

# “In the World of Iron and Steel”: On the Ethnography of Work, Unemployment and Hope

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In this paper the authors discuss three sets of issues. The first relates to the recent economic crisis, as well as the transitional crisis that preceded it, and is illustrated on the example of the devastation of the Sisak Ironworks. The collapse of the Croatian industry is explained primarily as a bankruptcy of political, ideological and economic values from the socialist period and only secondarily as the result of the global economic crisis. The second set of issues is revealed in the interviews with the employees of the Sisak Ironworks who were laid off, whose narratives mostly conceptualize their life without work, who talk about their life while they were still employed, and who consider their future life and work. In all these interviews the word “hope” is repeated as a kind of a leitmotif. The notion of hope is, in fact, the object of the final set of issues. In recent years, within the humanities and social sciences, the concept of “hope” was given considerable importance in research, especially in the analysis of individual and collective traumatic experience, such as losing one’s job. Thus, the authors present some of the more important theoretical articles about hope, and problematize them based on their own field notes.

*Key words:*

Sisak Ironworks, hope, unemployment

# I

*The Marxist attempt to find a satisfactory replacement  
for the market place is an experiment  
which is almost universally judged to have failed.  
But the non-Marxist scenario seems as  
implausible as the Marxist. (Rorty 1999: 231)*

During the early 1990s, humanities and social sciences have started to take more interest in post-Fordism as the new form of capitalist production and consumption. As one of the consequences of this interest, "inherent contradictions of the capitalist economy" (Harvey 1992: 142) have been detected. In his work on the paradoxes of capitalist economy, David Harvey noticed the link between market deregulation, the collapse of the Fordist paradigm of industrial production, and, consequently, the sudden development of "flexible accumulation".<sup>1</sup> While Harvey discussed these problems in relation to capitalism, the crisis of socialism, which began at the same time, brought about its own detrimental economic effects, which the researchers focusing on the former socialist countries describe in a variety of ways. Their studies, which examine post-socialism, the transition or transformation of the society and work towards capitalism in the former socialist countries, center on the change in the economic system. For instance, a number of anthropologists have become interested in the modes of privatization and the spread of global businesses with the takeover of former Eastern European markets (Dunn 2004: 29), the collapse of the (textile) industry and the state abandoning the area of market regulation and social rights (Vodopivec 2007), grey economy and state paternalism (Verdery 1996), the adjustment of transitional companies to the market economy, followed by the unfulfilled expectations and disappointment in capitalism (Müller 2007), and various hybrids of the economic politics and state management which are diagnosed as "neoliberalism as exception"

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<sup>1</sup> David Harvey explains the flexible regime of accumulation as the form of capitalism which emerged after the collapse of the Fordist paradigm in the 1970s. Caused by the big oil crisis, the collapse of Fordism has heralded new forms of political and social control and regulation of the market, as well as, among other things, the uncertainty of employment, the collapse of union power, and the underpayment of the labour (Harvey 1992: 124, 145–150).

and “exceptions to neoliberalism” (Ong 2006: 3–4).<sup>2</sup> However, most of these studies are based on a core assumption which is also advocated by Katherine Verdery, according to which the downfall of socialism is the consequence of non-adaptability of the new socialist economies to the new economic relations.<sup>3</sup> As Verdery put it, “socialism’s fragility begins with the system of ‘centralized planning’ which the center neither adequately planned nor controlled” (Verdery 1996: 20), which then had an impact on the transition itself. Supposing that post-socialism in the early 1990s still provided a polygonal perspective for studying the supposedly unified socialist form of economy, it was possible to interpret the fall of socialism as the process conditioned by its caving in on itself; i.e. by its economic illogicalities and unsustainable development planning (ibid.). The principal reason why socialism is said to cave in on itself in this proposal is the fact that “inside socialist countries, (there have been groups) whose structural situation facilitated their fuller participation in the global economy, (so they) now had reasons to expand their state’s receptivity to capital – that is, to promote reform”. On the other hand “the control that socialist states exerted over capital flows into their countries may have made them special targets for international financial interests, eager to increase their opportunities by undermining socialist states” (ibid.: 34–35). It is as if Verdery offers a pre-globalization view of the economy in which the

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<sup>2</sup> Aihwa Ong uses the terms “neoliberalism as exception” and “exceptions to neoliberalism” to refer to the contemporary perversions in the technologies of governing, which take place in the cases when the governments use the imaginaries and practices of neo-liberal doctrine implemented by the liberal democracies. “Neoliberalism as exception” impacts citizens through the regulation of the modalities of labour, and the desirable forms of entrepreneurship, but also through “self-formation” and “self-government” of the citizen responsible for his/her own survival in the “turbulent market conditions” (2006: 6). Ong emphasizes: “Neoliberalism as exception is introduced in sites of transformation where market-driven calculations are being introduced in management of populations” (ibid.: 3). At the same time “exceptions to neoliberalism” are emerging as random political decision making, a type of exclusion of some groups of citizens from the neoliberal reach, so that one group of socially endangered citizens would be socially privileged, which is, as a rule, done at the expense of another group of socially de-privileged (ibid.: 4). Both principles, according to Ong, are used to mask the capricious “technologies of governing” over the autonomy and citizen rights (ibid.).

