

## **Change in Practice ? Keeping Posted on Practices**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper aims at making more explicit the notion of “change in practices” by proving wrong the common assumption that fieldwork experience helps clarify such fundamental assumptions as the understanding of change. Fieldwork descriptions imply an interpretation of the notion of change, but it does not tell us what is change. To prove our case, we use strategy as practice (SAP) as a reference to explore the notion of change: we use rich data and observed interactions in the field to describe changing practices and we attempt to capture all the relevant dimensions of change. We conclude that, when using an SAP approach, the notion of change is implicitly used, making it an inconsistent object of the world as can be found in empiricism and modal realist ontologies.*

### **Introduction**

To an outsider, La Poste may have remained a timeless and out of space organization in a time of acceleration (Rosa, 2010). This institution was for years the target of humorists and jokes, for the administrative approach to operations despite the decline of such administrative style in the public space (Czarniawska, 2007). La Poste was indeed some sort of Kafkaesque “castle” that people would encounter on a very regular basis in their mail boxes or in Post Offices: it was timeless, it would never change.

However, when changes were implemented in La Poste, in line with the European directives on services, this derisive trend changed into a somehow chagrined mood: recent changes were deplored either because it was perceived as a remain and an embodiment of the welfare-state which should not have been touched or because change was perceived as inappropriate and a (bad) imitation of private firms. The origin of change was being questioned, and so was its legitimacy.

Finally, as the national second employer, La Poste was very much in the public eye and its ongoing change hotly debated. One of the reasons why the debate was so active was that everyone could come up with personal experiences of the recent changes. Most descriptions involved interactions in the Post Offices: they were very minute and one could see that some things had changed, others had not. That created dissociation between the ongoing process of

change and the intended state of change. Different changes meant a heterogeneous situation with no consistent notion of change as can be assumed in common sense.

This is that important notion, change, that we want to explore in this paper by focusing on the interactions in post offices that users and employees are involved in everyday. By doing so, we attempt to fill a gap in the literature on change and practices. The conflict between a strategic notion of change involving a monist view of that transformation on an organizational scale and that of experienced change by individuals in groups via interactions is generally solved by picking one scale (macro, meso, micro) involving a theory on change. Collected data become facts supporting this theory even though, admittedly, “practices” may never be reduced to a single interpretation and change is a multi-faceted notion. So if change is such a large notion and if practices are so diverse and complex, what do we mean by “change in practices”?

In this paper, we explore this notion of change by first providing an overview of the literature on change and practices. We attempt to show how the practice-based view does not explicitly provide a consistent view on the notion of change: it seems to be part of what can be understood via fieldwork participant observation (part I). Accordingly, we introduce our methodology to find and treat data that would fit and inform the issue of “change in practices” (part II). We then provide an overview of the field we have selected: La Poste, the French mailing services. The company has been experiencing recent changes moving away from its 350 year-old history of public services as a State company (part III). We describe some of the palpable results of this “change” as experienced by describing the interactions within Post offices before and behind the desks. (Part IV). Using this description, we finally provide an interpretation on the notion of change as it is used in strategy and organization (part V). We conclude that change in practices involves experience but that the experience of change makes the subjects of experience oblivious to their own practices. Participant observation does not give a clue on the nature of change. Clearly, it is difficult to draw a line between what has changed and what has not changed as far as practices are concerned. As a result, when researchers attempt to use fieldwork experience to solve the problematic question of change by offering a precise description of “real practices”, their descriptions implicitly rely on fundamental assumptions on the nature of the world: change appears as an inconsistent being in the world. We argue that this stand should be more explicit since it shows that SAP

## Part I. The notion of changes in practices

In this part, we first present the strategy as practice (SAP) approach to change as opposed to other approaches in management (1). We then focus on vexed questions about change such as the ones involved in new public management and the privatization of ex-public services. We describe the SAP approach to those changes (2). Finally, we focused on key questions about change that seem to be left unanswered despite a good knowledge of whatever field is under study (3).

### I.1. Strategy as Practice: A Specific Approach to Management

The practice-based-view (PBV) of change is already quite well-defined: many papers have now been written on this issue despite the fact that this stream of research is quite recent. It is characterized by an approach to all kind of changes using the different situations involving practices in organizations. The specificity of the approach is already quite definite and seems to be the result of the history of the paradigm in the discipline.

Accordingly, in practice-based-view, change in practices cannot be assimilated to “practical change” (common sense pragmatics based on experience). On the contrary, it implies a theoretical background involving different theories and assumptions on change. Practices are *“the social, symbolic and material tools through which strategy work is done”* (SAP Website).

Accordingly, we shall try to expose how the notion of change in terms of practices has come to be constructed by comparing it to two “older” research streams in management: mainstream and critical management.

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Insert chart 1 about here

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We assume that the three streams presented are in line with the tradition of change analysis in Western tradition of thought. Previously, the notion of change in physical and social matters had involved a great many debates around the notion of change and “factors of change”. From Antique Philosophy to Modern Philosophy, internal change<sup>1</sup> (endogenous) had been opposed to a theory of the external cause of change (exogenous) in systems attempting to describe social facts as part of a single whole or a system with origins (primum mobile) and a set of causes and reasons which could be organic or mechanistic. The form of change itself has been

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<sup>1</sup> For example contradiction (s) and dialectics (Hegel, Marx).

described as evolutionary, linear, cyclical, continuous and discontinuous. As we can see in the chart above, because they respectively inherit the positivist view of science and the criticism of that position on social facts, mainstream and critical management more or less provide a set of norms to define change in terms of unit of analysis, factors, degree of reality of facts and facts themselves (realia). In fact, most papers adopt a varied range of positions departing from the norms, which should not come as a surprise. With time, to provide a common theory of social change (Boudon & Bourricaud, 1982: 64), modern social sciences have been more and more inclined to adopt a pluralistic approach to change. In line with that evolution, the practice-based view has been offering insights on change using practices to explore the rich variations offered within social fields and openly favours variations on norms, as we shall presently see.

## I.2. Strategy-as-Practice and Change

The practice-based-view (PBV) which we perceive as in line with the strategy-as-practice school (SAP) assumptions seems to be strongly opposing any “ideological approach” to social facts. As a result, it insists on actual practices as opposed to an engaged approach to change to avoid easy generalizations.

In the SAP website, the research agenda insists on three specificities:

- An attention to micro-phenomena to understand “what is happening” in firms and society: research into the minutiae of organisational life and the practices that constitute the ‘internal life of process’ (Brown and Duguid, 2001; Chia and Holt, 2008; Fenton and Jarzabkowski, 2006; Rasche and Chia, 2009).
- The importance of practitioners whose situated view on their own practices needs to be heard: thus the suggestion to “bring back the actor into the research landscape” (Whittington, 2006) to have a view of the “praxis” defined as “the flow of activity in which strategy is accomplished” (Jarzabkowski, 2003 a; et al., 2003b; Johnson, 2000 ; et al., 2003, 2010)
- A collegial approach: theoretical pluralism involves different theories such as practice based, institutional, discourse, sense making, routines and cognition. It is open to multidisciplinary approaches and open to the contributions of researches from other fields of research

Regarding change, this SAP approach seems to provide a synthesis of both traditional management approach (presenting change as an event that can and must be managed) and critical management (focused on the detrimental consequences of change and managerial inability to implement proper change, Courpasson, 1998). PBV implies that the issue is not so much about the legitimacy-illegitimacy of change since a value judgement on change is beside the point. Depending on the multiple stakeholders' point of view, on the context, one may find different judgements passed on change. However, choosing not to judge change also implies that one compromises its ability to generalize change as a phenomenon: no unit of analysis, no factors, no stand on social facts and observed realia would be universally true. Post structural structural functionalism in SAP has gotten rid of structures by focusing on empirical facts to tell us about change.

