

Textile Workers in Slovenia: From Nimble Fingers to Tired Bodies¹

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Abstract

The representative figures from socialism have been remodelled: the portraits of revolutionary and self-sacrificing female textile workers were replaced with exhausted victims of the socialist economy. However, as a female dominated industry, the textile industry is imbued with an additional meaning. Representations of the textile industry are strongly interrelated with gender relations and ideologies: nimble fingers are one such example. Even though not as highly valued in the present globalizing world, nimble fingers are an important constituent in the identity construction of female textile workers on the shop floor of a still-operating factory in Slovenia. This article focuses on female textile workers' experiences of postsocialist transformation in this factory while addressing changing meanings of work and skill in relation to the body and notions of femininity. I draw on my ethnographic research at the Spinning Factory and interviews with persons who are employed, retired and unemployed in the textile industry across Slovenia. The empirical material is analyzed in the context of broader sociopolitical discourse on the position of textile workers in this society as well as contemporary transnational economic policy and its rhetoric on a self-regulated free market.

"A few days ago whilst reading a newspaper, a headline caught my eye Bankruptcy....it is not important what the name of the factory was. It was a textile company and I noticed that because you can see such headlines all too often these days. During the last few years when steel or machine factories and similar giants are being visibly and loudly rescued by various bodies: the textile industry is dying, silently but swiftly – some would say even effectively!"

The article "Dying in Silence," published in a daily newspaper in 1995,³ discusses two burning issues of the postsocialist transformation in Slovenia. Firstly, dying marks both the end of former times and at the same time, the end of the industry. The second topic

follows- the textile industry is dying silently, as the article's author Slovene sociologist Marija Cigal puts it, and it does so in stark contrast to heavy industries where the problems are solved loudly and publicly.

“Maybe,” she continues, “it is because heavy industry, even though cursed as a remnant of the Socialist past, still represents the one and only model for true industry? Or maybe because they mostly employ men, whilst in the textile industry, there are mainly women; patient, swift, hard working, accepting inhumanly low pay, silently even when a factory is closed down and they are sent home to the kitchen stove, without compensation, and without any guarantee of having something to put in the pot.”

In this article, I will explore how textile workers, female ones in particular, experienced the closure of the textile industry. I will question whether they kept silent when textile factories were closing. My aim is not to argue with what Cigal proposed. I remember this period in the very same way: industry was dying at large, yet, politics, media and the broader public paid more attention to heavy industry. Nevertheless, there may have been some other voices that we should reconsider: those of textile workers. I wonder if all textile workers merely kept silent or whether their voices were not heard during the transformation period because they got lost in its translation.

With the collapse of socialism, a new global ‘truth’ was introduced. Following this new global story, the role of industrial workers in particular changed enormously. Textile workers – portrayed as revolutionary heroes in socialism – were suddenly considered the remnants of past socialist times, the ones who paid for the mistakes of the former socialist regime. They were replaced by managers, who have become the new significant subjects of the “transition.” My thesis is that during the postsocialist transformation female textile workers’ voices were lost in the translation from socialism to capitalism.

After the dismantling of socialism, textile factories across various countries of the former Eastern block closed down in large numbers. Over the last 19 years following independence in Slovenia (before 1991, Slovenia formed one of the Yugoslav republics), the number of textile workers fell to one-fifth of previous levels.⁴ In addition to unemployment, textile workers at this time started to struggle with existential insecurity. The situation also deteriorated due to other political changes: social security disappeared, the health system was

restructured, the government reduced financial support for health and social services, and support for kindergartens and education was minimized.

Postsocialist transformation, portrayed as a new modernization plan that was supposed to bring prosperity and freedom to the former Eastern block, was experienced by many people as actually a step back. The data on macro economic stability in Slovenia (GDP), its EU membership and adoption of the EURO currency, are seen by many to depict Slovenian political and economic success. Allegedly, compared to other postsocialist countries, Slovenia had a better starting position and managed “transition” more successfully than others. Yet, political and economic macro accounts do not reveal the full story: the story of how wealth and prosperity are distributed among people and how individuals experience change in their everyday lives.

By illustrating how female textile workers experienced socio-political changes following the dismantlement of communism, I would not only like to add a micro perspective to the macro economic account, but challenge it all together, in order to reveal its single-sidedness. In the article, I will refer to interviews, media analysis, and field work in an operational spinning factory. Analysis of field notes on specific situations and relations on the shop floor in Litija factory, where I worked as a blue collar worker for two months in 2004, will be correlated with interviews and conversations I conducted (between 2000 and 2005) with various individuals who worked or used to work (retired and unemployed) in textiles across Slovenia; workers, foremen, managers, directors, and trade unionists.

