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Hazing amongst blue-collar workers in France in the contemporary period

Les bizutages dans le monde ouvrier en France à l'époque contemporaine

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Complementary points of view

Hazing amongst blue-collar workers in France in the contemporary period

Xavier VIGNA

Hazing or “ragging” [French: *bizutage*] describes practices presented as tests or ordeals, roughhousing, chants, etc., that “old-timers” impose on “newcomers” entering an institution, usually an educational one, but it might also be military or professional. This period of entry and testing, which also represents a moment of domination and bullying, is legitimized by implied tradition, and supposedly serves as a rite of initiation. The world of blue-collar labor – where professional training was traditionally performed on the job or during a period of apprenticeship¹ – also has its hazing rituals, however anachronistic the term may be (particularly in French). But these practices are not well known, on the one hand because they are informal, and on the other, because they are not approved of (being either criticized or barely tolerated) either by those in authority or by the labor movement, which has developed its own rituals.² Therefore they show up only in autobiographical accounts, reminiscences or, more rarely, in investigations and surveys.

Undertaking an analysis of such practices allows us to overturn some clichés: in contrast to a non-confrontational vision of

¹ Lequin 1989.

² Hobsbawm 1984: 66-82.

permanent, automatic working-class solidarity, it reveals horizontal forms of bullying and domination that could be extremely brutal. In contrast to a vision of female workers exclusively as long-term victims of their male colleagues' or supervisors' clandestine (because illegitimate) sexual harassment,³ it points out that women also imposed collective, public rites including a manifestly sexual dimension, almost exclusively, it seems, to the detriment of young men. Taking both gender relationships and bullying/domination into account, the present article unearths and explores practices that, unlike hazing in an educational context, such as the Arts et Métiers School's "machining,"⁴ are not codified. For this reason, they fluctuate between three categories: rites of passage; out-and-out bullying and domination of younger people by older ones; and practical jokes, roughhousing and horseplay.

Hazing as rite of passage

In the mid-1930s, a blue-collar woman explained what the women at a spinning mill in the Montbéliard region would do⁵:

And then, you know, the women were pretty cruel too, back then. Bad things happened when they could get their hands on a young lad! They called it "warming his timbers!" They... I'm talking about married women, mind you! They would catch a 12- or 13-year-old boy, and if they saw he was a bit shy, they'd pull his pants down. To embarrass him. It was really stupid. Sometimes girls would get "passed through the heater" to see if they had any hair yet. You can see why the women from the mill had such a bad name back then!

So this type of sexual hazing involved young boys, who had their pants pulled down by older women, while girls were rarely bothered⁶. The same thing took place elsewhere in the region, in the same

³ Louis 1994; Bender 2004.

⁴ Cuche 1985.

⁵ Goux 2003: 211.

⁶ In inter-war England as well, women workers were sometimes welcomed with something like rites, but those rites didn't have a sexual dimension. Parties and games were more likely to be organized on the shop floor when one of the women was getting married; see Todd 2005: 153, 157.

industry.⁷ In the mines in the Nord département, at least after World War I, women coal-sorters, known locally as “cafu”, would smear truck-grease on boys’ genitals,⁸ thereby justifying the disapproval that was expressed of them, as it was of their counterparts in St. Etienne, where they were called “clapeuses”.⁹ This type of roughhousing lasted until late in the century. At the Permaili factory near Nancy, in the 1970s, a former employee, Germaine, used to organize a “ceremony she reserved for newcomers. Usually, a small commando of women would kidnap the ‘rookie’, pull his pants down and coat his genitals with wax”.¹⁰

Through this roughing up of young men and/or those who had recently entered the workforce, the women would both humiliate them and offer a hand up: they seem in fact to be both mocking the boys’ impotence – greased genitals are no good for anything – and urging them to overcome it – but they might be good for something after all. Thus the roughhousing acted as a rite of passage from childhood into adulthood. The entry into the world of work, which takes place at puberty, becomes a potential opening up to sexuality. Which is why men also indulged in similar types of roughhousing: in the textile industry near Roubaix in the 1880s, boys were stripped and masturbated to see if they were men.¹¹

This enforced nudity, in a hazing ritual that acted as an initiation,¹² presents an analogy with going in front of the draft board, another initiatory step in young men’s lives. Until the 1960s, 20-year-old men would literally have to expose their manhood to the draft board, which literally checked it.¹³ That is undoubtedly why, in a brewery in Lille in the 1930s, one particular apprentice – future union leader

⁷ Hug & Rigoulot 1980: 24-25.

