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Unemployment and Turning Points in Careers: A Conventionalist Analysis

*Delphine Remillon**

Abstract: *»Arbeitslosigkeit und Wendepunkte in Berufsverläufen: eine konventionstheoretische Analyse«.* The present article aims to study employment inequalities from a double dynamic perspective. It deals with the study of turning points in career paths in order to understand, first, the process of exclusion from the labor market, second, the increase in long-term unemployment over time. I mobilize the approach of economics of convention, which accounts for the processes of selection by focusing on moments of quality valuations in "tests" (valorizations and devalorizations). I use qualitative data from 60 biographical interviews with French unemployed people to build a typology of conventional labor worlds based on mixed methods: quantitative lexical analysis with the software ALCESTE and qualitative analysis of the interviews. The empirical analysis reveals the existence of plural logics of coordination and valuation of work's quality, which can be connected to the different segments of the labor market brought out by the labor market segmentation theory. The processes of exclusion differ from one segment to another and are the result of specific tests and of interactions with specific intermediaries. The "critical transitions" often stem from a tension between different registers of valuation. However, some experiences go beyond these discontinuities. Some changes in recruitment conventions, that become dominant, are at the origin of a "denial of evaluation" and of the development of an "unemployment of exclusion."

Keywords: Economics of convention, career paths, unemployment, French labor market, dynamics of valuations, tests, biographical interviews, lexical analysis, mixed methods.

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This article is largely based on analyses conducted as part of my doctoral thesis and published in French in Remillon (2009b), Eymard-Duvernay and Remillon (2012), Remillon (2016). I have a debt of gratitude to the interviewees who accepted to share their life stories with us. I thank Emmanuelle Marchal with whom we worked on a first version of the textual analysis in order to study the job-search procedures (Marchal and Remillon 2012), and I am thinking in particular of François Eymard-Duvernay who directed this research project, which is highly inspired by his work.

1. Introduction

The present article aims to study employment inequalities from a double dynamic perspective. It deals with the study of “critical transitions” (turning points) in career paths in order to understand, first, the construction of unemployability (the process of exclusion from the labor market) and, second, the evolutions in the field of labor over time, especially the development of what François Eymard-Duverney (2012) calls the “unemployment of exclusion” [*chômage d'exclusion*].

I develop an analytical framework based on the approach of *economics of convention* (in short EC), which accounts for the processes of selection by focusing on moments of quality valuations (called “tests” [*épreuves*]). I use qualitative data from 60 biographical interviews with French unemployed people, which are analyzed with mixed methods,¹ i.e., a combination of qualitative analysis and computer assisted quantitative data analysis with the software ALCESTE (Reinert 1987). The hypothesis tested is that the “pragmatical approach” (Defalvard 2005) of the lexical analysis with ALCESTE allows to make emerge some “worlds” of labor, which can be interpreted as conventional spaces of valuation because the notion of convention “is narrowly connected with that of language” (Bessy 2012, 15). A qualitative analysis of the interviews is still necessary to describe these spaces of valuation and, in particular, to analyze the valorization and devalorization dynamics that cannot be captured through textual analysis. The empirical analysis reveals the existence of plural logics of coordination and valuation of work’s quality, which can be connected to the different segments of the labor market brought out by the labor market segmentation theory (Doeringer and Piore 1971). Each world is equipped with specific intermediaries, tests and tools of valuation.

The article is structured as follows. First, I will present the analytical framework based on key theoretical concepts of the economics of convention. Second, I will present the empirical material and the methods used to analyze it. Third, I will expose the results of the analysis: I show that the processes of exclusion (the construction of unemployability) differ from one segment of the labor market to another. In the last part, I will discuss the fact that the transitions from one valuation model to another are very difficult and the connection to identity issues. I will also highlight the changes in recruitment conventions over time, which produces some exclusion.

¹ “Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher [...] combine elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches [...] for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” (Johnson et al. 2007).

2. Analytic Framework

2.1 The Economics of Convention

The economics of convention refers to an approach developed in France since the mid-1980s by economists and sociologists. For them, “conventions are interpretative schemes for action and coordination that persons and actors use in situations under conditions of uncertainty” (Diaz-Bone and Salais 2011, 7). The actors use them in a reflective way (Diaz-Bone and Thévenot 2010).

They facilitate the coordination of economic agents under the conditions of uncertainty and of incomplete rules, in particular by stabilizing commune designation of qualification of product (people or other entities), legal and statistical categories. (Bessy 2012, 15)

The coordination through conventions does not, however, correspond only to a cognitive issue. Conventions are implemented in formats, procedures, tools. In fact, the role of objects is important for EC: “actors have to refer to objects in situations of critique and justification. No test of worth without the support of objects is possible” (Diaz-Bone 2014, 325).

Conventions are more informal or implicit rules than institutional codified rules but “through repeated interaction they become an intimate part of the history, incorporated into justifications, behaviors and social objects like institutions” (Diaz-Bone and Salais 2011, 7). Yet these rules stay conventional in the sense that they constitute one among several possible solutions and can always be called into question or changed. EC’s analysis is therefore necessarily dynamic.

In fact, EC postulates a coexisting plurality of conventions. Conventional research has thus highlighted the existence of a plurality of orders of production in firms (Storper and Salais 1997; Eymard-Duvernay 2004), of “skills conventions” and “matching dynamics” in hiring (Eymard-Duvernay and Marchal 1997; Larquier and Rieucou 2018 in this issue) and more generally, the existence of a plurality of “orders of worth.”² “Every empirically existing market and every empirically existing productive organization combine a plurality of these conventions” (Diaz-Bone 2011, 10).

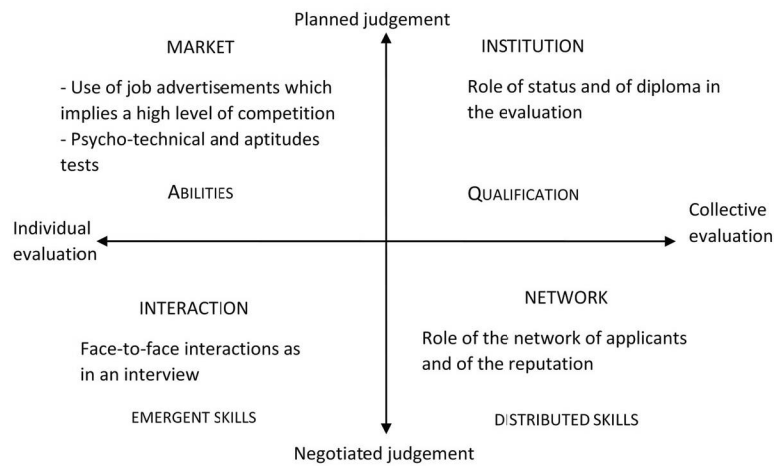
² Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2006) distinguished six orders of worth: the *market*, *domestic*, *industrial*, *civic*, *fame*, and *inspiration* ones. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005) added a seventh: the *network* one.

