

Flexibility Ambivalences - a French view

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In France the concept of flexibility has long been used in the social sciences and by economic and political leaders. It first became popular in the 1980s when, as a result of the work done by the OECD in particular, France earned the reputation of being an unwilling pupil, a land of innumerable restrictive practices that were obstacles to higher productivity and economic growth. The first studies in France at the time, in sociology and labour economics, were designed to clarify and produce a more accurate definition of the term that had become popular with some, while provoking suspicion and irritation in others. Numerous typologies of flexibility were devised: quantitative versus qualitative, internal versus external, numerical versus functional; the impact of flexibility on each aspect of labour relations (organisation of work, skills structure, labour mobility, employee training, social security and related benefits) (Boyer, 1986) etc., was examined. As concerns the work environment in the strictest sense, some researchers imagined a new post-Taylorian model with the rise in the level of employee qualifications giving them greater autonomy at work. In the real world the situation was not quite so positive and flexibility was often associated with lack of job security. Having said that, these studies emphasise the extent to which flexibility in the labour market has many different facets and cannot be reduced to insecure or precarious employment.

Both the situation in France and the frameworks used to analyse flexibility have evolved considerably over the last twenty years. Our paper aims to describe this transformation and defend a particular thesis: having examined the often contradictory diagnostics of flexibility in employment and the work situation, we intend showing that the phenomenon itself is essentially ambivalent. We use the Merton's definition of "Sociological Ambivalence" (Merton, 1976): "*In its most extended sense, sociological ambivalence refers to incompatible normative expectations of attitudes, beliefs and behaviour assigned to a status (i.e., a social position) or to a set of statuses in a society.*" (p.6). We first describe the situation that formed the background to the various debates on flexibility in France, and then present empirical data in support of our thesis.

1. French frameworks for analysing flexibility at work and in employment

1.1. The French employment regime: a gender contract and economic dynamism

The French Welfare State was set up after the Second World War and consolidated over the next thirty years. The dynamic economic situation during the French "Thirty Glorious Years"(trente glorieuses), provided a favourable environment for employees to acquire extensive rights in the workplace, a direct reflection of the powerful labour movements that

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were characteristic of the period. At the time the employee structure in France was organised in three ways:

- The first consisted of what can conveniently be called the “Ford compromise” that was a major factor of French employment regime (Puel, 1979). This combined a long-lasting salaried position and a “typical job”. A powerful symbol in modern employee relations, the typical job combines the performance of a particular job with a status (that of employee), guaranteed by an employment contract associated with a range of regulatory provisions (labour laws and regulations and collective agreements) and a wider system of (social security) protection.
- The second consisted of a “gender social contract” and gender-based conditions in social security cover. In France, this contract was paradoxical in that it was based on a somewhat traditional view of the sexual division of labour while valorising the image of the working woman at the expense of that of mother and wife. The most apparent paradox was in the employment policy and family law provisions that were in contradiction with the proclaimed harmonisation of social time and increased equality between women and men. A typical example was the creation of a parent’s education allowance for the second child in 1994. This family policy provision for both sexes was aimed at encouraging the reconciliation of the sexes. However, it was introduced at the same time as laws, mostly in favour of young people and women, institutionalising part-time work. The changes meant that income from APE (Allocation Parentale d’Education) and from part-time work was seen as interchangeable, with the result that government grants were preferred. This led to a system of underemployment¹.
- The third aspect concerned the labour market: after WWII, the French government set the economic and social modernisation of the country as its main objective, thus promoting full employment was seen as the only way of optimising a social security system based on the performance of a job. However, far from offering the same opportunities to all employees, full employment went hand in hand with gender employment contracts with three relatively contradictory effects: firstly it resulted in full employment and low unemployment for men as men were considered as a priority; and secondly a high level of under-employment in the low-priority populations of working age, i.e. working mothers with young children and young people in general.

