



**HAL**  
open science

# The Social Production of Revolt Reconsidered. A Study of Changes in the Membership of the French Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire since 2002 :

Florence Johsua

► **To cite this version:**

Florence Johsua. The Social Production of Revolt Reconsidered. A Study of Changes in the Membership of the French Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire since 2002 :. *Revue Française de Science Politique*, 2013. halshs-01930867

**HAL Id: halshs-01930867**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01930867>**

Submitted on 4 Dec 2018

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF REVOLT RECONSIDERED

A Study of Changes in the Membership of the French Ligue Communiste  
Révolutionnaire since 2002

Florence Johsua

*Translated from French by Alexandra Harwood and Translated from French by Vicki Whittaker*

Presses de Sciences Po | « [Revue française de science politique](#) »

2013/5 Vol. 63 | pages 841 - 864

ISBN 9782724633252

This document is a translation of:

-----  
Florence Johsua and Translated from French by Alexandra Harwood and Translated from French by Vicki Whittaker, « Repenser la production sociale de la révolte », *Revue française de science politique* 2013/5 (Vol. 63), p. 841-864.  
DOI 10.3917/rfsp.635.0841  
-----

Available online at :

-----  
[http://www.cairn-int.info/article-E\\_RFSP\\_635\\_0841--the-social-production-of-revolt-reconsid.htm](http://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_RFSP_635_0841--the-social-production-of-revolt-reconsid.htm)  
-----

The English version of this issue is published thanks to the support of the CNRS  
-----

How to cite this article :

-----  
Florence Johsua, « Repenser la production sociale de la révolte », *Revue française de science politique* 2013/5 (Vol. 63), p. 841-864.  
DOI 10.3917/rfsp.635.0841  
-----

Electronic distribution by Cairn on behalf of Presses de Sciences Po.

© Presses de Sciences Po. All rights reserved for all countries.

Reproducing this article (including by photocopying) is only authorized in accordance with the general terms and conditions of use for the website, or with the general terms and conditions of the license held by your institution, where applicable. Any other reproduction, in full or in part, or storage in a database, in any form and by any means whatsoever is strictly prohibited without the prior written consent of the

publisher, except where permitted under French law.

---

# THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF REVOLT RECONSIDERED

---

A STUDY OF CHANGES IN THE MEMBERSHIP  
OF THE FRENCH LIGUE COMMUNISTE RÉVOLUTIONNAIRE SINCE 2002

---

Florence Johsua

*Translated from French by Alexandra Harwood and Vicki Whittaker*

France, like the majority of industrialised countries, has seen changes in its economic and social structure in recent decades. These include increased job insecurity, a rise in the number of temporary contracts (such as fixed-term contracts), in part-time work and in the use of internships, and – specifically in relation to young people – delayed entry into the labour market and rising unemployment. All these factors have combined to dismantle the very structure of France’s employment landscape and, further down the line, have meant increasingly fragile conditions for those entering employment for the first time.<sup>1</sup> The question of how these social changes are expressed politically has already been addressed elsewhere. However, such research has primarily tackled the phenomenon from the perspective of a decline in political engagement – that of workers, the working class, or, more broadly, of the world of work as a whole – seen particularly in the crisis of the union movement and the increase in voting abstention rates.<sup>2</sup> Seeking not to contradict but rather

---

1. See in particular Luc Boltanski, Ève Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 291-343; Robert Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale. Une chronique du salariat* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), and *L'insécurité sociale* (Paris: Seuil, 2003); Louis Chauvel, *Le destin des générations. Structure sociale et cohortes en France au 20<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: PUF, 2nd edn, 2002); and “La seconde explosion scolaire: diffusion des diplômes, structure sociale et valeur des titres”, *Revue de l’OFCE*, 66, 1998, 5-36; “La paix des vainqueurs. Ce que les politiques font aux jeunes: étude internationale”, *Vacarme*, 47, spring 2009; Marie Duru-Bellat, *L’inflation scolaire. Les désillusions de la méritocratie* (Paris: Seuil, 2006); Gérard Forgeot, Jérôme Gautié, “Insertion professionnelle des jeunes et processus de déclassement”, *Économie et statistique*, 304-5, 1997, 53-74; Emmanuelle Nauze-Fichet, Magda Tomasini, “Diplôme et insertion sur le marché du travail: approches socio-professionnelle et salariale du déclassement”, *Économie et statistique*, 354, 2002, 21-48; Camille Peugny, *Le déclassement* (Paris: Grasset, 2009).

2. See in particular Stéphane Beaud, *80% au bac... et après ? Les enfants de la démocratisation scolaire* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002); Stéphane Beaud, Michel Pialoux, *Retour sur la condition ouvrière. Enquête aux usines Peugeot de Sochaux-Montbéliard* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), and *Violences urbaines, violence sociale. Genèse des nouvelles classes dangereuses* (Paris: Fayard, 2003); Céline Braconnier, Jean-Yves Dormagen, *La démocratie de l’abstention. Aux origines de la démobilisation électorale en milieu populaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007); Maurice Croisat, Dominique Labbé, *La fin des syndicats?* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1992); Guy Groux, René Mouriaux, “Syndicalisme sans syndiqués: dimensions et dilemmes”, in Pascal Perrineau (ed.), *L’engagement politique: déclin ou mutation?* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1994), 67-86; Frédérique Matonti (ed.), *La démobilisation politique* (Paris: La Dispute, 2005); Michel Pialoux, Florence Weber (with Stéphane Beaud), “Crise du syndicalisme et dignité ouvrière”, *Politix*, 4(14), 1991, 7-18; Ivan Sainsaulieu, Muriel Surdez, “Le travail contemporain et ses significations politiques”, in I. Sainsaulieu, M. Surdez (eds), *Sens politiques du travail* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012), 11-23.

to complement these analyses, my doctoral thesis on the changing face of anti-capitalist engagement in France between 1966 and 2009<sup>1</sup> prompted me to ponder a related question: Have these structural changes not in fact also had an impact on the political sphere in the longer-term, visible in the increasing politicisation of a particular sector of the population – a politicisation which has, in turn, prompted a wave of political mobilisation? This was one of the conclusions of my study, which seems to indicate that the economic crisis – and the various forms of downward social mobility which have resulted from it – has had political repercussions which are not limited to depoliticisation and apathy, or the rise of the xenophobic far right.<sup>2</sup> But as a tool for examining how political engagement connects with shifts in social status – especially downward shifts – the downclassing<sup>3</sup> framework,<sup>4</sup> which constitutes the dominant approach to analysing these connections, is biased in a number of ways which negatively affect its capacity to provide explanations. This article is thus a response to my surprise that the available frameworks for sociological analysis were so unsuited to understanding how certain politicisation and political engagement phenomena relate to social trajectories. It provides a preliminary,<sup>5</sup> empirically-rooted analysis which takes a fresh approach to the political effects of these instabilities in the labour market and the consequent disruption to individual trajectories. In moving the debate on in this way, I hope to contribute to a renewal of interest in these issues, in particular in the sociology of activism. Within this field, the levels of sociological analysis – the micro-level analysis of individual trajectories, the meso-level analysis of groups and organisations, and the macro-level analysis of the structural context – are frequently compartmentalised.<sup>6</sup> Such compartmentalisation makes it difficult to understand the impact of social changes on the cost of political engagement, on activist capital, on individuals' availability to commit themselves, and on their expectations of activism; and thus tends to obscure the ways in which individual trajectories of commitment are restricted or facilitated, both objectively and subjectively.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, certain issues, such as the links between the social mobility of groups (upward or downward) and their political engagement have remained in the background. Yet consideration of such issues is increasingly relevant today, at a time when an economic crisis of historic proportions is destabilising European economies, and raising a series of questions regarding its potential political consequences.

1. See Florence Johsua, *Anticapitalistes. Une sociologie historique de l'engagement* (Paris: La Découverte, forthcoming 2014), the book derived from my PhD thesis in political science: "De la LCR au NPA (1966-2009). Sociologie politique des métamorphoses de l'engagement anticapitaliste", Paris, Sciences Po Paris, 2011.

2. Within the existing literature, the political consequences of these macro-social changes are most commonly analysed through the prism of these particular phenomena – see references on page 1, footnote 2. There is no doubt that these phenomena are prevalent within society, and thus they capture the attention of both researchers and the media. However, as the preferred lens through which to observe society, they tend to obscure the development of other social phenomena which have been emerging in recent years with unprecedented vigour.

3. English translation for the French word "déclassement". We have adopted the translation proposed by Peter Collier in the Stanford University Press publication of Pierre Bourdieu's *Homo Academicus* (1988 edition).

4. This analytical framework and the problems with its use are detailed below.

5. See the methodological appendix for further details.

6. For further clarification of these levels of analysis and the importance of making connections between them when studying political engagement, see Frédéric Sawicki, "Les politistes et le microscope", in CURAPP, *Les méthodes au concret. Démarches, formes de l'expérience et terrains d'investigation en science politique* (Paris: PUF, 2000), 143-64; Frédéric Sawicki, Johanna Siméant, "Décloisonner la sociologie de l'engagement militant. Note critique sur quelques tendances récentes des travaux français", *Sociologie du travail*, 51, January-March 2009, 97-125.

7. See F. Sawicki, J. Siméant, "Décloisonner la sociologie de l'engagement militant...", 109-10.

This article approaches these questions using the results of a research project which shifted the social logics of political engagement back to the core of the analysis. It concerned the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League, henceforth LCR), a political party founded in April 1966<sup>1</sup> as part of the same shift which saw the emergence of various oppositional movements within the Union des étudiants communistes (Union of Communist Students), which eventually led to the formation of new political groups on the French extra-parliamentary far left.<sup>2</sup> The LCR witnessed 40 years of French social and political history before spawning the Nouveau parti anticapitaliste (New Anticapitalist Party, NPA) in February 2009. My research drew on empirical work which combined a statistical approach based on four quantitative surveys (three of which concerned all LCR activists at national level) with a broad qualitative approach to political engagement based on in-depth interviews and an ethnographic observational study of the day-to-day activities which constituted ordinary activism (see the methodological appendix for further details). Taking account of the temporal aspect of political party construction (as evidenced by the coexistence of various strata of engagement, corresponding to the period at which new members joined) made it possible to examine the links between developments in the recruitment of new members to the party and macro-social changes at work within society as a whole, especially those which have affected the labour market in recent decades. This article focuses on a specific stratum of political engagement, that of the “new” activists who joined the party from 2002 onwards.<sup>3</sup> The series of events set in motion by the first round of the 2002 French presidential election effectively occupy a specific place in the history of the LCR. The party, which just before the election could boast barely more than 1,500 activists in the whole of France, experienced an upsurge in membership during the campaign and in the months that followed. As a result, party ranks almost doubled in size. However, the transformation within the party membership was not just about numbers. This sudden influx of members imbued the LCR with new life and youthful vigour; it also became socially and ideologically much more diverse. My research showed that the new members did not socially resemble those previously recruited. Analysing their social trajectories prompted me to question the political consequences of social mobility, particularly downward, as well as the relevance of the downclassing framework as a sociological tool with which to understand the links between shifts in social status and political engagement. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, this article takes an objectivising and subjectivist approach to “small and large shifts in social position”<sup>4</sup> in order to open up the black box within which the concept of “downclassing” is contained, and equip ourselves to better understand how experiencing social mobility can contribute to the processes of individual and group politicisation. In this context, a multi-level analysis allows me to demonstrate the pivotal role played by the political work of the organisation. Consequently, this article seeks to revisit how social dynamics might influence the political commitment of both individuals and groups, taking into account the criticism levelled against the “relative deprivation”

1. Known at the time as Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire (JCR). For a history of the LCR between 1966 and 1981, see Jean-Paul Salles, *La Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (1968-1981). Instrument du Grand Soir ou lieu d'apprentissage?* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005).

