

OUR FACTORY: TEXTILE WORKERS' MEMORIES AND EXPERIENCES IN SLOVENIA

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The article deals with textile workers' memories of a socialist factory and industrial work in Slovenia, and their experiences during numerous contemporary restructurings and social transformations. It argues that textile workers were heavily marked by the disintegration of their community and loss of social recognition. The loss of the factory was experienced as personal and social loss, the loss of dignity and self-worth. Such experiences are connected to historically shaped meanings of factories, the role and position of industrial workers in the past socialist landscape, with particular memories and experiences of work. The metanarrative of socialist industrialization depicted them as protagonists of modernization and social development. They were co-creators of the industrial miracle, local infrastructure and social standard. They now felt robbed and dispossessed in a material and symbolic sense. The society showed little interest in their experience of such a loss. The absence of research and little attention paid to such questions by the society is connected to the way in which the society dealt with economic restructuring in Slovenia. The local experience is compared with other post-socialist ethnographies and industrial worker ethnographies in the transformed capitalist world.

Keywords: memory, factory, industrial workers, work, socialism

On a May morning in 2004, Marko, a maintenance worker in the *Predilnica Litija* [Litija spinners] spinning mill, complained about the changing industrial scape in Slovenia: "We have gas stations, and supermarkets. But no industry. Our factory is the only place where you can see smoke from the chimney. Only stores and cashiers. Fine, let there be cashiers, but without factories, nobody will be able to buy anything". Marko was questioning the significance of industrial workers in the transformed political space. He underlined the importance of chimneys – factories and industrial workers in the local and social space of the former (socialist) era. Simultaneously, he feared the uncertain future and wondered about the market logic, which had, as it seemed, introduced a society without industrial workers – a consumer society without production. The Litija spinners is one of the few remaining textile factories in Slovenia. The company was privatised and transformed. It specialised its production and reduced the number of employees (Vodopivec 2011). The majority

of textile factories have gone bankrupt, some have even been demolished. During the post-socialist transformation, smokestacks and industrial facilities were mostly replaced by service companies and modern commercial buildings with offices and shopping malls. The chimney as a symbol of classic industry and socialist ideology, which embodied the production power in the material and symbolic sense, left its mark on several generations of Litija's inhabitants and on Litija's surroundings as well as on other places in Slovenia, Yugoslavia, and the former socialist and capitalist world. Stories of industrial workers and factory labour in Europe and the United States (as well as elsewhere where factories are being shut down) are similar: they describe the *disappearance of smokestacks, loss of work, industrial decline, and the demise of factories*. The recollections of industrial workers are much alike. They talk about pride, but also about feeling cheated, physically and mentally exhausted, they refer to corrupt managers, personal and collective losses (Bonfiglioli 2020; Clarke 2015; Dunn 2004; Joshi 2009; Kasmir and Carbonella 2014; Kideckel 2008; Pine 2002; Portelli 2005; Stenning 2005). The narratives indicate that for the workers, the loss of their jobs and factories entails the eradication of their previous labour as well as the investments and trust of several generations.

In this paper, I claim that textile workers in Slovenia were severely affected by the loss of social recognition and their position in the society. They felt the collapse of their factories as the loss of their dignity, their social and self-worth. Such sentiments relate to the historical importance of factories, the role and position of industrial workers in the former socialist landscape, and their specific work-related memories and experiences. The metanarrative of socialist industrialisation portrayed the workers as the protagonists of modernisation and social development. They were co-creators of the industrial miracle, local infrastructure, and social standard. Now they feel dispossessed materially and symbolically. "We belong to the generations that used to create", a prematurely retired female textile worker said. "Now everything has been taken away from us". The interpretation of the loss should also consider (generational) dispossession.

In this paper, ethnographic analysis is thus closely intertwined with historical insights to better understand workers' contemporary experiences and sentiments, to grasp "a structure of feeling" that was "created in industrial workplaces during socialism, at the intersection between ideology, socioeconomic transformation and workers' everyday lives, and the processes of deindustrialization after the collapse of socialism" (Bonfiglioli 2020: 2).

Memories of the former significance of socialist factories and factory labour are co-shaped by the present experience and visions of the future. Memories are socially-commented constructions that bring together the past, present, and future. Although they are personal stories, shared by individuals, they are socially marked. In various ways, the society determines what we remember and how. People's memories are thus closely intertwined with the representations of the media, politics, and history.¹

¹ For more information on social memory in the context of the analysis of textile workers' experiences in Slovenia, see Vodopivec 2008.

The textile industry has a specific position in the history of industrial development. It has been thoroughly marked by gender ideologies, relatively simple technology, and a mass labour force. It is considered a labour-intensive sector and light or female industry. Such characterisations are not neutral and have contributed to the industry's history. Nevertheless, textile workers' memories on their factory are comparable with those of other industrial workers. Industrial workers in Slovenia were affected by the metanarrative about two endings: the end of socialism and industrialisation. Their memories are therefore interpreted within the discourse about the post-socialist transition, de-industrialisation, and broader political and cognitive transformations in Slovenia. The latter also encompasses the restructuring of the economy, labour market, employment and social security policies, the intensification and flexibilization of work, and the transformation of workers' subjectivities. My focus on a micro perspective brings an in-depth insight into particular local settings within Slovenia. My fieldwork experience – working in Litija factory for 4 months in 2004 – was very important for understanding the embodied experiences of the workers. Working in the factory and corporally experiencing the processes and relations myself enabled me to approach work experiences in an embodied manner which related me to my interlocutors in a specific way. Such insights cannot be gained from interviews alone, as work procedures are ingrained in workers' bodies. In addition to doing fieldwork in the Litija spinnery, I interviewed and talked to various people; redundant, retired, and still employed production workers, technologists, designers, employees, and managers in various textile factories in Slovenia between 2002 and 2019. I analyzed the collected material within the post-Yugoslav space,² comparative studies of post-socialism and studies of deindustrialization in other western countries. Although I talked to various people, in this article, I focus on the production workers.

