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The Crisis of Working Class Sociability in Croatia
Challenges of De-Unionization

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Abstract

This article investigates how the working class in contemporary Croatia responded to challenges brought by the post-socialist transition, with special focus on the patterns of sociability. In this ethnographically and historically informed paper, I explore three topics: the shrinking of cross-class sociability which is explained by the emergence of new, non-egalitarian orders of values; the privatization of sociability, often caused by the decline of trade union activities; and finally, the strategies of adapting to the new conditions by persisting on union activism and self-organizing of neighbourhood communities. The paper presents results from 17 in-depth interviews conducted in five research sites: two textile factories and one electric factory, one oil company, and one research institute.

Introduction

Almost 40 years ago Sennett and Cobb published their seminal work on "hidden injuries of class". In this work, the authors sought to give a thick ethnographic account on the ambiguities and problems American workers face in the wake of the new challenges brought by the post-industrial transformations. Unlike American society, where the "badges of ability" were being distributed among the *few* who have performed and won the respect, in opposition to the *many* whose "selves stay in limbo" (Sennett, Cobb 1993: 67), in state-socialism it was the *many* who earned the respect. Instead of idealizing the chosen few, the regime ideology celebrated the ordinary people. In the post-socialist transition, however, the dominant regime values went through a radical change. With de-industrialization creating large-scale unemployment in the industrial sector, and incomes plummeting, working class people very often ended up among the losers of the transition. While the income dispersion between occupational strata has expanded, providing them the possibility for grounding class distinctions in

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the domain of consumption to a larger extent than before, social status between manual and non-manual occupations has risen drastically. "In few short years", Kideckel shows, "industrial workers have gone from paragons of socialist virtue to near-pariahs of post-socialist uncertainty" (Kideckel 2008: ix).

Numerous studies have noted the deteriorating consequences the post-socialist transition had on the working class in Eastern Europe. In the case of Russia, Siegelbaum showed how workers in most, if not all sectors of the economy experienced delays or nonpayment of wages, a decline in state contributions to pensions and other benefits, the deterioration of health care, and a psycho-social disorientation that, though difficult to quantify, was no less real and undoubtedly contributed to steep increases in the rates of alcoholism and suicide among people of working age and a rise in the mortality rate of the general population (Siegelbaum 2004: 638). By analysing Czech female factory workers, Weiner demonstrated how the market "meta-narrative", that acquired a dominant position in the post-1990 Czech society, made them acutely aware of their marginal identity, whereas capitalism's promise remained unfulfilled (Weiner 2005). Heyns, on the other hand, provided a general account of the inequalities which have emerged throughout Central and Eastern Europe (Heyns 2005), even though, as Dawson showed, egalitarian movements nonetheless failed to materialize (Dawson 1999). Finally, post-socialist workers' lives diminished even further by the great difference between them and the lives of the "fortunate classes" which, as Kideckel claims, ballooned in the last years (Kideckel 2008), while workers served "both as an illustration and a cause of economic inefficiency" (Fuller 2000: 594). The literature on workers in post-socialism, however, had little to say about the consequences which the post-socialist changes had on working class sociability.

In the research presented in this paper, the ambiguities and problems Croatian workers face in the wake of the new challenges will be analysed through the prism of friendship, social support, and sociability. Furthermore, it will be shown that the de-unionization – the process that was especially prominent with the transition from state-socialist regimes – played a crucial role in shaping these trends.[2] In order to explore these topics, I conducted in-depth interviews with 17 members of the working class in Croatia, from 2009 to 2011. So as to provide a feel for the material, some of the stories offering the most memorable quotes or exemplifying the generated categories in the clearest or most explicit way, are

[2] The concept of de-unionization is meant not only in terms of the decline in the percentage of the labour force being unionized, but also in a more general sense as the waning of labour union activities as well as their social and symbolic importance. For more on the current state of Croatian trade unionism and its historical roots, see works by Grdešić (2007, 2008).

described in detail, using long block quotes. At the same time, I sought to present respondents as unique cases, with all their complexities and idiosyncrasies. The names of the interviewees reported in this research were changed, whereas some biographical facts of minor relevance have been altered in order to assure the respondents' anonymity.