2.2. Career Paths as Dynamics of Valorizations and Devalorizations

In the perspective of EC, the qualities of goods and of labor are not given and objective facts, contrary to what is supposed in the neoclassic theory. Workers do not have worth *per se*. Their worth depends on conventions and there are different ways of assessing labor quality. This has been clearly shown by François Eymard-Duvernay and Emmanuelle Marchal in their seminal book about “*Façons de recruter*” [“Ways of hiring”] (1997). They distinguished different methods used by the recruiters in hiring, with different forms of evaluation, which could be plotted along two different continuums (see Figure 1; Marchal 2013; Gerlach 2013): the first one goes from situations where the recruiter “plans” skills to those where he “negotiates” them. The *planned* judgement refers to situations of at-a-distance selection, such as when the recruiters sort the applications through the resumes and cover letters; on the contrary, the *negotiated* judgement designates situations of face-to-face selections as in a job interview. The second continuum goes from situations where the recruiter highlights the “individual” nature of the skill to situations where the “collective” foundations of the skills are put forward (Marchal 2013). As follows four “skills conventions” were defined, at the intersection of these two continuums: the *market* one: the recruiter publishes job ads, which implies a high level of competition between applicants, and try to measure the individual *abilities* through tests; the *institution* one where the evaluation is based on collective signals as status and diploma, which determine the *qualification*. In these two *skills conventions*, the skills are seen as pre-established, measurable, and independent of the context of work. The two other *skill conventions*, on the contrary, are based on local evaluations: the *network* one refers to situations where the recruiter consider that the skills are “distributed” in the network of the applicant – whereas the *interaction* one designates situations where the skills are considered to “emerge” in face-to-face interactions as during an interview.

According to the chosen *skill convention*, different applicants are considered as “good” and are hired. The choice of one recruitment channel, rather than another one, plays a role in delimiting who is employable and who is not (Eymard-Duvernay and Marchal 1997; Salognon 2007; Rieucan and Salognon 2014): “the applicants’ worth depend on the choice of recruitment and assessment methods, on the way of using them and on the type of actors involved in the process” (Larquier and Marchal 2016, 571). That’s why the EC theory focuses on the valorization/devalorization processes. To talk about “valorization” implies that the worth is constructed, not given and objective. The worth is the result of complex processes of judgement.

Figure 1: The Skills Convention



Source: Eymard-Duvernay and Marchal 1997, 25, my translation.

These valorization and devalorization processes take place during “tests.” The test is a major notion for the sociological tradition of EC (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). The tests are social devices (including, in addition to people, language, objects, technical and managerial devices, law) that establish an order between different people in a situation, valorize them more or less. Uncertainty is at the heart of the tests. In tests, people are evaluated and they demonstrate their skills. Analytically, the evaluation in tests corresponds to a dual-level choice, which parts are confused in the evaluation: the measurement of competence presupposes a preliminary arbitration between several conceptions of the quality of labor (labor quality conventions) (Eymard-Duvernay 2008).

Some actors are strongly involved in the construction of quality. They can be gathered under the generic term of “intermediaries.” The role of the intermediary is not only to circulate information, its role is not a neutral one (Marchal et al. 2007). The intermediary enables translations to be carried out between different qualification registers, which are first manifested in different lexical registers. However, the choice, by an intermediary, of a mode of judgement, implies exclusion for individuals who are poorly classified under these conventions. Some actors have the power to determine what’s worth; they have the “power of valorization.” The power of valorization is the ability to determine the value of things. It is distributed locally among people, language, and devices (Eymard-Duvernay 2016). Of course, firms are one of the major actors because major tests take place at the entrance (as the conventionalist research on recruitment has shown) or inside the company.

EC's pluralistic approach invites us to analyze the diversity of the valorization and devalorization processes, which cannot be the same (not the same tests, not the same intermediaries) in the different conventional labor worlds.

3. Data and Mixed Methods

3.1 The Biographical Interviews

Sixty-five biographical interviews were conducted with unemployed people between 40 and 60 years old, with a long working experience.³ The aim of choosing this age group was to observe long careers in order to capture cumulative processes of valorization and devalorization. The interviewees were contacted by various means in order to diversify the profiles met (in terms of origin, status, professional position, working experience, etc.): our personal networks, an ANPE⁴ agent, training courses for job seekers, an advertisement on the forum of a website devoted to unemployment, etc. The interviews were conducted in four regions: the Ile de France (Greater Paris), a rural area, a large metropolis of an old industrial region, and a medium-sized provincial city. The corpus of transcribed interviews was first submitted to textual analysis with the software ALCESTE in order to distinguish the different lexical registers that interviewees use when they talk about their past working life and unemployment experiences.

3.2 The Methodology of ALCESTE⁵

ALCESTE is software for textual data analysis, which allows the quantitative analysis of a text in order to extract its strongest significant structures. Researchers (in particular Max Reinert who developed this program, see Reinert 1987) have shown that these structures are closely linked to the distribution of words in a text. ALCESTE relies upon co-occurrence analysis, i.e., upon the statistical analysis of frequent word pairs in a textual corpus. It does not classify words according to their meaning but according to their distribution in the sentences. For example, “unemployment” and “inactivity” will be put together

³ These interviews were conducted between 2005 and 2007 by five interviewers: Delphine Remillon, Zineb Rachedi, Liza Kerivel, Jérôme Huguet, and Corentin Gallo. They took part of a research project supported by the French National Research Agency (ANR) in which François Eymard-Duverney (scientific director), Yolande Benarrosh, Guillemette de Larquier, Emmanuelle Marchal, and Delphine Remillon participated.

⁴ The ANPE is the previous name (now *Pôle emploi*) of the French national job center.

⁵ ALCESTE means *Analysis of the co-occurring lexemes within the simple statements of a text*.

in one class only if they often go together in sentences, regardless of their close meaning.

