

ANDREW HODGES

**Between Emic and
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and “Creative”
Destruction during
the Croatian
Shipbuilding Crisis**

ANDREW HODGES

LEIBNIZ-INSTITUT FÜR OST- UND SÜDOSTEUROPAFORSCHUNG, REGENSBURG

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Between Emic and Etic: “Systematic” and “Creative” Destruction during the Croatian Shipbuilding Crisis¹

This article examines the trope of systematic destruction (*sustavno/sistemska uništavanje*) and traces how it was mobilized during the 2018 Croatian shipbuilding crisis. First, an ethnographic vignette introduces the political actors and issues at stake during the crisis. The literature on post-socialist labor transformations and deindustrialization in South-East Europe is reviewed, and the tensions between political actors and policy are described. The concept of “predatory privatization” and the etic concept of “creative destruction” are then discussed as a prelude to an analysis of the emic concept of “systematic destruction.” Finally, the relations between the different concepts are described and the emotive power and political uses of the “systematic destruction” trope are explored and placed in the wider context of post-Yugoslav deindustrialization.

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KEYWORDS:

crisis, Croatia, shipyards, systematic destruction, Uljanik

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Introduction: Mayday

A crowd of people are slowly gathering in the public square beneath an imposing Roman arch in the city center of Pula, known locally as *Zlatna vrata* (lit. golden gate). It is May 1, and red carnations are being handed out to passers-by, while a brass band and choir dressed in red have assembled and are preparing to sing. The mostly elderly crowd are gathering here for Pula's official May 1 commemorations, and many have settled into seats on the outside terraces of neighboring cafes, which offer a good view of the proceedings to the expectant crowd. At the back, a group of activists from a radical left party, the Workers' Front (*Radnička fronta*), are holding up a banner with the slogan "The Struggle Continues" written in Croatian and Italian.² The atmosphere is light and pleasant, and the temperature comfortably warm. The choir and brass band strike up in song, performing a variety of melodies, including the *Internationale*, before several local authority figures move to the stage, poised to engage with the crowd. First, the vice mayor of Pula gives a speech focused mostly on the positive aspects of life in Pula. He describes Istria as the only region in Croatia with net positive immigration, while people in other parts of the country are leaving in large numbers to live in Germany, Ireland, and other EU countries. He also mentions that Pula is home to the largest number of entrepreneurs per capita in Croatia and makes a sympathetic reference to the difficult situation at the Uljanik Shipyard. An Italian-minority official then greets the crowd and gives a speech in Italian. Following this, a representative from the largest of the Uljanik Shipyard's three unions, Jadranski sindikat, gives a highly emotive speech about the current difficulties there. He mentions the declining numbers of workers over the decades and the protests that followed the late payment of wages in January 2018, and highlights workers' fears over the impending announced "restructuring." His tone is more powerful than the vice mayor's, and the crowd responds to his speech with a cheer of agreement. Following this, the officials gather and place a wreath comprised of red carnations on a memorial site in the square in memory of victims killed by the Italian authorities during the interwar period of Italian fascist rule. More music is played, and then the crowd disperses.

Minutes later, in the city's main square, Forum, where the city hall is located, a small and eccentric-looking group—members of the Workers' Front—arrive with a megaphone, imploring the people there "and tourists who understand Croatian" to listen to their message. Standing in front of the town hall, they display several banners with the slogans "decentralize Pula," "for a Pula in which everybody decides," and "Capitalism – some live in palaces while others dig through rubbish."³ A group member then reads out a long, scripted speech about the damaging effects of the ruling regional party's clientelism and the failure of the city authorities to address many everyday social

² Italian: *La lotta continua*, a phrase that also relates to a historical radical left organization with links to Operaismo that emerged in Italy in the mid-1960s.

³ "Decentralizirajmo Pulu," "za Pulu u kojoj svi odlučujemo," "Kapitalizam: jedni žive u dvorcima dok drugi kopaju po smeću." Translations: "(let's) decentralize Pula," "for a Pula in which we all decide," "Capitalism: some live in castles while others scoop through rubbish."

problems and inequalities. As quickly as they arrived, the group whisks off in the direction of the Uljanik Shipyard, and they complete their intervention in public space with another monologue on the crisis in Croatian shipbuilding. The contradictory position of the recently chosen “strategic partner” for the shipyard’s “restructuring,” a local tycoon who owns the concession to several luxury hotels in Pula, is the crux of their criticism. Before leaving to prepare for other interventions later that day, they cite his poor record in working with other Croatian shipyards, his imprisonment for economic crimes during the former Yugoslav period, and his allegedly suspect fortune amassed in the South African platinum mining industry.