⁸ Viseux 1991: 101-102.

⁹ Lequin 1997: 3367.

¹⁰ Rondeau 1988: 74.

¹¹ Marty 1996: 48. Women workers in the north-western United States indulged in the same kind of roughhousing, known as *sunning*, which may have been brought over from Yorkshire in the early twentieth century: Blewett 2006: 325-327.

¹² Pillon 2012: 74-79.

¹³ Perrot 1996.

Eugène Descamps – resorted to fisticuffs to escape the tradition of sending apprentices “to the draft board”, i.e. taking his pants off.¹⁴

But hazing as initiation also has a distinctly professional dimension to it, particularly in trades with a strong identity, like typesetters and printers. Among typesetters during the Enlightenment, apprentices were truly whipping boys, obliged to perform all sorts of unpleasant tasks, as well as being the butts of April Fools type jokes, like being sent for “the hammer to drive in hard spaces” or “the machine for bending quote marks”.¹⁵ This type of hazing, which made fun of the youths’ incompetence and naivety, while indirectly highlighting the experienced workers’ professional knowledge and skills, hung on longer. As late as October 1969, an apprentice at a Parisian printing shop was sent for “the pump to inflate the cylinders”;¹⁶ but to deflate the pride of recent graduates from the École Estienne (France’s Advanced School of Arts and Printing), more senior printers had no qualms about having them grind corks in an ammonia bath... Hazing’s professional dimension can perfectly well co-exist with or follow up on its sexual dimension. Thus in Boulogne-Billancourt in 1941, an apprentice in training to become a “choumac” (a boilermaker or coppersmith in industrial slang) was sent for the inexistent pedal-driven marking gauge, but his co-worker told him about older, tougher forms of hazing, particularly “cock-waxing”.¹⁷

It stands to reason that in “compagnonnages” (the apprenticeship routine for traditional guilds), the professional dimension of such practices was most pronounced. Because these initiatory rites – known variously as ceremonies, receptions or baptisms – recognize that mastery in the craft has been acquired.¹⁸ In fact, they exactly reproduce the three phases Arnold Van Gennep identified in rites of

¹⁴ Georgi 1997: 31.

¹⁵ Minard 1989: 78-79 and 147-150.

¹⁶ Thévenin 2006: 175-176.

¹⁷ Maroli 1977: 40-43.

¹⁸ Truant 1994: 80 ff.

passage: separation and transition followed by incorporation.¹⁹ Except that these rites were sometimes also the occasion for particularly brutal forms of roughhousing, which leads to another facet of hazing: brutal and even sadistic bullying.

Hazing as pure bullying

In 1909, for example, writing under the name Jean Connay, Henri Bricheteau described in great detail the shocking brutality of the rites that the “Charpentiers du Devoir” (“The Carpenters of Duty”), imposed upon candidates to their guild, who were christened “foxes”, as those rites took place in 1884.²⁰ The “baptism”, which lasted about a week or more, included a slew of ordeals, known as “passages”, which become more and more violent as the week went by: the candidates were beaten and whipped repeatedly. On the seventh night, the sixth passage, called “The Knot and the Roofer’s Apron”, which is described below, took place after the foxes had been stripped.

They stick a 4- or 5-inch piece of candle into his [the fox’s] anus, leaving barely a half-inch sticking out. Number 1 **bites off** that bit of candle: that’s known as *bolting and unbolting the staircase*; then, they dribble wine down his back to his anus, which they wash with the wine, Number 1 has to drink it, **with his nose in his colleague’s anus**; this is called *drinking from the knot*; then the other one stands up, squeezes his testicles as tight as he can, wine is poured on top and Number 1 has to drink it all; that is called *drinking from the roofer’s apron*. There, now you know the secrets and sacred mysteries of “compagnonnage”; Number 1 is done, except that then it’s his turn to get *bolted* and to have the other one drink from his *apron*. This passage can take a very long time, because many of them vomit.²¹

The scandal caused by the gradual revelation of these acts (foxes were also forced to swallow excrement and urine) led to a reform of the baptism process, between 1905 and 1907. This ritual clearly included “homosexual situations”, which could also be found in cabin-boys’

¹⁹ Van Gennep 1981 [1909]: 146-147. He makes only glancing reference to entering professions, indicating only that a rite of incorporation marked the end of apprenticeship in the guilds.

