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THE TERRITORIES OF ROAD FREIGHT TRANSPORT COMPANIES

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Abstract

French road freight transport firms are variously affected by the current crisis in the sector. It is the SMEs which are often the hardest hit by changes which force them to find new ways of working in order to cope with socioeconomic and financial pressures. To discover more about and better understand such companies and the way they have behaved in a variety of social and industrial territories we have examined a transport undertaking in the south of France over a period of approximately twenty years by combining the approaches of three different disciplines: social anthropology, geography and socioeconomics. This piece of exploratory research has revealed the large number of ways in which transport companies are interlinked with their environment and applies a new methodological approach.

INTRODUCTION

The authors of this paper are from different disciplines, and have set out to shed light on the factors which underlie the creation and development of road freight transport firms by combining three complementary approaches to the interrelationships between companies and the territories in which they operate. The basis for the paper is provided by various research projects conducted at INRETS and the LET (subsequently continued at the CNR). Its starting hypothesis is that the bonds between road freight companies and the territory within which they operate, i.e. the nature, diversity, strength and age of the links which exist between them and their social, professional and economic environment, have an important bearing on the conditions under which such firms are set up and, more specifically, play a decisive role in their future.

Through a detailed account of the history of a small road freight transport company, the authors have identified, described and analyzed various categories, types and facilitating mechanisms of exchange which determine the company's relationship with its territory and the spatial location of its activities. The authors show the stages, upheavals and changes which punctuate this process and the accumulation processes which takes place over time (accumulation of equipment, capital, know-how, professional statutes, networks of relationships, etc.). The approach is not restricted to the socioprofessional and economic processes which operate between actors in the transport sector (for example partners, large haulage companies, other carriers, service providers, company staff, unions and professional bodies) or relationships with players in the production sector (customers) and the public sector (local government, monitoring bodies, training organizations, etc.) but attempts also to establish links between these different actors and see them in the context of sociocultural networks and links, and of the value systems and identity systems within which the company also operates, while revealing and attempting to analyze the complex interrelationships between these different aspects which most research considers separately.

Without wishing to deny the importance of macrostructural factors such as transport policies, the economic situation, regulations and major infrastructures, the authors have undertaken an empirical study which pays particular attention to the reasoning of individual players in the road freight transport sector, to the types and styles of interactions which they create with their sociopolitical and spatial environment and the changes which these interactions undergo. In our approach the concept of "territory" is a reference to an ongoing spatial and temporal process of construction and appropriation which determines the course which the company will take. Although this process takes place in space, it is not simply the sum of the company's spatial relationships with its environment at a given instant: it is over time and with reference to broader collective processes that these spatial relationships have a meaning and constitute what we define as a firm's "territory". For our purposes the spatial positioning of these interactions are only of interest when socioeconomic and identity dynamics are also considered.

Of the many different dimensions which can be used to analyze the territorial approach of a road freight transport company, we have given particular weight to the company's dependence or independence with respect to the different entities it deals with. While we shall see that there is a link between the independence of the company and its appropriation or control of space, the opposite does not hold true: even a highly dependent company has inter-relationships which position it within its territory, even if these are very limited and restricted and given little importance.

The approach we have applied here to a transport company has methodological implications: the paper shows the number of aspects (in terms of activities, networks, interactions, spatial position, representations of values and value systems, company organization, socioeconomic relationships, etc.) which need to be explored and linked in order to identify the processes which determine company/territory interactions. This research deserves to be extended subsequently to cover several actors in their local contexts with reference to the specific dynamics of production and transport as well as local attitudes concerning identity.

In this initial study, we have considered the case of a small road freight transport company in the Rhône-Alpes region of France, which we shall refer to as R.'s company (R. being the initial of its owner and founder). At the present time this company possesses four vehicles (tractors and semitrailers), employs three full-time drivers and has an annual turnover of 2.5 million French francs. R.'s company is a small haulage company, which is a particularly important category in this sector: in 1996, 77% of French road freight companies had less than six employees (S.E.S., 1998). In addition, as during its history this company has had a number of different statuses, we shall be able to illustrate and analyze other professional and economic configurations.