As a result of its deliberate "different approach" to strategy involving social and cultural facts, within the SAP stream, some debates are presented in a new light thanks to the use of new material, often fine-grain longitudinal case-studies exploring the multiple facets of change via multidimensional multi-scaled reports from the field: the plan-process change debate; the resistance to change- path dependency debate; the intended-implemented change debate; the change agent debate (Top Management vs Middle Management) and finally the meaning (sensemaking/sensegiving) debate. However, all these debates often intersect and, when piled-up, do not present a clear view of change in practices.

Whereas the previous schools providing thesis on change could be criticized as simplistic therefore partial constructs, the practice-based-view seems to have a more nuanced yet vague notion of change because it depends on the practices described. For example, practices are the signs, easily available to free observation, of the fit between intended strategy and implemented strategy. Practices are a way to look at discourses and intentions by focusing on what are actually happening (reality), whereas a critical discussion on discourses and intentions could only be yet another discourse, with no factual support.

That is particularly the case in heated debates such as the one about privatization and the introduction of a new public management style of administration. The present approach to implement change has been new public management (NPM) rules of best practices (Moynihan, 2006 ; Kaboolian, 1998), but this Anglo-Saxon approach has often been conflicting with administrative rules (Vandenabeele, 2007) and bureaucracy (Wise, 2004) despite attempts to foster public service motivation in employees (Moynihan & Pundey, 2007). Practices are never neutral, and they may be instrumented, so referring to

practices as such seems to be a way, for SAP, to go back to what is observable, in the most detached perspective possible. As a result, observed practices in the field are often observed at individual or small group level and one of the most frequent type of practices is therefore “interactions” (Goffman, 1963; Winkin, 1981) in the Chicago School tradition of micro-sociology and ethnography. Interactions display what discourses and routines may want to hide. However, does that mean that understanding practices via participant observation will make us understand the meaning of change?

### I.3. Some Questions Left Open about Change

This provides an approach to change in practices and a great deal of data but does it tell us something more about change in practices than this general motto in qualitative research: facts differ very much depending on each situation. Whereas the two “older” research streams (mainstream and critical management) seem to provide key assumptions for the analysis of change, the notion remains quite difficult to tackle in SAP. One of the reasons for the lack of a unique stand on change is that the field of research is already quite vast and that many researches have led to a very pluridisciplinary tradition on change. Another reason would be that, in the tradition of Parsons (1951; 1961; 1976) and Merton (1957), structural functionalism provides no grand theory with a system of change, therefore, practices (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Schatzki, 2005) provide a grounded way to explain the moving equilibrium of social situations depending on roles bargaining within organized groups.

In fact, because the equilibrium is only a tendency so that a proper explanation can be found to both change and continuity, SAP authors are often led to use concepts engineered in the two previous streams for methodological and epistemological purposes, if only to prove them wrong. A mix of naturalism and materialist dialectics may sometimes lead to surprising descriptions of change, but a criticism of such notions as “resistance to change” can also be very accurate to describe real-life situations after decision-makers have adopted the notions of “resistance to change” and make us of them to impose their choice (Piderit, 2000). This attention to the instrumentation of social theory generally make SAP treatment of change more complex than that of classic authors that might be in line some of SAPs stands on organized groups and strategy (Argyris, 1993 ; Argyris & Schon, 1974 ; Lewin, 1952 ; Weick & Quinn, 1999) but intended to provide tools to make social change more easy in situation.

Finally, SAP provides many illustrations of the issue of “situations of change” in practice often based on a very in-depth analysis of group interactions (Goffman, 1963). Therefore, we suggest that one of the most obvious scale of analysis for “change in practices” in that of interactions as a function of the “ground” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) where the phenomenon is identified. This might seem to make a set of fundamental assumptions on change unnecessary: there is no “change” per se, practices change.

Yet we suggest that this stand also involves a whole set of assumptions and that it is still missing in most SAP research. As a result, the concept of change in SAP research on change(s) remains blurred ontologically speaking. In the two other streams of research, mainstream and critical management, one may easily grasp what is change: it is persistent (in time), it exists within a system of conservation through change (there are areas of stability in the system) and it has a principle of continuity (it follows regular patterns)<sup>2</sup>. These assumptions on change may seem unnecessary while assuming that change is not consistent, but then it even distorts them to use that notion of consistent change so SAP should refer to an ontology including change as inconsistent (Lewis, 1986; 1988 ; Priest, 1987 ; Priest & al., 1989 ; Von Wright, 1968)<sup>3</sup> using the Eleatic school and Empiricism heritage. However; few SAP papers contain findings which mention or even imply such a view (Chia & Holt, 2008; Rasche & Chia, 2009). What is more, all ethnographic descriptions contain implicit stands, this is why interpretations prove necessary (Geertz, 1986). Accordingly, in this paper, we shall attempt to demonstrate that the use of detailed (if not objective) accounts of on-field practices is not a way to get rid of the issue of change, a phenomenon that requires fundamental assumptions about the world. Furthermore, we shall try and see if the implicit view of the inconsistent nature of change is supported by our SAP-style research on change focusing on practices.

## **Part II. Methodology**

In line with the field tradition of SAP, we conducted most of our research on the field. We followed a research protocol which aimed at capturing the “change of practices” from the

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<sup>2</sup> You may find that even in French Theory and radical constructionism since it is contained in the absence of patterns of the criticism of traditional use of time and space.

<sup>3</sup> For example, that stand based on observation: *“in change... there is at each stage a moment when the changing item is both in a given state, because it has just reached that state, but also not in that state, because it is not stationary but moving through and beyond that state”* (Priest, Routley and Norman, 1989, p. 7)

most visible place, and at the same time, by combining various stakeholders point of view to finally provide a meaningful picture of “change in practices” as a clearly identifiable phenomenon. Therefore, we selected the practices dealing with mail and involving local post offices and clients who used to be called “users” as in public service. To examine a (potential) “change of practices”, our scale is that of interactions (Goffman, 1963; Winkin, 1981) referred to the broader context of organization and strategy (Jarzabkowski, 2003; Fenton & Jarzabkowski, 2006).

As exposed in the following chart (see chart 2 for a detailed account), a research protocol was designed to make it easier to gather fine-grain data (Van Maanen, 1979; Van Maanen, 1988; Van Maanen & al., 2007) in line with a qualitative, case-study approach (Becker & Ragin, 1992 ; Morgan & Smirchich, 1982) and yet to cover a very large case-study since la Poste is a nearly 260 000 people company. Therefore, following Balogun & al (2003), participant observation and in-depth interviews were combined with archival data, outside practitioner research, interactive discussion groups and self-report methods.