The French Welfare State was thus based on institutions of a hybrid, often contradictory and highly discriminatory nature. In the 1980s, almost as soon as it had been established, it was under considerable pressure from two powerful forces: the globalisation of the economy and women’s growing demand for emancipation. As a reaction to these pressures, “flexibility” was encouraged in the organisation of work in all its aspects. This was accompanied by employment and family policies encouraging women to work. Now, twenty years on, a large percentage of French women hold jobs². This has gone hand in hand with increasing structural flexibility of two kinds: internal flexibility (reorganisation of working hours, an evolution in

¹ Between 1994 and 2002 in France, the percentage of working mothers with two children fell from 69% to 50%. In 2002, 7.5 million Frenchwomen had full-time jobs, more than 3 million had part-time jobs and 4.5 million were not employed; 92% of women between 25 and 35 without children held jobs against 50% with two children.

² or more precisely, more women entered the labour market and became salaried employees.

the way work is organised internally, higher work rates, disruption of working groups and collective structures, etc), and external flexibility (part of the production process has been externalised, the range of employment contracts has increased, dismissals, etc). If the labour force in France, as in many countries, includes an increasing number of women, and the organisation of work is becoming progressively more flexible, industrial relations are still having a decisive impact on the search for a new French-style compromise. The new compromise to date, born in a climate of permanent tension, includes a number of *paradoxes*:

- What has happened to the French employment regime? In the past, predominantly male-dominated sectors with effective barriers to the entry of others, in a powerful position to negotiate agreements giving them significant advantages, co-existed with mixed sectors (women and young people) with little protection, which limited the ability of the employees concerned to mobilise. This dual system still exists today but has a very different effect: far from weakening the position of those in protected jobs it has entrenched their rights; however, the positions of both those holding permanent and “non standard jobs” (Temping, fixed term contracts, part-time work) are being strengthened in law. The difference between the two types of job depends less and less on their legal status and more and more on their durability: today, jobs with similar legal status are on a continuum running from jobs for life (that only the Government offers today) to one-day jobs. The new compromise includes yet another paradox; that of referring only to “standard jobs” in an employment system that is rapidly disintegrating into a flexible organisation of jobs with a range of different characteristics.
- What is happening to the “gender social contract”? To accompany the rapid growth in jobs for women, French employment and family policy is progressively encouraging mothers with children to go out to work by developing children care facilities. But at the same time these policies provide a system of associated rights that compensate women when they legitimately interrupt their careers, with the result that these measures perpetuate the over-representation of women in precarious jobs and encourage other types of flexibility. French society thus acknowledges women’s right to work while at the same time not calling into question the “gender contract” that places a higher priority on their role as wives and mothers. The new compromise is thus encouraging another paradox: a vast number of women are becoming salaried employees which is shaking the foundations of the traditional gender social contract, but has not yet called into question the classical division of labour between men and women.
- Finally, what has happened to Ford’s “full employment” objective? The reorganisation of complete industrial sectors in the French national economy is undermining the continuity of employment for the *hard core* of the labour force. The development of other more competitive sectors in parallel is compensating for the jobs destroyed, but they create less stable employment than in the past. Unexpectedly, given the context, the belief in full employment remains but now only applies to a limited *hard core* of the labour force to the exclusion of younger and older workers³: the “chosen few” have the best jobs and the best unemployment benefits (ex-wage’s related unemployment insurance and retraining grants). At the same time the others (mothers, young and old workers) are all overrepresented in the temporary work category,

³ Employment is concentrated in the 26 to 49 age group.

amongst the unemployed with no benefits entitlement, and amongst those receiving government grants related to non standard jobs. The new compromise contains yet another paradox: in a situation where available jobs are scarce, coupled with large-scale unemployment and a destabilized employment relation, the standard full employment paradigm still exists. It works for those who are entitled to it: they still have a standard job and low employment well covered by unemployment benefits. The others suffer from under-employment consisting less of a high rate of non-employment than a high level of unemployment largely covered by other forms of aid and related benefits.

1.2. New approaches to flexibility

In France, the paradoxical characteristics of the introduction of a “flexible wage-earned society” have had an impact on socio-economic studies, making analysis of numerous contemporary social phenomena more confusing. This has one major cause: researchers tend to retain the previous social model as given, with the result that they have been unable to build a global model to replace it that will take into account the increasing number of fragmented, non-standard ways in which work is organised, thus restricting all analyses to the model given in the French employment regime. Given their approach, flexibility in France has long been presented as a *cyclical dysfunction*: the norm remains access to permanent employment (the only way of ensuring the current level of social security cover), while precarious employment is regarded as abnormal (as it calls into question the French employment regime). Given this analytical framework, the new economic and social situation is considered unfair, useless, even dangerous over time, and employees’ behaviour is interpreted as that of victims adapting to acts of God: the wage-earner of the “affluent worker” is opposed to the wage-earner in today’s precarious employment situation (Paugam, 2000) and the conclusion drawn that the “new types of employment contract” are part of a rapidly deteriorating trend.