We have broken down the history of this company into three main stages: a long phase of dependence (as an employee and then an owner driver from 1973 to 1992), a crisis as a result of the bankruptcy of the large haulage company which provided it with work (1992 - 1993) and entry into a phase of independence and development in 1993. The paper presents chronologically the changes affecting R. and his company during each of these stages. A number of different approaches are used to analyze their history:

- spatial (R.'s zone of operation as an employee, as an owner driver and as transport company manager),
- economic (interrelationships between clients and carriers, relationships of dependence),
- social anthropological (representation systems which underlie R.'s decisions and relationships which affect the changing territorial position of the company).

ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE AND SOCIO-TERRITORIAL LEARNING

During the whole period covered, R. has lived in the same small town near where he was born in the south of France 100 km from Lyon, which is also where his company is based.

Economic dependence

One company is considered to be dependent on another when its relationship with it is essential, i.e. difficult to replace and/or accounting for a high percentage of its turnover. Non-substitutability is assessed on the basis of the specific nature of the relationship (specific nature of assets such as a special vehicle for carrying hazardous materials, and specific organizational features) and the possibilities of gaining access to the market, which depend in part on the number of competitors. Substitutability is greater when the relationship is not specific and access to the market is good (Grand, 1997).

From 1976 to 1985, in spite of his apparent legal independence, R.'s position was close to that of an employee, depending on a single haulage company both economically and professionally. There was no way he could hope to reduce gradually the percentage of his turnover provided by this company as he was bound by an exclusive contract. The haulage company which employed him at this time, which was based to the north of Paris, was in the opposite position. It had a large number of subcontractors and was certain of being able to find new subcontractors when needed, as no specialized equipment was required. The

haulage company was therefore able to impose difficult conditions on subcontractors who were obliged to accept them.

Employee, partner, tractor owner, subcontractor: a chronology and different facets of a dependence

R. became a professional driver in 1973, working as a driver in a haulage company near his home, and making journeys between France and Italy.

From 1976 to 1985 he worked as a self-employed driver for a large haulage company to the north of Paris which was specialized in bulk transport. At this time R. had no professional qualification and worked solely for this company.

R.'s company was created genuinely in 1985, as a limited company. Its first contract was with a flower supplier in Lyon which offered R. the opportunity to do some of its transport work. On the strength of this, R. purchased a tractor. His working pattern was as follows: at the beginning of the week he delivered house plants to the north of France. He then went to load up with other flowers in the wholesale markets near Gand (Belgium) or to the south of Amsterdam (Netherlands) and then took these down to Lyon. If there was still enough time left in the week he would go the south of France to supply other customers and returned to Lyon, stopping occasionally in Nice to reload in the flower supplier's glasshouses there. From 1986, in order to make up for the reduction in freight from the flower supplier, R. signed a contract with a company based in the port of Lyon and began to take containers to the port of Marseille. From Marseille, he brought back other containers to the port of Lyon when he went to the flower supplier at the beginning of the week.

In 1986, just one year after the limited company was set up, R. stopped working for the flower supplier and obtained a new contract working for a large haulage company near his home. He very soon began to work exclusively as a subcontractor for this company. In 1992, R.'s son joined his company as a driver, also working for the same client. R. purchased a semitrailer, and then another for his son. Although the company's main activity involved driving to Italy, it also had destinations in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. The loads for Italy from the Rhône-Alpes region often included wool (for making pullovers in the workshops of Reggio-Emilia) and polyester fibre (for making the hulls of boats in the shipyards of Genova and Livorno), but also parts for refineries in Sicily. On the return journey R. carried a wide variety of goods (steel, automobile parts, household electrical appliances, indoor or garden furniture, light fittings, etc.), for distribution throughout France.

When R.'s company was set up in 1985 it still seems to have been dependent on the company which provided it with work, the flower supplier from the Lyon region. Although the relationship was now between two companies rather than between an employer and an employee or semi-employee, its nature remained fundamentally hierarchical. Being unable to gain access to the freight directly, R.'s company was compelled to go through this intermediary in order to work and depended on it for all its turnover initially and a large proportion later on. Reaching break-even depended entirely on this customer (Glais, 1994). Furthermore, R.'s company was unable to exploit its assets as these were non-specialized (his semitrailer was unable to transport a specific type of product for which only a small number of carriers could tender) and confronted by a large number of competitors in the market (because access to the profession is so easy). The flower supplier was even more necessary to his company as it only had one tractor. However, the flower supplier was in a diametrically opposite position because of its ability to gain access to freight and its large number of potential collaborators.