The research was carried out on five research sites: two textile factories in the city of Čakovec, from the highly industrialized county of Međimurje, the most prosperous and the most densely populated Croatian region in the northernmost part of the country; and three research sites in Zagreb, the country's capital: an electric factory, an oil company, and a research institute. The interviewees, both male and female, consisted of textile workers, metal workers, and other manual labourers, such as gardeners, ceramicists, gas station salesmen, and photocopy workers, mostly being skilled workers with secondary education acquired at vocational schools. All respondents were found with the help of trade union officials from the following organizations: Trade Union of Textile Workers, Trade Union of Metal Workers, Trade Union of Oil Workers, Trade Union of Science and Higher Education. After arranging the interviews with trade union activists, I visited the respective factories and research sites, and had talks with respondents who volunteered to participate in the trade union premises.

The research findings will be presented in three parts. I start by analysing the life-stories of Croatian workers, underlining the transformations of their sociability with the changes in status. In the second section, emphasis is put on the phenomena of privatization of the social sphere, often caused by the decline of trade union activities, and the shrinking of cross-class sociability. In the final section, attention is also given to the strategies of adapting to the new conditions: persistence in union activism, self-organizing of neighbourhood communities, and class solidarity.

New boundaries and broken ties

Danica Lakić, a woman in her mid 50s, employed in a research institute as a desk clerk in charge of the photocopy machines, is generally content with her status at the institute. "You won't believe this, but after 31 years at the institute, I still can't see one single disadvantage. I still love this job! I like coming to the institute every day. I have an interesting job, people are very nice to me, and all these 30 years I feel deep respect for me." Mainly being surrounded by academics and scientists, she feels a deep respect from them "despite being just working class": "You feel those people need you, and you feel they appreciate it. And the whole institute does need me, no matter the function I have here." As much as

Danica, on the one hand, feels obliged to the institution that treats her so decently, on the other hand, she admits that in the meantime something has been lost.

When she came to the institute in the early 1980s, she recalls, everything was "wonderful, magnificent and superb". Every time someone new was employed, a senior researcher would take this person by the hand and personally introduced him or her to everyone: from the researchers and head of the institute to the staff from the kitchen. During the interview, Danica showed me photos from 30 years ago, which she took during a banquet organized at the institute. On black and white blurry photos of people in evening dresses, sitting around the table filled with wine bottles and food, she carefully explains to me who is who: "this old guy was a head of the department, this one was a famous physicist, the blond guy sitting besides him was an electrician, and I'm there on the right." In those times, there hardly existed any boundaries between the scientific staff and the blue-collar workers in charge of the physical work around the institute. Yet today, she says with nostalgia, this is not the case any more.[3] She herself, approaching the end of her career, still maintains a feeling of belonging to the institute which she sees as her second home, yet as for the new generations, certain boundaries seem to have found their way in between the two groups.

It is no wonder that a complex and overwhelming set of social, economic, and political transformations, such as the post-socialist transition, affected the patterns of sociability on the individual level in various ways. The increase in the spread of income between different classes, winners and losers of the transition, quite obviously took its toll on friendship ties. As recalled by a young architect entrepreneur, interviewed as part of the wider research project, the same thing happened to her parents:

> "For example, let's take my folks. So they were … so to say … well, some kind of half-hippies. But in one moment, they started earning more than before, which was not the case with some of their friends. And then you have a situation that we go skiing, you see, and they don't. Because, obviously, they couldn't afford to go skiing, not in their wildest dreams. So what are you gonna say to them? Are you gonna call them and say: 'OK so I went skiing and it was so much fun. We did this, we did that?' This

[3] For more on post-socialist nostalgia, as a representation of a longing for an alternative moral order, see Berdahl's work on former East Germany (Berdahl 2010). As authors exploring the topic of post-socialist memories have frequently stated, a feeling of nostalgia tells more about the present than it does about the past; faced with permanent stress and insecurity, romanticizing the past times on behalf of the workers, in this respect, makes such longing very understandable. Notwithstanding this remark, however, the visual frame within which the given recollection took place (the photo initiating the memory flow) adds credibility to Danica's story.

> simply leads to tensions, and frankly … I seriously don't know who was it in this case that abandoned whom?"

