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Life in the oilfields: Unveiling new sources for social history of French hydrocarbon industry

Abstract

Enjeu majeur pour la recherche en histoire des hydrocarbures, la difficulté d'accès aux sources archivistiques, notamment issues des entreprises, limite le champ d'exploration des chercheurs. L'ouverture de nouveaux fonds permet de développer des problématiques qui interrogent la dimension sociale et culturelle de l'histoire de l'industrie des hydrocarbures. Cet article présente les archives papiers et audiovisuelles de la Compagnie Française des Pétroles Algérie (CFP-A) et explique comment l'interdépendance entre sources écrites et mémoire orale peut contribuer à l'humanisation de ce champ d'études.

Plan of the article

- The Compagnie Française des Pétroles Algérie archive: new sources for social history of hydrocarbon industry
- Memories from the oilfield: the interdependence of oral and written sources in the Social History of hydrocarbon industry.
- Conclusion

1 At the beginning of the 1980s French companies created their first Archive department in charge of the corporate historical heritage. The unrestricted access to corporate records unveiled original sources and has fostered the emergence of new research questions among French scholars. Challenging the primacy of Public Archives, this evolution has supported the emergence of Energy History as an independent field of study. Oil and gas have always been tackled from the angles of Economic and Diplomatic History with a main focus on the geostrategic role of energy resources in the international system. The multiplication of corporate history monographs and biographies of the oil industry's founding fathers confirmed these main tendencies. Nevertheless, the emergence of the contemporary debate on energy transition and post-carbon society has raised several questions on the role of individuals in shaping oil culture during the 20th century. In this context, Energy industry archives are fundamental sources to relocate the human element at the core of the historical analysis¹. Defining the life in the oilfield as a new object of study, this paper presents the sources of Social history of French hydrocarbon industry in Algeria that are accessible in Total Historical Archives. We will introduce the *Compagnie Française des Pétroles Algérie* (CFP-A) historical archives as the main source to study the everyday life of French engineers and technicians in the Saharan oilfields. Furthermore, we will discuss the importance of memory and the interdependence of written and oral Social history sources of hydrocarbon industry, assessing the renewed role of historians and archivists in the creation of new archival collections.

THE COMPAGNIE FRANÇAISE DES PÉTROLES ALGÉRIE ARCHIVE: NEW SOURCES FOR SOCIAL HISTORY OF HYDROCARBON INDUSTRY

2 Social history has always been considered a multifaceted discipline characterized by a broad object of study. This can be summarized by the idea of the French Social historian Ernest

¹ Pascal Griset, "Histoire sociale et entreprise", in Christophe Charle (eds.), *Histoire sociale, histoire globale ? actes du colloque des 27-28 janvier 1989* (Paris: Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1993), 195-196.

Labrousse who explained that "all History is social and Social History is all the History."² In French academic debate, a limited amount of research has been carried out on the interactions between individuals, groups and organizations in the field of Energy History. However, focusing on the "social" dimension can be considered as an effective way to "[understand] the inner workings of the organizations through the analysis of the human factor."³ Most of the French scholars have so far privileged macro-historical perspectives considering energy as a strategic resource rather than as a consumer good and as the result of an industrial production process. After pioneering research on the cultural implications of energy,⁴ the renewed dialogue between Energy historians and Social scientists is contributing to the humanization of the discipline. In this sense, the oilfield, the refining plant and the pipeline construction site can be considered as a privileged field of observation to study labor relations, the social impact of technological innovation and the emergence of shared professional identities.

In order to understand the role of fossil fuels in the ongoing debate on energy transition it is necessary to question the emergence of oil culture⁵ and the myth of black gold in French society after World War II. This compels us to question the role of the men and women who participated in the evolution of hydrocarbon industry, to understand how they acquired technical expertise in oil and gas exploration and production and to define the role of French oilmen in shaping French collective imaginary. *Compagnie*

² Maurice Agulhon, "Ernest Labrousse, historien social (XIX^e siècle)", *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, vol. 276, n° 1, 1989, 129.

³ Pascal Griset, "Histoire sociale et entreprise" (cf. note 1).

⁴ Alain Beltran, *La fée et la servante. La société française face à l'électricité, XIX^e-XX^e siècle* (Paris: Belin, 1991); Gabrielle Hecht, *The Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity after World War II* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009 [1998]).