2. See Frédérique Matonti, Bernard Pudal, “L'UEC ou l'autonomie confisquée (1956-1968)”, in Dominique Damamme *et al.* (eds), *Mai-Juin 68* (Paris: Éditions de l'Atelier/Éditions ouvrières, 2008), 130-43.

3. Hereafter referred to as “post-2002” activists.

4. See Bernard Lahire, *La culture des individus, dissonances culturelles et distinction de soi* (Paris: La Découverte, 2004), ch. 12. This expression will be referred to again in this article. In the interests of clarity, the reference will not be repeated.

approaches while maintaining a focus on the mechanisms of the social production of revolt as an object of investigation.

### Changes in the social characteristics of new members

Within the LCR, the period which followed the presidential election of 21 April 2002 was marked by a wave of new members – the party’s ranks swelled to almost twice their original number in the space of a few months. The only comparable spike in membership in the party’s history occurred in May 1968.<sup>1</sup> While these two episodes may both appear to be (re)founding moments in the organisation’s history, they differ in one fundamental respect: the first occurred against an exceptional backdrop of political mobilisation, the “1968 years” [*années 68*].<sup>2</sup> The men and women who signed up during this period were swept along by this wave of political and social radicalisation. In contrast, those who joined the LCR in 2002 did not do so in the context of an upsurge in global political struggle. There is no doubt that, for these new recruits, Jean-Marie Le Pen’s progression to the second round of the presidential election was a defining political event which pushed them, as they put it, to “take the plunge” into party activism. But the event only served as a catalyst. Outside a context of intense politicisation, the question of what constitutes a prior disposition for political engagement becomes highly pertinent. The “post-2002” activists hailed from a variety of social backgrounds and did not all experience the same type of primary socialisation. Some joined the LCR after a long history of political activism and involvement in both the unions and the voluntary sector, whereas (many) others were first-time activists. However my research revealed one thing that they had in common: they had frequently experienced discrepancies and mismatches in terms of their social positioning. Combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches made it possible to uncover this commonality of experience and its effects on the activists’ representations of the social world.<sup>3</sup> Analysing these representations brought to light a process of politicisation which went some way to account for the trajectories of political commitment of the LCR’s “new” activists who joined from 2002 onwards.

#### “Post-2002” activists and the difficulty of entering the labour market

From the national survey conducted via questionnaire, the average age of the “post-2002”<sup>4</sup> activists was 37, and 59% were under the age of 40. Women were under-represented in this group (36%).<sup>5</sup> The breakdown by age could immediately be translated into social terms, with a sharp increase between the pre- and post-2002 groups in the proportion of university and baccalaureate students (from 2% to 18%) and a small decrease in the proportion of

1. Between April and June 1968, membership of the JCR, the LCR's predecessor, went from 350 to around 1,000 members: see Véronique Faburel, “La JCR, avril 1966-juin 1968”, thesis for a Master's degree in history, Paris, Université Paris I-Panthéon Sorbonne, June 1988, 12.

2. I use this expression – “années 68” – in the same way as it is used in Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand *et al.* (eds), *Les années 68. Le temps de la contestation* (Paris: Complexe/IHTP-CNRS, 2000). The expression assumes a long timescale for the events of 1968, beginning with 1962 and the end of the Algerian War, and concluding with the Socialist Party's arrival in power in 1981.

3. In the sense in which Roger Chartier uses the phrase in “Le statut de l'histoire. Entretien avec Roger Chartier”, interview by Alain Ehrenberg, Véronique Nahoum-Grappe, Georges Vigarello, *Esprit*, October 1996, 133-43 (143).

4. Activists who joined the LCR between 2002 and 2006 (N = 688): see methodological appendix.

5. Compared with 27.5% of “pre-2002” activists. This difference is largely explained by the fact that women tend to stay in the party for a shorter period of time than men: see F. Johsua, *Anticapitalistes*.

pensioners (from 11% to 8%). An increase in the number of people whose employment was insecure was also noted. Among the active population,<sup>1</sup> 88% of the activists who joined the LCR before 2002 had a permanent employment contract, a proportion which fell to 71% among the “post-2002” activists. This decrease was the result of an increase in fixed-term employment contracts, temporary work and internships (20% of “post-2002” activists were employed on such terms, compared to only 7% of those recruited before 2002). However, the decrease was also the result of unemployment as the proportion of jobseekers doubled, rising from 4% of the “pre-2002” activists to 7.8% of those who joined the party from 2002 onwards. If we add together the percentage of those with fixed-term contracts, temporary work, internships or other forms of insecure employment, and recipients of RMI [*revenu minimum d'insertion*]<sup>2</sup>, then 29% of “post-2002” activists were either in insecure employment, or were out of work altogether (compared to 12% of the activists who joined the LCR before 2002). The youth of the post-2002 recruits partly explains these disparities, which reflect the widespread changes in the French labour market: in 2011, three-quarters of all employment contracts were fixed-term, and turnover declined sharply as the age of workers increased.<sup>3</sup>

Changes in the membership also affected the breakdown by socio-professional categories.<sup>4</sup> Among the “post-2002” group, teaching was still the most frequently cited profession (25.8%)<sup>5</sup> but only slightly ahead of intermediate professional categories [*professions intermédiaires*]<sup>6</sup> (23.3%) and white-collar professions [*employés*] (21.4%). For the first time ever in the party, these professional categories were almost equal. From 2002 onwards, the proportion of activists belonging to the traditionally well-represented professional categories in the LCR began to shrink (-8 percentage points for teachers; -2 percentage points for executives and intellectual professions [*cadres et professions intellectuelles supérieures*]).<sup>7</sup> Instead, there was an increase in numbers among the professional categories further down the scale, in particular white-collar workers (a 6 percentage point increase) and, to a lesser extent, manual workers (+2 percentage points). White-collar and manual workers accounted for almost a third of post-2002 recruits. This represents an 8 percentage point increase compared with the members who joined the party before this date, and double the proportion of activists from the “1968 years”<sup>8</sup> who belonged to the same categories. Moreover, the “post-2002” activists in the working-class professional categories (white-collar and manual workers) were more likely to be employed in the private sector than their predecessors: 73% of manual workers and 53% of white-collar workers. The fact that the proportion of post-2002 activists

1. Students and pensioners were excluded from this calculation.

2. State benefit (paid to the over-25s) as a top-up to other income in order to guarantee a monthly minimum income.

3. DARES, “Les mouvements de main-d'œuvre en 2011: une rotation élevée dans le tertiaire”, *DARES Analyses*, 056, September 2012, 1-8.

4. *Translator's note*: The socio-professional categories identified by the Insee (the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies) are: 1. Agriculteurs exploitants; 2. Artisans, commerçants et chefs d'entreprise; 3. Cadres et professions intellectuelles supérieures; 4. Professions intermédiaires; 5. Employés; and 6. Ouvriers. Although such categories cannot be transposed exactly into an Anglo-Saxon context, here they are translated as (1) farmers; (2) craftsmen, tradesmen, retailers and company directors; (3) executives and intellectual professions; (4) intermediate professions; (5) white-collar workers [office workers]; and (6) manual workers.

5. This relates to all levels of teaching combined (primary, secondary and university). Historically, this was the most common profession among LCR members.

6. “Primary school teachers and associated professions” excluded.

7. “Professors and those working in science and research” are not included in this category.

8. Between 1966 (year in which the JCR was founded) and 1981.



employed in the private sector (42%) was almost 10 percentage points higher than for the pre-2002 recruits also reveals a great deal about the changes in the social profile of the party's new members, which had previously been characterised by a clear over-representation of public sector employees – a feature which the LCR shared with the other political parties on the left.<sup>1</sup> The social profile of these new activists thus differed on a number of points from their predecessors. They were less likely to belong to “protected” employment areas, both because they worked less in the public services and because they were more frequently employed insecurely (on fixed-term or temporary contracts, or on an internship). Yet, with an average age of 37, they were well past the average age of entry into the labour market which, in 2002, stood at around 21 years of age.<sup>2</sup> An analysis of the professional situations of these young wage-earners revealed that a significant number had experienced difficulty in entering the job market. Moreover, some had social trajectories which had been affected by various forms of social downclassing.

### Through the looking-glass: untypical white-collar and manual workers

Analysis comparing the social position, social background and level of qualification of the activists who joined the LCR from 2002 onwards revealed that a significant proportion of them had a social trajectory marked by an experience of “downclassing”, whether intergenerational and/or in terms of over-education, particularly common among those employed as white-collar workers or manual workers.<sup>3</sup> In most sociological work, to be downclassed is understood as meaning “not succeeding in maintaining the social position of one's parents”.<sup>4</sup> An intergenerational form of downclassing is thus inferred from a comparison between the professions exercised by parent and child.<sup>5</sup> Another form, known as over-education, refers to the mismatch between the formal qualifications which an individual has obtained and the professional position which he or she holds; specifically, in the Anglo-Saxon context, it describes any situation where an individual's initial level of education exceeds that ordinarily required by the post which they occupy.<sup>6</sup> The survey revealed that the majority of “post-2002” activists employed as white-collar workers came from working-class families (59% of fathers and 53% of mothers).<sup>7</sup> If we look at this category in greater detail, we can further state that a number of these activists had enjoyed a degree of upward social mobility, as 33% of fathers had been employed as manual workers, as had 10% of mothers. However, a significant proportion of this group occupied a social position far below that attained by

1. In 2006, 63.5% of LCR activists were employed in the public sector. This proportion stood at 70%, 59% and 70% in the French Communist Party, the Socialist Party and the Greens respectively in 1998, whilst the proportion of public sector workers among France's active wage-earners in 1999 stood at only 30%. See Daniel Boy *et al.*, *C'était la gauche plurielle* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003), 31.

