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Reshaping Work in the Platform Economy, Amsterdam – October 19 & 20, 2017

Panel 8: Boundary Work: Ambiguous Worker Identities and Social Protection

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New Militant Commitments or New Jobs? Becoming *Assembly leader* at *The Food Assembly* in France

Having only emerged a decade ago, a new form of commercial trade has been growing at a very fast pace over the past five years. It is characterized by exchanges of assets and services between private individuals coordinated via the Internet. Startups such as Airbnb, Etsy or Uber encourage private individuals to merchandize their personal items (apartments, cars, knitting...). The First studies on this subject are divided into two tendencies. Some of them, coming from economy, management or consulting, analyze those exchanges as part of a new model of embedded economy, more ecological and source of social bonding (Algar, 2007; Botsman and Rogers, 2011; Nghiem, 2013; Vallat, 2016). Doing so, they echo those platforms' proponents' discourses. Created in Paris in January 2012, the think tank "Ouishare" refers to those practices as a new "sharing" or "collaborative" economy. It defines those initiatives as « based on horizontal networks and participation of a community ». Other studies are less optimistic. They emphasize the risk that those activities may lead to new working poor, holding several jobs to make ends meet, paid on a piecework basis, lacking social protection (Borel, *et al.*, 2015). Those new forms of exchanges could also be seen as parts of a re-composition of the labor society, initiated by public policies to address unemployment (Abdelnour, 2014; Bessière and Gollac, 2014). Other analyses also wonder to what extent their development would result from the "*New Spirit of Capitalism*" as theorized by L. Boltanski and E. Chiapello (1999) (Peugeot *et al.*, 2015). Whether source of innovation or social regression, those exchanges via the Internet are considered by academic researches as new jobs, whose quality and consequences are still to measure.

However the commodification of personal possessions as well as domestic or leisure practices isn't always seen as a job. Web platforms and a collective such as Ouishare remain rather unclear about the status of those activities. In the agricultural sector, for instance, a startup, « The Food Assembly » (FA), invites private individuals to set up a pop-up food market in order to contribute to a fairer agriculture. This activity is presented as a new form of militant commitment, which is accompanied by a small allowance for the time and energy spent. Founded in France in 2011 this startup manages an online platform that allows consumers and food producers to meet up and bypass mass distribution. It's now spreading in Europe (Germany, England, Spain, Italy, Belgium...) under different names. There are around 700 assemblies in France in 2017. The online platform has 70 employees and an annual turnover of 2 millions euros.

The FA advocates « alternative » ways of producing and distributing food: local, hence more ecological, and promoting interactions between its « community members ». By doing so, the FA follows the « Community supported agriculture »'s basic principles that are now quite well known. Called « AMAP » (Associations pour le maintien d'une agriculture

paysanne – literally: associations for the preservation of peasant agriculture) those initiatives were founded in France in 2001. They bring together consumers and a farmer (usually a fruits and vegetables producer). The farmers pre-finance the production, which will be divided each week in an agreed venue. The latter commits himself to make and deliver those « baskets » of food. Consumers organize distributions in turn. Volunteers manage relationships between consumers and the farmers. The novelty of the FA is that it relies on private individuals getting a commission, who are thus neither volunteers nor employed by the platform. The merchandization of assets or activities previously excluded from the market is now concerning an unexpected part of private life: militancy and community life. Scrutinizing this case enables us to shift the debate from job quality to the relationships between work and militant commitment.

This question has already been addressed in the associative sector. Several studies underline the risks associated with activities that mix job and activism. It could in some cases lead to poor working and employment conditions, justified by the fact that employees are also activists (Hély and Moulévrier, 2013). The militant motivations may even sometimes appear to be less important than the urge to find a job – whatever the conditions- as it has been highlighted for job seekers in associations (Darbus and Hély, 2010) or others workers of the so-called sharing economy (Peugeot et al., 2015).

