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## Women's Memories in a Depressed Steel Valley: an Attempt to Deconstruct the Imaginings of Steel-working Lorraine

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### Abstract

*This paper is based on a research conducted between 2004 and 2006 and dealing with the memories of women in a steel valley struck by depression since the seventies, in the North-Eastern part of France. The imagery of steel-producing Lorraine coalesced in a rather standardized way around the figure of the steelworker working at the blast furnace. This research and the exhibition which followed from it, highlighted the activities of women, in the working place as well as in the domestic realm and in community or political movements. It thus contributes to a more complex imagining and less androcentric perspective on the ironworks past of the Lorraine region.*

This report<sup>1</sup> is based on a research led between 2004 and 2006 regarding the memories of women who used to work in the metallurgy industry, either in factories or in the mines, or who happened to be sisters, daughters or wives of steel workers and miners in the Fensch valley, a valley in decline since the seventies. This study, led by 4 women researchers, had been commissioned by a group of 10 towns of the valley, called the Communauté d'Agglomération du Val de Fensch, CAVF for short. This group was in demand because of the observation made, which academic documentary work and research confirmed, that there was a real dearth of women represented in the production both scientific and profane on the topic of Lorraine as an ironworks region. My paper is structured in three parts, and means to show how this study participates in the deconstruction of the dominant imaginings concerning Lorraine's steel-days: we'll first briefly expose the content of the

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from French to English by Judith Strauser and Emmanuelle Platzgummer.

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regional productions, both scientific and profane, as well as the imagery resulting from them; a second part will present the method and key question of our recherche, and finally, a third part lay out a few specific aspects of feminine memory. The conclusion will question and examine the academic participation to the very construction of memory.

## **Standardized imagery: the worker, the blast furnace, the immigrant worker**

Written, photographic and cinematographic productions on the topic of the Lorraine as a metallurgy region have at first focused on the condition of the ironworks worker and the miner. This trend started with Serge Bonnet, a researcher with the CNRS, who directed a collective work published in four books and explicitly titled *L'Homme du fer (id est Man of Steel)* (1975-1985). The book was a success as much in the scientific community as with the workers' families (Leveratto & Montebello, 2001, p.51). The same researcher also initiated the creation of an association called ARRESLI dedicated to studying the region and its industry (Tornatore, 2008b). Historians, sociologists, unionists and writers thus focused their word on the worker's conditions, at a time where the whole environment of the steel industry was perceived like a world of the verge of disappearance, the memory of which needed rescuing and preserving. As early as the late eighties, an effort for the recognition (Tornatore, 2008a) of the sons and daughters of ex-ironworks workers started up (though the daughters were never referred to in this precise fashion), manifested through various types of productions: photography, poetry, cultural interventions, exhibitions, etc. A diversity of books got published: monographies (Belleville, 1968 ; Conraud, 1988 ; Périoli, 1989), autobiographical accounts (Donati, 1994), even novels (Blanc, 1978 ; Filipetti, 2003) reporting and presenting the work and daily life of steel workers and miners.

The image of steel-producing Lorraine therefore coalesced in a rather standardized way around the figure of the ironworks worker – working at the blast furnace – and the social fights motivated by the multiplying closings of factories.

Next, the research turned to the phenomenon of immigration and the cultural roots of the relevant groups (mostly Italian and North-African), led by Gérard Noiriel (1984), still considering things under a masculine standpoint. Once more, the main objective was to deepen our knowledge of the workers' conditions. At the same time, festivals were born (festival of arabic world, festival of italian film of Villerupt, festival Men and factories Talange), which also valued and highlighted the population's cultural diversity in steel-producing Lorraine.

