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Commodification from below: reforming the national 'work ethic' in Serbia

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"Work is the only way to improve things for us. Work must be our main ideology, the foundation of our faith,
our investment in everyone's future. So I finish with what this Government gained the mandate for:
Reforms now! Laws now! Work now!" (Blic, 2014)

The current Serbian president, Aleksandar Vučić, announced a broad range of economic reforms with these words. Two decades before, during the Yugoslav wars, he had been a member of a far-right party that formed coalition with Slobodan Milošević, who once declared: "If we don't know how to work or do business, at least we know how to fight well". Meanwhile, Milošević was ousted and sent to the Hague Tribunal, and a series of market and policy reforms were conducted in the 2000s in Serbia. Capitalising on the widespread resentment with inequalities that ensued, Vučić transformed his party, went from a staunch Eurosceptic to a pro-EU pragmatic, and started getting unprecedented voting support in a new style of authoritarian populism. His prominent topic has been the national work ethic, as something that the supposedly lazy Serbians need to change. "We dreamt and we perished, and now it is time to wake up. Labour must be our ideology, our last experiment and our last try", Vučić claimed.

How can we understand this shift of rhetoric? On the first glance, Vučić's apotheosis of work could be understood through the prism of 'etho-politics', a late liberal strategy of governance that moralises policies and distributes responsibility onto individuals (see Apostolov 2015). In Serbia, this coincided with offences on the labour protection, welfare and pension cuts, and large state subsidies to foreign capital. With his open references to Max Weber's notion of Protestant work ethic as something that Orthodox Serbs should learn from their Western neighbours, Vučić's rhetoric could be read as state legitimisation of market reforms and

austerity measures, in particular geo-economic dependency. The promise of creating jobs also had a pragmatic resonance in the context where youth unemployment was around 35%. Such state capture of working class resentment into neoliberal authoritarianism has been widespread in Eastern Europe since 2008.

However, a top-down focus alone would miss some important aspects. Firstly, Vučić's portrayal focused not only on the condition of the state, but its citizens without labour. Living in a state which does not respect the value of work, Vučić implied, had made its people slaves to searching for connections and to being 'cynics' who 'fought harsh reality with moaning and jokes'. Such citizens were not just poor and without prospects: they were demoralised. Secondly, in focus was not simply wage work, but a broader activity of toil and diligence to be embraced for a wider communal aim. Vučić and his fellow ministers were the first to embody this active habitus: sleeping only a few hours to start the day early, with a tendency to 'work, sleep, and shower in the Parliament building', while condemning opposition as 'not doing anything'. Finally, labour acquired broader meanings of moral absolution, beyond the common ideologies of neoliberal self-responsibility. It promised both societal reconstruction and personal redemption from the depravity of idleness.

Old Zastava's industrial complex (2012).
Photo: Ivan Rajković

Witnessing Vučić's rise from my fieldwork, I was surprised by the extent to which he echoed many of my interlocutors. Between 2011 and 2013, I lived in Kragujevac, an important town with a population of 200,000 and a location of the 'Zastava' corporation. This was an iconic complex of Yugoslav workers' self-management which, at its peak in the 1980s, employed 50,000 workers in the town, and on whom several hundred thousand more depended in supplier firms across the country. 'Zastava' had produced cars, trucks, and arms for the domestic market as well as for various export programmes from US to Iraq. But when the Yugoslav wars started in 1991, it found itself cut off from suppliers that were spread in the former republics, now war zones. With hyperinflation and international embargo, production became irregular and dropped to 5-10% of its 1989 rates, and remained such for next two decades. Gradually, Zastava factories became the testing ground for what was locally termed

“buying social peace”, that is, compromises between market liberalisation and its social costs. In the 1990s, Milošević’s government continued financing the big factories and forbade layoffs, keeping masses of workers in work status yet on long-term leaves. Later in the 2000s, market reformers continued with ‘gradualism’ of neoliberal reforms. They covered the redundancy payments for Zastava’s workers fired in privatisations, and financed loss-making firms until a ‘strategic buyer’ would be found. In that way, the shift towards new market restructuration coincided with prolonged under-productivity.