The first step of the analysis by ALCESTE consists in reducing various grammatical forms of the same word (for example tensed forms, plurals, suffixes, etc.) to a root form. Through its dictionary, the software also divides the vocabulary of the text into “function words” (articles, prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, and auxiliary verbs) and “content words” which carry the meaning of the discourse (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs). The analysis is based on these “content words” with a frequency greater than four in the corpus.⁶ The whole text is analyzed as a single unit but individual speeches are separated by lines of “passive variables” which are a set of variables that characterize the interview: interviewee’s gender, first name, age group, place of residence, interviewer. These variables do not contribute to the calculation of the word classes but serve as illustrative variables for class description. They allow to assess how far some particular profiles of unemployed people are or are not associated with a particular class of vocabulary.

At last, the program provides a descending hierarchical classification on an indicator matrix with “elementary context units”⁷ (ECUs) of the corpus in rows and “contents words” in columns in order to identify word classes. At each stage, the classes with the most different vocabulary are separated until no further subdivision of the corpus is relevant in terms of maximizing oppositions. This textual data analysis is thus expected to highlight the main themes of a corpus, which emerge through different word classes.

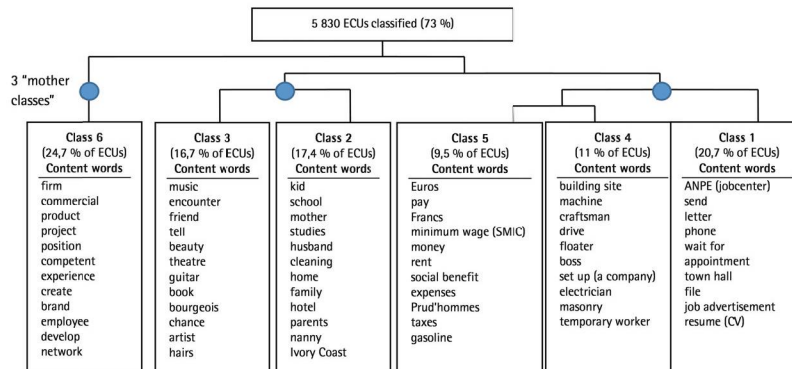
3.3 Six Classes of Vocabulary about Work and Unemployment

Figure 2 is a tree graph of the classes resulting of the statistical analysis performed by ALCESTE, schematized according to the descending hierarchical classification procedure. This dendrogram helps us to understand the relative importance of the classes and the relationship between them. We see that 6 different vocabulary classes (6 “stables classes” in ALCESTE’s vocabulary) are identified in the corpus of interviews, descending from 3 initial ones (3 “mother classes”). To make the interpretation easier, the software offers different tools: the list of the most characteristic words (see a very short selection on Figure 1) and a selection of the most typical ECUs of each class.

⁶ The interviewer’s questions were capitalized so that they did not participate in class definitions (uppercase words are excluded from the software analysis).

⁷ An ECU is a unit of text within which ALCESTE calculates the frequency of words co-occurrences.

Figure 2: Dendrogram of the 6 Vocabulary Classes



Class 6 (about one quarter of the ECUs) is the class including the most specific vocabulary (the first stabilized class in the descending hierarchical classification). Highly representative words of this class refer to large companies and careers (see Figure 2). The professional experiences are described by the various *positions* and *functions* (*commercial*, *product promoter*) held, the *firms* and *brands* for which the respondents worked. This class also includes a lot of economic vocabulary (*restructuring*, *financial*) and related to the resources that people say they can mobilize in their job search (*skills*, *personality*, *network*).

Class 1 (almost 20% of the ECUs) includes vocabulary related to job search: *letters* and *resume (CV) sent*, *appointments* at the *ANPE*, *replies to job advertisements*, *submit a file* to the *town hall*. However, this search for *contracts*, which is also carried out with *temporary employment agencies*, does not seem to produce very fruitful results: interviewees say they have to *call* repeatedly, and that they are *waiting* very long for an *answer*, which is very often negative because *jobs* are already taken. However, the jobseeker must prove constantly his or her *search* for a job or run the risk of being *struck off the list*.

The vocabulary of class 5 (9.5% of the ECUs) mainly concerns remuneration (*Euros*, *Francs*, the *money*, a *cheque*, an *indemnity*, *to pay*, a *bonus*, *to earn*, *to calculate...*). Money appears to be a problem because the *wages*, which are at the minimum level (the *SMIC*), or the low level of *social* or *unemployment benefits* make it difficult to cover a whole range of *expenses* (*gasoline*, *rent*, *taxes*, *credit*). Reading the typical ECUs of the class shows that remuneration is also often a source of conflict with the employer (to the *Prud'hommes*, the industrial tribunal). Finally, some interviewees say that returning to work would result in *costs* (of *travel*, of *childcare*) that are not cost-effective if the proposed work is low-paid and at part-time.

Class 4 (11% of the ECUs) includes many names or attributes of professions: a *machine operator*, a *truck driver*, a *plumber*, a *floaters*, an *electrician*, a *carpenter*, etc., often in the *building* or *catering* sectors. This world is that of small *bosses*, with whom close relations are established, but the relationships can sometimes degenerate and this leads to arguments. These professions open up the possibility to become a *team leader* or to be *self-employed*.

So these three classes (1, 5, and 4), descending from a same one, are characterized by the same realism of vocabulary, whether it is the description of the professions carried out, working conditions and remuneration, or job search procedures.

Class 2 (17% of the ECUs) has a vocabulary that is strongly marked by close family (*father, mother, husband, children*) and geographical origins (*Ivory Coast, Algeria, Gabon, French*) as well as educational background, with many terms related to the studies: the *bachelor's degree (BAC)*, the *BEP*,⁸ the *CAP*,⁹ *college, high school, teacher, homework, diploma...*). Finally, this class contains some vocabulary related to places or activities which seem to be outside work but are, in fact, related to the personal services sector where many low-skilled workers work (especially women who are over-represented in this class), such as *childcare, housework, kindergartens, retirement homes, hotels*, etc.

Class 3 (17% of the ECUs) includes a set of words referring to people who are close to the interviewees but not family relationships as in the previous class. The vocabulary is more related to friendly relationships (*friend, buddy, boyfriend, girlfriend*). These *encounters*, which are often the fruit of *chance*, seem to be the privileged mode of relations in this world of *artists*: the world of *music (guitar, records)*, of *theatre (actor)*, of *books*, etc. This universe is valued by those interviewed as a reference to a past period, characterized by a *strange* but *nice* atmosphere, opposed to the *bourgeois* world. This class also contains words related to communication (to *tell*, to *talk*, to *laugh*) and very general vocabulary with words like *life* or *beauty*.