In all the numerous cultural artefacts produced focusing on the topic of Lorraine as a region of metallurgy, the place given to women has remained marginal at best, until the decade of the nineties. One of the explanations for this is the fact that women are already practically absent from the historical material available and from the institutions who are themselves the producers of memory. It is not until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that a group of five women from the town of Florange realizes what is at stake for them with regards to taking active part in the creation of local memory: the five friends then publish together and later publicly present their personal memories as steel-working women (Collectif, 2004). Interest in women appears in social studies in 1993 only, with a research

paper from ethnologist Catherine Roth, who goes into details and differentiates finely when studying the relationships between men and women during the fifties in the Piennes mining basin (situated in Meurthe et Moselle). Her unfortunately unpublished paper was never followed by any other work. It is not until 2000 that the demand – framework for our own research – emerges again, with occurrences like the event « Rencontres pédagogiques en Lorraine pour lutter contre la double discrimination » once centred around the theme of « Immigrant women » (Association d'Information et d'Entraide Mosellane *et al.* 2004) or, more recently, with the existence of several chapters concerning women workers in Claude Rochette's thesis of PhD (2007).

It appeared necessary to work on the memories of and on women in this region, once the observation was made of how under-represented they were in the scientific production, but also how invisible they seemed to be in mainstream ones. The objective of the study was to account for the women's activities, and to thus help bring about a new, less androcentric outlook, on the ironworks past of Lorraine.

## Method and key question

The team of researchers has met and interviewed 57 individuals, 14 men and 43 women aged thirty to ninety-one years old. This study is not relying, in sociological terms, on a representative sample of the women living in the valley. It hinges instead on the life stories of such diversity that it allows the perception of the memory to be constructed and not be saturated by a unique point of view. The group interviewed is largely composed of ordinary women of diverse social background, and wide age and origin span. Only a few female public figures active in the area stand among the individuals met (notably, elected representatives) or the spouses of male local figures (such as politicians or important union activists, etc).

The intention was to take into account the very variety of the women's life stories, as well as how each of them reconstructed their own past, both personal and collective. The method of life story interviews is valuable on two accounts: it produces information on the socio-historical facts and, as the latter are recounted, informs us about the subjective experience of the interviewee (Bertaux, 2006). In that process, we do not intend that the discourse of the interviewees is the objective truth, following Maurice Halbwachs' teachings (1994) that any narration of the past is necessarily a reconstruction. For Halbwachs (*ibidem*), past narrations arise from the elements framing the recollection context: place – home, workplace, community centre ; time – age, phase in life; family – relationships, loneliness, existence of children or grand-children ; work – employment, retirement. The local community social environment – in our case, deindustrialisation, aging population, heritage policy – and even the media influence the memory reconstruction.

Halbwachs (1997) stresses that memory is first and foremost a collective construct, because it mirrors one or many trends of thoughts, invisible perceptions, among which an individual stands or has experienced. Thus, memory is made up not only of what the persons have witnessed themselves, have heard, smelt and felt, but also of what they have read, either in personal papers such as military work or family documents, etc., or in public writings such as books, newspaper articles or other forms of media (Zonabend, 1999).

Yet memory is also individual, in the sense that a person's memory reveals a complex combination of the different environments and experiences that he/she went through. Halbwachs (1997, p. 94) asserts that "the individual memory is a viewpoint on the collective memory", it changes with the position held by an individual and her/his interactions with various social *milieus*.

The narratives gathered during our study have hence been elaborated along the life story interviews conducted by women university researchers, aged 35 to 45, within the specific requirements set by a public institution (CAVF). Moreover, these reconstructions of women's past reflect a standpoint on gender, previous social status (industry worker, activist, housewife, secretary, spouse of engineer; etc.) and present situation (elder women, retired, still professionally or politically active).

