In France, this relationship has been strengthened by the role accorded to the sector in managing the “employability” of “hard-to-place” workers, including unemployed older workers. The benign discourse of the policy-makers and of employment agencies glosses over the stark

power disparity between agencies and user-firms (which gain considerably from labour market insecurity) and agency workers whose labour market choices are greatly restricted. It is this which defines the general character of a labour process framed by the triadic relationship and which places the majority of temporary agency workers in the final quadrant.

The trajectory of contemporary labour processes has been shown to be in the direction of more despotic forms of labour control, with hegemonic practices limited to the discursive level. As hegemony declines, it can be expected that coercive labour control will replace it, at least for a significant proportion of workers engaged in waged labour. Temporary employment agencies, with their increasing role in managing the disposable workforce for organisation, will continue to play their part in the duality of control, taking on the task of selecting, filtering and blacklisting workers for user-firms, whilst expecting agency workers to conform in return for access to employment.

On the other hand, coercive forms of labour control are but one element of the displacement of hegemonic forms of labour control. Hostility to a coercive labour process generates the seeds of resistance. The isolated instances of struggle reflect this, as do the individual forms of resistance discussed in Chapters 7 and 8. The more overtly conflictual nature of the capitalist labour process has the potential to propel new forms of collective organisation and action adapted to contemporary conditions. The future trajectory of the hegemonic despotic regime is dependent upon this as much as upon the development of the new phase of capitalist accumulation that began with the economic crisis of 2007/8 and intensified despotism within the hegemonic regime.

5.1. Manufacturing consent under conditions of despotism

Burawoy and Wright (1990) noted that despite the withdrawal of key elements of the hegemonic regime – public welfare and union power – there was little evidence in the US of a return to the market despotism of earlier periods of capitalist development. Instead they observed the emergence of subtle and sophisticated forms of control, in particular the forms of collective self-surveillance predicated upon the perceived need to maintain organisational

profitability in the face of competition. This was Burawoy's hegemonic despotism in action as workers "internalised" the discourse of global competitive markets and the ineluctable rules of capitalist competition under changing conditions of accumulation. The despotism that flowed from external market conditions, is translated internally into threats to the survival of the individual capitalist unit, generating an ideological hegemony over the workforce. Internal consent and "soft" control, coupled with the market despotism that flows from adverse external conditions, is the expression of a new form of production regime in which workers consent to increased exploitation in order to keep the organisation in business and safeguard their jobs. The source of consent within the labour process was reconstituted by new constraints faced by workers. Taking the old manufacturing industries as his starting point, Burawoy states that consent is no longer driven by the "mutual gains" of increased profitability, negotiated by the "internal state". Instead, workers feel compelled to cooperate with company goals in order to maintain relative profitability in the face of global competition. "Mutual gains" become reduced to the survival of the firm – at the cost of sacrifice from the workforce, (Burawoy, 1985, p. 264), as discussed in Chapter 3. Consent in this context takes on a defensive form, in contrast to the more positive form of consent that was said to be a feature of the hegemonic regime, underpinned by a comprehensive set of social and employment protections that translated into a more favourable negotiating position within the labour process (Burawoy, 1985, p. 126). In contrast, the new form of consent that Burawoy and Wright (1990) observed relied upon the construction of a hegemonising narrative whereby concessions to capital are presented as the only "realistic" response to preserve jobs.

Consent to work under fear of job loss can be viewed as a rational response by those whose material well-being relies on selling their labour power – what Burawoy and Wright (1990) refer to as "strategic rationality". The correlation between exposure to the market and work effort expresses a surface level "coordination" between the conflicting interests of workers and capitalists. From this, Gramscian-inspired perspective¹¹¹, longer-term, historical interests are

¹¹¹ Gramsci's understanding of hegemony was one in which the interests of the dominant appeared as the general interest (Burawoy, 1985, p. 10). Thus day-to-day ideology (common sense perceptions) wins out over the spontaneous ideology which springs from the experience of exploitation and oppression (Rees, 1998, p. 236).

concealed beneath the very real dependency upon wage-labour (or exploitation) for material survival. Other factors also affect work effort, such as behavioural norms which govern perceptions of what constitutes acceptable levels of performance – which Burawoy and Wright (1990) refer to as “non-strategic rationality”. As changes in the workplace take hold and workloads are intensified, the perceptions of groups of workers may change accordingly as the benchmark is raised higher, thus reinforcing the self-surveillance that Burawoy and Wright (1990) noted. Changing organisational norms regarding performance, work time, sickness and other types of absence, will be gradually absorbed, first by a reluctant, perhaps defeated workforce, and then may be accepted as new generations of workers enter the organisation. The latter are examples of defensive consent, whilst newer generations, aspiring to get on in the labour market are likely to be labouring under different perceptions of what constitutes “good work”. Changes in work and employment conditions have taken place over decades as the employment rights and conditions which framed the hegemonic regime have been whittled away, underscored by a consistent narrative of neo-liberalism by national and pan-national political elites. New generations of workers have entered the labour market in a very different context to that of older cohorts, one in which management-driven concepts of flexibility, efficiency and cost-cutting appear to be self-explanatory responses to global competition and market uncertainty. Younger workers may, therefore, be more inclined to express consent to work given the new frames of reference by which to judge their situation. For example, agency workers in Papinot’s (2006) study felt they had no right to a “real” job until they had spent some time in this “transitional” phase. Older workers, in contrast, may feel more ambivalence towards the changing workplace, burdened by the experience of defeats or “survivor syndrome” as they are compelled “to do more, with less” (Taylor, 2012, p. 36). Consent for these older workers is born of defeat, a very different form of consent to that born of the victories of the post-war period. For the younger worker who has known only precarious work within intense labour market competition, consent may be linked to their future aspirations and perceptions of what they need to do to realise their employment related aspirations. Subjective perceptions of work, therefore, can therefore lead to different sources of consent to work within a generalised regime of hegemonic despotism. In the context of a more fragmented employment relationship, the biographical location of workers is a significant factor in how the labour process is

experienced. Thus, a section of the workforce who are considerably disadvantaged in terms of salary, employment protection and security, draw upon future aspirations as a source of consent. This more positive source of consent contrasts with that of older and more (formally) secure workers experiencing a deterioration in working conditions.

5.2. Temporary employment agencies: cultivating aspiration or embedding constraint

As discussed in the last chapter, temporary employment agencies strive to be influential in recasting expectations of the employment relationship. Agencies, therefore, occupy an important place within the aspirational quadrant, representing the growing influence of market intermediaries in labour market outcomes. For the young workers in this research, agencies are key to their access to work, reflecting the difficulties in finding direct pathways to employment. As such, agencies play a central role in this stage of their working lives, a role that is likely to continue for some time if the average age of agency workers in France continues to rise. There is little to suggest from this research that agencies are seen as neutral or benign facilitators. Agencies were referred to by interviewees primarily in relation to control, setting out the parameters of behaviour, with the understanding that access to employment may be withdrawn if agency workers step outside of this. Yet agencies strive to portray themselves as facilitators within an uncertain labour market, providing advice which can secure future assignments. The triadic relationship can be located within both the aspirational and the constrained quadrants. Aspirational, since agencies can fulfil their role as provider of future employment opportunities, and constrained because this role gives employment agencies a powerful level over which to complement the control that is exercised within the labour process. The triadic relationship can be seen, therefore, to further obscure the complex interaction between aspirational and constrained consent. For agency workers labouring in difficult conditions, this may express itself in a constant movement between aspirational consent and constrained consent, as with example of Daniel, striving to find meaning and dignity in work and ever hopeful of continued employment, either through future agency contracts, or through securing permanent employment with the user-firm. This example, of course, contrasts with the cases of Léa and Elodie, for whom constraint appears to be overwhelming.

