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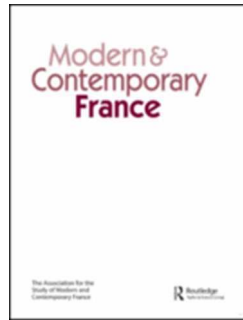
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**Liberalisation, surveillance and suicide at La Poste**

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## Liberalisation, surveillance and suicide at La Poste

### Abstract

This article examines how the contradictory dynamics of freedom and control that characterise neoliberal capitalism are played out on lived experiences of work in the context of the newly liberalised and restructured French postal services (La Poste). At La Poste, liberalisation was framed as a great emancipatory project that would reinvigorate a moribund state-owned company, remove regulatory constraints, deepen economic freedoms and strip away deadening bureaucracy. Yet, whilst liberalisation freed La Poste of regulatory controls, it was accompanied by an intensified surveillance and control of everyday working life. The new control measures were not limited to external working practices and structures, but sought to capture the individual worker's personality, communication and values and harness them towards the company's redefined commercial goals. Drawing on critical scholarship on neoliberal capitalism and labour, the article shows that when capitalist rationality extends beyond working activity and encroaches on complex, intimate and vulnerable dimensions of the person, this can have dangerous human consequences. At La Poste, liberalisation triggered a profound crisis across the company, transforming it into an 'entreprise en souffrance' characterised by escalating levels of psychological distress, chronic stress and a series of employee suicides (Fontenelle 2013).

Cet article s'interroge sur la façon dont les dynamiques contradictoires de la liberté et du contrôle à l'oeuvre dans le capitalisme néo-libéral se répercutent sur les expériences vécues des ouvriers dans les services récemment libéralisés et restructurés de La Poste. A la Poste, la libéralisation a été présentée comme un grand projet libérateur qui promettait de raviver une entreprise publique agonisante, de supprimer les contraintes réglementaires, d'approfondir les libertés économiques et d'éliminer la bureaucratie encombrante. Si la libéralisation a permis à La Poste de s'émanciper des contrôles réglementaires, ce processus a toutefois imposé une surveillance et un contrôle intensif sur chaque dimension des vies des employés. Les nouvelles mesures de contrôle ne s'étaient pas limitées aux pratiques et aux structures de travail externe, mais cherchaient à capter la personnalité, la communication et les valeurs de l'employé pour les orienter vers les nouveaux buts commerciaux de l'entreprise. En puisant dans la littérature critique sur le capitalisme néolibéral et le monde du travail, cet article montre que la rationalité capitaliste lorsqu'elle s'étend au-delà de l'activité professionnelle et s'empie sur les qualités complexes, intimes et vulnérables de la personne, peut avoir des conséquences humaines dangereuses. A La Poste, la libéralisation a provoqué une crise à travers l'entreprise, la transformant en 'entreprise en souffrance' marquée par des niveaux élevés de détresse psychologique et du stress chronique et par une série de suicides (Fontenelle).

### Introduction

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3 For leading critics such as Gilles Deleuze (1990) and Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (1999), the  
4 extension of capitalist power in contemporary societies is driven by contradictory dynamics of freedom  
5 and control which serve both to obfuscate and deepen capitalism's reach. Capitalist transformations  
6 are underpinned by an emancipatory narrative that promises to free the individual of traditional  
7 hierarchies, disciplines and constraints and offer the possibility of self-realisation. Whilst industrial  
8 capitalism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries claimed to deliver the individual from the oppression of church  
9 and monarchy, contemporary neoliberalism promises to free workers from the disciplinary constraints  
10 of industrialism and to espouse individual autonomy, creativity and self-fulfillment (Crouch 2011). Yet  
11 this rhetoric of freedom masks a countervailing tendency towards increased surveillance and control  
12 intended to make the individual more productive and further the interests of capitalist accumulation. In  
13 today's 'societies of control' liberating and enslaving forces therefore confront one another (Deleuze  
14 1990). To grasp the changing dynamics of capitalism, these critics suggest, we need to recognise and  
15 make visible the new mechanisms of control, elucidating the ways in which they harness and  
16 instrumentalise human activity and reveal a new system of domination. Yet, under contemporary  
17 neoliberalism, capitalist control assumes a new and pernicious dimension, extending beyond the  
18 productive capacities of the physical body and encroaching on the subjective resources of the worker.  
19 The critical feature of contemporary capitalism is that the 'the soul is put to work' and it is life itself that  
20 is plundered by the corporation (Berardi 2007, 9). For sociologist Danièle Linhart, the modern  
21 corporation, unlike the Taylorist factory, does not seek to dehumanise workers by stripping them of  
22 subjectivity and reducing them to raw productive energies alone, but rather it aims to achieve a 'sur-  
23 humanisation' by engaging all aspects of human personality in the economic needs of the company:  
24 'Le drame du travail contemporain ne vient pas, paradoxalement, de ce qu'il est déshumanisant, mais  
25 au contraire du fait qu'il joue sur les aspects les plus profondément humains des individus' (Linhart  
26 2015, 11).

