



Factory “Homers”: Understanding a Highly Elusive, Marginal, and Illegal Practice¹ ☆

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Abstract

A “homer” is an artifact that a worker produces using company tools and materials outside normal production plans but at the workplace and during workhours. Despite legal, artistic and ethnographic evidence of their existence, silence surrounds homers. Along with this evidence, interviews conducted mostly with retirees from a French aeronautics plant are used to show that this silence is not linked just to the marginal and illegal quality of these artifacts. Homers shed light on a high degree of “complicity” between employees regardless of their position in the hierarchy. Since the factory’s institutional framework has little room for this complicity, the silence surrounding homers is a sign probably of an inability to talk about them rather than of their marginality or illegality.

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A measurer is the thing you use to measure fuel and because measurer are not made in steel but in bronze... they make nice objects... You only need to polish them and to put them on a base, you insert a light bulb inside, and there you have a small reading lamp, a bedside lamp... it adds some charm... I'm not sure there is anything interesting in [my telling you about] that... you can write it down if you wish, but all the rest are anecdotes, right?²

The person who is referring to this bedside lamp, manufactured clandestinely, is a retiree from a French aeronautics factory. He worked there as a technician in a testing workshop. He is reluctant to talk about this lamp because “these things are oftentimes confidential” but admits that a “prescription period” also elapsed.

This lamp is also an example of a homer. Homer making consists in “the use of materials and tools by a worker in the workspace, during work hours, to manufacture or transform artifacts outside of the organization’s [official] production” (Kosmann, 1999). The French word for homers, “perruque”, encompasses both the activity of producing the artifact as well as the artifact itself. The nature of this activity and of this artifact renders a priori this practice marginal and illegal. The following observations show that the silence that surrounds it is not only related to its clandestine characteristic. If homers are not talked about, it is also that they are elusive. Neither the management of the factory, nor the labor unions are very talkative about homers. This practice and these artifacts are difficult to grasp. Yet a long tradition of homer making, specifically in mechanical industries, exists. The study presented here first highlights the prevalence of this phenomenon by relying on legal, artistic, and ethnographic “traces” of homers. It then offers an in-depth analysis of the recent history of a French aeronautics industrial plant to underline the complicity that exists between employees of this organization, regardless of their hierarchical levels. The disclosure of this complicity is made possible through a series of interviews conducted in 2001 and 2002 with retirees of this plant. Since this complicity between employees and supervisors around this practice, in appearance so counter-productive, does not fit very well in a labor union or corporate narrative, the silence surrounding this practice is probably more a testimony to an inability to find an institutional frame to talk about it rather than a sign of its marginality and illegality.

1. Delimiting the object and traces of its existence

1.1. Homers, “Bricole”, “Bousille”, “Pinaille”...

Historically the French term “perruque” refers primarily to “the diverting of material belonging to the state and placed under the supervision of the person who is culpable of this act”³ but the word is also used during this same period in non-public sector environments. For instance, Denis Poulot (Poulot, 1980), an ex-foreman in a Parisian mechanical workshop, talks about homers when citing the words of one of his employees: “The boss believes that he is not paying for the tools we are using but three quarters of them are made as homers in this firm, they end up costing him more than if he gave them to us”. To make a homer, adds Poulot, is “to make work for oneself”. The notion of work for oneself is often associated with this

² All quotes have been translated from French by the author.

³ Larousse universel dictionary, 1874.

practice. Etienne de Banville (Banville, 2001) who wrote a historical overview of homers in France, for instance, uses this notion in his definition of homers: “a job, an artifact done for oneself, during work hours, with materials and tools of the organization”. Initially, homers were often tools necessary for the job or artifacts necessary for everyday life that could not be found in shops. In that sense, the term “for oneself” has a historical explanation. The notion of work done “for one’s own benefit⁴” seems, however, nowadays more accurate. This more contemporary definition of homers stresses the fact that homers can be done for other recipients as well. Examples of gifts of homers (Hissard and Hissard, 1978; Banville and Dumont, 1998; Banville, 2001) and, specifically of homer gifts at the occasion of retirements (Gerome, 1983, 1984, 1998) reminds us that ultimately homers are not always done for oneself. Furthermore, in the publishing world, a homer refers to a job done by an employee at his desk in his organization but for another outlet.

The definitions of what a homer is are therefore multiple. When attempting to uncover a common denominator to these definitions, the notion, at minima, of “diverting” (Noiriel, 2002) work time, tools or raw materials of the employer is always present. In a more judgmental manner, the notion of “fraud” is associated with this practice. Because the morality of homer making is in itself open to discussion⁵, a definition of the phenomenon that refrains from judging participants is therefore more suitable. The definition given by Robert Kosmann (Kosmann, 1999, p. 20) is, in that regards, more precise: “the use of materials and tools by a worker in the workspace, during work hours, to manufacture or transform artifacts outside of the organization [official] production”. This is the definition I will use to talk about industrial homers. If the French word “perruque” is mostly used in factories, many lexical variations are found in France: “bricoles” and “pinailles” (Hissard and Hissard 1978), “bousilles” and “pindilles” (Gerome, 1983). The phenomenon is also known in the United-States as “homers” (Haraszti, 1978) and doing “government jobs” (Gouldner, 1954; Dalton, 1959) and in Great-Britain as “idling” or “pilfering” (Ditton 1977; Mars, 1994; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999)⁶.