<sup>3</sup> “Many enterprises were not prepared for this rapid transformation, which resulted in stopping production, closing down of factories, sudden increase in unemployment and social tensions, along with many ecological problems (e.g. Upper Silesia in Poland and the Czech Republic, Bistrica, Zilina in Slovakia, etc.)” (Miletić et al. 2011: 245). In addition to enterprises being the losers in the transition, they also talk about industrial cities and regions as a whole, while the phrase “workless and hopeless” (Stenning 2005: 983) can be interpreted as the consequence of the failure of the socialist working class to adjust to the new market conditions; according to this idea, workers are as responsible for their fate as the incompetent management structures.

adaptable, crafty capitalism manages to “outfox” the non-elastic socialism anchored in its political economy, which was attempting to survive at any cost. Following such interpretations, for Verdery, socialism, damaged by its own inconsistencies and ideologically exhausted, did not stand a chance in its constant struggle with the vital and ever adaptable capitalism.

However, the example of Yugoslavia shows that the idea of “central planning” started to dissolve as early as the late 1950s, with the “gradual liberalization of trade and strengthening of the de-centralization of the monetary system and fiscal policy”, and with the increasing participation in the global capitalist flows (Žitko 2012).

The development of the Yugoslav economy, which Žitko sees as part of the wider “modernist project” of the total transformation of the society (ibid.), shows that Yugoslavia was forced, much earlier than the other socialist countries, to learn the alphabet of economic liberalism, to develop a “market socialism”, and to adopt an almost neo-liberal economic policy of Ante Marković by the end of the 1980s. Moreover, Susan Woodward believes that the collapse of socialism in Yugoslavia was caused, in addition to its problems of unemployment and being subjected to external influences and crises, by the differences between the republics in their approach to economic development (1995: 264–265), i.e. by “economic nationalism” (Petak 2004: 70–71).<sup>4</sup> All this points to the fact that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to talk about two “pure” economic models – the socialist and the capitalist model – which clashed at one point, as suggested by Verdery; it seems that economic changes, for example in Yugoslavia, took place in parallel with the development of the socialist society.

Therefore, without questioning the laws of economic interaction (including the interaction between socialism and capitalism) and without neglecting the heritage of socialist economy, we are inclined to approach the “blind spots” of Croatian transition and the collapse of its economy in a way that does not place blame for the collapse of the industry exclusively on the auto-immune illness of socialism due to its structural illogicalities, but rather as a reflection of capitalist restoration<sup>5</sup> which has been going

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<sup>4</sup> “Stronger orientation of the western republics towards the market of the European Economic Community and their general reluctance to continue covering production costs and losses [of companies in the other republics] by operating solely within the confines of the Yugoslav market increased their level of economic nationalism.” (Petak 2004: 70)

<sup>5</sup> The capitalist restoration is also taking place in the age of transition, within the process of establishing capitalist social relations regardless of the transitional “lack of order” and “savageness” vs. the so-called “ordered” capitalism (cf. Marković n.d.). The economic aspects of the mentioned

on in Croatia. We propose that the “explosion of capitalism” as a way of managing the surplus value caused an implosion of the economic system and, as a consequence, massive de-industrialization, rise of unemployment,



Sisak Iron Factory, Reconstruction after World War II  
Unknown author, no date, private collection Goran Dević

and eventually, de-urbanization of parts of Croatia. The consequences, if not the causes and the context of de-industrialization and de-urbanization illustrated by the town of Sisak and its Ironworks, are similar to those mentioned by Christine Walley (2009). Describing the collapse of the Chicago steel factory Winsconsin Steel, the author stresses serious problems of the transformation of family relations, of the local community

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restoration are the “lack of any strategy of economic development”, “systematic de-industrialization on the state level”, “high centralization under whose influence the periphery is left to its own devices, left to wither away” (Žitko as cited in Ivšić 2012: 6), but also stealing during the transformation and privatization of the business sector, as well as de-industrialization related to the macro-economic policy of investing in the company shares instead of in the reconstruction and modernization of production (Družić 2007: 348–349), the increase of unemployment and precarious work, and the gender, class, national and age diversification of the population, especially in smaller industrial towns.

and of city neighbourhoods. For Walley, the collapse of the Fordist concept of economy nested in the heart of the American industrial steelworks is an auto-immune illness which, by breaking the industry and firing the workers, devours the urban social tissue built around it. In his text about the “areas of hope” Harvey dealt, among other things, with the downfall of the American economy, referring to the devastation of Baltimore economic and urban structures as a reflection of the global crisis of the 1980s (cf. Harvey 2000). The recent history of economic crises in the capitalist industry amply illustrates that the capitalist economy (at least the one Harvey and Walley are describing) had a lot in common with the fall of the largest socialist ironworks in Croatia. In this paper we will deal with the processes which have been going on for years in the town of Sisak as a reflection of the various political and economic crises which it faces. The example of the Sisak Ironworks enables us to understand the causes and the context of the blind spots of the Croatian transition, which includes the heritage of socialist economy with its structural flaws, but, even more so, it includes a lack of ideas and recklessness in managing state property, with the culmination of the cold-hearted capitalist logic which reigns in the recent economic crisis.