We suggest, building on defined works of feminist theory, that female memory is specific. Women, in a society where roles were and remain largely gendered, have a different way of looking at events and daily life. According to the Feminist Standpoint theory (Harstock, 1998) the dominant male standpoint has shaped all knowledge, be it political, scientific or profane<sup>2</sup>. Categories of thought are set as though they were universal, whereas they are male driven<sup>3</sup>. Women, as a dominated social group – like African Americans or working class proletarians – have access to specific knowledge non-available to the ruling groups. This theorizing, which contributes to feminist historical materialism, goes beyond a simple biological dichotomy in order to address how the social definition of "male" and "female" groups is intertwined in hierarchic relationships produced in the workplace, in the household and in sexuality. Harstock (1998) posits to theorize from women's life experience, that is, starting from what they do more than from what they are, because engaging in different activities as a woman produces different worldviews.

According to the historian Michelle Perrot (1998) the specificity of women memory stems from the fact that women are invisible in archives, notably public archives - the substantial working material for historians. Women's presence faintly appears through personal diaries seldom preserved, legal columns, or in all so often stereotyped newspaper articles. This author recommends resorting to oral history in order to collect the memory of women activities; keeping in mind however that the recollection process itself is gendered: men speak of the public sphere, women speak of the household realm.

Building on these theoretical approaches, we show that women bring to the table a specific point of view on their daily, social and professional lives. Childcare, child rearing and domestic chores, which were largely undertaken and shouldered by women until the eighties, are now discussed by the women themselves. But we also insisted on questioning women about their social and professional activities, all aspects which by contrast are much less brought up as far as men are interviewed: Fanny Zanferrari (2006, p. 120-129), interviewing men, got to hear a variety of contradictory assertions, some arguing a complete absence in ironworks of women, and others talking about the latter's strong presence. The interviews of women having actually worked there enabled the researcher to define which positions were held by women, and to understand furthermore that they liked their jobs despite the hardship and toughness. The women interviewed also presented

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<sup>2</sup> The history of sciences demonstrates that scientific constructs in biology, palaeontology and neurology are male-dominated (Vidal, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> This idea is also articulated in France by N-C. Mathieu (1991).

original point of views regarding men's work. Again, it is only through these interviews that it has been possible to gather detailed information on women's involvement in various work organisations, on their political activism, and on their specific role in migration projects.

Having argued to that point, we do not intend to over-emphasize the gender factor in itself and risk to pave the way for the idea that women's discourse and memory are univocal. A major critic to the Feminist Standpoint theory rejects the homogenization of "women" as a group, where hierarchies and diversity are at work. I. Théry (2008) suggests to differentiate between "gender regimes": we have indeed met women of different generations, from various social background, and with uneven education level. Furthermore, as Michèle Fraisse (*in* Collectif 1982, p. 20-21) shows, women are not speaking only as women but also as unionists, political activists, managers, white or blue collar workers. Their memories intersect and tally with those of men, the written accounts, the media.

Finally, we pointed that men also reconstruct a memory of women's activities. For instance, several men reported having memories of their mother working at the brick factory, at the factory's cafeteria or in the family's garden patch.

While listening to our first subjects, we saw various themes emerge, four of which then became the focus of our research:

- jobs held by women in steel work and in the mines between 1920 & 1980, as well as women's current jobs nowadays ;
- family responsibilities;
- political commitment and activism;
- stories and paths of women originating in other regions of France or foreign countries.

Paying such attention to the actions of women both in the private and the public sphere has allowed us to get a picture of the diversity of women's contributions to the social life in the valley, and as a consequence, to chip at the previously existing imaginary representation, rather monolithic not only in terms of genders but also with regards to socio-professional categories.

## **Women in the private and public sphere**

It would not be possible to present all the results gathered by a study, I will only touch on a few striking aspects.

First, we observed a diversity of jobs. Contradicting the common conceptions in this area, there has been a feminine professional presence both pre- and post- war in steel work, and

this in both blue and white collar jobs level, as well as, more rarely, in management or technical jobs<sup>4</sup>.

The women interviewed worked in the ironworks industry as unskilled workers in the loading area, i.e. in the ore triage or in cartridge factory. They were also employed to triage and control the plates, to work on tinplating, with a few of them working as overhead pontoneer women (that is, to manoeuvre the rolling cranes which served to direct the bars of iron).