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36 This article examines how capitalist dynamics of freedom and control are played out on lived  
37 experiences of work in the case of French postal services, La Poste, which recently underwent  
38 liberalisation and restructuring. The article aims to bridge a gap between theoretical scholarship on  
39 capitalism that lays emphasis on systemic or extraneous processes and lived and narrated accounts  
40 of work ('le vécu quotidien') in order to arrive at a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the  
41 freedoms and controls of the neoliberal workplace (Hanique 2014 187). Alongside critical scholarship  
42 on neoliberal capitalism and labour, the article engages with a range of primary and secondary  
43 sources on La Poste, including ethnographic studies, testimonial accounts, medical reports,  
44 occupational studies and internal company documents. Drawing on Saskia Sassen, I examine  
45 capitalist dynamics at 'the systemic edge', a site where abstract economics comes into contact with  
46 human bodies and gives rise to 'astounding elementary brutalities' (Sassen 2014, 211 & 220). Sassen  
47 defines the systemic edge as a point at which the extremities of contemporary capitalism become  
48 visible allowing us to glimpse broad economic trends that characterise the systemic whole and to 're-  
49 theorize' our conceptualisation of capitalism (Sassen 2016, 77). La Poste's liberalisation has its  
50 origins in a 'neoliberal counter-revolution' in the European Union from the mid-1990s onwards and  
51 was underpinned by a liberatory discourse that claimed to free capital from regulatory constraints,  
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3 deepen economic freedoms and unleash entrepreneurial energies (Hermann 2007, 2). The  
4 experience of French postal workers therefore mirrors that of postal workers across Europe and  
5 provides critical insight into the concrete effects of broader processes of liberalisation and  
6 privatisation. The article explores the paradox that whilst liberalisation emancipated La Poste of  
7 regulatory constraints and reinforced economic freedoms, it seemed to subject individual employees  
8 to unprecedented levels of regulation, surveillance and control. Whilst the company acquired vast new  
9 freedoms and was liberated of statutory obligations to the state and to its own workforce, individual  
10 employees experienced intensified control over every aspect of their working and non-working lives.  
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14 La Poste followed a particular model of liberalisation that sought to preserve a public service identity  
15 and tradition, whilst transforming this into a source of commercial gain (Vezinat 2012; Fontenelle  
16 2013; Hanique 2014). France's largest and oldest public service company, La Poste is defined by an  
17 enduring public service legacy that stretches back into French history and imbues everyday work with  
18 an overarching set of collective values and traditions. Rather than abandoning this public service  
19 legacy in favour of a global corporate brand, as its affiliate France Télécom had done, La Poste's  
20 management decided to re-orientate its public service tradition towards lucrative commercial ends.  
21 The everyday encounter between the post office worker and citizen that was grounded in values of  
22 proximity, trust and reliability (an 'intimité ordinaire'), offered a unique business model that could open  
23 up vast new profit-making possibilities (Hanique 2014, 187). Yet, in order to transform a public service  
24 exchange based on everyday autonomous interaction and underpinned by abstract egalitarian values  
25 into a commercial exchange orientated towards quantifiable economic results, a radically new  
26 management model was required. Whereas earlier reforms at La Poste transformed external  
27 workplace practices or conditions, the new measures required individual employees to change their  
28 whole selves: 'Il ne s'agit plus seulement de changer de manière de faire, il faut aussi changer de  
29 manière d'être' (Hanique 2014,20). La Poste's management introduced a barrage of new  
30 management methods designed to prescribe, monitor and measure every aspect of the public service  
31 exchange (Oblet and Villechaise-Dupont 2005). New prescriptive norms were introduced to define  
32 what postal workers should say, when they should say it, when to smile and greet the customer. The  
33 case of La Poste shows that the imposition of new control measures on workers' subjectivity and  
34 personality triggered a profound crisis at La Poste that was manifested by chronic levels of employee  
35 stress, rising absenteeism, depression and a series of suicides. This article seeks to demonstrate that  
36 when economic imperatives transcend working activity itself and seek to capture and instrumentalise  
37 intimate human attributes, this has profoundly deleterious effects on lived experiences of work  
38 generating a social suffering that can lead to the extreme act of suicide.  
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#### 49 **Liberalisation and the freedom narrative**

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51 La Poste's liberalisation can be situated within the broader mutations of capitalism and the transition  
52 to a neo-liberal regime characterised by conflicting dynamics of freedom and control. Critics point to  
53 the deeply contradictory nature of today's neo-liberal economic order in which the drive towards  
54 emancipation is accompanied by a countervailing tendency towards surveillance and control. For  
55 Gilles Deleuze, in the new post-industrial societies of control, workers are freed of the disciplinary  
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3 regimentation of the factory, they are subject to a less visible, yet more pernicious free-floating control  
4 that transcends the confines of the factory and permeates all aspects of life. The new mechanisms of  
5 control are no longer based on formal hierarchy and the direct gaze of the boss, but have become a  
6 kind of gaseous ethos that seeps into all facets of life: 'l'entreprise est une âme, un gaz' (Ibid). In a  
7 similar vein, Boltanski and Chiapello have argued that capitalist transformations are underpinned by a  
8 liberatory discourse that is used to mask and legitimise a ceaseless disruption of relations of  
9 production and of social life itself: 'le capitalisme se présente comme libérateur' (Boltanski and  
10 Chiapello 1999, 510). This rhetoric of freedom, they suggest, is an empty ideological tool that serves  
11 to deepen capitalism's reach and intensify control over individual workers: 'A la libération promise se  
12 substitute, en fait, une nouvelle forme d'esclavage' (Ibid, 513). The contradictory tensions inherent  
13 within neoliberal capitalism have also been examined in more recent scholarship on labour by Michael  
14 Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2006), Yann Moulier Boutang (2007), Franco Berardi (2009) and  
15 Cederström and Fleming (2012). Influenced by Michel Foucault's notion of 'biopower' as a form of  
16 power that moves beyond disciplinary regulation to control the whole of life in a 'subjugation of bodies  
17 and control of populations', these scholars argue that in today's capitalism, life itself has become the  
18 essential human resource and our subjectivities, knowledge, social relations and affect are put to  
19 work in the interests of the corporation (Foucault 1998, 140). Hence Carl Cederström and Peter  
20 Fleming describe the existential anguish that comes from a managerial injunction that calls on us to  
21 always be ourselves. Alongside the pressures of working activity, there is an ever present need to  
22 manage who we are and to mould a semblance of the authentic self to put on display in the workplace  
23 (Cederström and Fleming 2012).