Although the ideology of friendship discourages it from being seen in this way, equal resources that friends can bring to the relationship, Allan argues, oftentimes represent the crucial issue: friendship, to some measure namely, depends on the friends wanting and being able to engage in the same sorts of activity as the other, and this normally requires some financial expenditure (Allan 1989: 24). Surely, friendship begins with a desire between two persons to spend time together and engage in the same sorts of activity, but the young architect's example shows the obstacles friendships face in reality, with income disparities representing just one of them. However, Danica's experience of the transformations of sociability within a research institute where she works at the same time indicated another dimension: a newly emerging barrier grounded on an aspect more profound than was the case with a mere difference in wealth. Despite still sharing the same foci of activity (Feld, Carter 1999), people of different class backgrounds suddenly encountered, thanks to the new "orders of value" (Boltanski, Thévenot 2006), a wall in the very same space separating them from their former comrades.

From a sociological perspective, according to Allan, one of the most interesting features of friendship is found in the fact that friendship is essentially a relationship of equality.[4] In addition to being informal and free from broader structural imperatives, friendship is a bond in which issues of hierarchy and authority have no bearing (Allan 1989: 20); so, the argument goes, it is no wonder that the majority of friendships occur among those who occupy broadly similar social positions. "There is, of course, nothing within the notion of friendship that requires this to be so", but Allan claims, "the economic and social divisions within the society certainly encourage it" (Allan 1989: 23). Those who share similar social characteristics are likely to have much more in common than those who do not: "Their orientation to life, their experiences and interests, their hopes and expectations for the future, their values and beliefs, the frustrations and problems they face, etc. are that much more likely to be compatible and thus provide

[4] In reality, of course, one rarely meets a relationship freed from any asymmetry, as Gould shows, in his words, on the somewhat caricatured example of Alice and Beth: "Take any two people at random, and it is unlikely that they will match exactly in the degree to which they appeal to one another as friends. The mismatch might result from differences in social attractiveness on which everyone might agree, or it might be the result of purely idiosyncratic factors leading Alice to like Beth more than Beth likes Alice; the implication is nearly the same. Even if they do form a friendship, the asymmetry will manifest itself in a wide range of patterns that will consistently make one party to the relation feel neglected and cause the other to feel crowded if the former demands more attention" (Gould 2003: 49).

a firm grounding for the development of friendship" (Allan 1989: 23). Clearly, Allan concludes, it is much easier to treat as equal those who are in fact equal: who have the same economic resources, the same sorts of domestic commitment, or the same status in the wider society.

In this view, homophilic friendships can seem a consequence of the natural order of things: equal distribution of resources thereby enables a specific type of social ties, grounded on the idea of equality. What can be more natural than becoming friends with a person of similar social status? Danica's case, however, brings this into doubt by questioning the seemingly unproblematic conception of equality. Common "experiences and interests, hopes and expectations for the future, values and beliefs, frustrations and problems" certainly can be important, but if this is the case, why is it more important now than it was 20 years ago? Treating each other as equals and sustaining a long-run equivalence in their transactions, as Allan argues, most likely does represent an important structural characteristic of relationships of friendship. However, this example helps to indicate the contextual variability determining the ways actors understand and experience the notion of equality and equivalence. To put this more bluntly, the sense of equality is not only a matter of structural locations, but of the ways these structural locations are perceived by actors. In the new context, typified by different orders of values, as has been shown here, actors adjusted to the new expectations with the old feelings of equality disappearing and giving rise to new ones.

From Đilas to Szelényi, a whole array of critics sought to disprove the egalitarian nature of state-socialist societies in Eastern Europe – a value to which state-socialist regimes owed a significant part of their legitimacy. From the theories on the emergence of a new party elite (Djilas 1957) to the attempts to broaden the scope of analysis of the "new class" to "intelligentsia" in a more general meaning (Konrád, Szelényi 1979), these authors suggested the existence of a class antagonism between working class and the bureaucracy, demonstrating that any idealization of the working class status in state-socialism is highly dubious. In his ethnographical work in one Hungarian factory in the 1970s, Haraszti had tried to show a clear distinction between "us" and "them" drawn by the factory workers, thereby revealing a perception of an antagonism between them and all those who work in the office rather than on the shop floor (Haraszti 1977). But as much as Haraszti's workers seemed to show a strong feeling of identity constructed in opposition to the management and upper classes, the memories of working class respondents included in my research indicated this, on the contrary, to a much lesser extent. Notwithstanding critiques of the supposed class egalitarianism, workers' discourses presented in this section therefore vividly show what they once had, and what they lost.

