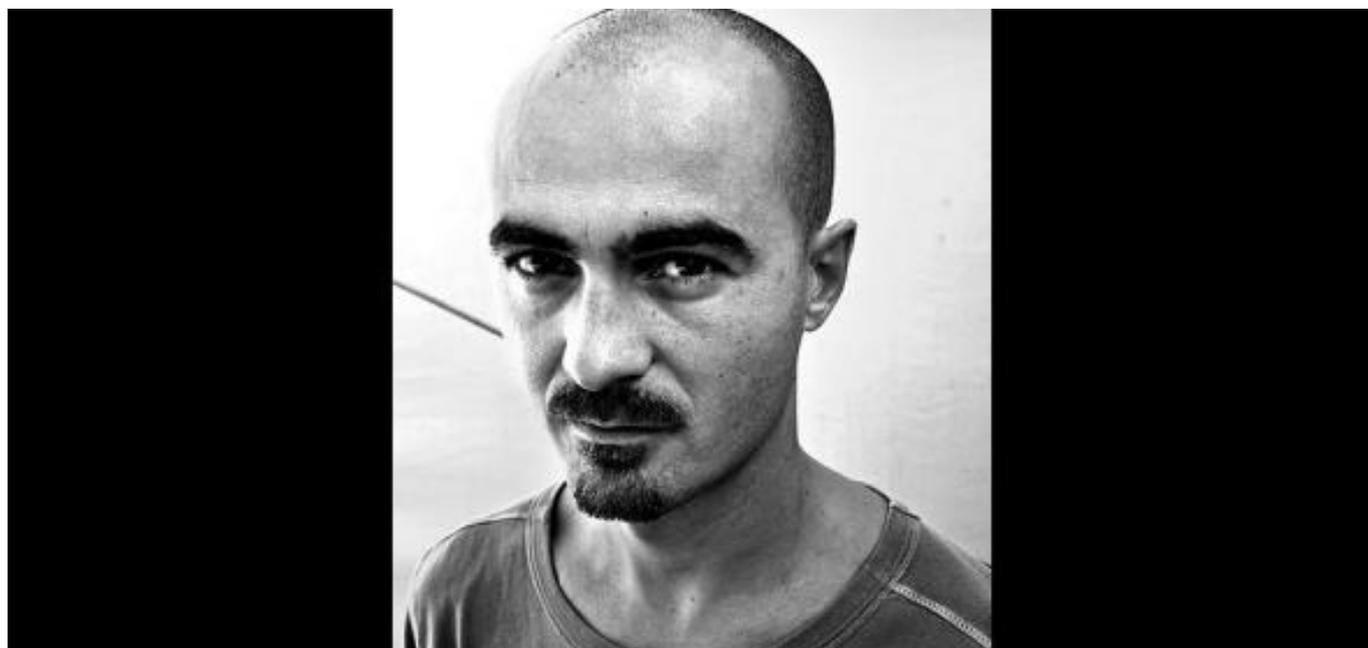


Mari Otxandi

Translated by Rob Dyas

Marin Ledun was made redundant from his job as an investigator at France Telecom. He has written the book *Perros de Porcelana (Porcelain Dogs)* about his time at the company. We talk to him about the modern workplace and its connection to our lives.



Marin Ledun, 37 years old, worked for seven years as an investigator in France Telecom (Orange). His time with the company ended in 2007 when the privatization of the company, brought into effect in 1998, was beginning to fundamentally change the internal personnel management approach within the organisation. An aggressive cost cutting strategy called the NExT plan was in course during 2006, attempting to deteriorate working conditions to such an extent that workers were psychologically pressured into resigning. Six years after the introduction of NExT, around 60 employees of the company have committed suicide. French public opinion has turned on this "tidal wave of suicides" to condemn modern management practices and the suffering they cause. In July 2012, the CEO of the company was placed under investigation for "psychological harassment". This is the first time in history that a CEO of a multinational will face such charges in a court of law. Ex-employee, Marin Ledun is now a writer of black novels and in one of his works, *Porcelain Dogs*, he describes his experiences there with the action set in a call centre.

In your novel, *Porcelain Dogs*, the protagonist, a workplace doctor, cures the ailments of the characters but is also in a privileged position to analyze the company world in its entirety.

The characters that can talk about the modern day company are few. To understand a little of the mechanisms of suffering at work, interconnected with the new labour organisations, the new management methods, you need a certain familiarity with medicine, psychology, the psychodynamics at work, the sociology of these organisations, etc. Although it's very rare for a work doctor to be taught the workings of these subjects, I have tried to construct the character that would know most about such things. Maybe I "over-invest" in her an understanding of the question, but this is so that she can testify as to how it works, relations between people, what is going on in their heads and details about the workings of the company machine.

Medical reports give the story a rhythm. They allow the reader to take breath and characterise, from my point of view, a certain kind of dehumanisation because of their

cold and distant nature.