This article is the result of a comprehensive ethnographic study which was conducted in Sisak last year. It consisted of conducting interviews with the former workers of the Sisak Ironworks who worked in the production and administration, with the members of the union, as well as with the members of the former management. The research covers a broad period of time of the Ironworks operations: the oldest interviewed worker started in the Ironworks in the mid-1960s and worked continuously until the early 1990s. The results of the ethnographic research have enabled us to view the dynamics of hope and hopelessness, which includes the actual disorientation caused by losing their jobs, which happened at the beginning of 2012 for most of the workers, when the company finally ceased production. This event ended all hope of resuming production and future employment.<sup>6</sup> At the very peak of production, in 1989, the Ironworks employed nearly 14,000 workers, and had an annual income of 500 million dollars (Malina as cited in Ivšić 2012: 6). Expected economic growth and

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<sup>6</sup> We presented the data on the individual strategies of coping with unemployment and gender differences in the acceptance of their new work status at the annual meeting of EASA, held in Paris in June 2012. We hypothesized about a possible interpretation of the transitional/capitalist crisis as the consequence of the masculine fantasy about power and robbery aided by the ideological “prohibition” of all criticism of capitalism.

modernization as well as stricter employment policy, all of which were part of the plan to restructure the Sisak Ironworks during the economic and political reformation period, were cut short by the change in the socio-economic system, when the number of workers in the Sisak region was reduced by 30% in 1990 (Braičić et al. 2009: 110). Another aggravating factor was the devastation of the town and its industrial plants during the war, conscripting the workers into the army, and migration of some of the workers of Serbian nationality from Croatia (Ivšić 2012: 6). However, the total collapse of the Sisak industry, primarily the Ironworks, came about after the military operations, in 2000, when the number of workers was reduced to 1700. It was expected that the bankruptcy and privatization of the Ironworks would lead to the reversal of the negative trend; there was a search for an investor willing to keep the workers, pay the debts and buy the equipment of the Ironworks for a symbolic price of 1 kuna. In 2007, the American company Commercial Metals Company took over the Ironworks with the goal of expanding its business activity in the steel industry. Although a new steelwork plant and facilities for manufacturing seamless pipes were constructed, in 2011 CMC announced they would sell or close the Ironworks, which was justified by their business decision that the Ironworks were not part of their “core business”. During the last year, all the workers were fired, and the future of the factory is uncertain. In the spring of 2012, the Italian holding Danieli – Acciaierie Bertoli Safau (ABS) – expressed interest in the bankrupted company, or the “pride of Sisak” as the Ironworks was described in a national magazine.<sup>7</sup> How serious this investor really was about buying the Ironworks was discussed in Sisak like it was a matter of life or death, but very soon, this “most serious candidate for the purchase of the Sisak Ironworks” started to be described in everyday conversations like all the previous potential investors – as someone who would “come and work for six months, then leave”. This statement is reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu’s explanation that the global financial markets and global investment logic work in such a way that they give “investors concerned with the short-term profitability of their investments the possibility of permanently comparing the profitability of the largest corporations and, in consequence, penalizing these firms’ relative setbacks” (Bourdieu 1998). Therefore, it is no wonder that the most recent information about the purchase of the Sisak Ironworks can

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<sup>7</sup> At <http://www.aktual.hr/clanak/hrvatska/4202/talijanski-konzorcij-kupuje-ponos-siska-golemi-industrijski-holding-danieli-najozbiljniji-kandidat-za-kupnju-zeljezare-sisak> (accessed 12 May 2012).

be interpreted as only one in a series of attempts to acquire profit through product marketing, by indirectly entering into a previously neglected or unavailable market; and this is exactly what the workers we interviewed thought about the reasons for the investment cycle in the Ironworks. However, Bourdieu, whose logic is relentless, points to two registers of discussion about "success". While investment success is the one which returns investment through a precisely scheduled realization of profit for the investor, the workers' success is the one best described by the term "security". For one of our interviewed workers from Sisak, the sense of security exists only if the factory takes care of its workers: "We knew that the Ironworks was ours. [...] Everyone knew that you wouldn't get laid off, that you'd have a regular salary, that you'd be able to get loans, that you'd be able to go to the seaside,<sup>8</sup> so in this respect there was security". Therefore, the workers, in fact, live in the "wrong" register, or in other words, they fail to comprehend that the interests of their current employers are different from their own. This is the reason why the workers are adamant in searching for "exceptions to neoliberalism", which would give them back their lost sense of security.

