

Misconduct, Malfunction and Dissatisfaction. A Social History of the Organisation of Complaint-Handling in Telephone Services[☆]

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Abstract

The article's subject is the genesis and development of complaint-handling practices in France's telephone services. It shows that, far from being a new facet of contemporary production models, complaint-handling has its roots in a long historical tradition in the organisation of telephone services. Looking back to three important moments in the history of telecommunications (the telephone crisis at the beginning of the century, the decade of the "telephone modernisation plan" that began in 1974, and the introduction of the "new legal and commercial framework" in the 1990s), we suggest that complaints performed different organisational functions, which shaped complaint-handling in different ways and assigned varying meanings to the complaint. The text depicts the work of complaint-handling as both influencing and reflecting the changes in a public administration that is now a commercial firm. Beyond its descriptive interest, the article raises the question of the management of conflicts with customers and their influence on labour and its organisation. © 2016 Elsevier Masson SAS. All rights reserved.

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Contrary to what a brief consideration of its modern meaning might suggest, the etymology of the word "complaint" refers not only to the voicing of a grievance but also to a social relationship. Its root is the Latin word *plangere* ("to lament") and the prefix *com* ("with"), suggesting a

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collective expression of grief or hurt, which came into the English language via the Old French *complaindre*, or *complainte* in its noun form. The word lost its usage as “lament” in the 17th century, eventually operating a semantic shift to its current English definition for our purposes, “a demand for something that you believe you have a right to, especially from a company, the government, etc.”,¹ which implies a structured expression addressed to someone with the status to exercise coercive power over people and things.

For the purposes of this article, we will consider the word in its most common modern usage where, since the rise of consumer rights, it has taken on a semi-legal meaning in parallel to its technical legal meaning, so that making a complaint (e.g. about poor service) in order to express displeasure (to “lament”) has evolved into making a complaint for the purpose of obtaining redress or compensation.

Sociology has recognised this new usage by developing studies on the origin, formation and formalisation of complaints as part of the spectrum of action available to customers, consumers or users. The authors show how before verbalising their dissatisfaction by *claiming*, the customer-consumer-user must have *named* (perceived the problematic character of their experience) and *blamed* (identified a guilty party), to employ the categories established by Abel et al. (1981). The complainant may have been helped in this process by different actors who have contributed to the “social construction of the dispute” (Pinto, 1989). They will then have made their complaint, employing strategies that are to varying degrees political (Fijalkow, 2006) or consumerist (Barrey, 2002), while seeking to “grow” within coherent moral orders (Trépos, 1988, 1991), in accordance with the conception of critical activity proposed by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991).

Although the shift of certain civil conflicts from the courts towards alternative dispute settlement methods, as well as the takeover of complaint-handling by organisations, give the subject a certain relevance today, corresponding scholarly efforts in France to study the way in which companies deal with complaints have been modest.² French sociology, economics and history are generally interested in the productive and commercial functions of companies, rather than in their capacity to handle customer complaints, whereas a significant programme of research has developed since the 1970s in the English-speaking world on complaints (Day and Landon, 1977), on *complaint-handling* or *complaint management* (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1988) and on *service recovery* (Krishna et al., 2011), in marketing and in management.³ It might be added that sociology, which came late to the study of the firm (Borzeix, 1986), has long thought of productive organisations as largely structured by conflicts specific to internal relations of production rather than those derived from commercial relations.⁴

¹ According to the online Oxford English Dictionary: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/>.

² For the European Union, see in particular: “Commission Recommendation of 12 May 2010 on the use of a harmonised methodology for classifying and reporting consumer complaints and enquiries”, *Official Journal of the European Union*, L136/1. Consumer Empowerment, *TNS Opinion & Social*, 342. With regard to the organisational sphere, the AMARC (customer complaint management association), a grouping of large companies, was set up in 2004.

³ The handful of studies outside this framework were produced by legal scholars, sometimes using the tools of legal sociology (Littlefield and Ross, 1978).

⁴ Pierre Dubois published “Complaint handling in the textile industry” in 1968, but he was referring to “worker claims” (Dubois, 1968). The issue of *Sociologie du travail* dedicated to firms contained articles focusing on the question of industrial relations and on the changes brought about by the Auroux laws (Borzeix, 1986). Similarly, the issue of the “complaint” was recently explored by Olivia Foli (2008), but within the framework of employee relations.

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