Hobbies and "hobbies": privatization of sociability

Asked about his hobbies, and demonstrating a somewhat tragicomic – and yet telling – misunderstanding of the word, Nadan Lerotić, a textile worker from Čakovec, names "fuš" as one these hobbies. In the North Croatian dialect, "fuš" (derived from the German word "Pfusch") refers to the whole specter of unregistered business activity, done in order to supplement regular incomes. In Nadan's case, as with most working class interviewees featured here, "fuš" however not only represented additional income, but also the regular supply of financial means necessary for the basic survival. Having misunderstood the meaning of the concept of hobby, and thinking that it refers to every activity performed outside of the line of work – and not just activities done in one's leisure time for pleasure – Nadan therefore considered the small jobs he did during most of his free time, in order to fill his family budget, as appropriate to be subsumed under the given category. Despite not explaining Nadan's real hobbies, this anecdote does illustrate social lives encountered among most working class respondents.

After he finishes his work in the factory, and when he is not amused with his "hobbies", Nadan reportedly prefers spending his free time by "lying on the couch in front of my TV"; yet afterwards sadly adding: "but this happens too rarely". Instead of supplementing their lives with spending their time with friends and doing hobbies, quite a few of my respondents reported spending little time socializing with anyone outside of their closest family circle. The post-socialist transition has been shown to cause a deterioration of working class lives in several respects; not only did it introduce insecurity and risk for their economic standards of living, but it also affected their dignity and feelings of self-worth, as the old socialist values of egalitarianism and appreciation of manual labour were replaced by the new meritocratic ideals, prone to gratify upper class credentials. The same, however, can be said for the realm of sociability.

The phenomenon of "privatization" of sociability is certainly not a novel thing in the studies of working class friendships. Several authors established similar class variations across different contexts. As shown by Allan for the UK context, while friendship offered an important route for social integration amongst the middle class, in working class practice it remained quite "foreign" (Allan 1999: 74). Working class respondents have regularly reported to have fewer friends, and to spend more time in the circle of their kin. Housing standards and patterns of marriage represented two crucial conditions for such organization of sociability. Working class circumstances in the home and of domestic life were anything but luxurious: most households tended to be overcrowded and to have few amenities, failing to provide an ambience conducive to entertaining (Allan 1989: 134). At the same time, gender divisions between husbands and wives were, in the working class, strongly marked, with males and females

routinely leading different lives. While middle class marriages implied sharing non-domestic leisure time activities and mutual involvement in sociable relationships, with the partial exception of kin gatherings, working class patterns reveal a stronger separation of free time. In their practices, home was reserved for family rather than being used as a site for entertaining others and developing shared friendships (Allan 1989: 136). Among interviewees encountered during my field research, however, this was not the sole factor, as their lack of socialization outside of their family had its roots elsewhere.

The dominant middle class pattern of developing sociable relationships involved, according to Allan, an extension or broadening of the contexts in which interaction occurred: when individuals, in this account, met others with whom they felt a sufficient degree of compatibility, they tended to foster the relationship by involving themselves with that person in settings other than that in which they first met (Allan 1999: 75). For example, Allan explains, people met at the work place would be invited to the home or to some sporting or cultural event. In this way, "rather than the relationship being confined, and thereby defined, in terms of a particular context or setting, they were broadened out in a way which helped emphasize the primacy of the relationship above that of specific contexts" (Allan 1999: 75). In contrast to that, working class sociability with non-kin was organized differently, with greater emphasis on the context and setting (work place or a local pub), and, as a consequence, underplayed the significance of the tie in its own right. With home being the province of "family", it was quite rare for men to socialize in a domestic setting, and as a result, there was less emphasis placed symbolically on the individuality of relationships: "whereas much middle-class sociability was planned and organized for its own sake, working-class sociability often appeared to be more fortuitous, being dependent on joint participation being defined in terms of the activity rather than the relationships involved" (Allan 1999: 75). Not only is it questionable if this can be applied to the workers in state-socialist societies,[5] but for Croatian working class people, post-socialist transition in this respect certainly signified a watershed.