2. According to Frédéric Lerais and Pierre Marioni (eds), “Dossier Âge et Emploi. Synthèse des principales données sur l'emploi des seniors”, *DARES, Document d'études*, 82, May 2004, 1-48 (5).

3. The number of new members from these two categories was small (115 and 58 individuals respectively). Nevertheless, their presence enabled me to identify a number of phenomena. However it would be useful to confirm these findings with a larger sample.

4. See C. Peugny, *Le déclassement*, 13.

5. In my research, this comparison was made based on the nomenclature of socio-professional categories as established by the Insee. See footnote 4, page 31.

6. See E. Nauze-Fichet, M. Tomasini, “Diplôme et insertion sur le marché du travail...”; C. Peugny, *Le déclassement*.

7. An individual's social background is frequently deduced from the profession of the father alone. In order to counter this problematic male bias which characterises the majority of studies in social mobility (see Dominique Merllié, *Les enquêtes de mobilité sociale* (Paris: PUF, 1994), 165-70), I took into account both the mother and the father.

their parents in the previous generation, as 15.6% of their fathers and 16.5% of their mothers held an executive or intellectual position. Whilst this proportion may not be overwhelmingly large, it is nevertheless atypical. In 2003, only 5% of white-collar workers in France had a father who belonged to this category, a figure which increased to 6.8% for white-collar workers under the age of 40.<sup>1</sup> Comparing these statistics with those obtained at national level thus reveals an over-representation of parents belonging to the higher professional categories among the white-collar workers recruited to the LCR from 2002 onwards. Moreover, these new white-collar LCR members are over-qualified in relation to their socio-professional reference group. Whilst the proportion of white-collar workers who possess a level of qualification equal to or above the baccalaureate is 39.5% in France's active population as a whole,<sup>2</sup> this figure rose to 66.6% among the "post-2002" LCR white-collar activists. The gap between the two statistics is an impressive one, even before one realises that, among this group, almost 40% had a higher education qualification. Amongst the post-2002 LCR activists employed as manual workers, there was also evidence of social trajectories marked by such experiences.<sup>3</sup> Half of this category had a father who was employed as a manual worker. This is a significant proportion, but one which also indicates that the other half of the group were the children of fathers with a higher social position. One figure is particularly striking: that referring to the proportion of activists whose parents worked as executives or in intellectual professions (21% of fathers and 17% of working mothers).<sup>4</sup> If we add to this the proportion of parents who worked in intermediate professional categories (5% of fathers and 10% of working mothers), this means that nearly 27% of activists working as manual workers had experienced significant downward mobility in relation to the position achieved in the previous generation by their parents. In the French population as a whole in 2003, only 9.5% of manual workers had a father who worked in an executive/intellectual or intermediate professional category (only 2% in executive or intellectual professions).<sup>5</sup> The "post-2002" manual workers in the LCR differed again in that their level of education was far higher than that which characterised their socio-professional reference group. In my study, 41% of activists had been awarded a qualification equal to or higher than the French baccalaureate (almost 28% were graduates of higher education). The latter statistic highlights the significant "education gap" between these activists and the population of manual workers in France, as only 18% of the country's manual workers in the active population held a qualification equal to or higher than the baccalaureate.<sup>6</sup>

1. Source: Insee, enquête Formation et qualification professionnelle [Training and professional qualifications, FQP], 2003, calculation based on detailed data. In this Insee study, the socio-professional group of those studied in 2003 was assigned according to the father's socio-professional group. Field: France's working population aged between 25 and 59 and employed in 2003.

2. See Observatoire des Inégalités, "Le niveau de diplôme des catégories sociales", 14 June 2013. Source: Insee, enquête Emploi 2010, Population active, hors non renseignés et chômeurs n'ayant jamais travaillé [Working population, excluding blank responses and unemployed people who have never worked] (<[http://www.inegalites.fr/spip.php?article908&id\\_mot=100](http://www.inegalites.fr/spip.php?article908&id_mot=100)>).

3. This group was made up almost entirely of men.

4. Almost a third of the activists' mothers had no professional activity.

5. Source: Insee, enquête FQP, 2003, as above.

6. Source: Insee, enquête Emploi 2010, above; see Observatoire des Inégalités, "Le niveau de diplôme des catégories sociales", above.

### Towards an objectivising and subjectivist approach to “downclassing”

The mismatch noted for a significant proportion of the LCR’s “post-2002” activists between their formal qualifications and their professional position appears to translate, at the level of the political party, the “trend towards formal qualifications becoming a minor factor in social success”, which now represents a statistical reality perceptible at macrosocial level.<sup>1</sup> The age variable makes it possible to connect these individual trajectories with the collective (generational) trend of social downclassing, which today particularly affects those aged around 30, sometimes even 40.<sup>2</sup> However, from this perspective, the LCR constitutes a textbook case which raises certain questions about how exactly these social trajectories might be interpreted. For example, the situations of these activists might reflect a second phenomenon known as *établissement*. For leftist militants (in particular from Maoist organisations),<sup>3</sup> this phenomenon involved choosing to work as a manual worker despite the fact that their educational qualifications meant other professional possibilities were open to them. This decision was always made for political reasons, whether to recruit representatives of “the working class”, to bolster the number of activists from a particular sector of industry, or borne out of their symbolic identification with the “working class” and the desire to share the fate and existence of the people whom the party defended and claimed to represent. In the LCR, this phenomenon of *établissement* (actively promoted by the party’s leadership on two occasions, in 1974 and in 1980) was never particularly widespread, but was, nevertheless, always present. This example speaks volumes about the difficulties involved in producing a sociological interpretation of this type of data. Quantitative surveys have the great advantage of objectifying the political party and sketching a faithful sociological description of it by revealing instances of statistical recurrence, thus shedding light on the broader phenomena which are specific to the organization as a whole. However, once produced, the problem remains of how to interpret such data meaningfully and “thus, on every occasion, researchers must seek the meaning of individual actions before drawing any conclusions. This is what the statistician who works [...] on formal data, which have been standardised to suit the needs of the study, does not do.”<sup>4</sup> From this point of view, “downclassing” does not appear to be the most appropriate sociological framework for explaining the factors at play in shifts in social position. Indeed, in the research produced thus far in both sociology and political science, this concept is almost automatically linked to the notion of relative deprivation, a notion whose relevance has been severely criticized by several authors.<sup>5</sup> In these approaches, it is first and foremost the mechanical link sometimes established between frustration and

1. C. Peugny, *Le déclassement*, 68. See also a critical review of the theory of academic inflation in Tristan Poullaouec, *Le diplôme, arme des faibles. Les familles ouvrières et l'école* (Paris: La Dispute, 2010), ch. 4.

2. The average age of “post-2002” LCR activists was 37 years old.

3. See Marnix Dressen, *De l'amphi à l'établi. Les étudiants maoïstes à l'usine (1967-1989)* (Paris: Belin, 2000); Robert Linhart, *L'établi* (Paris: Minuit, 1978). Such trajectories also occurred amongst the clergy after the Second World War with the phenomenon of worker-priests: see Charles Suaud, Nathalie Viet-Depaule, *Prêtres et ouvriers. Une double fidélité mise à l'épreuve 1944-1969* (Paris: Karthala, 2004).

4. See Gérard Noiriel, “Pour une approche subjectiviste du social”, *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 44(6), 1989, 1435-59 (1453).

5. See in particular Rod Aya, “Theories of revolution reconsidered. contrasting models of collective violence”, *Theory and Society*, 8, 1979, 39-99; Michel Dobry, *Sociologie des crises politiques. La dynamique des mobilisations multisectorielles* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1992) [1st edn 1986]; Olivier Fillieule, Cécile Péchu, *Lutter ensemble. Les théories de l'action collective* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993); Joan N. Gurney, Kathleen J. Tierney, “Relative deprivation and social movements. A critical look at twenty years of theory and research”, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 23(1), 1982, 33-47; Érik Neveu, *Sociologie des mouvements sociaux* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002) [1st edn 1996]; Anthony M. Orum, “On participation in political protest movements”, *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 10(2), 1974, 181-207.

revolt which proves problematic. Such approaches are permeated by an etiological illusion, entailing a risk of the type of circular reasoning which involves researchers automatically inferring causes from results.<sup>1</sup> The problem is that there is always the danger of making the explanation true because of the way the problem is defined, and of interpreting the process by which an individual comes to participate in political action (be that violence, mobilisation, or – more pertinent to the scope of this article – involvement with an anti-capitalist party) as proof of dissatisfaction. Conversely, it is undeniable that there will always be enough frustration present in society to explain collective action. Thus, what is criticized here is “an understanding of causality which is far too narrow”,<sup>2</sup> wherein the danger lies particularly in “the idea that the decisive factors in a crisis can be identified through sheer intellectual force or, more naively still, from statistical inferences, without any effort to understand what the crises ‘are’ or elucidate the elements which make them up”.<sup>3</sup> The downclassing framework carries a further risk – that of legitimism; because in the absence of concrete proof or evidence of resentment, to surmise that such a feeling exists and that it predisposes an individual to revolt is only possible “if one is working on the basis of a legitimist anthropological premise according to which the ‘dominated’ wish to be and to have what the ‘dominant’ are and have, and, neither being or having whatever that is, can feel only resentment”.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the notion of “downclassing” does make it possible to pinpoint certain phenomena, its analytical value appears limited, even limiting, when it comes to studying the political effects of the shifts in social status which individuals experience during their lifetime. This sociological interpretation, in particular that of the effects of social mobility on the various forms of (de)politicisation of both individuals and groups, must involve the application of an objectivising *and* subjectivist approach to the social;<sup>5</sup> one which seeks to understand *how* things unfold the way they do for the individuals in question rather than *why*.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, a methodology which combines both quantitative and qualitative research methods makes it possible to demonstrate that the micro-social processes at work in the transformation of individual perceptions at stake in social mobility can only be understood if the following are considered: forms of primary and secondary socialisation, integration into several social networks (professional ones, informal friendship groups, etc.), and also lifelong learning which occurs through experiencing events and as a result of group dynamics. Taking all of these factors into account makes it possible to analyse and understand the paths which “activist careers” follow.<sup>7</sup>

1. See M. Dobry, *Sociologie des crises politiques...*, 48-60.

2. M. Dobry, *Sociologie des crises politiques...*, 60.

3. M. Dobry, *Sociologie des crises politiques...*, 60. These developments relate to political crises. However, this line of argument is just as relevant when applied to phenomena of engagement, and to the risks posed by a naïve application of a “downclassing” framework, which is seen as automatically generating frustrations – frustrations which, in turn, are considered as automatically generating revolt.