5.3. The weakening of internal sources of consent

The influence of internal hegemonic practices upon the behaviour of agency workers are likely to be negligible. Beyond the possibility of a future job and “trying to get noticed” as a “good worker” to this end, agency workers are more likely to be “keeping their head down” and putting up with unsatisfactory work conditions. With regards to the user-firm, the experiences described in this research lend themselves more to the concept of despotism than consent, with little attempt by auto manufacturers to elicit positive consent from their disposable workforce. Core workers, on the other hand, still retain some institutional bargaining power at the plant level. The restructuring of work and employment has been a gradual and contested process, and many organisations subscribe to the idea that employees need to be engaged in the process of organisational change (Meaney and Wilson, 2009). Appeals to profitability as a way of protecting core workers continue to have some traction within the labour movement, as shown by the response of the CFDT to PSA’s discourse around competitive pressures. On the other hand, whilst managerial strategies may have succeeded in increasing work effort and bureaucratic control over the workforce, they may have had less success in positively engaging the employees in this process. The resulting combination of increased work effort and the degrees of cynicism/hostility towards management described in section 3 above can perhaps be ascribed in part to the lack of a generalised political response to counter the neo-liberal consensus¹¹². This may lead to a “fatalistic” acceptance that there is no alternative to an economic and political system that is increasingly unable to provide “decent” work and good living standards for large swathes of the population, as wages across EU countries decline in the face of rising prices (ILO, 2013). This fatalism is shared across the compromised, defensive and constrained quadrants, confronted with what Burawoy and Wright (1990) saw at work in their study, referred to as the “inescapable logic of precarious financial conditions” (Burawoy and Wright, 1990, p. 75). Under new conditions, with the negotiating power of labour weakened and the ability of capital to move production to regions more conducive to capital accumulation, workers are exposed to a constant narrative of the need to adapt to the reality of global capitalist

¹¹² Whilst debating the political responses of the mainstream left to neo-liberalism’s ascendancy lies outside of the scope of this research, the adoption of many of the core tenets of neo-liberalism by social-democratic parties (e.g. privatisation and a loosening of constraints on capital) can be said impact upon the range of perceived responses to workplace change.

competition, within which national companies struggle to maintain their competitive edge against lower labour costs (Sallaz, 2004). The narrative of competitive pressures which appear to operate outside of the realm of negotiation and regulation (Clarke, 2009) is a powerful discursive tool for eliciting consent to work under worsening conditions as workers “adapt” to these external conditions. The need to pare down the organisation in the name of “efficiency”, by restructuring and re-organising work around the principles of lean production and flexibility (Stewart et al., 2009) filters through organisations as a common sense narrative embodying the “rational tyranny of capital mobility over the collective worker” (Burawoy, 1985, p. 150). Today, workers are living with the consequences of a feedback effect within this process. With regards to this research, the acceptance of agency labour by a “defensive” core workforce has seriously undermined the capacity of the “collective worker” to withstand further concessions. Although concessions to capital are no guarantee of survival – as the workers of Aulnay discovered. The power of the discourse lies in the lack of an alternative and compelling vision to that of neo-liberalism. Hegemony, therefore, becomes problematised for all but the aspirational quadrant, which itself is ephemeral in nature, as the example of Daniel illustrates. In each of the other quadrants, hegemony - understood as ideological domination through the presentation of the interests of capitalists as somehow coordinated with the interest of workers - is weakened by both the experience of the capitalist labour process, and the inability of the capitalist system to provide a socially acceptable standard of living. How this is expressed in terms of consent to work differs in each of the quadrants, the conceptualisation of which draws upon literature which has attempted to capture the operation of consent under today’s conditions.

6. The contradictory nature of consent

The matrix presented above attempts to capture the complex and varied nature of consent and its expression within the framework of hegemonic despotism. A number of formulations have been used to express consent to work under increasingly unfavourable conditions. McGovern et al. (2007) talk of “forced cooperation”, whilst Goussard (2008) refers to “paradoxical engagement”, whereby consent is accompanied by a critical approach to the demands of management, similar to Durand’s (2004a) “paradoxical consent”. These concepts encapsulate

the contradictory nature of consent within the contemporary labour process and are reflected, in a modified way in the quadrant (constrained consent and forced cooperation respectively). Resistance may not be far from the surface, though it may be submerged by the façade of consent or “muted resentment” (Smith, 1998). Such constrained versions of consent are difficult to disentangle from compliance. As the frontier of control shifts in favour of management, positive forms of consent, and the space for misbehaviour that moderate the experience of alienated labour are both less likely to prevail. The new systems of labour control, couched in a discourse that bears little relationship to reality, may well breed the kind of cynicism referred to in the studies above, rather than engaged participation (Fleming and Spicer, 2007, cited in Belanger and Edwards, 2012).

Where there is an enduring attachment to traditional norms of employment, HRM is tasked with selling the new world of work to employees, playing a role similar to that of temporary employment agencies in recasting expectations of employment. The discursive practices of HRM embody “a powerful set of norms that have direct bearing on the ways that economic activity and human subjectivity are to be defined” (Vallas and Prener, 2012, p. 347). Vallas and Hill (2012) compare this to Burawoy’s view of the institutionalisation of worker’s “interests” within the hegemonic regime that deprives workers of the resources required to “fashion an oppositional consciousness” (Vallas and Hill, 2012, p. 175). They draw upon Foucauldian approaches to hegemony and “governmentality” to explain how new “hegemonic subjectivities” are formulated by powerful interests consciously setting out to influence norms of behaviour:

“By moulding subjectivities, governmental power does not merely produce subjects but also produces self-producing subjects – individuals who internalise and reproduce desirable governed behaviours and modes of thought.”

(Vallas and Hill, 2012, p.181)

Whereas Burawoy prioritises the labour process as the site of the reproduction of the social relations of production (the political moment of the labour process), Vallas and Hill (2012) see contemporary forms of hegemonic construction as located beyond the labour process. The construction of “self-managed subjectivities” is a practice of “positive power” seeking to

obscure and mystify power relations and control through the illusion of autonomous action and freedom. It is through the symbolic representation of agency work, for example, that the negative connotations of precarious work are challenged. This can be extended to discourses around employability and portfolio careers (Knell, 2000) and the presentation of human resource management as a benign function (Guest, 1987). Vallas and Prener (2012) argue that, as workers internalise new norms of employment, shifts in expectations of work “have the potential to recast the way workers think about and experience the employment relationship, with effects that can have powerful effects [sic] on the outcome” (Vallas and Prener, 2012, p. 338). This recasting of new “subjectivities” appears to be an inexorable process, given the reliance on Foucauldian constructs, through which social relations will be reproduced – an idea that is similar to Burawoy’s take on the neutralising effect of the hegemonic regime. Both veer in the direction of suggesting that the outcome of the class struggle is pre-determined. However, even as workers appear to accept the “inevitable logic” of new norms, the contradictory and contested nature of this process is unlikely to be far from the surface. Workplace relations may involve cooperation, which may be propelled by altered subjectivities at particular points in time, yet this still needs to be understood in terms of the structured antagonism that lies at the heart of the labour-capital relation which, although not driving behaviour in an immediate, unmediated way, feeds through at the level of workplace relations (Edwards, 1990). Thus, the flexible “subjectivities” inevitably come up against this structured antagonism which shapes the way in which other factors and pressures, such as financialisation, are “interpreted and acted upon” within the contradictory relationship between labour and capital (Edwards, 1990). This provides an analytical space for workers’ agency, challenging the idea that labour market insecurity has allowed employers to implement “totalising” regimes of control that have all but eliminated the capacity of workers to contest and resist management (Paugam, 2000; Taylor, 2013).