REMEMBERING THE SOCIALIST FACTORY

“We felt that the factory was ours. We believed it was important that it worked well”, a retired female spinning mill worker recalled in 2004 and emphasised that “in the past”,³ the workers used to believe that they were trusted, and they themselves trusted the management. I very often heard this statement in the various factories around Slovenia during all of the years of my study (2002–2019). In my fieldwork analysis, I discovered that workers' memories on “our factory” talked about connectedness and belonging rather than about property, self-management, or the Yugoslav socialist policy, which, after 1950, decentralised state administration with the slogan “factories to the workers”. In line with these

² I do not list all the scholars who dealt with industrial workers' experiences in post-Yugoslav countries, although I refer to some of them later in the paper. Chiara Bonfiglioli (2020), however, conducted an extensive study of textile workers in different former Yugoslav republics, and her analysis helped me situate my findings in a broader comparative context.

³ My interlocutors mostly used the term *in the past* in reference to the socialist period before the 1991 emancipation of Slovenia, although the exact time was not always clear.

ideas, workers and their workers' councils should assume management of the factories. It is debatable to what degree such declarative policies were realised in practice and what they signified in specific local environments. Self-management institutions were rarely the focus of our interviews or conversations. Especially the younger, post-war generations would often comment that self-management meant more meetings, conflicts, and debates about unimportant issues. Regardless of their reaction, this does not mean that production workers would not be attracted to the ideas of self-management. Yet, they did not address the decision-making power regarding the production of goods,⁴ the functioning of the factories, or work organisation (in workers' councils), but rather the transparency of management transactions, protection of workers' rights, the factories' concern with the living standard of their workers, and appreciation of labour and workers themselves.⁵ The elderly interlocutors who remembered social inequalities before the World War II, and the younger generations who experienced social differentiations and exploitations after the social change in the 1990s, specifically emphasized these issues along with minimal social differences within a socialist factory.

All the workers I talked to (between 2002 and 2019) emphasized “their” factory’s social role, its role in enhancing/maintaining social reproduction in socialism, in building “their” infrastructure and living standard. On the one hand, in their narratives they depicted a factory with its manager as their protective caretaker (in a paternalistic role). On the other hand, the workers emphasized their (own) agency in improving their social and living standard. A historical perspective shows, however, that the workers’ living standard improved only gradually, to some extent also because of informal practices and social relations, informal economy and a semi proletarian way of life (Rendla 2018). In the next few paragraphs I will turn to management strategies and social practices that built particular bonds between workers and “their factories”.

I argue that socialist factories would systematically instil feelings of belonging and construct workers’ identities (Vodopivec 2019). Such adherence involved a network of social relations, rights, obligations, duties, and reciprocities that encompass not only work-related social networks but also relations outside the factory walls, connecting factories and local communities, and different generations of people.

“I grew up with the factory”, a retired spinners worker said, pointing out that not only had she worked in the same factory her entire life, but had also known it as a child, through her parents or grandparents. Many people had known the work, materials, machines, production situation, and hierarchies in the factory even before they themselves were employed

⁴ For a similar comment in the case of the Sisak Ironwork in Croatia see Potkonjak and Škokić 2016: 121.

⁵ Empirical studies conducted by sociologists, in particular by Josip Županov (1987, 1989a,b) and Veljko Rus (1985, Rus and Adam 1986) in socialist Yugoslavia between the 1960s and the late 1980s confirm the thesis that workers were above all interested in the consultative procedure, the transparency of decisions rather than in decision-making itself. Their studies also demonstrate a gap that existed between the highly valued self-management by workers and low practices in exercising power. Workers were above all interested in transparency, unity and equality (Županov 1989).

there. These intergenerational relations played an essential role in the construction of experiences of work and the factory itself. Various generations of the same families were often employed in the factory. The Predilnica Litija management encouraged employment within families (the practices elsewhere were similar), thus strengthening or contributing to the intense memories of the *spinning mill tradition*. Such factory tradition or the 120-year existence of the plant (at the time of my fieldwork in 2004 and 2005) was important to the people. The factory represented a long-term means of survival. It also had symbolic importance, bringing together the past and the present and creating a sense of permanence.

Factory jobs played a crucial role in the formation of social networks, family life, and community integration. Factories constructed trade union halls, where local celebrations and social events were organised. They even had musical or theatre groups. They would also issue factory monographs and bulletins, where they reported on technological novelties, excursions, publish retired workers' memories and workers' personal narratives. The purpose of such factory publications was primarily to build connections and strengthen the feelings of belonging. Trade union excursions ingrained themselves into the people's memories, as they were, for some, their first trips to the seaside or abroad. In this manner, factories expanded people's horizons and experiences. Such activities and actions may be perceived from the contemporary perspective as subsidiary. Yet, they were emphasized by the workers in the interviews as they played a very important role in bettering their lives and constructing their identities.