To force them to fit into the classical paradigm, these categories are becoming more and more removed from the real labour market: today the reference to the legal status of a particular job no longer gives an adequate idea of the degree of vulnerability of the individual holding it; the degree of insecurity varies with very different consequences; a reversal in job security is more and more frequent; the accumulation of jobs is becoming progressively more widespread, etc. By invariably referring to the present situation as a sort of cyclical dysfunction, the scientific experts may well produce methods of analysis suitable for public policy analyses, but they have frozen social reality into a series of rigid categories (those who are integrated, excluded, have stable or precarious jobs, etc) that have increasing difficulty explaining what is actually happening at the social behaviour level.

R. Castel (1995) successfully called the traditional analytical approach into question. In his work, that presented the historical aspects of the subject in depth, he developed a dynamic approach using the concept “social vulnerability” by arguing that this vulnerability is not a specific *state* on the fringe of the standard type of employment, but a process that is an integral part of the way modern organisations work. The problematics of flexibility are thus part of all work experience (from that of “hard core” salaried employees to the outer reaches of the phenomenon). There is a “dispersion” of different levels and forms of vulnerability (its application is extended and diversified) with all workers being part of this dynamic in a series of interconnected zones, more or less removed from full integration into the labour market.

By breaking with the rigid, classical analytical categories, Castel opened the way for new approaches (more European and more interdisciplinary) that had until then remained on the fringe of the debate in France. Using these new approaches, the “Ford compromise” was analysed for what it is (a standard theoretical framework), and criticised for what it had become (a rigid framework that was unable to take the non-egalitarian division of labour between the sexes into account). Given the new approach we need to examine the *structural* components of the changes rather than treat them as cyclical disequilibria, and insist that the social problems are less a dysfunction than they are a mutation of the system as a whole.

This approach offers new ways of analysing flexibility which form part of a less negative analysis (no longer concentrating on the problems it raises, and what it destroys) and favour a more visionary analysis (What does it correspond to? Under what conditions can we make sense of it? etc.) It gives us a way of making sense of heterogeneous situations arising from conflicting logics without falling into a *miserabilism* based on some (real or theoretical) paradise lost.

1.3. Flexibility and ambivalence

The empirical work that we cite in the second half of the paper should be seen in the light of this change in problematics. Starting from empirical surveys of people dealing with insecurity at work and in precarious jobs, we wish to emphasise the new dimensions provided by our analysis of flexibility. We start with a new frame of reference (under development), in which the change in societies of the first modern type is assessed using contemporary risk analysis. Under this perspective, we are evolving from the type of society prevalent during the first modern era (characterised by the Golden Age of salaried employment, all-powerful science, faith in social progress, and strong social pressures on individuals through their historic social ties) and entering societies of the second modern type based on the individualisation of life styles and ways of thinking, with an increase in doubt and uncertainty, with higher job mobility, and as a consequence, with people having to handle individual and social challenges to which they are not accustomed. While sharing the idea that individuals are emancipating themselves from the previous “predetermined” futures in favour of futures they can decide and build for themselves, we are well aware of the extremely paradoxical nature of modern society which makes everything and the contrary possible, i.e. a horizon offering unprecedented freedom and potential, but with no guarantee that everyone will profit from it or even successfully manage the incalculable risks raised by their personal development. Given this context we wish to emphasise three important ideas:

- Firstly: The post WWII Years was based on a clear split between time spent at work and time spent outside work, a split that largely coincided with the gender-defined roles played by men (workers) and women (wives and mothers). This opposition no longer exists today, and any analysis of social behaviour must take the new situation into account. Thus in assessing the dynamics of individual careers, any analysis of flexibility has to consider their experience both at work and outside the work situation.
- Secondly: Individuals cannot be reduced to the status of victims of some vast social machine that they fear and which is outside their control. To take such a postulate seriously when examining flexibility, we also need to ask how such a system developed in the organisation of work and what role it played in the organisation of individual careers.