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Insert chart 2 about here

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This research protocol followed various steps to account for the richness of La Poste as a social organization. As we shall see, La Poste is a very old institution in France and it is now present in all French localities as a consequence of what was called “the mail age” (Henkin, 2007). The advantage of the company is that it is very open to the public, since post offices are open to the public and mailmen are always in contact with end-users. There were many occasions for interactions but also had to find a way to capture this diversity and yet limit the on-site observations and in-depth interviews to a reasonable amount despite the size of the company (Balogun & al., 2003).

An exploratory phase of research was a visit of multiple post offices in different French regions and data gathering via archives (international, national and local press, internal documents from la Poste, official archives from both Assemblée Nationale and Senate debates as well as declarations by the government and the Cour des Comptes (Rapports de l’Assemblée Nationale, du Sénat, Rapport de la Cour des Comptes 2009) and amendments of the European Parliament and services commission. Our goal here was to assert the reality of changes as announced in the public space as a consequence of the intended strategy of the Group during the “change of status” (privatisation) phase.



The second phase of research was the realization of multiple interviews to clarify the nature of changes in terms of practices. We interviewed 17 key informants (12 middle managers and 5 external experts working on La Poste or being consultants or working in unions or local politicians), using the grid of questions elaborated as a result of the first phase of research. Since the interviews were in-depth and often open ended, multiple meetings were necessary, a total of 45 interviews were realized. Our respondents' answers on change in (mostly their) practices or practices familiar to them were not unanimous and often quite ambiguous (annex 3) so at this point, we hoped the next phases of research would provide a more consistent picture of the issue at stake.

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The third phase consisted in an ethnographic work in three post offices. This possibility was offered by managers who had been interviewed and were interested by an outsider's perspectives on the local implementation of change in la Poste offices. As a result of the previous steps in terms of analysis, we adopted a more narrow focus on change of practices. We introduced twenty students (18 French, 2 Germans) in their third year of business school to the company and to the ethnographic method. Three groups were formed and shepherded by the author to realize three sessions of participant observation of three hours each in three post offices of Rennes, a city West of France. The three offices had been picked by a manager in charge of implementing the new quality standards in post offices in agreement with the three heads of these post-offices. One was in the centre of the city, the other one was in the periphery of a large shopping centre near the station, and the last one was in a peripheral district of the city assimilated to a "poor neighbourhood". Despite separate meetings with each group and three meetings with the three gathered groups to gather our descriptions and provide a uniform description, we failed to come up with common findings on the company. As a result, the presentation would be threefold, comparing the differences occurrences of the field.

The fourth phase of research was the presentation of the findings during a three hours long meeting in the presence of three middle managers of la Poste and one expert, two of which had helped us during the course of the project. That public strongly reacted to students presentations especially since most of the conclusions insisted on the inability of La Poste to change the way its top management would want to see its changes according to "ambition 2015", the official strategy. La Poste managers and students agreed on the hybrid nature of La

Poste with a strong commitment to the public and its social needs by tradition in addition to new objectives as defined in most private firms. Finally, the question of change was left open since it became: would the present change and changes within the company lead to a fit between the social tradition and the new focus on financial performance and (subsequently) what would that imply for the organization in general and people in particular?

The fifth phase of our research was supposed to provide an informed answer to the question left open in phase four and exposed in a research paper. It was the presentation of the results of a research paper in a research seminar (Riot & de la Burgade, 2011, to be published) at the occasion of Arndt Sorge's valetudinarian lecture in Gröningen (Nov 2010). The paper was mostly a descriptive case-study focused on norms and standards (La Poste changed from "universal service obligations" to global standards focused on quality such as ISO 9000). The two authors presented their paper to a 20 people audience from a great variety of countries in Europe. In the end, spontaneous reactions were split between critiques and supporters. The last ones agreed with the authors' comparatist view that French traditions strongly influenced the specific situation of the company (a slower evolution towards private status) than elsewhere in Europe. Critiques on the contrary argued that changes in La Poste were in no way specific and that what the authors were describing was in fact the "resistance to change" of employees (and some "users-clients"), something that they had also been observing in their own country. As visible in the chart (see chart 2 above), our conclusions at the end of each phase was that we were really unable to come up with answers on the nature of change. However, paradoxically, it seems easy enough to describe change and changes as a common sense notion taken as granted with no position on its persistence, its system of conservation and a possible principle of continuity. Before we go on to the description, we feel compelled to expose the limits of our research data, however inconclusive their interpretation may turn out to be. This is, however, important, since it means that change remains a fuzzy concept (Nef, 2006) at different levels of research: data collection, description and interpretation.

### **Possible Biases in the Approach to Practices:**

Despite our efforts to deal with the problem of describing and interpreting practices by following a specific research protocol, the research itself may have created sources of rigidity and inadequacy that, in our view, are difficult to control. However, before providing an interpretation on the results of this research, we think it is important to expose some sources of inadequacy in the results since they may be interpreted as exceedingly divergent.

The conclusion at the end of this research is predominantly that of a great variety of answers to the question of change in practices. Each step brought about different reflections on change in practices. That was mostly due to the differences in points of view, especially contrasted were the views of insiders and outsiders on change. Insiders (managers and employees) had a more thorough understanding of practices, and they seemed quite aware of the gap between their perceptions of what was happening in their company as opposed to their public image. That should have provided a more-in-depth picture, also more involved. But these interviewees were also responsible for the information given about the company to outsiders which implied a more cautious description of “change in practices”. Experts and outsiders may have had more distance and more independence of speech. However, some divergences seemed to be in line with their social position and in particular previous political stands (were they in favour of privatization or not)? These positions may have created an artificial consistency in the description of “change in practices”.

On the other hand, the variations in the descriptions of change in practices have often been greater than those presented above as results. Various conclusions from contributors have been prone to vary with time and our own point of view has evolved with time, one the reason of that evolution being knowledge through the scale and scope of the study, sharing of information and the fact that new events happened. However, taking into account the evolution of the different points of view and exposing it in a detailed way would imply a whole new paper with a different focus this is why we limited the variations of points of view to each step of the research protocol setting of this specific research, however detrimental for the exactitude of data it may be. We shall now attempt to give a detailed presentation of the company, La Poste, before we go on to the detailed results of our investigation.

### **Part III. La Poste: A Moving Picture of the Company through Time**

Our object is that of “change of practices” in a company that is well-known to all, not only in terms of image and activity, but also, in a very familiar, every day way. For these reasons, many people have been able to perceive and experience the impact of two factors of change on La Poste: the influence of free trade on all commercial activities in Europe and the emergence of new technologies as a growingly dominant force shaping all forms of communications. We shall be examining those factors of change when presenting a detailed account of recent strategic changes in la Poste as well as the official strategy of the group. We first look at the change in status of La Poste (1), then at the change in competitive

environment (2) to finally point at a change in core business from mail to retail banking (3). Throughout all these three parts which constitute a background for our observations, we also point at limits to change (factors of non-change) for the organization despite a change in its strategy and its structure.