In a similar way, the significance of factories in the lives of people was vividly described by the worker in the Mura clothing factory in 2009. She associated the factory with the region's most important river, after which the factory had been named. "Nothing around here happens without Mura. Without it, even the river Mura would not flow" (Brajer and Šalomon 2009: 2). Mura was particularly renowned in the history of the textile industry in Slovenia and among the people. It was the model of high quality, good work, and highly productive working hours. The Mura clothing factory developed from two sewing workshops and prospered during socialism. It was a clothing manufacturing giant in terms of size (in the 1980s, it employed 6,500 people, which represented half of the Pomurje region labour force) and in terms of its reputation in the Yugoslav clothing industry. It boasted a well-developed trade network (even abroad), advertising, and a modern information and technology system. Judging from a historical analysis, Mura managed to survive economic crises in the socialist Yugoslavia thanks to its long-term development strategy, focused on the foreign market, and proper management (Prinčič 2008: 234). Between 1963 and 1983, the factory built 400 apartments for its employees, and every year it approved between 150 and 200 loans for individual construction. It subsidised food for its employees, built a health clinic, financed its cultural section, a sports hall, organised transportation to and from work, and enabled the construction of two kindergartens (Prinčič 2008: 236). Mura's fame reached other European countries beyond Slovenia and the former Yugoslav republics. For the inhabitants of the Prekmurje region, the Mura factory embodied industrial (and socialist) modernity. I argue that the employees felt like the factory's co-creators.

TEXTILE WORKERS' LIVING CONDITIONS IN SOCIALISM

By developing the local infrastructure and structuring leisure time activities, factories improved their employees' living standard.⁶ Ideologically, socialist factories were envisioned as centres of social and cultural modernisation. They were supposed to serve as the driving force of modernisation that raised awareness of the (mostly rural) population. However, this was not only political propaganda. People would experience the factories' modernisation role and paternalistic protection as an expression of their care for the workers.

Factories paid special (systematic) attention to the issues of housing, nutrition, and health of their employees. All of these areas were exceedingly important for the production workers, as many of them (especially women) endured poor living conditions. Canteens that served warm meals were "America", as one of my interlocutors put it – especially for those that had no one to cook at home. This was crucial for women, who represented around 80 % of all employees in the textile industry and who, after the war, mostly took care of their households. The employees would also take food home for their children.

In the 1960s, textile workers faced housing problems, rheumatic diseases (spine), and chronic respiratory conditions – i.e., illnesses stemming from the circumstances in which they lived and worked. Lea Rappl, a human resources employee in the Litija spinnery, underlined the problems of production workers that she would continuously encounter at work. In 1967, she carried out a survey in which she analysed the issues and pointed out the need for a social worker in the company. At that time, 874 people worked in the spinning mill, 632 of these women. 53 % of women had children, and their average age was 34.8 years. In her analysis, Lea focused on mothers who worked at the shop floor (192 mothers of 353 children). She pointed out that most often grandparents looked after the children (in 54 cases). Only 14 mothers had their children in a kindergarten. In 47 cases, children were not looked after, while 17 of them did not even live with their mothers due to inappropriate housing or lack of childcare.⁷ At that time, Litija had only one kindergarten, attended by more than a hundred children. It did not offer any organised childcare in the afternoons or at nights, and the workers had to work in three shifts.⁸ The goal of Lea's survey was to demonstrate the need for a social worker⁹ in the factory, who could address housing and childcare issues, help with specific children-related problems, and take care of the workers' health (together with a doctor).

Lea had two children. She considered leaving her job in the spinnery, as it was difficult to coordinate her family, home, and factory work, but was persuaded not to do so by her

⁶ In their analyses of industrial work experiences and the importance of factories in the lives of the people in the socialist Yugoslavia, the latter fact was also highlighted by Bonfiglioli 2020; Jambrešić-Kirin and Blagačić 2013; Matošević 2011; and Petrović 2016.

⁷ In the rest of the cases, children were looked after by other people, maids, etc.

⁸ Besides working in the factory, all the respondents did housework and 176 of them worked on farms.

⁹ For more on social work in the factory, see Vodopivec 2015.

co-workers (because of her pension). Her husband supported her, and she could afford domestic help. The topic of her survey was probably influenced by her own experience. Based on her research, the Litija spinners employed a social worker.

Analyses indicate that the Litija spinners was not a solitary example. Childcare was an enormous problem, most often solved by grandmothers, husbands and wives taking turns, through extended families, or by children living with their grandparents or other relatives. The problem was even more pressing because young girls were primarily employed during the expansion of industry and the establishment of smaller industrial plants in the countryside.

In the history of the textile industry, the image of textile workers was always an image of mothers leaving their children as they went to work. Jane Schneider connected the dilemmas that girls faced during the early industrialisation of modern Europe (Collins 2003: xi) and the social ambiguity that accompanied their employment in the factories with a Rumpelskin story. In the story, a miller's daughter, imprisoned in a tower, had to weave a golden thread out of straw. She asked a mythical creature for assistance, who demanded her firstborn child in exchange. The story illustrated the dilemma where girls would sacrifice their children in exchange for a better future and prosperity (1989: 7, 8; after Collins 2003: xi). The stories of textile workers leaving their children to go to work were well-known all around Slovenia.¹⁰ According to older people, they could hear children crying in their apartments. The daily press after World War II and my interlocutors indicate that female textile workers (and other working women) often felt guilty when they left for work.