It is in this context that I did my ethnographic research, at the time when Zastava’s workers were for long seen as both the most abandoned and most privileged ones, the best craftsmen and the worst idlers. I focused on the re-education courses offered to the workers made redundant, various idled companies of the old Zastava complex, and wider town transformation - at a moment when the arrival of FIAT became a focus of much hope and resentment. In these various sites, I found, a shared theme was often the lack of legitimacy in the absence of ‘proper’ work. Because on the one hand, many workers had ambivalent stance towards their jobs in Zastava factories, where much of the work had for long been seen as a mere simulation funded by the state. I called this mock-labour: an activity which social actors see as just an imitation of some ‘proper’ work, and which they ridicule (Rajković 2018). However, simulation existed with various new forms of work practice that were attempts to make do, to improvise in a depleted company setting. Since the 1990s, such improvisations actually reintroduced manual labour and skill into spaces that had previously been more automatically organised, creating new forms of bricolage and endurance with contested value.

“What production - pouring anti-freeze, is that it? As a boss, he should create some work for me. Instead he doesn’t do any work, nor do I, for years, and he is still acting all self-important”. This is how an accountant of a big former wholesaler of Zastava Cars’ spare parts disparaged her manager. In the absence of mass production renewal, many implied, managers were only high-blown pretenders. Namely, workers came to experience their work routines as lacking clear events of production – such as those remembered before 1990 - but abounding in ‘quasi-events’, i.e., many small activities of make do, like working without proper equipment, heating, or appropriate tools. These still connected the firm to the workers, making them to feel they were voluntarily giving themselves to a wider, collective cause they could not see failing. And yet, they were always close to being seen as no events at all. Such value anxieties cast doubts on people’s own sense of deservingness. “We don’t do anything here. If the state wants to close us, it can totally do it. We can only say: thank you for even giving us this!” said another Spare Parts employee.

"We are what we create", FIAT's billboard (2012).
Photo: Ivan Rajković

While retaining some social security for labour surplus, the state politics of financing under-productive employment gradually became divorced from an inherited ethos of productivity, in which work - as both a profitable and life-fulfilling activity - had been understood as a basis of fair rewards. Waiting for the end of the work day with little or no activity to be done, or protesting for equal access to employment whilst thinking that those who do have jobs don't do the 'real' work either, created intensive affective registers between righteousness and complicity, nonchalance and shame. In this context, yearnings for what people call 'proper' labour and 'proper' capitalism emerged as offering a clear arbiter of social worth and economic legitimacy, and structural conditions for moral absolution. In other words, if a 'market' was being summoned, it is not simply because neoliberal reformers spilled its hegemony - it is because it seemed like a way out of everyday value anxieties, where one was not clear whether he 'earns' or 'receives' a wage. This was a *commodification from below* – an attempt to decouple wage work from the 'social question' it had ambiguously been part of.

Such mobilisations of work ethic occur fairly regularly in Serbia's modern history. If Nazi propaganda pitted peasants against the lazy communists, the 1980s 'anti-bureaucratic revolution' saw workers protesting against the 'unproductive' cadres, while FIAT is now evaluated from the point of view of whether it would be able to assert a new work discipline - or get overwhelmed by the local idleness. These episodes share a distinctly Balkanist trope: one describing Western Europe as more ordered and industrious than Serbia, and acquiring working manners as a matter of civilizational progress. Such ethno-Occidentalism reminds us that, even if highly Eurocentric and problematic, Weber's notion of Protestant work ethic remains a powerful ideal, an embedded node of comparison in many worlds we study. These are some of the issues I shall develop as a member of the REALEURASIA team.

References

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