## 1. Change of Status and its Consequences

The liberalization of the French Post Offices – La Poste- is effective since January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011. Its core business has had to change from mail to a series of complementary activities. It is the end of the two centuries of “the postal age” (Henkin, 2007). It might also be the beginning of free trade legislation in Europe as opposed to national state policy on public and private services. The European Union used law to drive countries towards a convergent model fit for global competition. Ex-public State companies have been prompted to go private and adapt to global competition by the 1997-1998 European Directives<sup>4</sup>.

Over the last two decades, La Poste has changed, namely, observers have been describing many changes. The last strategy plan called “plan ambition 2015” has been supervised by the board, among which one finds top management but also high-rank civil servants. It is in line with the wish of the State to open the capital and to find private funds for its future development as one of the dominant player of mail and banking services in Europe. As soon as 1990, four activities have been isolated for mail (traditional core business), parcels, banking and the post offices defined as retail outlets (l’enseigne). Clients have also been segmented in terms of revenues and as individual, professionals, firms and large accounts.

Firms are especially important since they represent 70 % of total revenues so far (80 % of ordinary mail). But firms are nowadays using less and less mail services. That implies a decline of activity for La Poste, and more specifically a decline in its traditional core business. The first alarming signal has been the creation of an e-card for social security and health (carte vitale), which resulted in the loss of a large account for La Poste and

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<sup>4</sup> Directive 97/67/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 December 1997 on common rules for the development of the internal market of Community postal services and the improvement of quality of service, *Official Journal of the European Communities*, n°L15, 21 January 1998, p.14-25.

the beginning of e-administration. Another alarming signal was the decline of the written press. In September 2009, newspapers feared a potential 30% drop of sales by 2015<sup>5</sup>. As firms stop sending regular mail and now favour the Internet, La Poste has been focused on keeping those clients by providing new services targeting professionals. This appears in the creation of “pro areas” (carrés pros) with specific cards through which clients may benefit from a special offer. Digiposte (via Internet) also provides new packages including communication tools for small businesses and possible sale of clients accounts out of La Poste’s large data basis.

Other targets may prompt further departure from the USO-public service approach to mail and banking: the focus of 95 % clients satisfied, having AFNOR certify its post offices and its focus on cost-cutting. This is done by closing down the less active post offices, mainly in rural areas. But the number of desks remain almost unchanged with approximately 17 000 desks (points de contact) in France. Even if La Poste faces strong resistance of local politicians for any change of the network, full-services post offices are now often replaced by postal agencies or postal outlets: either the costs are shared with municipalities (postal agencies) or commerce to provide postal services (postal outlet). There were 12,522 full-service post offices in 2006 compared to approximately 10,610 in 2009; 3,295 postal agencies compared to 4,615 in 2009 and 1228 postal outlets in 2006 compared to 1819 in 2009<sup>6</sup>. The main concern for La Poste is to increase its profitability and reduce the cost of its network, even if the argument given by La Poste is that postal outlet may be in locations and at opening hours that can be more convenient for clients.

However, the 25 million mailboxes still need mailmen and the reorganization of the local post office makes it much more problematic to make that possible. Finally, La Poste has benefited from early retirement plans by not replacing departures. Most employees with a public status will no longer work in 10 years. As a result, the second employer in France (260 000 employees) will very likely shrink and change in nature. For example, the working conditions of the 200 subsidiaries created by La Poste under the name of Sofipost are more flexible than those of La Poste itself because of work traditions. This decreases the cohesion of the group and, if not recognised as part of La Poste, these activities may suffer from a decreasing trust from customers.

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<sup>5</sup> « Le courrier est-il durablement menacé par Internet ? », *La Tribune*, 22 September 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Sources : ARCEP, *Observatoire des activités postales : année 2005*, décembre 2006 ; and « La présence postale en zone rurale va bénéficier d'une aide accrue », *Les Echos*, January 28, 2010.

## 2. Change in Competitive Environment

La Poste has been preparing for the end of its monopoly and at the same time dealing with its drop in competitiveness since its core business is a less and less attractive activity. Mail revenues have been going down regularly especially in B2B (70 % revenues come from firms). It is now 63 % (2009) of total revenues and expected to be only 30 % in 2015 because of the 5 % annual drop in activity. Geographical constraints make it unlikely that another operator would attempt to cover the same territory as La Poste for mail collection and delivery (Ailleret, 2008): it is extensive and the network quite dense (Broussole, 2008). "Low cost" strategy may appear from competitors such as delivery 2 or 3 days only per week (vs. 6 days per week for La Poste) and/or restricted activities on urban centres, which are more profitable (more quantities and therefore economies of scale). The main risk, as Cremer (2004) and Broussole (2008) mention, is that if new competitors target the more profitable niches, the doctrine of a unique price for all areas from all areas (according to USO) may be challenged. Today, whatever the destination in France, you pay the same price for the stamp of the same letter.

Today, most of the competition comes from fully liberalized markets such as parcels and express. Ex-public monopolies are dominant and have an aggressive growth strategy in these activities. They try to develop at the European level or worldwide and have created loyalty in their corporate customers. For example, Deutsche Post (DPWM) became a strong integrated logistic group worldwide, TNT is more and more global on the European market of express, and the American UPS and Fedex are becoming global actors on parcels and express mail. The parcels and express activities are undergoing a strong globalization of their industry: over the last ten years, this segment experienced 160 mergers and acquisitions worldwide. Even if those activities provide more value added and may therefore be more interesting for operators, it is also a way to enter a new geographical market where ordinary mail is or will be fully liberalized.

Competition in the ordinary mail activities is not yet as strong as in parcels and express mail because the market is not fully liberalized yet. However, a company like Deutsche Post (DPWN) is strengthening its position on direct marketing because it is a more profitable activity than universal postal services. In 2011, La Poste may also face competition from local players such as Adrexo, which was initially working on letterbox

document distribution and wants clearly to enter the mail market. Both DPWN and Adrexo have competitive advantages compared to La Poste.

But with the drop in revenue of ordinary mail, one may wonder on which activity the operators should focus. This drop of revenue cannot be fully compensated by price rises and La Poste is now betting more on its banking activities. Yet in the new targeted core business, banking, local competitors are very present and La Poste is not a leader despite expected alliances with Société Générale for loans, with IARD, CNP and Groupama for insurance and the anticipated acquisition of Banque Palatine to target entrepreneurs. These alliances would, no doubt, modify the boundaries of the company and also its internal organization therefore, probably, a great deal of practices.

In retail banking, clients tend to keep the same company for a long time and do not like to change. Additionally, La Poste is bank number one for clients who have low revenues and would not be accepted by other banks. It is stuck with the image of “the piggy bank of the poor” despite its effort to benchmark competition (credit card and online services have been added). So far, the banking activities had been related to a social service under State supervision. Now La Poste has 770 000 bank accounts but most of them are not profitable for the company. Having 28 million clients in a population of about 60 million does not only mean you gather a lot of funds. It means you need to deal with 700 million monthly social helps front desk operations. La Poste is often the only bank in rural areas and it gathers 70 to 80 % of bank accounts in poor urban areas (ZUS. Zones urbaines sensibles). Employees deal with difficult clients for a little profit and so far, the reason for that had not been scale and scope and performance, but a social need in a democratic society.