However it would be regrettable not to take into account seriously the desire of some of those workers to find a better articulation between work and convictions. Studies about solidarity economy or political parties have indeed highlighted the existence of individuals striving to reconcile convictions and profession (Rodet, 2013, Bargel, 2011). The workers of the FA could thus be similar to those people. The success of the marketization of practices previously considered as private, could point out a desire to find a better articulation between work and areas of interest. It would be inadequate to analyze those activities as only a default choice.

This paper aims at understanding the causes and possible effects of the extension of those new forms of exchanges. It focuses more precisely on the articulation between work and areas of interests or militant commitments by exploring the case of the FA workers. How do those people get involved in such an activity? Are they really some kind of new working poor hoping they'll manage to eke out a living, in the end? Or are they qualified workers looking for militant commitment, alongside a main paid employment – and if so, why don't they then do it as volunteers? To what extent are those workers similar to those committed to solidarity economy? Can several profiles be identified?

This communication addresses those interrogations, drawing on a fieldwork research in Lyon. It first of all presents the French ongoing debate about the workers of nonprofit economy, where some of them strive to reconcile work and convictions. It then shows that the FA workers met in Lyon are in a difficult position regarding employment and carry out this activity as a job. It finally underlines the motivations put forward for undertaking such an activity.

Methodology

This communication relies on the one hand, on a completed research on new forms of commitment in solidarity economy, and on the other hand, on an ongoing one concerning assembly leaders in Lyon. There are eighteen Food assemblies in Lyon and its surroundings at the moment. Nine assembly leaders have been extensively interviewed (between 2 and 3 hours each). They are between 29 and 60 years old (the average age is 36) and have been carrying out this activity for three months (Violaine) to two and a half years (Christel). Basic

information has been gathered about two others still waiting to be interviewed (one is no longer in charge of an assembly but did it for several years). Two employees of the platform have also been interviewed. Weekly distributions have been observed in six different Food assemblies in the same city. Some data has also been collected on the FA website, among which nine other Assembly leaders' portraits.

I – The Assembly Leaders: the New Form of an Ongoing Debate?

The questions raised by the FA leaders echo an ongoing debate about workers of what is called the “social and solidarity economy” in France. We will first present this discussion in order to evaluate then to what extent the FA leaders are similar to the workers of this sector.

A) Association Workers: a Default Choice Related to the Transformations of the Public Sector?

The proportion of people employed in associations in relation to the active population has been increasing in France since the 1990's (Hély, 2009). Some researchers interpret this increase as a consequence of the transformations of the French public sector (Hély et Moulévrier, 2013; Simonet, 2012). They stress that working in this sector or in associations represent two ways of serving the common interest. Indeed, occupations are very similar in both sectors: education, social work fields, health, sports and culture. Besides, the associations' workers appear to share some characteristics with those of the public sector in terms of gender, qualification or social origin. They are mainly women (68 % of workers in associations, 62 % in the public sector), with a similar level of qualification higher than national average. Moreover, the proportion of people whose parents are or were working in the public sector is higher in associations than in the active population. An “ethos” of serving the common interest would therefore be conveyed and would lead to the search for a community-oriented job. According to those researches, the decline in recruitment in the state public sector results in an increase of employment in associations. In other words, jobs in the associative sector would be essentially default choices.

This is all the more problematic as the employment conditions are far from being identical in the public and the associative sectors. The urge to work for the common interest or at least to undertake a meaningful job would encourage workers to accept poor employment conditions such as lower incomes or unpaid overtime. Those conclusions advocates for a strengthening of the public sector or at least an improvement of jobs in associations, taking into account the public service they carry out. Those research works however analyze jobs in associations only and overlook what happens in the nonprofit sector taken as a whole.

B) Studies on the Nonprofit Sector as a Whole: New Forms of Militant Commitment?