Mayday Political Actors and the Uljanik Shipyard Crisis

The two Mayday gatherings had a strikingly different character, which reflected generational differences and sources of funding among the political left’s orientation in Croatia. The older, more official commemoration highlighted the greater continuity of institutions and experience of the former Yugoslavia, combined with higher levels of official support from trade unions. In the case of Istria, a region that, along with historically left-leaning parts of Italy’s industrial northeast near the Slovenian border, is sometimes referred to as the “Red Adriatic,”⁴ there was clear support from the city authorities for center-left political organizations that had a generally positive view of many aspects of the socialist Yugoslav system. In contrast, the second Mayday gathering embodied the spirit of a more radical protest orientation among the (mostly) younger Croatian left that had emerged out of the university protests and struggles of the late 2000s. Many of these activists had no direct experience of socialist Yugoslavia, nor of the nineties’ wars for the younger among them.⁵

Many of those present at the larger commemoration had a direct stake in or a close connection with the crisis currently unfolding at the shipyard. In January 2018, workers did not receive their monthly wage on time, and protests broke out before the EU Commission granted additional funding to cover costs during a short “restructuring” period. The shipyard management chose a local tycoon as their strategic partner, whom many did not believe was serious about saving the shipyard from significant downsizing or bankruptcy. It later came to light that this tycoon intended to repurpose large parts of the shipyard space located in Pula’s city center for tourism. After a further six months of squandered time and money, mass worker protests erupted, with the government seeking to intervene. Several top-level members of the shipyard management were later arrested. Shortly after, the shipyard closed and many of its assets were liquidated.⁶

⁴ Eric R. Terzuolo, *Red Adriatic: The Communist Parties of Italy and Yugoslavia* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

⁵ Paul Stubbs, “Networks, Organisations, Movements: Narratives and Shapes of Three Waves of Activism in Croatia,” *Polemos* 15, no. 30 (2012): 11–32.

⁶ See “Uljanik Shipyard’s Holding Company Liquidated by Creditors,” accessed on February 14, 2020, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/uljanik-shipyard-s-holding-company-liquidated-by-creditors>.

The vice mayor who gave a speech at the larger commemoration is a member of a regionalist party named the IDS (*Istarski demokratski sabor*). The IDS were widely accused of being part of a clientelist web seeking to profit from the expansion of tourism in Pula at the expense of the shipyard—more specifically through seeking to convert part of the shipyard's grounds into a luxury marina. A small number of public statements the party leader had made on tourism several years ago were cited, and rumors circulated that their motives were aligned with those of the chosen strategic partner. As the crisis deepened, this regionalist party, which was nominally center-left, came into conflict with the ruling right-wing party, HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union). The HDZ have been caught in a double bind between the transfer of class power enabled by neoliberalism⁷ (which many believe has established a "crony-capitalist" or "comprador" class of business and property owners linked directly to their party) and the party's informal social contract with poorer and more rural sections of the population due to capturing voter bases through offering privileged access to employment and other benefits.⁸ In contrast to states such as Poland where neoliberal shock therapy was introduced, such changes were slower due to various reasons, not least because of the wars in the 1990s.⁹ While declaratively pro-EU and committed to implementing market reforms, the HDZ's capture of certain voter bases, including war veterans receiving substantial pensions and other benefits, resulted in delays to or blocking of certain reforms.¹⁰

98 Regarding Uljanik, sharp words had been exchanged between members of the IDS and the HDZ, with both sides arguing that the other party was responsible for Uljanik's collapse. The IDS line was that the HDZ government had deliberately wanted to destroy Uljanik. Members of the HDZ argued, in contrast, that they had done all they could (within the confines of the EU framework) to save Uljanik, and that the IDS, in league with the Uljanik management, had been running the firm into the ground over the past thirty years.¹¹

The shipyard also housed three trade unions, and this multiplicity reflected the relatively fragmented political opposition. Two of the unions sat on Uljanik's supervisory board and were regarded by workers as being largely ineffective. The third, more militant union, gave a speech at the commemoration described above and also helped forge links with a self-

⁷ David Harvey, "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610, no. 1 (2007): 21–44.

⁸ Dražen Hoffmann et al., *Naša zarobljena mista* (Zagreb: GONG, 2017).