On the other hand, it would be wishful thinking to suggest that this space has been occupied to any great extent. Instead, varied forms of modified consent to labour prevails, which under certain conditions exhibit features more characteristic of compliance through coercion. Although Berribi-Hoffman’s (2012) IT professionals and Goussard’s (2008) auto engineers and

bear similarities to Cushen and Thompson's (2011) Irish IT engineers, there are important differences. In both studies, high levels of productivity in the context of a high performance workplace suggests an outward consent, which was shown to obscure an internal critique of lean production and work intensification. However, resistance, albeit of an individualised nature, is more apparent in Goussard's study in the form of high levels of resignations. In Berribi-Hoffman's study too, experience of domination appears to be more keenly felt. It could be that in the French context changes in employment and work are more keenly felt amongst some cohorts of workers, due to residual expectations of work which conflict with new practices. This may also be a factor in the suicides within the French telecommunications sector. In a national context where public sector workers have traditionally benefited from relatively good employment conditions, and where private sector workers have been covered by the employment protections accorded to all employees, deteriorating conditions at work appear to be incompatible with societal expectations, leading to the widespread phenomenon of *souffrance au travail*.

7. Agency in conditions of heightened constraint

These dramatic individual responses do not, however, tell the whole story. At the Aulnay plant, permanent employees are able to engage in strategies which offload some of the negative aspects of the labour process onto less secure and more vulnerable agency workers. This fragmentation of the workforce constitutes a mobilising element for core workers situated within the defensive consent quadrant. The role of a marginalised workforce with access to limited resources to negotiate with or challenge management, is an aspect of hegemony and consent that Burawoy overlooked, and which remains relevant today. On the other hand, the relatively more despotic labour process under which such workers labour can also lead to instances of resistance, as illustrated by the historical account of *ouvriers spécialisés* in Chapter 6, and, at a more individual level, by the actions of Léa and Elodie in this research. The matrix does make space for agency in the form of resistance although it is likely to be found under constrained consent. As the labour process is experienced more in terms of heightened constraint and despotism, with movements from other quadrants towards constrained consent, the possibility of resistance becomes heightened. For resistance to take place, defensive consent

needs to be seriously undermined by the realisation that the guarantees accorded by “mutual survival” strategy are limited, and the aspirations of those seeking to carve out decent futures need be exposed as unrealistic.

Despite the implicit fatalism within Burawoy’s theoretical framework, it is possible, therefore, to draw a more positive account of the future of labour from his conceptualisation of the dynamics of the labour process as being played out along the dimensions of hegemony and despotism. Within Burawoy’s work lies an essential understanding that workers, as active agents, are compelled to find meaning in their condition as wage labourers, and that this is relevant across different types of production regimes which rely upon varying configurations of coercion and consent. Workers cannot be reduced to mere factors of production to be exploited as “warm bodies” or docile subjects – a conclusion that is implicit in Aubenas’ (2011) account of night cleaners in France employed on temporary agency contracts and ground down by a labour process that dehumanises and isolates. Even within such atomised circumstances, workers’ agency is compelled to express itself within the realms of possible action. This can be through humour (Taylor and Bain, 2003) or faking commitment (Fleming and Spicer, 2007) and other forms of “organisational misbehaviour” (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). Workers are reflexive, creative actors (Brook, 2009), responding to their position in the labour process in a variety of ways, be it by engaging in collective struggle to limit exploitation and control, or by finding individual means to alleviate the alienating affects of the capitalist labour process. In the absence of discernible resources to engage in the former, the latter response can include positive forms of consent that generate an illusion of control even in the most constrained circumstances. So the agency worker may indeed appear to internalise the idea that individuals have the power, and the responsibility, to shape their working lives and improve their position, not by collectively challenging the constraints of the market, as previous generations have succeeded in doing (albeit in a limited way), but by framing their working lives in terms of enhancing their labour market position or “employability”. Such is the contradictory nature of workers’ agency, responding to and reacting against the experience of an empirical reality in ways that seem to correspond on one level to immediate interests. Behaviours targeted at alleviating the negative consequences of wage labour have the potential to both challenge and reinforce social relations,

and are a potential source of collective action (Martínez Lucio and Stewart, 1997). Rather than an act of submission, “consent to domination” is a deliberate action on the part of workers as they combine critical appreciations of the capitalist labour process with practical necessities related to survival, an expression of the contradictory nature of consciousness, or “dual consciousness” to use Gramsci’s terminology (see Burawoy, 2011). For those who pursue radical social change, this contradiction provides an opportunity to build upon the capacity for human creativity and social justice within which the potential for counter-movements is lodged (Bolton and Laaser, 2013).

Outside of a revolutionary transition, labour cannot escape being embroiled within the workings of capitalism, and thus, even whilst acting against the negative experience of capitalism, it can, in effect, reproduce social relations of production and other relations of oppression – as the history of the post-war period illustrates. The social progress that improved the working and living conditions of the populations of advanced capitalist societies simultaneously strengthened capitalism against the threat of revolution, just as the hegemonic production regime undermined (rather than neutralised) the development of independent class consciousness amongst Burawoy’s factory workers. Such were the factors that facilitated the expansion of capitalist relations of production, fortified ideologically and politically by social democracy (Braverman, 1974; Gramsci, 1971, cited in Rees, 1998).

The degree of leverage of discursive practices cannot be disassociated from economic and labour market environments that frame the choices available to workers. The marginalisation of contesting voices means that making concessions to capital becomes a pragmatic response for those obliged to sell their labour power. This, in itself, can be a powerful influence in shifting employment norms. What were considered “bad jobs” become normalised for increasingly larger sections of the working class, relieved to find themselves still in employment. However, this process is not a smooth one. The agency workers in this research resisted the subjective internalisation of these norms. This is the case even for Daniel who, although most prepared to play by the new rules of the game in return for a more secure future, harboured negative attitudes to his employment situation, which he was careful to conceal. The process of recasting

subjectivities is, therefore, not without obstacles and is by no means inevitable. In the current context, when the past still weighs upon sections of the working class, the contradiction that lies at the heart of the capitalist labour processes generates tensions that can deflate the ascendancy of neo-liberal ideology. Thus, though new norms of employment are emerging on the back of the financial crisis, the reality of contemporary forms of wage labour will not cease to compel workers to challenge a labour process which condemns them to harsh, alienating, precarious and low paid labour. There are numerous examples of the compulsion to resist, such as the campaigns in support the migrant temporary agency workers denied legal recognition (*sans-papiers*) in France (Tapia and Turner, 2013) or the struggles of low-paid migrant workers in the “Justice for Cleaners” campaign in London – and also by the actions of Léa and Elodie in this research. Thompson et al. (2012) provide an important reminder of the dynamic tension that exists even in the highly unequal relationship between employers and migrant workers. By identifying a shift in the behaviours and attitudes of migrant workers who became less “good” over time as they felt more settled, “permanent” and informed of their rights, the authors make clear the contingent and fragile nature of consent under conditions of despotism. The same can be applied to the four categories of consent identified in this chapter. It is this fragility which opens a space for contesting hegemonic narratives.

