



**MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE**  
FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

# In Quest of the Work Ethic in Hungarian Tobacco Shops

**Author: Luca Szücs**

**July 21, 2016**

“What makes people work?” This ostensibly simple question was raised by Olivia Harris (2007) in her nuanced ethnography of the cooperative labour of Andean peasant communities. Going beyond materialist answers, she argues for a holistic approach to the comprehension of work, including the broader understanding of value under various historical, political and cultural circumstances (Harris 2007: 137). Olivia Harris was not the first anthropologist who dealt with this question. The nature and meaning of work in different cultures was the subject of numerous founding fathers of anthropology among them Karl Weule, Richard Thurnwald and Bronislaw Malinowski (Spittler 2010). As the social historian Jürgen Kocka has noted, “in many ways work is one of the bonds, which keep our societies together.” (Kocka 2010: 10). While the early ethnographers were engrossed by the question “what makes people want to work?,” social scientist contemporaries such as Max Weber had a considerable influence on their approaches (Spittler 2010). The theoretical problem of rationalization occupies a central place in Weber’s sociology. Comparing Weberian and Marxian class analysis, Erik Olin Wright (2015) has recently pointed out that Weber uses the concept of rationalization to examine class and social relations as well as the question of the appropriation of labour. Referring to the discussion of the extraction of labour effort, performance and technical efficiency in the *Protestant Ethic*, Wright argues that Weber dealt with these questions mainly as an issue of work discipline or work ethic. To understand the question of what motivates people to work and shapes values in a broader sense, a Weber-inspired conceptual approach seems appropriate for the analysis of my ethnographic material.

I kept the complexity of Harris’s question constantly in mind during my participant observation in two National Tobacco Shops. In Hungary a new law introduced in 2013 gave the National Tobacco Shops a monopoly over the sale of tobacco products.<sup>1</sup> Concessions are granted by the state through public tender. Fees vary according to the location and size of the shop. Further amendments to the law enabled National Tobacco Shops to sell alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, coffee, newspapers, and lottery products. The justification had two

prongs: to improve public health by reducing access to tobacco products for young people (under 18 years of age) and to support family-run businesses.<sup>2</sup>

My main interlocutor gained concessions for three tobacco shops in 2013, all in suburban neighbourhoods of Szeged. Running tobacco shops was not a new economic activity for the owner, since his family had two tobacco shops in the past. The business is truly and legally a family concern, since father and son are the joint owners of the three shops; one member of the extended family is employed full time as a shop assistant and another works part-time. As an analytical tool, however, the categorization “family business” is not particularly helpful, since family and kinship do not play a decisive role in the organization of work. The business has 10 permanent employees, (nine women and one man) who work 8 hour shifts. Three employees work as shop assistants in each shop and one additional office employee takes care of the accounts. The employees are aged between 24 and 46, with the majority in their late twenties and early thirties. They all graduated in vocational schools; some of them had further vocational training, in branches such as pâtisserie or manicure. Unlike the employees, the owners had university degrees.



A National Tobacco Shop in the village of Tázlár.

(Photo: Chris Hann, August 2013)

All shops are open six days a week from 6am to 10pm. The morning shift lasts from 5:15am to 2pm and the afternoon shift from 13:15pm to 10pm. On Sundays opening hours are 7.00am – 5.00pm and there is only one shift. The shop assistants work alone and only meet their colleagues during shift changes, apart from calls at the ‘central shop’ where the office is located. However employees are by no means isolated. The shops are embedded in the life of the neighbourhood and function as a social institution for their clientele. Employers and some of the employees, their friends, and their families, live in the same neighbourhoods, and the shops are used by local residents to meet and exchange information.

The shop assistants must keep track of stocks and replenish as necessary; they are also responsible for cleaning the shops. The owners maintain the business relationship with suppliers and marketing representatives of wholesalers, supervise and manage their shops

and collect revenue daily. Nevertheless, the boundary between labour and capital isn't sharp. Prior to April 2016, when the Sunday closing law was abolished, it was not possible to employ non-family members on a Sunday. Even now, owners still fill in for their employees in cases of sickness or other contingencies.

My puzzle was the question of work discipline and job satisfaction. While some have work-related issues (sometimes very serious ones) and complaints, I found that on the whole the employees find their job gratifying and fulfilling. My task is to conceptualize the values and meanings they give to their work. I need to focus on what motivates employees to work in a disciplined way. How do they respond to the owners' incentives? How do they react to surveillance of their labour process? What do motivations and incentives reveal about the wider social world and values in postsocialist Hungary? What ethic underpins reciprocity and mutual help between the employees (horizontal) and between employees and employers (vertical)? How do social interactions with customers shape the work process?

By unpacking the work ethic of these specific shops, my research will illuminate the nature and meaning of work and value in 21st century Szeged.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 2015 the government took a further step in the re-regulation of the tobacco market by creating a central, state-owned intermediary organization to supply the retailers. National tobacco stores are now compelled to buy from this official supplier.

<sup>2</sup> Until 2012 80% of tobacco sales were through grocery stores; the remainder took place through specialist tobacco shops, petrol stations and multinational companies such as Tesco or Cora (Laki 2014).

## References

- Harris, Olivia. 2007. "What Makes People Work?". Pp. 137–167 in *Questions of Anthropology*, edited by Rita Astuti, Jonathan Parry and Charles Stafford. Oxford-New York: Berg.
- Kocka, Jürgen. 2010. "Work as a Problem in European History" Pp. 1–17 in *Work in a Modern Society: The German Historical Experience in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Jürgen Kocka. Oxford-New York: Berghahn Books.
- Laki, Mihály. 2014. *A trafikpiac átalakulása és átalakítása, esettanulmány (Restructuring and re-regulation of the Hungarian tobacco market – a case study)*. Budapest: MTA Közgazdaság- és Regionális Tudományközpont Közgazdaság-tudományi Intézet.
- Spittler, Gerd. 2010. "Beginnings of the Anthropology of Work: Nineteenth-Century Social Scientists and their Influence on Ethnography". Pp. 37–55 in *Work in a Modern Society: The*

*German Historical Experience in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Jürgen Kocka. Oxford-New York: Berghahn Books.

Wright, Erik Olin. 2015. *Understanding Class*. London: Verso.

© 2003-2022, Max-Planck-Gesellschaft