New businesses are also developed. As a result of its new for-profit status and performance-orientation, La Poste is looking for areas of growth where it can capitalize on its network, large financial muscle and experience. On the specific segment of direct marketing, La Poste and its subsidiary Mediapost are increasing internationally and made acquisitions in Portugal, Spain, Romania and United-Kingdom in 2009. However the expansion through acquisitions does not make it an integrated global operator but a possibly multi-domestic operator with a dominant home market.

### 3. Change in Core Business

The globalization of its industries may have prompted La Poste, the French postal company, to change its status in January 2010 to be able to increase its capital. The adoption of a more independent private status (still impossible to match with international standards) should allow the State and the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignation (a French organism in charge of investing French people's savings at interest rates level) to invest respectively 1, 2 and 1,5 billion euros in La Poste to meet its 2015 target.<sup>7</sup> The development of the banking activity has been La Poste's top management ambition for more than sixty years (Vezinat, 2010), so it seems to be the result with complex origins.

Most investments are aimed at banking, the activity top management expects to become La Poste's core business. The recent history of ex-Postal European banks examples shows that other solutions might have been selected: the then private banks Postbank has been sold to ING in the Netherlands (30 % of the market), Caja Postal to Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria, and Girobank in the UK has been bought by the Alliance & Leicester group. In Germany and in Belgium just as in the Netherlands and the UK, as opposed to France and Italy, banks are not a subsidiary of the post office. However, in Germany, Postbank (11,5 million clients) had been separated from Deutsche Post in 1989 and had a public market introduction in 2004, but it was reintegrated to Deutsche Post as a result of a huge drop in clients affluence due to the loss of the large postal outlet infrastructure. A consequence of the split between mail and banking, in Finland and Sweden, has been that one out of two outlets shut down. In France, since change comes late, these examples might have been instructive. More fundamentally, because the State is the dominant player with its golden share and because it uses La Poste as a social agent at arm's length, the development of banking activities can be read as the key to maintaining as many retail outlets open as possible. That plan would require not only the huge existing infrastructure but important financial resources.

Still, the main reason given for the capital increase is that the operator needs to be able to cope with the international competition and the liberalization of its markets (La Poste, 2009; Ailleret, 2008) and as such, it would become a functional equivalent of

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<sup>7</sup> This is still a vexed question as we write, since investing partners (CDC) think La Poste has been overestimated by its main shareholder, the State. They were also quite concerned to discover that, contrary to its promise of 1,2 billion euros, the 2011 official State budget indicates a provision of only 300 millions.



other groups in Europe following the specific affinities of its production and service delivery regime.

### 3. Factors of Resilience in and out La Poste

Some of the factors of resilience in La Poste have counterbalanced the impact of the two change factors previously described: free trade and the Internet. The three dimensions often alluded to are, in our view, of a social nature:

- La Poste workforce and management has remained the same ; the influence of State officials remains very important
- The social role of La Poste, especially in the countryside, has made it very difficult to simply implement a competitive strategy with no regard for local traditions and especially the role of local officials (pillars of the decentralization policy for 30 years now) who defended the presence of post offices everywhere in France in the name of public interest and the tradition of republican equalitarianism or local particularism.
- Despite changes in organizational structures to fit the new competitive strategy in a top-down structure, middle managers remain employees-oriented. The main change in structure has been the 1990s choice to introduce divisions into the business separating four activities: mail, packages, bank and post offices which were called “retail outlets”. To save costs on basic activities, sorting (mail) and retail were highly mechanized and huge investments were made in large triage centres whereas sorting had often been part of the post office activities. The benchmarking of all business units was made easy by the new use of numbers and charts, a very strong tradition in La Poste, but internal audits had so far been based on the notion of “universal service obligation” and equality of treatment of users whereas it is now based on quality standards (ISO) and performance. To be ready to face free trade competition, La Poste has been creating a great deal of subsidiaries with a partial control of shares following the model of franchising in services. It has also created an internal market with post offices (“retail outlets”) becoming the supplier of the three other divisional activities. This was used, in particular, to prompt the change of culture, from face to face

interaction to automatons, since a face to face transaction is billed 1.20 € and a machine transaction only 0.30 €.

#### **Part IV. A Practice-Based View of Interactions in Post Offices**

In the use of observation at interaction-level, we follow the SAP tradition of believing in micro-level information to make sense of specific situations such as change. This observation has two main advantages in post offices: the information is easily available and it provides a consistent picture that can be contrasted with strategic discourses on change. This approach and its research protocol deliberately follow the rich data tradition of SAP in order to provide detailed descriptions prior to any interpretation. In the following paragraphs, descriptions of situations of interactions in post office bureaux are exposed to the readers following the three dimensions we have been looking at specifically: the persistence of change in time, the system of conservation subsisting together with change and the pattern of change (regularity means there would be some kind of principle of continuity).

##### **- Persistence of Change in Time**

“Change” is something referred to by all respondents and it is observable in participant observations as well: “it changed”, “something is different”, it did not use to be that way, which is something else than saying “it is different elsewhere”, as one respondent pointed out. Public users have become clients, as post offices became retail outlets, and this involves a change in the interactions: people are treated as clients, urged to consume, to buy more products at higher prices, but to do so, they must be convinced of the quality. However, people still go to La Poste as they used to go before and they know they could not go elsewhere. Moreover, they observe that despite the new design of post offices and the insistence on not having people queue, (all signs in la Poste focus on this with mottos such as “we save your time” and “time is money”), people still wait in line at “rush hour” and they still look for the line “out of habit” even when there are few people. Hours have been changing at La Poste, and people go to La Poste at less expected times than they used to. Yet, the different changes of opening times are perceived as confusing by clients, just as the pricing and mix of objects/services selected by La Poste to suit their customers’ needs. As a result, both employees and clients see a persistence of “need for change” in the intended strategy of La Poste and they also perceive tension in their interactions if they fail to adapt

(this is the “resistance to change”, “path dependency” theme). One respondent observed: *“It is embarrassing if you have it wrong or if you fail to understand the new way, because it is so important now in la Poste to make sure things have changed, it is all brand new”*. Employees and middle managers complain that the evaluation and key performance indicators have changed, but the tasks per se and the skills and knowledge they require have not really evolved. People change without things changing, for example when front desk employees are compelled to help people use machines, when in fact employees are doing what they would do without machines at their desk. So observations provide a very mixed result on the existence of a single movement of change.

- System of Conservation (through change)

Observations lead to a very clear view on the existence of a strong tradition and what could be called a pre-eminence of institutionalized patterns. Some furniture may have been removed, both employees and clients interact in a timeless space of customs and routinized practices in line with core values dealing with the transmission of things and information through time and space. In terms of image, La Poste is still perceived as an administrative body because of its long tradition: the service exists since Louis XI and then the kings of France based their system of centralization on what was called the general farm (Ferme Générale (1672)) to unify the territory. During the Revolution, postal services were perceived as so vital that elections were organized for the heads of offices, as public servants). It is very present in the basis of the Constitution of the French modern state in 1801 and then mentioned in the 1946 Constitution Preamble and the 1958 Constitution. Since the XIXth century, there used to be a Ministry of PTT. La Poste’s real estate park, as big as the city of Grenoble, is generally located near the town office and the public school; sometimes it is still in the same building. The head of office was lodged above the office. Offices, front-office desks used to be combined with banking and mail operations (the mailmen took the letters and packages in that office and went their round). Therefore, during a long time, specific roles had not been assigned to employees; they changed depending on age and each office needs. The differences were based on rank in the hierarchy and age. People learnt their job by being sent in different regions of France at each promotion, just as civil servants. Users expected them to act as such and expected reliability and simplicity. It is not so sure employees’ job definition and users-customers’ expectations have so much changed despite new ways of life.