Those analyses have been criticized for not taking into consideration the idiosyncrasies of the jobs that can be found in the nonprofit sector as a whole. M. Abhervé and H. Defalvard (2008) for instance underline that this sector enables people to combine common interest and individual initiative. Other researches point out that a significant part of workers come to the nonprofit sector in order to find a way to have a political action outside traditional institutions such as parties or trade unions (Rodet, 2013, 2014). This concerns

above all the founders of big networks in Fair-trade, organic agriculture, LETS (Local Exchange Trading Systems) or CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). They were activists before having a commercial activity. They were involved in left-wing political parties, trade unions, think tanks or the “may 1968” movement. The creation of a nonprofit initiative was a way to pursue their militant commitment.

The younger generation employed in those networks (often as “coordinators”) also claims its desire to contribute to a political action. Some other workers, employed in local structures (a fair-trade or an organic shop for instance) can also give similar reasons for choosing such a job. They were looking for a job in the nonprofit sector and often volunteered previously in the organization before being employed. Some of them experienced a disappointment during their studies or during a first job in another area. They say they didn’t “recognize themselves” in a position that wasn’t consistent with their values. They decided to switch career. One of them, thirty years old and working in a fair-trade shop in Paris says for instance:

“When I finished *Centrale* [A prestigious engineering school] I looked for myself a lot. I worked shortly in the IT sector and I rather quickly understood that this was a financially comfortable situation (...) but which I didn’t really like, from a psychological point of view. (...) I believe I really moved ahead. Anyway, I recognize myself much more.”

The social characteristics of those people (whether they are national networks coordinators or shop employees) are very close. They are around thirty or forty years old, have a high level of education (most often a master’s degree), and studied human and social sciences, frequently along with a training in environment (agronomy, sustainable development...). They spent one or more years abroad. They come from rather affluent and educated family (architects, doctors, teachers, business owners...). Those workers share many characteristics with activists from the alter-globalization movement (Agrikolianski and Sommier, 2005). But they are also very similar to the militant employees of the French Young Socialist Movement studied by Lucie Bargel (2011). All of those people are eager to find a job that enables them to make a living out of their areas of interest. Their jobs are not exactly “default choices”. They are looking for something they wouldn’t have found in the public sector: a job that enables them to advocate a cause, and have a say on how to do it. One can thus wonder if the workers of the so-called collaborative economy don’t share some characteristics with those workers. We will refer to them as “solidarity economy workers”. In France indeed, the nonprofit sector can be referred to as on the hand “social economy” (associations, cooperatives and mutual insurances) and on the other hand as “solidarity economy”, which encompasses organizations giving priority to other purposes than profits (irrespective of their legal status).

The questions raised by the increase of employment in the nonprofit sector also apply for jobs based on the online platforms. Are the workers concerned new working poor who would have preferred to find a regular job? Is this activity a militant one alongside a regular job (as the FA platform itself says it is)? Or are the FA leaders, qualified workers looking for a meaningful job, different from what they could find anywhere else? We will now give the first results of an ongoing research on Assembly leaders in Lyon, aiming at understanding better who are those workers and how they turned into food entrepreneurs.

II- Assembly Leaders: People Looking for a Job...

We start by describing more closely the FA's functioning in order to better understand the part played by Assembly Leaders. We then compare the ideal worker described by the FA with the ones we met. In most cases we investigated, the leader's activity appears to be a kind of job, although the FA doesn't want it to be one.

A- The Functioning of the FA: an Enterprise and its Branches?

To open a new Assembly, leaders have to apply to the FA and get an authorization. They fill in a form about their motivations and are interviewed. The people I met remember that the FA's employee made it very clear that this activity wasn't a job in any case, and could only provide an extra income. Leaders are then responsible for finding a venue. According to all the people met, this is the most difficult part, which sometimes takes a full year of investigations. Future leaders can't afford to pay a rent but need to find a delivery point big enough to receive producers and consumers, with a vehicle access nearby and available during the evening. It is often a restaurant or a bar willing to attract new people. The distribution can also take place in the premises of an association. Assembly leaders then start contacting producers within 150 miles radius. They can either choose people already working with Assemblies nearby or find new producers. The FA induces the leaders to make their own network of producers in order to increase the number of those working with them.