They perceive the governing economic laws as blind to their social reality, and they perceive their social reality as completely uninteresting to the creators of economic policy. Moreover, economic policy is separate from them (cf. Bourdieu 1998), which is why they most often blame the government for their situation, because it does not have any compassion for them, or they blame the state, where something went seriously wrong. In the workers' expressions of dissatisfaction, which could be easily translated into the opposition to the imposed post-Fordist economic ideal with its "precarious wage labour and social insecurity turned into the privileged language of economic activity" (Bourdieu and Waquant 2001: 3), their sense of being second-rate people/objects in relation to the new economic laws is very obvious. In the words of Marta, a 55 year-old with 30 years of service in the Ironworks, who was laid off in 2007:

It happened all the time, whenever someone new came, we were under a lot of stress – you won't have a job, you will have a job, you'll be laid off, you'll be

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<sup>8</sup> "Go to the seaside" means to go on holidays somewhere on the Croatian coast. In the socialist Yugoslavia, many factories had apartments for workers on the Adriatic coast; Sisak Ironworks also had apartments in Malinska on the island of Krk, where many workers and their families spent their vacations.



gone, you'll be all right. Then, we didn't get paid for three months. This is how it had been since the war, the whole time. Then we started working again. We were happy. We were working. Everything was good, things were rolling along. You would get your salary. When we ended up on that bridge, we had not been paid for three months. One had to be such a survival artist – even you yourself didn't know how you managed to survive.

## II

*Though we place them insistently in the individual, neither desire nor hope can be removed from social engagement and implication. (Crapanzano 2003: 25)*

The life that our interlocutors view as “normal” (or as one of them said when remembering the past, “you didn't have to think whether you'd have a job the next day or you wouldn't, whether you'd get paid the next day or you wouldn't. You'd get a salary, you'd have a job. There was a job for everybody who wanted to work.”) is closely connected to the idea of job security. Such a concept of a linear and stable life, enabled by regular salaries and permanent employment, was shattered by the war, and then by privatization and unemployment. The former workers of the Sisak Ironworks often told us about their life when there was still work to be done:

...we were so content... you went to work in a jovial mood, with no worries, so to say, and then we went back home – we were joking all the time... there was a mass of people at the entrance gate. It was a giant company, and I thought it couldn't collapse. It would survive forever, forever...

However, even more often we listened to narratives which conceptualized life without work, as well as considerations of life and work in the future, and the word “hope” was often uttered as a kind of a leitmotif. Therefore, in this paper we pay special attention to the role of hope when a person is out of work. This term is conditional, because people we talked with are anything but idle: their days are filled with black market work or unpaid work, uncertain and without union protection. Hope is also mentioned

when they talk about their non-formal work, which they do not consider the same as having "a real job". Such work and such understanding of work prevents them from conceptualizing themselves in the present and from building a projection of their desired future. Their reluctant (self-) positioning between hopelessness and hope makes the foundation of our understanding of their relation towards work and towards the prevailing work policy. It is also the basis of our proposal that the concept of hope should be recognized as a valid and valuable analytical tool of work ethnography.<sup>9</sup>

Recently, the concepts of hope and hoping have been utilized in academic consideration both of the future of capitalism, and of post-socialist societies.<sup>10</sup> By turning away from analyzing "despair" or hopelessness and by analytically focusing on hope, the researchers of "social historiography of the future" interpret hope narratives primarily as subjective narrative strategies, and only then as forms of political rhetoric visible in the media (cf. Jansen et al. 2008). Although the consideration of hope in this paper is not related to any interpretation of the collapse of socialism or to the question of how to approach the study of socialist and post-socialist social constructions, the concept of hope and the orientation towards the future (which is how the above-mentioned researchers conceived of their analysis of the post-socialist social dynamics) is useful and informative in terms of the present article. As we have already emphasized, hope has become a central place of the survival narrative, and was related to the possibility of work, of earning a respectable living based on one's work, of alleviating social differences, and of the questions about one's own

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<sup>9</sup> The attempt to analyze hope in this paper is the result of subsequent analyses and reflections based on field notes. Hoping, calling for hope, talking about hopelessness, projecting a future life, consideration of the present through the lens of what was lost, and deliberating about the near and far future as an opportunity to regain what was lost, was not intentionally observed or invited during our research. Questions like "what do you hope for?", if and when asked, were a spontaneous reaction within the context of a conversation. Questions about hope did not represent a standard question in the questionnaire, nor were they the topic that we had agreed on prior to the research. Our attempt of "analytical reading" and "close reading" when we talk about hope and hopelessness, stems from the principle of grounded theory, which, on the one hand, avoids formulating research hypotheses, and on the other hand, strengthens the reading of the ethnographic notes, records, transcriptions "with an eye toward identifying events described in the notes that could themselves become the basis of categorization" (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995: 152).

<sup>10</sup> The series of meetings of young anthropologists dedicated to the understanding of the post-socialist state of transformation is called "Towards an Anthropology of Hope? Comparative Post-Yugoslav Ethnographies", and in 2007, hope was intentionally considered as an analytical frame and an experiential category which can be empirically tested (cf. Jansen et al. 2008).