This type of organization of activities between contracting partners is rather similar to that described in the work of M. Aoki (1986) on the company J. and its semi-integrated network of subcontractors. For the first time, R. nevertheless attempted to reduce his dependence on his principal client by approaching a company based in the port of Le Havre. This change was

only possible because the flower supplier had not tried to impose too many restrictions, such as an exclusivity stipulation for example, on R.

From 1986, R. considered that the conditions imposed on him by the road haulage company near his home were more difficult than during the previous period. R.'s new position was remarkably similar to his position with the Paris company from 1976 to 1985, namely an exclusive agreement, rounds lasting several days, long distances (this time on a European scale), very long driving hours, etc. The subcontractor was dependent all the time on an independent company which provided him with work. The subcontractor was paid separately for each trip, and often unaware beforehand how much he would receive for his work and also frequently had to wait more than sixty days for payment. Although he was able to refuse, if he did the company providing him with work would penalize him by refusing to reload his lorry for several days.

A very restricted space

During this twenty year period of high economic dependence (from 1973 to 1993), R. covered large distances, driving back and forth throughout France and Europe. Although he was already a full-time driver, he became a transport professional on the roads of Europe. The distances he drove varied during this period. Between 1973 and 1976 his journeys were just to Italy, after which he began to drive around France. His experience of northern Europe began in 1985. From 1986 he once more started to make frequent trips to Italy, while continuing to drive regularly to Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands.

Geographically, R.'s work has tended to be localized along one of two main axes, depending on different periods of his activity. The first - south-north - covers the whole of France (in particular the northern part, but also includes trips from the south of France to the Lyon region) and to some extent the north of Europe. The second - east-west - covers the Rhône-Alpes region and the whole of Italy. These axes are related to the major flows of goods in the Rhône-Alpes region: north-south on the one hand, particularly in the Rhône valley, from the Paris region towards the south of France, and transversally either within the region itself or with Italy, usually via the alpine valleys and the three main tunnels (Fréjus, Grand Saint-Bernard and Mont-Blanc).

In this first long phase of his career, the Italian axis already held an important position in R's activities. R.'s journeys to Italy were his only work between 1973 and 1976, stopped entirely between 1976 and 1985, began again to some extent between 1985 and 1986 and then became dominant (80% of all trips) between 1986 and 1992. The east-west axis, in the same way as the north-south axis, was an expression of R's dependence at the time. Following his instructions he drove all over the Italian peninsula, often going as far as Sicily. Thus the drive from the north to the south of Italy can be seen as a north-south journey.

For each of these freight access configurations the space within which activities took place was defined, leaving no room for driver initiative. R.'s dependence on a single employer or provider of work was total as he had no control as regards organizing his journeys or choosing loading and unloading locations. He drove his lorry from one place to another without being able to modify his destinations in any way. Between 1975 and 1985 in France, as between 1986 and 1992 in Europe, during the two longest periods for which he was working for a single customer, R. and his lorry were moved in accordance with a plan fixed elsewhere by persons other than himself: what matters to the customer was for the goods to be delivered in time and the lorry reloaded as quickly as possible in order to leave for another destination. Between 1973 and 1975 (when he was an employee), and between 1985 and 1986 (when he became an owner driver) during which periods his access to freight was different from during the other two periods, his pattern of journeys remained the same. It was only during the phase immediately after setting up his firm (between 1985 and 1986) that R. tried to extend the

area he worked in to Provence in order to escape as far as he could from the spatial constraint imposed on him.

Economic dependence was coupled with commercial dependence, the spatial nature of which R.'s case illustrates perfectly. Between 1975 and 1992 the space within which he worked was entirely decided by his employer or the company who provided him with work. In one respect the space in which R. operated at this time was poorly used: he failed to exploit his potential resources - in terms of the contacts he inevitably made, encounters with other companies providing haulage work, etc. More than ever, during this period, it would be inaccurate to refer to the space in which he worked as his territory. However, although very real, this dependence was qualified by other mechanisms.

Locations and links: learning about territory

1973

Even before he became a driver in 1973, R. already belonged to the world of transport, working as a mechanic in a local garage where he not only acquired skills which were soon to be of great value to him but also came into contact with locally-based employed drivers and owner drivers. It was one of these who told him that a local haulage company was taking on drivers: garages (like service stations and motorway rest areas) are not just functional areas which provide a service but also meeting places where social contacts are formed, information is exchanged, transactions are negotiated and learning of all kinds takes place.