⁵ Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (eds.), *Oil Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson and Imre Szeman (eds.), *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

Française des Pétroles Algérie (CFP-A) archives can help to develop these research questions studying the emergence of the “Saharan Oil Saga” during the *Trente Glorieuses*. Presenting the role of individuals in shaping mentalities and organizations, the archives of the first *Compagnie Française des Pétroles*’s Exploration-Production affiliate will help historians and social scientists to write an alternative history of French hydrocarbon industry in the second half of the 20th century.

- 4 The *Compagnie Française des Pétroles Algérie* is a 75 linear meters⁶ archival collection today accessible in Total Historical Archives.⁷ It is one of the rare examples of a corporate records collection rescued from the nationalization of foreign oil companies that took place in Algeria in 1971. Part of the documentation dating from 1951 to 1962 has been saved after Algerian independence when the archives were repatriated from Algiers to Paris.⁸ After this, thanks to an effective record management strategy, CFP-A archives have been enriched with new sources produced from 1962 to the beginning of the 1980s. The uniqueness of this collection is due to the inaccessibility of records from other French companies that worked in the Sahara such as the state-owned *Société Nationale de Recherche et d'Exploitation des Pétroles en Algérie* (SN Repal) as well as the *Régie Autonome des Pétroles* (RAP) and Royal Dutch-Shell joint-ventures, the *Compagnie de Recherche et d'Exploitation de Pétrole au Sahara* (CREPS) and the *Compagnie des Pétroles d'Algérie* (CPA).
- 5 Preserving a rich collection of activity reports, corporate bodies’ meeting minutes and correspondence, CFP-A archives is the main accessible source of French hydrocarbon industry

history in Algeria. The collections keep important documentation presenting innovation in oil and gas exploration techniques, administrative methods automation, human resource management and organization. Readers will also find an important collection of financial documentation presenting the activities of different joint-ventures founded by CFP-A and SN Repal. For example, the *Société Pétrolière de Gérance* (SOPEG) records attest the role of French engineers in the Hassi Messaoud – Béjaïa pipeline. Presenting workers’ everyday life, these files complete the important photographic collection preserved in Total Historical Archives. In the same way, the *Société d'Exploitation de Hydrocarbures d'Hassi R'Mel* (SEHR) records contribute to study the development of Hassi R'Mel gas field between the 1960s and the 1970s. The *Compagnie Algérienne de Méthane Liquide* (CAMEL) record helps to explain the evolution of gas consumption in Europe thanks to the development of liquefaction technology and the construction of the world first liquefaction plant in Arzew.

In addition to these thematic orientations, CFP-A 6 archive sheds new light on three distinct periods of French hydrocarbon industry history. The first period starts with the beginning of Saharan geological exploration in the aftermath of World War II. For CFP-A this phase officially started with the signing of a cooperation agreement with SN Repal in 1951, formalizing the joint exploration of a 260 000 km² area in northern Sahara. The massive mobilization of private and public investments rapidly led to the first oil discovery in 1956 while the Algerian war of Independence was in full swing. After the mediatization of the Saharan Oil Saga among French public opinion, the second period is dominated by the 1962 Algerian independence and the consequent decision to start oil exploration in other productive regions of Asia, Africa and in the North Sea. Nevertheless, the archives highlight the role of CFP-A in French-Algerian cooperation agreement and in training Algerian engineers and technicians. The third period is characterized by the nationalization of French oil companies in 1971 and the adoption of a new industrial strategy based on cooperation and technical assistance.

⁶ Total Historical Archives, 18V01807/1-714, *Archives de la Compagnie Française des Pétroles Algérie* (the archival processing of this collection has been carried out by the author of this article between 2016 and 2018).

⁷ Total Historical Archives are located in the company’s headquarters in La Défense. The reading room is open by appointment from Monday to Friday from 9am to 5 pm ([gs.tfms-paris-archives@total.com](mailto:tfms-paris-archives@total.com))

⁸ Total Historical Archives, AO011902 *Récit de carrière de Jean Picard*, Paris, 9th May 2018

7 A large number of research questions could be answered using these unpublished sources. Life in the oilfields could be approached from a multidimensional perspective focusing on three main features. The first one is the division of labor between expatriated and local workers, a subject that has recently been approached by scholars.⁹ The analysis of CFP-A Human Resources strategy can contribute to this rising academic debate, envisaging a comparative analysis of training and social promotion models developed by French companies in Algeria and Anglo-American companies especially in the Middle-East. The second feature focuses on the technological development enhanced by the adaptation of oil and gas techniques to the Saharan working environment. CFP-A Technical Department archives present the technological innovations in seismic prospection, drilling techniques and gas liquefaction process. Presenting the company's achievement, archives do not conceal the industrial misadventure and the projects that never got off the ground like the Trans-Mediterranean pipeline that was first envisaged during the 1960s. The third feature is the analysis of the oilfield as a spatial framework that fostered the emergence of a new professional category. CFP-A collection shows the everyday life in Hassi Messaoud "Maison Verte", the company living base that was designed to provide French personnel with the highest standard of living. Drawing a portrait of the first French oilmen, these sources give a general overview of habits, rituals and mentalities, retracing the life of this community in the middle of the desert.