4. See Boris Gobille, “Crise politique et incertitude: régimes de problématisation et logiques de mobilisation des écrivains en Mai 68”, doctoral thesis in social sciences, Paris, EHESS, 2003, 109. See also Claude Grignon, Jean-Claude Passeron, *Le savant et le populaire. Misérabilisme et populisme en sociologie et en littérature* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 1989).

5. See G. Noiriel, “Pour une approche subjectiviste du social”.

6. See Howard S. Becker, *Tricks of the Trade: How To Think About Your Research While You're Doing It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), translated into French as *Les ficelles du métier. Comment conduire sa recherche en sciences sociales* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002), 105-17.

7. See in particular the special edition of the *Revue française de science politique*, 51 (1-2), 2001.

## Logics of political engagement in times of crisis

A number of sociological studies have successfully used qualitative approaches in order to refine the understanding of social mobility trajectories, and provide the tools to analyse their effects on individuals and social groups from a subjective point of view.<sup>1</sup> In my own research, it was likewise through undertaking interviews and an observational study of activism that I was able to emphasise the influence of the activists' educational and social trajectories within a process of politicisation which shed light on their decision to join the LCR. The study conducted in 2003 in a branch of the party in Paris's 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, which had been founded a year earlier to cope with the influx of requests for membership, enabled me to examine these changes in the party's activist population from a qualitative perspective. In order to better understand the subjectivisation processes at work, let's change our scale of analysis in order to see differently. Moving to a micro-sociological level, this study now focuses on one individual trajectory which, to a greater extent than the others examined, raises a number of questions. Pierre Brévent's trajectory – representative of the new socio-demographic characteristics of the party's new recruits and marked by an experience of over-education – is rooted in a social background which made his commitment to the LCR highly unlikely.

### Lengthy studies and small shifts in social status: when the wide gap between social aspirations and professional position creates a sense of injustice

Pierre Brévent joined the 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement branch of the LCR in April 2002. He was 31 years old during the first stage of my research.<sup>2</sup> The oldest son in a family of three children (he has one brother and one sister), he was from a modest working-class background. His father, however, did rise up through the ranks of the working class: after leaving secondary school with the vocational CAP, Mr Brévent senior began his professional career as a metal-worker, and, following a series of other jobs, ended working life as an offset printer in Normandy. Apart from occasional jobs as a cleaner, Pierre's mother remained a housewife. His parents were not activists, but were politically aware nonetheless. Moreover, Pierre was able to sketch a broad picture of the changes in their political preferences.

“At one point, my father was drawn to the RPR, the right. My mother was even a fan of the Front National, and then the last time we talked about it was in the `90s, my father was voting for Arlette Laguiller [a candidate for the far-left party, Lutte Ouvrière]. I'm not sure about my mother, but I think she stayed on the far, far right.”<sup>3</sup>

1. In this analytical perspective, see in particular Daniel Bertaux, “Mobilité sociale biographique. Une critique de l'approche transversale”, *Revue française de sociologie*, 15(3), 1974, 329-62, and “Mobilité sociale: l'alternative”, *Sociologie et sociétés*, 25(2), 1993, 211-22; Marie Cartier, *Les facteurs et leurs tournées. Un service public au quotidien* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003); Marie Cartier, Isabelle Coutant, Olivier Masclat, Yasmine Siblot, *La France des “petits-moyens”*. *Enquête sur la banlieue pavillonnaire* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008); Cédric Hugrée, “Le CAPES ou rien? Parcours scolaires, aspirations sociales et insertions professionnelles du ‘haut’ des enfants de la démocratisation scolaire”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 183, 2010, 72-85, and “Aux frontières du ‘petit’ salariat public et de son encadrement: de nouveaux usages des concours”, *Travail et Emploi*, 127, July-September 2011, 67-82; B. Lahire, *La culture des individus...*; Paul Pasquali, “Les déplacés de l'ouverture sociale”. *Sociologie d'une expérimentation scolaire*, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 183, 2010, 86-105. Studies in social mobility have recently taken a subjectivist turn: see Claudine Attias-Donfut, François-Charles Wolff, “La dimension subjective de la mobilité sociale”, *Population*, 56(6), 2001, 919-58; Marie Duru-Bellat, Annick Kieffer, “Les deux faces – objective/ subjective – de la mobilité sociale”, *Sociologie du travail*, 48, 2006, 455-73; Dominique Merllié, “Comment confronter mobilité ‘subjective’ et mobilité ‘objective’”, *Sociologie du travail*, 48, 2006, 474-86.

2. Two interviews were conducted with this activist, the first on 24 June 2003 and the second on 10 July 2005: see the methodological appendix which appears at the end of this article.

3. Interview of 24 June 2003.

Pierre's political orientation and his activism thus set him firmly apart from his parents, as did his high level of educational qualifications: he gained a Bachelor's degree in sociology and had begun a Masters, although the latter had not been awarded when our first interview took place. In Pierre's case, investment in his education appeared first and foremost to be a strategy chosen by his parents in order to ensure their son would climb the social ladder. For his parents this meant attaching a high added-value to school and being willing to make large sacrifices to finance their son's education.

“They were well aware that if their kid was going to succeed they had to pay for him to go to the good schools. So they paid to see me through the private schools, because they were the schools in Caen with the good reputations. [...] Having not studied themselves, that was [their] approach and they'd understood that to succeed, there was a fairly simple strategy – put your children in the best schools so that they have a greater chance of success. [...] And my parents, despite the fact they knew little [...] about all the different paths I could follow at school, very quickly had one overwhelming aim – to see me get to university. And they did everything to make that possible.”<sup>1</sup>

The strategy of investment in education that Pierre outlines here is costly, both in financial and symbolic terms. In this, he faithfully reflects the wishes of his parents, for whom social success could only be achieved via academic success, of which they themselves had no experience. If considered strictly from this perspective, for Pierre, their strategy proved successful – but only just. When I met him for the first time in 2003, he was a public sector employee working in a university resource centre. However, when Pierre spoke of his professional situation, he did so with a certain degree of disappointment. In particular, he pointed out that he was only a low-ranking state employee (*catégorie C*) and therefore occupied a support staff role in the university library. His initial level of qualification thus far exceeded that ordinarily required by the post which he held.<sup>2</sup> Pierre boasted a significant amount of educational capital (proof of which was the university degree he had obtained after a three-year course), and, as was clear from the interview, had very high intellectual expectations. Furthermore, despite the fact he greatly enjoyed working in “the library world” a place in which he could rediscover the book-filled environment of his childhood,<sup>3</sup> Pierre did not try to hide the fact that he was dissatisfied with his job – essentially a support staff position – which left him little room to use his own initiative or develop his role. He also pointed to his fairly meagre wage, 1,180 euros a month net,<sup>4</sup> which he deemed far short of the amount necessary to live decently in Paris. As he talked, his disappointment was patent at the disparity which existed between, on the one hand, the value which he attached to his university studies in sociology and, on the other, his job which did not fulfil his aspirations. He also emphasised that it was because he had to earn a living – need rather than choice – that he had had to sit the exams to become a state employee, and abandon his studies. His dissatisfaction with his professional situation was further indicated by the path which his life subsequently followed. Two years later, when I met Pierre again to conduct a second interview, he explained

1. Interview of 24 June 2003.

2. Certain professional exams for low-ranking public sector positions (category “C”) are open to those with no formal qualifications. Other jobs require either the school diploma obtained at 16, the vocational skills qualification (the CAP), or the professional skills qualification (the BEP).

3. Pierre explained that: “With my father being a printer, there were always books in the house, along with everything else to do with printing, and so on... it's fair to say books formed the backdrop of my whole life, really” (interview of 10 July 2005).

4. Amount earned in June 2003.

that he had returned to his studies and intended to sit further professional exams which would allow him to change jobs. Pierre's trajectory thus clearly demonstrates how difficult it is to capture the defining features of those who experience downclassing, as the dividing lines which separate them from the rest are blurred and continue to change. This makes it almost impossible to formulate generalisations from observations made at a specific point in time.<sup>1</sup> However at the time this research was carried out, one year after Pierre had joined the LCR, his disappointment was palpable. From a modest working-class background, Pierre had gone along with the idea of the education system as the route to social success. The fact that he was at pains to emphasise the sacrifices made by his parents says a great deal about the weight of responsibility which he felt, and thus about the duty to succeed which came with being the bearer of the family's hopes. There was thus a particularly appreciable gap between Pierre's lofty ambition of climbing the social ladder, his parents' sacrifices and his own efforts to fulfil that ambition on the one hand, and the small step up he had managed to take on the other. Whilst it is true that in becoming a low-ranking state employee<sup>2</sup> Pierre had escaped the working-class status which had marked his father's professional trajectory, he nevertheless remained confined to a support staff role.<sup>3</sup>

Pierre Brévent drew an explicit connection between his perception of "certain inequalities, injustices – let's call them social" and his family history, and identified a link between this perception of inequalities and his political engagement. In this context, he discussed his family's decision to move to Normandy and leave Vitrolles in southern France, where they had lived until the mid-1980s and where Pierre had many friends of Arab origin. He found the racist remarks of his new classmates in his private school in Caen particularly difficult to stomach. As the son of a working-class family, this experience of private education is key to understanding the way in which his perceptions of the social world took shape, and how he came to appreciate the barriers between "them" and "us" and the consequent discovery of social class, and the relationships of domination which set one class against another – a process which Annie Ernaux, that "organic ethnologist of class migration", has described so well.<sup>4</sup>

"There's no doubt that it was in private school – where I went until the year before the Baccalauréate – that I quickly discovered – in the shame and humiliation that I suffered, and at a time in life when your feelings are everything, and you can't think clearly – the differences between the pupils. Differences which you don't initially link explicitly to social background or to the money and cultural capital of the parents, and differences which you experience as personal indignity, inferiority and loneliness. [...] As a child living in a dominated social class, I had early and sustained *experience* of the reality of class struggles. Somewhere in his work, Bourdieu refers to 'the excess of memory of the stigmatised individual', a memory which cannot be erased. I will carry it with me forever."<sup>5</sup>

1. This was exactly the conclusion drawn by Marie Cartier in her study on postmen. She states that "piecing together trajectories from staff archives made it possible to demonstrate that a certain number of over-qualified individuals do not remain postmen for long, either because they resign or because they are offered internal promotion" (M. Cartier, *Les facteurs et leurs tournées...*, 236).