Since the diverting, from an employer, of time, materials and tools for personal use is generally implicitly or explicitly forbidden by corporate internal codes of conduct, few employees are willing to discuss homers. Secondary sources (legal, artistic, and ethnographic) offer nonetheless historical evidence of homer making activities, specifically in mechanical industries in which tools and materials best suited for homers are most frequent.

1.2. *Legal traces*

The North American jurisdictions relying on a corpus of easily searchable indexed past proceedings offers easier ground for research than French labor courts. The following cases that are presented were not resolved internally and are probably exceptions (since homers are essentially, as will be later shown, an intra-corporate affair).

The artifacts brought as evidence to court might appear fairly non-threatening (such as “typing of a personal memorandum during company time”, Court of Appeals of California, 2001), oftentimes rather utilitarian (“a bumper guard for a car”, Manitoba Arbitration, 1997) and

⁴ Hachette multimedia dictionary, 1999.

⁵ For an example of distinctions between internal (to a given work group) and external morality, see Anteby 2003.

⁶ “Homer” probably refers to the fact that the artifact is brought home or that its manufacturer can be sent home. “Government jobs” ironically indicates that working for the State might equate to doing homer work.

sometimes akin to craft (“a medicine cabinet”, Ontario Arbitration 2000) yet they all were manufactured inside the company and with company material. These examples were found by conducting a search for the terms “theft of company time” in the WestLaw legal databases of six random North American jurisdictions (British Columbia, California, Indiana, Manitoba, Ontario, and Texas) since 1990. The fact that this search only returned eight cases might appear low but has the advantage of giving current visibility to this practice⁷. The industries range from a chemical plant to wood and steel mills. Invariably, the employees are deemed guilty, with some attenuation circumstance in the event of ignorance by the employee of the “seriousness” of the potential sanctions that he or she faced.

In most cases, the suspects defend themselves by claiming that others were engaging in similar activities and painting homer activities as fairly routine. One defendant claims that his foreman “had his own personal business... and at one point he welded an exhaust fan or cover for a bathroom for him” (Manitoba Arbitration, 1997). The unexceptional aspect of homer making is also put forth by a mediator in a case of an Ontario arbitration when he rules that building a medicine cabinet is an “abuse of the government jobs” system (Ontario Arbitration, 2000). This suggests that less visible or less material/time consuming homers might be tolerated. To stress this point about the relative normalcy of some homer making activities, another defendant accused of manufacturing a car gasket for his car (Texas Court of Appeals, 1996) testifies that other employees did similar things in the past and that no one had been asked to refrain from doing so.

What these legal proceedings and mediation cases provide is, first, evidence of a limited number of contemporary cases of homer makers being prosecuted. They also showcase a certain legal view of homer making that, at least in the North American context, associates homer and theft. Once the practice has been shown to occur, penalization is almost certain unless important attenuating circumstances are made salient (such as, for instance, complete ignorance of the liability involved). In France, the testimony of a fired homer maker (Banville and Dumont, 1998) or the case of a former student turned worker (“etabli”) fired in 1969 after the discovery at his home of a homer (personal communication, Danièle L., 2002) suggests a similar equation between homer and theft.

1.3. *Artistic traces*

Artistic venues provide a second intriguing arena to identify homers. These “folkloric” artifacts are, for instance, of interest to collectors and to industrial museum curators. Exhibits on homers in 1994 at the industrial museum of Le Creuzot or in the region of Basse-Loire, discussed by Francois-Xavier Triviere (Triviere, 1999) provide such evidence. The actual physical space where the artifacts were made is sometimes hard to determine; the distinction between work done inside or outside of the firm is sometimes hard to make (the exhibit discussed by F.-X. Triviere seems more focused, in that regards, on external productions). Yet this distinction is crucial in talking about homers or “work-on-the-side” (Weber, 1989). At least one artist eases our task: Pincemain, a former welder, jumped from the factory to the “artistic” world (La République, 2001). If the pieces he currently exhibits are no longer homers, his initial creations were homers.

⁷ The low return can be interpreted as a low frequency of occurrence. Most probably, however, it points to the low frequency of legal prosecution of homer makers.

More generally, the voluntary jump into the official art world also signals the end of a certain homer-making trademark. Work “done for oneself” or for “ones’ own benefit” (restrictive definition of homers) does not fit well into a network of commercial art. If homers are described as “free, creative, and precisely without profit works” like Michel de Certeau writes (Certeau, 1990), the value art worlds bestow upon these artifacts is suspicious. The rare artistic venues where the manufacturing of the artifacts is clearly distinguished from the valuation of the artifacts seem therefore more “acceptable”. Thus, an exhibit of artifacts seen during labor strikes by the photographer Jean-Luc Moulene (Moulene, 2002) shows what most probably is a homer (labeled as “the head of a [miniature] rocket” manufactured in the LIP quartz watch corporation). The homer quality of this rocket head remains, in a certain manner, “pure” since the homer was not manufactured to be shown. It is therefore not a surprise that homers that find their way into official collections are mainly shown for their historic rather than artistic characteristic. A notable exception needs to be highlighted: the Labor Council of Snecma Evry-Corbeil organized in 1984 an exhibit of approximately a hundred homers belonging to employees of this aeronautics plant (Simony and Marcon, 1995). These homers were representative of a sub-set of homers, namely only retirement homers. Whereas the terms imagination, know-how, workers’ culture, and masterpieces (with its ancient journeyman connotations) were mentioned, the words art or artistic are absent from the booklet that accompanied this exhibit. This exceptional and rare exhibit only confirms the rule: the craft quality of these artifacts, instead of their artistic characteristic, is highlighted.