⁹ Elizabeth C. Dunn, *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Paul Stubbs and Siniša Zrinščak, "Citizenship and Social Welfare in Croatia: Clientelism and the Limits of 'Europeanisation'," *European Politics and Society* 16, no. 3 (2015): 395–410.

¹¹ See "Miletić: HDZ bi platio da je Uljanik u Lici, u Istri nemaju glasače," April 8, 2019, <https://www.ids-ddi.com/vijesti/aktualno/6349/miletic-hdz-bi-platio-da-je-uljanik-u-lici-u-istri-nemaju-glasace/> and "Istarski HDZ: Uljanik je preživio sve, ali ne i pustošenje najvećih istarskih sinova," January 21, 2020, <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/istarski-hdz-uljanik-je-prezivo-sve-ali-ne-i-pustosenje-najvecih-istarskih-sinova-20200122>. I discuss the apportioning of blame in Andrew Hodges, "Psychic Landscapes, Worker Organizing and Blame. Uljanik and the 2018 Croatian Shipbuilding Crisis," *Südost Europa* 67, no. 1 (2019): 50–74.

organized workers' initiative, called Headquarters for the Defense of Uljanik (Stožer za obranu Uljanika), that emerged during the crisis.¹²

Nevertheless, since EU membership had become a key goal of the political elite from the early 2000s onwards, structural reforms had been undertaken over the past fifteen years with strict IMF rules on how public money could be spent. Such reforms placed limits both on the mobilizing power of trade unions and on the ways in which shipbuilding could be funded. EU competition law (chapter IV) demanded the privatization of Croatian shipyards as a condition for Croatia's accession, and it stipulated strict conditions on further state subsidies for shipbuilding. After the shipyard was floated on the stock market in 2012, in line with a worker-ownership model (workers owned 46% of shares),¹³ rumors began to circulate about the new shipyard management's intentions and their relationships to the aforementioned political parties. In the early to mid-2010s, several new political parties also began to emerge.

New Political Actors and "Systematic Destruction"

More recent parties that have emerged in Croatia include the Workers' Front (*Radnička fronta*) on the radical left, founded in 2014, and Human Blockade (*Živi zid*), a political party founded in 2011 that has combined elements of political ideas from both the left and the right of the ideological spectrum. Both parties had taken an interest in the shipyard crisis, with the Workers' Front pushing for nationalization of the shipyard, with Human Blockade and even the IDS later coming to share this view.¹⁴

During the crisis, one of the tropes that these various groups and parties mobilized—as did members of the general public—was the notion of "systematic destruction," used sometimes in a reactionary, resigned fashion, while at other times as a call to arms. Here, systematic destruction refers to the perceived non-transparent, destructive activities of agents positioned at the top of a hierarchy (e.g., the company management, the local or national government, Brussels), acting according to a hidden agenda of deliberately running a large business into the ground for their own personal gain. It relates to a number of other tropes, such as predatory privatization (both emic and etic) and the etic concept of "creative destruction." One interpretation of the latter has come to assume a key influence on EU policy making regarding competition, with strict laws on the kind of aid EU states may offer struggling firms.¹⁵

This article examines this family of analytic and field concepts and their psycho-political life in the field, and interprets them as "structures

¹² For more details, see "Could a self-governed workers' movement boost Croatia's dying shipbuilding industry?" December 17, 2018, <https://www.equaltimes.org/could-a-self-governed-workers?lang=en#.XkaQUSj70uQ>.

¹³ Marina Šunjerga, "Mali vlasnici drže 46%, država 25,5%, a Adris 12,4% Uljanika," *Večernji List*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.vecernji.hr/biznis/mali-vlasnici-drze-46-drzava-25-5-a-adris-12-4-uljanika-1266223>.

¹⁴ See "Živi zid: Brodogradilišta odmah vratiti u državno vlasništvo!" February 12, 2019, <https://www.24sata.hr/news/zivi-zid-brodogradilista-odmah-vratiti-u-drzavno-vlasnistvo-613781>.

¹⁵ See "State Aid Control," accessed on October 12, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/competition/state_aid/overview/index_en.html.

of feeling" grounded in material conditions of existence that relate to the shipbuilding crisis.¹⁶ It begins by contextualizing their use within the ideological changes that resulted in a redefinition of the value and importance of work (understood here as employment). This redefinition was experienced by many as a form of loss, and this conceptual family, which includes potentially reactionary and revolutionary elements, emerged to describe workers' experience of these changes. Following this, "predatory privatization" and "creative destruction" will be examined, and their relation to EU policy and political change in the post-Yugoslav region will be described. Finally, systematic destruction will then be discussed. In particular, the psycho-political power of the systematic destruction trope will be analyzed in reference to the Uljanik shipbuilding crisis. Several of the trope's properties—its productive ambiguity, emotive power, and upward movement—will be discussed and related to workers' practices of self-organizing during the Uljanik Shipyard crisis.