However, their jobs were regarded, symbolically and financially, as having little value, since it was “only” unskilled labour, and thought to be easier than the men’s jobs (notably those performed in high heat environment). This has since been contradicted by the women’s life stories:

While describing her job in the loading area, Mrs Pierrot<sup>5</sup> notes that once the roll of ore was ready, she had to “pass the sponge over it. Fingers were chapped and fissured. She tried to heal it on Sunday, and Monday it started all over again. » Working on one’s feet, up all day, was also tiring. She adds that the women who were a little too slow (and did not manage to process their entire load in the normal hours) worked overtime without food and without pay, just so they would finish processing their load – they were afraid, otherwise, they would get laid off.

Mrs Clavel stresses the hardness of the work done in the rolling factory : « It was not so nice because... we had to put on the mask and everything (...) It was hard work yeah (...) You had to wear the leather apron, and you had to put the mask on, the rag on your head, and 8 hours like that.”

“We did women work, work where you need dexterous people; for the triage you need to be nimble, and also for the controller job.” (Mrs Scarlatti in F. Zanferrari, 2006, p. 124).

Starting in the fifties, clerk positions were filled by women: secretaries, data-entry jobs, shorthand-typists, personnel registry, inventory... These jobs allowed certain women to rise through the ranks and become forewomen sometimes, middle managers, or more rarely, lower echelon executives.

A few pioneers with higher qualifications were hired in technician positions, notably chemists hired for lab work.

Until the seventies, a majority of women were employed in their youth (from 14 onwards), and then stopped working as they got married or when pregnant with their first child, usually around 20 or 22. Widows and one-step mothers kept working throughout their lives. A few of the women interviewed had (and prided themselves on) a ground-breaking role, by continuing to work for pay all while raising a family, sometimes against their husband’s or in-laws’ opinion.

The positions held by women in ironworks and general metallurgy industry have since the eighties become more varied and higher skilled : there are jobs held by women in the hot tinplating workshops (a job considered ‘noble’, long reserved for the men), and there are women engineers and women executives.

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<sup>4</sup> There are qualitative observations : we didn’t quantify the women’s jobs.

<sup>5</sup> All the names are fictitious in order to respect the anonymity of people interviewed.

With this short report already, the image of a uniquely masculine world is undone, and the diversity of job types and professional categories in this sector is highlighted; it shows that both the main representations found in the constructed memory of the metallurgy in Lorraine were limited. Beyond the skilled workers at the blast furnace, many men and women were unskilled workers for the same sector, or occupied other intermediary positions like the engineers and middle management; all had been previously neglected by memory.

Second, the domestic tasks were crucial for the local economy. Up until the seventies and eighties, women also were responsible for all the family-related topics and chores. In the beginning of the study, a few of the men relayed their perception of women's work as "doing nothing". During the study though, through the life stories, what has emerged instead is an image of women who "did everything themselves, on their own". Every woman asserted, strongly, that they had reared their children alone, and had alone coped with the entirety of the domestic workload, without help from their husband.

"Often I say—he doesn't really like it, but, I often say I raised my kids alone. [...] I don't mean he got disinterested, not at all, but materially, physically, he was never there."

Until the arrival of electrical appliances in the home (the most important of which was the washing machine), the chores were very long and very tough.

"also it was customary, you know, that men when they'd come home, well, their work was done. And it was the woman who had to cope with, um, everything else. [...] In the beginning, when I was married still, there was, er, washing the work clothes, [...] you had to soak them in soda water in the evening, let them soak all night at least, [...] you had to brush them by hand, it was, er, it was a lot of work really."

Education and childcare was left entirely up to the women, to deal with within a life the rhythm of which was dictated by the factory: shift life, days divided in 3 time-periods of 8 hours; working on bank holidays and holy days; workers on-call every weekend, which in turn meant meals served in several times, silence observed during the sleep of the father, etc. Cleaning, cooking, washing, gardening, sewing were all necessary to the replenishing of the energy of the husband for work, but also for raising the children, which were usually destined to in turn become part of the factories and companies' workforce.