2. *Translator's note*: "low-ranking state employees" translates "'petit' salariat public". See C. Hugué, "Aux frontières du 'petit' salariat public..."

3. Christian Baudelot, Michel Gollac *et al.* have highlighted the significance of the distinction between support staff or administrative roles and management roles in explaining employees' satisfaction at work in *Travailler pour être heureux? Le bonheur et le travail en France* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).

4. See Gérard Mauger, "Annie Ernaux, 'ethnologue organique' de la migration de classe", in Fabrice Thumerel (ed.), *Annie Ernaux, une œuvre de l'entre-deux* (Arras: Artois Presses Université, 2004), 177-203.

5. Annie Ernaux, *L'écriture comme un couteau* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), 63-4.

This experience, for the children from a “dominated” social milieu, forms part of a process of politicisation: it can lead them to reappraise the social world in terms of new principles of vision and division and, in so doing, prompt them to contest social boundaries.<sup>1</sup> Pierre Brévent’s sensitivity towards social issues and economic equalities, as well as the importance he attached to social justice, which shaped his views and the justification he provided for his political engagement, appeared intrinsically linked to his early discoveries of social and racial inequalities, and to his own experience of the discrepancy between his aspirations for a future social position which matched his educational trajectory and the cultural capital it had provided, and his actual situation. And yet, “the gap between the qualification I obtained – the sign of the social status which I at one point hoped to attain – and the level of education required by my profession can also trigger a sense of dissatisfaction at work”.<sup>2</sup> Where Pierre is concerned, this disparity did indeed appear to be the root cause of an unhappy relationship with his job, creating feelings of disappointment and even discontent. However, Pierre did not experience this discontent in the form of resentment.<sup>3</sup> And it appears that the impact of his studies in sociology was crucial in this regard: he encountered teachers at his *lycée* who left their mark on him, and was influenced at university by authors such as Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, and these experiences provided him with the tools to analyse and understand his own situation, and to reinterpret it through an “injustice frame”,<sup>4</sup> rather than as a form of personal indignity.

“Sociology as a discipline made me socially aware, [...] because it involves the study of society and its dysfunctionality [...] But there comes a point when it isn't just about sociology any more, and that's when you start to want to take action yourself. After exploring society and analysing it, there's no doubt that, with all the horrible things you witness, you get to the point when you want to take the next step.”<sup>5</sup>

Two aspects of his family configuration<sup>6</sup> during his childhood appear decisive in Pierre’s journey towards political engagement. First, there is the upward social mobility enjoyed by his father, who thus experienced “personal emancipation, based on the gradual discovery of the possibility that he could ‘become something else’”.<sup>7</sup> Second is the specific form which his parents’ mobilisation took: championing education. In effect, according to Jean-Pierre Terrail, “among the working classes, it is far from given that plans will be made in order to ensure a child’s educational achievement. Planning the long-term future of the family line means actively managing one’s destiny, seeking to give it meaning as a result of one’s own actions rather than because of the whims of fate, making oneself the author of one’s own

1. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Leçon sur la leçon* (Paris: Minuit, 1982), 14-15. This particular definition of “politicisation” will be explained further below.

2. C. Baudelot, M. Gollac *et al.*, *Travailler pour être heureux...*, 93.

3. In effect, Pierre Brévent held a different set of values which opposed those of the society in which he lived, unlike the resentful person who does not aspire to any another society and who holds the same values and desires as the dominant classes: see Max Scheler, *L'homme du ressentiment* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970) [1<sup>st</sup> edn 1912], and Luc Boltanski's analysis in *Énigmes et complots. Une enquête à propos d'enquêtes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), 249-62.

4. See William A. Gamson, Bruce Fireman, Steven Rytina, *Encounters with Unjust Authority* (Homewood: The Dorsey Press, 1982); William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

5. Interview of 24 June 2003.

6. See Bernard Lahire, *Tableaux de familles. Heurs et malheurs scolaires en milieux populaires* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 1995).

7. Olivier Schwartz, “Sur le rapport des ouvriers du Nord à la politique. Matériaux lacunaires”, *Politix*, 4(13), 1991, 79-86 (82).



story.”<sup>1</sup> The plans which Pierre’s parents enacted thus, for their son, contributed to the development of a disposition to believe that “change was possible”<sup>2</sup> and to work towards that change; just as Pierre initially intended to do by becoming involved in student and neighbourhood associations that organised debates among citizens on a wide range of social issues.

For Pierre, confronted at an early age by the violence of racist behaviour towards his classmates of Arab origin, the progression of Jean-Marie Le Pen to the second round of the French presidential election in April 2002 was the catalyst which prompted his political activism. His commitment appeared to have been long underpinned by a desire for social justice, which was at the root of a critico-societal<sup>3</sup> conversion process that, in this extraordinary political context, led him to take sides in order to “radically change a so-called ‘capitalist’ system which, in the way it is constructed and functions, casts aside a whole section of the population and exacerbates social inequalities”. From this perspective, the way in which Pierre defined himself politically and the way he explained his involvement with the LCR are particularly significant. Pierre described himself as “left-wing only because [he had] social ideas”. And while he found it difficult to “think of himself as a die-hard communist”, he did nevertheless identify with the communist label, offering his own, unique definition of the term: “the ability to change the world, to make it so that everyone can live decently, with a roof over their head, a job, etc.”. It was this project which, in his view, was “the LCR’s overarching project, its battle-horse, the thing which really pushed [him] to sign up”<sup>4</sup>.

Pierre Brévent’s trajectory demonstrates that over-education explains nothing in itself but that it acquires a certain significance as a factor in explaining his decision to join the LCR, when taken alongside his whole family configuration and the background factors from which his specific relationship to culture and education derive; particular dispositions to act, think and perceive which he developed during primary and secondary socialisation, but also interactions with others; and the socializing effects of exposure to political events. Together, these factors explain his use of an “injustice frame” in his subsequent interpretation of not only his own personal situation but, more generally, the inequalities and forms of domination which structure today’s society.

### **On the relationship between social mobility and forms of individual and group politicisation**

A public service employee with a high level of cultural capital at his disposal, Pierre Brévent (like many other young men and women who joined the LCR from 2002 onwards)<sup>5</sup> shared

1. Jean-Pierre Terrail, *Destins ouvriers. La fin d'une classe* (Paris: PUF, 1990), 225. The working-class conversion to the model of lengthy studies has been researched by T. Poullaouec, *Le diplôme, arme des faibles...*

2. Interview with Pierre Brévent, 24 June 2003.

3. I have coined this expression to emphasise the phenomenon of cognitive subversion which arises during political subversion. The phenomenon of cognitive subversion causes individuals to distance themselves from the representation of the social world as the natural order and can, under certain conditions, lead them to voice protest in a variety of ways.

4. The quotations in inverted commas in this paragraph are taken from the interview conducted on 24 June 2003.

5. As part of the “turn to service” in the LCR (in reference to the “turn to industry” implemented in the 1970s – with no success), these men and women have contributed to substantially altering its social and ideological profile: see Florence Johsua, “Le parti doit changer de bases: la LCR et le ‘Nouveau Parti’, transformations militantes et (re)définitions partisans”, in Bertrand Geay, Laurent Willemez (eds), *Pour une gauche de gauche* (Bellecombe-en-Bauges: Éditions du Croquant, 2008), 277-92.

many characteristics with the “highly qualified dominated class” (*dominés aux études longues: graduates, but employed in positions requiring few qualifications*)<sup>1</sup>, whose involvement with trade unions and collective action in the workplace have been the subject of research in recent years.<sup>2</sup> The studies conducted on these over-educated employees, whether working in large publicly owned companies or the private sector, demonstrate how their social position can prevent them from identifying with the dominant group within the company and thus lead them to disobey the rules and defy the order established by this group in a variety of ways.<sup>3</sup> They further show how, in such cases, employees may mobilise academic qualifications and cultural resources in order to resist the hierarchy and how, in so doing, they create a breeding ground for protest in the workplace. My research into anti-capitalist political engagement revealed a further dimension of the politicisation process which results from these personal experiences, and looked at how experience of such situations can contribute to how individuals develop ways of perceiving, classifying and interpreting the social world – ways which also structure this world, since they generate practices. My research did not take a mechanistic approach to the relationship between the social and the political, or between social mobility and political engagement. Rather, the aim was to understand how “macro-social contexts determine the form, the intensity and even the existence of the micro-social processes at work during the transformation of individual perceptions”.<sup>4</sup> If social mobility must be taken into consideration when analysing the logics of political engagement, it is because it appears to contribute to changes in individual perceptions of the social world for those who experience it, and thus to support the various politicisation processes to which individuals are subject. This line of thought is based on a particular definition of politicisation which it is useful to clarify further at this point.

“The small and large shifts (both inter- and intra-generational) as well as the numerous instances of friction (both diachronic and synchronic) between the norms, dispositions and varied tastes experienced by each individual explain the fact that people gradually internalise a series of symbolic oppositions (‘high’ vs ‘low’, ‘advanced’ vs ‘basic’, ‘distinguished’ vs ‘vulgar’, ‘good’ vs ‘poor quality’) and that this way of apprehending cultural goods and the ways in which they are consumed can be felt within oneself or for oneself: *the distinction is as much between two versions of the self as it is a distinction between oneself as a member of a group or a class and another individual deemed working-class, subordinate, inferior etc.*”<sup>5</sup>

1. Annie Collovald, Lilian Mathieu, “Mobilisations improbables et apprentissage d'un répertoire syndical”, *Politix*, 22(86), 2009, 119-43 (122). The French expression, “dominés aux études longues” which here has been translated into English was coined by par Olivier Schwartz: see the thesis he wrote for his accreditation to supervise research [HDR], “La notion de ‘classes populaires’”, Versailles, Université Versailles-Saint-Quentin en Yvelines, 1998.

2. See in particular M. Cartier, *Les facteurs et leurs tournées...*; Vincent Chabault, “D'un investissement culturel à l'autre. Deux générations d'employé(e)s à la Fnac”, *Le Mouvement social*, 228, 2009, 131-45, and *La Fnac, entre commerce et culture* (Paris: PUF, 2010); A. Collovald, L. Mathieu, “Mobilisations improbables...”; Sophie Bérout, Paul Bouffartigue (eds), *Quand le travail se précarise, quelles résistances collectives?* (Paris: La Dispute, 2009). See also the special issue “La précarité mobilisée”, edited by Magali Boumaza and Emmanuel Pierru, in *Sociétés contemporaines*, 65, 2007.

3. The same types of process can be identified for the working classes: see, for example, S. Beaud, M. Pialoux, *Retour sur la condition ouvrière...*, especially chapter 6.

