

Bata and the modernity. A French debate during the Inter-World War years

Florent Le Bot

Bata enters in France in 1924 with the installation of a general sale agency, then in 1926 with the foundation of its first stores in Roubaix and Tourcoing (north of the France). This takes place with a growth of the firm on an international scale. In April 1930, Bata France limited company is constituted with her registered office in Strasbourg (east of France). She launches the construction of a factory in the Moselle (not far from Strasbourg), at Hellocourt. Organizational principles applied to Zlin are similar to Hellocourt, including accommodation of working-class families, a chapel, a school, some shops, constituting a veritable "Batatown" like the Czech model. In 1934, first year of its function, the factory produces 2.5 million pairs of shoes and employs 2,400 workers. In 1939, its production reaches nearly 4 million pairs of shoes. During the years 1930, Bata France have projects to extend its capacities to produce and commercializing, and to diversify its production by the acquisition or the creation of factories and points of sale.

This expansion of the Czech group induces a vigorous debate in France during the 1930 years, involving production experts and working experts, trade unions, some politicians, above all a lot of competitors, and also some architects, some famous writers (as Jean Giono)... Bata has come to epitomize the modernity, negatively or positively according the point of view.

Three principal stakes take shape through these debates: the massification of the production and its economic effects; working conditions and more largely the position of the work in the society ; the nature of the civilization which seems in gestation, and whose the giants factories and the company towns would be the indication. In addition, these concerns require to study the points of view about the war, with the prism of pacifism - War meaningful Bata for some people as Giono-, and also the xenophobe's point of view concerning a "foreigner" firm.

These are the actors of these debates and the terms of these stakes that we will present in this contribution. What is Bata for the French during the Inter-World War years?