- Pattern of Change (in reference to the principle of continuity)

Change is perceived as something problematic in interactions (Goffman, 1963) because people find it easier to know what to expect. Therefore, practices in Post offices as in many service companies can be referred to that notion of “continuity”. Most middle managers argued that there was continuity in the change of la Poste in so despite a change in the nature and style of services, the key is still servicing people. However, clients and the 2 million people who participated in the spontaneous referendum on the future of la Poste in 2009 argued that the “change” in la Poste was not in line with the natural evolution of La Poste and its role in the French society. It was perceived by many clients as “being artificially changed” which was one of the anthems of many members of the unions: only the logo remains, La Poste will soon no longer exist, “for if La Poste changes the way it is being changed, it will be just another bank and there will be no La Poste”. If we look at practices as clusters of interactions, people’s interactions had so far been guided by a grid of interactions which fit the functions of the interactions (send something somewhere else). In effect, as one may observe in participating in interactions in post offices, the virtualisation of transactions and their transactions make that grid both relevant (this is how people still perceived exchanges using material references) and irrelevant: older people especially have difficulties finding their way through the grid of material and concrete exchanges because the scales and the meaning are in fact different. Some people will on the contrary prefer to avoid La Poste and use machines and PCs to avoid what they see as “the old administrative style with all its unnecessary forms and sheets and the loss of time and the feeling of being dependant on the hidden clerks playing crazy games” said on student who was participating in the fourth stage of research as an observant. The other students (former participants in the three observation field expeditions) agreed. The pattern of change is therefore so much related to inner representations and social norms that assuming a simple common pattern would be inaccurate. Nevertheless, change seems to represent “something” and a shared notion since people are able to communicate with that notion in mind. The problem is that, depending on the circumstances, the shared notion seems to draw a different picture of La Poste and the social interactions defining practices within post offices. What’s more, suppose you change topic, and once again, it will be difficult to have a uniform notion of change. Overall, it seems easier to describe practices in terms of stability and identity than in terms of change, judging by the consensus on point 2, the system of conservation. However, we shall now look into more

detail the fundamental assumptions of what could be called a micro-sociology- ethnographic-based approach of change in practices, both sociology and ethnography being keen on permanence and set traditions and social norms.

## **Part V. An Interpretation of what we mean by “change in practices”**

- the practice-based view provides a non-parochial, diverse approach to change that make it difficult to come up with a definition of what we mean by change in practices since change remains a universal notion (Aristotle...) whereas practices as defined as varied, multiple, idiosyncratic, complex. However, we consider that there is a specific approach to change of practices common to most texts belonging to SAP since they share two basic assumptions : change exists (non-eleatic ontology) and change exists within a realm of tropes and bundles (metaphysics of tropes). However, as a consequence of these assumptions, a few questions about change remain unanswered, especially that of the nature of change: is it a coherent whole or is it incoherent? Most of the papers we have read seem to leave aside that fundamental question. They do so by focusing on the specific realia of their case(s) and the interplay between the idiosyncratic nature of situations in the field and the more general realm of phenomena it can be related to. Therefore, some aspects of change are elicited whereas others remain in the shadow. That means that change in practices never allows any full picture of change despite numerous references to the notion.

Using field observation of practices, we attempted to provide an illustration of the elusive nature of change from a practice point of view. Combining change and observed practices leads to an atomistic approach to all sorts of changes. As a consequence, the use of the notion of change by SAP might need some more thinking unless we all are satisfied with a growing jurisprudence with no doctrine. This is why we shall now examine the notion of “change in practices” by questioning the consistency of the concept of “change” generally used in SAP.

The problem of the consistency of change can be approached in three ways: is change persistent in time, is there a system of conservation throughout change (change happens in contrast with at least some elements of stability) and finally, is there a principle of continuity in change (change corresponds to a regular pattern).

- Persistence of change in time is difficult to find since, as soon as one attempts to go beyond the idiosyncrasy of each practice and each field and refers to an evolution, one has to admit that this evolution is neither the mechanistic consequence of structural characters but the result of a complex combinations of elements which form a system, a combination which seems difficult to pose as eternal or unvarying. As a result, change in practices seems to describe a group of interactions in a continuum of both endogenous and extraneous processes during a long period of time. Results may affect not only the rules of any organization but also its environment in a two way reaction. As a conclusion, the persistence of change (in time) would require an acceptance of a “historical” or at least timely description of the occurrence of change, from beginning to end. As seen through our investigation, this would require a consensus on the causation of change as well (to be able to describe that origin or the factor of change) (Lewis, 2000) and an agreement on reality (Lewis, 1986): what facts are facts in a real world and what facts are facts only in possible worlds? Observing practices and interpreting them seem to require a great deal of empiricism mixed with scepticism (Nef, 2004 ) which makes it difficult to come up with an ontological proposal.
- Assuming the existence of a conservation principle seems a no less difficult task. It would mean to identify it on the basis of the results we get about practices and in reference to persistence of change, because the persistence of change should be the equivalent of a non-persistence of non-change (stability), which seems quite absurd as demonstrated by the Eleatic school (Nef, 2004) with the example of the “moving motionless arrow”. Interactions are all made of “movements” and these movements can be described as familiar (part of routine) or unfamiliar depending either on the observant or on the conditions of observation selected. Moreover, the more one comes to know about each practice, the more complex it becomes to explain the relations of practices as a “system”, therefore, it would be arbitrary to decide that if an ensemble, a hub or a set of practices (which in ontology would be called a set of tropes (Stout, 1971). Bundles of practices or clusters of practices do not seem to create a ground to define a general conservation principle although one would tend to intuit that a conservation principle is very important for practices especially as defined by Goffmanian interactions.
- The principle of continuity comes from Aristotle’s metaphysical principle (Aubenque, 1966 ; Nef, 2004 ; Nef 2006), no change happens through a leap. This would imply

that, for practices taken as things of the world, we would define properties (Nef, 2006) and also use some sort of categories of being (Nef, 2004 ; Nef, 2009), that would allow us to oppose “leaps” and change which does not leap despite the tropic character of practices, that is to say there identification with some sort of specific occurrence. This is not how we describe practices, generally, such questions are besides the point. Moreover, change often to be perceived as a “leap” for people interacting on the social theatre (Goffman, 1963) where conventions and rituals were the condition of “maintaining face”. Therefore, social aspects of organized life, among them practices analyzed via interactions, seem a very problematic way to assume a principle of continuity unless we suppose (against the principle of contradiction) that social situations and therefore social facts are a constant mix of change and non-change.