Therefore, these two last classes, descending from a same “mother class,” deal essentially, at a first glance, with extra-professional aspects of life.

3.4 From Lexical Classes to Labor Worlds and Valuation Spaces

The partition resulting from the quantitative lexical analysis of the data can be interpreted in at least three different ways:

The lexical analysis highlights “a set of narrative places invested in the interview and whose layout constitutes a trajectory” (Guérin-Pace 1997, 881; my translation). Therefore, the vocabulary classes distinguished by ALCESTE

⁸ BEP (*brevet d'aptitude professionnelle*) is a technical school certificate.

⁹ CAP (*certificat d'aptitude professionnelle*) is a vocational training certificate.

correspond, first, to the different stages contained in the narratives that are organized around some major poles: the one of the job search, the time of the small jobs, the longer professional experiences, the life outside work, etc.

Second, the three main classes (“mother classes”) can also be interpreted as three general grammars of expression about work and unemployment that cut across the narratives as a whole and which are related to the three universes of meaning that Reinert (2007) distinguished in various literary corpus using ALCESTE: the grammar of realism which dominates in vocabulary classes 1, 4, and 5; the grammar of imaginary (classes 2 and 3) which designates “a world of sensations having taken on meaning through a life lived since childhood” (ibid., 202); finally, the grammar of symbolism characterized by a high level of abstraction of language, a rather assertive, prescriptive, or demonstrative style which is typical for class 6.

Third, it is also possible to analyze these lexical classes as the trace of different labor worlds, more or less distinct from each other. ALCESTE’s pragmatic method (counting the co-occurrences of words) makes it possible to identify the words with which the actors conceive their actions, which are the traces of what is repeated in their practices and their use and therefore of different worlds in the sense of pragmatic philosophy (Defalvard 2005). This is also what emerges from a qualitative analysis of the interviews, by reading the most representative interviews in each of the vocabulary classes, identified through “passive variables” that indicate which interviews are over-represented in each class. We will see that the professional careers typical of each lexical class are very different from one another and are situated in different professional worlds. Qualitative analysis allows us to go even further in the analysis, by locating the tests, tools, and major actors of evaluation in each of the worlds and thus interpreting them as distinct spaces of valorization, in a conventionalist perspective. In this perspective, the vocabulary specific to each class is finally the trace of these different orders of worth.

In the following sections, we describe some typical trajectories of unemployment in distinct valorization spaces, which correspond to the six lexical classes distinguished by the lexical analysis.

4. Results: Plurality Trajectories of Unemployment in Conventional Labor Worlds

4.1 The Recurrence of Unemployment and Gradual Exclusion on the Segment of Low-Skilled Jobs

Because of the great diversity of the jobs they have held, the group of interviewees who are the most representative in class 1 of textual analysis, is not characterized by one specific occupation, such as Helen's itinerary (see Box 1).

Box 1: H  l  ne, 37 Years Old, Greater Paris: Great Instability and Chronic Unemployment

H  l  ne dropped out of school early, in the middle of a training of shorthand typist, which she did not complete. She experienced a first period of unemployment, and then went on to work for several years as a temporary worker, mainly in handling jobs, without ever integrating a stable job. Back problems forced her to find something else. A period followed when she worked in small jobs (childcare, replacement of the caretaker of the building where she lives, etc.) and gradually she moved further away from employment. She is now only receiving social benefits having not accumulated enough working hours to be eligible for unemployment benefits.

In their case, the multiplication of professional experiences is a handicap rather than an asset or a sign of high employability. They are confronted exclusively with jobs at the first-level of qualifications and suffer from job insecurity: they are employed mostly on temporary or fixed-term contracts. Work is remunerated at the minimum-wage level, is often at part-time, and their trajectories are punctuated by periods of unemployment. This great instability explains why these people *a contrario* describe the "good job" as a stable job. The precariousness is even greater for people who – like some of our interviewees – do not have a residence permit: they describe very small work experiences, a few hours a day, without any contract. In this class, exclusion is progressive and occurs at the end of a succession of short-term jobs and short periods of unemployment. Some key events seem to accelerate the process and are the main obstacles to returning to work, including health problems.

The most representative interviewees in class 5, which concentrates the vocabulary on remuneration difficulties, also have low levels of formal qualification, but they had a less "bumpy" career path than previous ones, with even a few long work experiences, as Gilles (see Box 2). However, they also had jobs in many sectors, so that they do not have a well-identified profession. Although

they sometimes have initial vocational degrees, they have hardly ever worked in the sector of activity corresponding to their initial training and have not had any promotion, even in their longest experiences. The vocabulary of this class focuses on working and remuneration conditions because it is on these aspects that the respondents compare the jobs throughout their career: a good job is above all a job with a good level of remuneration.

Box 2: Gilles, 37 Years Old, Tours: Good and Bad Jobs at the First Level of Qualification

Gilles obtained a butcher's CAP and started working in this profession as a workman but he was laid-off after one month. He then left for the army, after which he completely changed course: he entered a company as an order picker but denounced the working conditions, particularly the extended hours (including weekends and bank holidays) without being paid overtime. He was then hired by a major car manufacturer (as a temporary worker) where he remained for eight years, until the site was closed, resulting in his dismissal. He then found a job as a warehouseman, which ended in a conflict with the employer, and then he got a job in a large company of frozen products with still difficult working conditions (900 € per month, working in the cold, etc.). He then joined a large pharmaceutical company, first as a temporary worker, then switched to a fixed-term contract and finally to an open-ended contract. Although he has no prospect of promotion, he appreciates the working conditions (the wage, working hours, working atmosphere, social benefits of a large company). All these different working experiences throughout his career were interspersed with periods of unemployment of varying lengths.

This leads them sometimes to value the jobs as temporary workers that offer better salaries (due to precariousness bonuses) and are sometimes a stepping-stone toward stable contracts in large companies offering, in the absence of promotion, at least some better working conditions comparing to others. As in the previous class, exclusion from the labor market is progressive. Some interviewees become discouraged little by little and declare themselves worn out by the succession of bad working conditions. This sometimes leads them to refuse job offers, preferring not to work rather than endure them or to prefer some temporary jobs. As in the previous case, some events accelerate the exclusion from the labor market, including health and mobility problems. For instance, one interviewee cannot work anymore as a temporary worker since his driver's license has been revoked and since he lives in a rural area, without public transport. Indeed, the search for temporary work requires mobility within a local labor market area and a high level of availability (Marchal and Remillon 2012).

