

# Logistical Meanderings

## When Working Class Mobility Transits Through the Warehouse

*by David Gaborieau & Carlotta Benvegnù*

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**The term ‘logistics’ refers to work connected to warehouses: storage, order packing, handling etc. These activities, which are often too arduous to be carried out over the long term, now structure the condition of the working classes and their career paths.**

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Far from having disappeared from French society, the world of the working classes has partly drifted into new, little-known spaces. The decline of the manufacturing industry has gone hand in hand with a transfer of working class jobs towards activities that, while they are not strictly part of the secondary sector, nevertheless retain an industrial character in terms of the forms of work they imply. The field of logistics has a big role to play in this shift: it now accounts for 13% of working class jobs, compared to 8% in the early 1990s.

In warehouses, workers do not manufacture consumer goods, but rather store, sort, package or sometimes label them. It is thus a flow of goods that is produced in these places, which we might call “package factories”. Producing this flow involves repetitive and arduous tasks that are carried out in shifts, sometimes at night; those tasks are subject to production quotas and often cause occupational diseases. People thus rarely feel a calling to enter a warehouse, and most often try to get out of them once they have.

When workers are asked about how they started working in logistics, most answer that they ended up there “by chance”. Given the low social visibility of this field of activity and the low level of professional attachment it inspires, it is tempting to believe them. Be they order packers, warehouse clerks, pickers, forklift drivers or sorters, few people really dream of going through the doors of a warehouse to handle packages. How can we analyse this encounter, and

its possible consequences, between a particular segment of the population and a type of work? An examination of working class career paths can partly do this, as well as depicting experiences of work which members of the working class are often exposed to these days .

First, we will study the factors that lead an individual to go and work in a warehouse based on a typology of the groups of people that can be found in such places. Then we will examine the determining factors in social mobility in the light of the poor career options on offer within and outside of the warehouse. These categories were defined based on situations observed during two ethnographic surveys—one carried out in the sector of logistics for large food retailers<sup>1</sup> and the other in that of express mail service platforms<sup>2</sup>—in both cases taking an approach that focussed on small instances of mobility “in action” as well as to these workers’ subjective experiences.

## Constrained Career Paths

### *Convert Logisticians: Trying to Believe*

The group of convert logisticians is in the minority in this field. It includes workers who have diplomas in transport and logistics such as, in France, a CAP-BEP, a *Bac Professionnel* and sometimes a BTS, having studied with the idea that this sector could offer them the possibility of an ascending professional career. The fact that they might have had a father who was a lorry driver, a cousin who was a cargo handler or a mother who was an administrative secretary in a warehouse will have made them aware very early on of this field of activity. Their social origins place them in a slightly higher band of the working class, in particular due to the situation of their mothers, who are more often employed, mainly in the service sector. Despite having a complicated relationship to educational institutions, they go on training courses in logistics as a way of reaching a position that is deemed respectable. Regarding the *baccalauréat professionnel*,<sup>3</sup> Kevin states: ‘I did actually like it, I made more of an effort than usual.’ However, they then have the opportunity to discover, in particular when they do work experience within a company, that the world they are hoping to enter is not necessarily very conducive to exercising a skilled job.

When they start at the warehouse, the vast majority of them have positions as handlers. They favour permanent contracts and internal promotion, which should fall to them first, in accordance with the image that the logistics sector puts forward of itself. In order to achieve

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<sup>1</sup> David Gaborieau, ‘Des usines à colis. Trajectoire ouvrière des entrepôts de la grande distribution’, PhD thesis in sociology, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

<sup>2</sup> Carlotta Benvegnù, ‘Dans les ateliers de la circulation. Une ethnographie du travail logistique entre le Grand Paris et la métropole diffuse vénitienne’, on-going PhD thesis in sociology, Université Paris 8 – Università degli studi di Padova.

<sup>3</sup> Or vocational high-school diploma.

this, they rely in particular on acknowledgement of the efforts they make on a daily basis and on the assertion of their specific know-how. But this position as defenders of a logistic professionalism pushes them into relationships that are sometimes antagonistic with other categories of workers. They are particularly prompt to condemn the lack of commitment of their temporary colleagues, those who ‘don’t play the game’, and the lack of ambition of their older colleagues, those who ‘haven’t worked out how to adapt’.

