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Afterword

Transformations of work

This edited collection presents an original and diversified overview of post-socialist work transformations in the post-Yugoslav region and in Central Eastern Europe more broadly, exploring such changes through legal, philosophical and anthropological perspectives. Alongside tracing the different legal and social implications of post-socialist transformations of the working sphere, the volume also innovatively explores processes of knowledge production about the sphere of work, industry and society. It also examines how hegemonic discourses have dictated common scholarly and popular understandings of the post-industrial turn, sidelining the experiences of current and former industrial workers in the region. These workers have been placed at the bottom of the social scale, and have been stigmatised alongside the old socialist system for not being able to adapt to new circumstances (Kideckel 2002). The volume also shows how neo-liberalism permeates not only the sphere of work but also the sphere of everyday life, particularly through new gendered forms of precarious, affective labour.

The different chapters in the volume add to the current renewed scholarly interest in class and labour relations during the period of state socialism and during post-socialist transformations (Archer et al. 2015; Siefert 2020; Ost 2015). This interest has led to the production of a remarkable amount of research in the past decade, also as a result of new social movements addressing issues of labour exploitation and precarity in post-socialism (Horvat and Štiks 2015). The in-depth case studies presented here contribute to wider anthropological debates on ongoing transformations of work and workers' subjectivity, following Ognjen Kojanić's convincing argument that "the greatest contribution

that the anthropology of post-socialism can offer to the anthropology of European peripheries is in the meticulous ethnographic attention paid to spaces and peoples that get marginalised as a consequence of political-economic processes and marginalising discourses” (Kojanic 2020). In this afterword I will highlight what in my view are the most interesting findings presented in the different book chapters that make up the collection, and I will connect these to ongoing debates in the field of class and labour. I approach the anthropological and ethnographic approaches presented here through my own research on labour and gender history, and particularly the history of textile workers in post-Yugoslav states (Bonfiglioli 2019).

The first cluster of articles addresses conceptual debates, legislative changes and hegemonic knowledge production in the sphere of work. Sven Cvek discusses how discourses on the post-industrial society were already permeating socialist Yugoslavia in the 1980s, and how these discourses justified a shift in class relations that aimed to discipline workers. Yugoslavia partook in the global rearrangements in the capitalist system, and the changes in discourse in favour of capital were already present before 1989. Cvek addresses the role played by sociologists, particularly Županov, who theorised socialist egalitarianism as blocking reforms and the valorisation of intellectual knowledge, because of the pact between the political bureaucracy and egalitarian-minded workers. The working class was seen as resisting social change, particularly because of ongoing strikes that involved over half a million employees in 1989, which Cvek investigated through the case of the Borovo leather factory, in a research project and exhibition together with Jasna Račić and Snježana Ivčić (Cvek et al. 2019). This chapter adds to recent debates on the position of blue-collar workers in the transition from market socialism to capitalism, and from Yugoslavia to post-Yugoslav nation-states. Workers’ participation in the “anti-bureaucratic revolution” appears to be ambivalent, encompassing various political stances related to power structures in self-management and to possible reforms of the Yugoslav economy in a more egalitarian, more market-oriented or more nationalist direction (Musić 2013; Archer and Musić 2020). This research connects to the literature that shows the interconnections and exchanges between Western and Eastern

experts on the development of market economies, and which explores the cultural influence of Western capitalism on market socialism, in Yugoslavia in particular (Bockman 2011; Jelača et al. 2017).

The importance of class conflict in rethinking commonly used categories such as post-industrial society and precarity is also at the core of the analysis proposed by Mislav Žitko. He revisits the different debates on precarity and the precarisation of labour in contemporary society, and the works of well-known authors on the subject, such as Bauman, Beck and Castells. These authors assumed the inevitable advent of a post-industrial society due to globalisation and technological change, without, however, considering the issue of class conflict and the policies that make people precarious. He also comments upon Standing's attempt to define the precariat as a new class, which is ultimately unsatisfactory, as it tends to blur the boundaries between the precarisation of social life and the precarisation of work. Žitko suggests instead considering Polanyi's idea of the embeddedness of work in the social structure and E.P. Thompson's concept of moral economy, to emphasise that precariousness is neither ubiquitous nor inevitable.