Sisak Iron Factory / CMC, Building of the new plant and blast furnace, shoots taken during reconstruction in 2011, still from documentary film *Two furnances for Udarnik* Josip Trojko, dir. Goran Dević

work future. Such hope is revealed in individual statements recorded in our conversations with the workers who were made redundant, and in the collective narratives which are formed using plural constructions such as “we can only hope” or “please, God, let us come back”, and which are related to the entire local community. For our interlocutors, hope was a way of bridging the gap between their suffering and their vision of personal well-being. It was also a vision of the future of the community. Borrowed from the political discourse the notion of hope was especially discernible in the interviews where the workers talked Croatia’s accession to the European Union. Richard Rorty believes that it is less and less likely that hope will be mentioned in the context of social progression, everyday life at work, and improvement of living conditions. For him, this seems to be “a result of the increasing inability to believe that things could ever get much better than they are now” (Rorty 1999: 230). In his book *Philosophy and Social Hope* Rorty claims that “hopes for constructing such a classless society have been embodied, in our century, in two scenarios” (ibid.) – the Marxist one, and the Western (leftist-) intellectual one. While the former leaned on proletarian revolutions and on the abolition of private entrepreneurship, the latter was inspired by peace and technological progress realized within the frame of the free market, which would eventually ensure equal opportunities for every individual (ibid.). For him, hope was related to utopian thought, to modernity and the promise of progress that might have been uttered in the euphoria after the Second World War, when the suffering ended and

restoration began (*ibid.*). Such hope was, in a sense, related to the promise of the “triumph of justice”: desired, postponed but conceivable state of the just fulfilment of rational wishes related to existential issues. According to Rorty, such euphoric mood is gone, which is witnessed by our interviewees, bringing the notion of hope to the level of mere survival, instead of living with an existential “surplus” which would bring about the prosperity of the individual and the community. Charity Scribner expresses an equally pessimistic view. Although collective hope, she says, is a way to bridge the collapse of the “industrial modernism and collapse of its utopian potentials” (2004: 3–4), unfortunately, the “principle of hope” transforms into an aesthetic, rather than operational principle: “this hope seems to dim in the workplace, its glow can be rekindled in literature and artworks that remain” (*ibid.*: 20).<sup>11</sup>

In a situation when the space of work is lost or seized, and the notion of the worker is reduced to a “despised subject” (Duda 2012: 2) in the political and media discourse, the narratives of hope and hopelessness – both in the case of Sisak Ironworks workers as well as, we believe, in the case of others who were made redundant or are working without payment – are formed primarily as a narrative trauma of the people, of a place, of the social system (cf. Walley 2009), caused by the transformation of the economy.

### III

Notwithstanding the differences between the various theoretical approaches to the concept of hope, as stressed by Stef Jansen, what all of them have in common is a “concern with temporality, and particularly with its forward dimension”, primarily “in a sense of futurity” (2009: 58). This was confirmed by our research in Sisak: our interviewees regularly associate hope with a future state, especially one related to work and existential security.

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<sup>11</sup> It is necessary to stress the unusual fact that in the story of Sisak hope was put forward as a theme in the aesthetization of the collapse of the industry in Sisak. This is primarily related to the works by the Sisak performer and art activist Marijan Crtalić. In his works, he is almost obsessively dedicated to Sisak. Works like the archiving of memories of socialism in the exhibition-documentation project “Invisible Sisak – Ironworks phenomenon” which was purchased by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, or the documentary-experimental film project “Industrial paradise”, which deals with the relation between the remains of the Sisak iron and oil industry and the slow demise of the urban and social structure of the Sisak neighbourhood of Caprag, provide an insight into the lost utopia (more on this in Potkonjak and Pletenac 2011).

We have already stressed that they do not perceive themselves as being currently employed, although many of them do earn some money, mostly in the black market, by doing non-paid or temporary jobs. For them, it is a transitional, non-active state, in which they constantly think about the past, in order to keep the coherence of their present life. In this sense, the thoughts of Vincent Crapanzano and Hirokazu Miyazaki are especially relevant to the discussion – they assign an operative meaning to the concept of hope in solving existential issues, emphasizing the moment of temporality. According to Crapanzano, hope can be viewed through two principles: “active hope”, coloured with the powers and the charisma of positive thinking, and “passive, paralyzing hope”, which reflects both cynicism and resignation (2003: 18). This latter type, which we saw in the interviews with the former workers of the Ironworks, is in some way linked to despair, i.e. it goes hand-in-hand with hopelessness, and is motivated by a pointless, untenable present (ibid.: 17).<sup>12</sup> According to one of our interlocutors, who has been unemployed since 1996, waiting for an early retirement, she found the loss of her job as severely disorienting. For Marta, time which immediately followed her unemployment was informed by despair and hopelessness:

I was lost for two or three months [waiting to be laid off]. Then, you're thinking: I'll lose my job, I won't have anything to eat, what should I do now? My husband is retired, but what will I do? My son is employed. He was still unmarried at the time. Where will I go? What will I do? How will I live? I thought all the time: I won't have any income, I won't have anything!