The logistician workers we met were most often goods-in workers, forklift drivers, data entry employees or quality controllers, positions which they reached after an occasionally long period as handlers. To effectively rise out of the working class, they would have to accede to the position of team manager or to more technical functions. While exemplary cases of such career paths do exist, vertical mobility remains relatively inaccessible, since 80% of logistics jobs are working class. As is the case in points of sale,<sup>4</sup> the meritocratic ideal is thus largely mythologised, and people’s initial commitment can quickly give way to forms of resignation and frustration.

### **Kévin, 24 Years Old: a Logistician in Search of a Promotion**

Aside from the ‘odd jobs’ he carried out from the age of 16, Kévin has never known any other field of activity outside logistics. He holds a *Bac pro logistique*<sup>5</sup> qualification, and identifies as belonging to the profession: ‘Me, I’m a logistician.’ He discovered this field through his father, who worked as a lorry driver for a small haulage contractor in Normandy. He got his first job as a worker through some work experience, which he had in turn got thanks to the ‘string-pulling’ of a friend he met in his class at the *lycée professionnel*. When he was then recruited on a permanent contract by Consolog, he would pay his schoolmate back: ‘They were looking for competent people, no slackers, so I told them I know a guy who takes things seriously.’ After three years of working as a handler for Consolog, he rose to a position as quality controller, which was less physically demanding but extremely repetitive. Two years later, just as he was thinking of leaving the warehouse, he was offered the opportunity of undertaking a six-month training course that would allow him to apply for a position as team leader. But Kévin complained that he was too tired in the evenings to devote his time to it. Following an internal restructuring of the group, the managers who trusted him ended up leaving his warehouse. ‘I don’t really think it’s going to happen anymore,’ he admits about his internal promotion; he believes that logistics ‘can be interesting in some companies, but here it’s all over the place, they don’t understand anything about logistics.’

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<sup>4</sup> Sophie Bernard, ‘La promotion interne dans la grande distribution : la fin d’un mythe ?’, *Revue française de sociologie*, no. 53, 2012, p. 259-291.

<sup>5</sup> A vocational high-school diploma with a specialization in logistics.

### *The Elders: Respectable Workers*

In this sector, the elders may not necessarily be very old—it is above all their seniority in the warehouse that earns them this categorisation. When Willy, a 27-year-old forklift driver, explains that ‘you age quickly in a warehouse’, he is not just referring to the effects of the work on his health, but also to his fear of tipping over into the category of elders in a sector where working conditions cause extremely early retirements.

The group of elders is generally made up of workers who are over between 30 and 35 years old and who are employed on permanent contracts. Working class origins are more pronounced in this group: the majority have a working class father, often employed in industry or sometimes in transport, and an unemployed mother, who might herself be a worker or work from home in a field such as childcare. Less frequently, the father is an independent craftsman, a mechanic or a lorry driver. These workers became teenagers between the 1980s and the early 1990s, and half of them studied no further than the BEPC<sup>6</sup>. The other half studied for CAP exams, a type of diploma that prepared them to take on jobs as skilled workers in industry or as employees in the retail sector.

Their career paths are characterised by periods of instability, aborted projects and failures that have led them to favour the stability of permanent employment offered to them by the warehouse. They did one ‘odd job’ after the next until they settled down in a working class job that allowed them to support the family life they were just establishing. Signing a permanent contract is in fact very often correlated with needing to take out real estate mortgages or consumer loans from the bank. As workers, they had jobs in industry or transport, and some of them worked independently as craftsmen or shopkeepers. They frequently identify with these reference environments they knew in the past and which implied a certain relationship to work, a ‘nostalgic socialisation’ that leads them to maintain dispositions acquired in the past (Avril, 2014). These same dispositions lead them to take a critical view of today’s warehouse, of staff rotation, of computer control or more largely of the loss of an ‘atmosphere’ which they associate with a loss of occupational know-how. Olivier, who has been employed for 16 years in a delivery service, believes he handles ‘any kind of junk’ ever since his warehouse started working for online sales: ‘Now we’re transport whores.’ These workers are often very strongly rooted in their local areas, and tend to try to construct outside of work a respectability that they struggle to find at work.