Traces of homers can be found in the artistic arena but, generally, more in a historical context and without associating them with the term “artistic” (the craftsmen described by Veronique Moulinie (Moulinie, 1999) refuse to be called artists). Assuming, however, that museums and collectors suddenly gain interest in these artifacts, Miklos Haraszti (Haraszti, 1978) warns us: “Connoisseurs of folklore may look on homers as a native, decorative art. As yet, they aren’t able to see further than that”. It therefore comes as no surprise that official art worlds offer few traces of these productions.

1.4. Biographical and ethnographic traces

Ethnographic and biographical traces of homers are slightly more frequent. The biographical tradition is open to managers and workers alike. Thus, D. Poulot (Poulot, 1980), a foreman, and Melville Dalton (Dalton 1959), a manager, both write about homers: the former writes after working in a Parisian mechanical shop, and the later builds on his knowledge of large North-American corporations. From an employee’s perspective, M. Haraszti (Haraszti 1978) is probably the most prolific writer on homers. He offers, for instance, a list of homers going from a key-chain to an ashtray, via necklace charms, television antennas, daggers, and bath mats that he was able to see produced in the Hungarian tractor factory he was working in. “Henri H.”, a French automotive employee interviewed by Hissard and Hissard (1978) testifies also about homers he saw, including toy dolls for children cut out in foam. Closer to our time, R. Kosmann (Kosmann, 1999), a former automotive worker, evokes homers at Renault where he worked, but also at Air France, the Paris Subway (known as RATP), and the national French railway, SNCF. Pierre Contesenne (Contesenne 1984), a former mechanical worker at Air France, adds to this list by sharing with us interviews he conducted with some of his former coworkers that he describes as “great” homer makers.

Other studies extend these rare biographic testimonies. The settings for these accounts reflect in general the physical trajectory of the artifacts: workshops, sometimes retirement ceremonies, and homes. A first set of ethnographic data deal with homers inside factory workers' homes (Deniot, 1995; Moulinie, 1999; Banville, 2001; and, to a lesser extent, Bonnot, 2002). In Joelle Deniot's account of the domestic interiors (Deniot, 1995), homers go almost unnoticed. The examples cited are "small tiled tables", "flower pot holders" or "nicely twisted metal shreds" apparently mounted on a base. V. Moulinie (Moulinie, 1999), on the other hand, described artifacts that she saw at the homes and in the gardens of retirees and factory employees in the Lot-et-Garonne region of France. Though many of these artifacts were done at home, others seem to come from a nearby metallurgic plant. Another author, E de Banville (2001) is quite exhaustive in his enumeration of homers produced in France, mainly since the 1950s. The range of homers he covers is impressive (from a kitchen spoon to elaborate sculptures). He does not say, however, much about homer dynamics within a given social community, and focuses instead on multiplying the geographical settings and the historical periods of his homer accounts. A unity of time and place is provided however by Thierry Bonnot (Bonnot, 2002) who describes ceramic pots found in homes and antique shops in the Creusot region in France. He only incidentally notes that many employees also produce homers (Bonnot, 2002) to hint towards the fact that some of these ceramics might have been homer productions.

The advantage of homer descriptions at the occasion of retirement ceremonies is that the homer quality of the object is easier to confirm. Colleagues who manufactured them attest more openly to the homer quality of the gift. These gifts are also known as "retirement homers" or "behavior homers" (suggesting a kind of prize for a good behavior at work). Noelle Gerome (Gérôme, 1983, 1984, 1998) has focused in details on these gifts in the aeronautics industry and has described the symbolic characteristics of these retirement ceremonies. The artifacts often evoke occupations (for instance a "small metal toolbox of a blacksmith", Gerome, 1983) or a hobby (sailing, soccer, cycling, etc. See specifically the pictures of the retirement homers shown in the booklet of the Labor Council of Snecma Evry-Corbeil (Commite d'Etablissement Snecma Evry-Corbeil, 1984)⁸. But in order to capture the manufacturing process of these artifacts, more contextual accounts are necessary.

Case studies of corporations (Gouldner, 1954; Lescot et al., 1980; Beaud and Pialoux, 1999; Kosmann, 2000; Messika, 2002) allow an integrated view of homer making in work environments. Alvin Gouldner (Gouldner, 1954, p. 51) first introduces the term "government jobs" when discussing leniencies in the gypsum mine he was studying. If an employee needed a table fixed or welding done, for instance, he would bring it to the mine because raw materials and finished products were made available to employees. After reading Gouldner's account, the impression we are left with is, however, that all employees benefited from this leniency. Stephane Beaud and Michel Pialoux (Beaud and Pialoux, 1999) fill, in some ways, this gap when discussing a trial of a worker dismissed in 1990 for exiting an automotive factory with a tool. Though the trial per se does not revolve around homer making, the authors note that during the hearings, a number of colleagues of the dismissed worker shouted the names of executives they had done [homer] "work" for, thus framing this dismissal in the context of homer making. The authors also write that skilled workers could engage in homer work because they had a certain level of job autonomy. The following example, in a very different setting, also involves skilled workers. R. Kosmann (Kosmann, 2000) writes about homers