Resistance, whilst sporadic and partial, can always be found, from the low level acts of individual misbehaviour/resistance to more collective class conscious resistance in the form of strike action. Whistleblowing by talking to journalists, or, indeed, researchers, is one form of individual resistance where overt resistance is risky. There are many examples of this type of action by agency workers working in the French auto sector. There are also examples within Europe of workers broadly situated with the compromised or defensive quadrants who have reasserted their collective power. The 2011 strike of airline workers at British Airways against changes to their terms and conditions, or the strike of biomedical staff at a UK hospital trust against proposals that would strengthen management’s control over working time in the context

of understaffing¹¹³ are but two examples of the potential for resistance even within conditions that are unfavourable for labour. The fierce resistance that met the announcement of the closure of the Aulnay plant is a further example in the French context¹¹⁴. This militant localised struggle has not as yet been matched by generalised economic and political struggle capable of imposing a significant reversal of closures. Apart from a minority of trade union militants organised around SUD and, at times, the CGT, factory occupations and the occasional threats of violence against management have been targeted at improving redundancy compensation rather than preventing closures. The defensive nature of workers struggles, however, does not negate the militancy of those struggles, but rather highlights the gap between this militancy and the political confidence of trade unions. In the UK, the weakness of collective trade union action is reflected in the way much of the resistance to the poor employment conditions takes place outside of the workplace. The response in the UK to employment contracts which are deemed to be “beyond the pale”, such as zero hours, unpaid internships and workfare¹¹⁵, highlights both the continued attachment to minimum standards in employment relations and the emergence of new sites of struggle around employment. Where agency at the point of production is compromised due to the vulnerability of the workers in relation to the employment contract and/or labour control, workers’ agency is being reconstituted, in the first instance at least, outside of the labour process. This kind of action in the UK is similar to collective action around the conditions of migrant agency workers in France and reasserts the capacity of working class collectivity to renew itself under new conditions, thereby challenging the hegemonic practices that seek to alter workers’ “subjectivities”. In the UK context, social media has been a crucial tool used against companies involved in a “bad practice”,¹¹⁶ providing a site for counter hegemonic action in the absence (so far) of sustained action at the point of production.

¹¹³ See Unite press release “Biomedical scientists at Lancashire hospitals strike over imposed working conditions”, 28th August, 2013.
<http://www.unitetheunion.org/news/biomedical-scientists-at-lancashire-hospitals-strike-over-imposed-working-conditions/>

¹¹⁴ <http://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/151013/sylvain-pattieu-jen-ai-tellement-raconter-sur-psa-aulnay>

¹¹⁵ The response to the use of zero-hour contracts led the Labour leader Ed Miliband to make an uncharacteristic pledge to “crackdown” on the use of the contracts.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-24012368>

¹¹⁶ http://www.cipd.co.uk/blogs/cipdbloggers/b/public_policy_blog1/archive/2013/11/11/from-hero-to-zero-zero-hours-contracts-in-the-spotlight-part-1.aspx

8. Despotism at odds with democracy

The current economic context has brought into sharp relief the processes detrimental to labour that were already being identified prior to 2008 (Taylor, 2012). Austerity – the only political response to economic crisis that the ruling political parties in Europe countenance – has deepened the employment and economic insecurity of European workers. In the absence of sustained resistance, this is likely to result in a further rebalancing of the hegemonic-despotic spectrum. The continued withdrawal of the welfare state will further undermine the position of labour in relation to capital, potentially creating a perception of powerlessness as workers struggle to survive under new constraints. The fear of job loss in the context of diminishing social protection may further alter the expectations of work as those in employment will consider themselves “lucky” in relation to those out of work and faced with decreasing state support. Those in employment may even perceive of themselves as agents of their destinies navigating the new realities of work as they follow the advice of experts to enhance their “employability”, gaining experience through low-paid (or unpaid) work and propelled to work harder to prove their worth to employers. In the absence of jobs, unemployed and underemployed workers are told to enhance their “portfolio careers” by imbuing themselves with key skills such as “emotional intelligence” (Hughes 2005), and to find ways of standing out from the crowd. At the point of recruitment, potential employees are being asked to engage in humiliating experiences to prove they are “happy” and/or willing to cede to managerial requests,¹¹⁷ or to convincingly articulate their intrinsic motivation for what are essentially low-skilled, demotivating jobs (Aubenas, 2011). Although, as this chapter has argued, the alignment of employees’ expectations and perceptions of decent employment arrangements and working conditions within the new realities of work, continues to be problematic. The conceptual matrix presented in this chapter attempts to capture the contradictory and dynamic nature of how the labour process is experienced under these evolving circumstances.

The promise of secure, ongoing, “decent” employment that permits citizens to carve out a future and feel that they have a stake in society is becoming increasingly elusive, particularly for “Generation Y” (those born after 1980). This has far-reaching implications that extend beyond

¹¹⁷ A university graduate was asked to dance in what he described as a humiliating recruitment process (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-23972952>).

the workplace. As Appay (2010) points out, current trends in employment are at odds with the very basis of the democratic societies that grew out of the “social and democratic struggles to build a fairer society based upon political and social rights”. The precarisation of work is a “trend that is in contradiction to the progress of the social state of democracy” (Appay, 2010, p. 23). Standing (2011) also takes up the theme of the incompatibility between current trends in employment and work on the one hand, and democracy on the other. As standard employment recedes in the face of insecure work punctuated by periods of unemployment, a new “precariat” class finds itself alienated from, and hostile to, a diminishing core of mainstream society and increasingly open to the appeal of populist and neo-fascistic type movements, as anger, anomie and anxiety takes hold. Whilst Standings’ (2011) categorisation of new layers of workers and skilled professionals is debatable and, according to Conley (2012), lacking in empirical rigour, he does make an important contribution to the debate on the wider consequences of changing employment norms. Other commentators have likened the rise in new forms of precarious work since 2008 to the condition of stevedores in early periods of capitalism (Pocock et al., 2005) for whom paid work was a hit and miss affair. On the other hand, it was under such conditions that the mass organisations of the working class emerged (Mason, 2007). Whether this can be the outcome of the current condition of the working class will depend upon the development of the forms of struggles discussed in section 7 above.

9. Prospects for turning back the tide of despotism

European societies are at a turning point. In the past, although insecure, low-paid work and varying degrees of coercive management never ceased to be a feature of work for many workers under the hegemonic regime, workers in general benefited from the altered power relations between labour and capital. The unravelling of this compromise that has been taking place over three decades has modified the nature of the production regime by reasserting market despotism and repositioning hegemony in the context of a globalised economic system in which organisational governance is driven by the requirements of financial institutions. Since 2008, the dismantling of what is left of the remnants of the hegemonic regime that prevailed under hegemonic despotism is intensifying a process that is resulting in a transformation of power relations within the workplace and in society as a whole.