In freight services, promotions to line management are more frequent but are still in the minority. Mostly, elders have progressively risen to positions as forklift drivers, data inputters or operations assistants, although some of them have remained handlers. These types of mobility, which are mostly horizontal in terms of status and salary, are still moves upwards from a symbolic perspective and are experienced as such. They allow people to escape from the most

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<sup>6</sup> Translator’s Note: national diploma taken in France after 4 years of secondary school, around the age of 15.

arduous and punishing work conditions in the long term. They are the condition for someone sustainably remaining in an operational position in a warehouse, and workers who do not manage to make such a move find it difficult to endure their work once they are over 40 years old. Requests for reassignment on the basis of unfitness for work are numerous and mark the end of a person's activity in the warehouse in companies where no other viable solution is on offer. When occupational wear and tear is taken into account by the company, employees may be offered customised positions such as cleaning and picking up empty boxes in the aisles.

### Yannick, 37 Years Old: a “Logistician” turned “Elder”

In the warehouse, Yannick always wears his work overalls, which are red and printed with the Prestalog logo. His outfit is adorned with an array of tools well beyond those provided by his employer. He is passionate about mechanics, a field in which his father worked in a small suburban garage, and regrets not having chosen this career path so he could have ‘a real job’—his broken dream would have been to be a panel beater. Having been encouraged to study by his parents, he gained a BEP and then a *Bac Professionnel Transport et Logistique*. At age 20, he was taken on as an order packer in a warehouse. Since then, he has never managed to leave this position, which has made him pass from the category of convert to that of elder. He no longer sees himself climbing the career ladder in a warehouse, and is very critical of his current company—a subcontractor for the large retail sector—and of the sector more generally: ‘Their management is a bloody mess, but it’s always like that with logistics.’ At the weekend, Yannick devotes a considerable portion of his time and income to his passion for vintage cars.

### *Temporary Workers: Young “Self-Starters”*

While they may be ‘passing through’ a particular warehouse, temporary workers are not necessary novices in the field of logistics. Their connection to a specific employment area and to certain temping agencies leads most of them to accumulate assignments in warehouses doing very similar tasks. This creates a micro-market of logistic jobs which benefits companies looking for an interchangeable, low-skilled workforce that is already trained to work in a warehouse. For their part, as M. Pialoux observed in the 1970s,<sup>7</sup> temporary workers follow the logic of an ‘ad hoc basis’, navigating from one company to the next, with perhaps less illusions as back then that they will be able to ‘try their luck’, but always with the option of ‘walking out’.

These paths of mobility, although they are constrained and limited in scope, generate a feeling of distance from the work being carried out. This leads to numerous possibilities for coming into conflict with workers who hold diplomas in logistics or with elders. Field observations do indeed show that these workers are more inclined than others to circumvent

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Pialoux, ‘Jeunesse sans avenir et travail intérimaire’, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, no. 26-27, 1979, p. 19-47.

systems or rules, but these circumventions are often motivated by a desire for psychological or physical self-preservation, and cannot be reduced to the indifference of which they are accused. They are exposed to the most arduous work conditions, and learn to distinguish between the rules it is necessary to comply with and those that can be disregarded.

Their social origins are close to those observed among the ‘elders’, with the exception of children of immigrants, whose parents belong to the more vulnerable fringes of the working classes. Depending on the geographic situation and the legal status of the warehouses observed, the group of temporary workers is more or less strongly made up of racialized workers, with this progression partly coinciding with the proximity of the warehouses to major urban centres. Born in the 1980s or early 1990s, mostly single and sometimes living with their parents, they include holders of BEP or CAP diplomas in electronic engineering, the maintenance of mechanical systems, carpentry, sales or construction, and less frequently holders of BTS diplomas in business or electronics. As far as concerns these jobs that they originally trained for, they explain that they had not really chosen them, that they discovered in retrospect that they were not suited to them, or that there were not enough job opportunities.

Their social and leisure practices suggest that they look for modes of self-expression elsewhere than in their work, even more so than in the other categories presented above. They highlight this aspect of their existence, not just during our interviews, but also at the warehouse. Many of them devote themselves to practising a sport—football, bodybuilding, riding a motorbike, karting, combat sports—assiduously and within the framework of a club or association. In the break room, they are often the ones to drive the most animated discussions, and their favoured subjects range well beyond the warehouse, in contrast to the logisticians or elders whose members favour discussions about the work they are currently engaged in.