During state-socialism, a number of working class respondents reported having dynamic and fulfilling social lives, with trade unions representing a crucial mechanism of socialization. Trade union excursions, sports competitions, festivities and celebrations represented important means of socializing for most in-

[5] House visits among Romanian workers, as Kideckel shows, represented important rituals: "Informally visiting colleagues in their homes was an especially important way to maintain social relations. During socialism's heyday people offered guests food and drink as soon as they entered a home and continuously throughout a visit [...] Though miners' hospitality was not as lavish, visits to workmates, who were also neighbours, still strengthened work group solidarity" (Kideckel 2008: 138).

terviewees. Their firms therefore filled them not only with feelings of dignity and pride, but provided a key role in organizing workers' lives even outside the factory. "Every New Year's Eve", Nevenka Hodak, an employee in a textile factory from 1980 on, recalled, "the firm would organize a celebration for workers, and it was massive! But nowadays, no way they would organize a big party. Everything simply went apart. Today you can't even gather three people to go for coffee together … Then it was so nice to work in this firm, we had so much fun together. For instance, here in the factory we had a restaurant, which later got privatized, with 300 seats, and how can I put this, … you couldn't find a free place there! We all hung out together, but nowadays no such things are left any more." In the 1980s, Predrag Livaković, a metal worker from Zagreb, tells me, workers from the firm would organize a football tournament with ten teams and rent the whole sports hall. At present, however, he adds with an ironic smile, they could hardly find half a dozen men healthy enough to play. Once, he continues, it was normal for guys from the factory to go to the Jarun lake (a city lake which is a favorite excursion place for Zagreb inhabitants), make a grill there, play guitar and play football – but those times are gone.

As a union man, Nadan Lerotić, a textile worker, is still trying. He organizes excursions and sports tournaments followed by the dinner in a restaurant, seeking to keep things of the former system that he found good and positive. Despite his fellow workers who despise that as a relict of socialism, he holds on. Unlike before, the union does not cover all costs – people have to pay for the transport and the union pays for the dinner, while company bosses also "chip in sometimes". Out of 350 workers in the factory, 100 are often ready to join him, which he sees as a good turnout. They still "feel in a socialist way", he says, refusing to forget the sense of solidarity and all the good things from "the dark times", as he says ironically. At the same time, Nadan admits that a sense of insecurity has taken over, seriously affecting socializing patterns between workers: "Before, we also worked a lot, but we found time for hanging out. And I mean, we worked both at home and at work, just like today. After finishing his shift in the factory, my dad also worked for himself. But still, we found the time for hanging out … because we had security, security of the work place and a safe salary every month. And then it wasn't a big deal to go for a beer after work." At the end of every year, Nadan and his co-workers would have two or three parties to celebrate it, but today no one shows up any more: "They all say, 'I don't have time', 'I don't have money'. You know how it goes … obviously we reached a point where people have neither enough money, nor a motive for hanging out."

A forty-year-old metalworker from Zagreb, Darko Vokić, recently married and soon to be a father, is full of understanding for that: "Fuck it, one doesn't have enough money any more … [laughter] And money is everything … Before I would do a road trip, and all of us, guys from the factory, would go together for

a barbecue to a cottage on the countryside where one of the guys comes from. But it's a bit screwed up to go for a road trip without money, so you know, we're left with sort of amusement that is for free [laughter]". Once a month Darko visits meetings of a small socialist party, attended also by his friends:

> "So yeah, one would go for a drink after the meetings, but this friend of mine is unemployed and can't pay for a drink. So you see, he would go with us, but you know he's too embarrassed. And so everything revolves around money, even if you wanna hang out with your friends. I know the feeling myself, I was in situations like that, too. When you are so ashamed, and you wait for your folks at home to help you out, but in fact you don't wanna go anywhere … you don't have a will to get out of the house. 'Cause even if you go out, and even if you manage to get enough cash to pay an entry, you won't have enough to pay for a drink afterwards. So you see, it's better not to go out in the first place'."

While it is certainly possible for friends to do things together without spending much money, Darko's experience confirms that many forms of sociable activity in fact require some level of expenditure. As Allan points out, even with what appears to be relatively mundane things, like going for a drink or playing sport, may in practice be limited by financial consideration, especially given that sociability has a relatively low priority within most households' scheme of things (Allan 1989: 35).