⁸ The rich symbolic of homers, specifically retirement homers, is not explored in this article.

done by blacksmiths employed by the Paris subway system. He focuses more on the product than the production of homers but allows us to view in context a community of homer makers. The interviews conducted by Yves Lescot, Georges Menahem, and Patrick Pharo on “workers’ knowledge” in the shipbuilding yards of the Ateliers et Chantiers de Bretagne also provide a very fine grain account of such a community. Both a “means to gain recognition”, “recreation” and “cooperation” (Lescot and al. 1980), homers are not equal for all participants and in every occasions. Finally, Aurelie Messika (Messika, 2002) provides a rather unexpected field setting for homers, since she writes about automotive engineers and technicians who develop sometimes as home projects their pet projects. These projects have sometimes been officially “killed” by distant bosses but continue to progress thanks to the tacit approval of their local direct supervisors. All these traces (legal, artistic, ethnographic) suggest a certain practice of homer making, specifically in mechanical engineering industries and among a population of skilled workers⁹, yet do not provide any estimation of the frequency of such practices.

2. Data to estimate a frequency of homer making

Two sources (one historical, the other contemporary) were analyzed in order to attempt to answer the question of quantifying homer making. The first source is a historical collection of workshop codes of conduct and the second is a survey conducted by the French national statistics institute (known as Insee).

2.1. A repeated history of penalization

The Bibliotheque Nationale de France has accumulated, in its collection, by legal deposit from French printers, a set of 354 workshop codes of conduct dated from 1798 to 1936, and indexed by Anne Biroleau (Biroleau, 1984). Most industries and regions (of that period) are statistically represented. Focusing on workshop codes of conduct can provide “negative” evidence of homer making. If homer making is systematically forbidden, it can be inferred, by default, that homer making systematically occurred. Alain Cotterau suggests such a reading of these codes of conduct in his introduction to the index (Biroleau, 1984). A random sampling of this collection (10%, i.e., 35 codes of conduct) indicates that 84% of workshop codes refer to material, tools or objects channeled out of the workshop and 20% discuss specifically work done for one’s own benefits (see Appendix 1 for details of this sample). Bringing out objects, materials, or tools is always forbidden (except with an “exit slip”). In a soda factory, for instance, these rules cover carrying out objects (*sortie d’objets*); in a print shop, carrying out good or bad paper (*emporter du papier, bon ou mauvais*); and in a steel mill, carrying out waste materials (*emporter des déchets de matières premières*). These same codes of conduct usually also allow for extensive employee searches upon exiting the factory. In order to justify these searches, a code indicates that this is done in the interest of bosses as well as honest employees (*dans l’intérêt des chefs mais aussi des ouvriers honnêtes*). Several codes explicitly forbid personal work on premises. In some limited cases, the possibility for steelworkers and piece rate laborers to manufacture or repair the tools needed for their work is authorized, “the firm provides all the materials”. But, in general, however, codes remind workers that it is for-

⁹ There are fewer traces of homers in industries with younger employees, a higher proportion of female employees, or more recently arrived immigrant labor (see Noiriel, 2002, p. 249 for a mapping of these industries).

bidden to manufacture something for their own use inside the shop, even during lunch hours (*faire un ouvrage pour leur compte dans l'intérieur de l'usine, même pendant les heures de repas*), to engage in a work other than usual work without express supervisory consent (*faire un travail autre que le travail habituel sans y être commandé*) or to bring work from home in the shop (*d'apporter du travail de chez eux*). This last rule hints towards the possibility for supervisors to order some homers but the practice needs to be policed; all supervisors cannot order homers. Another code stipulates, for instance, that ordering work without the authorization of the crafts-master or a specifically named shop foreman is forbidden (*commander quelque travail sans approbation du maître, ou celle de M. Grand*).

Within the subset of codes of conduct with no mention of carrying out objects, tools or materials outside the workshop or engaging in personal work (14 out of the 35 codes), five of these codes regulate workshops where employees are exclusively on piece-rate salaries (essentially textile mills). Piece-rate remunerations automatically regulate work done for one's own benefit since the negative financial incentives are important; thus, the absence of references to homers in piece-rate environments might be expected. Five other remaining codes of conduct cover very non-typical work environments (luggage porters on a wholesale market, a job clearing house, etc.). Therefore, only four codes of conduct in environments where homer making is possible (a shipyard, a printing shop, a shoe manufacturer, and roof tillers) do not mention anything about bringing out artifacts, tools or materials or work done for one's own benefit.

This first historical source suggests the prevalence of diverting time, tools or materials since 84% of workshop codes of conduct refer to such practices and 20% of these codes penalize specifically work done for one's own benefit at work.

2.2. *Statistical data on a more contemporary practice*

A second, more contemporary, source on the relative frequency of homers is provided by a survey carried out by the French National Statistics Institute (Insee) and cited by Michel Bozon and Yannick Lemel (Bozon and Lemel, 1990). In this survey, 28% of male factory workers (the highest percentage amongst the identified social groups) indicate that: “[on their job] they [frequently or occasionally] manufacture “something” or do a job not designated for their employer” (Bozon and Lemel, 1991, p. 113). Moreover in 40% of cases cited by male factory workers that “something” is an “object”¹⁰. These same male factory workers also indicate that they frequently or from time to time bring home scraps, materials, and office furniture (48% of respondents). Unfortunately, the details of this salvaging are not provided. This survey was conducted in 1986 and 1987 with a representative sample of 446 individuals, aged thirty to forty-nine, living in couples and spans all occupations. M. Bozon and Y. Lemel conclude that, at work, “free work” (*le travail libre*) permeates forced work (Bozon and Lemel, 1991, p. 126). More to our point, this second data source points to a fairly high frequency of homer activity among male factory workers.