The idea of these reports was to remind us that the company is not what the protagonist lives, this kind of empathy that she has for the people, the human relations that exist despite everything. What predominates is the clinical manner, really cold, in which men and women are seen as numbers, statistics, like a calculation of "symptoms". And above and beyond a certain number of serious symptoms, it is decided that it is not profitable. Everything must be input into Excel spreadsheets. My intention was to remind that the company was of this type, really cold, very mechanical. The initial idea of Perros de Porcelana could be summarised like this: there exists the fiction characterised by the doctor, and there is exists the reality, the reports. And each time we enter a report, we enter into reality.

Why the process of dehumanisation of the people in the company?

That is due to the dehumanization mechanisms already established in individuals in general society. The corporation is a product of a number of processes; the quality control processes that appeared in the '80s and '90s for example, and, something on which I place much emphasis because of their symbolic quality: the periodic employee evaluation or personal development interview. It is the mechanism *par excellence* for commodifying the individual, made up of three very important elements to which the individual will be reduced: knowledge (training received), "know-how" (experience acquired) and the personal development / evaluation interview, which entails a new element that consists of the entirely arbitrary measurement of something that does not exist known as "behavioural targets". This can mean anything and is absolutely impossible to measure.

There are many things included here that cannot be measured, quantified, but they use them specifically because of this, because this allows them to subjugate the individuals and produce a kind of double mechanism: control of the people - direct control that allows for the "tightening of screws"; if extra pay depends on the interview then the workers are obliged to play the game - and auto-control - the individual internalises all these mechanisms so that they can better anticipate them. They are destructive mechanisms.

Does work still represent an instrument of socialisation?

From the moment work is no longer perceived as something collective. when it is converted into a purely individual act, with individual trajectories and mechanisms, then, necessarily, it will no longer have any socialisation function. But if one considers that work is not limited to the company, which is itself also precisely a mechanism of socialisation and of life, then one may say that the unemployed too work, and much more: when someone does "no work", that is work in the salaried sense of the term, they are still working nevertheless. Someone who decides to detach themselves from the world of work and live simply from their small-holding in self-sufficiency, is working. They are not working in the *tripalium* sense, a torture instrument, in the salaried sense, exploitation etc., but they are working. And in this sense, work remains an instrument of socialisation. There are those that are militantly opposed to the notion of work but, in the end, they are working. It's simply that they do not have a salaried job. They have rejected by choice this subjugation, or sometimes because they have no other option.

What is the crux of this subjugation?

The question of subjugation is laid out in the novel and I planned to include it from the outset. Whilst I was contracted to France Telecom in 2004, my purpose was to observe and begin to investigate the mechanisms of subjugation in the workplace. In the end I was caught and was forced to leave, and not on good terms, but once I had time to digest the situation, I remembered that this was however part of my initial objective.

The objective that I had planned was to work under the double mandate made up of the subjugation in work and subjugation in consumption. I set out on the principal that the two were entirely interconnected. It is because we take out loans, because we consume, that we are subjugated in the workplace. This is self evident, but typically the mechanisms of production and the mechanisms of consumption are analysed independently of each other. Today, when we operate as workers, we are workers in work, in the office or on the production line, but we are also workers permanently situated in everyday life: in our fitted kitchen, with our dishwasher, our food processor, all the things we have bought because they supposedly simplify our lives so that we might work longer hours.

At the end of the novel, there is the sensation that we have assisted in the triumph of Fordism.

It is exactly that. In fact, in the masterplans, it is predicted that the scientific organisation of labour will coincide with the scientific organisation of consumption. Historically this was not in the end viable because the Eastern societies were not yet prepared for such consumption as they have been since the '60s. The plan was delayed somewhat but they've made up for lost time since then. The designers are somewhat cynical when it comes to these methods - or sometimes sincere which is even worse - they had predicted the use of these mechanisms. Meanwhile, they have gone about adding other things, such as unemployment, which is also organised scientifically and is an integral part of these two entities.

The Spanish press have highlighted a particular phrase of yours: "Rest or be free"

This in fact is a quote from Cornelius Castoriadis. It is the idea of the somewhat personal aspect of the work of yesteryear: moments to reflect and formulate questions about our mode of being, the way we work, consume, all of this is itself part of work. It is even more than the job: it is essential. I'll use an example from a case I was told about (maybe the figures are not correct): a study carried out by two psychiatrists on workers in an abattoir who were given three minutes to carve up an animal. Some technicians arrived one day and decided that the animal could be carved up in two minutes. The workers tried this and agreed that yes, it was possible. So from then on they did it in two minutes. And little by little symptoms such as depression, physical problems began to emerge.... Technically and physically, they were able to do the job in two minutes, but they were missing an unquantifiable minute, that corresponded to a minute of humanity, of respect for the animal that they had just killed, the contemplation of death. And, to rest or be free, is exactly that: they needed, at a given moment, that personal part of the job that was not quantifiable and was implicit in the initial calculation.

"To rest or be free" is also to prefer not to see things, not intervene so as to avoid problems.