A fan of heavy metal music, Darko shares many friendships with people he met in the 1980s, when as a teenager he hung out in the "Moše Pijade" cultural centre, famous for the genre of rock and heavy metal, where they would see concerts and exchanged LPs. "Nowadays, the only thing I like is music, you know, to go see a concert. And those are my only nights out, if I have enough money for the ticket. If my wife lets me … but she doesn't like this music so I get to go alone then [laughter] [...] I don't know, for me everything revolves around money. I would always go somewhere, see every concert I haven't seen. I find that interesting, I really love to see it and hear something new … if I had enough money."

Darko's narrative, together with the depictions given in this section, indicates the grim and lonely reality of the working class in Croatia. Faced with decline in economic and social respect as well as with the loss of the strong position of trade unions, which until then had a crucial role in organizing workers' sociability, workers in Croatia have seemingly withdrawn into their private sphere – a finding which corresponds with several other studies of working class' lives in

post-socialism.[6] However, was the situation really that bad? Have many workers really given up so easily? The final section turns to alternative forms of sociability, and their role in sustaining working class pride.

Self-organizing the community

In the 1990s, Nedjeljko Gilić, a metal worker from Zagreb, managed to keep his job, but his wife was not that lucky. As the sole breadwinner, he was not only faced with loss of income and responsibility of supporting his family (his wife was forced to survive by selling things on the black market, but never managed to earn much), but also with the erosion of sociability. As presented in the previous section, the union excursions, sport tournaments, and a lively social atmosphere had been replaced by the rising individualization, loss of team spirit, and people withdrawing into their own private spheres. However, thanks to a decision to buy a house, after years of renting a home, Nedjeljko's life changed for the better. Some 10 years ago he took out a mortgage and bought a house in a small suburban town north of Zagreb: "So I bought this house in the year 2000 … until I lived as a sub tenant … and this makes me happy and fulfilled. It's an old house, 70 years perhaps, but I was so happy when I bought it, for me, and my wife and son … I rejuvenated, completely. For years I wanted to have something that is my own, something which I can create and work on with my own hands." When he first arrived at the newly acquired house, Nedjeljko recalls: "It was summer, the garden and the house needed cleaning, and I had no tools with me." In such a setting, the help of his new neighbours proved of great importance. Although having no previous acquaintance, Nedjeljko's neighbours readily agreed to help, not only by borrowing a tractor and other tools which were needes, but also helping him with physical work. "Later, they told me, they saw me working and cleaning things, and they said to themselves 'look at this guy, what a hardworking man.'" And for this warm welcome, Nedjeljko feels very much indebted: "Their support meant so much to me … Now, I'm ready to help them even if they call me in the middle of the night", he says.

Nedjeljko's house fills him with pride and has become a centre of his life. "I'm very happy with what I achieved. And one can see your effort and work … it makes me very much content." Since he bought the house, Nedjejko has not

[6] In her ethnographic work on the working class community in Nowa Huta, Stenning reached similar results: during socialist times this largest single project of Poland's first Soviet-style plan provided its inhabitants a range of social and cultural facilities which gave workers and their families opportunities to socialize and be entertained within the community; much of this, however, disappeared in the 1990s (Allan 1989: 35).

traveled on vacation – not only because he could not afford it, but because, as he claims, he would not have the desire to do so, in the first place. "I would be sorry to go somewhere for a month instead of using this time for works on the house … and this one month is the best time for work! This is a real vacation to me." However, Nedjeljko is aware he would not do it without his neighbours: "Respect to them, really big respect. They were of so much help to me when I arrived there. It was a new environment, among new people, in a new region, with different customs, with everything different. And these folks … they've done so much for me." In the basement, Nedjeljko constructed a workshop: "It is a lovely workshop, I mean nothing big, only for me, but I spend a lot of time there, always working on something. You know, just for a hobby, I do things with wood or with metal … either for me, or for my neighbours. But of course, I don't do it for money! God forbid, I would never take money from them, nor have I ever done that, I only do it to help them." Nedjeljko and his neighbours therefore maintain a friendly relationship, "whether through parties we have together, birthday celebrations, or regarding work we do together, we are always a team. And a good team! This really makes me proud."