A worker-mother-housewife paradigm was an integral part of the socialist ideology and everyday life.¹¹ Factories' social concern that reached over the factory walls alleviated the distress of the working women in many ways. In the factories, female workers encountered a different way of life, acquired new experiences and learnt other skills. Employment changed the social position of women, their roles in the local environment, their family lives, and the relationships between different generations of women.

WORK EXPERIENCES IN SOCIALIST FACTORIES

A work experience is related to the social perceptions of textile workers in different periods (also in socialism), and above all to generational and local textile industry traditions. As already stated, the textile industry is characterised by gender. Many women worked in factories due to family tradition, for economic reasons, or because of other benefits stem-

¹⁰ Such accounts cannot be related to a specific time. However, as the interlocutors who told me this had been born before World War II, I dated them to the period before as well as after World War II.

¹¹ For more on this aspect in Yugoslav contexts, see Bonfiglioli 2020.

ming from their employment (organised meals, access to apartments, loans, insurance, etc.). In the context of socialist modernisation, the employment of women was based in textile industry. The textile industry became exceedingly feminised.¹² Women were employed in production, administration, and human resources, but rarely in the leading positions or technical services. Female labour on the shop floor was naturalised, related to their natural manual agility, patience, persistence, and resilience. The division of labour in production seemed natural and self-evident: men operated physically demanding machines and modern technology. A historical overview of the relationship between technology and gender indicated that women were not to understand the technologically more demanding machines (Simonton 1998: 265). Men knew how to restart the machines, which is how they maintained control of the labour. This is true to a certain point: when a machine broke down, female workers had to wait for experts or their supervisors. The longer they waited, the more difficult it was to meet the production norm. Yet, a look at the micro-level in the plant reveals that the workers would often restart the older machines themselves. Their skills were appreciated by maintenance workers and superiors, who even sought their advice. Therefore, apart from the macro-level of the general society, factory work also needs to be examined from the micro-perspective of the local community and in production. Work experience and value ascribed to labour is shaped in specific relationships and situations between the machine, the environment, and the community.¹³ In production, the embodied dimension of labour is direct and clear. Work is not articulated verbally, it is bodily performed. As I discussed work procedures with retired workers, they frequently explained them by moving their bodies. I understood what they meant only when I witnessed the production process myself.

Embodied work experience was (also) marked by hierarchical organisation based on strict piece rate regime of labour measurement – a production norm (*norma*). According to my interlocutors, *norma* would often result in anxiety and fear. Some interlocutors underlined that *norma* contributed to fairness, as one was paid according to one's productivity. Retired workers claimed that some refused to leave their posts even during their lunch breaks. Such eagerness was not popular. However, on the other hand, they listed the examples of women who *had not tried hard enough* and who *kept paying for this lack of effort* even in their old age, in smaller pensions.

¹² At the end of the 1970s, the wages in the textile industry were the lowest of all the industries, falling behind the industry average by as much as 13%. In reality, they were even lower, as payments for night shifts were also partly included in the average (Debevč 2001: 108). My interlocutors did not mention this in our conversations.

¹³ I also registered this situation during the post-socialist transformation in the still operational Predilnica Litja spinner in 2004. Experience in working with the machines remained a crucial criterion in the production. Everyone in the production – male and female workers, managers, and technicians – was aware of this. Working with machines demanded specific knowledge and skills. Although the skills of textile workers were not highly appreciated in the labour market, they nevertheless importantly defined the place of a worker in the production.

Work would normally take place in three shifts, alternating every two days or on a weekly basis. The night shift represented one of the worst problems for female workers. They associated it with chronic exhaustion and the feeling of neglecting their children. At night, they would sometimes lose their strength, dozing off over their machines. Household chores awaited them the following day, and children, who did not understand why their mothers were tired.

Work in Slovenian socialist factories resembled the Fordist organised production in assembly lines, but the two should not be equated. Despite specific features of the Yugoslav self-management, factory regimes in Yugoslavia were also subject to political decisions, quotas, customs barriers, and shortages of machinery and raw materials. Such circumstances forced managers to stockpile goods and endeavour to gain control over resources. Negotiations between factory managers, the state (political officials) and workers loosened the centralisation of power in the factories, establishing factory communities and feelings of solidarity with the factory and among the employees.

Company managers would address the shortages of technology and raw materials, the problems stemming from complicated administration, with the assistance of production workers. Specific relationships and trust in the factory would thus form between the management and employees, between workers and lower management in production, which had a significant impact on social relations, factory work experience, and loyalty to the factories. Such relations ensured that workers enjoyed guaranteed jobs, stability, social security, rewards, profit-sharing, in exchange for overtime, harder work, and lower salaries. They also had access to other parts of the social network: education, housing, aid for families and children (stipends, summer work, etc.), which was particularly important during crises. This system was possible due to *soft budget constraints*¹⁴ and self-management structures intertwined with local communities' traditions and a semi-proletarian way of life. Many workers obtained some land or assisted with harder seasonal work at the farms of their parents or family. People also engaged in afternoon activities, which contributed to their living standard. Formal and informal economies were closely intertwined, informal economy enabled security (cf. Bonfiglioli 2020: 179, 180).