- Thirdly: Today, ambivalence is at the heart of individual social experience (Bauman, 1991; Tabboni, 1999). For a significant part of classical post-war sociology, ambivalence had primarily negative connotations. As a product of attempts to satisfy irreconcilable norms, ambivalence was seen as destructive in that it created tensions, dissatisfactions and malfunctions in a world governed by an unequivocal adherence to closely defined social roles (Merton, Barber, 1963). However, in a more open, more varied, and perhaps less “comprehensible” world, given the conflicting orders individuals receive, ambivalence is in fact more constructive. It becomes a resource that enables people to nurture ambitious projects, even when these are probably unattainable. An ambivalent attitude can thus be defined as avoiding irreversible choices and unequivocal decisions in favour of other practices based on the conviction, *a priori* unreasonable, that it is desirable to pursue opposing objectives: accepting and maintaining working relationships in an ambivalent work situation, assuming contradictory social obligations, consciously living recurrent, short phases of intense involvement and disengagement “without flinching”, accepting a way of life that will evolve throughout their lives, etc.

We have illustrated these ideas with four examples taken from empirical investigations:

2. The ambivalence of flexibility: a few examples taken from empirical investigations

2.1. To work and/or be a mother? The case of young working mothers in France in insecure jobs

Our first case illustrates changes that are taking place in the way women manage their ambivalence between their professional and family commitments. Today flexible employment is at the heart of these new ways of managing the conflicting demands between work and family. It enables women to transform a traditional tool, called “discontinuity” in France, as a way of arbitrating between work and family. Used in this way, job flexibility is itself “ambivalent” inasmuch as it raises as many problems for women (making their employment even more precarious), as it provides solutions (a stronger position in their working lives). The research into working women from which we have drawn our examples (Nicole-Drancourt, 2004) shows that men and women do not always live in the same worlds when they live as a family. Mothers have two major types of activity (their jobs and their families) while men primarily organise their lives in relation to the main determining factor, i.e. their work as employees. While French women go out to work more often than women in many other countries, the persistence of their ambiguous family role⁴ means that even today, women have a painful ambivalence in attempting to reconcile these incompatible demands. The demands are all the more incompatible in that each of these two areas, family and work, require a total availability (being a parent has become a complex, high risk activity, especially in event of failure, while jobs are hard to find and even harder to hold down). These problems are aggravated by the fact that jobs for women are largely marginal and their employer-employee relationships even more fragile (part-time work) and/or insecure (fixed-term contracts, casual jobs). Given the context, how do women manage these conflicting demands?

⁴ An ambiguous reference in that a man was required to work to feed his family and a woman, although she could work if she wished, could also choose not to work in that the government granted her this right in the form of family allowances.

Today, young women with family responsibilities are inventing new ways of arbitrating between their working and family lives. In spite of the problems they face finding stable employment, they nevertheless do not intend to give up work completely. In fact these young mothers concentrate on long-term objectives and have developed sophisticated ways of managing their time. Most of them “take advantage of” their precarious job situation by mounting other projects in the “breaks” between jobs. (Strategies include deliberate changes in jobs, further training, and even “planning” to have a child.) On occasion they extend the periods without work thus making their professional careers even more precarious. But, alternately in employment, and without jobs or unemployed, these women have one thing in common: they are active on two different “fronts”, i.e. professional and family, and carefully combine them by taking advantage of the precarious nature of their jobs. Their aim is to be permanently ready for and on the look-out for work and to become wage-earners under the best possible conditions. Thus even when the time they are without work tends to last, they nevertheless actively look for work. During transition periods, the jobs they do are often atypical (temping, casual work, including part-time work as this is often a precondition to getting a full-time job).