Thus, opposite a blurry imaginary picture, the study offered a very different perception and memory of both housework and childcare, and helped show how valuable that work actually was – allowing us to rehabilitate it, like feminist theory taught us, and to show that these activities were the bedrock of the economical workings of the valley.

Third, women were implicated into the public sphere. A few women also chose to get involved in forms of activism and associative activities. Next the masculine activism in unions, a separate feminine social activism could be found. The division is a classic within the context of French unions, in which women were mainly regarded only their roles of wives of activists or as logistics persons. The organized actions of the women focused mostly on bettering everyday life at first; on personal help; on child care.

A few women got involved in more political activities (unions, young women Christian workers society) and became union representatives. Some transformed the skills they had

acquired within the associative movement in professional skills or political skills (for those who were voted into public office).

The existing picture of the masculine involvement in union activism (peppered with the strong images of very tough strikes, notably during the closing of factories in the eighties) becomes more complex once we catch sight of a feminine involvement at the day to day level, by women working at bettering living conditions, but who also, post eighties, emerged to take a place in the political public sphere.

At last, we underscore a specific feminine immigration. When one thinks of the populations of immigrants come to steel-working Lorraine, one thinks most often of the immigration of men coming from Poland, Ukraine, Germany, Italy, or post World War II from Algeria – men who either chose to come or were called upon to come work in the mines and factories. Masculine immigration completely hides feminine immigration. Mostly, the women who emigrated to Lorraine were young women fetched by their husbands after some time spent in France, or who came on their own to join their husband, sometimes with children in tow. Daughters moved to be reunited with their fathers, coming with their mothers, etc. But there are also women who came alone to France in search of work, most often as maids, and who then moved again to join their husband in Lorraine.

This is the case of women from Ukraine, Poland and Italy, arrived before the war in Lorraine, and whose daughters and daughters in law talk about now:

“She got a work contract [in 1932] and her trip was paid, but to Marseille. My mom found herself in Marseille. Staying with winemakers... [...] And then after a year Mom got permission for some leave because she really wanted to see her husband... [...] Mom wanted to go back [to Marseille] because she found it nice at these people’s [...] And Dad did not want her to leave. He told her “listen, okay, leave if you want but then don’t come back.” [...] And then she stayed [in Moselle].”

When women narrate immigration we thus get to hear about arrival circumstances, the difficulties there were adapting and getting accepted at first:

Mrs Mann arrived from Italy in 1957 with her mother and brother; they were joining their husband and father. She describes a very long journey (she was four years old), followed by her confusing another man for her father upon arrival. They were the second Italian family to settled in that small town, and it was difficult; she remembers starting up at school and having to deal with racist discriminatory remarks from her teacher.

Algerian women we interviewed all say they keenly felt isolation: they did not know anyone when they arrived, and often they stayed alone for up to a whole year, at home, without any local contact.

Finally, women’s stories give us a fresh perspective on immigrant men, too: some for example describe how, as part of their work at the factory, they taught new young recruits from Italy, teaching them French at the same time. For several, these men then went on to become their husbands.

Once more, our study aims to render more complex our perception and memory of immigration in the region, by showing that it was not only the purview of the men who have come in for work, but also of women, whose migrations paths and stories are varied,

and do not only consist of movements to get reunited with their husband or family. Thus, our research may contribute to create a new imagining of the Lorrain region steel industry area. And, it is not without a certain questioning that social anthropologists, who we are, can take part in the construction of memory.

## Getting involved in a memory construction

Our study was commissioned by a public institution and aimed at unveiling a forgotten memory, the memory of women living in the Fensch Valley. The research report handed in March 2006 has remained rather confidential so far, as its circulation was restricted to academic circles mostly and didn't reach a broader population. It might only have little impact on the collective consciousness of this steel industry area. On the contrary, we can expect to catch the general public attention thanks to the exhibition that followed from our study: the show opened on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008 at the bottom of the blast furnace in Uckange (a registered national heritage site).