By setting out the employers' obligations and the right to employment, the socialist state upgraded the paternalist family company model, based on the employees' right to aid and the company's moral obligation to take care of its employees and their family members. On this basis, personal networks were constructed, used by the people to access goods and services. The same system persisted even during the early years of post-socialist changes.

¹⁴ The socialist state (politics) would bail out companies with a deficit. Later, analysts also associated the concept (created by Janos Kornai in 1980) with the capitalist system, particularly with the collapse of the banking sector in the East-Asian economies in the 1990s.

POST-SOCIALIST CHANGES AND CONTEMPORARY RESTRUCTURINGS

In the second half of the 20th century (in particular in the 1970s), the textile industry in Slovenia prospered and became one of the most prominent branches of the economy. After 1990, however, many textile factories went bankrupt, and the number of employees dropped drastically. Some elderly production workers retired prematurely, while others had to struggle in the labour market. Those in their forties were often written off at the labour market, as they were supposedly too old to work elsewhere. In many cases, they were left without any severance pay, previously unpaid wages, or health and social security contributions. They would even fight this in courts (Vodopivec 2012c). Some of them struggled with physical injuries and diseases (resulting from factory work), while others suffered psychological problems. They were shocked; they could not believe that they had lost their jobs. Some of them found work elsewhere. Regardless of the specific situations, experiencing factory collapse was heavily marked by broader socio-political changes.

As I described in more detail elsewhere (Vodopivec 2012a, b, 2016), the changes in Slovenia (in the context of the post-socialist transformation, the EU accession, the Lisbon Strategy, and the austerity measures during and after the financial crisis) include the reformation of employment policies, social legislation, workers' subjectivities, and appeals for a different mentality. The post-socialist period was characterised by politics based on market rationality and the imperatives of efficiency, flexibility, and competition. Market rationality called for individuals who knew how to create jobs and take care of their employability, health, and prosperity. Active employment policies introduced the concept of *employability* instead of *employment*, defined as the individual's capacity for solving their place at the labour market by adapting their skills and competences portfolio. The individual's self-activation imperative was closely related to the individualisation of the labour market, social security, and other areas of social welfare (health). The understanding of social problems changed; they were no longer considered a consequence of the social conditions but the responsibility of every individual (Leskošek 2014). I argued that the changed policies, material circumstances, and social perceptions introduced the developmental paradigm of self-responsibility.¹⁵ According to the paradigm, people were supposed to take care of their situation responsibly, rely on themselves, and not expect any assistance from elsewhere (the state).

At the beginning of my research these processes were fairly new. Yet in the following years the paradigm got naturalized and became a new normality. In Slovenia, the paradigm was established in the critique of the former socialist paternalism and "the socialist" way of thinking – through a cognitive and ideological rupture. However, broader international

¹⁵ I built on the reflections by Nikolas Rose, who viewed the paradigm of self-responsibility as political rationality and considered technology of management through the mechanisms of self-regulation. He underlined the role of entrepreneurship and economy, which had usurped the various social spheres (Rose 1998; Rose and Miller 2008).

processes were at work, also altering the post-Fordist regimes of accumulation and the positions of industrial workers in the former Keynesian systems of organised social care and responsibility (Vodopivec 2012a).

During my interviews and while analysing reactions in the media, I kept discovering that people would blame themselves for their social position, regardless of their anger, directed at the economic corruption and the state (Vodopivec 2016). Even though the self-responsibility paradigm was not all-encompassing and did not ultimately steer the actions of the people, it nevertheless had a structural impact on them.

In Slovenia, significant changes in industrial relations, employment and social policies took place towards the end of the 1990s or after 2000. The changes related to European policies and regulations, and the increasing flexibilisation of the labour market. In the first period of socio-economic transformation (the 1990s), all the actors were involved in the redistribution of the former social property: the state (administrative politics), employers (managers), and workers (trade unions). After the accession to the EU, the cooperation between the three actors ended, the relations radicalised, while the workload increased (Stanojević 2010). During the final privatisation (after 2005), the public learnt about managerial exhaustion and buyouts, the distrust strengthened, as well as the feelings of injustice because the elites had gone unpunished. As labour became more intense and flexible, people no longer had time to earn an additional income from informal sources (combined with the legal persecution of the grey economy).

WORK EXPERIENCES IN POST-SOCIALISM AND THE LOSS OF WORK

The first managerial move in labour-intensive export-oriented companies was to intensify internal authoritative regulations (Stanojević 2010: 26, 27). For example in the Mura clothing factory, a textile worker Silva,¹⁶ discussed the deterioration of working conditions. The procedures in production were only set up in theory, it was never *physically tested whether such work could be executed in practice*. The working time did not include the time-consuming preparation (different materials require different machines), the time spent waiting for the materials, or the fact that machines might require repairs. The shortage of consumables (scissors, thread, spools, and shuttles) prevented the workers from performing their tasks on time, while the production norm was increased. The work procedures were exacerbated by spatial constraints: “We worked in impossible conditions. We were like chickens under heat lamps”, Silva described how they worked at 42 °C. “We never did enough. They would have liked to glue us to our chairs that we could not even go to the toilet. I have a trapped nerve, but they did not change my position, and the disability commission did not acknowledge my injury.”

¹⁶ Interview, Murska sobota, 2011.