Post-Yugoslav Labor Transformations and Deindustrialization

For 50 years we haven't been recuperating. And where are we then with tourism and industry? We've destroyed the ironworks, we've destroyed shipbuilding, we've destroyed the textile, wood, and furniture industries, there's nothing left. And everything is being thrown into tourism, unfortunately. (Welder, male, in his 60s)

What is the alternative for me, as an ordinary citizen, who hasn't got a restaurant, hotel, apartment—who works exclusively at that Uljanik, what's my alternative to earn a living? Germany? Fuck off. (Crane operator, male, in his mid-30s)

These quotes from interviews conducted with Uljanik workers during Spring 2018 highlight stances toward and the depth of feeling around the crisis in which the Uljanik Shipyard was embroiled at that time. Above and beyond the shipyard, they highlight a perceived negative trajectory that relates to processes of deindustrialization and devaluing industrial labor that have occurred during the "transition" to capitalism in Croatia. Numerous other studies of post-socialist labor transformations¹⁷ have drawn attention to similar feelings of loss and disorientation, changes in how work is recognized, and the decrease in workers' rights that has accompanied the "transition" as inscribed in labor laws.¹⁸ The labor historian Chiara Bonfiglioli noted that, "while industrial workers were bestowed with symbolic recognition and social rights during socialist time, post-socialist transition led to an overall devaluation of industrial labor, notably women's labor,

¹⁶ Raymond Williams, "Structures of Feeling," *Marxism and literature* 1 (1977): 128–35.

¹⁷ Ognjen Kojanić, "Nostalgia as a Practice of the Self in Post-Socialist Serbia," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 57, no. 3–4 (2015): 195–212; Ivan Rajković, "Concern for the State: 'Normality,' State Effect and Distributional Claims in Serbia," *Гласник Етнографског института САНУ* 65, no. 1 (2017): 31–45; Tea Škokić and Sanja Potkonjak, "'Working Class Gone to Heaven': From Working Class to Middle Class and Back," *Narodna umjetnost* 1, no. 53 (2016): 117–32.

¹⁸ Mario Reljanović, "The Normative Position of Trade Unions and the Ideals of Self-Management," in *We Have Built Cities for You: On the Contradictions of Yugoslav Socialism*, ed. Vida Knežević and Marko Miletić (Belgrade: Center CZKD – Center for Cultural Decontamination. 2018), 61–80.

across newly formed post-Yugoslav states.¹⁹ This structure of feeling can be distinguished from feelings of loss associated with a fall in living standards²⁰ and the dissolution of a Yugoslav “we.”²¹ More specifically, it relates to the disruption of routines and normal lives that accompanied changes in the material position and social valuation of work.²² A prosaic yet important point is the strong *socialist* connotation often attached to industrial work in this context, which is connected with sweeping industrialization during the early socialist Yugoslav period. This connotation partly explains its ideological and practical neglect by the post-Yugoslav national elite in Croatia that sought to distance itself from socialist ideology during and following the war. The events at the shipyard were therefore inserted into a wider negative narrative of the region’s capitalist trajectory, and a family of concepts were used by the different political actors mentioned in the introduction to articulate dimensions to this process.

Predatory Privatization, Creative Destruction, Systematic Destruction: A Conceptual Family?

The concept of predatory privatization is a field concept and has been used analytically—albeit sparingly—in academic and business literatures.²³ It typically refers to a situation whereby a company is managed or purchased by actors who deliberately seek to run the enterprise into the ground. This is often to enable asset-stripping, in which a relatively easy profit can be made through the sale of assets when they are valued at more than the company’s net worth instead of engaging in making a struggling company “profitable” again. One related concept is that of “intentional bankruptcy” (*namerni stečaj*), which is also used to refer to such predatory privatizations.²⁴ “Intentional bankruptcy” could be considered a more extreme example of predatory privatization, and the less extreme variant would consist of a separating an enterprise into profitable and unprofitable elements and permitting the slow failure of the unprofitable elements. The state sometimes plays a role as an actor in this process, for example, through forms of “cronyism” by selling firms to individuals well-positioned in the state bureaucracy. In the post-socialist literature, Kupka briefly mentions “predatory” privatization at the end of an article on capitalist “transition” in the Czech Republic, defining it as “when the management of a state enterprise founds small stock companies that

¹⁹ Chiara Bonfiglioli, “Post-Socialist Deindustrialisation and Its Gendered Structure of Feeling: The Devaluation of Women’s Work in the Croatian Garment Industry,” *Labor History* 61, no. 1 (2020): 36–47, 42.