We can link these two typical working lives to a first segment of the labor market identified by the labor market segmentation theory: the unskilled jobs on the secondary market:

Secondary work situations are characterized by relatively low wages, poor working conditions, and generally inferior or demeaning social status. The jobs provide little security of career advancement. (Berger and Piore 1980, 18)

For some people, the transition through these jobs is a stepping-stone toward higher-skilled and better-paid jobs, but for the interviewees representative of these two vocabulary classes, these low-qualified jobs are a trap. There is a high degree of job instability on this secondary segment of the labor market (cf. Helen's itinerary), but above all, even at times of greater stability, employees of these two classes do not experience any valorization and accumulation of qualification, which could constitute a resource in their search for future jobs. As pointed out by Bernard Gazier (2006), "secondary" jobs are not necessarily specific forms of employment but jobs with no prospect of promotion. Gérard Ballot (1996) added that dualism could be internal to the company, with large companies offering some of their employees short contracts that are not integrated into the promotion chain, such as Gilles's jobs in large companies.

It is neither experience nor qualification that are valorized in this market but the adaptability of individuals, their availability and mobility in response to the flexibility requirements of companies and their resistance to poor working conditions. Marsden (1989) refers to the "unorganised" market on which workers are interchangeable. Workers on this segment have held many sorts of jobs. Their versatility is not valorized and is not really recognized as a mark of employability that would allow a gradual increase in qualifications and wages and would compensate for other handicaps. Some life contingencies that alter this flexibility and adaptability, such as health or mobility problems, can cause them to suddenly lose their employability. The workers have to prove themselves continuously in new tests. The major tests on this segment are first, the hiring test – the search for contracts is permanent in this world (Marchal and Remillon 2012); and second, what happens within firms, which offer more or less stable and good working conditions (which wear out the body more or less). The major intermediaries, those who have the "power of valorization," are the firms and the actors of the labor market, for instance the *ANPE* agents, who help and control the job search. The major quality convention on this segment is the *market* one (see above and Boltanski and Thévenot 2006).

4.2 Unemployment as a Rupture in a Career on Internal or Occupational Labor Markets

The career paths of the employees who are over-represented in class 4 are characterized by contractual instability but stable career paths. Indeed, their various jobs

have been relatively well connected and have enabled them to build up experience in a specific field of activity or profession (e.g., the flocking in the case of Nabil, see Box 3). These activities have given them satisfaction and recognition, both financial and social (good reputation with peers and clients). In these professions, training is done through the acquisition of technical diplomas or “on the job,” often starting with a period of apprenticeship. These employees have very close relations with their bosses – owners of small businesses, often in the construction, craft, or catering industries. There is moreover a thin line between employee and self-employed status, since these employees have frequently tried to become self-employed at some point in their career.

Box 3: Nabil, 60 Years Old, Greater Paris: An Itinerary in the Flocking Sector

Nabil started working at 14 years old in Algeria in an earthmoving occupation. In France, after a first experience in a civil engineering firm as a plumber, he entered the flocking industry thanks to a relationship. All the rest of his career has been marked by a gradual professionalization in this sector: he first spent a year in a company where he learned the profession of flocker and then, for a period, turned from one building site to another with the same team, their choice being made on those who paid the best. Then he worked for six years in another company and then for six years too in another one, where he worked on diverse construction sites, including in Saudi Arabia. Since the latter firm preferred to deal with subcontractors rather than employees, he had his own business for eleven years. He later renounced working at a loss, and after a long period of unemployment, he was hired as a team leader. But despite the promises made, he was paid well below his skills, which led him to go before an industrial tribunal.

Careers in class 4 refer to the *occupational labor market segment* (OLM) (Marsden 1989): An OLM is a labor market in which workers have access to jobs of a particular type in many firms, this access being based upon the holding of a recognized diploma or qualification or on the recognition of the workers’ peers (Eyraud et al. 1990). The qualification increases as the experience progresses and is assessed by peers. As the content of the jobs does not change from one place to another, the qualification is transferable. The fluidity of the market is ensured by horizontal mobility. This type of market is characteristic of craft industries. Reputation plays an important role; everyone knows everyone in the small world of a very specific profession as the floacking and / or a small area: “I’m known to one and all” [*je suis connu comme le loup blanc*] confided one of the interviewees, restaurant-owner in the historic center of Tours. Here the professional network supports the skill (as in the *network skill convention*, see above) and allows mobility, more than the individual qualification. A good example is given by the same interviewee who described a difficult transition when he wanted to move from traditional to collective catering (to have better working conditions). Alt-

though he was a very good cook, he had difficulty at first finding a job in the catering industry where recruitment channels were not the same and where he did not have a professional network. Knowing codes and language are in fact very important in this segment and are specific to a working environment.

For this group of interviewees, the valorization space is a professional environment. A valorization dynamic has been set up, so that it is possible to speak for them of trajectory or itinerary in a primary market, even if certain characteristics of their work (instability of contracts, low level of initial training, and training “on the job”) are common characteristics of the secondary jobs presented before. However, their experience of unemployment is very different. While unemployment was recurrent for employees on secondary markets, the disruption is often more pronounced in the career paths of individuals in OLM, linked to the sudden fluctuations in labor demand in the profession or to the narrowing of the professional network, the importance of which, as we have seen, is essential to circulate in this market. Thus Nabil, the floater, became unemployed because of the changes in the flocking market. He explained that the new floaters coming from Eastern countries broke the prices, so there was only room for big companies, with large equipment and his professional network was gradually shrinking (Marchal and Remillon 2012). In addition to these cyclical fluctuations, to which the crafts and building sector in particular are highly sensitive, health problems are at the origin of turning points in many cases. These physical occupations, carried out in difficult environments (cold, hot, dust, chemical products...) are sources of health deterioration, of occupational diseases, and even workplace accidents. In the end, this experience of unemployment as a break in a rather linear and rewarding career path brings them closer to employees in another primary market segment: the employees of internal labor markets.

Box 4: Bruno, 48 Years Old, Greater Paris: An Upward Career within the Consumer Electronics Sector

At the end of his studies in economics (he obtained a master's degree), Bruno did an internship in a large automotive company where he discovered the commercial occupation. Feeling attracted by this occupation, he looked for and found a job of sales representative in a consumer electronics company by job ads. He then became product manager by internal promotion. Then there was a restructuring (company merger) that resulted in a reduction in staff. But by the intermediary of his professional network, he found a job as a sales manager in another company in the same sector of activity. Later, his former boss moved to another major consumer electronics company, offered Bruno to join him and appointed him regional director and then sales manager for France. The French subsidiary was finally sold in July 2004 to an investor who took over the brand but not the employees, who were laid off and Bruno was unemployed for the first time in his career at the age of 48 years.