Today the system taken as a whole suggests, paradoxically, that the lack of job security coupled with a social security system that provides some protection from the most serious threats (the application of social criteria in the allocation of unemployment benefits, paid holidays on the birth of children, further training grants, individual support in career planning...) gives women the possibility of working from time to time as they choose. In a sense, today’s working careers, with “natural” breaks as a consequence of the unstable job market, enable mothers to continue working while looking after their families. Older mothers have a “choice”: they can choose to continue working while looking after their children (take full-time jobs), choose to work less and devote more time to their children (part-time jobs) or choose to stop work from time to time or even permanently (leave the job market). Today in fact women have a real choice: the increasingly precarious job environment combined with sophisticated strategies for arbitrating between work and the family, enable them to combine professional and family projects. By contrast with what occurred under the classic schema, when women left the labour market for good, and in which the choice between work and family was invariably in favour of the family at the expense of work, the reverse situation applies today. For example, women who lack adequate financial security can give their work a higher priority than their family life. This is confirmed, for example, by women who go on training courses or take temping jobs immediately after the birth of a child (if the opportunity arises), by others whose work commitment is not connected to domestic life and events, and finally by statistics that suggest that young mothers working in precarious jobs are less likely to be excluded from the labour market in the medium term (Bouffartigues, Pendariès, De Conink, 1992). If we compare the way these women arbitrate between work and family, the decision to stop work made by an earlier generation has been replaced by a decision by young mothers to take jobs with little security.

In other words it would appear that young mothers have professional and family objectives that can, paradoxically, only be reconciled by their taking advantage of their precarious situation. The nature of women’s personal careers today is thus not, or at least not only, a reflection of the problems caused by the increasingly insecure nature of the jobs available, but is also a modern variation on the ambivalent attitude women have always had to professional careers. Today women no longer wish to be workers **or** mothers; they no longer want to combine being mothers with holding down jobs to the detriment of one or the other; they

want both careers, in full. Their objective is ambivalent in that it cannot, in strictly logical terms, be attained.

However, job flexibility itself is equally ambivalent. If we accept Beck's concept of model biographies as an explanation of why individuals are not just "destiny's playthings", that in fact they anticipate, plan for the future, take risks, and try to acquire the means to limit or overcome potential problems (Beck, 1986). In brief, if we admit that the model in its classic form is fast disintegrating, this not only raises questions concerning the nature of flexibility as such, but as a corollary, concerning the type of flexibility that will enable individuals to best organise their lives. Flexibility is no longer just an employer's organisational requirement, it has also become a technique individuals can use to organise their lives, ironically even to the extent of "refusing to accept an employer's demand for flexibility" when this becomes a key issue in negotiations. One can see that flexibility is ambivalent in this sense also.

2.2. *Work and/or play? The case of young engineers in a computer engineering company*

A second form of ambivalence in dealing with flexibility can be seen in the attitudes to work of young engineers in computer engineering and service companies (Lallement, 2003). This professional world has several very specific characteristics: average age under 30, mostly unmarried and highly qualified, high job mobility... those young engineers, who do not clearly separate their work and leisure worlds, are all the more likely to invest in their work personally if they see it as a game that takes place in a relaxed and friendly environment. At the same time, specific events could reduce, if not block their relatively positive attitude to work. In support of our thesis, let's take a look at Netgame, one of a number of companies that mushroomed overnight, like many start-ups at the end of the 1990s. In this computer graphics company, work consisted of projects lasting from several weeks to one or even two years. Work groups were formed, split up and reformed not only as required by the projects in hand, but also, often arbitrarily, simply because management so decided. If the way in which work was organised was often haphazard, human resources management was no more coherent. This was a classic situation for start-ups in the rapid expansion phase. Nobody was particularly concerned about recruitment, salaries or career management until the 35-hour week became law. This encouraged management to take a closer look at their often obscure or incoherent practices. As concerns social relationships, they were *a priori* relaxed and friendly. Everybody used the informal French *tu* when talking to each other. Employees wore very informal clothing to work: jeans, tee-shirts, trainers, caps...

The way in which Netgame negotiated and implemented the 35-hour week is a good example of the type of relationship its employees had with their work. When the Company reduced working hours, it decided to maintain its long opening hours so that its employees could come and play as and when they wished. In fact there was little sense in restricting working hours for these young engineers; letting them come and play on the Company's premises at any time was an excellent idea. The play dimension of their work was important for these young employees (mostly men) who were already interested and involved in this type of activity. All the personal histories we recorded confirm this: the way in which they were socialised at school had a significant formative effect on them; the time they spent at university or in scientific colleges became, thanks to role-playing games in particular, a way of acquiring their specific culture (based on all that is strange, irrational and fantastic...). For these young engineer/software developers, joining Netgame was a "natural" continuation of their personal careers which combined the acquisition of rigorous, formal and rational knowledge with a