The case at stake (change in practices in La Poste) observed at interaction level provides some answers to in many the ways to whatever reality we have been looking at with the notion of change in mind. However, for change to be a concept endowed with consistency, we would require the three notions we have just been describing to be firmly asserted (Nef, 2004). Such is not the case. It appears that the three different ways do not favour a consistent view of change, rather an inconsistent, fragmented picture of that notion since each way leads to different conclusions as far as change is concerned. It cannot be assumed, although it would require further testing, that another field would provide the same results. Furthermore, the notion of change per se cannot be combined with the notion of practices in SAP since in SAP practices supersede all other notions. As a result, although change can be exposed, in the literature review, as what Leibniz (Nef, 2004: 292) would call a “singular substance” (the notion implying all its predicates), it almost always becomes a predicate of practices when it is described and interpreted as characterizing fields. This is because practices are singled out and singularized whereas change is transversal to the different practices. It becomes singular if and only if it is instantiated as part of one practice. However, this approach implies an ontological stand, contrary to what most SAP papers seem to forget.

Therefore, the use of field work and raw data based on experience is not a satisfying solution to the problem of change since the description does not lead to a satisfactory interpretation in terms of change in practices since that was the research agenda for this paper. From this, we conclude that the notion of change would need a more consistent program of research to come up with clear ontological propositions dealing with social facts. Such ontological systems already exist and provide a large range of solutions in line with an inconsistent view of change (Lewis, 1986, 1988 ; Priest, 1987, et al., 1989; Von Wright, 1968). This would be an

occasion to support the vision that SAP is not only another school mixing different styles and approaches but that is grounded, not only on “true accounts” of what happens in real life, but also on a coherent underlying metaphysics.



## Conclusion

Describing change as a key to its interpretation is something very difficult, despite all the tools and methods now available. SAP has been providing, in recent years, a lot of new combinations that fit the expectations of a good theoretical contribution: utility and originality (Corley and Gioia, 2011: 13). Yet some would probably not share that vision of its contribution as a school. Indeed, as both Bourdieu (1984) and Boudon (Boudon & Bourricaud, 1982) pointed out long ago about social sciences, theories are always at least partly dependant on the tools used to observe a phenomenon and the framing of the field, which makes it difficult to characterize research output only in terms of utility and originality. What researchers may find original and useful may be quite different that what practitioners or outsiders to the field of research find useful and original. That is precisely what SAP is about.

If we take the notion of change in practices in la Poste, the notion of change is used by all actors and looked upon with great interest by both practitioners and researchers. To many, the notion of change implies a clinical approach to events making explicit the specific combination of matter and movement as part of nature (Aubenque, 1966). However, the adoption of a naturalistic view of social practices is problematic: the confrontation of the different versions of those “naturalistic descriptions” makes way for a much more complex view on change in terms of practices. Practices are a way to contextualize change and enrich a notion, but on the other hand, the main advantage of the concept of change, its neutrality, is lost in the process. This is why, so far, SAP has been more efficient in proving wrong naturalist views on change than on providing an alternative theory on change.

However, we still believe that there always is more to a theory and its finding than what the tools and the situation alone would say. As such, SAP is an interesting venture into the field of social sciences and management because it has been exploring norms and common criteria to account for social realia. Its various research programs have not yet provided a consistent approach to such broad notions as change but the multiples attempts within SAP have often provided solutions consistent with such higher level norms as clarity, utility, elegance and non-contradiction (Nef, 2004: 50). We admit that this means a deliberate choice for the future research agenda of SAP since it imposes a moderate realism ontology to define such concepts as change.

One might still argue the opposite way, defending a radical differentialist stand that both practitioners and ethnographers often favour, that every situation is different and that there is no going beyond that single principle. The solution of escaping the debate by simply avoiding the assumptions made by previous streams of research in management is, however, not consistent with the will to escape these assumptions and the desire to “start afresh”, free from the mimetic behaviour of those belonging to a “school” and more or less compelled to some sort of parochialism. Besides, in doing so, many of those scholars probably want to escape that debate too, and they do it by conforming to the doxa which seems an easier way than SAP solutions: doing things differently and simply refusing to mention “the doxa on change”, which is proved wrong by examining practices. That solution would leave us only with notions of atomic changes depending on live experience. Far from providing a solution to the notion of change, it would leave us with an inconsistent notion of change or it would imply getting rid of the notion, both solutions quite opposed to SAP with its reliance on common sense.

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Annex 1: Chart 1. Views on Change

	<b>Mainstream</b>	<b>Critical management</b>	<b>Practice-based-view</b>
<b>Setting of change/unit of analysis</b>	Firms in competitive field(s)	Firms in society, groups and individuals	Organized social groups ?
<b>Approach to change</b>	Pragmatism	Materialism	Post-structuralist structural functionalism ? Particularism ?
<b>Main factor of change (engine or dynamics)</b>	Rational action (plan or process) or nature (evolution)	Dialectics, power	Adaptation to situations, roles bargaining ?
<b>Stand on reality of social facts</b>	Realism, naturalism, empiricism, evolutionism -persistence of change in time -system of conservation (stability exists too) -principle of continuity (regular pattern of change)	Constructivism, constructionism (influence of Marxism and French Theory) <sup>8</sup> -persistence of change in time -system of conservation (stability exists too) -principle of continuity (regular pattern of change)	Moderate realism? Moderate constructionism?  <i><u>Is change persistent ?</u></i> <i><u>Is there a general notion of stability as opposed to change ?</u></i> <i><u>Is there a principle of continuity that make change specific (real) ?</u></i>
<b>Observed realia about change</b>	Competitive dynamics, dynamic capabilities of firms, leaders, managers and teams, networks	Social institutions, individuals and groups, labour, discourses	Practices everywhere
<b>Authors</b>	Ambrosini & al, 2009 ; Anderson & Tushman, 1990 ; Bromiley & Fleming, 2002 ; Easterby-Smith & Nyles, 2003 ; Teece & Winter, 2007 ; Nelson & Winter, 1982 ; Simon & al., 2007	Badham (1999) ; Cooke (1999) ; De Roche (1994) ; Deetz (1999) ; Egan & Levy (2000) ; Hassard (1995) ; Mc Donagh (1995) ; Scully (1995) ; Spich (1996) ; Stephens & al (1995) ; Thompson (1998) ; Willmott & al. (2000) ; Zorn & al (2000)	Angwin & al (2009) ; Balogun (2003, 2007) ; Czarniawska-Joergens & Sevon, 1996 ; Denis & al. (2010) ; Hendry & Seidl (2003) ; Jarzabkowski (2003) ; Johnson & al. (2010) ; Langley & Denis (2006) ; McLennan (2011) ; Rouleau (2005) ; Stensaker & Falkenberg (2007)

<sup>8</sup> This is the reason why we did not quote authors like Mats Alvesson and Stewart Clegg : their stand can vary depending on the issue at stake and the papers.