With these two data sources in mind, we can therefore conclude in a fairly certain manner that homer making has almost always been considered illegal by workshop codes of conduct standards, and yet remains, even today, a relatively frequent practice. Whereas the manufactur-

¹⁰ In other social categories, such as, for instance, executive males, that “something” is “office work” in 62% of cases.

ing of traditional homers might be in decline because of the relative decrease in size of workers as an occupational group¹¹, the automation of tasks, a loss of skills among factory workers compared to more upstream development and design teams, more accurate tracking of scraps materials as quality norms are implemented, and a higher availability outside of the factory of low priced traditionally manufactured functional homers, the vivacity of homer making remains. Homers are clearly illegal and marginal artifacts; yet, even accounting for these characteristics, their visibility is fairly low. Why so? Other forms of clandestine actions that appear to be as illegal and marginal as homers, for instance, “goldbricking” (Bernoux, 1981; Ditton, 1976,1977,1979; Mars, 1994, Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Morrill et al., 2003) have gained more visibility.

3. Talking/Not talking about homers at Pierrville

In order to answer this question, I conducted a series of interviews in 2001 and 2002, mostly with retirees of a French aeronautics plant (called Pierrville¹²). The mix of interviewees was done in the most representative manner possible and with the assistance of Pierrville’s Labor Council¹³. The Pierrville plant houses several thousand employees and manufactures essentially airplane engines. It also belongs to a larger French industrial group. To date, the plant encompasses testing and final assembly operations for engines as well as research and development teams.

3.1. Giggles, silences and denials

The topic of homers conjures diverse reactions among Pierrville employees: often giggles, sometimes silences, and in rare occasions strong denials. The denials were first found among shop floor workers and appear legitimate in light of the official factory code of conduct. At Pierrville, like in many other factories, employees are “personally responsible” for tools and materials in their possession and the loss of these must be “immediately” reported to a supervisor (article one of Pierrville’s code of conduct). Moreover the use of machine for departmental or other matters necessitates “prior approval” and management can conduct searches concerning “the nature of objects brought in or out of the factory”. Though there seems not to be any official cases of terminated workers for homer making, several departures after suspicious abuse of company material or tools were spontaneously discussed by some retirees. That employees deny any homer activities in such a context is therefore to be expected. What was less expected however was the intensity of the denials.

Homers... that’s a legend! I’m against it. It might exist in certain corners of the factory but not in the shop Y... People say workers can do that but that’s not true! ... I am telling you quite clearly this does not exist. You might be mixing homers up with the best French worker’s contest [a national contest]. These contests do not take place in the factory but outside the factory. Maybe you are thinking about that... Again, I repeat, in the shop, this

¹¹ The notion of a decrease is relative since, for instance, in 1999, factory workers still represent 25,6% of the active French population and represent close to 6 million individuals (Noiriel, 2002).

¹² The names of individuals and of the corporation are all fictional in order to prevent uncontrolled use of these data.

¹³ Thirty-eight informants were interviewed for this study, oftentimes on repeated occasions, either at their homes or in a space located outside the factory and provided by the Labor Council.

does not exist. (Rene H., retired worker, workshop Y)

In another instance, the wife of a Pierreville employee who had been told by a mutual friend that a researcher might call to discuss homers answered the phone and quite angrily announced: “her husband had never engaged in homer activities”. She added that he had no comment to share on that topic since he did not know anything about homers. It is interesting to note that both these denials (one direct, the other indirect) came from employees of a workshop that is notorious among Pierreville employees for the quality and quantity of homers manufactured there. Denials were however not limited to the shop floor; a similar denial process occurred at the managerial and executive level. A retired executive that I had met on several occasions and who never mentioned his own homers was once “confronted” by one of his ex-employees with a photography of his retirement ceremony that showed the employee giving him a retirement homer. The homer was fairly large, crafted, and mounted on a wooden base. “Oh, yes, that’s true...” the executive said when looking at the picture, “I had forgotten”. Asked where the homer was today, he said it was standing in the middle of his personal library. Forgetfulness? Embarrassment? The interpretation is open.

One of the most illustrative “denial” mechanisms was however suggested by a current manager at Pierreville. After an hour-long meeting in his office, he wished the author well and offered this last piece of advice: “if this can be of any help to you, you don’t need to tell others that you met me. Just act as if we never met”. His comment was both considerate and illustrative of the reactions on homers. By allowing me to deny contact, he was trying to facilitate this study. At the same time, he was informing me on how best to talk about homers: by simply not mentioning them.

Whereas these above reactions were perhaps the most extreme, most employees voluntarily censured themselves without denying however the existence of homers. Sentences went unfinished, names of individuals were swallowed and, sometimes, clear indications not to pursue certain clues were given.