The writings of E.P. Thompson are recently being rediscovered in post-Yugoslav space, particularly his edited volume *The Railway: An Adventure in Construction*, in which the British historian discusses his participation in international youth brigades constructing the Šamac-Sarajevo railway. A new edition was published with an introduction by Slobodan Karamanić, while the recent Serbian translation of the volume is accompanied by new texts engaging with the history of youth actions, edited by Tanja Petrović and Andrea Matošević (Thompson 2019, 2020; Matošević and Petrović 2020).

The theme of class is also explored in the contribution by Mario Reljanović, who looks at how workers are being made precarious through changes in labour legislation. The author highlights how post-Yugoslav states are joining in the "race to the bottom" for production costs in the global capitalist economy, notably in the case of Serbia, by offering subsidies to multinational companies for local investments. However, this tends to create a myriad of exploitative and precarious, low-paid jobs, with unionisation also at threat (see also Radenković 2016). The legislative changes reflect the nation-state gradually losing

its usual social functions after the twentieth century, with temporary contracts, overtime and no pauses during work being the rule. Workers are not accepting the current exploitation, as shown by over 100,000 workers who have left Serbia and the other post-Yugoslav states to find work in Western Europe. The state is then resorting to the solution of hiring foreign workers from India, China and other countries with a cheaper workforce, to supply greenfield companies. Such “import” of foreign workers happened during socialism as well in several Central and Eastern European countries, but it was more rooted in Cold War geopolitics than in the global “race to the bottom” for production costs, and it allowed for local and foreign workers’ agency, in contrast to the present-day situation (Alamgir 2020).

Alongside labour intensification and exploitation, deindustrialisation and factory closures are also a phenomenon that characterises the post-Yugoslav region after 1989. A growing historical and anthropological literature addresses industrial workers’ memories of work under socialism and their experiences of post-socialist transformations and factory closures. The second cluster in the book is dedicated to deindustrialisation, nostalgia and workers’ industrial structures of feeling, based on research conducted for the TRANSWORK project (Transformation of Work in Post-Transitional Croatia, 2017–2021). This project resulted in 132 thematically focused interviews being gathered, conducted with workers of different ages and socio-economic status in all parts of Croatia, from Pula, Rijeka and Čakovec, to Ilok and Dubrovnik. The interviews discussed the changes that took place in the workplace after the end of state socialism in 1990, after the global financial crisis of 2007–2008 and as a result of Croatia’s accession to the European Union in 2013.

Reana Senjković’s chapter shows that workers’ “post-socialist nostalgia” is in fact not a fantasy, but is rooted in lived experiences of solidarity, equality and job security that were lost with transition and deindustrialisation. In dialogue with the existing literature addressing deindustrialisation in North America and Western Europe (Strangleman 2017; Strangleman et al. 2013; High et al. 2017), the author highlights that similar feelings are expressed by former industrial workers in the West: both “Eastern” and “Western” workers found a job easily, felt

proud of their achievements in the workplace, were satisfied with their salaries and worked for the same employer until their retirement. The concept of “nostalgia”, however, is mainly used as a scholarly object when discussing workers’ experiences of post-socialist countries, which hints at the stigmatisation of any possible alternative system in the current neo-liberal context (exemplified in post-Yugoslav states by the phrase “I am not Yugonostalgic, but...”) In the following chapter by Sanja Potkonjak and Tea Škokić, the collapse of the ironworks in the post-industrial town of Sisak, which used to employ up to 14,000 workers, is investigated through the lens of “multiple temporalities”. The geographical and affective landscapes generated by deindustrialisation and by the migration of many inhabitants to the capital city of Zagreb created a cultural conflict between older generations who see the city as having “no future” after deindustrialisation, and younger generations who are attempting to build their own future either in Zagreb or in Sisak itself, despite the transformations.