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32 La Poste's liberalisation has its origins in the neo-liberal shift in the European Union from the mid-  
33 1990s onwards, when ideas that had been propagated a decade earlier in the United States and the  
34 United Kingdom, were integrated into mainstream European policies and transformed into a  
35 hegemonic project to liberalise and privatise public services. Drawing on classical ideals from the 17<sup>th</sup>  
36 and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, liberalisation discourse was driven by a liberatory narrative in which the demand  
37 for greater market freedoms was joined by a cry for liberty as a singular, indivisible quality and a  
38 human right (Crouch 2011). Whereas traditionally, liberal ideals were invoked to promote the  
39 commercial interests of a nascent bourgeois class, in the 'nouvel esprit du capitalisme' of the 1990s,  
40 these ideals were harnessed in the interests of multinational corporations and global capital (Boltanski  
41 and Chiapello 1999). It is no longer the individual who is conceived as a natural bearer of rights, but  
42 private capital and the corporation are instead endowed with abstract rights and freedoms. It becomes  
43 the duty of government to deepen and extend these rights by eliminating barriers to trade, removing  
44 economic regulations and opening up markets. La Poste's liberalisation can therefore be situated  
45 within a broader European project to privatise postal services and the experiences of French postal  
46 workers mirror those of workers in other national contexts including Germany (privatisation of  
47 Deutsche Post in 2000), the Netherlands (PostNL in 1989), Belgium (Bpost in 2006) and the UK  
48 (Royal Mail in 2014). Liberalisation was driven by a series of directives that acted as a powerful  
49 market-making machinery transforming abstract neoliberal ideas into economic policy by setting out a  
50 set of common principles and a timetable for liberalisation. The first postal services directive was  
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3 passed in 1997 and was subsequently amended by directives in 2002 and 2008. These directives set  
4 out a regulatory framework for the creation of a single market in postal services through a phased  
5 liberalisation with a full liberalisation to be implemented by 1 January 2011. In these directives,  
6 liberalisation is framed in a language of rights and freedoms that champions abstract ideals of free  
7 trade, free capital mobility, fair competition, equal access and consumer rights. The purpose is to  
8 emancipate companies from regulations and constraints that impede their free movement and to  
9 create a 'level playing field' in which conditions of unfair advantage are removed and all entrepreneurs  
10 have equal access to the market (Hermann 2007, 73). Under neo-liberalism, state ownership of public  
11 services is no longer perceived as a means to deliver essential and equitable services and ensure  
12 democratic control over how public taxes are spent. In this reordered ideological framework, the state  
13 is portrayed as a site of vested and particularist interests that is at best, obstructionist, inefficient and  
14 monolithic and at worst, a threat to democratic rights and freedoms (Crouch 2011). Yet the balance  
15 sheet of the liberalisation of postal services in Europe, according to some critics, has been  
16 overwhelmingly negative and in particular, triggered a significant deterioration of working conditions,  
17 with massive job cuts, an increased use of part-time contracts and an intensification of workloads  
18 (Hermann 2007, 2014).