The deployment of Burawoy's concept of hegemonic despotism to analyse changes in the labour process, in particular in auto manufacturing, provided a powerful rebuttal of the proponents of lean production and new management techniques (Danford 2000; Hatzfeld, 2004; Stewart et al., 2004). With the expansion of these managerial strategies to other economic sectors, the concept of hegemonic despotism can usefully be used to describe the production regime of the labour process in the 21st century. Viewed dynamically, this regime can be seen to be moving in the direction of despotism accompanied by a weakening of the (reconstituted) hegemonic dimension. The economic whip of the market, strengthened by the overhaul of the welfare state, has facilitated management in reorganising and restructuring work and labour to meet the demands of financialised capital. The situation of temporary agency workers described in this research, whilst representing an extreme form of vulnerability (though now being outpaced by new forms of employment such as workfare and zero hours), can, in some ways, be applied to workers on standard employment contracts who are also labouring under conditions of insecurity and perceptions of powerlessness. Whilst organisations still feel compelled to pay lip service to mutuality and employee well-being in the workplace, employing HRM discourse to elicit the "consent" of employees to work under worse conditions, current trends suggest that the hegemonic dimension of the labour process may recede even more in the face of despotism, and that consent can very quickly become thinly veiled compliance. Hegemonic despotism might be usefully be viewed as a transitional phase as the representatives of capital seek to return to a more "natural" state of market despotism. Where Burawoy saw "emergence of a new despotic production politics in the contemporary period, one that bears the marks of the pre-existing hegemonic regime" (Burawoy, 1985, p. 14), today those marks of the hegemonic regime are less pronounced, and despotism is more readily detected in the workplace. However, within this framework, it is possible to identify differences in how consent operates in today's context. The matrix presented in this chapter focuses attention to the location of workers, not only in relation to employment status and other sources of negotiating power in the labour process (such as skill level), but also to the biographical location of workers, in particular in relation to younger workers embarking on their working lives.

Labour, then, appears to be in retreat. Years of political defeat have had an important impact on the relations in production within the labour process. This, in turn, has undermined the ability of labour to influence political outcomes beyond the workplace. Of course there have been moments of resistance and instances of counter-hegemony that have challenged the right of management to manage and restrained the trajectory of free market capitalism. However, there has been no consistent mainstream narrative against the market outside of a marginalised far left. Although left of centre political formations have attempted to offer a more comprehensive political alternative (e.g. Front de Gauche in France, Syriza in Greece, Die Linke in Germany) and have in some cases obtained impressive electoral results, the narrative of neo-liberalism, austerity and welfare state retrenchment has dominated the political landscape. There is, however, space for optimism within this bleak outlook. In order to set out a more optimistic scenario it is useful to return, with a critical eye, to Burawoy's understanding of the transition from the hegemonic regime to hegemonic despotism. Burawoy's theorisation of this transition emphasises the role of the internal workings of the labour process under the hegemonic regime in sealing the fate of workers. The alignment of workers' interests with those of management under the hegemonic regime was seen as being at the root of labour's inability to resist changes in the organisation of work. This approach is too reductive and ignores external factors in shaping class consciousness – and in doing so goes against Burawoy's stated intention in *The Politics of Production*, i.e., to go beyond the factory to account for political and ideological apparatuses distinct from the moment of production. It also ignores the militant struggles that labour embarked upon against employment practices inspired by the Chicago school of free market economic theory which came to prominence in the era of Reagan and Thatcher. In the US, which formed the backdrop of much of Burawoy's research, airline workers staged protracted strikes to defend their employment conditions. In the UK, it was the miners who symbolised resistance to Thatcher, followed by the printers and the dockers. In the case of France, the working class did not give up any of its gains without prolonged struggles and continued to demonstrate its organisational strength, most visibly in the 1995 public sector pension strike. The crisis of the hegemonic regime lay not in the supposed passivity of a working class incapable of forging demands in opposition to capital, but rather in the long-term incompatibility of the "Fordist" compromise with capitalism. The post-war period can be seen

as one in which the logic of capitalism was thwarted by the class struggle, expressed in a political settlement which restrained, to differing degrees, both labour and capital in the pursuit of their interests. The transition from this compromise away from the gains of labour was not an inevitable process with its origins lodged in the supposed neutralisation of the working class. Rather, it was the consequence of political choices, most notably by the dominant social democratic and communist parties and labour movements which continue to operate under the assumption that capitalism can still simultaneously pursue its profit-seeking logic and provide an acceptable standard of living for the majority.

Similarly, the future positive development of society, and the nature of work therein, will be dependent upon the emergence of a political response to the current consensus. Any political alternative will need to reconnect the economic and political struggle by finding ways of appealing to a class that is increasingly fragmented. The development of new layers of trade union activists, capable of organising young workers on temporary agency contracts and other atypical contracts, as well as unemployed workers, will be crucial if this is to occur. This process has begun as trade unionists and activists have come together to channel civil societies' response the degradation of work into campaigns and action around a variety of issues; "justice for cleaners" in the UK and *sans-papiers* in France (Tapia and Turner, 2013); exposing Foxconn's treatment of agency workers (Chan et al., 2013); campaigns against zero hours and workfare¹¹⁸. Social scientists researching work and employment have a role to play in helping this process by exposing the negative consequences of current forms of employment. As Appay (2010) puts it: "social scientists have a responsibility in the battle of ideas, [that] they contribute actively or passively in the development of dominant paradigms and thus validate or invalidate the ways that thought and consequently action are organised in a given society" (Appay, 2010, p. 25).

Burawoy's work has been influential in providing researchers of work and employment with an analytical framework through which to challenge the proponents of the new world of work. In spite of an underlying pessimistic view of the class struggle under the hegemonic regime,

¹¹⁸ New Statesman, 24th February, 2012: "The Revolt Against Workfare Spreads".
<http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2012/02/scheme-greggs-grayling>

Burawoy's commitment to the emancipatory politics of Marxism, akin to Gramsci's "optimism of the will" (Gramsci, 1977), meant that, despite his theoretical approach to working class consciousness as forged in the context of the post-war labour process, he was also able to set out a more optimistic response to the transition from the hegemonic regime to hegemonic despotism, one which is even more relevant today¹¹⁹:

"One can anticipate that the working classes will begin to feel their collective impotence and the irreconcilability of their interest with the development of capitalism, understood as an international phenomenon. The forces leading to working-class demobilisation may also stimulate a broader recognition that the material interests of the working class vouchsafed only beyond capitalism, beyond the anarchy of the market and beyond despotism in production."

(Burawoy, 1985, p. 152)

Burawoy's work is still important in that it centres attention on the dynamic tension between despotism and hegemony as employers attempt to square the circle of profit-seeking activities under new conditions of capital accumulation, whilst simultaneously seeking to elicit consent to the increasing exploitation that this demands. This provides a useful frame of reference with which to understand how workers consent to work under conditions of duress and insecurity. However, although Burawoy's intention was to move beyond the limitations of his focus on the "internal state" (Burawoy, 1985, p. 11) by elaborating a theory that drew in external factors, encapsulated in the political and ideological apparatus of production that regulated relations in the labour process, his work has a tendency to focus almost exclusively upon the process of production as the site of the reproduction of social relations of exploitation. Vallas and Hill's (2012) response to this is to bridge the gap by bringing in external sites of ideological disempowerment, which influence workers' orientations and interpretations of their specific labour process, in particular the ideological recasting of employment norms. In relation to the hegemonic regime, Burawoy referred to the promotion of

¹¹⁹ However, Burawoy has recently promoted his "uncompromising pessimism" in a series of articles offering a bleaker view of the future of working class struggle (Burawoy, 2010 and 2013).

“possessive individualism” (Burawoy, 1985, p. 10) within the internal state through the negotiation of workers’ interests and the internal labour market. Yet, that this was based upon the collective defence of (individual) workers is of crucial importance from an analytical perspective. Today, the combination of managerial discourse and the ideological narratives of governments and other powerful actors (e.g. employers and employment agencies) promote aggressive individualism through flexible employment relations, the heightened monitoring of individual performance, individual bonus systems, and also competition for jobs. The individual is rendered responsible for their career progress. Individual relations with managers take on a more significant role in this context and, in the case of agency work, the relationship with an employment intermediary exerts a further layer of pressure upon workers seeking some form of employment stability. By extending Burawoy’s analysis of hegemonic despotism beyond the core workers upon which his concept was based, it is possible to view hegemonic despotism as a more varied and dynamic process which encompasses very different, though interrelated and changing experiences of the labour process.