MEMORIES FROM THE OILFIELD: THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF ORAL AND WRITTEN SOURCES IN THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF HYDROCARBON INDUSTRY.

8 Even if CFP-A archival collection impresses the reader with its richness and entirety, a minor part of the documentation has been lost over the

⁹ Touraj Atabaki, Elisabetta Bini and Kaveh Ehsani (eds.), *Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Elisabetta Bini and Francesco Petrini, "Labor politics in the oil industry: new historical perspectives", *Labor History*, vol. 60, n° 1, 2019, 1-7.

years. This is due, on the one hand, to complications occurred while the documents were transferred from Algeria to France during the Algerian war of independence.¹⁰ On the other hand, the conservation of the archival collection has been deeply influenced by the archivists' historiographical sensitivity. According to archival theories, the archivist decides the destruction or the conservation of records at the end of their lifecycle. The conservation of records because of their historical value is deeply influenced by major historiographical tendencies in a defined context.¹¹ This is the reason why only a limited number of internal documents reporting the living condition in the oilfields and the social life in the industrial sites are still accessible nowadays.

This lack of written sources attesting the everyday life in the company imposes to resort to memories and stories of the people that lived through this important chapter of French industrial history. Whereas the legitimacy of oral sources has been debated for a long time among French archivists and historians,¹² nowadays it seems that the existing distinction between "regular archives" and "alternative archives" is losing its appeal.¹³ Oral Archives are no longer perceived as alternatives sources but their complementarity with paper archives is confirmed. Nevertheless, recent debates¹⁴ have highlighted

¹⁰ Total Historical Archives, AO11916, *Récit de carrière de Sylvianne Loste*, Paris, 24th January 2019.

¹¹ Cf. Association des Archivistes Français, *Les archives dans l'entreprise : guide des durées de conservation* (Paris: Association des Archivistes Français, 1997). Roger Nougaret and Association des archivistes français (eds.), *Guide des services d'archives des entreprises et organismes du monde du travail* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1998).

¹² Florence Descamps, *Archiver la mémoire: de l'histoire orale au patrimoine immatériel* (Paris: Éditions EHESS, 2019). Florence Descamps, *L'historien, l'archiviste et le magnétophone : de la constitution de la source orale à son exploitation* (Paris: Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France, 2001).

¹³ Didier Devriese, "Archives 'régulières' versus archives 'alternatives': un examen en légitimité", *17e Journées des Archives: Archiver le temps présent - les fabriques alternatives d'archives* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Université catholique de Louvain, 2018).

¹⁴ "Pratiques contemporaines de l'histoire orale. De l'entretien aux archives orales" Paris, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, April, 11th to 13th, 2019.

how nowadays the interview methodology has integrated the historian's toolkit.¹⁵ In the field of Energy history, research on History of Electricity has encouraged the development of the first Oral Archives programs since the 1980s. The first project aimed to collect the career stories of Electricité de France managers and French hydroelectric engineers.¹⁶ But, despite the fact that the number of Oral Archives projects on hydrocarbon history has increased in the Anglo-Saxon world,¹⁷ a lack of memories from the oilfields persists nowadays.

10 For these reasons, after processing the *Compagnie Française des Pétroles Algérie* archival collection, all the conditions have been met to launch the first Oral Archives program in Total Historical Archives in 2018. The first one was to acknowledge that the existing gap in written archives needed to be bridged with the career stories of the former CFP-A personnel. The heritage aspect has been the most important reference during the conception of the project. Nevertheless, the issue of the intergenerational transmission of technical knowledge was taken into consideration. The second condition was the fruitful interaction between Total Historical Archives and the CFP-A former staff association. The retired company agents were willing to take part in the Oral Archives program, sharing their stories and preserving the company's collective memory. The third

¹⁵ Daniel Berteaux, "L'histoire orale en France: fin de la préhistoire", *International Journal of Oral History*, vol. 2, n° 2, 1981, 121-127.