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25 European directives provided the context for a profound transformation of La Poste as successive  
26 French governments put in place legislation to dismantle its historical relationship with the state and  
27 deregulate its public service status. Hence Law 90-568 of July 1990 prepared under the Socialist  
28 government separated postal services from telecommunications within the existing PTT and redefined  
29 La Poste as 'un établissement public à caractère industriel et commercial' (Conseil d'Etat 1998).  
30 Alongside its mission to deliver a public service, according to a notion of universal mission, postal  
31 services were required to fulfil a commercial purpose and generate profit with an 'extension des  
32 activités financières de la Poste' (Legifrance 1990, art 2). This law overturned La Poste's tradition of  
33 employing only public service employees or *fonctionnaires*, by allowing the company to recruit new  
34 employees on short-term contracts who no longer had the social or legal protection of the traditional  
35 *fonctionnaire*. In one testimonial account, Thomas Barba, a former postman and trade unionist  
36 describes how when he began work as a postman in 1983, the low pay and physical hardship of work  
37 was mitigated by the sheer joy of his daily encounter with villagers in the tiny rural community of Lisle-  
38 sur-Tarn in the south of France. He describes his visits to isolated farmhouses where the owner had  
39 chosen not to install a letter box, so that he could personally greet the postman each morning. He was  
40 frequently invited to share meals with a family and at Christmas, when he sold La Poste's calendars,  
41 he was able to double his monthly salary. For Barba, liberalisation destroyed a notion of public service  
42 that had defined the parameters of a daily engagement with the citizen and stripped postal workers of  
43 the status and prestige linked to their role as *fonctionnaires*: 'C'était avant que la lame de fond du  
44 libéralisme ne vienne tout emporter, tel un tsunami déchaîné' (Barba 2013, 15). However, such  
45 testimonial accounts must be approached with caution, as they represent a certain nostalgic vision of  
46 La Poste's public sector past that is used by the Left to challenge liberalisation as a political and  
47 ideological project. Interestingly, such myth-making is also propagated by La Poste's management  
48 itself which invokes public service symbolism as a means to further the company's commercial goals.  
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3 Such idealisation draws in turn on popular culture where, for instance, the postman has long been  
4 configured as a symbol of communal life, tradition and timeless simplicity.<sup>1</sup> In 2010, La Poste changed  
5 status again becoming a 'société anonyme' (limited shares company). Whilst the state remains the  
6 principal shareholder, this statutory change allows La Poste to pursue private sector funding by  
7 placing shares on financial markets. For some critics, this statutory change has fundamentally  
8 transformed the nature of La Poste from being a state-owned company underpinned by public service  
9 ideals to a private enterprise driven by share holder value on financial markets (Brun 2013; Fontenelle  
10 2013).  
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14 Liberalisation provided the backdrop for a restructuring of La Poste as chief executive Jean-Paul  
15 Bailly (2002-2013) and subsequently Pierre Wahl (2013 onwards), put in place economic strategies  
16 designed to modernise postal services, expand commercial activities and cut staffing costs. The Cap,  
17 Qualité, Courrier plan introduced in 2003 by Bailly under the leitmotif 'modernisation' set out a  
18 strategy for a major reorganisation of La Poste designed to modernise its structures and launch a new  
19 commercial strategy. Modernisation was driven by a sense of urgency and necessity: in the face of  
20 impending market competition and the rise of the internet, La Poste had either to modernise or  
21 disappear.<sup>2</sup> La Poste's bosses secured an investment of 3,4 billion euros from the state to support a  
22 large-scale modernisation that was intended to transform territorial structures that had remained  
23 unchanged since the Napoleonic era. As 66% of the state's investment had to be repaid from La  
24 Poste's own sources, the need to generate profit became paramount. A report presented to Senate in  
25 June 2003 prior to Bailly's plan sets the tone for modernisation, invoking metaphors of La Poste's  
26 imminent demise: this is an organisation that is that is 'en mal d'oxygène' that is gasping for breath  
27 and suffocating under the weight of its own bureaucracy (Larcher 2003, 1). La Poste is criticised as a  
28 state monopoly that is moribund, stagnant and immobile and that is consigned to a stagnant public  
29 service role as 'la banque des pauvres et des vieux' (Ibid, 7) By contrast, liberalisation is described as  
30 a life-affirming force, an emancipatory tide that will free La Poste of stifling bureaucracy and unleash  
31 vital economic energies. The report describes the two overriding objectives for La Poste's reform:  
32 firstly, a deep-seated modernisation of its operations and territorial networks and secondly, an  
33 aggressive commercial strategy that will increase La Poste's profit margins. This economic strategy is  
34 not a matter of choice or an issue for debate, but is an urgent necessity: 'se réorganiser pour ne pas  
35 mourir' (Ibid, 1). Whilst announcing that jobs and working conditions would be protected, under  
36 Bailly's leadership, La Poste cut one third of its jobs (84,000 jobs in 10 years) through a non-  
37 replacement of fonctionnaires and shifted recruitment increasingly towards private contract  
38 employees. One third of post offices were shut down between 2002 and 2010, with some communal  
39 offices disappearing and others centralised as branches within supermarkets or other commercial  
40 entities (Cazes and Hacot 2015).  
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51 Pierre Wahl's 2014 strategic plan 'La Poste 2020: Conquérir l'Avenir' is framed in a language of  
52 conquest, dynamism and innovation in a bid to transform La Poste into an 'entreprise conquérante'  
53 that delivers profit, innovation and captures new business (Cazes and Hacot 2015, 49). In a rhetoric  
54 not dissimilar to that of a venture capitalist group, Wahl's ambition is to 'conquérir de nouveaux  
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3 territoires', 'changer de modèle' and 'stimuler l'innovation' (Le Groupe de La Poste 2014, 2, 3). His  
4 strategic priorities are to push La Poste increasingly towards profit-making activities such as banking  
5 and commercial services, develop new technologies in online services and 'modernise' public  
6 services by cutting costs. As part of this strategy, banking is identified as a core economic activity,  
7 with plans to raise profit returns from 547 million euros in 2012 to over a billion in 2020. The plan sets  
8 out a vision for a multi-tasking postman ('un facteur multi-tâche') who can deliver a wide range of  
9 services to his 'clients' for payment and Wahl even suggests that in rural areas, postmen could help  
10 deliver shopping. In a bid to mobilise La Poste's workforce, a '20 projets 2020' project encourages  
11 employees to devise 'start-up' ideas which can generate new business for La Poste. However, Wahl's  
12 inspiring vision of economic innovation is counterposed against a brutal cost-cutting strategy for  
13 employees: 'Ne remplacer personne au départ, mettre tout le monde sous pression pendant six mois,  
14 un an et en tirer les conclusions' (Cazes and Hacot 2015, 49). Yet, as sociologist Nadège Vezinat  
15 makes clear, La Poste's liberalisation did not constitute a brutal rupture with a public sector past, but  
16 was instead, an extension and intensification of existing financial and commercial activities. La Poste  
17 was the key institution for banking transactions in France in post-war France until the 1970s and long  
18 before the creation of a Banque postale in 2006 (Vezinat 2012).<sup>3</sup>