All along the research process and the preparation of the exhibition, we have thought over our own involvement in this construction of the memory and the heritage of the Fensch Valley, which can be extended to the Lorrain region steel industry area (Demagnet & Vinel to be published). The ethnological approach provides room for a minority voice to emerge – women voice – which has had little echo so far. As anthropologists, we are consciously and actively taking part in the unveiling of a stretch of social life that was kept invisible<sup>6</sup>. Our involvement implied to follow a set of ethical principles, and a constant questioning about our action. Indeed, a pitfall often detected when working on memory issues, is to set up one social phenomenon as an example (Micoud, 1991). To put emphasis on one particular group memory more than another can reify the image of a local area, thus contravening an always fluttering and re-imagined memory. In order to avoid such a pitfall, on the one hand, we have made the sponsors of the research aware that memory is ever reconstructed and reinvented, on the other hand, we stressed on the fact that women memories and life stories are many and polymorphous. One part of our study is dedicated to the involvement of the women in the valley nowadays; the aim is here to link the past to the present and reverse a backward-looking view of women representations. Our first argument was difficult to put across out of the academic paper, however, the designers of the exhibition were careful over our second and third points.

The second pitfall consists in the fact that the elites (local elected representatives who sponsored the research and intellectuals such as we) – in line with 19th century Folklorists (Rosselin, 1996) – produce a disembodied memory, extracted from the people and designed for the same people. We can not assert to have totally cleared out this problem, insofar as our writings belong to the academia (reports, papers ...) and the exhibition was produced by the project's sponsors. Nevertheless, we tended to conduct this applied research within and with the people considered. First of all, the majority of the women interviewed – and elderly women in particular – were very pleased with the project and pointed out that “it was about time” to talk about women. This population was in demand

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, the instigator of the research project (public officer and local elected representative of the Val de Fensch) as well as the researchers, were all women.

of memory building, as another local initiative – a memory workshop composed of five women, which gave birth to a book and a show on stage – also proves. Secondly, we handed back the research report to the women interviewed at a party organised in May 2006; on that occasion we invited them to participate in the preparation of the exhibition. Two of them were members of the exhibition scientific committee, and a few others – including men – contributed to the event by giving objects, photographs or press clipping to be shown. Our work doesn't fit into the community initiative development framework as defined by Hugues de Varine (1991): a collective project created by and designed for a population itself. Yet it is not a pure academic construct either, elitist, disembodied, decontextualised and distant from the people studied. Our anthropological stance sticks to this in-between: it combines a professional and scientific approach on the one hand, and a personal involvement of the researchers, sponsors and the people considered on the other hand.

## Conclusion

Unveiling women's life stories has brought to the light a diversity that was lying unexplored in the representations we have about the *milieu* of metallurgy in Lorraine. It gives interesting input to the gendered division of tasks and social roles, on the variety of existing jobs at the time, and many more issues. These stories show that political activism meant more than men-dominated union activism, and grasp more ground than the history of the great strikes; they also show a different aspect of immigration. This study takes an active part in the deconstruction of rather monolithic imaginings, and helps shade in a more nuanced, more complex image of industrial Lorraine. Naturally, focusing on certain aspects of life (jobs, political involvement, immigration, homemaking) also tends to mask other aspects. We had no intention to dismiss or minimize the importance of men activity, but to bring out information and help qualify it. Our academic work aimed at exposing a segment of the social reality of this valley, and by so doing, maybe, contributed to the making of a new imagining; even though the goal of any research project is never to try and substitute new imaginings to previous and older ones. We suppose that the exhibition will have an impact on the perceptions people have on industrial Lorraine, yet only a study on how the research results and the exhibition that followed were received by the public, would point to the inventions and appropriations stirred by our work.

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