Nina Vodopivec also discusses industrial collapse and ruination, and particularly the closure of the textile mill in Murska Sobota, Slovenia. The mill employed up to 6,000 workers during socialist times and its closure led to the loss of 2,635 jobs in 2009. The affective and embodied experience of deindustrialisation materialises in the workers’ use of words such as “rubbish” and “garbage” to express their feelings of devaluation. Vodopivec shows that workers are no longer seen as agents of social modernisation, but as a social problem, while during socialism they were praised for their diligence and encouraged to make further self-sacrifices for the community. This was particularly the case for female workers in labour-intensive industries such as the textile industry. The current situation therefore leads to a breakdown in trust and reciprocity, and the lack of discursive space to express such trauma results in physical and mental health issues, particularly for women who are unemployed. Former workers’ survival strategies and call for a different kind of “moral economy” are embedded in the valorisation and dignity of manual work experienced during socialist times (“People used to ask me: how have you survived? I have survived. I am managing to press on. I have been blessed that my nature is what it is and that I have golden hands”.) Such findings are similar to those

found in other studies dealing with female industrial workers across post-Yugoslav states, which emphasise the social meaning and embodied experience of factory work, and the gendered industrial structure of feeling present in “women’s factories” (see Bonfiglioli 2019; see also Kosmos et al. 2020).

Deindustrialisation and job losses in the post-Yugoslav region and in Central and Eastern Europe more broadly were accompanied by the survival of state-sponsored industrial jobs emptied of their past meaning and content (Rajković 2018), or by labour intensification and exploitation in the remaining industrial jobs, particularly within new private firms set up by multinational companies. This is the subject of the following cluster of papers dedicated to labour intensification, precarity and risk, which presents three case studies: the automotive industry in Hungary, the steel industry in Bulgaria and the childcare sector in Croatia. Tibor Meszmann presents his research on job quality in a relocated automotive company in Hungary, where precarity, coercion and labour intensification affect even those perceived as “elite” workers with good wages. The relocation of certain sectors of automotive industrial production to Central and Eastern Europe brought 180,372 new jobs between 2008 and 2018, reaching a total of 736,961 jobs in Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and Romania. This relocation implied not only a deterioration of job quality in comparison to the work regime in Western Europe, but also further deterioration of job quality and increased intensification once the factories were in place, as in the case of Kecskemét studied here, where health risks were also intensified, and accidents were frequent.

The pervasiveness of risk for current industrial workers is explored further in Dimitra Kofti’s chapter on the Bulgarian steel industry, which highlights changing values and ideas of risk in the Pernik steel industry, which employed up to 9,000 workers during state socialism. The workers interviewed by Kofti have also been affected by severe dispossession and alienation, with widespread poverty and social welfare replaced by “kinfare”. Workers’ overall indebtedness makes it difficult to take political initiative against the management, and while intensification puts workers at risk, risk-taking is characteristic of the construction of masculinity in heavy industry, with workers at times refusing to use

safety equipment in order to establish their own agency and mastery. In contrast to the previous case studies focusing on heavy industry and masculinity, the study by Jelena Ostojić, Marko Lučić, Katarina Jaklin and Teo Matković on the childcare sector in Croatia highlights the feminisation and precarisation of this field. The frequency of temporary contracts and of extremely short contracts has a negative effect on the experience of work and quality of life of childcare employees, whose contracts are often discontinued around Christmas or the summer holidays and resumed afterwards. This has a specifically devaluing effect on female workers, who are unable to plan their lives because of the lack of job security.

Moving away from the field of industrial work and into the study of migration, a further cluster of articles explores issues related to migration, affective labour and gender, in relation both to the wave of Middle Eastern refugees along the Balkan route from 2015 onwards, and to the simultaneous wave of post-Yugoslav economic migrants seeking out better opportunities in Western Europe. Romana Pozniak addresses the condition of Croatian humanitarian workers who have engaged in providing aid to refugees along the Balkan route. These workers often belong to activist NGOs and engage in different forms of “vernacular humanitarianism” (Brković 2017). Their dependence on international funding, however, is creating a tension between the prescribed rationality of humanitarian aid and the emotions generated by affective labour on the ground. For many local humanitarian workers, self-care is seen as a luxury given the situation in which aid recipients live. This lack of self-care, alongside the precarity of their work and the need to limit their political engagement and criticism, takes its toll on their mental health. The author also reflects on knowledge production in the field of humanitarianism and on how the concept of self-care is used as a control mechanism for neo-liberal governmentality in order to foster individual resilience, while taming criticism of global power relations and the limits of humanitarianism in tackling inequalities.