### 25 **Surveillance methods**

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27 If liberalisation freed La Poste of regulatory constraints, it was accompanied by an extension of  
28 countervailing 'mécanismes de contrôle' that tightened regulation and surveillance over each  
29 individual worker (Deleuze 1990). Critics have shown how neoliberal imperatives were incorporated  
30 into the workplace through a new and redefined management model that projected a vision of work  
31 based on exciting ideals of self-realisation, creativity and freedom. The model worker was someone  
32 who identified completely with the goals of the company, so that control became internalised and  
33 formal hierarchies and supervision were no longer necessary. Work is no longer measured by the  
34 direct gaze of the boss, but through sophisticated software techniques, self-reflexive evaluation and  
35 individualised performance targets (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999, De Gaulejac 2005). Management  
36 methods are increasingly directed towards the whole person seeking to harness personality, affect  
37 and sociability to the economic needs of the company. Workers are exhorted to be themselves and to  
38 bring their own personality into the workplace. Vincent De Gaulejac and Fabienne Hanique describe a  
39 'capitalisme paradoxant' in which individual freedom is summoned forth in the workplace only to be  
40 captured and moulded by prescriptive norms and controls: 'On lui prescrit d'être autonome, mais la  
41 conquête de l'autonomie passe par la soumission à des injonctions, par l'incorporation de normes,  
42 par l'intériorisation de façons de faire et de manières d'être préétablies' (De Gaulejac and Hanique  
43 2015, 20). In the new restructured workplaces, employees are led to believe that they can achieve  
44 self-fulfillment, conquer obstacles, achieve ambitions and dreams and become more fully themselves.  
45 Yet, the promise of freedom is a hollow simulacrum that serves only to coerce and manipulate the  
46 individual worker. It results in an expression of human freedom that appears spontaneous, but is in  
47 reality, rigorously controlled and performed to fulfil the demands of capitalist economic rationality.  
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3 La Poste elucidates the new mechanisms of control that characterise today's neoliberal workplaces in  
4 which a rhetoric of freedom serves as a means to extend regulation and surveillance of the individual  
5 employee. In this case, new management methods were driven by an economic strategy that sought  
6 to transform a public service exchange that was enclosed and autonomous into a commercial  
7 transaction capable of delivering profit. In the new rebranded postal services, the notion of public  
8 service was seen to be compatible and even complementary with a commercial and profit-driven  
9 strategy (Teissier 1997; Oblet and Villechaise-Dupont 2005) In order to re-orientate the everyday  
10 public service exchange towards commercial goals, La Poste needed to target the whole person and  
11 mould personal and social skills towards the exigencies of a commercial transaction. Management  
12 introduced a barrage of new management methods designed to prescribe, monitor and measure  
13 every aspect of the public service exchange. One set of measures introduced prescriptive norms that  
14 were designed to control forms of individual expression and sociability used by the post office worker  
15 in his/her daily exchange with the citizen. The aim was to achieve a 'Taylorisation du sourire' by  
16 instrumentalising the most intimate and subjective dimensions of the human personality in the  
17 interests of capitalist rationality (Ariès 2014). An early example of this was the BRASMA technique  
18 (Bonjour, regard, attention, sourire, merci, au revoir) introduced in 1996 that instructed the postal  
19 worker when to smile, to maintain continuous eye contact and greet the customer politely.  
20 Management set as its goal to ensure that 100% of employees were 'en état de Brasma' (Oblet and  
21 Villechaise 2005, 350). Employees were rigorously monitored and audited to ensure a strict  
22 adherence to a pre-defined script. Post offices were regularly inspected by a 'client mystère', a  
23 manager posing as a customer, who would evaluate the post office worker, adding or deducting  
24 points according the 'qualité de l'accueil' and whether a product sale was achieved. This evaluation  
25 would then be used to allocate a grade to each post office which in turn determined monthly bonus  
26 pay for all employees in that branch. In her detailed ethnographic study of postal workers at a Paris-  
27 based post office, Fabienne Hanique describes how in the aftermath of such an inspection,  
28 employees were chastised for failing to comply with prescriptive norms and the inspector reported:  
29 'les agents ne respectent pas scrupuleusement le Brasma et n'ont pas le réflexe vente' (Hanique  
30 2014,167). As a result, all employees were sent on a training workshop where they had to rehearse  
31 their prescribed lines and learn how to better satisfy customers through modules such as 'satisfaction  
32 client' and 'accueil plaisir' (Ibid, 278-9). For some critics, these techniques are designed to condition,  
33 infantilise and control employees in order to construct a type of employee whose every impulse,  
34 thought and emotion are attuned to the economic interests of the company (Balbastre 2002).

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Other management measures were designed to inculcate employees in a new workplace culture and  
identity geared towards the company's commercial goals. As a traditional public service organisation,  
La Poste was characterised by a distinctive workplace culture and tradition rooted in an overarching  
set of public service values that defined the parameters of individual engagement in work (Teissier  
1997, 14). For many employees, the shift to a new commercial logic was experienced as a profound  
upheaval 'une révolution culturelle' that challenged deeply held values, professional experience and  
subjective identities (Ibid, 14). In order to instil new commercial attitudes and skills, new measures  
were introduced including 'challenges' whereby post office branches would compete against each

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3 other to achieve the highest product sales, or 'sprints' where a specific product had to be sold within a  
4 specified period of time. Meanwhile in banking services, employees were exhorted to follow the 'Sept  
5 G' sales method setting out 'sept étapes gagnantes' designed to achieve an effective sale (Veziat  
6 2012). Every banking transaction with a member of the public, from opening an account to  
7 transferring money, was allocated a strict time limit. Hanique describes how the new sales culture was  
8 often a source of division and controversy amongst employees. The value of work was increasingly  
9 measured not by the quality of public service delivered, but by the number of sales achieved. She  
10 describes how some employees would cheat the system in order to avoid having to push sales on  
11 members of the public. One male post office worker in his forties found himself unable to adapt to the  
12 new sales culture: 'Jacky n'est pas un vendeur' and in order to meet his monthly sales target, he  
13 would buy pre-stamped envelopes in bulk and pass them on to his wife who would then sell them to  
14 a stationary department in the accountancy firm where she worked (Hanique 2004, 122). This allowed  
15 Jacky to gain his monthly bonus whilst preserving his sense of professionalism and public service  
16 values: 'toucher la prime sans se salir les mains' (Ibid, 127). For others, the drive to commercialise a  
17 daily public service relationship was a source of immense psychological distress requiring employees  
18 to assume a personal disposition that was in conflict with their values and sense of identity: 'Or, c'est  
19 cette transaction intime avec les valeurs, que chacun est amené à opérer en situation de vente, qui  
20 rend difficile du point de vue subjectif – voire coûteuse d'un point de vue psychique – cette  
21 composante nouvelle de l'activité de guichetier de la Poste' (Ibid, 128) One study based on interviews  
22 with over 50 postal workers in 6 post offices, reveals the resentment, frustration and anger generated  
23 by the introduction of enforced sales techniques. In areas where some customers were  
24 socially disadvantaged and had linguistic difficulties, postal workers often refused to follow  
25 instructions to push commercial sales and were angry that La Poste was manipulating a public  
26 service reputation to achieve economic profits (Siblot 2011).