heavy investment in gaming activities that were often based on the antithesis of scientific rationality. For some of them we can trace all the stages in their apprenticeship: early use of computers thanks to a favourable home environment, scientific studies, role-playing between students, “promotion” to games master, on-line connections and participation in MJC, a public organization close to “YMCA” (maison des jeunes et de la culture) networks bringing together computer games enthusiasts... In Netgame, around 60 of them took part in computer games every lunch-time and some 30 joined a local network in the evenings (with the aim of conquering virtual kingdoms). They battled directly against each other, challenged each other, formed alliances, exchanged arms and poisons, developed joint strategies... For these young engineers, the boundary between work and play was, at the least, permeable. Some spent 20 (even 25) hours playing: mornings, afternoons, evenings and nights, and even weekends. One of the young engineers “fringe identity” confessed it was not unusual for him to leave the Company at four in the morning...

The relationship they had with their work encouraged these young people to participate without counting the time spent both in and for the Company. However, it was relatively fragile and could change rapidly. This occurred as a result of two types of event that we observed: the first was economic: In Netgame (we noted a similar reaction elsewhere) the announcement of a redundancy program had the effect of a cold shower dampening the employees’ enthusiasm. Even the young software developers (who previously had never counted their hours) started watching the clock. The second event was biographical: the employees started founding families and the birth of the first child forced the young couple to consider the impact of flexible hours at work. All of them, the heads of department above all, described how they started organising their work to optimise their output in order to be free in the evenings, to have some genuine free time and be with their families.

One can see that being (or not being) flexible was not an immutable form of behaviour but was susceptible to what we have called an ambivalent appreciation. To be fully understood, these ways of thinking need to be situated both in the different, brief periods in the economic cycle (state of the job market, the company’s order book...), and in the employees’ somewhat longer personal life cycles. It is not surprising that in Netgame there were two groups with well-determined types of behaviour: on the one hand, young engineers ready to spend all the hours needed and for whom the Company provided a highly sociable environment that was a natural follow-on to their school and university careers; on the other hand, the departmental heads and project leaders (now over 30 years old with a desire to have a family life). The latter were more likely to compartmentalise their lives and optimise their productivity at work. The reaction of the first group to the redundancies was initially disappointment, followed by a loss of interest in their work that they had previously lived as if on an enchanted island. The second group had a more relaxed approach to the crisis as the diversity of their interests went beyond the work environment.

2.3. Remain an employee or become an entrepreneur? The case of employees in an on-line brokerage

The third example enables us to illustrate another way in which attitudes to flexibility were ambivalent. This analysis was based on data collected on two occasions in a dozen companies in the on-line brokerage business, followed by interviews with the same employees two years after the start of the survey. This enabled us to produce an analysis over time (Sarfati, 2003). Employees working in sales in on-line brokerages are young (average age 28), hold degrees

(82.5% have at least one two-year post-school diploma), and are male (65.8%). Their job consisted of replying to private, telephone clients who wished to invest on-line on the stock exchange. This professional group had created a “edge” spirit in the sense that, while they did not really belong to the traditional world of high finance (in which the trader is the archetypical figure), their experience in the sector was seen as an opportunity to devote themselves to their passion for the financial markets (a number of them had already invested in the market before being recruited).

During the first phase of interviews, we noted they had an ambivalent relationship with their job. They were deeply committed to their work and always looking for ways of innovating: “sometimes at the weekend I amuse myself by setting up a trading system for example... or think of ways of inventing something extra for the company... as I mentioned previously... consultancy for example...” (Jérôme, age 28). They did this as much to satisfy their personal interest in the stock market as in the hope of internal promotion. At the same time these employees said they would not hesitate to leave the Company the day there was nothing more to learn or if the on-line stock exchange business slowed down. In terms of their work they were more interested in personal satisfaction and development, and “self-realisation”. They thought of their work as a good way of developing their personal skills and, if the opportunity offered, of selling themselves on the job market. They invested heavily in the hope that the “markets would take-off” and reward their efforts, but at the same time they were quite happy thinking of changing sector if the crisis persisted. The market was thus seen *positively*, as the major factor determining their professional future.