I aim to confront diverse discourses on textile working women by taking into account female workers’ active engagement in the process of constructing social identities, as well as shaping memories of the socialist past. This will take into account discourses shaped at national, international, and local levels in addition to the shop floor level of a textile factory.

An Image of a Socialist Female Textile Worker

The textile industry is intensely interrelated to the idea of modernization and has been so since early industrialization. Industry was literally born in the textile. In addition to the present most rapid deindustrialization, it is the textile that occupies a central role in discussions about globalization. Historically and spatially different modernization plans, constructed in various ways and in specific sociopolitical contexts, have placed industrialization and deindustrialization in the very core of their ideologies.

Representations of the textile industry are an integral part of wider industrial image yet at the same time they interface with gender relations and ideologies. They are implicit in discussions about 'light', i.e. female-dominated industry as opposed to 'heavy' male-dominated industry. These representations, rather than being mere images, imply a set of social concepts and views, uncovering networks of social relations and identities. I will focus on the imagery brought about by these views as well as social relations and identities, and the process of their construction.

The female-dominated textile industry⁵ was, even in socialist Yugoslavia, considered a light industry and thus not privileged. Heavy industry was the ideal subject to depict the communist scenario of industrialization. Nevertheless, due to the high numbers of workers employed in the textile industry it occupied a significant role in the Yugoslav economy and was also recognized as such publicly.

When a former managing director of a textile factory was asked to explain the notion of the Slovenian textile industry in 1987, his answer was: "Above all it represents working habits, precision and patience, the struggle to overcome poverty despite living in a miserable environment, which is an extremely arduous process." A former director depicted the textile industry by referring to characteristics ascribed to female textile workers, thus highlighting gender ideologies which shaped its development in socialism. Following these gender ideologies, I will briefly explore the portrayal of women working in the industry during socialism.

The construction of the image of this female textile worker was strongly interrelated with the political memory of a pre-revolutionary industrial strike of textile workers in 1936. Political commemorations of the event (after the war) shaped the image of a "real" revolutionary socialist working woman – that of a textile worker. The main actor in shaping this memory was a young girl (always referred in media as a "young" girl) called Ivanka, who actually was a textile worker and a member of a strike committee in 1936.

Ivanka was from a poor, large rural family and had to work to support her family. Her story, as it was presented in daily magazines and newspapers after the war, took place in the period before the socialist revolution, a technique that served to portray the life of a classical capitalist industrial textile worker. The aim was to emphasize the gains of the socialist revolution, in particular for industrial workers. The annual shaping and repetition of the politically organized memory was to strengthen post war authority and the monopoly of the Communist Party.⁶

Even though the majority of people I talked to did not remember any references made to this prerevolutionary textile strike and had not even read about it or discussed it, many pointed out Ivanka's characteristics, such as her "one and a half hour walk to work," which symbolized her strong will and commitment to the revolution. Retired elderly workers and directors used this image to emphasize female workers' "engagement and loyalty." When using exactly these terms, I first thought my interlocutors were referring to loyalty to socialism, but very soon I discovered that what they meant was the loyalty to the factory and the work itself. In interviews, textile workers proudly emphasized their endurance: "never being late," "rarely taking sick leave" and "frequently working overtime."

At the same time, however, another discourse used a totally different set of imagery to shape the ideal of a female textile worker; this discourse was based on "female nature" and the gender division of labor during socialism. "Female nature" did not disappear from the communist vocabulary and imagery. According to my research and also to references made by Croatian ethnologist Lydia Sklevicky, it appeared as a central theme, being presented as an unquestionable link between a woman's physiology and her social role. Sklevicky noted that the "female nature" manifested as an unproblematicized continuity of social gender coding and revealed the contradictions in understanding the socialist female character (1996: 78).

Socialism politically redefined the female image; this new socialist image was in many ways influenced by female collaboration in the National Liberation War during World War II, which in many respects not only changed the official political portrayal of women after the war, but also altered relations between men and women. Yet, the courage, combativeness and determination that women had shown in the national liberation battle were qualities that in the notorious post-war image merged with traditional female characteristics. The image of the revolutionary socialist woman thus remained ambiguous; a woman was strong and self-confident, but at the same time maternal, emotional and modest.⁷

In the Communist political doctrine and practice, the "female nature" remained the source of gender difference, the basis on which gender division of labor and also the rhetoric of the textile industry were founded. The proclaimed ideas of post-war political discourse on sex-neutral roles couldn't avoid the issue of 'nature' and sex. A socialist worker was always presented as a mother, overloaded by her work, her family life, housekeeping, and in particular her guilt of leaving her children behind.⁸ These portrayals were not only part of the political (communist) milieu, but also of the social world. On the individual everyday level this indicated the struggle almost all women had to fight, a constant feeling of neglect:

neglecting work or children. The political portrayal of socialist female textile workers, intensely interrelated with the discourse of femininity, had an impact on women's lives in the socialist past, and as I will try to prove further, also on their present lives.