To rest is to close ones eyes, for the purposes of general comfort, due to cowardice sometimes. In work, we have all experienced one day or another where somebody did not come to our aid when we were suffering an aggression in which they might have helped, but they do not do so because it is not in their interest. This is to rest. It is the antithesis of freedom, of the mechanisms of liberation, of aspiration towards collective and individual autonomy, as Castoriadis says. To rest is to allow things to play out by themselves. I do not implicate myself, I do not stir anything up, I do not join a union. In the end it is not worth it, afterwards I will have problems, I won't receive bonuses. I will not vote because in the end it is pointless, but I don't look for alternatives either and I don't want to complicate my life being a militant, reflecting on other means of struggle. The traditional means of struggle, unions, politics, the traditional political parties etc, all this is obsolete, it is dying (and that's the truth). What is more there are only extremists on the left, radicals, anarchists, libertarians, this thing or the other...So then I rest, I don't do anything.

When you say that the political world should take on the subject of the world of work, what are you trying to say?

The politicians will not do it. The extreme left itself has not taken up the cause of the suffering that is going on at work which is, for me, a formidable lever to discuss all the themes: capitalism, globalisation, "collateral damage", as they call it. It's a shame. From the moment there is even a single case of suicide due to working conditions in companies such as Renault or France Telecom, it is already too many. It is not just a private issue, it does not concern only the company, it should become political. We all have something to say. To begin with, the employees themselves that do not have this right over their instrument of work. They should be able to replace the shareholders, the capital, the general directors that are paid millions at a time to put in place whatever marketing strategy they like because there is "only" one person dead and because that falls within the budget of costs and quotas... At the moment of crisis in France Telecom, the director general, Didier Lombard, was only concerned with the deteriorating image of the company. It's really scandalous. The fundamental thing is that employees re-appropriate their instrument of work, whether that be through a union or another route. How they go about this is something that should be collectively decided. And in these companies, the employees are in no position to do so, psychologically. In France Telecom, there are a certain number of deaths by suicide each year and there is no mobilisation, although there should be a revolution in the company. There are colleagues dying!

They rest, in one sense...

Not really. There is a physical consequence for them also: they are physically incapacitated to react. They are in a survival state. It should also be added that the company machine does all it can to ensure they are unable to react. This is why the issue needs to be politicised once more. It is us, the citizens, that should say collectively that there is a problem that concerns us all: this company is part of the society in which we live, we all use telecommunications. And this is related to all companies, large and small: they employ the same organisational models. Maybe France Telecom is a laboratory, but this concerns all companies. The people who are suffering in the workplace today, physically and / or mentally, are of all ages, at the end of their career or at the beginning, they may have very good salaries or might be paid peanuts, they might be experienced or not, generally they have a family life that is more or less happy...The condition of suffering at work is not that of the unionist, of 50 years old, the civil servant, depressive and alcoholic. It can happen to anybody. The mechanisms of suffering are generalised in the workplace. They are then lived out in very different ways: in some cases they translate into what is discussed in the novel, depression, suicides, murders etc. But on the whole, the situation could be summarised with the title of a book by a French work doctor: Not everybody died but all were affected.

By way of conclusion?

The reply we can give as of today, which is the opposite of what we are told; the world of work is not failing just because the economy is going badly. It is failing because the work practices imposed upon us lead to its failure. This is my conviction. It is not viable on a human level. And, contrary to what some say, sometimes rather moralistically, those that have known work in the '60s or '70s, the more ancient ones, that are familiar with the more paternalistic companies, the company has really changed its mode of operating, radically, although we still have difficulty in measuring this. To work on a production line today is certainly less difficult than in the era of Zola or in the '20s or 30's. The duration of work has been reduced, there are protections (that are now being removed in full view). It is "better" to work today than 100 or 150 years ago. But on the other hand, psychologically, working on a production line today is completely different from working on a production line 30 or 40 years ago. There is not the same solidarity, the same collectivism is not there. Before, these paradoxical orders that are given today did not exist, there was not the same policy of numbers, there was not the commodification of our "mental schedule", at work and in consumption, and all this has catastrophic consequences. It is imperative that we now think of work in another manner. //

Overtime without the log book

"I was talking with a union member from Peugeot who explained to me the moment in which they changed the way bonus payments were paid. Before, it was the same for everyone: the team was the important thing, the collective. Then they introduced the personal evaluations and the bonus payments were decided by what each person did individually. At the beginning this didn't seem like such a bad thing to the workers because: 'In the end, when someone else isn't pulling his weight, when I'm working harder, there's no reason I shouldn't be paid more than him, it isn't fair to slow down the whole line'. But after some time, they began to notice the suspicion that had been implanted amongst them: the bonuses became a taboo subject, a kind of competition became prevalent amongst the workers, they suspected so-and-so of earning more bonuses... And it is with these kind of very simple processes that they can introduce the mechanisms that in the end result in an entirely dehumanised company."

Etiquetas:

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