²⁰ Connay 1909: 120-183; Truant 1994: 297-305.

²¹ Connay 1909: 153.

baptisms in the nineteenth century: after having drunk liquor and been given tobacco, the young sailor was undressed and his body rubbed with gravel. The older sailors *scrubbed* him, in their parlance. The others *salted him*: they kneaded his genitals with handfuls of worms until he fainted or passed out.²²

It should also be pointed out that the near-sadistic brutality of these acts was a reflection of the violence that young workers were subjected to regularly: autobiographies²³ and studies²⁴ about child labor describe daily life filled with bullying and blows that were meant to pound the trade into their young minds and hands and/or punish mistakes. Consequently, the brutal domination and bullying involved in hazing was nothing more than the radical and virtually final act (because afterwards, the victim had become an adult) of an every-day violence. In 1871, for example, a mechanic from Douai pressed charges because his son, a saddle-and-harness maker, was subjected to hazing by three workers who beat him, dabbed dyes on his face and mouth, and shaved his head in a patchy way. Yet this sort of violence continued for a long time. As late as 1935, in the shipyards in Bordeaux, an older worker known as Tarzan subjected a red-headed apprentice to especially ghastly bullying, in particular, something known as “stretching”. One worker would grab the young man, hoist him on his back, and kneel down, and another would grab the apprentice’s feet in such a way that he was pinned in a horizontal position. At that point, the third man, Tarzan, would pull his own pants down and rub his buttocks on the apprentice’s nose, accompanied by the hoots of laughter of those watching.²⁵

Like all hazing, the violence and humiliation in these examples acted as calls to order, and were meant to show the importance of hierarchy, the “barriers and levels” within the trade,²⁶ particularly to those, i.e. the apprentices, who were first being introduced to this world, as well as to a hierarchy they would inevitably seek to

²² Sohn 2009: 164-165.

²³ Truquin 2006 [1988]: 19-23; Chabot 1978: 70-77.

²⁴ Heywood 1988: 135-138; Perrot 1996: 108; Sohn 2009: 383-386.

²⁵ Loth 2010: 13-14.

²⁶ Lequin 1997: 3373.

overturn, in that they would rise up within it. Publicly humiliating and striking these beginners was a way of showing them a hierarchical world they would have to start out by submitting to, whose codes and customs they would have to accept before they could really become a part of it.

That is because hazing always works on the principle that the hazed will later become the hazer, and the victim the bully, once his incorporation into the professional community has been achieved. That is the paradox of, or rather the justification for hazing – it demonstrates violence that is pure, but/and incorporating; bullying and domination that are brutal, but/and integrating; hazers aim to humiliate, bully and dominate *temporarily*, the better to welcome definitively. That is why these moments of violence are also filled with the laughter of those looking on. Joining a profession means finding camaraderie woven from shared struggle and, on a daily basis, from tomfoolery, fake fights, horseplay and, indeed, rituals.²⁷ So in fact, workers' hazing is also a kind of practical joke.

Hazing as practical joking or horseplay

A worker in a shoe factory describes what went on in Paris in the 1920s:²⁸

There was plenty of roughhousing and lots of practical jokes played, especially on newcomers; it was the tradition. Aside from the “when is it?” round of drinks that every new recruit was supposed to offer the whole shop-floor, we also went in for what’s known elsewhere as hazing. The classic trick was “gluing”.

The old-timers would work it out so that when the new guy was walking by, a bunch of them would tackle him. They would get him on the ground, and while the rest of them pinned him down, someone would open his fly: then one of them would quickly shove a brush with shoemakers’ glue into the opening.

The bigger the brush, the more glue the novice got on him, and the happier the pals were. Not that they were bad guys at heart, but there weren’t that many chances for a laugh, and nobody was concerned with the morality of this pretty gross bit of fun.

²⁷ Lequin 1997: 3373.

²⁸ Michaud 1983: 89.

I was subjected to the gluing ordeal several times myself, and being no better than my colleagues, I took part in hazing newcomers as well.