²⁰ Especially in Serbia, see Marina Simić, “Travel and the State after the ‘Fall’: Everyday Modes of Transport in Post-Socialist Serbia,” in *Mobilities in Socialist and Post-Socialist States, Societies on the Move*, eds. Kathy Burrell and Kathrin Hörschelmann (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 173–93.

²¹ See Ivana Spasić, “Smrt Bricea Tatona i uslovni kosmopolitizam socijalističke Jugoslavije,” in *Horror-porno-ennui: kulturne prakse postsocijalizma*, eds. Ines Prica and Tea Škokić (Zagreb: Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, 2011), 51–69.

²² See Jessica Greenberg, “On the Road to Normal: Negotiating Agency and State Sovereignty in Postsocialist Serbia,” *American Anthropologist* 113, no. 1 (2011): 88–100.

²³ In the latter the terms “corporate raider” and “asset stripping” are more often used (pejoratively) to describe such practices that increased in the USA from the 1970s onwards.

²⁴ Ivan Rajković, “Concern.”

flourish at the expense of the sinking state enterprise, which they brazenly exploit."²⁵ This definition suggests coordinated siphoning off of the firm's resources into a smaller, "profitable" entity. This is arguably what happened when Uljanik was privatized: a smaller profitable entity (Uljanik plovidba d.d.) in which the top-tier management bought shares did well on the stock market, while shares in the larger Uljanik d.d., which workers purchased, sank.

A more general definition of predatory privatization that I came across in field conversations was "the hostile takeover of an enterprise under the patronage of the state," a view that described state structures as being compromised by interest groups using them for their own gain. This is also visible in the verb *privatizirati* (lit. to privatize), which was sometimes used pejoratively to refer to individuals taking over an institution for their own personal gain.²⁶ In Serbia, the sociologist Nada Novaković, in an analysis of workers' strikes from 1990–2015, briefly mentions the concept of predatory privatization in relation to discussions in the Serbian media over the firm Sartid:

Sartid had a debt of 1.7 billion dollars, alongside commitments to creditors, cancelled (a debt to the state remained). Slobodan Antonić characterized the sale of MKS or "Sartid" as a "predatory privatization" and explained their debts in detail, noting that the state had previously invested around three billion dollars in this enterprise.²⁷

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The scholar Novaković is referring to is a political figure in the anti-establishment right in Serbia. This emphasizes the cross-ideological appeal of such a trope and, in the case of Uljanik, its use by actors on both the left and right. I suggest that this relates to its presence in working-class structures of feeling, which following Raymond Williams I understand as explicitly not hegemonic, but emergent forms in particular class bases.²⁸

The related concept of creative destruction has been used by a range of theorists and policy makers in different ways, from Marx to Schumpeter and Harvey.²⁹ All three authors understood the process of creative destruction as intrinsic to capitalism and as contributing to its eventual demise. Marx's view combined a deep respect for the revolutionary power of capitalism as enacted through such processes with a deep concern for the social inequalities it created. David Harvey paid attention to the increased volatility of the neoliberal variant of capitalism, in which "periodic episodes of growth interspersed with phases of creative destruction, usually registered as severe financial crises."³⁰ Schumpeter's view of creative destruction was somewhat more positive:

²⁵ Martin Kupka, "Transformation of Ownership in Czechoslovakia," *Eastern European Economics* 31, no. 1 (1992): 25–46.

²⁶ In exclamations such as "Privatizirao/la je udruhu" (lit. S/he privatised the association).

²⁷ Nada Novaković, *Radnički štrajkovi u Srbiji od 1990. do 2015. godine* (Belgrade: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe and Institut društvenih nauka, 2017), 219.

²⁸ Williams, "Structures."

²⁹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin, 1993); Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Routledge: 1976); Harvey, "Neoliberalism."

³⁰ Harvey, "Neoliberalism," 34.