To conclude, the future of work and production regimes will be mapped out in the coming years as the struggle over welfare, workers’ rights and the growing influence of financial capital continues. This chapter has sketched out some of the more evident examples of workplace despotism that have been described in recent academic literature and in anecdotal accounts in the media. It is a description of trends and future directions rather than a generalised account of work in the early years of the 21st century. From these trends, the chapter has drawn out some tentative theoretical implications for Burawoy’s concept of hegemonic despotism. There will be considerable variations in experience across occupations and between countries. Within Europe, the UK appears to have gone the furthest in reconstructing the political apparatus of production by comprehensively restructuring the relationship between state and labour. Under the current government, the choice for many is to take up employment that scarcely provides for the reproduction of labour power or face

destitution. In other countries, the process of change has been more gradual, though the extreme circumstances that have affected the southern European countries have dramatically altered the pace of change.

The Politics of Production was written partly in response to those who heralded the death of the traditional working class through fragmentation and recomposition. Three decades on, working class struggle is still an integral part of the European landscape. In France, where the position of young workers is characterised by precariousness and uncertainty, with temporary agency work an inevitable part of their working lives, the “core” working class is still engaged in a battle to defend its gains within a system which is no longer prepared to redistribute profits in a more equitable way. The struggles that continue to break out demonstrate the weight of collective ideals emanating from working class struggle since the late nineteenth century – despite the changes over the past 30 years and the power and resources of political elites pursuing the neo-liberal consensus. Much more fundamental than the marks of the hegemonic regime, it is the essential contradiction of the labour-capital relation that lingers on to thwart or hinder the reassertion of despotism.

Whilst this thesis has focused upon one specific form of work in a specific national context, this chapter has broadened out the discussion of hegemonic despotism to general trends in employment and work. Previous chapters established the specificity of temporary agency work in relation to the constitution of production regimes, and examined how consent, coercion and resistance might be expressed under increased exposure to market despotism, the duality of control and the emergence of new expressions of hegemony. Whilst the experience of agency workers cannot be unproblematically transferred to other forms of employment, it is possible to establish similarities in the effects of job insecurity in contemporary labour markets and the unfolding of new forms of despotism, underpinned by political and ideological apparatuses operating both internally and externally to the labour process. As such, this chapter sets out the current direction of production politics, which may or may not

be the outcome of current trends, given the influence of a variety of contingent factors which have the power to either actualise or block the emergence of a new despotism.

CHAPTER 10

THESIS CONTRIBUTION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This short, final chapter sets out the contribution of the thesis to current knowledge and makes suggestions for further research.

As discussed in Chapter 2, segmentation theory provides an important critique of neo-classical explanations of agency work, it is necessary to engage more fully with the complex social processes that have led to the expansion of agency labour, particularly its increasingly structural position in those occupations and activities not traditionally associated with the periphery. This thesis builds upon the emerging literature that has examined how the activities of the temporary employment agencies have not only facilitated changing human resource practices in user organisations but have also actively engaged in business models aimed at reshaping local labour markets and the role of employment agencies therein. By closely examining the role of the French employment agency sector, itself an influential component of CIETT (the European industry organisation), the thesis both confirms and extends the analyses of this expanding business by Peck and Theodore (2007). It also contributes to the literature by examining the example of a temporary employment sector which has grown in a very different and contradictory environment to that of the US or UK sectors, yet has successfully carved out an indispensable position in labour allocation and in accompanying state institutions in implementing employment policies aimed at young workers.

Peck et al. (2007) argue that “visualising the temporary [agency] workforce in a zero-sum relationship with the permanent workforce misses the point concerning the true significance of these employment practices” (Peck et al, 2007, p. 272) which is that the temporary employment sector has had a transformative influence on the US labour market. The same can be said of the sector in France, despite the strict regulatory context and the deeply entrenched attachment to the standard employment relationship, to the extent that the role of the sector can now be “summarised as one of continuous labour mediation” (Peck and al., 2007). At the same time employment agencies depend upon contracts with user organisations, hence the price wars in

the sector in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which drove the large centrally organised contracts that benefitted from economies of scale. The period opened up since 2008 illustrates that the alliance with big car manufacturers can be a difficult one as manufacturers are able use the economic conjuncture to push down fees. The closure of the Aulnay plant will have a negative effect on the local agencies that supply the plant. On the other hand the employment agency industry has proved itself capable of adapting and diversifying its activities, as it places more emphasis on high-skilled agency workers with whom the large agencies promote a long-term relationship (Kornig, 2011) and expands into placement and training activities.

By focusing on the car sector, the research fills another gap in the literature. Whilst studies of car workers have inevitably referred to agency work, there has been no sustained empirical and theoretical focus on agency labour in the sector. The data presented in this thesis partly confirm many of the assumptions and evidence (both academic and anecdotal) of the difficulties encountered by agency workers in the auto sector, and the nature of the work they carry out due to the employment insecurity associated with temporary contracts in a sector characterised by intense competition and organisational restructuring. Further, by adopting Burawoy's conception of factory regimes and examining the interplay of despotism/hegemony and control/consent, it was possible to go beyond approaches to agency work that focus on "quality of work" and labour standards – important though they are. This was done by examining how new forms of employment have far-reaching effects that alter the position of labour in the labour process and, subsequently, the constraints and possibilities of workers' agency. Car manufacturing plants, as important sites of research in the labour process tradition, have been seen to embody contemporary expressions of hegemonic despotism. Researchers have tracked the profound changes in the organisation of work in auto plants and appraised whether new forms of hegemony have succeeded in limiting the need for control and coercion in the workplace. As discussed in Chapter Two, the literature has identified the way in which new management techniques have attempted to elicit the consent of the workforce to the production goals of companies, and the diverse ways in which workers have responded. Within this literature, agency workers have been discussed predominantly in relation to their vulnerability to the constraints of a despotic form of labour control. Drawing upon studies that have identified

how consent can operate within the triadic relationship, the research presented here shows that agency workers in the sector can engage in a wider range of behaviours and responses within the constraints of the triadic relationship, than that assumed in the literature. Whilst the conditions within which production takes place may generate particular forms of factory regime more conducive to compliance than to consent, the special commodity that is labour power asserts its subjectivity and in so doing confounds preconceived assumptions about behaviour. The traces of consent that are identified in the interview data, within the overall picture of despotism that emerges, illustrate the complex nature of hegemony and despotism within the labour process. This research shows the confluence of factors involved within the context of the agency contract, including in some cases the role of traditional notions of the “good worker” in enhancing self-respect despite humiliating conditions of work. Padavic (2005), in observing the same phenomenon, concluded that the need to overcome the “spoiled identity” associated with being “just a temp” is a powerful driver of this kind of behaviour. However, it is also simultaneously driven by the need to maintain material security. Added to this mix is the role of the employment agency in setting out the standards of behaviour expected of its agency workers so that prior conceptions of the “good worker” are amalgamated with agencies’ and car manufacturers’ conceptions of an “ideal worker”; a worker who keeps his/her head down, works hard, is reliable and avoids trade unions.

Future research could build upon the findings of this thesis by extending the sample base upon which these findings rest. The most important limitations in this research reside in the small sample size. A more rigorous investigation of the contribution to theory made in this thesis requires a larger sample size of auto worker and agency workers, in order to thoroughly investigate the breadth of workplace experiences and behaviours, and interactions with employment agencies. Further research would also be enhanced by access to user organisations and employment agencies. Temporary agency workers are also present, in even greater proportions, in second and third tier suppliers. Researching the factory regimes of agency workers throughout the supply chain, where they are assumed to be labouring under more intensive conditions of work than those in assembly plants, is an important and neglected area of research.