Once a venue and four or five producers have been found, the leaders can open their Assembly and start looking for consumers from their neighborhood. As assemblies are called "Hives" in France, clients are designed as "bees". They register on the website and then are free to order or not products of their choice each week (there isn't any commitment to buy something as in Community Supported Agriculture). Payment is made online. Once every week, the "queen bees" (or "bumblebees" sometimes) organize the pop-up markets: they set up tables, help producers to unload their truck, and somewhat decorate the premises with items customized to The FA's colors and name. The leaders themselves wear an apron displaying the startup's logo.

According to the leaders, there are few contacts with the FA's employees after the creation of the "hive". They provide technical support whenever there is some trouble with the website. A part of the platform's employees' income is received in kind: they have a right to order products from the platform in any Assembly. As a consequence, they regularly visit the assemblies, have a look at them and taste the products. The FA leaders are most of the time « auto-entrepreneurs » (French simplified self-employment regime), which is the case of all the interviewees- or have the « EURL » status (one-person limited liability undertakings). Those two statuses actually concern 66 % of them – while the others are registered as nonprofit organizations or other enterprises. Leaders get 8,35% of the farmers' and food makers' pre-tax turnover. Another 8,35% goes to the startup in order to manage and develop the website. Thus, the relationships between the local group and the online platform share some features with a franchise system: the startup decides whether the leader can open a new Assembly or not, suggests prices, sometimes gives some indications about the venue, and provides a "distribution kit" (decoration and apron). However, as said during the first interview, the leader's activity isn't supposed to be a job.

B- The Ideal Leader: A Forty Years Old Woman Hosting an Assembly Out of Conviction

The FA's website indeed presents this activity as a militant one. The page dedicated to future leaders is entitled "The steps involved in hosting an Assembly" and invite people to "Eat the best and freshest food in [their] region and support [their] local economy and community »¹. It underscores that it requires "strong personal commitment". Neither the word "consumers" nor "clients" is mentioned. The website refers to the "Assembly community", or the "neighborhood" instead. (Leaders themselves often prefer to speak about their "bees". According to them, the latter are only the producers' clients, not theirs.)

The FA French website puts forward nine portraits of Assembly leaders from different regions. Their age and occupation are written next to their picture. The average age is higher than in Lyon: 43 years old (versus 36). Seven are women, only four are men. They all seem to have stable full-time jobs: notary clerk, communications officer, filmmaker, consultant...

Among the leaders met in Lyon, only one matches the ideal description of the Assembly leader given by the website. Christel is a forty years old young woman, working in an enterprise specialized in safety clothing. She's married and has two children. Her husband also has a full-time job as a cook in a school canteen. The Assembly is for them a way to meet people from the neighborhood, and to teach their children how to eat healthy food. Christel grew up in the countryside and finds it very important to maintain a relationship with agriculture and peasants. She says she hosts an Assembly "for fun" and for her children but not for the extra income. She saves the money earned on a dedicated bank account and sometimes uses it to buy something for the Assembly: a scooter to help with the distributions, a video projector, white wine shared with the "bees" after each pop-up market. However, in Lyon, Christel's case isn't the most frequent one.

C- Finding an Activity when one is in a Difficult Economic Situation

The other Assembly leaders we met are in a difficult situation on the job market. Four out of nine were unemployed when starting this activity. Two of them, Christian and Luc, around sixty, had to dissolve their societies and didn't manage to find another job. Younger, Fabien (thirty-eight years old) had had several fixed-term contracts in journalism and communication before enduring a full year of unemployment, a period he describes as "a wilderness experience". Just joining the labor force, Mathilde was multiplying training experiences and couldn't find better than a "civic service"². Another one, Violaine, thirty years old, was trying to quit her social worker job and had started half-time work. For all of them, the FA was a way to find an extra income. Being in charge of a "hive" can bring around 300 or 400 euros (net) a month. Mathilde, who has been hosting the biggest one in Lyon for two years and three months, earns around 1000 euros per month. She is known as an exception.