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36 Other measures were designed to intensify workloads and raise levels of individual productivity. As  
37 the work of each employee was no longer concerned with delivering a public service, but was now an  
38 instrument for generating profit, it was subject to a plethora of new mechanisms designed to quantify  
39 working activity. In *La Société malade de gestion*, Vincent Gaulejac suggests that neoliberal  
40 management was obsessed with quantifiable results ('la culture du résultat'), seeking to convert all  
41 forms of working activity into numerical data and dismissing work that could be quantified as  
42 worthless (Gaulejac 2005, 10). For instance, the Facteur d'avenir strategy introduced in 2007 was  
43 intended to measure, quantify and monitor the delivery rounds of the postman in order to maximise  
44 efficiency. Whereas delivery rounds had traditionally been monitored by a postal inspector who would  
45 take into account human variables such as the age of the postman, whether the terrain was hilly or  
46 flat, whether it was rural or urban and weather contingencies, the new mechanisms relied on software  
47 which often ignored the human realities of the delivery round. The Metod software calculated optimal  
48 time slots to speed up delivery rounds that used arbitrary criteria disconnected from the human  
49 activity involved. Similarly, in post offices, employees were connected to a programme, Morg@ne that  
50 divided work into a series of tasks, each of which is given an 'efficiency ratio' and measured according  
51 to the number of sales achieved (CHSCT 2014). These measurement mechanisms correspond to  
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3 what Boltanski and Chiapello refer to as the 'nouvelles formes de contrôle' of neoliberalism in which  
4 surveillance is no longer carried out by the direct authority of the boss but executed at a distance  
5 through forms of self-management or through new technologies that exert 'une pression quasi  
6 permanente sur les salariés' (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999, 520). At the same time, the postman was  
7 required to extend his or her work beyond the traditional task of delivering mail in order to embrace an  
8 array of lucrative commercial services. A 'Bonjour facteur' service was introduced in 2011 that  
9 extended the role of the postman to delivering medication, visiting the elderly (exploiting a lucrative  
10 'silver economy'), meter reading, delivering shopping and recycling. In some regions, such as the  
11 Dordogne, a new service was introduced whereby the postman would search for lost dogs for a  
12 specific fee (Cazes and Hacot 2015). Since 2015, all postmen are equipped with a smartphone that  
13 can be used to process home insurance claims. In one marketing brochure, in the form of a sketch  
14 with interactive web links, La Poste represents the new modern identity of the postman as someone  
15 who combines public service familiarity and trust-worthiness with slick commercial efficiency. He is  
16 presented as an amiable and trustworthy figure wearing the postman's familiar cap, satchel and  
17 sturdy boots, but the customer can discover by clicking on the interactive links, a range of cutting-  
18 edge services, from reading meters on his smartphone, to delivering shopping or visiting the elderly.  
19 In its glossy corporate publication, *Facteurs en France* (2006), La Poste plays on this idealised image  
20 by presenting a series of scenic images and testimonies, that configure the postman as an unsung  
21 hero whose tireless commitment to public service and to duty are bound up with an image of the  
22 French nation itself and its struggle to preserve its own values in a world of globalising change and  
23 upheaval: "les 100 000 facteurs partout en France, incarnent chaque matin les valeurs de La Poste et  
24 du service public' (La Poste 2006, 13).