R. seized this opportunity immediately and took up employment as a driver. He explains his decision on the grounds of several distinct types of motivations and factors, and these also shed light on his future career and decisions. Firstly, his love of lorries, which he traces back to his childhood: his father worked at one time for a wine merchant and R. occasionally accompanied him on his rounds in the vineyards of Provence. Next, there was the desire to work "*independently*", which is an extension of the first reason as it is essentially based on his image of lorry driving: even when working as an employee or as a subcontractor, R. thought of lorry driving as offering more independence than factory work which he associated with working to the clock, repetitive rhythms of production and a lack of opportunities for initiative.

1976-1985

In 1976, it was again one of his colleagues, from the same region, who told R. about the possibility of being taken on by the haulage company to the north of Paris. As we have already seen, legally and economically and as regards working conditions this job offered very little freedom. However, according to R.'s evaluation criteria, it represented a significant improvement in status. In his opinion, the fact that his gross salary was three times higher than before amply compensated for the working hours. Furthermore, the possibility of owning his own vehicle and the guarantee of regular loads "*with no worries*", was perceived as an increase in freedom, if not a further step towards the status of self-employed owner driver which, in any case, R. was not considering yet. R. described himself at this time as a "*better category of driver*", "*almost self-employed*". Lastly, very pleasant contacts with the company manager (a "*competent*", "*honest*" and "*sincere*" person) also added to his enthusiasm for his new status, as did the relationships within the company (full company meetings twice a year, contacts with other drivers, opportunities for discussion and expressing one's opinion about working conditions and customer relations, "*human contacts*"). As counter examples, R. gave the names of large companies in the area where "*the workforce are just numbers*", [... and] *often the Managing Director does not know half the drivers*".

1985-1986

Although it owed much to his previous experience, setting up the limited company in 1985 was less the result of a long term strategy than the combined effects of a number of constraints, opportunities and various types of aspirations, predispositions and resources which stimulated interactions between R. and the many components in his socio-territorial environment. It became a legal obligation for those providing services to the company for which R. worked to have a professional qualification. This R. could not obtain, as he was unwilling "*to go back to school*". At this time through his family he got the contract with the Lyon flower supplier, and very soon decided to set up a limited company with the help of a colleague in his region who had a professional qualification. The main driving forces of R.'s gradual transition towards the status of businessman were the constantly restated desire for independence, the mobilization of networks of family members and friends, and confidence.

In terms of the number of driving hours his new status offered little improvement on the previous one and his income probably fell. But now it was R. who, with help from his wife, "*did everything*". As he now had his own vehicle he felt he had become "*really independent*". This new status, and the fact that he found it interesting to transport flowers, to discover the bustle of the Dutch wholesale markets, to help out his employer in the glasshouses, to share a meal with him "*like in a family*" also counterbalanced the material constraints. Thus, depending on the circumstances, social links can constitute a resource (in this case finding a new job and acquiring the status of businessman) or help to compensate for - and therefore maintain - a situation of economic dependence. In any case, they did not withstand the pressure of competition very long: faced with a reduction in activity, the flower supplier gave the freight to the second owner driver who was cheaper than R. Consequently, R. had less work, as the freight he carried for a company in Le Havre did not make up for his lost income.

1986-1992

Some colleagues at a service station told him about opportunities to work for a major haulage company in the region. After a few journeys which resulted from telephone contacts and an interview with one of the managers of the company, a deal was struck, at least verbally. In this case too a whole set of material and symbolic benefits compensated for R.'s economically dependent status and allowed it to continue. In this context, the client company manager's image was decisive: R. described him as being very active and competent, but in addition generous, honest and straightforward. This image played an important role in determining R.'s perception of the company (good relationships between staff, in particular between the operators - "*those in charge of chartering*" - and the drivers or subcontractors) and its relationship with service providers ("*helpful and ready to repair a broken down vehicle*", without demanding payment, "*reliable*", "*good payers*", etc.). These representations and ties linking R. to the company which gave him work were always constructed with reference to other actors, in particular certain large haulage companies operating in the area whose image was extremely negative (management of staff, market conquest strategies which threatened the local SME fabric, etc.). The territory, in this case as a structured and ranked set of actors, economic, social and symbolic interactions, gave meaning to and made a direct contribution to the relationship between R. and his successive employees, the companies providing him with work and those whose goods he carried. Once again the corollaries of this system of inter-relationships (which was further strengthened in 1991 when R. chartered another lorry to be driven by his son and by the purchase of a second semitrailer) were "*an absence of worries*" i.e. no need to look for customers or freight, little management work, no journeys to organize, etc.