4. Olivier Fillieule, “Conscience politique, persuasion et mobilisation des engagements. L'exemple du syndicat des chômeurs, 1983-1989”, in O. Fillieule (ed.), *Sociologie de la protestation. Les formes de l'action collective dans la France contemporaine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993), 123-55 (146).

5. B. Lahire, *La culture des individus...*, 421.

The experience of social mobility can thus contribute to reshaping individuals' perceptions of the social world by revealing, through these numerous frictions, how society is divided and ranked into a set of inherited, incorporated, embodied categories, and therefore ordinarily invisible to those who are the object of such categorisation. This is why discrepancies in social position are prone to reveal the arbitrary workings of the social world and its ranking systems, with their underlying logics of power, thus helping to foster "subjective ruptures with 'what goes without saying'"<sup>1</sup> – a process which I term "politicisation". The mismatches which disrupted the social trajectories of a number of "post-2002" activists appear to have formed part of such a politicisation process, contributing to transforming their perceptions of the social world. It is also important to emphasise here the pivotal role which school plays in these mechanisms. The socialisation of these militants through the education system appeared of prior importance in explaining not only these forms of subjective detachment, but also their appropriation of intellectual resources – symbolic weapons which provided them with the legitimacy necessary to affirm other values and orders in place of the dominant ranking systems. In this connection, although a number of the post-2002 activists grew up at a time of democratization of access to higher education, they differed from those young people from a working-class background whose chaotic route through the education system, often tinged with bitterness, had reinforced their tendency to unquestioningly submit to the order imposed by the dominant classes. Such young people appeared weakened by their passage through the education system (in particular at university), and thus less inclined towards mobilisation (including within the context of unionised or political resistance).<sup>2</sup> An important difference between the two groups undoubtedly lies in the fact that those at the "top" amongst the working-class children who grew up with widening access to education<sup>3</sup> – those whose higher education' trajectory might be described as successful – found in this intellectual development a form of unprecedented release from their social background, the memory and effects of which extended far beyond their (downward) social mobility. The study thus sheds light on another aspect of the consequences of the democratization of access to higher education for the children from a working-class background who had achieved academic success.

Those interviewed as part of my research highly valued the time spent at university in particular; enchanted memories of certain lessons and professors remained freighted with significance in their discourse. However, diachronic analysis of their trajectories highlights the ambivalent effects of their relationship with the education system, which was also a source of disenchantment for them. The stories of these young people are effectively marked by an unfulfilled desire for emancipation, achieved only in a small step up the social ladder which translates both their access to an academic and cultural sphere – often as the first of their family to enjoy such access – but also the inertia of a system still governed by social reproduction. These are the type of experiences that reveal what Luc Boltanski has termed "hermeneutic contradictions",<sup>4</sup> which individuals are forced to face when "reality tests"<sup>5</sup> demonstrate that the institution with which they are dealing creates a reality which does not match its principles. This is the case of the education system, for example, which – when

1. Bernard Pudal, "Ordre symbolique et système scolaire dans les années 1960", in D. Damamme *et al.* (eds), *Mai-Juin 68*, 62-74 (69).

2. See S. Beaud, *80% au bac... et après...*

3. See C. Hugué, "Le CAPES ou rien"...

4. Luc Boltanski, *On Critique. A Sociology of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), translation of *De la critique. Précis de sociologie de l'émancipation* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).

5. L. Boltanski, *On Critique*, 105.

academic success no longer guarantees upward social mobility – appears not to respect its own rules any more. The fact that the system is dysfunctional thus becomes clear when the rules which have been established (and which should work for everyone provided they play the institution's game) no longer yield the rewards expected in return. Henceforth, by “posit[ing] a differential between what should be and what is”<sup>1</sup> within the institution in question, these reality tests unveil contradictions which open up the space for the development of a critique questioning both social relations and the social world.<sup>2</sup> These reality tests may be accompanied by “existential tests”, experienced individually, and which “are based on [lived] experiences, like those of injustice or humiliation, sometimes with the shame that accompanies them”.<sup>3</sup> These experiences can, if commonly experienced, assume a collective character which “is liable in its turn to be foregrounded to support demands”.<sup>4</sup> The different types of mismatch between expected and actual social position which affected the LCR's “post-2002” activists appear to have fostered the development of a critical stance towards the social world with which they were engaged. The tests which they experienced had transformed their perception of how society works, by revealing to them a number of the system's “malfunctions”, its “inefficiency,” its “flagrant injustice”, and made clear the “outrageous inequalities”, which rendered it “repulsive” and “truly hideous”.<sup>5</sup> The accumulated discrepancies which constituted their social position, and “the ways the job market has reneged on the promises and guarantees made by the educational system”<sup>6</sup> thus contributed to the politicisation process which led them to join a “communist revolutionary” political party.

### The role of context and representation

Disparities between the educational qualifications obtained and the professional position held, or between this professional position and social background, can be identified well beyond the trajectories of the activists studied in my survey. As highlighted above, the transformations noted over time in the LCR activists are part of an overall macro-social dynamic – the changes visible in activist profiles were merely the reflection of this dynamic within the party itself. However, it is worth noting that these transformations did have an impact within the party, because the translation of phenomena which are visible at a macro-economic level to a political party is far from self-evident.<sup>7</sup> It therefore remains to explain why, following the shockwave triggered by the events of 21 April 2002, these changes in France's social structure manifested themselves within the LCR as a significant change in the profiles of new members. To answer this question we need to examine the nature of the political choices on offer in 2002, since “the processes of interpretation and meaning-making are social processes and, as such, occur as part of the interaction between individuals and within given contexts, in other words in a multi-organisational field of competing and allied

1. L. Boltanski, *On Critique*, 106.

2. A reformist critique, since it reminds institutions of their duties.

3. L. Boltanski, *On Critique*, 107.

4. L. Boltanski, *On Critique*, 107. According to the author, these existential tests, unlike reality tests, pave the way for what might be termed a radical critique of the system.

5. The quotations cited in this sentence are taken from interviews conducted with activists who joined the LCR's branch in Paris's 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement after 21 April 2002.

6. Pierre Bourdieu, “The contradictions of inheritance”, in P. Bourdieu *et al.*, *Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), pp. 507-13 (507) [1<sup>st</sup> edn in French, “Les contradictions de l'héritage”, in P. Bourdieu (ed.), *La misère du monde* (Paris: Seuil, 1993, 711-718 (712)].

7. Given that the socio-demographic characteristics of political parties' members are far from representative of those of the general population.

organisations. Consequently, if we wish to situate strategies of persuasion within an ever-changing environment, we must examine the organisational networks and the systems of alliance and conflict in which movements are rooted.”<sup>1</sup> The context of the 2002 French presidential election and the particular features of the campaign of the LCR candidate, Olivier Besancenot, allow us to better understand both the phenomenon of involvement in political parties in general, and the specific nature of the LCR’s new recruits after 21 April 2002.

In seeking to explain their decision to join the LCR, many of the activists interviewed emphasised the key role played by the presidential election campaign and the “shock”<sup>2</sup> which they felt at the result of the election’s first round. However, qualitative analysis of the processes involved in the genesis of their dispositions towards political engagement led me to qualify “the force of the event” as one factor amongst many when seeking to explain the particular path which their careers as activists had followed.<sup>3</sup> Focusing attention on in-depth description of the activists’ own personal trajectories led me instead to adopt an intermediate analytical approach which resituates their mobilisation within deeply rooted social contexts, without neglecting consideration of “the way in which dramatic circumstances change the hand the protestors have been dealt, imposing new rules for the expression of grievances and offering new frameworks within which opposition to injustice can be voiced”.<sup>4</sup> However, in April 2002, the context was not simply one of emotion, of “moral shock”, but rather a sequence of events over the course of which a variety of frameworks for interpreting the social world were operationalised, and hence, a mobilisation process undertaken. Individuals’ decisions to join the LCR following 21 April 2002 must therefore be examined in context, and considered as the outcome of the combination of these dispositions to contest social order and a form of political engagement which gave meaning to their social experiences in such a way as to lead to revolt. The LCR offered a toolbox to conceptualise the world, providing words, a language, and a coherent analytical framework through which social phenomena could be experienced and observed, and which made them meaningful in terms other than fatalism or personal indignity; in so doing, the political organisation plays a vital role in converting anger into agency.<sup>5</sup> The interpretative frameworks which it offered “enable individuals ‘to locate, perceive, identify, and label’ occurrences within their life space and the world at large. By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective.”<sup>6</sup> The inclination towards either apathy or action thus depends in part on this combination. In the spring of 2002, the LCR’s electoral campaign fulfilled this function. Fronted by Olivier Besancenot, a 27 year-old candidate who was a postman and a newcomer to the electoral stage, the campaign focused entirely on the issue of social justice, and set out an emergency social action plan to promote employment, wages, minimum social welfare payments, pensions and an alternative distribution

1. O. Fillieule, “Conscience politique...”, 146.

2. This term was used by several of the interviewees, who did not hesitate to mobilise the rhetoric of “moral shock” in order to explain their political engagement: see James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest. Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

3. See Stéphane Latté, “La ‘force de l'événement’ est-elle un artefact? Les mobilisations de victimes au prisme des théories événementielles de l'action collective”, *Revue française de science politique*, 62(3), 2012, 409-32.

4. S. Latté, “La ‘force de l'événement’ est-elle un artefact?”, 411.

5. See F. Johsua, “‘Nous vengerons nos pères...’. De l'usage de la colère dans les organisations politiques d'extrême gauche dans les années 1968”, *Politix*, 26(104), 2013.

6. David A. Snow *et al.*, “Frame alignment processes, micromobilization, and movement participation”, *American Sociological Review*, 51(4), 1986, 464-81 (464); Robert D. Benford, David A. Snow, “Framing processes and social movements: an overview and assessment”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 2000, 611-39 [French translation in *Politix*, 25(99), 2012, 219-55].

of wealth. Yet in the campaign rhetoric which Besancenot developed in the press and during his radio and television appearances,<sup>1</sup> the elements of collective action frames are evident.<sup>2</sup> The four-page official leaflet produced by the LCR for the first round of the presidential election provides a summary of the campaign's chief themes.<sup>3</sup> The element of *identity* is first introduced when he presents himself as “a young person, a worker”. In specifying that he “is 27” and “a postman”, he places himself firmly on the side of “the majority of the population, [who] take home less than 8000 francs (1220 euros) a month. [He is not] a professional politician but a young worker [...] who shares your concerns and hopes.” This element of identity is also developed in reference to his opponents. He talks of “those who govern us [who] sometimes talk about social equality, without ever turning their words into action. Instead, they have let inequalities become deeper, poverty worsen, and fortunes grow unabated”. In going beyond fatalism or personal indignity and attributing responsibilities to the problems he intends to tackle, the political language he chooses is intended to “transform people’s experience of unease into [a sense of] injustice and scandal”,<sup>4</sup> and to foster this *sense of injustice* among the population. With this aim in mind, Besancenot reminded voters throughout the campaign that “employment was the most basic of rights” and that “it [was] only fair to increase all salaries, pensions and basic social welfare payments”. Finally, his discourse promoted *agency*, based on a faith in the power of “collective action” as a way to “see our interests prevail” and on a subversion of the principles of vision and division which govern the social world, summed up in the slogan: “Our lives are worth more than their profits!”