### 33 **Going postal**

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35 In October 2016, La Poste's management announced that they were temporarily suspending all  
36 restructuring plans in order to allow talks with the trade unions to take place (Waters 2016). This  
37 decision followed the publication of an open letter addressed to La Poste and to the French  
38 government that was signed by dozens of medical experts and warned of a rapid deterioration in the  
39 state of health of employees that was leading to dangerous levels of personal distress and in some  
40 cases, to suicide (Baujard 2016). The letter was prompted by the suicide of a 53 year old postman  
41 who hanged himself at his home on 17 July 2016, leaving a letter addressed to La Poste's bosses. In  
42 this letter, published in the press, the postman explicitly blames work as the cause of his actions,  
43 accusing La Poste of abandoning public service values and of destroying its own workers: "Depuis  
44 quelques années, la Poste a petit à petit détruit ses employés, les vrais postiers, ceux qui avaient le  
45 contact avec les gens. En ce qui me concerne, ils m'ont totalement détruit" (Roudaut 2016). He  
46 presents himself as a desperate lone defender of the public interest in the face of a tyrannical  
47 organisation that is bent on destroying collective values in its pursuit of particularist gain. According to  
48 one enquiry, there have been 9 suicides and 5 attempted suicides at La Poste between 2013 and  
49 2016, but some sources have placed this figure much higher. In a communiqué sent to the French  
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3 government, the trade union SUD-PTT accused La Poste of bearing responsibility for 200 employee  
4 suicides between 2008 and 2012 (Michel 2013).  
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6 France is not unique in experiencing acts of extreme violence and the expression 'going postal'  
7 entered American slang in the aftermath of a series of mass murders by United States Postal Service  
8 workers. Over 20 incidents of murder took place between 1970 and 1997 in which postal workers  
9 killed managers, fellow workers, police officers and members of the public, often before taking their  
10 own lives.<sup>4</sup> In *Going Postal* (2005), Mark Ames argues that these were not sporadic acts of violence  
11 by deranged individuals, but were a collective response to structural conditions of work and in  
12 particular to a seismic shift in corporate culture following a semi-privatisation of postal services that  
13 had resulted in mass lay-offs, chronic stress and impossible productivity targets. Yet, suicide has long  
14 been viewed as symptomatic of structural conditions in society and for sociologists in the tradition of  
15 Emile Durkheim (1897) and Maurice Halbwachs (1930), suicide constitutes a kind of mirror to society  
16 that reveals its fundamental nature and tensions at a given historical juncture. In their wide-ranging  
17 sociological study of suicide, Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet recently observed: 'Ce n'est pas  
18 la société qui éclaire le suicide, c'est le suicide qui éclaire la société' (Baudelot and Establet 2006,17).  
19 More generally, extreme acts of subjective violence are viewed by some as a response to the hidden  
20 systemic violence of contemporary capitalism (Žižek 2008, Berardi 2015). Workplace suicides are a  
21 new phenomenon in historical terms and documented cases in France prior to the 1990s are rare and  
22 generally confined to the farming sector (Dejours and Bègue 2009). At La Poste, suicide can be seen  
23 as an extreme manifestation of a more generalised suffering that has been made evident in recent  
24 years by rising absenteeism, chronic stress, burn-out and depression. La Poste has been identified as  
25 a site of social suffering where overarching transformations in working conditions have prompted a  
26 crisis in the mental health of employees (Kaspar 2012). Suicide in French postal services seems to  
27 correspond to what Durkheim described as 'anomic suicide' caused by a profound disruption of the  
28 social order, usually as a result of the destabilising effects of economic crisis. Neoliberal restructuring  
29 at La Poste seemed to trigger what Durkheim describes as 'des perturbations de l'ordre collectif' that  
30 disrupted an existing social world through which individuals defined themselves and their  
31 relationships with others (Durkheim 1930, 271). Beyond its material effects, restructuring was  
32 experienced by many workers as an assault on identity, on a subjective sense of self and belonging in  
33 the world.  
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45 The recent crisis has brought to the surface a question that has plagued La Poste in recent years,  
46 namely, the impact on lived experiences of work of an overarching drive towards liberalisation and  
47 restructuring that has modified both the values and organisation of work. In 2012, two suicides by  
48 postal employees in close succession, both committed in the workplace, prompted La Poste's boss  
49 Jean-Paul Bailly to launch a full-scale enquiry into working conditions that led to the publication of a  
50 detailed report and set of recommendations (Kaspar 2012). In the first suicide case, a 28 year old  
51 manager jumped out of the window from the fourth floor meeting room of a post office building in the  
52 centre of Rennes on 29 February. He was described as highly ambitious and conscientious employee  
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3 who had been rapidly promoted from a role of postman to one of manager. However, he had recently  
4 been deployed to a succession of roles below his career level. He left a letter addressed to his wife in  
5 which he blamed work as the cause of his actions and stated that his home life had nothing to do with  
6 his suicide: 'toute cette anxiété professionnelle a pris le pas sur ma vie privée' (L'Express 2012). Ten  
7 days later, a 42 year old former postman who was on sick leave took the decision to return to the  
8 postal centre where he worked on a Sunday in order to hang himself. He left a detailed portfolio of  
9 documents including letters, e-mails, meeting minutes, a video and audio recordings of his meetings  
10 with managers. In one letter he blames work for destroying the values on which he had built his  
11 working life: 'Je considère que la hiérarchie de la Poste (à tous niveaux) est à l'origine de ma perte de  
12 repères, de la remise en cause des valeurs profondes sur lesquelles j'avais bâti ma vie.' He goes on  
13 to explain why he chose to take his own life in his place of work : 'Je voulais faire cela sur le site de la  
14 poste , car les responsables sont les dirigeants' (Le Nouvel Observateur 2012). Following lengthy  
15 legal proceedings, a Rennes tribunal ruled in March 2016 that his suicide was a work-related accident  
16 for which La Poste was liable. The tribunal statement noted that the victim had been in conflict with  
17 management following a forced redeployment and noted that the victim had made the symbolic  
18 decision to take his own life in the workplace (Tribunal Administratif de Rennes 2016).  
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25 The report commissioned by La Poste's chief executive, published in the aftermath of these suicides  
26 ('Rapport de la Commission du Grand Dialogue à la Poste') presents a contradictory picture of La  
27 Poste's liberalisation and subsequent restructuring in which economic successes, according to a wide  
28 range of indicators, are contrasted with evidence of a workforce experiencing unprecedented levels of  
29 pressure and psychological distress. From an economic perspective, La Poste's restructuring had  
30 been 'couronnée de succès' with an increase in net profits (+23%), improvements in service quality  
31 and in formal workplace conditions, with a steady rise in salary levels and an extension of permanent  
32 contracts (Kaspar 2012, 18). Yet employees themselves were experiencing a severe deterioration in  
33 the quality of their working lives, with rising levels of absenteeism, unmanageable workloads and job  
34 dissatisfaction. The report highlights the contradiction between a liberalisation of La Poste that  
35 removed centralised bureaucratic controls and transferred greater freedom and autonomy to local  
36 agencies and the realities of a workplace where these newly acquired freedoms were subject to strict  
37 production targets, prescriptive norms and tight surveillance. The report situates workplace suffering  
38 in this conflict between, on the one hand, a model of work that is prescribed, controlled and measured  
39 and on the other, one that calls on the employee to take initiatives, to become autonomous and self-  
40 reliant: "Tout semble indiquer que l'entreprise hésite profondément entre une culture industrielle  
41 traditionnelle, fortement rationalisée, favorisant le travail prescrit, et une culture plus responsabilisante,  
42 invitant à la prise d'initiatives, notamment dans la relation clients' (Ibid, 36).  
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51 Some suicides have been linked to an intensification of workplace pressures at La Poste. On 25 of  
52 February 2013, a 51 year old director of internal communications at La Poste's head office in Paris  
53 hanged himself at his home. He had been on sick leave for three weeks as a result of extreme  
54 exhaustion. At work, he had been filling three separate jobs and managing an excessive workload in  
55 the context of company restructuring. His wife who is pursuing litigation against La Poste claims that  
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3 her husband was hounded with e-mails, phone calls and texts from work in the period leading up to  
4 his suicide. On the day of his suicide, he had allegedly received 50 work e-mails on his smartphone  
5 (Aizicovici 2015). A week later on 4 March 2013, a postman in Bayonne attempted suicide by hanging  
6 himself at the postal centre where he worked. He left a letter entitled 'La Poste m'ma tué' and evoked  
7 'une épouvantable politique managériale' which had destroyed collective values in the workplace: 'où  
8 l'intérêt general et le respect humain ont cédé la place au carriérisme malsain et au mépris  
9 systématique' (Maussion 2013). Trade union representatives attributed this suicide to an excessive  
10 workload and aggressive management strategies.  
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14 La Poste has been plunged into a profound crisis whereby economic strategies based on an  
15 extension of modes of regulation, surveillance and control, have exerted a heavy cost on thousands  
16 of employees. A report published in June 2014 that summarised the findings of nearly 60 enquiries by  
17 occupational experts into working conditions in post offices across France described a workplace at  
18 breaking point: 'L'organisation paraît sous tension, au bord de l'implosion: les personnels travaillent  
19 en mode dégradé et en ressentent beaucoup de souffrance, tant physique que mentale' (CHCST  
20 2014, 20) It describes the damaging psychological effects of a prescribed model of work that is  
21 disconnected from the realities of everyday work and that creates a 'fracture entre le prescrit et le réel'  
22 (Ibid, 32). Post office employees are forced to comply with prescribed behavioural norms that  
23 reduce work to a set of standardised and robotic gestures and that dehumanises a public service  
24 relationship. Rather than improving the quality and efficiency of work, this prescribed model forces  
25 employees to betray their deeply-held professional values and deliver a service of poor quality or that  
26 is inappropriate or abusive. Employees are exhorted to push product sales on customers who may  
27 not want or need them, as work is measured according to quantitative rather than qualitative criteria.  
28 As a consequence, La Poste's workers are characterised by a 'souffrance polymorphe' generated by  
29 a profound sense of alienation, intensified pressure and psychological distress (Ibid, 16).  
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### 36 **Conclusion**