[The process of innovation] incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of creative destruction is the essential fact about capitalism.³¹

Schumpeter's description of innovation through cycles of creative destruction is relevant here as it has significantly influenced EU policy making regarding competition and entrepreneurship, and an EU chapter on competition law affected the Croatian government's ability to continue to sustain shipbuilding via the provision of certain forms of state aid. It has also influenced the role and understanding of entrepreneurs as key actors able to innovate and bring about positive change in times of economic crisis. As mentioned in the introductory vignette, this was also true of the IDS representatives, who placed special emphasis on entrepreneurship. They emphasized that Istria was home to the largest number of entrepreneurs per capita in Croatia and attempted to attract entrepreneurs to relocate there. Tourism was also presumed fit to accommodate workers following Uljanik's dissolution or downsizing. While tourism was heavily promoted by the Croatian government, it was viewed as unambiguously inferior by many, as the technical skills involved were neither as specific nor precise as those consolidated over the years of shipbuilding.

During Yugoslavia, "systematic destruction" perhaps entered more widely into popular culture through the film *Kako sam sistematski uništen od idiota* (1983) (literally translated as: How Idiots Systematically Destroyed Me), directed by Slobodan Šijan,³² who referred to the concept in relation to class war. The film's title denotes a long essay written by a homeless, wandering Marxist to describe his difficulties during the liberalizing Yugoslav socialism of the late 1960s when society was rocked by student protests against the "red bourgeoisie."³³ While related, the field concept of "systematic destruction" does not have the positive gloss present in Schumpeter's "creative destruction"—it simply references intentional destruction rather than any space of creative possibility generated therein. This is unsurprising from a worker perspective; the destructive actions and disruption are salient. Notably, the trope has a troublesome history that imbues it with a strong emotive connotation. It has also been used to refer to the destruction of an "identity" or "culture," including the real physical and systematic destruction of urban environments during the Yugoslav wars and the liquidation of populations in concentration camps during the Second World War.³⁴ Such connotations underlie the assumption that what is being destroyed is more

³¹ Schumpeter, *Capitalism*, 83.

³² *Sustavno* and *sistemsko* are synonyms, the former more widely used in Croatia and the latter in Serbia.

³³ See Jana Bačević, "Pogled unazad: Antropološka analiza uvođenja usmerenog obrazovanja u SFRJ," *Antropologija* 1 (2006): 107.

³⁴ See also *systematische Vernichtung* and systematic annihilation. A quick internet search reveals that the term has been used on numerous occasions to refer to genocidal acts. Examples include Ivana Cvijović Javorina, "Jovan Bajford, Staro Sajmište: A Site Remembered, Forgotten, Contested," *Historijski zbornik* 65, no. 2 (2012): 541; Martin Coward, "Community as Heterogeneous Ensemble: Mostar and Multiculturalism," *Alternatives* 27, no. 1 (2002): 29-66.

than a singular industry but a "culture" or a "way of life" in the sense that Raymond Williams described. They also denote a process that often plays out over many years.

Systematic Destruction in Worker Narratives

This trope continually cropped up over the course of my fieldwork, from my first conversation with an apartment host picking me up from the bus station, to numerous conversations with a variety of workers and political actors who had a stake in Uljanik or a wider interest. In interviews with Uljanik workers, several possible examples were given of perceived "deliberate mistakes" that were very costly for the company. A worker active in one of the trade unions made the following comment:

Worker: What we once did easily, with our eyes closed, today we can't do without repeating the same thing two or three times. This means that we're destroying material, we're losing hours through first setting up, then taking down, then setting up, then taking down, and then happens what? In the end you don't get the job done on time and then you have to pay more. And then that's why workers began saying the destruction is systematic, intentional –

Author: Aha, intentional.

Worker: Intentional. Unfortunately, I often ask myself if it's really intentional or a coincidence. For example, just so you get a feel of how it is: in the place where the steel and tin should have been inserted with a 6mm thickness, we put them in at 9mm, and where we should have put them in at 9, we put them in at 6. Not once. Lots of times. And nobody can convince me that this is accidental. This is just one example. (Trade union activist, male, mid-40s)

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This is an everyday example of a practice that potentially consists of sabotaging the firm's potential to deliver on time, and therefore also its profit-making potential. In addition to practical "mistakes" on the job, processes such as public tenders for services also generated suspicion. One worker mentioned the price of painting ships suddenly doubling overnight, and when workers raised this as an issue, they were told to ignore it. In addition to intentional harm, workers mentioned a lack of expertise on the part of some of the new foremen:³⁵