Employees who are representative of class 6 have known real upward careers, either within the same company or within integrated sectors of activity and business networks, such as Bruno's itinerary (see Box 4). In their narratives, a clear boundary separates an "inside" – where the assessment was self-evident and their specific skills, acquired over the course of their careers, were valorized – from an "outside" where skills are not well appreciated and valorized. Employees in this class have all experienced a hierarchical and salary progression in their careers and have reached management positions. Their narratives, always chronological, retrace this progression by identifying a start of their career (the end of their initial training) and an end (the dismissal that takes them out of their professional environment). This break is all the more difficult to live with, as the job was much appreciated. The interviewees describe this moment of their career as particularly painful. Most of the time, the disruption is due to the closure of the company (decentralization or bankruptcy). The economic layoff then produced a brutal dequalification, a rupture in the dynamic of valorization.

The career paths in class 6 refer to *internal labor markets* (ILM, primary segment) as defined by Peter Doeringer and Michael Piore (1971).

An ILM may be said to exist when an employer regularly fills certain vacancies by upgrading or transferring existing staff, confining recruitment from outside to a limited number of entry points. (Eyraud et al. 1990, 502)

ILM are characterized by internal mobility between different jobs within the company, by the existence of specific qualifications that are not easily transferable outside a particular sector of activity, by in-house training spread out over the course of a career and by the role of seniority in the promotion of employees, particularly with regard to remuneration (seniority-based pay). Not all experiences of job stability, however, are similar to careers in ILM, as we have seen with the typical career paths of class 5, which are stable but without progress in qualification. In the opposite, the employees on ILM have benefited from a dynamic of positive evaluations, so that we can talk about a real career evolution for them.

At the end, on these two segments of the labor market, there is an increase in qualifications as the career progresses and dynamics of valorizations are observed. Competencies are carried by diplomas and certifications (acquired in initial or vocational training) and especially by peers (professional networks); skills are *distributed*. Critical moments are horizontal mobility (from one company to another) in OLMs and a vertical mobility from one position to another within the company in ILMs. Major intermediaries are colleagues, clients, and small bosses. Major conventions are the *network* and *industrial* conventions for ILMs and *network-reputation* for OLMs. Following a career break-down, all these employees (whether they come from an OLM or an ILM) experience the same difficulties. Apart from the psychological impact of the break, the main problem is that the very specific qualifications acquired during their long working

experiences are not easily valuable outside the company or sector of activity or profession.

4.3 Two "Atypical" Pathways at the Frontiers of Work, Unemployment, and Inactivity

From the textual analysis, two classes of residual vocabulary emerge, grouping together elements of discourses that do not seem directly related to professional activity, but rather to other social dimensions of life (origin, family, friends, leisure, etc., see above). However, as in the previous classes, career paths that are particularly representative of these two classes can be inventoried and compared. Two other typical career paths are thus identified, which *a priori* have no reason to be grouped together, except that they are each located at the frontiers of work and off-work.

The people most representative of class 2 are mainly women, having experienced long periods of professional inactivity when raising their children, as in the case of Nadine's path (see Box 5).

Box 5: Nadine, 45, North of France: The Difficult Conciliation of Work and Family Life

After a sewing CAP, Nadine entered a garment factory as an assembly-line worker. She remained there for ten years, until the company encountered financial difficulties leading to its closure. She then took a seven-year parental leave to raise her four children. After a divorce, she was forced to find a job while caring for her children. She then worked three years part-time taking care for the elderly, and is now a full-time domestic worker: she takes care of the four children in another family (and of meals, housework, etc.). She is satisfied with her new job because she no longer works part time, but she would have liked to have found a different job from what she does when going back home (where she takes care of her own children).

In many cases, women of this class have not completely chosen to stop working at a stage of their life: their low skills make the jobs they could find unprofitable because it would be more expensive for them to have their children looked after than not working. Some employers even encouraged them to stop, as Maryse, who worked as a cashier in a hypermarket: when she returned from two years of unpaid leave, she was pushed out. They are often forced to return to work because of financial difficulties following for instance a divorce. But their main obstacle to returning to work is their distance from the labor market. These women have indeed developed skills in areas – the household sphere, sometimes the volunteering – which is not recognized on the labor market, except in the personal services sector, where they are generally integrated. But

they are then victims of the very precarious nature of this type of jobs (part-time, etc.). In the end, these trajectories appear to be similar in their characteristics to those of the secondary markets presented above. They are only distinguished by an even greater distance from employment and the blurred boundaries between activity and inactivity.

The interviews representative of class 3 are distinguished by very specific professional backgrounds and a very particular relationship to work. As in Patrick's itinerary (see Box 6), these people held many small jobs, before working in an artistic activity (music, theatre, etc.) that they liked. As this work environment is professionally very risky, these interviewees experienced real financial difficulties, frequent periods of unemployment and returns to "jobs that pay the rent." However, for nothing in the world would they want to leave this environment for a "normal" job. These trajectories have certain characteristics that bring them close to the occupational labor markets described above, including the role of reputation. Indeed, in this professional environment, individuals circulate in groups; the reputation is not individual, rather collective, and specific to a group of individuals who circulate together from job to job, on the model of the theatre troupe (see Marchal and Remillon 2012). But these artistic career paths are distinguished from those of the workers on the OLMs by some blurry boundaries between employment, unemployment, and leisure.¹⁰

Box 6: Patrick, 43 Years Old, Greater Paris: The Risky Choice of an Artistic Career

After graduating from high school, Patrick began a first period of his life in Rennes with a very bumpy career path, working in small and diverse jobs: he worked in bars, as a receptionist in a hotel, etc. He was looking for a path of life, which caused a lot of worry for his parents who tried to push him towards a "real" job. He was already very attracted by artistic activities and undertook training courses in drama, music, and fine arts (he obtained a master's degree in plastic arts). He moved to Paris and joined a recruitment company where he trained on the job as a model maker until his dismissal. He then started a new theatre training. Since then he has been working in this field but without actually earning a living. He is receiving unemployment social benefits and does not yet have enough hours to obtain intermittent status.¹¹ He is nevertheless satisfied that he has gone to the end of his passion.

¹⁰ It is notable that in this career class, not only careers in the artistic world can be found, but also professions such as body care (aesthetics or luxury hairdressing) that value the same qualities (the beauty, creativity, and competence of the group of professionals used to working together).