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39 As a workplace transformed by liberalisation, La Poste elucidates the conflicting dynamics of freedom  
40 and control that characterise the shift to neoliberal capitalism and its effects on flesh and blood  
41 experiences of work. For critics, such as Deleuze (1990) and Boltanski and Chiapello (1999),  
42 capitalism is underpinned by a liberatory ideology that is invoked in order to extend and deepen  
43 modes of capital accumulation. An emancipatory discourse, grounded in a rallying cry for individual  
44 freedom, is used to extend capitalism's reach and to dissimulate an extension of control mechanisms  
45 to all spheres of human existence. In Deleuze's societies of control, capitalism's power transcends the  
46 spatial and temporal confines of the industrial factory and captures all facets of life. Today's neoliberal  
47 workplace is characterised by a 'surhumanisation' whereby workers are exhorted to invest every fibre  
48 of themselves, their thoughts, values and emotions, in the economic needs of the corporation (Linhart  
49 2015). At La Poste, liberalisation was framed as a great emancipatory project that would deepen  
50 freedoms, strip away deadening bureaucracy and release capitalist energies. In successive official  
51 texts, the market was presented as a life-affirming force that would reinvigorate La Poste's failing  
52 economic fortunes, heal its administrative dysfunctions and save it from an otherwise certain demise.  
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3 Yet, whilst liberalisation freed the company of regulatory constraints, it was accompanied by an  
4 intensification of methods of surveillance and control over all aspects of individual working activity and  
5 subjective personality. The critical feature of La Poste's new management methods, is that they were  
6 not confined to external working practices and structures, but sought to transform complex, intimate  
7 and vulnerable aspects of a worker's personality (Hanique 2014). Employees were under pressure to  
8 instrumentalise a public service relationship and turn it into a commercial exchange by placing their  
9 own subjective resources at the disposal of the company. A public service relationship that was based  
10 on a relatively autonomous and intimate human exchange and determined by historically-defined  
11 collective values was re-programmed as a cold cash transaction subject to rigorous prescriptions and  
12 controls. Those that deviated from the pre-defined script were subject to disciplinary sanctions or  
13 were forced to endure re-education in order to hone their commercial skills and sales techniques.  
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18 The case of La Poste shows that when capitalist rationality extends to the whole person and  
19 encroaches on complex, intimate and subjective dimensions of the human personality, it can lead to  
20 dangerous and even tragic consequences. This article shows how the control mechanisms of  
21 contemporary capitalism described by Deleuze, Boltanski and Chiapello are given material  
22 embodiment in the workplace in the form of extreme human suffering manifested by the act of suicide.  
23 Liberalising reforms transformed La Poste into a site of extreme suffering, where the workforce was  
24 subject to escalating levels of work-related stress, chronic psychological distress, depression and a  
25 series of suicides (Fontenelle 2013). Whilst it is impossible to know the complex motivations that push  
26 an individual to suicide, recent cases point to the profound trauma experienced by workers in the  
27 newly liberalised workplace. In letters left by suicidal individuals, they unequivocally blame work,  
28 management pressures, work intensification and restructuring as the cause of their violent actions.  
29 They describe a reorganisation of their workplace, not in terms of piecemeal changes to material  
30 conditions or practices, but as assault on their values, identities and very selves. They present their  
31 actions in terms of a desperate, yet ultimately futile line of defence against a tyrannical organisation  
32 bent on destroying the public service values on which they have built their working lives and identities.  
33 In the post-script to *Dead Man Working*, Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming interpret work suicides  
34 as a kind of human strike against an extreme neoliberalism that puts the whole person to work at the  
35 service of the corporation. Workers have become their jobs, and one way to end the tyranny of work  
36 and the dead end nature of capitalism is by ending themselves: 'when there is no clear separation  
37 between *what we do* and *who we are* – the great tragedy of the post-industrial condition- we have to  
38 extend the meaning of the strike to include our very person' (Cederstöm and Fleming 2012, 69). This  
39 article points to the importance of limiting and curtailing the new control mechanisms in order to  
40 reinstate a clear line of demarcation between work and the person, between the professional and the  
41 private and between productive activity and private space.  
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4 <sup>1</sup> Such imagery is celebrated in films such as Jacques Tati's *Jour de fête* (1947) where the figure of the postman  
5 incarnates a lost world of rural community in the aftermath of the world war. In his daily rounds of the village  
6 on bicycle, the postman embodies the virtues of a close-knit community characterised by timeless simplicity,  
7 communal innocence and village life.

8 <sup>2</sup> Despite warnings of impending market competition following liberalisation, there is still no other company  
9 competing with La Poste at national level, so that it still delivers 99% of letters to post boxes. Whilst  
10 approximately 15 private companies now offer postal services, these are confined to specific regions and  
11 localities (Portail de l'IE).

12 <sup>3</sup> La Poste had been assigned a role in financial activities since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1918, the first cheques  
13 postaux were introduced. In 1953, La Poste began providing private loans to households and it was the main  
14 institution for banking in France until the 1970s when mainstream banks took over this role (Veziat 2012).

15 <sup>4</sup> A notorious recent example involved Stephen Craig Paddock who was responsible for the 2017 Las Vegas  
16 shooting where he shot 58 people at a country music festival from his hotel room, before killing himself with  
17 his gun. Paddock was a former postman who worked for US postal services between 1976 to 1978.