At a time when critics were fiercely denouncing the “market’s domination” of working conditions and workers, these young employees initially had a somewhat discordant attitude. For them, acquiring the skills needed in the trading world involved not only internalising the appropriate norms, values and codes, but also the “laws” governing the market, even if the latter could well interrupt their careers. Thus, while a quarter of them said they were looking for another job outside the company, their search should not be seen as a rejection of the nature of their work, as at the same time they said they wanted to continue working in banking and finance: “I always look (for jobs) in financial companies... yes, exactly... you never know what will happen to the economy. Markets can collapse and you need to protect yourself... One makes contacts at least... One explains the situation to potential employers... and if they need you, they already have your CV. After all, it doesn’t necessarily mean you are going to leave...” (Nicolas, aged 24).

What was their situation two years later? When the second series of interviews took place the sector had been dramatically reorganised. In one of the companies observed, the changes were tangible (it had been taken-over by a competitor, departments had been consolidated...). The new management informed the employees that no redundancy plan was being offered, but that “for those who no longer wanted to be part of the adventure, the door was open.” Jérôme, who during the initial interviews was seen as a company “stalwart”, decided to leave to devote himself full-time to an activity he had been running in parallel. He negotiated a “golden bowler” and transformed a hobby he had previously practised as part of an association, into a job (organising festivities). Nicolas and Rémy resigned to “go off on another adventure”. Both decided to go and live “in the provinces”. They founded their own web business and now tele-work together developing websites. Their decision to leave on-line broking, to which they seemed fully committed, can be explained. Firstly all three said they had been disappointed in the sector: they had started with unbridled enthusiasm and a strong determination to have successful careers in the sector at a time when the new economy

promised an incredible future (fabulous salaries, increasing responsibility, an ever-growing interest in their work...). When the internet bubble burst, their consternation was as great as their lost illusions. However each of them had close friends or relations who had set up in business. Finally, they wanted to create their own business, taking advantage of the subsidised probationary period and other facilities available to unemployed business creators. It is not surprising that they left the on-line brokerage business. Nicolas, Rémy and Jérôme therefore chose to leave at a not very promising moment in time economically.

These young employees did not live their high risk situation and experience flexibility as if they were submitting to Fate's iron hand. With their sound academic background, a wide network of contacts..., they were in part able to make a virtue of necessity, starting again in a different sector with fresh energy and with a different professional status.

2.4 Stay or leave? The case of consultants

The last case we will be citing is based on studies carried out in the 1990s in a number of large computer service and consultancy companies (Berrebi-Hoffmann, 1997). In an economic context in which the demand for computer engineers exceeded the supply, the consultants interviewed in the sector saw their job mobility as a choice rather than a necessity. On the one hand it enabled them to raise the level of their expertise (and thus their value on the market) and to bump up their salaries on each change of job. This meant they had much faster promotion than their colleagues who did not accept this flexibility. The case we propose to examine now is one of accepted ambivalence, similar to that of the working women described in the first example.

The computer engineers interviewed were aged between 23 and 30; most held 3- or 5-year degrees from elite university colleges; they mostly worked on their own, independently of others, on short-term computer projects (three months to a year), on the customer's site (large and medium and small companies, government departments...). Enterprises in the computer service and consultancy sector (including networks of freelance engineers and large loosely structured groups) were split into a number of small, independent units all over the world run by local managers (from 14 to 20 different countries in the companies we studied).

These loosely integrated structures and functions, that some referred to as "fragmented", constituted the vast majority of organisations in the sector, but their engineers and consultants nevertheless shared a common culture: "when all is said and done, we are more an aggregation of independent consultants than a classic company. In fact, we share the same culture, perhaps because we all have a higher education, mostly at an elite university college. We wouldn't survive if we didn't share this minimum cultural consensus on entrepreneurship and autonomy, together with a rejection of management hierarchies, etc. We are more motivated by the fact that we enjoy our work than the rest of the package; it gives a sense of personal achievement (Jacques, age 42, head of a local office).