In addition to this situation of dependence a number of changes were taking place, some gradual and not very visible, others more sudden and dramatic. These were to lead R. to alter profoundly his company's organization and modify its relationship with the territory. In 1988 R. finally obtained a professional qualification: he was able to avoid what he considered to be

excessively time-consuming training by stressing that he had managed a company for three years. While constantly covering the roads of France and Europe (in particularly of Italy) R. continued his professional apprenticeship, acquired more of the wide range of practical skills required to work as a driver and manage a company, even a very dependent one. He also assimilated the behavioural and cultural codes which ease the transition to technically different types of work and different countries. Finally, he enriched his networks of ties in his native region, France and abroad. R.'s ties were soon supplemented by his son's, who had become a qualified lorry driver in the south of France. The contacts and ties which his son formed through travel and professional experience combined with those which were established during his years of apprenticeship. In addition, new institutions, in particular training institutions, had entered the local environment of companies and modified their future.

DURING THE CRISIS

Between 1992 and 1993, following the bankruptcy of the haulage company he worked for, R.'s company found survival extremely difficult and debts of almost 300,000 francs mounted up. These debts, which represent about three months turnover for a small company, also generated three months of unpaid work, as any work the company did was paid a minimum of 60 days after it was done and on the 20th of the month. During this period the firm nevertheless continued to pay its fuel and vehicle maintenance bills - services not provided by the haulage company. In spite of this situation, R.'s firm continued to work for this company and as he was paid by weekly cheques from the receiver was able to support his family, pay his debts and avoid bankruptcy until he found new customers.

This unexpected bankruptcy was to bring about a large number of sudden changes. Spatially, it does not seem at first view to have had important repercussions as for several months R. and his son continued their journeys to Italy and back. It did, however, have a profound significance: after having driven for ten years for a haulage company based in the north of France whose head offices he had never seen, R. had worked from 1986 - 1992 for a company based 50 km from his home whose manager and freight allocators he knew well. R.'s proximity in both spatial and relational terms with the large haulage company who gave him work was typical of a large number of owner drivers based in the Rhône valley who worked for this same company. However, neither in R.'s case nor in theirs did this proximity lead to any long-term guaranteed market. On the contrary, when this haulage company, who had monopolized R.'s time and spatial activities for years, went out of business, R. initially found it difficult to find other customers or loads locally, within a 50 km radius. R.'s difficulty in solving his problems at this time of crisis was a direct result of the immobility caused by his dependence on the haulage company which also inhibited any impulse to approach other customers, including those belonging to the bankrupt haulage company.

When any problem arose it was the last link in the system, the weakest, which suffered the most severe consequences, irrespective of whether it was a subcontractor whom the company providing work had known for a long time or a recent arrival. This period of uncertainty for R. lasted several months before he finally managed to find another source of work. Those of the bankrupt haulage company's subcontractors who were not able to do this are no longer in business.

Apart from its immediate economic impacts, this crisis acted as a catalyst for individual and collective professional identities. It made it very clear to R. that his position as a small carrier completely dependent on a single provider of work was extremely fragile. The crisis and the way in which it was dealt with (official receivership) completely altered his view of this company, whose charismatic manager had left a year before and which R. Felt had become like one of the large haulage companies described above, his rejection of which became even more extreme.

This crisis also had a mobilizing effect: an association was set up near Marseille on the initiative of a woman who ran a small haulage firm which worked as a subcontractor for the same large haulage company as R. Like many of other small haulage firms who faced difficulties as a result of this bankruptcy, R. joined this association, one of whose main aims was to change bankruptcy legislation so as to provide better protection for those providing transport services. By breaking down the isolation of the considerable number of small haulage firms who were affected, often dramatically, by the bankruptcy, this association helped R. realize that he belonged to a group, that of small haulage undertakings. Although this mobilization did not go very far, this was less because of the "individualism" of its members than their "weariness" in the face of objective constraints and the "injustices" arising from their legal and economic status, the silence of politicians at local and national level and the large gap between owner drivers and the professional bodies representing the road haulage industry.