Silva's injury needs to be understood in the broader context of not acknowledging occupational diseases in Slovenia at the level of the state (lack of systemic regulation) and society (social perception of the problem). Therefore, Mura's fate had an even stronger impact on the workers in the labour market (Vodopivec 2012b). Silva's chances of finding another job (her employability) were, like in the case of many other workers, not only limited by structural unemployment, but also by health problems and injuries. The worsened working conditions and relations exhausted people a long time before its bankruptcy. The interlocutors discussed numerous humiliations and insults by the management and their co-workers. The tensions and disputes spilled into the broader environment. The company's non-transparent operations, lack of information regarding its bankruptcy, and constant uncertainty intensified the fear, desperation, and distress among the workers. A study performed by the Clinical Institute of Occupational, Traffic and Sports Medicine found that the situation in the Mura factory during bankruptcy severely impacted the health of its staff (Draksler et al. 2018).¹⁷ Their warnings were alarming, but there was barely any public response.

I interpret such an attitude of the public and political stakeholders in the context of specific economic restructuring in Slovenia, which was understood from the viewpoint of efficiency and in the context of self-responsibility discourse, where individuals had to face risks on their own. Social response to social restructuring indicates a lack of interest in workers or the broader local environment. Workers had no opportunity to articulate and discuss their distress, disappointment, and needs. Extensive media coverage (of the Mura case) did not resolve the problem. The inaudible and invisible workers may have become visible, but the media objectivised and victimised them (Autor 2011).

Milena Srpak,¹⁸ a psychologist in the Ormož psychiatric hospital, described the shock of the dismissed Mura workers, many of whom had sought help in the hospital as early as the 1990s. "During the first years, we noticed the shock of the workers who realised that the socialist postulates – for example, that they were a part of the factory – were no longer true. They felt that everything that they had invested had been for nothing, that they had lost much, and that nobody appreciated them. They suddenly became insignificant. They were no longer needed. They could not understand this at all, which resulted in profound depression. Some of them could finally talk. Others needed incentive to start talking at all. They did not understand what was going on." The workers did not see their problems as structural: they would seek help due to insomnia, tiredness, and pain in their arms and legs. Their experiences were embodied and unarticulated verbally. In time, some of them opened up. "They were terrified when they arrived. Their value – as persons and as

¹⁷ The study explored physical and mental health consequences of the 2011 restructuring and it was conducted using a survey. 70.6 % of the respondents assessed their health as poor and reported more stress-related illnesses. Depression stood out. People reported dissatisfaction, loneliness, and suicidal thoughts or ideas.

¹⁸ Interview, Ljubljana, 2011.

workers – had declined enormously. They took every rumour personally. It was such a shock, they had worked hard, only to be fired overnight.”

No arena to articulate such sentiments in the self-responsible knowledge-based society intensified their problems. In that sense, the workers’ sentiments did not change during my studies (between 2002 and 2019) as much as they intensified. Their experiences were pushed into the intimacy of their emotional world. They struggled alone. Their despair remained embodied without any social space for articulation. Their shock was also caused by the realisation that they had become a burden for the society and the state. Industrial workers were no longer recognised as a part of the economy and social modernisation, but rather as a social problem related to poverty, historical anachronism, and social marginalisation. Socialist modernisation had placed industrial work at the forefront. The world of modernisation had been experienced through industrial labour. The workers who perceived it as active (social) inclusion were now excluded. The loss of their position as subjects that meant something is of *central importance for understanding the post-socialist rationality* (Prca 2007: 183).

In an analysis of the British social security and labour market policies, Chris Haylett (2001) argued that poverty was associated with inactivity rather than unemployment. Policies may have been oriented towards changing the situation of the economically disadvantaged; but in reality, they defined industrial workers through a culture of dependence.¹⁹ In Slovenia, sociologist Vesna Leskošek (2014) established the same. It is therefore important to explore how social inequalities are institutionalized. This involves the symbolic inscription of industrial workers in the transitional discourse,²⁰ employment policies, and social security.

The social representations portrayed industrial workers as inflexible, emotional, nostalgic, and paralysed because they mourned the past. However, workers did not want to return to the past. What they demanded was a different present and a future. Their experiences reflected social conflict and dispossession, and called for social recognition. The workers I talked to felt bereft and angry.

While economists and sociologists kept explaining the changes in the Slovenian textile industry using the local and global context (the loss of the Yugoslav market, unsuccessful business restructuring, entry of Asian goods to Europe, crisis of the global textile industry, and industrial transformation in Slovenia), my interlocutors blamed their managers for their factory collapse. Their greatest disappointment, however, was directed at the state and legislation that had enabled, as far as they could see, the exploitation and humiliation of workers.

¹⁹ She also highlighted the problematic considerations of economic differences that translate inequality into cultural differences. Workers’ culture and identity thus appear as direct results of the working conditions.

²⁰ At this point, I refer to transition as an etic category. Analytically, I explore it critically in the context of numerous other critiques of post-socialist literature (Vodopivec 2016).

I noted this already in 2004 and 2005 when conducting interviews with workers. These sentiments deepened in the following years, in particular after the 2005, when media reports on managerial exhaustion and takeovers and the impunity of the elites became more widespread. A disappointment got intertwined with anger due to managerial exhaustions and buyouts, their diversion of funds, their failure to pay health and social security contributions, and their impunity. I found that for people, this was not merely a legal, but also a moral question. In this case, morality did not only entail what people believed was right, just, or unjust. It also included rules, norms, responsibilities, obligations, and reciprocity involved in people's actions and expectations. The changes stunned the workers, who kept appealing to human dignity.