A longitudinal approach would permit an interrogation of the way in which agency workers respond over time to their situations, given the emphasis here on the dynamic and shifting nature of labour under a contract which is ostensibly temporary and sold as a way into permanent employment, but which is increasingly long-term. A longitudinal study would also be able to track the longer term effects of the 2008 crisis in the auto sector and the effect of the closure of the Aulnay plant on labour relations in PSA and the wider industry. The recent presidential and legislative elections which brought an end to Sarkozy's presidency and led to a new era of Socialist government in France would also provide a useful backdrop to investigate agency work and employment in the auto sector. François Hollande has pledged to tackle *precarité* by proposing additional social charges where companies misuse agency labour and other forms of temporary contracts, a proposal that has been criticised by the head of Prisme.¹²⁰ During the election campaign, Hollande addressed a meeting at Aulnay-sur-Bois that centred on the theme of youth and precarious employment, in which he condemned the increasing precarisation of a generation who, seeking employment, were offered agency work.¹²¹ Hollande has made employment a priority of his period of office. In respect to this, the closure of Aulnay (referred to by PSA not as closure but as the “progressive reduction of activities” and “external mobility”) is a major test for the new government. Rejecting calls to ban redundancies in profitable companies, his ministers have appealed to “the patriotism of big groups like PSA who have been largely funded by the public”.¹²² Those appeals have fallen on deaf ears. So far proposals aimed at responding to the problems of auto manufacturing have centred on building capacity for innovative forms of green technology. The immediate future, however, is uncertain. The lessons of the Mitterrand era suggest that proposals to counter the spread of agency work, for example, can easily fall by the wayside.

As Glaymann (2005) points out, the development of agency work is part of a trend towards the destabilisation of the standard employment relationship in France. Despite the principle of non-

¹²⁰ See <http://www.capital.fr/carriere-management/interviews/non-l-interim-ne-favorise-pas-le-developpement-de-la-precarite-716504>

¹²¹ http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xpz4r5_meeting-de-f-hollande-a-aulnay-sous-bois_news

¹²² Les Échos, 12th July 2012: PSA, the first social test for the government, a shock for public opinion (*PSA premier test social du gouvernement, choc pour l'opinion*).

substitution in legislation, the sector and user-organisations have succeeded in constructing a parallel form of employment, which, although hard hit by recession is able to rebound in the context of what Peck et al. (2010) refer to as a “jobless recovery”. Whilst the drive for flexibility is the root of temporary agency work, it has profound implications for labour control, generating new configurations and forms of consent, compliance and resistance, filtered through the duality of control shaped by the triadic relationship. The “new culture of work” promoted by the sector, whilst not necessarily achieving popular acceptance, appears to be encroaching upon the rights of labour. The trade union movement, having made small steps in the direction of responding to this, needs to continue to reappraise its approach to new forms of employment and adapt its mobilising strategies in the light of the lessons learned. This, too, is an important area for further research.

At the European level, an additional unknown is the outcome of the crises that are engulfing the southern European states. The drastic upheaval of the securities of the post-war years, which has led to unprecedented levels of unemployment and the removal of basic safety nets from large swathes of the population of Greece, for example, ushers European society into a whole new period, the outcome of which is unknown. In this context, labour process takes on a different significance, as it becomes both a site of survival for those still in employment, and a site of resistance to austerity. Future broad configurations of coercion and consent will depend upon the outcome of current struggles. Chapter 9 discussed how the crisis has exacerbated and deepened processes that were identified prior to 2008, in particular employment insecurity and forms of management that undermine workplace autonomy and discretion, even amongst skilled layers of workers, to the extent that researchers have used highly charged terminology to describe new management practices such as “management by terror” and “workplace tyranny”. Theories of labour control in advanced capitalist societies have been developed in a context of relative stability. The extended theoretical chapter has critically examined what the current phase of capitalist accumulation may mean for labour control and consent to work across occupational boundaries and employment statuses, as hegemonic despotism takes on a more despotic coloration. In doing so, the thesis has developed Burawoy’s concept of hegemonic

despotism by drawing upon the insights from the empirical data to set out how recent developments have transformed the broader labour process.

With regards to the specific example of agency labour, the danger of extrapolating too much from a small data set has been countered by a comprehensive attention to integrating the data with theory in order to delve deeper into the mechanisms of the triadic relationship as they play out in the labour process. The need to bring in the voices of temporary agency workers is made all the more pressing by their relative absence and the indications in the literature that many agency workers do not feel able to share their experiences. This may be due either to their vulnerable position or to the numbing effect of their working lives, as summed up in the following extract from an interview in *Libération*: “I find it difficult to talk, to explain what I do. At the moment I just try not to think about it too much. Otherwise it’s too hard”.¹²³ It is for this reason that it is important that future research succeeds in hearing and understanding the voices of those who “find it difficult to talk”.

¹²³ *Libération*, 26th July, 2006: PSA accused of exceeding the limit of agency workers.
<http://www.liberation.fr/economie/010155978-psa-accuse-de-depasser-les-bornes-de-l-interim>