Sources: (left) BNF, Recueil. Presidential elections. 2002. Leaflets (code: FOL- WZ- 1713). Presidential election of 21 April 2002, official campaign material for Olivier Besancenot, LCR presidential election candidate, four pages; (right) Dominique Drouin, *La République de Nicolas Sarkozy et la France de Jacques Chirac. Affiches des élections présidentielles 2007 and 2002* (Nantes: Dominique Drouin éditeur, 2007), 43: photograph of an LCR poster stuck to a campaign billboard in April 2002.

1. Several of our interviewees referred to radio programmes on France Inter, or TV programmes in which they discovered the LCR, and its candidate, sometimes for the very first time.
2. See in particular W. A. Gamson, *Talking Politics*.
3. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF), Recueil. Élections présidentielles. 2002. Tracts (cote FOL- WZ – 1713). All the quotations in inverted commas in the rest of the paragraph were taken from this four-page campaign leaflet.
4. É. Neveu, *Sociologie des mouvements sociaux*, 91.

Of course, this political agenda was not unique to the LCR during the presidential campaign of 2002. Furthermore, in order to better understand what it was that specifically attracted my interviewees to the LCR, we must also take account of their emphatic rejection of the political parties of the institutional left who had been part of the *Gauche plurielle* experiment: the Socialist Party first and foremost, but also the Communist Party and the Greens. The interviews conducted revealed deep disappointment and, in some cases, a real mistrust of these organisations.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, for some interviewees, their sensitivity to issues such as the fight against racism, feminism, and on occasion the environment, also explains their distance from the other far-left parties standing for election in 2002, namely Lutte Ouvrière and Parti des Travailleurs, who were also frequently accused of being “sectarian”. In more general terms, those interviewed often expressed the feeling that they were not adequately represented by the traditional political organisations.<sup>2</sup> It was thus in this dynamic environment that the campaign to persuade and mobilise orchestrated by the LCR struck a chord with a section of the population. For a number of those interviewed as part of my research, the particular features of their social trajectories, and their effects on their representations of the social world, throw some light on the conditions of possibility for this persuasion. If we are to avoid an “immaculate conception” view<sup>3</sup> of how these dispositions to activism came together with political engagement, then we cannot study how the LCR worked to transform existing interpretative frameworks without also undertaking an analysis of individuals’ perceptions, of their mind-sets, and of how new forms of challenging the established order came about. Finally, as far as individuals’ decisions to join the LCR are concerned, it would be impossible to deny the importance and impact of the progression of the Front National candidate to the second round of the French presidential election. Indeed, for these individuals, 21 April 2002 appears to have represented a shock which, when combined with certain features of their own personal trajectories, activated for some what could be termed an “ethic of responsibility”,<sup>4</sup> which in turn pushed them to “get properly involved in politics”.<sup>5</sup> Qualitative analysis of the trajectories of activists who joined the LCR following the first round of the presidential election in 2002 thus demonstrates with particular clarity that “dispositions to act don’t operate automatically, but only according to the particular contexts of action which emerge”.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, my research also highlighted the particularly fragile nature of such precarious political engagement; the result of forms of protest caused by the discrepancies which have arisen from collective crisis (in the workplace, or within institutions) and the deeply damaging effects such crises have on individual trajectories, the combination of which

1. The activists interviewed were nevertheless anxious to distinguish between the leadership of these organisations and their activists, among whom “there were still some interesting figures”.

2. This was a criticism which some of the activists I interviewed levelled against political parties, but also against the unions in the case of those who had experienced unemployment or whose employment situation was insecure. On the problems of union representation for modern wage-earners, and the difficulty the unions have experienced in adapting to the realities of occupational environments in which employment is insecure, see S. Béroud, P. Bouffartigue (eds), *Quand le travail se précarise...*

3. See Verta Taylor, “Social movement continuity: the women's movement in abeyance”, *American Sociological Review*, 54(5), 1989, 761-75 (761), translated into French by Olivier Fillieule as “La continuité des mouvements sociaux. La mise en veille du mouvement des femmes”, in Olivier Fillieule (ed.), *Le désengagement militant* (Paris: Belin, 2005), 229-50.

4. See Max Weber, “Le métier et la vocation d'homme politique”, in *Le savant et le politique* (Paris: Plon, 2000) [1st edn 1919], 123-222.

5. Interview with Marianna Ochoa, conducted on 27 April 2007. Marianna was 32 years old in 2002, when she contacted the LCR on 22 April to sign up. Like Pierre Brévent, she was one of the “highly qualified dominated class” studied in this article.

6. Bernard Lahire, *Monde pluriel. Penser l'unité des sciences sociales* (Paris: Seuil, 2012), 39.

is unlikely to lead to sustained activist engagement. And, in fact, nearly two years after my first period of fieldwork with the LCR branch in Paris's 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement (the majority of whose members had joined the party in April 2002), a significant proportion of these new activists had already left the organisation.

\*  
\* \*

In the work published in France to date, the political consequences of social mobility essentially relate to voting (which usually boils down to a binary left-right choice). More rarely do authors identify consequences for political attitudes, for people's value systems, and for party political preferences.<sup>1</sup> In particular, these works highlight the effects which downward social mobility has on individuals' degree of ethnocentrism,<sup>2</sup> or on the relative degree of attraction to the far right which downward social mobility fosters.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, they echo the conclusions of studies conducted in other countries, which have emphasised the consequences of downward social mobility in terms of ethnic intolerance and xenophobia,<sup>4</sup> while other research has pointed out that downward social mobility causes a decline in social ties, which in turn can manifest itself in low levels of political participation and various forms of social isolation.<sup>5</sup> And although an analytical frame which focused on the fear of social downclassing was used to explain the student mobilisation of May 1968 in France, the relevance of this interpretation for understanding these events has been challenged since.<sup>6</sup> In the meantime, the specific issue of the consequences of downward social mobility in oppositional terms (e.g. collective action, political remobilisation, universalism, radicalisation on the left, etc.) has remained largely absent from existing analyses dealing with the post *Trente Glorieuses* period.<sup>7</sup> Yet the conclusions drawn by the studies cited in this article demonstrate that downclassing (intergenerational and/or in terms of

1. See Camille Peugny, "La mobilité sociale descendante et ses conséquences politiques: recomposition de l'univers de valeurs et préférence partisane", *Revue française de sociologie*, 47(3), 2006, 443-78 (449-50).

2. Nonna Mayer, "Ethnocentrisme, racisme et intolérance", in Daniel Boy, Nonna Mayer (eds), *L'électeur français en question* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1990), 17-43.

3. M. Cartier et al., *La France des "petits-moyens"...*; Nonna Mayer, *Ces Français qui votent Le Pen* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002); Olivier Masclet, *La gauche et les cités. Enquête sur un rendez-vous manqué* (Paris: La Dispute, 2003); C. Peugny, "La mobilité sociale descendante..."

4. Bruno Bettelheim, Morris Janowitz, *Social Change and Prejudice* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1964); Jörg Flecker (ed.), *Changing Working Life and the Appeal of the Extreme Right* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007); Joseph Greenblum, Leonard I. Pearlin, "Vertical mobility and prejudice: a socio-psychological analysis", in Reinhard Bendix, Seymour Martin Lipset (eds), *Class, Status and Power. A Reader in Social Stratification* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1953), 480-91; Katherine S. Newman, *Declining Fortunes. The Withering of the American Dream* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

5. Peter M. Blau, "Social mobility and interpersonal relations", *American Sociological Review*, 21(3), 1956, 290-5; Seymour M. Lipset, Joan Gordon, "Mobility and trade union membership", in R. Bendix, S. M. Lipset (eds), *Class, Status and Power...*, 491-500; Katherine S. Newman, *Falling from Grace. The Experience of Downward Mobility in the American Middle Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1988).

6. See B. Gobille, *Crise politique et incertitude...*, and "Mai-Juin 68: crise du consentement et ruptures d'allégeance", in D. Damamme et al. (eds), *Mai-Juin 68*, 15-31 (18-19); Louis Gruel, *La Rébellion de 68. Une relecture sociologique* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004); F. Johsua, *Anticapitalistes...*; Catherine Leclercq, Julie Pagis, "Les incidences biographiques de l'engagement. Socialisations militantes et mobilité sociale", *Sociétés contemporaines*, 84, 2011, 5-23; Érik Neveu, "Trajectoires de 'soixante-huitards ordinaires'", in D. Damamme et al. (eds), *Mai-Juin 68*, 306-18 (315); Julie Pagis, "Les incidences biographiques du militantisme en Mai 68", thesis for her sociology doctorate, Paris, EHESS, 2009, and "La politisation d'engagements religieux. Retour sur une matrice de l'engagement en Mai 68", *Revue française de science politique*, 60(1), 2010, 61-89; Isabelle Sommier, *La violence révolutionnaire* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2008), 45.

7. *Translator's note*: the economic boom in France between 1945 and 1975.



over-education) is not necessarily synonymous with dwindling political mobilisation and that it may be compatible with other forms of collective engagement, particularly in the workplace.<sup>1</sup> My research on the LCR appears to indicate that downward social mobility and crisis can also encourage forms of mobilisation which seek to challenge, on the basis of universalist and left-leaning values, the legitimacy of both the socio-economic and political system and that of the governing class to govern. The aim of this article was to underscore the benefits of re-appropriating social mobility within political sociology. However, the analyses presented in this preliminary study constitute more an invitation to delve deeper into an area of research which continues to receive insufficient attention<sup>2</sup> than a conclusive study into the links between social mobility and the various forms of individual and group (de)politicisation (see the methodological appendix). This article lays out a research agenda at the intersection between a qualitative approach to politicisation and a quantitative approach to social change. This agenda could, moreover, link with other areas of research, in particular with work conducted in recent years on the uprisings in the Arab world; a number of the observations made in these studies are in line with the analyses presented in this article.<sup>3</sup> In any event, this body of work demonstrates the need for researchers to cast aside any deductive-nomological ambitions when exploring the links between social trajectories and activist engagement.<sup>4</sup> As far as the broader study of political behaviour is concerned, such work empirically confirms the observations made by Mohamed Cherkaoui, who criticised “the naïve belief in the existence of one behaviour which would alone explain the effect of mobility”.<sup>5</sup> In light of the projections that recession will most likely increase the prevalence of situations of downward social mobility, it appears that there is an urgent need to improve our sociological understanding of these phenomena, of the way in which they are experienced and of how they can influence the politicisation of individuals and groups. Analysis of the types of political engagement which arise in these unsettled times, and that of the conditions of the politicisation of anger through a universalist frame, constitute a theoretical and methodological challenge for research in the social sciences, in that they make it possible to study the social conditions for breakdowns in allegiances to social order *in situ*. Shedding new light on these processes is a crucially important issue today, both in academic and political terms. For “nothing threatens the social order more than those individuals who do not feel the ‘need’ for it, and who, against their will, discover its arbitrary nature. Particularly, moreover, when these individuals have the desire and the intellectual resources to decipher its text, [...] and are sufficiently numerous to want to write another”.<sup>6</sup>

1. In another context, focusing on individuals who have not yet been “classified”, see the analyses presented in Bertrand Geay (ed.), *La protestation étudiante. Le mouvement du printemps 2006* (Paris: Raisons d'agir, 2009).