When my interlocutors discussed their diminishing rights, they did not understand them solely in the legal sense but also referred to the rights governed by the previous relationships and norms. They looked to the state to protect their basic human dignity. In their expectations, they turned to it as the caretaker of the social contract, according to which they had also attained certain rights (entitlements) apart from the payment for their (good) work.²¹

Vesna, another dismissed worker from the Mura factory, criticised the state for stepping on the other side – the side of the capital: “The state does not help the unemployed, but supports those who have everything.”²² Vesna hinted at the unpunished managers and the elites: “Thankfully, I can still buy bread, in October I’ll be left without any income. I don’t have anything. Is this a welfare state, governed by the rule of law? Is this fair to us who created?” Vesna referred to justice and dispossession. Someone who had been creating (producing) and was prepared to keep doing it, was left without any foundations for existence and social reproduction – without bread, work, perhaps without a roof over their head. She referred to social recognition and inclusion and hinted at the cultural and historical significance of work in society, the cultural value of work, and the rights and obligations such a social contract involved (with a longer history from socialism).²³ She called upon reciprocity. Vesna underwent retraining (a requalification program). She kept sending out applications but was unable to get another job. When we talked in 2011, she was 46 years old. She had worked in the factory for 27 years. She wrote 800 applications and received only three answers, all of them rejections. When finishing this article, in 2020, I learnt that Vesna finally got a new job.

²¹ The role and image of the state were not always clear. People addressed the social and legal role (legislation) or the entire system that ensured “smooth operation” (or, in other words, provided for social reproduction).

²² Interview, Murska Sobota, 2011.

²³ As historian Andrej Studen pointed out, historical discourse on labour is an entanglement of intertwined and contradictory viewpoints and interests (according to Josef Ehmer 1998, as cited in Studen 2012: 9). The value of work in Slovenia was marked by the Enlightenment and the Judeo-Christian tradition. By the end of the 18th century, work had acquired a moral value that began to blend with state-forming discourses. It was the people's duty to advance the state with their work and diligence (Studen 2012: 17).

EXPERIENCING THE END

You built a tower, now you're a beggar; you made the guns and planes, and they don't even remember your name; [...] and then they sent you off with a shake of the hand and didn't notice that your hand is stiff with work-induced paralysis. (Alessandro Portelli 2005: 57)

Oral historian Alessandro Portelli wrote that the stories about the closing of factories in the USA and Italy were similar. They spoke of silence, emptiness, defeat, disappointment, anger and expropriation, about importance in the past and lack of recognition in the present. Portelli compared the experience with work loss and estrangement of workers in Detroit, USA, and Turin, Italy. He discovered that in both cases, factory traditions had been closely intertwined with family traditions, as several generations of the same families worked in the same factories. The closing of the factories broke the intergenerational continuity. For workers in the USA, the rupture was an existential crisis, an injury to their identity, pride, and self-esteem. For Italians, however, losing their jobs in the “family” factory was even more painful, as the importance of the Italian working class had been established precisely in the factories. The Italian workers had been brought up to consider themselves as the vanguard of history (Portelli 2005: 58).

In 2010 in Ohio, I saw the documentary film *The Last Truck*.²⁴ The film focused on GM car factory workers during the last month before the 2009 closure of the plant in Dayton. “This is our plant,” a worker said at the beginning of the film. “We don't own it. But this is our plant”. His statement reminded me of the former spinning mill worker, mentioned at the beginning of this article, who talked about “our factory”. Many other statements in the film were very similar to those I had heard in Slovenia. The memories that various production workers have of the factories reveal what profound impact industrialisation has had on the people's experience and their position in the society. Moreover, they have been strongly influenced by the metanarrative about the deindustrialisation²⁵ and marginalisation of their place in society (which depicts them as parasites and obstacles to social progress).

Sharryn Kasmir, who studied the car industry in the USA, saw the contemporary emergence of the industrial workers' uncertain living conditions as a strategy of accumulation by workers' dispossession. In the collection of texts she published together with August Carbonella, the authors discussed the disorganization of the Fordist working class to point out the multiple ways of accumulation and dispossession, through which the state and the capital undermined the power of the industrial working class. The workers' labour contracts, secure work, stable wages and experiences of solidarity once enabled a class-based “structure of feeling”. The concept of dispossession developed in the collection speaks to the ways in which the alienation of political position, organizational capacities,

²⁴ The movie can be accessed at <https://vimeo.com/142525140> (accessed 3 April 2020).

²⁵ Here I refer to the deindustrialisation as an emic category. For more information on the critique of deindustrialisation and post-industrialisation, also see Mollona et al. 2009: xiii, xiv.

culture, and consciousness are intimately connected with economic setback (Carbonella and Kasmir 2014: 17).

Post-Fordist transformations and the disintegration of the Keynesian system entail similar stories about the loss of factories, work, social recognition, dignity, and value (Narotzky 2016). New forms of capitalist accumulation shattered the former Fordist-Keynesian system of capitalism, where production workers/citizens still held a decent position despite the principles of inequality. Regardless of the similarities between the Keynesian-Fordist and the self-management system (the role and position of the workers in the context of industrial modernisation and the social state), the position of industrial workers in the socialist self-management society was different. Apart from formal and ideological commitments, rights, and provisions, the transparency of factory operations, we also need to take into account the aforementioned informal relations, relationships, people's value orientations, social recognition, the power of promises and aspirations that had a different impact, intensity, and power in the self-management society.