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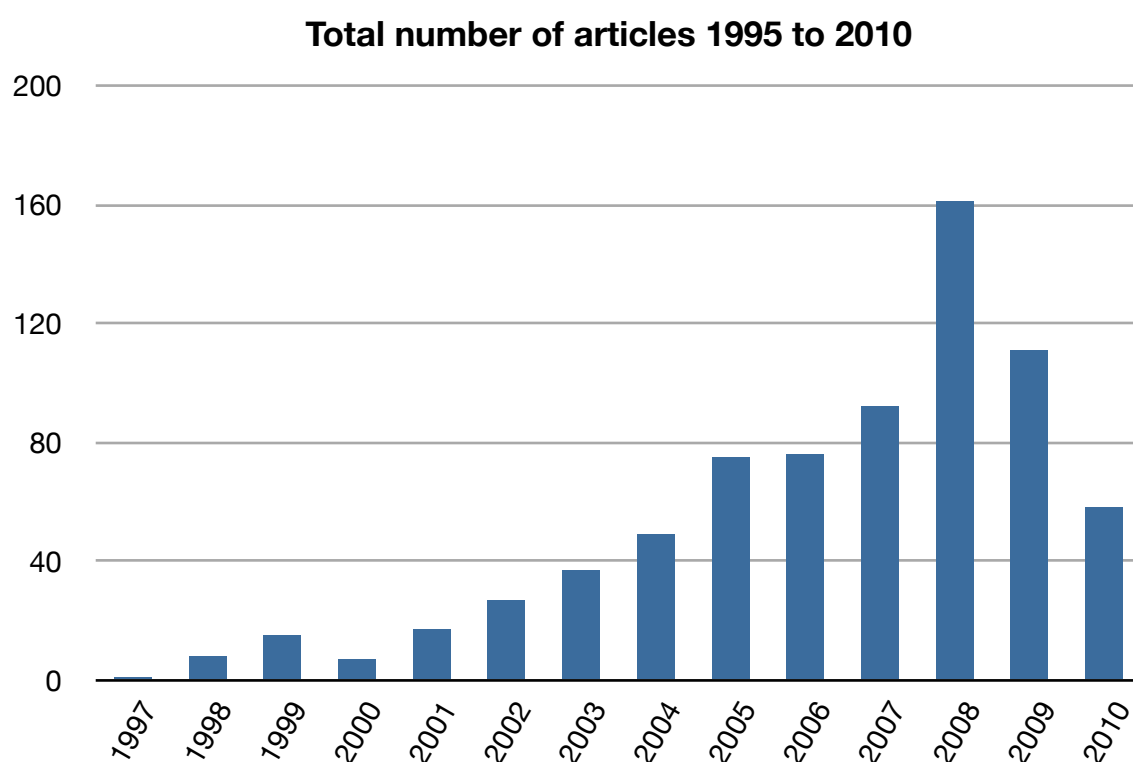
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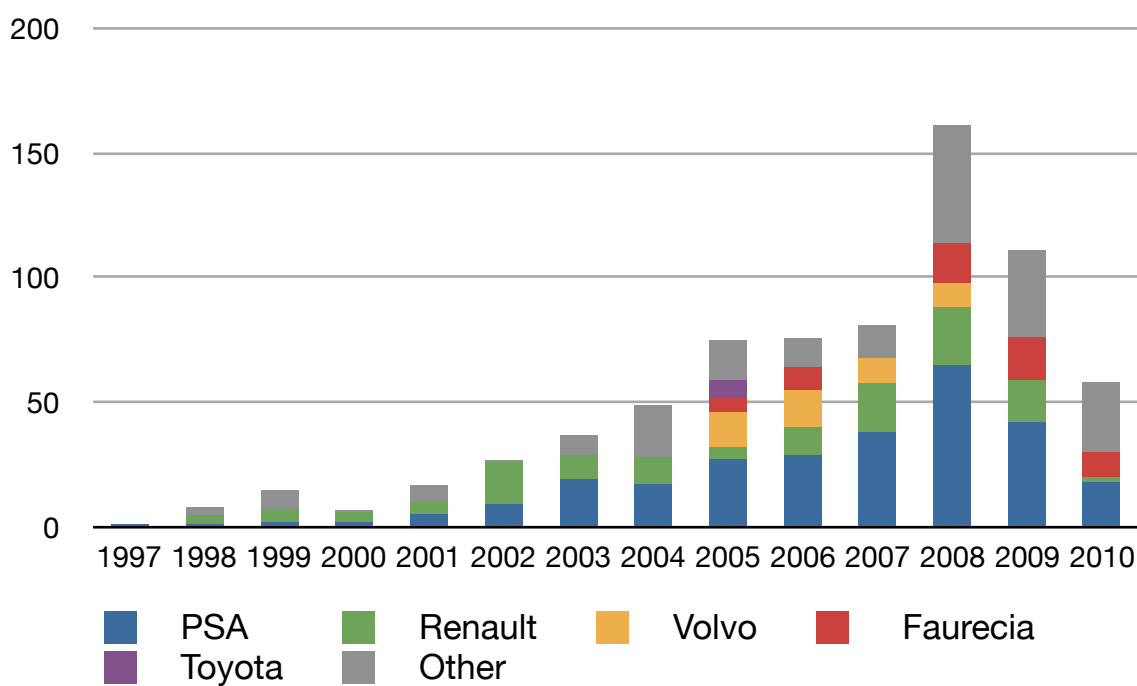
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APPENDIX ONE

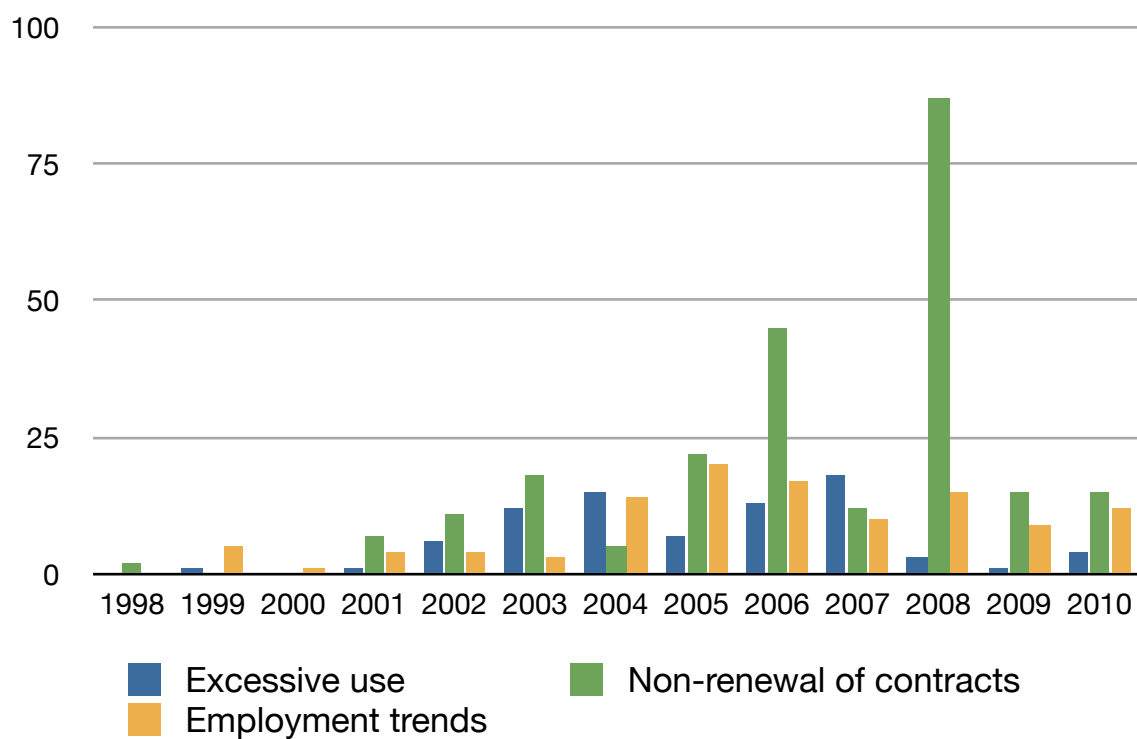
Notes: The data presented in this appendix are the results of a search of the Factiva database which contains digital archives of newspapers from around the world from 1995 onwards. The search generated few results from the period 1995 to 1999, partly due to the limited digitalisation for that period. Regional titles which are published daily in France and have a high circulation, do not figure prior to 2000. A separate search of the financial newspaper, Les Échos, the archives of which have been digitalised from 1995, confirmed the low number of articles between 1995 and 1999, confirming the overall trend of the original search.



Distribution of articles by company



Distribution of most frequently cited themes per year



APPENDIX TWO

Sources for estimates of temporary agency workers at the PSA Peugeot-Citroën Aulnay plant

2012: 300: Various newspaper articles on closure

2011 800 source: Newspaper articles on closure, corroborated by interviews

2010 700 source <http://www.lutte-ouvriere-journal.org/?act=artil&num=2183&id=41>

2009 900 source: USI-CGT leaflet dated 16th December 2009: Expulsion of undocumented migrant agency workers at Aulnay (*Expulsion des intérimaires sans-papier à Aulnay*).

2008 450 source: Usine nouvelle 18th Dec 2008

2007 700 source: <http://www.cnt-f.org/fte/?PSA-Aulnay-en-lutte-On-tiendra&lang=fr>

2006 600 source <http://libcom.org/history/temp-workers-strike-citroen-france-2007>

2002 1300 source: Libération 14/02/2002 Auto les interimairees attaquent (<http://www.liberation.fr/economie/0101403082-auto-les-interimaires-attaquent>)

2000 1500 source: Libération 8/03/2001 <http://www.liberation.fr/economie/0101366505-citroen-abus-d-interim>