In his response to Crapanzano's “call for attention to hope as ‘a category of social and psychological analysis’” (Miyazaki 2006: 147) Miyazaki goes a step further, pointing to the fact that hope can be understood as “a method of search for alternatives to capitalism”, in a manner advocated by “social theorists” like David Harvey or Mary Zournazi (2006: 163), as well as a kind of pragmatic hope which develops through people's individual strategies during their work life, as a kind of criticism made by a “skeptical participant in global capitalism” (ibid.: 164). As such, it has the potential to play with the principles of capitalism in favour of the workers, although in the end it

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<sup>12</sup> In this manner, Crapanzano takes over the idea of hope as a dream of a better tomorrow: “Fantasizing pulls the future into the present, giving a silhouette to hope...” (Burrige as cited in Crapanzano 2003: 24).



Main entrance of what used to be Sisak Iron Factory. Photo by Goran Dević, 2013

often just perpetuates these principles, spending its strength in the process of creating everyday procedures oriented toward how to earn one's idleness in the culture of work exhaustion. Such hope is described by Miyazaki as an "exit strategy" from the whirlpool of the capitalist economy, in which one attempts to overcome the system by operationalizing its values, i.e. one tries to achieve an individual victory increasing the efficiency of earning, so that one can retire as early as possible, or "to earn enough money to start an initiative to put an end to the current system of capitalism" (ibid.: 161). Such hope will bring the relief of being in capitalism to those who manage to "outfox" the capitalism by its own means. However, we did not meet with such hope in conversations with our interlocutors in Sisak: it is not that they did not try to achieve this – they did not even think of it, failing to recognize capitalism as a system which can be outsmarted by the strategy revealed by Miyazaki.

In both cases, Crapanzano's and Miyazaki's, hope is related to the future; it is a projection one contemplates after hard work, but hope which still lives in capitalism, in relation to capitalism, and can be realized only through it. Our interlocutors from Sisak have also considered possibilities to realize a new form of system security in the new, capitalist system. The supposition that hope is not only a look forward, but also "the mental work focused on sustaining the world as it always was", a yearning for the world which was known to us and safe, and which has disappeared (Badiu as cited in Zigon 2006: 258) was confirmed in their thinking about Europe, which was again perceived as the old/new saviour. Almost regularly, their answers point to the fact that Europe is a metaphor for the new system security, a guarantee

of safety, order and work. On the one hand, they say with great certainty that “there is no work in Sisak, or in its vicinity”, or that “in Sisak, no one gives you a permanent job any more. You have a job now, but the next month they do not need you and they can fire you. There are no obligations toward you, the state, anyone...”. On the other hand, they open a space for Utopian hope, in which Europe starts to figure as attracting business, clear structure and lack of relation to everyday reality that is very well known to these workers. One of our interlocutors showed how hope, which emerged from suffering because of unemployment and uncertainty, was transferred into the future, and tied to the future of Europe as the provider:

I think it's great that we will enter the European Union, as far as young people are concerned, and not us, who are old. I mean, if there is no job here, you can go wherever you want, and now all the children speak English (...) I mean, if we manage to enter the EU and if it survives. I think it's great.

A similar attitude was also adopted by another interlocutor, a 40-year-old crane operator, who has been working in a low-paid job “in the city administration” since 2007, where she worked as an assistant in the human resources department at first, and later as a gatekeeper. She talked about her future and the future of her family:

Europe knows the value... when I entered the school (Metalac), the salary was good... 1000 German marks, it's 4000 kunas now. But they had even more, especially when they worked in shifts. It was great. Yes... Oh, yes... then, the worker was well protected... and today, you cannot even utter a word...

The job isn't as hard as we thought. And if only the salary were better... I would work again... If there were a chance... I mean, if we enter the Union next year. Well, it's good I have a certificate for this! You never know where I will end up! Somewhere in Germany, working for two or three thousand euros. Three – the salary has to be such out there! I didn't make any inquiries yet. When they talk about the Union, and here... more and more talk about the surplus of workers, about being made redundant... I think... I'm not worried at all. When we enter the Union, there will be Veronika, going to work on the crane... In Germany. I have the certificate. I know how to work.

Trying to reduce the fear caused by the almost certain end of employment as they knew it, our interlocutors were feeding on passive hope, expecting

a kind of improvement which would happen without their influence. This hope is, as a rule, related to a vague feeling that “everything will be better if we enter the EU”. When talking about hope and “normal life”, Jarrett Zigon points to the fact that hope is most often related to the trinity – family, job, health (cf. Zigon 2009). On the other hand, the neo-liberal economy functions in such manner that it produces effects of uncertainty and hopelessness which “destroyed [...] the ability of [workers] to think about themselves in the future” (Bourdieu 1999: 2). Because of that, hope – which is related to the sustainability of “normal life” as we know it – although present all the time, is really not achievable, or is difficult to achieve. Therefore, even when they talk about the way they see themselves in the future regarding the loss of their jobs, our interlocutors notice with irony that “wife will feed her husband” or that “people will somehow take care of themselves”. In hope that “normal life” will return, despite the fact they are unable to act in the market and on the market they say:

There is no work in Sisak... I looked at many job advertisements where they searched for a worker, and no one wants to take me. It's not important that I have work experience... the point is – the older you are, the more likely you are to go on sick leave... you won't work...