¹¹ The status of intermittent workers concerns workers in the entertainment industry without steady employment. They have access to a specific compensation scheme for the periods

Although they are of very different natures, the lexical analysis highlights the connection between these two professional career paths and classes because they are both situated at the frontier of work, unemployment, and inactivity. In both cases, the individuals concerned have developed experience in other areas of life (artistic world, domestic sphere). The skills they developed in these areas and which are valorized there (the “emotional labor”¹² in one case, the inspiration and creativity in the other) are not well-recognized and valorized on the “classical” labor market. This creates real difficulties when these people seek (or are forced to) return to “classic” jobs. Their experience testifies to the strong discontinuities existing between the different spheres of life and illustrates the fact that the transitions between these different worlds are extremely difficult, little framed. These people are perceived as more remote from employment than the former, that’s why they have little access to “classic” intermediaries (ANPE, temporary employment agency) who require diplomas or at least consequent experience. The major quality conventions in these two worlds are the *domestic* one in one case and the *inspired* one in the second.

5. Discussion

5.1 “Critical” Transitions as Tensions between Different Conventions and Work Identities

The analysis of life narratives reveals a sequence of “tests,” which valorize or devalorize the individuals. One can speak of (positive) “test pathways” when each one gives rise to an evaluation at the end of which the individual acquires a certain level of proven quality, which gives the possibility to access other more qualifying tests (Martin 2005). These “test pathways” take place according to different temporalities depending on the labor worlds: ascending courses with abrupt turning point or flatter temporalities.

A certain irreversibility is built up over the course of the trajectories: the “tests” that are passed gradually reduce the range of the possible choices. Over the course of the “tests,” an identity is forged in a professional world that expresses itself in a particular way of “saying the work” that is found in textual analysis. This question is at the heart of the seminal research on segmentation, and in particular in that of Piore for whom dualism designates both differentiat-

they don’t work, provided they have reached a certain number of paid working hours in this sector.

¹² See Hochschild (2017 [1983]).

ed job qualities and distinct work identities from one segment of the labor market to another, so that the standard rationality model of the neoclassic theory seems insufficient to account for these differences:

What is important about the discontinuities we perceive is that they distinguish labor market segments which are qualitatively different. The qualitative differences are such that both the behavioural characteristics of the principal actors (workers and managers) and the nature of human experience vary from one segment to another [...]. Because the nature of experience is different, well-being of workers in one stratum is fundamentally incommensurate with that of workers in another and cannot be expressed by a single monetary scale. (Berger and Piore 1980, 16-7)

Piore (1983) emphasizes that these processes segmenting the workforce around different work identities (parallel to job segmentation) are primarily social. They are the result of differences in training, education about how individuals learn and imagine the work they do.

We have seen that the “critical moments” in a trajectory are often caused by tensions between different valuation registers and identities: tensions between *domestic* and *market* valuation (when a large group takes over a family business), or tensions between *internal* and *external* valuation for former employees of ILM who are suddenly projected onto the external labor market, etc. It would not make much sense to say that former employees in ILM find themselves unemployed because of their sudden loss of productivity. In reality, their difficulties stem from the fact that the criteria for evaluating on the labor market, the “employability judgments” to which they are subjected when looking for a job, are far removed from the criteria by which they were valued until now. If transitions are so difficult from one world to another, it is because each convention builds a form of product quality and qualification of people (Diaz-Bone and Thévenot 2010) – also the person who has made the majority of his or her career in a quality convention is marked by this qualification and has forged one specific work-identity. The turning points are very hard to live because they touch on this work-identity. Change is even more destructive when it contaminates different spheres of life, i.e., other dimensions of the social identity. For example, dismissal leading to family tensions. However, not all trajectories are characterized by a single critical transition. On the first segment identified, it is the repetition of tests that causes exclusion, the absence of valorization dynamics.

5.2 Reduction of the Plurality of Conventions as Source of Exclusion: Changes in Hiring Practices

There is another source of exclusion in the narratives that is linked to the general dynamics of conventions. In Marchal and Remillon (2012) we have shown the plurality of the job-search procedures, in combination with the plurality of the valorization spaces described above. Individuals are enrolled in different

“worlds” (on different segments of the labor market). Their skills are only really readable in this valuation area, which corresponds to specific definitions of quality and specific quality assessment tools. For each type of labor market, specific job-search procedures are adapted.

However, the narratives describe a trend towards the standardization of hiring methods, in the sense of growing formalization and of increasing at-a-distance selection. The typical recruitment methods in France and their evolution over time have been well described by conventionalist research on recruitment: Marchal and Torny (2003), in looking at the evolution of French job ads since the 1960s, have pointed out the increase in the number of required criteria cited and specially the criteria for experience and level of education. Marchal and Rieucan (2006) showed also that French job advertisements contain many very detailed required criteria and that the at-a-distance pre-selection appears particularly common, depriving the candidate of any negotiation power in the hiring process. British job advertisements, in contrast, do not give a detailed profile and leave room for face-to-face meeting and “emergent” skills, attributing less importance to pre-selections. These hiring practices have strong impacts on the applicants. Rieucan (2015) described a change in the hiring channels used by a food-retail chain that implemented online recruitment practices instead of the classic ones used before (walk-in-application, word-of-mouth, and in-store adverts). She showed that a centralized and at-a-distance recruitment process decreases unfair face-to-face discrimination in selection but, at the same time, introduces indirect discrimination. For Marchal, Mellet and Rieucan (2007), the Internet contributes to increase requirements, standardization, and quantification of the criteria in job adverts; people who are not computer literate and who have not the required standards are not able to apply and there is no room to avoid the rules and the tools.

These new recruitment models are particularly disadvantageous for older and low-skilled people: jobs that did not previously require special qualifications now require a certain level of education and/or of experience. For example, one interviewee who only held a *certificat d'études*¹³ told us that from now on, for a position as an office clerk, a two-years higher education minimum (*bac+2*)¹⁴ is required. The situation is the same for another former saleswoman, who is found competing with bachelor's degree holders (*bac+3*). They feel that they “no longer fit the job-advertisements,” nor the criteria that are valorized on the labor market, and regret classic recruitment practices when they could show their skills in being on trial, without going through formal and at-a-

¹³ The *certificat d'études* was the certificate formerly obtained by pupils at the end of primary school.