It happened a few times, a person, a fitter, an experienced fitter familiar with the outline, who knows his work, he'd look and say "this is impossible." He's told "it is impossible, but do it." And he assembles it, and then later the foreman says, "let's replace it," and while you're cutting it, until the new material arrives to patch it up, weeks pass by. And once again you pay a welder, handyman, fitter for those hours. (Machine operator, male, mid-30s)

³⁵ I have chosen to use the non-gender neutral term "men" here, as it reflects the strongly male-gendered environment at Uljanik. While there were famous examples of women working as welders, etc., the vast majority of people I interviewed with roles involving hard labour or the management of industrial spaces were men. A more extensive study of the Uljanik environment would not be complete without an in-depth analysis of gender, and indeed, scholars such as Andrea Matošević have completed work in this vein. See Andrea Matošević, "A lot of sweat, a little bit of fun, and not entirely 'hard men': Worker's Masculinity in the Uljanik Shipyard," in *Everyday Life in the Balkans*, ed. David Montgomery (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019).

Similar ideas were present in discussions about the situation more widely in the region, as Uljanik was one example of several large industrial companies that had been reduced in size or been closed completely:

We had the mighty Sisak Ironworks. Renovate it a little, do something, invest, you can't not invest in it for fifty years. We head an aluminum foundry, a rarity, down in Šibenik I think. Same goes – invest a little! Do some restructuring, employ a young workforce and so on! How come it's worthwhile for others to work, but not for us? Just tourism and trade. (Welder, male, in his 60s)

Another time, I conducted an interview in May 2018 with a retired welder named Ivan, who had worked at Uljanik for forty years. When arranging the meeting, I spoke with his wife, Jadranka, on the phone, and she later sat in on the interview and asked lots of questions. Ivan, who was covered in tiny scars from the sparks of welding, described how they had changed the technology they used. Nowadays they used a CO₂ system, which could be much faster, but according to Ivan, the quality was lower, and this was visible in the quality of the ships produced. He said many of these ships now have lots of tiny holes in them, whereas before they didn't. This system was also less labor intensive, so there were fewer welders. Ivan then talked in more general terms about the situation at Uljanik. He was nostalgic for the socialist Uljanik, saying that it was a much better system because "it looked after its workers, while the new system just looks after the managers." The new managers do not understand hard shipyard labor as they are not "experts" (*stručnjaci*), meaning they cannot do the tasks those beneath them do, and therefore cannot see errors etc. He said the new system had destroyed industry and Uljanik was now heading in this direction. Jadranka, however, saw things quite differently. She said that the problem in Croatia was "wild capitalism" (*divlji kapitalizam*), while "real capitalism was just" (*pravi kapitalizam je pravedan*), arguing that even the poorest paid legal worker in Germany can afford to live on the wage they receive. Jadranka used to work for Agrokor, a Croatian agricultural conglomerate and supplier that went bankrupt. She had left and received her pension a short while before it went bust, so she was not directly affected. Yet when both talked about the post-socialist period in Croatia, they spoke negatively, using the phrase "systematic destruction of industry" (*sustavno uništavanje industrije*), which unified and elided their differences in perspective. In this paradigm, the idea of systematic destruction was a resigned commentary on the path that heavy industrial work had taken over the course of the post-socialist "transition." The concept was used quite differently, however, by several of the political actors described earlier.

Systematic Destruction in Political Discourse

Rather than spoken with resignation as a comment on an ill-fated situation believed to be too difficult to prevent, "systematic destruction" was mobilized accusatorily by political actors as a charge directed at certain individuals or institutions. Such use more closely relates to its effectiveness in garnering interest in and concern for the fate of the shipyard. The trope's political usefulness also lay in the ambiguity underpinning its non-

identification with any single political tradition, therein serving a powerful function in unifying narratives present on the left and anti-establishment right.

Crucially, the trope externalized blame and directed it upwards to individuals or groups at the top of company and wider political hierarchies, while leaving the actors unnamed. For instance, one of Human Blockade's representatives on the Pula city council stated on the record that Uljanik was being systematically destroyed in line with the European Union's wishes. Interestingly, as the crisis played out, similar tropes were employed by members of the local political elite; the vice mayor of Pula mentioned the *svjesno uništavanje* (conscious destruction) of shipbuilding, directing his criticism upwards at the Croatian government and their plans for Uljanik.³⁶ The trope locates blame consciously within a set of actors rather than structurally—for instance in terms of capitalist conditions or as an unintended consequence of bad management.

These arguments are visible in the following figure that was circulating on the social media of radical left actors following the Uljanik crisis:

KOLIKO PUTA MOŽEMO POPUŠITI ISTU FORU?

