



Working life in France before 1914, documented by the Bonneff Brothers

From 1905 to 1914 – a period spanning nearly 10 years, brothers Léon and Maurice Bonneff studied many aspects of working life in France and wrote several reports on the subject. Their deaths in the early months of the Great War brought a premature end to a body of work that was picked up on by their contemporaries and is now particularly valuable to anyone pondering the history of work and recent trends in the field.

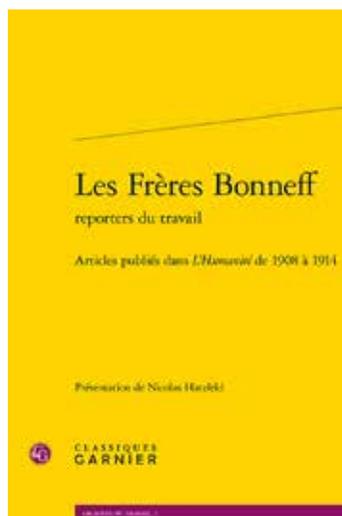
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The Bonneff brothers led life at full speed and, from very early on, blended social curiosity with commitment and writing. As sons of Jewish traders in precarious working conditions who lived in Franche-Comté, eastern France, they entered secondary education before each leaving for Paris after reaching the age of 16. The elder brother was taken on as an apprentice by a cousin who was a social sciences and philosophy publisher. He became familiar with processing texts and the writers' world, and

worked on journals where he mixed with committed intellectuals. The era was simmering with the rise of the strike movement, the development of trade unionism and socialism, and the intellectual sparkle that fosters experimentation. Léon involved his younger brother in some joint publishing projects. Having dreamt of becoming writers, they were urged to observe the social world, ordinary people and workers' lives. They acted on that advice with skill and imagination.

Their first notable initiative was to conduct an investigation into the murderous working conditions that prevailed in certain industries, working with the trade unions for the occupations concerned. The survey was published in 1905 in the form of a book, *Les métiers qui tuent [Occupations That Kill]*, structured around each source of poisoning or type of medical condition. They were only just in their twenties. Drawing on work by medical officers of health they traced how substances such as lead, mercury or arsenic, dust and insanitary conditions caused sickness in workers that often proved fatal. They supported their analyses with proposals drawn up with 20 or so professional trade unions and federations, including the withdrawal from use of poisons such as lead and mercury and the implementation of safety procedures in workshops and construction sites. They also



advocated vigorous trade union action on health matters. The book's style was sober and factual, and it was an effective tool for the unions. It built the brothers a reputation in the trade union movement as thorough and methodical investigators who listened to the difficulties encountered by workers and put forward practical proposals.

This initial experience of cooperation with the unions was repeated in the brothers' preparation of a second book published in 1908 entitled *La vie tragique des travailleurs* [*The Tragic Life of Workers*]. The authors extended their investigations into the circumstances of female and male workers, on the basis of their occupations. The first group included the major industries such as textiles, glassmaking and steelmaking; the second comprised various hazardous or murderous activities such as the manufacture of grindstones, the repair and maintenance of furnaces, or rubber production. The third section related to home-based work by seamstresses or Jewish tailors living as refugees in Paris. The book tackled the technical, social and economic aspects

of the occupations. Without shying away from the damage to health arising from housing conditions or alcoholism, they noted the harm caused by the work itself in terms of injuries or sicknesses. The work drew comment from the trade union and socialist press, and opened the doors of the major daily newspapers to the brothers.

Later the brothers followed each other into writing literature. Maurice's novel *Didier, homme du peuple* [*Didier, Man of the People*], published in 1914, traces the story of a worker as he becomes a trade union activist and is based loosely on the life of Henri Pérault, a unionised labourer. When he left for the front, Léon left a manuscript, *Aubervilliers*, which was published posthumously in 1922-1923. This is a more lyrical novel set amidst the harsh conditions for workers in Aubervilliers, a Parisian suburb, and offers a vision of a decent, happy life.

It is chiefly through these publications and their occasional re-release that the Bonneff brothers' work is known. Nonetheless, a significant and perhaps the most important share of their activities was for the journals that printed their work from 1908 until they were called up at the end of July 1914. They also published an impressive number of articles (370 in all) in *L'Humanité*, *La Dépêche de Toulouse* and a few trade union and socialist periodicals, all under a joint byline using both their given names. A few of the texts deal with social issues, but the bulk of them concern workers' lives and working environments. As part of their activities as journalists, the brothers continued to work frequently with trade union organisations and, when the occasion arose, with experts. However, their strength lay in the reports they did following on-site visits, asking questions and sometimes experiencing the working conditions for themselves. Disputes were a special reason