¹⁶ Martine Bungener, Alain Beltran and Jean-François Picard, *Histoire(s) de l'EDF: comment se sont prises les décisions de 1946 à nos jours* (Paris: Dunod, 1985); Part of the oral archives are accessible online "Mémoire de l'industrie et ses réseaux" project website: <http://www.memoire-orale.org>, consulted on august 19th, 2019.

¹⁷ Since the year 2003 the University of Aberdeen and British National Library Oral archives project "Lives in the Oil Industry", has collect more than 200 life and careers stories on the history of the UK North Sea oil and gas industry: <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/oillives/about/programme.shtml> (consulted on September 2nd, 2019). In Canada a project cofounded by oil companies and the Petroleum History Society "Petroleum Industry Oral History Projects" has collected more than 400 interviews in between 1981 and 2013: <http://petroleumhistory.ca/oralhistory/>, (consulted on September 2nd, 2019).

condition was the decision to go back to the roots while preparing Total centenary anniversary in 2024, replacing the historical dimension at the core of the corporate identity.

Integrating the archival methodology and Social history approach, the project « Archives orales de la Compagnie Française des Pétroles Algérie: une entreprise de mémoire (s) » has made it possible to collect the memory of 23 members of CFP-A former staff between 2018 and 2019. The main target group of the oral archive collection is divided into three categories: CFP-A and Total Algérie agents, CFP and partner companies' personnel seconded in the Sahara, consultants and contracted workers. The Oral Archives program has been chronologically limited to the period between the foundation of the company in 1953 and the retirement of the first generation of engineers and technicians trained in the Sahara during the 1990s. Participants have been selected in order to ensure an equal representation of different oil industry's families of profession: geologist, geophysicists, drillers, producers, jurists and executives. Considering the overrepresentation of Pieds-Noirs¹⁸ among the company staff, it has been necessary to widen the target population in order to collect a greater variety of stories. Furthermore, although hydrocarbon industry has been for a long time a male dominated environment, this project has made it possible to collect career stories from the women who worked in the CFP group. CFP-A Oral Archives present today, among others, a long interview with the first French female exploration engineer recruited by Total group in 1957.

The result of this Oral Archives campaign is a collection of 24 interviews lasting from 1 to 3 hours for a total of more than 50 hours of audio and video recording. Every interview has been structured following a chronological approach and focusing on the main stages of the interviewee's professional career. Starting from young age

¹⁸ The term Pieds-Noirs, literally Black-Foot, indicates the population of French and European origin that was born in Algeria during the colonial period and moved to France after Algerian Independence in 1962.

education, the career stories retrace the path followed by the first oil engineers and technicians at the beginning of oil and gas exploration in the aftermath of World War II. Interviews have focused on the recruitment process in the company to deepen the understanding of the company's human resources strategy. The information collected has given important details about the Algerian labor market, the physical and psychometric criteria adopted to recruit the company personnel and the role of the company in adapting its organization to work in an extreme and isolated environment such as the Sahara. Furthermore, collecting information about the workday activities has helped to understand the workers' perceptions of the company structure, the management style adopted and the relations between different departments. Otherwise, the most important topic discussed during interviews was the everyday life in the company living bases in Hassi Messaoud. Memories about this life experience enables us to question the identification process that characterizes this social group and their professional identity. Collecting details about the yearly celebration of oilmen's patron saint on Saint Barbara day, the interaction between French and Algerian communities in the living space and the ceremonial relation between the District Chief and his subordinates suggest that oil history is, first and foremost, a humanized history.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary social demand for energy transition is requiring us to deepen our knowledge of the social dimension of Energy history. Understanding the 21st century conception of energy phenomena obliges us to analyze from a historical perspective our relationship to fossil fuel, our consumption patterns as well as the representation of hydrocarbon industry in everyday life. Since the beginning of Energy history, scholars have privileged the adoption of a macro-historical approach that contributed to the development of a top-down historiography. The processing of corporate archives, such as the *Compagnie Française des Pétroles Algérie* archival collection, has provided historians with unpublished sources supporting the adoption of micro-social perspectives¹⁹ in oil and gas history. Instead of focusing on organization, industrial structure and decision-making process, these new collections enable us to analyze specific aspects of people's daily life in the hydrocarbon industry. Considering the lack of sources that characterizes corporate archives, the systematic development of Oral Archives programs can help to preserve the collective memory of companies and organizations. A fruitful interaction between historians and archivists can support the collection of life stories contributing to affirm the idea of complementarity of oral and written sources.

¹⁹ Christophe Charle, "Contemporary French Social History: Crisis or Hidden Renewal?", *Journal of Social History*, vol. 37, n° 1, 2003, 57-68.

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