It is also worth noting the FA leaders interviewed all are in a downward social mobility situation to some extent. They all pursued higher education and come from rather affluent families. As far as the youngest are concerned, Fabien's parents are banker and stay-at-home mother respectively. Violaine's father was also a banker, while her mother works for the tax administration. Mathilde is a military's daughter. Her mother was also a stay-at-home one. Fabien and Violaine admit their parents financially help them.

¹ <https://laruchequiditoui.fr/en/p/open#building> (mai 2016)

² The French Civic Service is a voluntary service managed by the State- or on behalf of the State in the social field or in associations.

Since hosting an Assembly doesn't bring enough money to make a living, they all have at least one more rewarding activity. As mentioned earlier, one is a part-time social worker; another one is a freelance journalist. Mathilde is paid around 200 euros a month for writing on the FA's blog. Fabien and Luc both strive to start a freelance activity, in communication for enterprises and packaging business respectively. Neither of them makes a living from it. The former gets 80% of his income from the rental of a Parisian apartment he owns. The latter has a working wife but confesses he has financial problems.

D- A "Kind of Job"

For those people, who don't have a stable or satisfactory job in parallel, this activity is considered as a kind of job or "part of" a job, as Christian says. They all use the word "work" [travail] to talk about it. Mathilde even says twice "when I was recruited" in order to relate her first contacts with the FA. She laughs about it: "Well, it's not really a recruitment, but...". It doesn't take a very long time each week - from 10 to 15 hours - but still requires regular monitoring. Managing an Assembly involves setting and maintaining a local webpage connected to the main online platform, as well as checking and sending emails. Producers often need some advice in order to promote and sell their products. Leaders oversee the way they present their assets on the platform, encourage them to put nice pictures and to chat with the "bees" during the distributions. Consumers, as far as they are concerned, need to be reminded a sale has begun on the Internet each week. The "queen bee" thus sends a weekly email to announce what products are proposed, regardless of whether those are new or not. The distribution lasts approximately two hours. Once in a while, a "bee" also forgets to come to the pop-up market and collect his "basket" of products. Some leaders take the time to call them and find a solution. Some others prefer to offer the products to the volunteers who help them with the distribution. Two leaders among those interviewed have people regularly helping them. The leader's role also includes informal meetings with the other "queen bees" in order to share good practices and think about potential improvements. Six of the interviewed people thus decided to meet once a month. They plan to organize an event around the FA to increase its visibility. It could be a bike ride in the city, with a free products distribution, as organized by Assembly leaders in Nantes last year.

To sum up those first elements, it appears Assembly leaders carry out an activity that has all the aspects of a wage earner's job without being one. They aren't the startups' employees. The time spent is neither recognized nor paid. They have a commission pay, no holidays nor sick or maternity leave. This could lead us to conclude that their situation is similar to the one mentioned above concerning associative workers. The discourse enhancing a community-oriented activity would overlook poor working and employment conditions, only visible if you start considering the activity as a real job. These people would thus suffer from the transformations of the economy (whether it refers to changes in the private or the public sector). In the case of associations, those researches imply that the workers would rather work in the public sector. In the case of the FA this interpretation means that the Assembly leaders would have preferred to be employed by the platform to carry out the same activity. This is far from being obvious when listening to them.

III-...But not “Any” Job

Hosting an Assembly is for most of the leaders’ met a “kind of job”. However it isn’t “any” job, or solely a default choice. It meets their need for more meaningful jobs, for militant commitment to environment or agriculture and for greater autonomy. They share many social characteristics with solidarity economy workers. They are thus very similar to them, although they really appreciate being independent.