¹⁴ *Bac+2* and *Bac+3* mean 2 or 3 years of studies after the bachelor's degree (le “*bac*” for *baccalauréat*).

distance selections. Indeed, for any job, the examination of resume and cover letters has become an approach systematically taken by French employers, to the detriment of people with poor literacy and writing skills. The valorization of the “staging of oneself,” of “the worker’s personality traits” rather than the evaluation of the know-how in real working situations also penalizes them, as one interviewee, mason and machine operator, who criticized the way in which certain recruitment processes are now carried out in his sector of activity:

Last time I had a job-interview [...] we’re starting to talk [...] he said ‘What do you like to do in life?’ [...] I said to him: ‘But, excuse me, what exactly are you looking for? [...] because, if you are looking for bricklayers, look at my know-how, send me to your building site, if the site manager don’t like me, you say goodbye to me... and then it stops there. And there is no need to tell me: do you like music, do you like flowers...’

These changes in recruitment methods and their standardization in the sense of increasing formalization seem particularly unsuitable for the functioning of most of the labor markets that we have identified above: secondary markets where the diversity of experience can hardly be summarized in a CV, professional markets where one can only prove one’s competence through work and reputation, etc.

As Eymard-Duvernay (2012, 28) explained: these new conventions in recruitment are partly linked to the quantitative imbalances between supply and demand for labor, which lead to greater selection, but they also have a deeper structural dimension: an over-selection system can continue even though the economic situation has changed (because the conventions are implanted in tools, objects, and formats that have a certain inertia) and can paradoxically provoke new quantitative imbalances, even in a context of massive unemployment (cf. employers’ recurrent rhetoric about labor shortages in low-skilled sectors). In convention theory, these are called “bad conventions” (Larquier and Batifoulier 2005; Larquier 2016).

The difficulties encountered by the jobseekers surveyed, and in particular the least qualified and oldest among them, thus relate to the reduction of a plural space of valorization (the different labor quality conventions and the corresponding recruitment methods) to a single one of them, on the model of the hiring practices of the managerial staff. Judgement criteria and tools that are foreign to what is important to assess threaten the plurality of conventions, which generates exclusion. The test of the job-search can thus be described as “critical” in that it shows moments of extreme discontinuity and difficulties in translating between different valuation principles. However, some of the experiences of older unemployed people encountered go beyond a discontinuity between different valuation principles. Competencies are no longer assessed at all when computer search engines are used, that automatically eliminate candi-

dates who do not meet the required criteria (notably age or diploma criteria). One can then speak of “denial of evaluation”:

There is a denial of evaluation when the judgment criteria applied to the action ignore the plurality of the dimensions that constitute it qualitatively; when the one who evaluate or the one who is evaluated, or both, refuse to venture into a process that is uncertain as to its outcome [...]; when the judgment overlooks relevant dimensions of the assessed experience and goes so far as to emancipate itself from any test of reality. (Périlleux 2005, 121; my translation)

This concept can be compared with Axel Honneth’s concept of “denial of recognition” (2005).

If a good (or work) is presented in a format that is not compatible with the convention applicable to the situation, it is not taken into account. This is a more drastic devalorization than a drop in value: the good (or work) is outside the calculation space. (Eymard-Duvernay 2012, 14)

The last two identified pathways can be considered in this way, as the developed (care or artistic) qualities are not recognized on the labor market.

The concept of “recognition” of Honneth is very useful here: before knowing, either to calculate, it is necessary to recognize, or to admit belonging to a political collective, i.e., to a common space of values and justice under construction. “Reification” is the forgetting of this prerequisite for “recognition.” (Eymard-Duvernay 2012, 14; my translation)

What constitutes an injustice in the eyes of older unemployed interviewees is not so much to be misclassified, poorly evaluated, as to no longer be evaluated at all, to be “invisible.”

Changing these hiring practices is not so easy: making CVs anonymous is not enough to combat exclusion and discrimination. On the contrary, Marchal (2013) has shown that with anonymous resumes, recruiters are “lost in interpretation” because they cannot anymore consider the context of particular biographies. Removing all these bases for judgement add a source of uncertainty in the hiring process. Some back-to-work programs and innovative intermediaries try, on the contrary, to develop an interventionist approach that maintains a diversity in hiring-channels and that fights against the over-selection by seeking to change employers’ assessment and recruitment practices in order to be more adapted to evaluate the key requirements in low-skilled jobs and to thus help vulnerable candidates who are always rejected. That’s the case of the IOD method (Intervention on Offer and Demand, see Salognon 2007; Remillon 2009a).

6. Conclusion

In this article, I have proposed a conventionalist analysis of the sequence of events in careers to perceive the dynamics of valorization and devalorization. It allows to account for the process of exclusion from the labor market and makes it possible to perceive more macro dynamic changes in conventions. I have used mixed methods to analyze the working life histories of 60 interviewees. The pragmatist approach of the ALCESTE software is particularly well suited to conventional analysis. Quantitative analysis allows in fact to distinguish lexical registers that are the trace of different “labor worlds” and conventional valorization spaces, because these spaces of valorization are characterized by work-identities, tests, and evaluation tools that express themselves in different vocabularies, which are spotted by the textual analysis. But to identify the major events and intermediaries in each space and, above all, the cumulative dynamics of the tests, qualitative analysis is essential. Mixed methods are therefore very appropriate for conventional analysis; they share the same pragmatic perspective.

I have highlighted 6 typical pathways on the labor market, referring to pathways in different valorization areas. The experience of unemployment differs from one world to another and the critical tests also differ. Of course, firms are a central actor because the major events take place within or at the entrance to the firm, employers have the “power of valorization.” The analysis shows that the critical moments in unemployment trajectories often stem from a tension between different valuation registers. However, some experiences, notably in job search, go beyond a discontinuity between different valuation principles. There is sometimes “denial of evaluation” and “denial of recognition” when there is a reduction of the plurality of the recruitment conventions to a single convention. Combating the “unemployment of exclusion” thus implies better framing transitions, creating bridges between the different areas of valuation, with the help of “interprets” – intermediaries on the labor market have there a great role to play with interventionist and not adaptive approaches in order to make the recruitment practices change. It also implies to build some dynamics of valorization where they do not exist in particular on the secondary labor markets (the non-organized markets) – here the training undoubtedly has a great role to play. Finally yet importantly, it is essential to guaranty the plurality of values through a plurality of recruitment channels. In a word, to establish more democracy (criticism, debate) in the firms and on the labor market. The challenge is not only to change the waiting list for jobs. Those whose qualities are denied are definitively excluded from the labor market leading to a shrinking of the labor market, which is neither fair nor economically rational.

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