PROGRESS TOWARDS TERRITORIAL AUTONOMY

New companies and markets

From 1993, R.'s company found a large market in the Rhône-Alpes region and finally stopped working for the large regional haulage company. At the time of writing the company has four employees, three of which are full-time drivers, with R. still driving occasionally. Since this date the company has been working directly for a manufacturer based near Avignon. Each week R. collects raw materials from various factories near his home and transports them to Italy (2 return journeys per week) where the end product is manufactured. Export work for this manufacturer accounts for more than 50% of R.'s turnover. R.'s destinations in Italy are mostly within the Milan - Turin - La Spezia - Bologna quadrilateral. Once back in France R. takes regular loads from 5 or 6 French companies, including the manufacturer in Marseille, carrying items varying from agricultural machinery to packaging. His destinations are generally in the Rhône-Alpes region, but also sometimes in Provence too - in which case R. subcontracts the work out to other carriers in the region. Occasionally R.'s company obtains additional contracts, for example transporting fodder from Rhône-Alpes or Spain to the Massif Central or Italy, or transporting equipment for the Pêchiney factory.

The progress towards autonomy, or social links as a productive resource

The major economic and identity changes which the 1992 - 1993 crisis provoked acted as a trigger and led R. to make the decisive step towards a very different kind of autonomy from that which previously he had demanded and experienced. However, on its own the bankruptcy of the large haulage company is not sufficient to explain the new directions his company has taken since 1993. Initially, as on other occasions, an opportunity had to be provided by a fellow carrier who put him in touch with his first direct customer, who is still his largest today. What was also required, above all, was the desire for independence, which has been one of R.'s constant characteristics and which had recently been accentuated by his circumstances. He took this opportunity immediately and began a gradual transformation of his company's organization and operation. It was finally with this new configuration of events and actors that all the know-how and social, professional and technical capital which R. had built up over the years became productive. Much more than in the past these became resources which he mobilized and made strategic use of. From being a "better category of driver", and a self-employed driver doing subcontracting work he became a businessman in the full sense of the term.

This new position was accompanied by some major changes in his relations with his environment. R. no longer worked as a driver and made long journeys, apart from occasional

trips to help out in an emergency. As he had become almost sedentary, R. devoted himself full time to business contacts with his customers, looking for freight, organizing movements, recruiting and managing drivers - activities which, however, entailed many more local journeys. Family involvement in the firm increased when, after taking a diploma in business and management, his daughter joined her elder brother (still working as a driver) in the company and helped R. with administrative tasks. R.'s wife still helped, although in a less formal way. R. found himself at the head of this, admittedly small, group and in a position where he had to take decisions, lead, impose penalties and deal with technical and human problems.

More systematically and to better effect than in the past, his family, social and professional networks began to be mobilized in order to find customers, discover information about freight or exchange services of various kinds (for example, loans of equipment, swapping freight, joint trips, vehicle repairs, short term freight storage). The formal structure of his network of relationships had barely changed, in particular the solidarities which linked him to other drivers were not new. However, the transition to operating directly was sufficient to change their nature (contacts became more frequent and more varied). Above all, the impact of these links on the future of the firm became much more important: commercial activity, which had previously been non-existent was now central to the company's operation and dynamism, and mainly stemmed from R.'s social resources and contacts.

Starting in 1993-94, the circle of senders for whom he worked grew. Even though one of them occupied a particularly important place in his activities, R.'s contacts with senders increased and diversified. As he describes them, his relations with these direct customers were very different from those which he had with the haulage companies he had worked for as an employee or subcontractor. Of course R. does mention the verbal nature of contracts and commitments, trust, the nature and quality of the relationships with commercial staff as contributing to the durability of the links with these new partners. However, he more clearly and more often emphasizes the service provided, the quality of the work performed (punctuality, regularity, availability, flexibility, reliability) when talking of the links and conserving them, and close relationships seem less decisive than was previously the case.