for reporting, and sometimes their articles on such matters included an appeal for support. They soon adopted a lively style, sometimes addressing readers by appealing to their emotions or their sense of humour. Yet the foundation of the Bonneff brothers' work lay in the wealth of sound information they had. They almost always set down working hours, forms and levels of remuneration and, where appropriate, categorised them by job type. In so doing, they covered most grievances. The brothers did not stop there: in their investigations into the origins of the disputes, they were uncompromising on working conditions, unhealthy conditions, accident risk and the factors involved in occupational sickness. They drew such matters into sharp focus and did not hesitate to cast the spotlight on them when, in their view, those issues were more significant than wage-related grievances. 'We describe the work in detail', they stated in one article, 'in order to illustrate that the grievances are legitimate.' The focus was therefore on people in their social context. Finally, they took the fairly unusual step for the time of often giving male and female workers a voice. They would gain recognition as pioneers of social reporting.

The articles were written as news stories developed, rather than as part of a set schedule, and the brothers were not trying to construct a representative tableau of the world of work in their era. However, the elaborate fresco painted by the articles when combined creates an astonishing image of that world: it is at once very removed from our own society yet carries very strong echoes of current trends.

The tableau depicts workers from various industries, including metalworking, textiles, woodworking and glassmaking, as well as mining and oil extraction. Plenty of room is also given to smaller-scale

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manufactures such as foodstuffs, school slates/blackboards or artificial flowers as well as to sectors that often have a lower profile such as construction materials or waste processing. Workshops, however, were far from the only point of reference. Construction sites occupied an important place in the world of work, whether their purpose was to extract materials or erect buildings, especially since mechanisation was in its infancy and hand tools were still predominant. Home-working was also huge, involving mainly women.

The Bonneff brothers were also interested in commerce, especially small shops, although their gaze also landed on large stores and jobs in hospitality and catering. They also studied many occupations in transport and communications, for example the railways, mail, docks and shipping. In addition to blue-collar workers, they also looked at white-collar workers, whose conditions and grievances varied widely between quasi-servitude and the development of 'wage-earner' status.

Across this patchwork of jobs and occupations, the two reporters noted the value of professions and know-how, but never at the expense of the health and safety of the people concerned, sometimes taking unscrupulous bosses to task for exploiting workers' pride or courage. They never overlooked the weakest people in the workforce, aids, assistants, labourers or apprentices. Their articles focused a great deal of attention on women performing tedious or menial tasks in many industries while exposed to accident or sickness. They showed that the overall system of remuneration was inherently gendered and that women's value was often half that of the men's regardless of their mastery of a job's skills. The women working in cottage industries earned, as one of the women themselves put it, enough to cheat death, but not enough to live.

The brothers focused particularly on children, who were exploited shamelessly, often in disregard of very conservative legislation. In commerce, apprenticeships were often a pretext for working long hours and living in unfit conditions in exchange for highly variable training. In industry, the two journalists waged a campaign against the derogations afforded to the metalworking and glassmaking sectors on the age requirements and working hours for children. They doggedly denounced child trafficking, the long nights, the brutal abuse inflicted on children sometimes younger than 10 years old, and the obstructive practices employed by glassworks bosses in respect of labour inspectors' checks.

Another legacy of their reports relates to the strength of the remuneration systems, which was a determining factor in the pressure brought to bear on the length of the working day, which was often more than 12 hours, and the effort put in by workers. As a general rule, these two aspects were where the emphasis lay in workshops, construction sites and home-working. Piece-work was in operation because it directly reflected the work done by the female or male worker concerned. The bargaining was often performed by a master craftsman or woman who sometimes involved others in the actual work. The system could result in a multi-stage process in garment-making, to the disadvantage of a dressmaker or tailor looking for work from arrogant intermediaries. Moreover, the commercial and employment relationships often overlapped at the expense of reliable remuneration.

The weakness of worker status is evident in some of the distinctions drawn between workers and employees. Although wages varied, protection was the area where the gap was starkest. As a general rule, workers' remuneration was linked to gender, as we have seen, as well as to the occupation in

question, and finally to a worker's strength. It therefore peaked before old age beckoned. After that point, as for children (who were yet to attain it) and women of all ages, the pool of family resources was what prevented a lonely, poverty-ridden existence. In some industries, employees' remuneration did not fall with advancing age; moreover, some establishments implemented forms of retirement or mutual funds to cushion against life's risks.

Stability and certainty of resources, together with occupational health, are perhaps the issues with echoes for contemporary society that give pause for thought in the picture of the world of work that emerges from the Bonneff brothers' writings. All the details of the circumstances they describe mark the gap that separates the two eras. However, the 1900s and the weak policy, wage and social protections that the era provided have implications for our times too, when regulations are being called into question to varying degrees. ●



FURTHER READING

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