My interlocutors felt useful in the factory, they felt social and personal worth, and work provided them with self-confidence (cf. Bonfiglioli 2020). That was not necessarily related to the pleasure of working in itself, but rather to the possibilities of accessing other sources of satisfaction (autonomy), social integration, and the combination of formal and informal relations and relationships, guaranteed by their employment in the factory. They emphasised their work efforts. Their contributions involved sacrifices (especially the time they had for their children), devotion, and commitment to the work and the factory. "Some of us literally grew up there," said Silva who started to work in the factory (like many other women) at the age of 17. Like other workers, she dropped out of school to get a job. When the factory went bankrupt, she was 42. She had worked in Mura for 25 years: "We spent more time at work than at home. We could not spend time with our children, because we worked on weekends. You end up devoting half of your life and come out empty-handed. Nobody cares about the people. They (the managers) steal and lie, yet they are not punished. We respected the company and were devoted to it. Even if we were fed up with it, we went to work each morning. We always gave it our best. Mura was a quality company, that was in our blood." Narratives about work experiences and factory workers' memories are not one-sided/unanimous. Yet this should not be understood as a contradiction in memories, as they are ambivalent. Nevertheless, the factory played a central role in workers' lives and became a part of them, which was often described by body metaphors "it becomes a part of you, it is in your blood", etc.

Industrial workers' children (in their early twenties) staged a theatre performance²⁶ in the Koroška region in 2014 about the changing significance of factories, factory work, and the social position of industrial workers. When I talked to them in 2014, this is how they described the experience of factory work in the past: "[The factory] becomes a part of you.

²⁶ *Ah ti ših!* (Beware, work!), Gledališče dela (Theatre of Work), 2014.

On the one hand, you can hardly wait to go to work, while on the other hand, you can't wait to be done with it.²⁷ It is important to emphasise this, even though the example is from another industry. Memories of the factory from the (socialist) past are often seen as nostalgic idealisations. However, the relationship is multi-layered, just like any experiences in everyday life. Ethnographies underline precisely this fact along with the gap and various negotiations between values, ideals, and everyday realities. Despite referring to it as “our factory”, people were also angry with the factory. They would use factory materials for personal needs, make fun of community actions' ideas, and complain about them. At the same time, they appealed to the collective values and ideas.

The reorganisation of work and the transformation of factory regimes could not be understood outside the restructuring of the labour market and the relationship between the state, its citizens, and workers. The self-responsibility paradigm usurped different spheres of life precisely when the social and existential living space was changing drastically. On the one hand, the past experiences of work and the factory are strongly affected by the contemporary contexts of socio-political changes. On the other hand, we cannot erase the past (embodied) experience of recognition and creation/production (see also Bonfiglioli 2020).

People's experiences that involve mourning, shock, and paralysis, also call attention to social conflict (cf. Clarke 2015), generational dispossession, and breach of the social contract. The end is final – as also expressed in a statement related to the closure of the Mura clothing factory: “Here, no one will ever sew again. At this location, sewing has stopped forever. All the knowledge of the workers who knew how to operate the machinery will be lost, and all the models and sewing patterns will lose their value. It's nothing but history now” (Horvat 2019: 6). The past contributions, knowledge, skills, and efforts of the people – who are still alive today – have therefore been erased (and debased).

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²⁷ Tomaž, a member of the Theatre of Work group, interview, Ravne na Koroškem, 2014.

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NAŠA TVORNICA: SJEĆANJA I ISKUSTVA TEKSTILNIH RADNIKA U SLOVENIJI

Rad se bavi sjećanjima tekstilnih radnica i radnika na socijalističku tvornicu i rad u Sloveniji te njihovim iskustvima tijekom mnogih suvremenih restrukturiranja i društvenih transformacija. Tekstilni radnici su bili obilježeni dezintegracijom zajednice i gubitkom društvenog prepoznavanja. Propast tvornice doživljavali su kao osobni i društveni gubitak: gubitak dostojanstva i vlastite vrijednosti. Takva su iskustva povezana s povijesno oblikovanim značenjima tvornice, ulogom i položajem industrijskih radnica i radnika u prošlom, socijalističkom okruženju, s konkretnim sjećanjima i radnim iskustvima. Metanarativ socijalističke industrijalizacije prikazivao ih je kao protagoniste modernizacije i društvenog razvoja. Oni su bili sutvorci industrijskog čuda, lokalne infrastrukture i društvenog standarda. Danas se osjećaju opljačkanima i razvlaštenima u materijalnom i simboličkom smislu. Društvo je pokazalo malo interesa za doživljaj takvog gubitka. Manjak istraživanja i pažnje koje društvo posvećuje takvim pitanjima povezani su sa specifičnim načinom na koji se društvo bavilo gospodarskim restrukturiranjem u Sloveniji. Autorica lokalne doživljaje uspoređuje s drugim postsocijalističkim etnografijama i etnografijama industrijskih radnica i radnika u preoblikovanom kapitalističkom svijetu.

Ključne riječi: sjećanja, tvornica, industrijske radnice i radnici, rad, socijalizam