### **Abdé, 22 Years Old: a Young Self-Starter**

Every day, before clocking in, Abdé does some bodybuilding at the gym. At the warehouse, he wears very baggy jeans, hoodies and gold chains around his neck. His father, who is employed in the hotel sector, and his mother, who has occasional cleaning jobs, left the Comoros for France in 1993. He is the youngest of six children, and lives with his family in a flat on a housing estate in a northern suburb of Paris. Having left school before obtaining the *baccalauréat*, he started a training course to become an electrician thanks to the support of the local mission, encouraged to do so by one of his uncles who was already working in this field. After having tried out working on a building site for a few weeks, he stopped this course in order to train as a forklift driver on the advice of a friend. He very clearly asserts his preference for unstable—temporary or fixed term—contracts, so that he does not ‘get stuck’ in the warehouse and is able to alternate periods of work and unemployment. He is assigned to the job of ‘debriefing’ drivers: he loads and unloads light vehicles and checks the delivery forms. In his job, Abdé nurtures a feeling of camaraderie with the drivers based on humour and discussions of their evenings and leisure activities.

## One Place Rather than Another

### *“No Worse Than Elsewhere”: Mobility Towards the Warehouse*

Many logistics workers evaluate working in a warehouse in relation to reference environments that they reject. Among these deterrents, assembly-line work represents the world of extreme constraint. By comparison, in spite of its quotas, productivity bonuses, or performance monitoring, working in a warehouse has the advantage of allowing workers to move through space and vary the rhythm of their work. To use a phrase one hears very often, ‘you don’t need to fight to go take a piss’ in a warehouse. Jacques, a retired worker who has experience of shift work in a shoe factory, believes that ‘in a warehouse, you travel, it’s not the same thing at all.’ Romain, a young temporary handler, takes the view that ‘when you’ve done other jobs, like agribusiness or waste, the warehouse is almost like a holiday, you know.’ The warehouse can also be perceived as a place that protects you from more serious health risks. Talking about his time spent in a foundry, Moussa explains that in spite of having ‘the feeling I was getting two paychecks’, he refused a permanent contract because of the ‘big drawbacks’ of this kind of work: ‘I could see the particles of stuff in the guys’ lungs and everything, so then I stopped.’ In the case of Sébastien, it was also a fear of cancer that led him to refuse a permanent job as an asphalter for motorway networks. While he felt he had ‘hit the jackpot, it was €3000 easy’, he quickly specifies that ‘they burn up your lungs, those things do’.

In employment areas bringing together several logistical areas, it is particularly easy to enter the warehouse job market. In working class environments, the information that this sector recruits strongly seems to get around. Like many others, Abdé heard the rumour from friends at a time when he was looking to get out of the construction sector: ‘On construction sites you really get a tan. There’s the cement that gets into you. So I said no, it’s not a job. It’s well paid, but seriously [...] I have friends who are forklift drivers and they said forklift driver is a bit tiring, but it’s OK.’ In a warehouse, these workers must accumulate overtime and productivity bonuses to slightly get over the minimum wage, but this arbitration between working conditions and income can turn out to be preferable at a particular moment of a worker’s career.

### *Blocked Mobility: the Cardboard Ceiling*

The feeling of having left a deterrent does not survive work in a warehouse for long, since logistics too includes numerous arduous jobs that everyone tries to escape from. The deterrent jobs in a warehouse are those that involve the most handling: order packing, stocking, package sorting, loading-unloading or packaging. To get away from these, workers must move into related positions that are still working class jobs but are less brutally arduous, such as positions as forklift drivers, operations assistants, controllers or data inputters. Those who succeed present this mobility as inevitable. Jérémy for example took on his job on the condition

that his contract stated he would be working as a data inputter: ‘Then I said yes right away. You can’t do packing your whole life anyway. Got to find something else.’ At the moment of transition, the challenge of leaving a position seems greater than that of taking on a new one, but the position reached gains value from the comparison. During a discussion in the break room, a forklift driver harshly outlines the boundary separating him from his order packing colleagues: ‘Me, I couldn’t anymore. Packing is shit. Anyway my job is forklift driver. I’m not talking about you, but there it is, it’s my job.’

Mobility from one company to another can also allow temporary workers to gain access to less arduous positions, to find ‘the right company’. All warehouses do not offer the same working conditions, although they are organised along similar lines. The level of the salary and production bonuses are of course essential criteria – but they are not sufficient. Other factors taken into account are the kind of ‘atmosphere’, the kind of management and the kind of recruitment. A worker might reject a place described as ‘the ghetto warehouse’ due to the dilapidation of its equipment, but also appreciate it for the working class sociability it fosters. Conversely, a very modern online retail warehouse might be appreciated for its cleanliness but rejected as a ‘madhouse’ in reference to the way the new management runs it. These circulations from one place to another thus lead to the workers involved viewing the organisation of work with a certain critical distance that senior jobholders are not always equipped with.