What do you want me to tell you? There are things that escape us... For instance I can bring you to my garden and there you see a chimney... not any kind of chimney, one with quality materials.... How it came to my garden? That’s something I know, but I won’t tell you about that! (Marc B., retired technician, quality department)

Oh, you’ve heard about the story about the person who tried to walk out with some material... If you want a piece of advice, don’t go down that road. It’s too recent; people won’t want to talk to you. All the employees are still active today. Forget about it. (Antonio F., retired workers, testing workshop)

Besides these reactions, giggles surrounded many conversations and the idea of “shame” was often voiced. Such a “shame” (*honte*) is normal, commented a retired female engineer, since “there always is a small dishonesty” (*malhoneteté*) around homers.

3.2. *Multiple complicities around homers*

This “shame” is perhaps not only linked to “dishonesty” (towards the employer) but also to a reluctance to disclose the practice of colleagues. In that sense, talking about homers is like being a traitor to one’s own people since homer making is oftentimes a collective endeavor.

The existence of homers in factory is like a “public secret” (Simmel, 1950) and the initiation into this domain is almost a given when one works on or near the factory floor.

When I started working for this firm, I did not know what [*homers*] were about. Since my father worked also in a similar industrial firm, I asked him: what is « *perruque* » [the French term for homers]? This is not hair? [*perruque* in French also means a wig]. And he told me what it was. I did not know anything about it at the time, I was a bit naïve but everybody talked about it discretely.

(Marie-Francoise T., office worker, administrative department)

Not one of the interviewed informants needed any priming to discuss (or not discuss) the topic of homers. Many had either received one upon departure, seen one, helped manufacture one for a colleague or were aware of at least another person who produced homers. Moreover shop supervisors and factory managers are aware of these practices. Homers are not restricted to only private use.

Most of the times it’s the executives who ordered gifts from our shop, for instance, for people who were retiring. So we would go and see our supervisors and would ask him if he was OK with our spending X time manufacturing these pieces... Yes, we needed to do this because the time is taken from our official work time! (Marie-Francoise T.)

With waste materials, people transformed, polished, sanded, and did many other things with them... with the complicity of management. At a retirement party for instance, we all see that the piece was done as a home project... But we don’t say anything; we turn a blind eye. (Jeannine C., retired executive, administrative department)

This last testimony is from an executive at Pierreville and illustrates the compromise around homers. In one occasion at least, this position was qualified as hypocrisy by a factory employee. He picked the example of retirement homers to illustrate his point. At retirement parties, he added: “all the managers are present, they all know how these gifts were made, and... nothing is said. They all act as if nothing had happened, as if everything was normal”. Another retiree also commented:

When they gave me my gift [an engraved metal board] they were all there... the head of the department was also present... and they left it on the main machine until we moved... therefore even the president at that time, when he came, could see it. (Annick S., office worker, administrative department)

What appears fairly common is the fact that executives and supervisors cover up for their employees or even benefit from the homer work of their employees (or other employees who are not members of their teams via other executives and supervisors). In some instances, a specific employee is even designated for such “internal” jobs.

used to sometimes eat with their supervisor, and I would ask him, don’t you have a guy who can do this for me...? And he made it happen. If this is a home project or not... I’m not sure; I’d rather say that this is to be of service... (Marc B.)

Oh, in my workshop I was the assigned person for these kinds of jobs [*homers*] in the testing shop. And now [in my new job] people still come to see me for these jobs... You know it’s kind of dumb, it gets decided... like that, he’s leaving and we should do some-

thing for him... and because I inevitably was asked to do it, I simply did it. (Andre P., retired worker, testing workshop)

These accounts testify to complicity across hierarchical and functional occupations of homers rather than to individual deviance. This leads to a fairly elaborate system of exchanges, with gifts and counter-gifts. The words “reciprocal services” and “system” are even used.

You need to think in advance about an object, be able to do it, find the guy in quality control who will give you the wasted piece, find the people who will work on the base, there are a lot of parameters involved [in making a retirement homer] that can block the system and make it not happen... (Andre P.)

For instance, if a skilled worker has a friend in the factory and has a problem [he cannot deal with]. He broke for instance an object in his home and needs a torch job. He will simply ask his friend, it’s an altruistic service... or, granted, perhaps an exchange of services with reciprocation upon need. (Stephane M., executive, administration)

Many employees can therefore be part of the hower system, even though all are not equally equipped to engage in home projects. Access to certain skills, materials, tools, machines, scrap parts, etc. condition the possibility to manufacture or not homers. Specific functions (maintenance, development, woodshops...) are more prone to homer making¹⁴. The “golden hands” workers (*des mains en or*) as other Pierreville employees call them, are without doubt the ones most in demand as far as homer making goes, but other employees also insert themselves in what Viviana Zelizer refers to as “circuits of commerce” (Zelizer, 2003)¹⁵. As an illustration, an administrative assistant at Pierreville types up the notes of the parent-teacher meetings for a technician who provides her with homers.

3.3. *Regulating aspects of homers in workshops*

What appeared at first like a deviant and individual behavior is, in Pierreville’s context, more of a collective behavior involving multiple complicities. The relative hierarchical tolerance can be explained when considering the regulative quality of homers.

These little parallel things are always interesting and they are also for the managers a way to regulate a little bit what happens... This also is important in my view, it is not, ... I mean, the benefit is not necessarily at the level of the artifact, it also can be found at the level of the relation... created between them. (Alain F., manager, administration)

Besides the direct benefits that supervisors can gain by allowing his employees to manufacture homers (artifacts for himself or others), homer activity also can benefits regular official work.