Danijela Majstorović also addresses the ways in which neo-liberalism permeates everyday lives, and particularly the choices of Bosnian women who migrated to Germany in search of better employment and opportunities in the care and medical sector, some with higher quali-

fications, but most doing underpaid and undervalued jobs in nursing and elderly care. This movement towards Germany can be described as a “third wave” of migration, after the influx of Bosnian refugees in the 1990s and the earlier migration of Gastarbeiters during the socialist era (Bernard 2019). The disillusionment with Bosnian state politics and its “negative peace” is one of the reasons pushing many Bosnian citizens to emigrate to Germany (in 2015 over 200,000 Bosnian economic migrants moved to Germany). Much has been written about Bosnia and the feeling of living in a state of stagnation, including from a work perspective that stifles its inhabitants’ hopes for the future (Hromadžić 2015; Jansen 2015). “Kinfare” seems to be again at work here, with previous family ties and connections shaping the direction of their migration. The hard work done in Germany comes at the expense of time with their family and children back home, who are nonetheless the beneficiaries of the remittances. The global character of domestic work has been at the core of several publications and research projects in recent years.¹

A final cluster of articles addresses the issue of class and commodification in the spheres of culture and everyday life in Croatia. The topics range from the depiction of corruption in cultural terms through the construction of the “Dinaric type”, to the commercialisation of traditional music, and the experience of private Airbnb hosts affected by the current pandemic and by the end of tourist flows in the city of Zagreb. Petar Bagarić and Orlanda Obad come back to the issue of knowledge production, this time about corruption specifically, and highlight how certain group with less social and cultural capital, or “weak subjects”, such as the inhabitants of Imotski in Croatia, are blamed for corruption and for belonging to the “Dinaric type” when they mobilise their family connections to survive. At the same time, nepotism at the highest levels of Croatian society is not scrutinised in the same way. Čaleta addresses how traditional *klapa* singers, who met mainly recreationally during socialist times, have now turned into paid professionals who depend on tourism and “gigs” to make ends meet. Škokić and Biti analyse another post-socialist phenomenon, namely the emergence of “daily capitalists” and “urban entrepreneurship,” with the booming of

¹ Notably, see the outputs of the Dom Equal project based at the University of Venice, <https://domequal.eu/>.

private Airbnb hosting in Zagreb. This often turned into a full-time job for many, but has now almost completely disappeared because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Overall, this edited collection presents a significant and innovative overview of ongoing transformations of work and discourses about work in the post-Yugoslav region and Central and Eastern Europe more broadly, and it speaks to wider global debates on deindustrialisation and post-industrial society. The richness of workers' narratives in most of the chapters allows the reader to explore the subjectivity of different social groups and categories of workers, from textile workers in Slovenia to steel workers in Bulgaria, from Bosnian migrant nurses in Germany to childcare employees in Croatia. The overall post-Fordist longing for a Fordist time² in which job security and social protection were at least possible, if not widespread, and the feeling of devaluation and precarity in post-socialist, neo-liberal times, seems to be a constant theme. Another recurring theme is the gendered, affective and emotional character of the post-socialist labour experience, which does not only apply to humanitarian aid workers on the Balkan route, but also applies to former industrial workers embodying the loss that has resulted from factory closures or to current industrial workers experiencing the intensification of working rhythms in greenfield industrial plants. The collection will be of great interest to scholars addressing the sphere of labour from anthropological, sociological and historical perspectives, not only in post-Yugoslav and Central Eastern European states, but also globally.

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² On post-Fordist affect, see Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012.

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