<b>Conclusions about the “change in practices” in La Poste</b>	No conclusion on the persistence of change, a likely system of stability (social customs) and mixed results on the principle of continuity in change (regular pattern of change)
<b>Findings</b>	There is a great uniformity in the postal operations. The look of bureaux is always quite the same (yellow colour) and in line with street facilities (mail boxes). However, there is a clear difference between large bureaux which have often been redecorated and equipped with machines and small bureaux. Yet, the range of available operations remains the same in all bureaux. Interactions are much more relaxed in smaller bureaux and there are much less signs, adds and objects. In larger bureaux and at rush hour, you still find queues, little body distance, and people may argue. They frequently are rude to employees or get angry with the machines and equipment. The reason is generally two kinds: people have no time to waste and people do not understand the rule. Banking seems to benefit from more comfortable conditions but there are few clients. New spaces are reserved to “professionals” but they seem quite idle too.
<b>Gathered material</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pictures<sup>9</sup>,</li> <li>2. Note taking :participant observation (as client, bank, mail and packages), comments by employees and clients</li> <li>3. Gathering newspaper clippings and official reports (internal and external) on La Poste and mailing services</li> <li>4. Triangulation of data to come up with questions</li> </ol>
<b>Research activity</b>	Visit to Post offices :
	Step 1

Annex 2: Chart 2: Research Protocol



<p>Some view on the persistence of change, no likely system of stability (social customs) and mixed results on the principle of continuity in change (regular pattern of change)</p>	<p>The persistence of change seems to be incompatible with a strong system of stability (values and traditions) and our results on the principle of continuity in change (regular pattern of change) are even more mixed now as we gather more material on all sorts of changes. The</p>
<p>Experiences made by La Poste's management show that there is a great deal of reflection and information gathering about "clients expectations". The new setting of bureaux is expected to bring higher value transactions and keep clients happy (quality of service) throughout the transition to a banking oriented new version of La Poste with more machines. Employees have been retrained and clients have been urged to participate in consults about the future of la Poste (panels). Managers and experts think that the transition will not be easy, because it involves changing routines, but it is ineluctable.</p>	<p>Practices were quite different from one Post office bureau to another. Changes had been implemented in all three bureaux with variable success. Front office observation showed that "clients" were still trying to stand in lines and were confused by the new setting and the machines. The visit of back offices allowed us to realize the multiplicity and the complexity of tasks operated involving both products and services. Therefore, the changes in practices within the bureaux were not so much influenced by the new setting and that was true for the three bureaux. The other common feature, despite the different types of clients and of rhythm (rush in the central office) was the cooperation of the teams and the existence of sophisticated types of coordination (prior to recent changes ?).</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Interviews</li> <li>2. Triangulation of data</li> <li>3. proposition of a research project to regional management (Western Region)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Three visits of one post office with three students each time (one hour of participant observation, visit to the back office, interviews of la Poste managers and employees) after having observants prepare the visit (infos and method)</li> <li>2. Feedback with each group on the findings based on three to four pages accounts of visit</li> <li>3. Feedback to post office managers after the visit and discussion (researcher alone)</li> <li>4. Meeting of the three groups and debate about common facts and differences in terms of practices and change</li> </ol>
<p>In-depth interviews with managers and specialists :</p>	<p>Participant observation of three post offices bureaux in Rennes as a research project with la Poste</p>
<p>Step 2</p>	<p>Step 3</p>

<p>The persistence of change seems to be compatible with a strong system of stability (values and traditions): some would argue La Poste is evolving with society and some would insist that society is “blocked”. Our results on</p>	<p>The persistence of change does not seem to be related to any system of stability: since there is no agreement on the “subject” of change, what is perceived as changing or changed can also be described as fix or stable. Our results on the principle of continuity in change are also mixed because of that. We are incapable of providing a common obvious definition but we are urged to</p>
<p>Students who had been observing La Poste believed that top management was wrong in believing the company could ever be competitive. It still acted like an administration and employees and clients were forced to change with no real effect on performance. The measures taken were perceived as slow and uncoordinated (no plan). Managers from La Poste retorted that the company was responding to external factors of change yet keeping its strong identity as a social structure (people oriented). The change was challenging but processual and going on as planned. The final argument had to do with the role of public and State services and users’ basic rights during recent social changes.</p>	<p>Two views were expressed each supported by a significant part of the assembly: the norms of La Poste were difficult to change because of specifically local (national) and organisational practices (our thesis) ; no specificity but a resistance to change of employees and clients from European ex-public services (counter-thesis)</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Note-taking on the event</li> <li>2. Video capture</li> <li>3. Creation of a Website for the participants to go on with the discussion and find additional information (the one used during the project)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Presentation using Power Point Slides</li> <li>2. participation in the debate (question and answers)</li> <li>3. Note taking</li> <li>4. further work on paper as a result of the seminar and reviewing</li> </ol>
<p>Presentation of the findings to three managers of La Poste (West division) and one expert (management professor and consultant for La Poste) for two hours then debate about the presentation for one hour</p>	<p>Redaction of a research paper with co-author (Riot &amp; de la Burgade, to be published) about the implementation of the strategic change using norms (from internal rules to external ISO standards). Presentation during a research seminar before 20 European researchers</p>
<p>Step 4</p>	<p>Step 5</p>

### Annex 3. Chart 3. Questions and Answers to Respondents on Change in (their) Practices

List of questions to interviewees and on-field informants about changes in practices (after stage 1):	List of themes used to observe changes in practices (after 3 stages of research):	Key answers
<p>How are you related to La Poste? What is your job at la Poste or why do you go to La Poste? Have you observed change(s) in your company lately (since a few years)? How do you explain that/these change(s) ? What is the pace of that change (s) ? Is it constant ? Stable ? One-sided ? How has that affected you and your co-workers (you and other managers/you and other users-clients) ? How has that affected your interactions with users/clients? Can you describe a few of your practices before and after changing them? Can you describe practices that have not changed? What is the purpose of the change in your practices? Is that expected purpose reached? Is the origin of the change(s) you experienced internal or external ? Who is accountable for change in your company? Is that change planned or processed? What would be the ideal scale to observe change in your view?</p>	<p><u>Objects and services</u>: the interactions and combinations of “objects” and “services” have changed boundaries, the norms come to be different and it affects employees and users-clients practices ; it may be aimed at improving performance or at raising prices of goods and services by changing the mix or by playing with norms on basic services in line with Universal Service Obligations (USO). We will look at discussions between clients and employees about those goods and services. Are there legitimacy issues?</p> <p>Time and space: the acceleration of information exchanges has often made La Poste adopt a very energetic approach to standards of performance within a value chain that is largely controlled by la Poste with little competition yet. However, the issue of time and space is often debated because it is perceived differently by people (culture, situation, ...)</p> <p>Public and private: La Poste has so far maintained a “status” that is quite unique, some argue that it is only due to governmental PR because this is a hotly debated issue in politics. Does it affect how people interact in Post offices ? Do people refer to that issue ? Are there signs that inform insiders and outsiders about that question ?</p>	<p>Change could be described as both “change in general” and various changes. There have been recent changes in la Poste Referents see factors of change as both external and internal. There is no clear explanation for change. The pace of change is perceived as rapid or slow, with no single unit of analysis Change and changes have affected some parts of workers and users-clients interactions. Practices that have changed deal with the way objects and services are exchanged, not so much the nature of these services and change and not so much either the roles or the structures/systems of interactions. The most visible change would be the new interior design of post offices. It struck people as inadequate. The purpose of change is assimilated to “money” (economic performance) but there is no certainty on whether the goal is reached or not. Employees and managers feel responsible for change and changes. Change is both described as a planned process or a process which excluded too much planning. People generally feel that they are in a fairly good position to have a clear view on change and changes. They regret that this point of view is so often dismissed.</p>