R.'s previously gained knowledge of the industrial fabric (location of firms, road access, organization and rhythm of production, identity of contacts within companies, etc.) became a powerful tool, not only for gaining freight but also organizing rounds and ensuring the quality of the services provided by his drivers and more generally his firm. Being "*local*" not only involves thorough geographical knowledge of the area but also being known to institutions. The council of his commune has put some land at his disposal for parking vehicles. After having checked his lorries and drivers on a few occasions, the Gendarmes now stop them less frequently because "*they soon realized which companies don't break the law*". He also hopes that his new status will act in his favour and allow him to obtain a loan from the banks (which are nevertheless increasingly "*reluctant*" to support small companies) so he can purchase new vehicles. In this way he would avoid being in debt to a company for which he works as he had been in the past and therefore gain a little more independence from his customers.

The re-conquest of a space

From 1993 R.'s company started to define for itself the space within which it worked and restrict its journeys to an area which includes the Rhône-Alpes region and the adjacent area of northern Italy - Piedmont, Lombardy, Liguria and Emilia-Romagna.

At the same date too the company started to transport forestry products to processing plants in the north of Italy for its principal client. It collected the raw materials from businesses located within a 50 km radius of R.'s headquarters, the nearest being 5 km away and the furthest being to the south of Lyon. The most valuable of these businesses to R. is one which loads his lorries

to go to Italy 2 or 3 times per week. R. desired this spatial concentration and negotiated it with the customer, who has sites all over France and could have offered him work covering a larger area. In Italy, the regions R. covered were more concentrated in the north than was the case during the previous period, his lorries making deliveries to an area between Milan, Turin, Bologna and La Spezia.

For the return journey, R.'s firm selects freight in the same way it has since 1993. The lorries usually take on a new load of finished products for the French customers, although R. knows a number of Italian road haulage companies who could charter his lorries. The return loads are selected on the basis of their distance from the place of unloading, but also, and in particular, on the basis of their destination in France, priority being given to the Rhône-Alpes region. When return loads from Italy have destinations in the south of France, for example Provence or Languedoc, R. subcontracts them to two nearby owner drivers, after brief storage in a warehouse belonging to one of these. However, R.'s company refuses return freight to destinations north of Lyon.

Unlike what occurred in the previous phases, this spatial organization of freight flows seems quite intentional and strategic. The company has been reconquering a space with which it was already familiar, as R. had made frequent journeys between Italy and France in the past, the difference being that he was now taking his own organizational decisions. In this way, the management of the areas where R.'s company operates is part of the broader processes of territorial conquest and positioning which R. decided to undertake after the crisis. The operating space which R. has been attempting to create for his firm is even more strictly controlled than this, in that offers of freight are always dealt with in accordance with a clearly defined spatial strategy. When R. accepts contracts which are additional to his work with regular customers this operating space is barely if at all extended, and R.'s lorries do not have to enter too far into new areas. He does, for example, occasionally transport freight to the Massif Central or across the Rhône.

R.'s spatial strategy is also sound as regards the lengths of journeys permitted by driving hours regulations: when drivers start from R.'s region to make a delivery in Milan or Bologna, reload in the same area and return to almost the same starting point they are able to make the necessary breaks, one after 4 1/2 hours driving, the other after a total of 9 hours driving in the same day (a driver can sleep in Milan on Monday night and then reload and return to the company's base on Tuesday in order to leave again on Wednesday). The average distance involved in driving to the north of Italy (500 km) and the way he organizes the trips allows the company to comply with driving hours regulations without adverse consequences.

Regulatory constraints are thus spatially beneficial to R.'s firm, as long as it retains its current markets which are compatible with them. However, the weakness of the company as a result of the high proportion of its turnover which comes from one customer forces R. (who is aware of the limits of his contracts) to be constantly on the look-out for additional contracts. These must meet at least one condition, that of not increasing the company's operating area too much as this might diminish its territorial control (by creating a need to reorganize the work of drivers and serve new regions) which is currently its major strong point.

Finally, it should be stressed that R.'s commercial and entrepreneurial space in France, with his regular customers being located within a radius of 50 km around his home and firm, more or less corresponds to the zone covered by his social and professional relationships, which were built up a long time ago and recently mobilized in order to assist the company's operation.

A fragile equilibrium

R. is able to mobilize networks of contacts and family and to use his knowledge of the industrial and social fabric of northern Italy in order to reach new markets. It is therefore

relatively easy for him to find contracts from sources other than his main customer, as is evidenced by his work for local farmers. It is nevertheless likely that these new contracts will not be as regular and finding them will involve extra costs for R. Although R.'s main customer is independent, this independence is qualified by the difficulty it may experience in finding carriers who are willing to transport return freight (imbalances) and above all the quality of service provided by R. This quality is the result of organizational flexibility, a high level of driver availability and a thorough knowledge of routes. Such specific organizational features mean that some companies are able to provide an additional level of service and are a factor which reduces the substitutability of subcontractors.