A- Finding More Meaningful Jobs

All the interviewees underline the fact that they were looking for a more meaningful job when they discovered the FA. The question of the meaning given to an occupation is omnipresent whether they talk about themselves or about their friends and relatives. For Violaine, for instance, who preferred to pursue her social worker job part-time, the important thing was to find a meaningful job. She wanted to “help people”, to “make them think about consumption” in the same way as she had been led to think of it. She made up her mind after traveling one year in Asia and Oceania. There, she realized she could live with less money and without knowing what she’ll be doing the day after. According to her, her relatives also played a part in her reflection. She wonders if it isn’t because she saw her mother disliking her own job that she was looking for something she liked. She describes her partner as a consultant, who’s very active in associations in order to “overcome her professional life’s lack of meaning”. Violaine repeats several times she “[isn’t] on it for the money”, or “in search of stability”, but to do something she likes.

Fabien has a very similar speech: he was looking for a meaningful activity, in which he could fully develop, “recognize himself” and do something “useful”. During his job search he saw a documentary about the founder of a big French nonprofit group (“Groupe SOS”) and was very impressed. He decided to do “something like that”, which enables to “reconcile economics and human”. He had already volunteered for two nonprofit organizations (The Red Cross, and Le Génépi, a student association teaching to prisoners). His first choice would have been to work for a NGO but his applications did not succeed. Being an Assembly leader is currently “a work that has more meaning than [his] communication activity”. As for Christian, after dissolving his SME, he looked for “a source of income consistent with [his] convictions”. Indeed, they all want to some extent to contribute to some sort of a social change.

B- Tacit militant commitments

The meaning Assembly leaders want to give to their activity isn’t a political one in the institutional sense of the term. It refers nonetheless to a desire to change society from an individual or local level, in the same way as the solidarity economy workers mentioned above want to. Contrary to the latters, they don’t mention a political commitment in a party or a trade union involvement. But they show the same desire to have a social impact without “doing politics”.

Some of them even reject terms associated with activism. Violaine for instance says she is a “committed person” but not an “activist” one³. She has “a negative vision of activism: strikes, demonstrations, opposition... people who have extreme behaviors”. She defines herself as a left wing or centrist person, moderate in politics and life in general. Local agriculture and healthy food are what really motivate her. Fabien has more or less the same

³ « engagée, pas militante ».

opinion: he is opposed to the idea of doing politics or being involved in a trade union and doesn't like the word "activist". Christel isn't involved in a party or a trade union, she "doesn't believe in politics". However she wants to "act locally"⁴, to diffuse another vision of food in her neighborhood. She says for example she's very much involved in her children's school. According to her, her husband is a little more interested in politics although she doesn't really know what he would answer. In any case, he is "not on the bosses' side, though he used to be one, but big enterprises and SME are different". Luc sees himself as a "hummingbird", according to a story he heard in a recent famous ecologist movie⁵: a person who isn't big but "does his share".

Mathilde on the contrary presents herself as an activist⁶. The tension she perceives between the FA's values and its capitalist functioning, troubles her. She underlines several times that the enterprise (in her own terms) makes it very clear that being an Assembly leader is not a job but can only provide extra pay. She is involved in an association for basic income. At the end of the interview Christian claims it is necessary to "change the system", not only concerning food but also concerning alternative medicine and spirituality: "everything is related". He organized a "civic café" in Lyon during several years. Two leaders were thus already involved in social economy or civic associations before knowing the FA.

