EMOTIONAL BODIES
A WORKSHOP ON THE HISTORICAL PERFORMATIVITY OF EMOTIONS

Doing Emotions History

In March 1938, more than thirty thousand Parisian workers of the Citröen Company went on strike, including women who in majority were employed as seamstresses in the saddlery workshop. This kind of social protest was not really new in France. Indeed, the French working class had begun its revolts two years before, when Léon Blum, representing the left wing alliance known as Le Front Populaire (The Popular Front), was elected Prime Minister. Trade unions such as, the General Confederation of Labour (la CGT) took advantage of the favorable conditions to call workers out on general strike. The most relevant conquest resulting from this series of social upheavals would be the Matignon Agreements (les accords de Matignon), which were signed in June 1936 recognizing basic workers’ rights, such as the right to strike.

During the spring of 1938, Parisian workers, and particularly those belonging to the metal industry, saw their recently acquired rights threatened; something that they interpreted as a sign of the rise of Fascism in Europe. Therefore, they decided to go on strike again, also demanding the intervention of Blum’s government in the Spanish Civil War to stop the advancement of the rebel nationalist troops supported by Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini’s air forces.

On March 23, one day before the protests began in the Citröen factory, Rose Zehner, a thirty-eight trade unionist addressed a speech to her fellow women workers in the canteen of the Quai de Javel workshop. She was doing a report about a meeting that took place between the delegates of the Ministry of War and the workers’ commission for the solidarity with the Second Spanish Republic, when she
saw somebody in the distance who opened the door, took a photograph and quickly left the room.

That person was Willy Ronis. He took the shot of this women’s meeting with his second hand rolleiflex. Almost at the end of his life, he would explain in an interview:

J’étais dans l’usine, en grève, j’ouvre une porte et je tombe sur cette scène. C’était l’époque où les conquêtes sociales de 1936 étaient remises en question. Les gens criaient de colère. Je n’ai pas eu une vraie réaction de reporter; l’atmosphère était tellement tendue que je me suis senti de trop et suis parti. Je n’ai fait qu’une photo, celle-là. Il a fallu attendre 1982 pour que je rencontre cette femme, Rosette (Rose Zehner). Nous avons reparlé de cette époque et elle m’a dit qu’elle avait eu le temps de me voir et cru que j’étais un flic. Tout au long de ma vie, j’ai fait mienne la lutte des hommes pour leur dignité et leur mieux-être.¹

Ronis forgot this photograph until the eighties.² The same thing happened with the heroine of this photograph, Rosette, who was also completely forgotten after the strikes of the Citroën. She was fired because of her unionist activity and decided to open a bistrot in Paris. Rosette only became an icon of the French working class forty years later, in les Rencontres Internationales de photographie d’Arles, when she would meet Ronis again.

If we have selected Grève aux Usines Javel-Citroën as the image introducing this workshop, this is because, in our view, it represents perfectly the idea that we would like to discuss with you during the next two days: that emotions are not things that we have in our minds or which we manifest through our bodies. Emotions can be alternatively understood as «a practical engagement with the world whose

meaning emerges from bodily dispositions conditioned by a social context which always has cultural and historical specificity ». In other words, emotions are practices that do things and have the power to change history by means of shaping the identity of social bodies, such as the working class movement. (Fig. 5) In the case of this photograph, emotions seem to be very close to what Sophie Wahnich has called *les émotions populaires* in the French revolutionary tradition, which means the way through which the population set things in motion, *c’est-à-dire, la manière dont le peuple se meut en mouvement*.


To read the performance represented in *Grève aux Usines Javel-Citröen* is not a simple task. Its emotional meaning only emerges in connection with an ensemble of doings and sayings that were inscribed in the norms, codes and institutions that were the rule in the early twenty-century French society. Although we can think that this photograph mirrors a spontaneous event that Ronis captured when he opened the door of the workshop at La Javel, its power lies in showing some conventional forms of what a social protest means in the French revolutionary tradition, such as the gesture of the protagonist who is standing on top of a chair and raising her hand while making her speech.

As Michel Onfray has pointed out, the composition of this photograph has many similarities with *Le Serment du Jeu de Paume* (1789) de Jacques Louis David.

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3 Monique Scheer, ‘Are Emotions a kind of practice (and is that what makes them have a history) ? A Bourdieuan approach to understanding emotion, History and Theory, 2012, 193.

Bailly, lui, aussi est debout sur une table; de la même manière que la femme de l’usine Citröen ; il effectue un geste avec son bras droit tendu ; il tient également un papier, une note qu’il ne consulte pas non plus ; il émerge pareillement d’une foule (...) à la façon de l’ouvrière, il consulte le point focal de la construction de l’œuvre (...) La voix féminine, la parole masculine incarnent le registre linguistique du performatif : ici, dire, c’est faire : dire l’histoire, c’est faire l’histoire.⁵

The performativity of Ronis’ photograph comes from the fact that it updates a longstanding cultural tradition, which gives meaning to the action of protest as a kind of ritual ceremony of the French working class. However, neither Jean Sylvain Bailly nor Rose Zehner can be considered the real agents of the action represented in these artistic compositions, but rather la foule, the crowd that eliminates individualities in order to form a unique emotional body. In the case of Ronis’ photograph, this foule was not represented by well-known male political personalities such as Robespierre, but rather by an anonymous mass of female workers who lost their identity once congregated in the factory. This difference was not at all meaningless.

La foule as represented in Ronis’ photograph mirrors the process of industrialization that took place over the course of the nineteenth century, which created a society in which masses became real actors, living in cities and working in factories. The idea that masses could become active, capable of taking political power, was not just a theoretical possibility and particularly in France, where this had already become reality. In the French collective mind, the worst crowd that could be imagined was one composed of women, such as the pétroleuses of the Paris Commune, as they were supposed to be more emotional and, therefore, more irrational than men. As the pétroleuses, the female workers of Roni’s photograph

⁵ Michel Onfray, Fixer des vertiges : Les Photographies de Willy Ronis.
break with classical gender roles, as they are associated with the political action of going on strike, and, therefore with emotions such as rage, hatred or resentment.

The turn of the twentieth century was a period in which emotions related with the working class were demonized to such an extent that some physicians such as Gustave Le Bon interpreted them as pathological manifestations of the social body, states of collective madness, which were communicated amongst the population as a kind of contagious disease. Not even science was a practice free of emotions when it was aimed at reinforcing the control on the working class by the political élites as in the case of La psychologie de foules that shows, furthermore, the influence of broader emotional cultures in the emergence of scientific styles of reasoning.

Dans les foules, les idées, les sentiments, les émotions, les croyances possèdent un pouvoir contagieux aussi intense que celui des microbes (...) Chez l’homme en foule toutes les émotions sont très rapidement contagieuses et c’est ce qui explique la soudaineté de paniques.⁶

In conclusion, the scene captured in this photograph reveals just the moment in which the female workers joined together to form a unique emotional body. The foule did not exist or nor had feelings before the women met at the workshop at la Javel-Citrœn; it only became real while they were protesting. As Ronis wrote: La foule dans ses évolutions, c’est une machine à produire des merveilles. Ma vie fut éclairée de moments d’immense félicité: quand tout à coup je captais, du bout de l’objectif, le diamant entr’aperçu et prêt à s’évanouir.

Ronis’ photograph is a good example with which to examine the importance of the performativity of emotions in constructing social identities in the past, as well as new ones in the present. Emotions are neither inside, nor outside us; they are produced in the same interaction between the individual and the world, becoming

⁶ Gustave Le Bon, La psychologie des foules
sites for social exchange and political change that allow us to write history from a doing-emotions-perspective.