"KUPljena" UPRAVA NAMJERNO OŠTEĆUJE FIRMU
U FORMALNOM VLASNIŠTVU DRŽAVE ILI RADNIKA



 **CRVENA AKCIJA**

Figure 1. How many times can we fall for the same trick? (Crvena akcija)

³⁶ "Cvek: Vlada RH svojim potezima svjesno uništava brodogradnju, a time i Uljanik," accessed on May 14, 2019, <http://www.ids-ddi.com/vijesti/aktualno/6118/cvek-vlada-rh-svojim-potezima-svjesno-unistava-brodogradnju-a-time-i-uljanik/>

Figure One's title reads "How many times can we fall for the same trick?," suggesting that the population is being duped by a set of nefarious practices. The top picture, depicting a person in a suit, has a caption stating, "The 'bought' management is deliberately harming a company formally owned by the state or workers." The next graphic of a television news program is accompanied by a caption stating, "The media and politicians sow panic and call for the company to be removed from the state budget," and finally the left-hand graphic, depicting a factory torn in half, states, "Foreign competition buys the firm very cheaply and turns it into their subsidiary." Presumably, something is missing, as the graphic is circular. That something, in situations where the company is floated on the market, bought by a (foreign) buyer, and then subsequently crashes, could be re-nationalization or the state intervening in the choice of a new buyer in situations in which there is mass public uproar or even unrest surrounding the course of events.

This infographic relates to the sister concept of predatory privatization, which frequently occurred in the post-Yugoslav contexts when companies were sold to a small number of "friends" of the political elite via sweetheart deals.³⁷ Yet it also tells one story of how the process of systematic destruction is enacted in this context, conveying "intentional harm." The accusations implicit in the trope of systematic destruction sometimes bordered on conspiracy. As a professor of political psychology Nebojša Blanuša argued in his discussion of political conspiracy theories in Croatia, "conspiracy theories are not typical of eccentrics, but are rather a widespread way of thinking connected primarily to politically controversial events and processes. It does not have solely antidemocratic, authoritarian, and collectively-protective potentials, since one of the types thereof functions as a way of 'exposing the dirty linen' of the democratic order."³⁸ They are perhaps best understood then as a human reaction to the specific conditions in which many workers found themselves, and is compounded in situations where feelings of powerlessness are experienced. As Blanuša further dissected, the content of conspiracy theories relates to political cleavages. Those sympathetic to the HDZ are more likely to believe in conspiracies of "internal and external enemies of Croatia," which relates to this role of conspiracies in producing homogenous national "groupness."³⁹ And conspiracies critical of the Croatian government of the 1990s are less likely to be held by HDZ members.

³⁷ See also Nada Novaković, "Strikes, Unions and Privatization in Serbia," *Sociološki pregled* 47, no. 1 (2013): 23-52.

³⁸ See Nebojša Blanuša, "The Structure of Conspiratorial Beliefs in Croatia," *Analitičko društvo* 6 (2009): 113-43, 142.

³⁹ See Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Concluding Remarks: The Transgenerational Appeal of an Ambiguous Trope

In summary, this trope clearly had a long history of use, reuse, and reinvention. Its success in the present-day context of Pula lay in its ideological ambiguity and emotive import, and that it tapped into an emergent structure of feeling defined by experiences of deindustrialization and material loss. Taking a step back, the trope also points to the weaknesses of left-wing language in public discourses. It is therefore unsurprising that this family of concepts came to the fore during a period of industrial crisis, as it relates to a structure of feeling present among disempowered elements of the working class in Pula. The ideological ambiguity is particularly relevant to Croatia, where strong symbolic divides exist and have been exacerbated by politicians who use them as a form of symbolic politics that detract from material issues.

The transgenerational appeal of the trope among relatively young followers of parties calling for extensive social change and older interlocutors with whom I spoke, such as Ivan and Jadranka, is also worthy of comment. Older generations would likely be familiar with the term's genealogy as well as its temporal connotations, which understand it as a process unwinding over time. For the younger generations, its reactivity to the present and intentionality, which externalizes blame and responsibility, would be more salient. The emic concepts became a social commentary on the capitalist trajectory that Croatia and the wider region has taken. The positive spin implicit in policy references to creative destruction shifts here into a negative, accusatory form that shifts blame "ambiguously upwards" within state hierarchies and has the power to unify voices on the political left and anti-establishment right. Such ambiguous, powerful concepts tread the line between being potentially mobilizing—and potentially dangerous—and therefore warrant further study.

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