The decline of the importance of trade unions, as shown in the previous section, had a devastating impact on the social lives of workers. However, as demonstrated by Nedjeljko, several working class interviewees found a replacement in strengthening their neighbourhood communities. Faced with the lack of social activities in the village near Čakovec where she now lives, eight years ago Marija Sokač, a textile worker, decided to do something about it.

> "I was one of the founders of this recreational group. We were talking a bit and we concluded that something has to be done, something has to happen in the village. That is like … as a member of the socialist youth, I was used to something always happening in the village. Because when I was young, there always existed some youth groups, for chess, football, firefighting groups and so on. So when I got married and had children I stopped taking part, because … my husband wasn't that interested. You know, when you're that age, then it's nice to be together. But later, when my kids grew up a bit, I found myself again in this recreation for women, because nothing else existed in the village."

Years ago, Marija recalls, the textile factory where she worked organized a recreation for its employees, mostly women: "So every morning we had this guy from the school of sports science leading a recreation. We had a 10 minute break from the machine when we would do exercises together, and I found that fantastic. Because when you work on the machine, it's not that you're sitting just in one position, but you don't get to move much. So this exercise was something else!" Given that she enjoyed it so much, Marija decided to do something simi-

lar: "Now, in town there are a number of private gyms but they aren't that cheap for our circumstances. But in the village there were several of us girls who were interested in such a thing and we decided to self-organize!" However, Marija explains,

> "It's not just about sports, it's also the socializing. You go out, you hang out with people, hear some news, you hear a few jokes and so on. If someone has a birthday, we celebrate it of course. We're like 'I have a birthday, and we finished with recreation', so we sit around the table, have a glass of wine, beer, juice, a slice of pizza or a cake, and chat a bit. This circle of women included, ranging from girls in their 30s to ladies in their 70s … but we found ourselves!"

Although having started by renting the communal home (the so-called "mjesni dom", a building owned by the local government, and intended for public use), soon they took over the premises, in exchange for maintenance: "We had been very unhappy with how it looked. We were renting the hall, but it was full of dust and so on. So a few times we made complaints, but there were no improvements. So finally, they invited tenders for the maintenance, we organized ourselves, applied for the tender and got it! And now we clean it weekly, and few times per year we do major cleaning actions. And so on … we have bought some equipment all by ourselves, readjusted a handball pitch for beach-volleyball. And then men from the village joined us as well, so we're all there twice a week." Thanks to Marija's initiative and the will for self-organization, the recreational centre became a social centre of the village which up to that point provided weak and unsatisfying social lives for its inhabitants: "It's a very nice spot for hanging out, but in a sense of sport and recreation. You know, good for body and soul. It makes me very satisfied."

Sports and recreational activities represented a crucial mechanism of socialization for a number of interviewees. Faced with loss of sociability caused by the changing role of trade unions as well as deteriorating financial conditions, workers in Croatia had to find alternative ways, and Marija's story represents an example of a successful endeavour. Instead of simply accepting their destiny, Marija and her colleagues readily engaged in new foci of activity, which they saw as a chance to enrich their social lives. Life in a small town community with a rural feel certainly facilitated such self-organization, and yet a similar story emerged from Darko Vokić, metal worker in Zagreb. In the previous section, Darko was reported complaining about the impoverished social life, mostly due to the lack of money. However, like Marija, as a sporty person Darko and his colleagues, amateur table-tennis players, decided to organize themselves. For 7 years now they meet twice a week in a space they rent together with a dozen other teams. "It's nice, you have your keys, and come when ever you want to

practice … but it's not just that. We also have room for hanging out … it's something like this here, with a table, a fridge for keeping beers cold and so, you know … guys come to play cards … we even have a fish aquarium! [laughter]".

In contrast to previous times when their factory would organize sports activities through the trade unions, Darko and his colleagues finance this themselves, since "the war has screwed up everything, you know". For the Croatian working class, many things indeed had been "screwed up" since the 1990s, but this section focussed on the ways they tried to normalize their lives. The experience they gathered from socialist times, thereby, seemed to play a role – from the memories of the days of their socialist youth when they would organize various activities to the self-managing factories which actually cared for the well-being of their workers, enough to provide them recreational programs which meant so much to them. The experience shaped by the structures and practices of state-socialism was thus directed not only to their past, but also towards their present behaviours and future actions.