When you stayed within limits, and you did your work, your day’s worth of work...

¹⁴ These functional specificities of homer makers are also highlighted by Gerard Noiriel (Noiriel, 2002), S. Beaud and M. Pialoux (Beaud and Pialoux, 1999), F.-X. Triviere (Triviere, 1999) and R. Kosmann (Kosmann, 1999).

¹⁵ V. Zelizer uses the word “commerce” in its historical acception, i.e., in reference to communications, exchanges, charnel relations, etc. The “circuits of commerce” she describes include both intimate exchanges as well as more impersonal commercial exchanges.

there was a tolerance [for homers]. I don't think it ever was a problem... I even knew a supervisor who said that the guy who did not do any home projects was lazy... This meant that the day you made a homer, you needed to boost yourself at your job... (Armand I., retired worker, workshop Y).

In that regards, homer function as an unofficial incentive system with the particularity that, at any time, the homer maker can be qualified a thief and the person making them accused of diverting (materials, tools or time). For the skilled workers, it probably is merely the “price to pay for their work” (*le prix à payer pour leur travail*) as recalls a retiree. For most employees however, homers are probably an incentive to perform their official work. A high-level executive in the factory describes this as a trust relation that cannot be admitted (*inavouable*): both a necessity to get the work done and something logically illegal (*logiquement on n'a pas le droit de le faire*).

This analysis of homers as regulating mechanisms is also suggested in other industrial settings. A. Gouldner (Gouldner, 1954), for instance, describes “government jobs” in the context of a discussion of indulgency. Indulgency is a “connected set of concrete judgments and underlying sentiments disposing workers to react to the plant favorably, and to trust their supervisors”. F.-X. Trivière (Trivière, 1999) who interviewed several French factory workers who enjoyed building objects at home during their free time also discussed homer activity with his informants. He concludes that homers are an “attempt to maintain the productive order in the factory” and cannot only be seen as a form of resistance. Paradoxically, tolerance towards a practice officially forbidden is a means of regulation. These apparently deviant homers solidify, in the same manner that Howard Beckers's deviant individuals did (Becker, 1963), the institutional order of the factory.

4. Conclusion

Homers are unquestionably illegal and relatively marginal but more importantly elusive because they highlight a real complicity at the workplace between employees; this complicity does not easily fit, on one hand in a labor union narrative, nor does it fit, on the other hand, in a managerial one.

Notions of resistance have long dominated labor union discourse. Talking about homers suggests a potential form of “resistance” but more generally a form of complicity, or in more pejorative terms, a form of “collusion”. Isaac Joseph sums up quite well the reluctance exhibited by some activists with regards to this practice: “One should not be surprised if the dissenter has taken over from the activist and homer making replaced class struggles. The weakness and limits of homers are known upfront: homers only play on salvaging and on bits and pieces, homers only operate by diverting flows, they assume an intimate understanding of the system of supervision, an over-adaptation to methods of control. The geography of freedom that homers allow us to explore is pathetic, as pathetic as all small acts of resistance - escapes, retreat, silence, jokes, wit - that are not inscribed in a logic of contradiction and that escape the intimate mixture of supervision and docility”. (Joseph, 1980). He adds that homer practices are “already lost battles” since they are already “integrated” in the system. A union representative from the metallurgic branch of Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT) interviewed by E. de Banville in the Lyon region does not exactly echo this position but very consciously discusses his reluctance to deal with this topic. “If I were to talk about homers, I would say upfront, and

would insist, that there is not an official position of the CGT on homers. This means there are exchanges on the subject; it's part of the labor movement... the CGT does not have a position on it, and, in practice, we leave it up to every one to decide for him/herself, and come up with his/her own position" (Banville, 2001). And E. de Banville writes about a "non position". In a very similar manner, a union representative from the Pierreville Labor Council, who was instrumental in helping me contact retirees, acknowledges the historical presence of homers but does not identify any labor union stake associated with the topic. When Philippe Bernoux writes that homer making is an "appropriation process" with a "dual function of affirmation in one's work, and via this collective affirmation, a way to create a workers' community" (Bernoux, 1981), the fact that foremen, and even managers, might be part of this "workers' community" might be in contradiction with some other labor union claims.

On the corporate side, Pierreville managers and executives stressed the difficulty of talking about homers. Talking about homers accounts to destroying them, not because homers are illegal and marginal, but because homer making is a practice the employer cannot officially have knowledge of. To openly talk about homers is to admit to a shared complicity, or, by default, to pigeonhole the practice as an individual behavior (cf. the arrest of the worker at this home in 1969). E. de Banville (Banville, 2001) writes about an attorney representing employers sent to "the exhibit halls of an industrial museum where a homer exhibit was in the making". Photographic evidence was gathered, oral commentaries recorded, but no legal actions were initiated. The representatives of employers understood the dilemma: it is hard to talk about homers without incriminating managers and executives; homers are best dealt with by not talking about them. An event that occurred in another plant of the group that owns the Pierreville plant seems to confirm this preference not to talk about homers. In 1980, suspicions of "traffic" in caste iron fireplace mantels were growing. The direction of the group initiates an expertise in order to assess the accuracy of these suspicions. Based on the fact that a chimney mantel "requires the active participation of 10 to 15 different individuals and cannot be ignored by all the other [members of the workshop] including supervisors", the expertise concludes that the existence of such a traffic is "highly improbable". Regardless of the reality or not of the traffic, the extent of the potential complicity also contributes to silencing the accusation. The only rare occasions when corporations openly talk about homers amount to cases of relatively "isolated" workers (or workers depicted as such). In these occasions, corporations can talk about homers without having to disclose too much about the tacit or active complicity of the employer. The general rule, however remains not to talk about homers.