I have 36 years of service and 56 years on my back, and there's little hope that I'll get a job anywhere, not to mention the Ironworks... But hope is always there... I hope our children will find a job... these young people... because this means that we will have our pensions in the future...

When they say they “want a job and to be able to earn a living doing that job”, “seven days out of ten I dream I have a job”, or “I'm not afraid of any work”, all of these statements point to an overlap between hope and expectations (Crapanzano 2003: 9) based on their hope that there is a possibility on the horizon for the job market to (self-)regulate, and work to “appear”. In relation to this, it is especially important that the future horizon is often called up as if job security and the continuation of the social state doctrine should happen by themselves. Since the people “are hoping, still hoping”, at least to get their severance pay, reimbursements, Easter and Christmas bonuses guaranteed by the collective agreement, as one of the workers told us, it is still possible to stay within the space of hope as a vital leitmotif in which one has to “keep going on” to reach the change (Badiou as cited in Zigon 2009: 263). As a union member from the Ironworks put it:



Everyone expects that when they [the Ironworks] get money, the problem of the Ironworks will be solved and that they will get a job there. This is it. Every one of us 913 iron workers believes that we will get a job. I think that the new plan is to employ some 200 people in the next year, if the new owner decides to expand production.

Jarret Zigon gives a more pragmatic role to hope, which he sees in an almost theological sense. Zigon considers hope to be an obligatory precondition in acting in one's own best interest. According to him, hope is the opinion that life should be lived through acting, here and now, and that one should take responsibility into one's own hands. Sometimes contrary to Crapanzano and Miyazaki, he posits the idea of hope as "temporal structure of the background attitude that sustains an already accomplished social life and [...] temporal orientation of intentional ethical action" (Zigon 2009: 254). In his ethnography of hope, Jarrett Zigon, through conversations with selected Muscovites who work as "culture workers" formulates an insight about "secular characterization of hope", which is based on its constitutional role in everyday life. Zigon, who is in principle opposed to the dichotomous concept of hope as understood by Crapanzano which includes active and passive hope, offers an interpretation of hope as obligatory acting on behalf of one's own well-being (ibid.: 256). For Zigon, hope is not realized or searched for in the future, but in the present; however, it might embrace the future conditionally, offering a linear logic of cause and effect – i.e. the belief and hope that every work leads to some result. Therefore, we can talk about an overlap of hope as being oriented toward one's well-being and the understanding that it is possible to realize hope only by action. However, in the interviews with the former workers of the Ironworks, like in the fragments we presented here, there are very few such expressions. The principle of uncertainty as a notion associated with contemporary capitalism – as a union representative of the Ironworks said, "the worst form of capitalism which came into these transitional countries" – has shaken the foundation, as we emphasized before, of the conceptualization of work as "secure", linear and stable movement in which "everyone knew that you wouldn't get laid off and that you'd have a regular salary".

The period preceding the war and the "worst form of capitalism" was described by one of our interlocutors as follows: "There was a sense of security. You work for eight hours, you go home, you go to sleep and you know you'll have a job tomorrow, and get paid for this job, and be able to buy whatever there was in the stores for that salary...". When he talks

about the present, he says that these are times which provide "little hope". Another worker stated the following in a newspaper interview:

It is very sad – I left once already in such a way, carrying only my bag, leaving everything behind me. It was in 1991, when they banished me from Petrinja. I had some hope then, I knew we would return and begin everything anew. I was young. Now I'm 54, I'm too young for retirement, and too old to hope for a new job. Who will need me at my age, even if a new owner comes and if production starts? They won't call me; they'll only call the young ones. (Piškor 2011)

The statement about the loss of hope of finding a job, like the one in the story of the Sisak worker, and the statement about the resilience of hope of returning to her home town and her job after the war and its devastation told to us by the refugee from Petrinja, point to two different hopes fused into one big hopelessness when people think about the possibility of finding work at present. When referring to hope as a belief that influences one's social path as suggested by Zigon (2009: 262) it is hard to believe that the war can offer an active possibility of hope and that it can be included into a rational prediction of the future which encourages optimism. This is a rhetorically powerful message – unless, of course, it is an attempt to discredit the state as the invisible and inactive initiator of a new existential devastation, by recalling the war context as the context in which there was hope (but in actuality, it was the most horrifying existential experience). When we started to make notes of the conversations held in Sisak, in addition to our attempt to record the way of life without having a job, i.e. the hopes of our interlocutors, we simultaneously started to notice another narrative line. It was related to statements about the disappearance of social security, as well as a state which would protect work and working conditions as the workers once knew them. These considerations were not merely nostalgic, nor were they an interpretation of the crisis only by looking at the relation between socialism and the transition (as in stories about "before" and "after"). They were much more: they questioned the present state and the responsibility of the government. As the former workers of the Ironworks say, in the 1990s, the state could have created CRO-STEEL ("united Croatian ironworks"), it should not have agreed to "petty politicking", it should not have allowed the type of "infamous privatization" in which the workers "gave their shares to the manager, because he would know best how to manage them" along with the excuse that "we [the workers] don't know