Once again, this hazing ritual has a markedly sexual nature, especially since the men use a brush rather than their hands, in order to avoid any ambiguous gestures.²⁹ What's interesting about this account is that it points out that the hazing goes along with the "when is it?", the drink that the newcomer has to buy his elders, which we find mentioned elsewhere as well:³⁰ that it gives the "pals" a good laugh, and, most of all, that it can be done more than once. In that sense, the hazing ritual no longer acts as a rite of passage, which is by definition unique, but is more like horseplay amongst equals³¹ or roughhousing on the shop floor. This is a vast area that, to my knowledge, social science has hardly explored at all. Narratives by³² and studies of³³ blue-collar workers do show the frequency of this type of joking and roughhousing, which was at once entertaining and confrontational, demonstrating both complicity and rivalry, uniting men and women, young and old, and featuring an important bodily dimension. In fact, the most common victim of this horseplay could be either the newcomer or an old acquaintance. Which is why the hazee who is the butt of the joke has to try to take it on the chin and accept the insult: his/her ability to become integrated into the work group depends on it.

*

This unearthing of hazing practices is hard to bring into historical perspective.³⁴ It is in fact difficult to establish how they evolved, even if we have every reason to believe that they were significantly reduced by several things: longer schooling (which, in France, became mandatory up to age 14 in 1936, and to age 16 in 1967), increased training of young blue-collar workers, the disappearance of the most

²⁹ Pillon 2012: 78.

³⁰ Loth 2010.

³¹ Pillon 2012: 92-97.

³² Lime 1949: 77; Durand 2006: 1st part; Corouge & Pialoux 2011.

³³ Aumont 1953: 128; Lüdtkte 2000: 44-50; Willis 2011.

³⁴ Hobsbawm 1984: 68.

specific forms of working-class culture, and finally, by the slow transformation of attitudes towards children's bodies, which can no longer be abused as they once were.³⁵ By the same token, in Britain, the arrival in the mid-1970s of female compositors led printers to replace their brutal integration ceremonies with parties.³⁶ In addition, as a hypothesis, one could correlate their gradual elimination with the arrival of immigrant workers from non-European countries, whose presence might have made hazing's bodily horseplay, with its strong sexual connotations, essentially impossible. It is as if racial differences – fantasized obviously – put a stop to the horseplay, and the promiscuity that went along with it. Put another way, it is as if it was absolutely unthinkable that an “Arab” or a “black” – to whom colonial imagery had assigned two contradictory sexual roles: passive homosexual, or macho rapist³⁷ – could watch, or worse, participate in the hazing of a French (i.e. white) youngster, whether male or *horresco referens*, female.

The function of these practices is, at any rate, easier to see. In the same way that machining tries to make both metal parts and hazees perfectly homogeneous, these traditions, which sanction or accelerate an entire socialization process, tend, in part, to consolidate workers' collectives by integrating novices, however brutally. Yet at the same time, hazing transmits – in a way that is meant to be more or less humorous – a sense of and a respect for a hierarchy that is inextricably generational and professional. Thus the horseplay is simultaneously informal³⁸ and a reminder of the rules.³⁹ In addition, insofar as it includes a sexual dimension that can sometimes be extremely explicit, this type of hazing surely contributes to reinforcing yet again, in representation, the association between blue-collar masculinity and virility. Getting through these ordeals proves to both the laborer and his co-workers that “he's got balls”, and that for

³⁵ My thanks to Éliane Le Port for this suggestion.

³⁶ My thanks to Siân Reynolds for this information.

³⁷ Blanchard 2008: 210-213.

³⁸ Willis 2011: 52.

³⁹ In a similar vein, in the Ural Mountains, laborers use practical jokes to remind their forgetful or reckless co-workers about various safety measures: Blazes 1997.

this reason, he deserves a place amongst his peers, who are, consequently, as well-endowed as he. Lastly, women workers' sometimes active role in hazing demonstrates their importance in maintaining shop-floor culture, and shows that they too can enjoy defying the codes of respectability.⁴⁰ But the roughhousing has surely also contributed – along with the swearing, the obscenities and the provocations – to female forms of resistance to patriarchy on the shop floor, about which a great deal of work remains to be done.

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⁴⁰ Robertson 2005.

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