The only voice remaining is therefore the one of the employee who produced, facilitated, and sometimes benefited from homers. This singular voice is hard pressed to find a resonance in classical institutional frameworks. This voice does not fit the workers' culture as imagined by some labor activists. It does not either fit, by definition, in a managerial discourse since homers have to be hidden. And if this voice ever ends up in court, it is oftentimes limited to its punitive component, thus, is severely truncated and used as a pretext to accelerate the departure of an unwanted employee. Homers are probably difficult to grasp because of their surface illegal and marginal qualities but homers are with more certainty elusive because they escape traditional institutional frameworks, present in the factory that might lend resonance to their existence.

Appendix A. Details of Workshop Codes of Conduct Sample

Index number ^a	Name	Year	Industry (if known)	Location (if known)	References to channeling out of the shop company materials, tools, or illegal objects	Specific references to personal work done on the job
17	MM Collier et J Hall	1845	-	Saint-Denis	Yes	-
49 ^b	Henri Delattre père et fils	1853	Textiles	Roubaix	-	-
55	E. Jouvin et fils	1853	-	Bernay	Yes	Yes
59	Imprimerie Julien, Lanier et Cie	1854	Printing Shop	-	-	-
80	M. Hofer et Cie	1855	Textiles	Kaysersberg	Yes	-
82 ^c	Boldoduc Frères	1855	-	Lille	-	-
104	Etablissement Impérial d'Indret	1857	Sea Vessel	Indret	-	-
113	Ateliers de X. Mann Fils	1857	Steel Work	Mulhouse	Yes	-
118	Société de Carrosserie Française Et. Le Vieux et Cie	1857	Metal Work	Courvevoie	Yes	Yes
122	Atelier et Société de Secours Mutuels de la Maison Lefaucheu & Cie	1858	-	Paris	Yes	Yes
130	E Derrien	1859	-	Chantenay	Yes	-
148	Ateliers Ve. Lesergent et Cie	1860	-	Mulhouse	Yes	-
151 ^b	Filature de Louis Bastard	1860	Textiles	Loos	-	-
184 ^b	Delerue, Leruste & Cie	1863	Textiles	Roubaix	-	-
200	Ateliers Raphaël Dreyfus et Cie	1864	-	Mulhouse	Yes	-
239	Ateliers Dollfus-Mieg et Cie	1867	-	Mulhouse	Yes	-
243	Réglement des Ouvriers Couvreur	1867	Roof Tiles	Roubaix	-	-
249 ^c	Maison Teillard	1867	Religious Community	Lacluse	-	-
251 ^c	Machines à Imprimer	1868	-	Mulhouse	-	-
262	Tuilerie de Golbey	1868	Roof Tiles	Epinal	Yes	-
277 ^b	Teinturerie de toiles d'Ernest Serret d'Haubourdin	1871	Textiles	-	-	-
282 ^c	Administration du Stationnement, Halles de Bercy	1873	Luggage Porters	Paris	-	-
287	Chantiers de M.E. Deny	1874	Landscaping	-	Yes	-
289	Etablissement Henri Deren	1873	Textiles	Roubaix	Yes	Yes
305	Tissage Mécanique	1879	Textiles	Armentière	Yes	-
315	Fromagerie de la Balme-Sur-Cerdon	1888	Food	Villefranche	Yes	-
317	Imprimerie de P. Hoffmann	1889	Printing Shop	Montbéliard	Yes	-
318	Fabrique de Sulfure de Carbone	1890	Chemicals	Rouen	Yes	-
321	Etablissement Bazaban, Puissancourt, Mangin & Co	1897	-	-	Yes	-
322	Cornil Wallart	1899	Metal Work	Aire	Yes	Yes
323	Badische Anilin et Soda Fabrik	1899	Beverages	Neuville-sur-Saone	Yes	-
327	Manufacture de Chaussures Aubertel	1900	Shoe Factory	Ligny-Guerpont	-	-
334 ^c	Hotel des Syndicats	1901	Job Clearing House	Lille	-	-
352	André Koechlin et Cie	?	-	Mulhouse	Yes	-
354 ^b	Scierie, Tréfilerie et pointerie de MM Foncier et Logette	?	Woodshop	Nantes	-	-
Total = 35	Relevant sample size once [atypical codes]^c and [exclusive piece rate environments]^b are deducted = 25				21 out of 25 (84%)	5 out of 25 (25%)

^a These thirty-five index numbers were generated randomly by a computer (range of 1 to 354) and refer to the classification of the codes of conduct collection (dated 1798 to 1936) indexed by Biroleau (1984).

^b These five codes of conducts (#49, #151, #184, #277 and #354) relate exclusively to piece-rate work environments.

^c These five codes of conduct either cover atypical work environments (#249: a religious community, #282: wholesale goods porters and #334: a job clearing house) or specific work regulations (#82: children's work and #251: illness and accident regulations).

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