Take the case of a subsidiary of the Cap Gemini Sogeti Group, now Cap Gemini. The consultants had chosen to join this service company rather than one in a more traditional, even "more respectable" sector like heavy industry, high-tech, or a major computer company. They rejected the idea of large bureaucratic companies where "one is just one pawn amongst others". They were attracted by the wide variety of experience they would acquire, the top-level skills, the reputation earned from working for the Group, and by what they thought

would be highly promising career prospects in a young and fast-growing sector. Nevertheless they did not stay with the company: almost all of them left the office and the Group within three years of being recruited as there was little internal mobility, with few technical postings elsewhere in the Group or possibilities of promotion to management positions. Thus these consultants had a particularly contradictory attitude (even though chosen and accepted) to internal and external flexibility:

- on the one hand, they were strongly committed to the company during their short (3 to 6-month) projects, had high salaries, and planned to leave after two or three years as part of their career strategy to enhance their personal success. “We joined CAP for the reputation one acquires working there. You have to stay two or three years and can then sell yourself elsewhere. In general we move between Andersen Consulting, Unilog, Cap Gemini, Télésystème, GSI and Sligos, and have a significant rise in salary with each move. Obviously you can’t do it every three months, but every two years is OK.” (Paul, age 26, consultant, 9 months service).
- on the other hand this strategy is evoked in negative, even pejorative terms, showing a sense of remoteness that is contradicted by their real investment in the Group in terms of the work done (overtime, evenings and weekends, strong commitment to the customer’s interests...). “I’ve done 2½ years and if my calculations are right I’ve got six months to go.” (Pierre, age 28, consultant), “Software and computer service companies just suck you in and spit you out. We are really doing the oldest profession in the world, if you see what I mean.” (Antoine, age 25, consultant). The computer engineers swung quickly from strong loyalty to their project and their customer, matching their technical and intellectual investment, to cynical attitudes bordering disinterest, and even threatening to leave.

In fact our surveys showed that these young consultants combined several apparently contradictory strategies, either simultaneously or in succession, when faced with flexibility and their potential external careers. We summarise their attitudes in the table below:

Typology of strategies concerning flexibility used by employees in computer service and consultancy sectors

<i>Employee strategies</i>	<i>Initial threats of leaving</i>	<i>Alliance with others in peer groups to take advantage of the reputation they would acquire</i>	<i>A new moral deal with employers based on a mutual exchange of services</i>	<i>Over-commitment and personal acceptance of the demands of the system</i>	Access to the customer
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A career in a company requires a positive personal investment in that enterprise and a commitment to hard work. If independent consultants did not have these characteristics they could never carry out the intangible, intellectual work required in their creative and inventive activities (over-involvement, alliance, a bilateral deal). At the same time, they reserve the possibility of leaving in the short term (threat of leaving, access to the customer). They were permanently and simultaneously both in the company and looking for a job outside the company or in a consultancy. To achieve this they had to have an ambivalent attitude, in particular as concerns their commitment at work. They invented ways of being both committed and indifferent. Their critical remarks on their *milieu* and commitment to their personal careers suggest they required specific tools to enable them to sustain this

ambivalence, thus ensuring their loyalty was not that strong that it would prevent them from leaving the company at the right moment. The employers themselves were ambivalent when faced with the situation and had mixed attitudes running from commitment to the company to indifference to the relationship and to their implicit contract with the employees that we have summarised in the table below.

Typology of strategies concerning flexibility used by employers in the computer consulting and service sectors

<i>Employers' strategies</i>	<i>Renunciation of control</i>	<i>Punctilious control</i>	<i>Confidence</i>	<i>Charisma</i>	<i>Arbitrary and authoritarian</i>	<i>Political networks</i>
	<i>Skills bought in the labour market as need be</i>	<i>Applied management rules (ISO 9000), administrative and legal rules (refund of expenses) occasionally having a nuisance value</i>	<i>Relied on employees' commitment and over-investment given their uncertainty as to the results of their work</i>	<i>Played the role of master, arbitrator, adviser, and tutor playing on the employees' doubts</i>	<i>The type of character denounced in harassment cases, a perverse sort of psychological control alternately bullying and encouraging the subordinate</i>	<i>A small loyal group visited outlying units or were posted to subsidiaries to ensure that information passed up the hierarchy, and top management could exert their influence in the decentralised units</i>

Most enterprises we studied in France used four or five different management techniques with their employees. The same techniques were used by office and agency managers who, although they were employees in the agencies and consultancies, also acted as employers.

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