how to do it", or that "the state is not a good owner". Instead of giving in to hopes and daydreams about working in the future, the new narrative of the Sisak workers actually warns about the fact that there has never been a public discussion about what kind of economic system we want in Croatia. In other words there was no awareness that every "discussion of neoliberalism should begin with Karl Polanyi's warning [...] about [the consequences of] letting the free market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human being and of mother earth" (Ong 2006:10).

In this paper, we tried to read the narratives about unemployment with the help of theoretical concepts related to hope and hoping. We tried to shed light on the passive and/or active aspect of hope in the accounts of our interviewees, as well as on their relation toward their status of being unemployed, their expectations from other stakeholders who should help them in overcoming their unemployment, and their possible future positioning as working people. In this sense, the selected theoretical concepts guided our view towards seeing hope as an individual ethic responsibility for one's own well-being (cf. Zigon 2009), they offered a model of emancipating social hope (Harvey 2000; Rorty 1999), and they interpreted hope as a way of craftily playing with the limitations of capitalism (Miyazaki 2006) or as a way of considering the present through daydreaming about a better tomorrow (Crapanzano 2003). The research has shown that the narrative of hope does not only bring energy of change and emancipation, but that we are dealing with a more complex set of a variety of emotions and imaginations. The narrative of hope can simultaneously include active visions of the future, but also passive, destructive, apathetic considerations about the present. Positive ideas about the near future – in our paper related to hoping for job security, being permanently employed, having a safe income, and the possibility of planning a "normal" family life – are accompanied by narratives of present despair, disorientation and hopelessness. Taking notice of the narrative of hopelessness enabled us to recognize the dark side of "coping" with unemployment. It is characterized by our interlocutors' impossibility to conceive and perceive their life without a job and to explain and accept their being deprived of a predictable existence. In other words, they do not see their precarious work, black market work or the participation in non-commodified forms of economic activities<sup>13</sup> as activities which give them hope for a better

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<sup>13</sup> These are economic activities "in the households and the family networks, but also within the wider social environments which are often called 'the community'" (Wright 2011: 43).

tomorrow. Also, the fact that they would “manage somehow and survive” their unemployment does not contribute to their perception of themselves as valuable workers. The recognition of this, sometimes conflicted passive-aggressive emotional charge in the narratives helped us to recognize hope mostly as focusing on a desire for a better life for the younger generation, i.e. our participants were telling us that their hope relates to their children. We also noticed a narrative about a better tomorrow related to the action of external “forces”, especially positive associations which the interviewees expressed regarding Croatia’s accession to the EU. Some reasons for turning toward Europe, as well as reasons for their own passivity, are revealed in their attitudes towards the state, i.e. its political structures. The former workers of the Sisak Ironworks have very little faith in the prospect that the context in which the state would act and make plans would enable them to position themselves more actively regarding their own future. Therefore, it seems to us that passive hope expressed at the level of narratives should be recognized as the consequence of the failure of transition in Croatia, as the locus of political, ideological and economic bankruptcy that neutralized the force of hope in everyday life and promoted it into an exclusive discourse of politics.

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## **"U svijetu željeza i čelika": etnografija rada, nezaposlenosti i nadanja**

### **SAŽETAK**

Autorice u članku otvaraju tri problemska čvorišta. Prvo se odnosi na propitivanje recentne ekonomske krize, ali i tranzicijske koja joj je prethodila, na primjeru propasti Željezare Sisak. Kolaps hrvatske industrije ponajprije objašnjavaju kao politički, ideološki i gospodarski bankrot vrijednosti koje su postojale u socijalizmu, a tek onda kao realnu i globalnu ekonomsku krizu. Drugo se problemsko čvorište otkriva u razgovorima s otpuštenim radnicima i radnicama željezare u narativima koji uglavnom konceptualiziraju život bez posla, u pripovijedanju o životu dok je posla još bilo te u razmišljanjima kako će život i rad izgledati u budućnosti. Kao svojevrsni lajtmotiv ponavlja se riječ nada. Upravo je pojam nade predmet njihova posljednjeg razmatranja. Unutar društvenih znanosti i humanistike posljednjih je godina koncept nade zauzeo važno istraživačko mjesto, posebice u analizi individualnog i kolektivnog traumatskog iskustva kao što je i gubitak posla. Stoga autorice predstavljaju neke od značajnijih teorijskih radova o nadi te ih propituju na vlastitoj građi.

*Ključne riječi:*

Željezara Sisak, nada, nezaposlenost