It is also worth noting that seven out of the nine interviewed leaders had previously an interest for food and agriculture. Christian's uncle was a peach producer in the South of France. He remembers the holidays he spent there as a child and now deplores the industrialization of the peach production. Nina grew up in the Italian countryside and couldn't understand why it was so difficult to find fresh and local vegetables when she first arrived in Paris. She looked for an easy way to get some and found the FA on the Internet. She then became an Assembly leader when moving to Lyon. Christel's parents are winegrowers so she "never ate ready meals" and doesn't want her children to do so. She also wants to give them another "vision of society": "it's not "everyman for himself" in life". Christel and her husband participate to a shared garden, and so are Mathilde and Nina. Luc's wife is planning to do it too. If all the Assembly leaders met aren't as politically committed as Mathilde says she is, some of them have relatives who seem to be. Luc was convinced to enter the FA by his daughter who is, according to him, strongly committed to sustainable development. As for Violaine, she became concerned by food and ecology thanks to her partner who was "paying very much attention to food".

C- Strong Similarities with the Solidarity Economy Workers

Assembly leaders thus share some characteristics with the solidarity economy workers who strive to reconcile jobs and convictions, and were presented in the first part. They are looking for more meaningful jobs, and a way to advocate a cause. They are also around thirty or forty years old and come from rather affluent families (as seen in the second part). Moreover, they attained a high level of education in Social Sciences, Economy and often in Environment. To carry out their activity, Assembly leaders use skills they developed in their professional life or their studies. Christian learned management and business administration. He then met associative directors while working as a freelance journalist and discovered the nonprofit sector. Mathilde studied Sociology and obtained a master's degree in Local Development. Fabien learned Journalism and Communication and first wanted to offer his skills to the nonprofit sector. Luc directed two SME and presents himself as a "salesman". He

⁴ « faire des choses à une petite échelle ».

⁵ *Demain*, directed by M. Laurent and C. Dion, 2015.

⁶ « très engagée ».

underlines that he knows how to manage his Assembly, for it's just "a business" as others. Eventually, as a social worker, Violaine is used to being in contact with people and taking care of them. The pop-up market is the part she prefers in her leader's activity. She considers it as teaching people how to eat better quality food. Nina, who studied Education Sciences, says exactly the same thing.

Nevertheless, they sometimes also had to learn some new skills: the use of computer technologies (Christel), a better knowledge of food and agriculture (Violaine, Fabien). Most of all, they had to learn about the FA and the way it works: how to use the website, what criteria should they follow to choose the adequate producers? The web platform provided them with an online training they all used and found very useful. Christel refers to it as her "Bible".

The Assembly leaders met share many characteristics with solidarity economy workers presented in the first part. They have similar social characteristics and they try to use their skills in a job consistent with their values. Last but not least, they really want to have a social and environmental impact at a local level. Assembly leaders' desire for independence is more particular to them.

D- Autonomy and Flexible Working Time

The Assembly leaders met are looking for a meaningful job that enables them to use skills they already have and develop new ones. One could thus wonder if they wouldn't prefer to carry out the same activity as employees. If that was the case, the FA's success (and the development of other jobs from the so-called "sharing economy") would therefore just be an indicator of the fact that more and more people try to make their living by doing something they like. However, the people asked maintain that they really enjoy being independent. They appreciate making their own decisions, and not having a manager telling them how to proceed. They also like to have flexible working hours. Violaine "really feel[s] independent" with "nobody telling [her] what to do", whereas in her social worker job, "there is always someone telling [her], asking [her] something". Moreover, she wants to have free time for family and friends. There is "more to life than [her] job". Christel already has a good job and doesn't need to change it but when asked whether she would appreciate to be employed by the FA, her answer is similar: "No, I like to make my own decisions". Christian has only had one experience as a wage earner and didn't like it at all. He "never felt good" as one. He wants to be free to choose his own working time and admits he has "troubles with authority". Likewise, Fabien asserts he could only be a wage earner today "on his own conditions": flexible working-time and autonomy. He didn't enjoy a previous salaried experience, with "standard working-time and hierarchy". He now really appreciates to be able to "go to a conference if [he] wants to", even if it's not directly related to his job.