2. In terms of research which adopts the same analytical perspective as the present article. Any future work in this area should be longitudinal in nature and based on the study of large social groups to allow for “control groups” necessary for the analysis.

3. Whilst rejecting the idea that these factors have played a “causal” role, several works include in their analyses specific description of educated young people facing employment-related problems: see in particular Amin Allal, Thomas Pierret (eds), *Au cœur des révoltes arabes. Devenir révolutionnaires* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013); the special issue “Soulèvements arabes” of *Les Temps Modernes*, edited by Laurent Jeanpierre and Patrice Maniglier, 664, 2011; the special issue “Retour sur les situations révolutionnaires arabes” of the *Revue française de science politique*, edited by par Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi and Olivier Fillieule, 62 (5-6), 2012.

4. See Olivier Fillieule, “Travail, famille, politisation”, in I. Sainsaulieu, M. Surdez (eds), *Sens politiques du travail*, 345-57 (352).

5. See Mohamed Cherkaoui, “Mobilité sociale et comportement électoral: taxinomie des modèles de relations”, *Revue française de sociologie*, 36(1), 1995, 171-83 (182).

6. B. Pudal, “Ordre symbolique et système scolaire...”, 73-4.

---

 Florence Johsua
 

---

With a PhD in political science, **Florence Johsua's** publications include: “*Nous vengerons nos pères...?* De l’usage de la colère dans les organisations politiques d’extrême gauche dans les années 1968”, *Politix. Revue des sciences sociales du politique*, 26(104), 2013, 205-33; “Abeyance structure”, in Olivier Fillieule, Lilian Mathieu, Cécile Péchu (eds), *Dictionnaire des mouvements sociaux* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2009), 17-23; “Les conditions de (re)production de la LCR: l’approche par les trajectoires militantes”, in Florence Haegel (ed.), *Partis politiques et système partisan en France* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2007), 25-68. *Anticapitalistes. Une sociologie historique de l’engagement*, a book derived from her PhD thesis, will be published in 2014 as part of the collection “Laboratoire des sciences sociales”, by La Découverte. Her research focuses on the sociology of collective action and social movements, the sociology of political parties, changes in political activism and the processes of political socialisation, anti-capitalism, and radical left-wing movements (Centre d’études européennes de Sciences Po, 27 rue Saint-Guillaume, 75337 Paris cedex 07, <florence.johsua@sciencespo.fr>).

## Methodological appendix

When I began my doctoral research, there was no quantitative data available on the composition of the LCR’s activist population. As a result, the production of representative, national-level quantitative data was a crucial aspect of my work. To supplement this objectivising process, the study also developed a significant qualitative approach in order to ensure a comprehensive analysis of political engagement. The quantitative aspect of the research included the study of the LCR’s membership cards for the years 2003 and 2005, which numbered 1800 and 1476 respectively. It also included the distribution of a questionnaire to the delegates at the party’s 15<sup>th</sup> conference in late 2003 (N = 262, 74% of those in attendance), as well as a survey conducted nationally via a questionnaire issued to all LCR activists in France in January 2006 (N = 1557, 59% of all members at the time). The quantitative data presented in this article all came from this last survey.<sup>1</sup> The qualitative approach was developed in parallel and involved conducting 45 semi-directive and life-history interviews with the activists and leaders of the LCR, plus one final important aspect of the study: the observation of a wide range of partisan activities, undertaken throughout the research project. Identifying the processes through which the “reconversion of party sociation”<sup>2</sup> was achieved following the arrival of new members whose profiles did not match those of veteran members involved producing an up-to-date picture of the new forms of interaction between activists, of the tensions which could arise, and of the questions which sought to challenge the former practical organization of partisan activities. Consequently, observation was necessary in order to reveal how, within daily scenes of activist life, new forms of interaction were emerging which were destabilizing the ordinary basis of the party’s routine activities. Observations

---

I should like to convey my thanks to the anonymous readers at the *RFSP*, whose comments encouraged me to clarify this article and to partially shift its focus. I should also like to thank Bernard Pudal for our long discussion on downward social mobility, which provided inspiration for the views presented here; such views are nonetheless those of the author alone. Thanks to Paul Pasquali and Yasminne Siblot for their advice on further reading, to Etienne Ollion for his help in the home strait, as well as to Damien de Blic and Sylvain Pattieu for their careful reading of the article and their invaluable advice. The OXPO Research Group and the Maison Française in Oxford made it possible for me to make progress with this research project, for which I thank them.

1. The number of activists who joined the party before and after 2002 were 834 and 688 respectively. The remaining 35 questionnaires did not include the date of entry.

2. Bernard Pudal, *Prendre parti. Pour une sociologie historique du PCF* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1989), 296.

made at the LCR's national conferences between 2003 and 2009,<sup>1</sup> along with activity witnessed at national, local and public meetings and the party's summer universities held between 2002 and 2009 give some idea of the wide variety of party activity which I recorded during my research. As part of my fieldwork, I also shadowed the everyday life of activists at the LCR branch in Paris's 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement for four months, and regularly observed the 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement section<sup>2</sup> for a year,<sup>3</sup> then at less frequent intervals until 2010.<sup>4</sup> The methodological aim of this research was to equip me to understand political engagement via a process and multi-level approach, without at the outset restricting the wide range of forms of engagement and the meanings it might have for the activists. Furthermore, engagement is understood from a diachronic perspective (through the study of individuals and partisan trajectories between 1966 and 2009) and from a synchronic perspective (through the production of a sociography of the party in order to study the collective at a specific point in time and in a specific geographical area, as well as through a cross-examination of what was said in interviews with the practices observed in relation to activists within the same party branch).

However, it should be noted that – as was the case for Olivier Schwartz in his article on workers from the north of France and their relationship with politics<sup>5</sup> – the analytical perspective adopted here was not envisaged at the beginning of the project, and thus it neither structured the research question, nor guided the choice of methods. Whilst I did highlight the importance of the theme of social justice for the LCR's new post-2002 activists very early on,<sup>6</sup> statistical identification of instances of intergenerational downward social mobility and/or over-education was only possible after having coded and analysed the results of the national-level survey conducted via questionnaire with all party activists in 2006. At that point, the qualitative study had already been completed and it would not have been feasible to embark upon a new series of interviews. As a result, the comprehensive analysis of this type of trajectory was instead conducted using existing material, and by looking at cases which presented a social mismatch. This material was inevitably somewhat patchy when it came to highlighting “the values which individuals ascribe[d] to their social shift”<sup>7</sup> – whether social or educational – and its effects. A further difficulty lay in the fact that it was the first interviews conducted in the 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement branch – the briefest and those which were semi-directive in nature – which most explicitly raised the issue of the social dynamics of political engagement. This was due to the fact that when this part of the research was carried out, this branch chiefly comprised new members who had joined the party after 21 April 2002. However, because the interviews conducted always focused extensively on individuals' trajectories (and their family, educational, social, personal and activist dimensions), and

1. The 15<sup>th</sup> conference (30 October to 2 November 2003), the 16<sup>th</sup> conference (19-22 January 2006), the 17<sup>th</sup> conference (24-27 January 2008), the 18<sup>th</sup> conference (dissolving the LCR, 5 February 2009) and the founding conference of the NPA (6-8 February 2009).

2. The section comprises all of the branches operating in a single arrondissement.

3. During which the majority of different activities conducted were observed: branch meetings, section meetings, neighbourhood fetes, public meetings in bars and community halls in the 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, sales of the newspaper at the market.

4. The research changed nature in 2007-2008, when I started observing the committees for the foundation of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), then the 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement NPA committees from 2009.

5. O. Schwartz, “Sur le rapport des ouvriers du Nord à la politique...”.

6. Florence Johsua, “La dynamique militante à l'extrême gauche: le cas de la Ligue communiste révolutionnaire”, *Cahiers du Cevipof*, 37, 2004.

7. B. Lahire, *La culture des individus...*, 413.

because they had sought to understand “how”, rather than “why”,<sup>1</sup> the material collected nonetheless provided a valuable source for studying such social shifts, what they meant for the actors involved, and their influence on their trajectories and the structure of their representations of the social world. The interviews referred to more specifically in this article varied in nature, and were not conducted during the same period. The interviews with Pierre Brévent were conducted as part of the study carried out in the LCR branch in Paris’s 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. Two interviews were conducted, two years apart, as part of a project which involved following the activists studied in order to understand how time could affect their involvement. The first interview with Pierre took place on 24 June 2003, fourteen months after he joined the LCR, and was semi-directive. The second took place on 10 July 2005 and was non-directive in nature, inviting him to discuss how his political engagement had changed since our first meeting. By way of conclusion, let me emphasise here that the analyses presented in this article are based on a much larger corpus of interviews. Out of the 45 interviews conducted for the purposes of this research, nine were with activists who had joined the LCR post-2002. Yet these interviews highlighted with particular clarity the influence of social logics of engagement. Consequently, whilst this issue was rarely discussed and was often entirely absent from the interviews conducted with the more established members of the LCR, it was frequently mentioned in the interviews with the organisation’s newest recruits and held considerable importance for them; hence it prompted me to focus more specifically on the issue of the social production of revolt when analysing these qualitative sources.

---

1. In particular, this working method involves knowing “all the circumstances of an event, everything that was going on around it, everyone who was involved [...] On this view, we understand the occurrence of events by learning the steps in the process by which they came to happen, rather than by learning the conditions that made their existence necessary” (H. S. Becker, *Tricks of the Trade...*, 60-1).