These career paths are very informal and only affect jobs in handling or areas close to handling, a limitation that might be described as a ‘cardboard ceiling’.<sup>8</sup> Underneath this ceiling, dissatisfaction at work remains despite small instances of mobility. Forklift drivers, who are now guided using radio frequencies, speak of a certain weariness, a boredom caused by the monotony of their tasks. Marco, who has become an operations assistant, finds it difficult to put up with the routine and lonely work, and comes to admit: ‘I miss the [sorting] line.’ Alvin, who moves from one warehouse to the next within the same logistical area, is ironic about the lack of benefits he draws from it: ‘Whatever you do, it’s the ghetto!’

### *Getting Out: the Future is Elsewhere*

When mobility leads to a dead end, people’s projection into the future moves outside of the warehouse. Many of them then turn to fields of work close to that of logistics. Working as a driver, for example, means remaining a worker while getting out of the factory, occupying an executive position while being removed from the gaze of your boss. Some people idealise this profession without taking into account the ways in which it has changed in recent years, but it remains a job that is organised around a specific know-how and that receives a certain level of social recognition. Still close to logistics, jobs as ambulance or taxi drivers have a certain allure. They have the advantage of being accessible without requiring any other qualifications than a

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<sup>8</sup> Sébastien Chauvin, *Les agences de la précarité*, Seuil, 2011, p. 322.



driving licence, and are the kind of positions for which there are numerous job offers. A desire for independence might also make people look towards craftsmanship and retail, with jobs in mechanics and fast food being particularly popular.

When an individual has decided on a career change, their current activity is viewed as temporary, and the project is in itself a kind of self-affirmation through work. Professionalism is perceived as a horizon to move towards, with the aim of going beyond a subaltern and deskilled working class condition. However, the difficulties faced by such workers when they try to exit the warehouse illustrate how limited access is to these positions that used to be favoured by the working classes. An HGV licence is expensive, and it is difficult to get funding for it. The exam involves taking part in training courses for the theory test, which some individuals absolutely refuse to do. More generally, asserting one's right to further training proves problematic. The application process is complex, and requires the approval of an employer who has no interest in giving workers the green light—so that they are often turned down.

This difficulty in leaving the warehouse, and more generally the working class world, is also connected to a reduction over recent years of the independent professions of craftsmanship and retail, as well as of subaltern jobs with a good status, in particular those in public service. These jobs traditionally opened up horizons that were accessible to men with working class jobs. This observation shows that mobility is also constructed outside of the warehouse and that the futures that can be considered sometimes become less accessible due to more general transformations in contemporary economies. In the context of an increasing proletarianisation of third sector activities and of a concentration of jobs in large-scale, industrial-type organisations, the exit doors from the working class seem to be less open than they used to be for the subaltern fringes of this group.

While the world of logistics is rarely studied in social sciences, it is well-known among the male working classes. It is a sector that does not arouse much enthusiasm: one enters it without really believing in it and wants to get out of it without being certain of being able to. Given the low level of career progress that is on offer within the sector, the possibilities of integration and assertion of belonging to a particular profession are very limited. In a sector that concentrates a large majority of low-skilled jobs, external but intra-sectorial mobility also offers few resources compared to that of more skilled workers in the manufacturing industry.<sup>9</sup> Mobility connected to the warehouse is thus more marked by limitations and the rejection of counter-models, deterrents which the sector itself contributes to producing. Self-preservation is a powerful motor for these career paths, which, internally and externally, largely aim to find positions whose working conditions are not too arduous. While some aspects of these forced mobilities may well constitute a form of resistance—the exit, whether it is taken or considered,

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Amossé, Michel Gollac, 'Intensité du travail et mobilité professionnelle', *Travail et Emploi*, no. 113, 2008, p. 59-73.

can be perceived as a critique of the work itself—the rejection of this condition mainly benefits the companies involved, since the high wear and tear inflicted on workers' bodies creates a constant need for renewal of the low-skilled logistics workforce. Nevertheless, these positions express, from a subjective perspective, the continuation of a form of refusal of the working class condition which, in the most subaltern fringes of the working class world, is more associated with the impossibility of integration than with a refusal of social downgrading.

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