When asked about the future, the interviewees give surprisingly close answers (except for Christel, the only one having a full-time job). Three of them dream about opening a social grocery or a cooperative. They mention examples of those they like in Lyon. Violaine would love to have with her partner a shop like "Three Peas", which sells local and organic products⁷. Mathilde refers to the bar where we met for the interview: a cooperative where workers are "multi-skilled and the owners of capital". Fabien has subscribed to a "MOOC" (Massive Open Online Course) on social entrepreneurship, in order to retrain to get another job. He would like to find one still related to food and agriculture, "maybe a local producers' store".

⁷ <http://www.3ptitspois.fr/>

Yet in the short term, opening another Assembly appears to be an easier solution. Christian is creating a second one nearby and is already thinking about a third one. Likewise, Fabien considers opening another one. When asked about the future, Luc answers: “Opening another Assembly...because it’s much easier than product packaging”, his alternative business venture. As for Violaine, she wishes she could live only from the Assembly. This could almost happen if the orders were bigger without increasing the bees’ number (in order to preserve the relationships between members and producers).

Conclusion

Scrutinizing the “*Food Assembly*” and its hosts in France is a way to question new activities that are emerging through the Internet. This case study enables us to shift the debate from job quality only, to the relationships between work and militant commitment. We wondered who are the Assembly leaders and to what extent they consider their activity as a job or as a militant commitment. We highlighted that this reflection echoes an ongoing debate concerning workers of the nonprofit sector. Some researches consider that associative jobs are default choices: workers would have preferred to work in the public sector but couldn’t find such a job. According to those analyses, the enhanced motivation and meaning that can be found in those jobs is a way to make workers accept their poor employment and working conditions. However, other researches on the nonprofit sector taken as a whole show that some of its workers really strive to reconcile job and convictions. They wouldn’t rather work for the public sector for they want to advocate a cause, and have a say on how to do it. We thus wondered to what extent those reflections could help us understand the Assembly leaders’ case.

The FA doesn’t present the leaders’ activity as a job but as a militant commitment. According to the online platform, the ideal leader would be a forty years old woman hosting an assembly out of conviction, along with a regular full-time job. However, the first results of our research in Lyon show that most of the Assembly leaders in this city are people in a difficult situation on the job market. Hosting an Assembly is for them a “kind of job”. They undertake an activity that has all the aspects of a wage-earner job without being one. This could lead us to conclude that their situation is similar to the one of the workers in associations. These people would both suffer from the transformations of economy. Associative workers would rather work in the public sector and Assembly leaders be employed by the platform.

Yet this ignores the fact that this activity is not “any” job for the Assembly leaders. Indeed, enhancing that this activity is community-oriented and meaningful helps minimizing poor working and employment conditions. It is also worth noting that hosting an Assembly is not exactly a default choice. Assembly leaders are looking for a job enabling them to use professional skills they already have and to acquire new ones. They are looking for more meaningful jobs. This activity allows them to contribute to the defense of environment or to promote healthy food. Besides, they wouldn’t have preferred to be employed by the platform to carry out the same activity. They wish they could live only from it but their first choice would be to open other assemblies or even have a social grocery. This makes Assembly leaders more like workers of the nonprofit sector taken as a whole (solidarity economy workers), trying to articulate jobs and convictions.

As a consequence, those first results tend to show that being an Assembly leader is a job, but not any job. The development of these activities is related to the transformations of the French public and private sectors: those people are indeed in a difficult economic situation.

Yet it is also favored by a sincere desire for independence and more meaningful jobs, as well as a wish to find other ways to have a local political action.

This perhaps does not apply to all the so-called “sharing economy” workers and research still needs to be pursued on the FA and the platform economy. The poor work and employment conditions of those jobs need to be taken into account seriously. However, researches on the nonprofit sector, as well as those first results, tend to show that going back to the labor society doesn’t seem to be the right solution. New jobs which meet the needs for more meaning (whether it concerns militant commitment or areas of interest), for greater autonomy and for social protection, are still to be invented.

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