Conclusion

In the early 1990s the working class disappeared from Croatian reality. As the newspeak of the newly formed state slowly started excommunicating "inappropriate" words from the standard language, the word denoting "worker", in Croatian "radnik", was officially replaced with the new artificial term "djelatnik", which had no traditional background in the Croatian language.[7] As a result, just four years after the collapse of communism, interestingly enough, not a single "worker" remained in Croatia, this representing just one tiny step in the project of symbolically burying the country's state-socialist past.

In the dominant system of values of the socialist ideology, qualified manual labour was highly appreciated, while the distance between occupational statuses, primarily between manual and non-manual, were less expressed. In the state-socialist societies of Eastern and Central Europe industrial workers were considered paragons, even if that image was often "rhetorical lip service" (Kideckel 2008: 29). One only has to think of icons depicted on Yugoslav banknotes presenting steel workers, farmers, and coal miners. Instead of idealizing the chosen few, the regime ideology celebrated the ordinary people.[8] In this way

[7] The word "djelatnik" comes from the adjective "djelatan", meaning "active", and until then had only two meanings, "working day" and "activist", none of them being even remotely similar to the meaning of the word "worker" (Opačić 2009).

[8] For more on the banknotes as a source of analyzing the official ideologies see Tschoegl (2004). The embracement of the regime ideology should be taken with a healthy dose of

it was possible to see outstanding historical personalities such as Nikola Tesla or Marshal Tito, holding their place on the banknotes besides an anonymous coal miner Alija Sirotanović, together with his legendary shovel.[9] In contrast to the state-socialist celebrations of the "revolutionary" working class, the new regime began propagating a rather different set of values: capitalism, market economy, and entrepreneurial spirit. In this new set of values, needless to say, there was no place left for the working class – just as there was no place left for the coal-miners, electricians, and peasants among the icons depicted on the banknotes of the young independent state of Croatia, until recently proudly adorning old Yugoslav banknotes.

With the shift from the egalitarian socialist regime to a more meritocratic capitalist one, upper classes faced the ideological and material changes by acquiring new possibilities and mechanisms of social closure (residential segregation, private schooling). Various attempts of Croatian entrepreneurs and professionals to achieve this goal, were documented in literature (Cepić forthcoming). By focussing on the ways used to create their feelings of self-worth as well as criteria applied when constructing their friendship-networks, it was possible to discern different patterns through which they realized the newly acquired opportunities, but also how they capitalized the old ones. In this paper, however, I have turned to the opposing category and explored those who were left with little to capitalize on. Even though the past events and reminiscences of state-socialism constituted an important part of the respondents' discourses, Croatian workers interviewed for this research were asked primarily about the present, and how they settled down and adapted to the new context.

The working class in Eastern Europe has been studied in a variety of aspects. In this paper, I have contributed to this field of research by discussing three distinct, yet related topics. Firstly, I examined how the changes in their social status which workers experienced after the end of state-socialism affected the patterns of sociability, while special emphasis was put on the concept of homophily and the sociology of friendship. Secondly, I studied the workers' retreat to the private sphere of their families and the process of deunionization which played an important role in the privatization of sociability. Finally I also explored the

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skepticism; often, as is well-known, there exists a wide gap between the values promoted by the regime and the ways normal citizens perceive them. Yet, the social importance of national iconography should not be underestimated, as shown by Shlapentokh's analysis of the Soviet glorification of labour (Shlapentokh 1989: 43).

[9] Alija Sirotanović, a Yugoslav coal miner, got famous and was installed to be a regime icon after winning the coal-mining contest. According to the popular anecdote, as a reward for setting a coal mining world record, Marshal Tito offered to fulfill any wish he had. However, Alija was reported to have requested only a bigger shovel.

new forms of self-organizing, illustrating how the tradition of unionized organizations inspired workers to remedy their situation, even long after the warm and cozy feeling of belonging to the state-socialist working class community – so faithfully depicted in the descriptions of past trade union gatherings – has elapsed. Even though these topics have rarely been in the focus of sociological and anthropological exploration of Eastern Europe, the attempt of this paper was to show that any account of the fate of the working class in the whirl of post-socialist transformations that fails to recognize the full dimension of sociability can hardly manage to assess the full extent of these changes.

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