From the economic point of view R. appears to be dependent on his main customer who provides him with 50% of his work and is in an independent position (there is a considerable amount of transport supply between France and Italy and the customer does not require specialized equipment). The subcontractor therefore needs this customer in order to keep his firm in business. In spite of these qualifications, and even though R. still states that he is independent, he is certainly aware of his position of inferiority. There are two possible ways in which he can cope with this:

- do nothing, and be in danger of going bankrupt if he loses his principal source of work, i.e. finding himself in the same position as in 1992-93;
- try to reduce his dependence on this customer by diversifying and distributing his activities more evenly. R.'s company is interested in a new market (transporting batches of pottery from Italy to France). If this plan comes to fruition R. will have to open up new routes to the north of France, and even Belgium, purchase more suitable semitrailers and hire new drivers.

Considerable risks are inherent in this last possibility as well:

- firstly, the pottery market requires him to invest in specialized vehicles. Should he lose this customer these may prove difficult to redeploy, so he may lose money on this investment;
- secondly, R. exists within a socioeconomic environment which is uncertain. The regulatory constraints which apply to driving times and working times tend to increase the difficulties of company management. The industrial fabric and freight flows in the region are constantly changing;
- lastly, R. will need to move outside his familiar conquered territory.

CONCLUSION

The criteria which are generally used to describe firms can provide a distorted picture of reality. Although from a strictly legal standpoint R.'s firm was already independent in 1985, it was still economically dependent and failed to mobilize or employ the territorial resources which it possessed even then: until 1993, although managing a company, R. was still working as a driver. However, a whole set of representations, values, and material and financial benefits modified his perception of his situation. They also reduced the "objective" unpleasantness of his working conditions (as measured by conventional criteria). This explains the value of approaches which are able to take account of collective representation and value systems, identity dynamics, relationships between groups within the transport sector and relationships between transport and the territory: when seen within their context of socioeconomic dynamics, relationships within the world of transport take on a different meaning.

This example also illustrates the value of a diachronic approach, which provides the only means of understanding the way companies are linked to their territory, that is to say the only

means of going beyond the spatially located system of interactions and activities and the only means for researchers to perceive the interpretations of R. which determine and modify these relationships. Space is never neutral: in phases 1 and 2 of his career R.'s networks of relationships and zones of activity were practically the same as in the last phase, except that then they were experienced, described, mobilized and experienced differently and employed in different processes and systems of meaning. The transition to the active exploitation of the many types of territorial resource which build up over time is only possible as a result of the conjunction of a number of factors (including, paradoxically, an episode of sudden economic crisis) and new opportunities. Under these circumstances social relationships become a decisive factor in the economic future of the firm. In this respect, this approach is similar to the analysis conducted by Italian researchers, who in their work on "territorialized micro-industrialization" see socio-territorial links as being an economically important factor in production, and consider the territory not as an asset but as fixed capital (Marotel et Regazzola, 1996-1997; Regazzola, 1997).

However, the temporal and spatial aspects of a firm's operation are not permanent and, in R.'s case have not resulted in a definitively controlled territory. Without stating it in so many words, R. makes it quite clear that his autonomy is recent (since 1993) and that he is continuously called upon to make vital decisions (concerning new customers, hiring new staff, purchasing vehicles, etc.) which could potentially modify his situation, in particular by increasing or reducing his autonomy. In this respect the history of R.'s company shows that in some situations sociocultural factors are unable on their own to counteract economic processes and constraints. The ability to mobilize and exploit all aspects of the entire set of resources which they have accumulated in the territory is increasingly necessary for transport firms, but will it be enough in the future?

Both as regards the issues which are examined and from the methodological point of view this initial study has obvious limits: although our work has attempted to explore the interactions between the company and its territory in detail and as thoroughly as possible, our analysis nevertheless involves a single company and takes no account of the dynamics affecting its environment. It would be more heuristic to broaden our approach to include localized configurations of actors and to apply it to a set of cases which appear to be particularly representative of the socioeconomic and professional dynamics in operation.

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