“It is a Woman's Job:” Gender Division of Labor on the Shop Floor

In this section, I will discuss the gendered division of labor on the shop floor in the Litija factory where I conducted my field work. In order to comprehend the various explanations about relations between the textile industry, femininity and womanhood, I will refer to interviews with workers (retired and currently-employed), and management.

The spinning factory Litija is one of the few still operating textile factories in Slovenia. It is located in a small town, Litija, not far from the capital Ljubljana. The factory was built in 1886, and many workers had ancestors who worked in the same factory. Thus working in a factory is closely related to family tradition which intertwines the locality and family “spinning traditions” in a very intense way. This, in particular involves a common acknowledgment and appreciation of female textile workers in the community.

In 1994, *Predilnica Litija* was registered as a joint-stock company and in 2005 as a limited liability company. Following the dominant privatisation pattern in Slovenia, the factory's managers and workers became majority shareholders. However, the shareholder structure has changed over time, as many workers sold their shares.⁹ Slovenian economists argued that during privatization the number of managers who held shares increased, whereas that of workers decreased (Prašnikar 1999) and we can therefore talk about *managerial capitalism* (also compare Szelenyi 1995). In the context of these changes, the factory management redefined its entrepreneurial orientation and production, and reorganised its division of labor and spatial and social relations.¹⁰

On the shop floor, almost all machines are managed by women. Men work as mechanics, transportation workers, carpenters, electricians or as foremen and shop floor managers. Such was the case in the socialist past as well, though there were differences between the types of factories; more men worked in spinning, leather and the knitting industry and fewer in manufacturing and retail. However, in socialism, some women worked as shop floor managers, though not many.

This is exactly what I, as a newcomer, first noticed when I arrived on the shop floor in 2005. When I asked my coworkers about the reasons for this division of work they were confused by the question; the situation seemed natural to them. Gender division of labor

seemed natural and obvious to almost everyone I talked to. People referred to both the past and the present in their explanations: “Labor in production was divided, machines that were for fine hands were operated by women, the foremen were men,” a retired office worker, Mila, told me. “Then labor was divided by physical difficulty – more physically strenuous jobs, like hackles, were operated by men.” “Physical difficulty” is the most prevailing argument used for the division of labor on the shop floor. Yet, the very same hackles, mentioned by Mila in the quote, which were in the socialist past operated by men, are at present managed by women. The hackles have not changed; what has changed over time though, is the categorization of a physically demanding job.

In the same spinning factory before World War II, for example, there were some specific machines which were exclusively operated by men. At that time, factory management solicited exclusively male workers to operate flayers, machines that transform raw materials into cotton sliver. It was impossible to find enough male workers in the vicinity of the factory and the factory management had to extend its search for male workers to other regions as well. Similarly, as in the case of hackles, today these machines are almost entirely managed by women.

Many retired and presently employed people across Slovenia assured me that women in the socialist past did not do “physically demanding jobs.” On the other hand, however, they said that “if it was necessary” women also carried 30 or 40 kilograms of linen.

Besides “physically demanding jobs,” another argument was used to explain gender division of labor on the shop floor, one that is related to technology and notions of modernity. New modern machines were at first always handled by men. Women, as a retired foreman stated, worked on “old primitive machines,” whereas behind “the modern machines” there were men. According to his opinion, modern machines were more demanding and more difficult to handle: “When introducing new machines, it was decided with regard to the physical effort required, who will handle machines – women or men. At first, automatic machines were handled by men and then later, also by women.” Older machines were, however, less automated and often broke down. Workers had to manually restart them and this demanded physical strength. In the end, then, it was the women who needed to be strong to do that. A physically demanding job is not a final definition in itself; it is fluid and thus changing. The meaning of “physically demanding jobs” is constructed and ascribed to certain tasks, which also change.

The manner of defining certain tasks as female or male related, is connected to the (discursive) relation between technology and skill (Simonton 1998). By analyzing relations

between modernization and gender in history, Deborah Simonton pointed out the very fluid nature of such relations. Changing ideas and notions of female work can be in line with the way a skill is defined and used for redefining gender division of labor (1998: 3). A manner of understanding and defining an actual skill is related to the values ascribed to certain work. With devaluation of industrial work the value attributed to a skill to manage machines changed. Managing machines to produce textiles, however, introduces an additional meaning: the skill in a textile factory is naturalized and intensely intertwined with femininity.

“In every case women have more skills, they are also more active. It is like that. And I also think, it is in their nature that women are harder workers,” a middle-man in Litija told me. He was referring to “natural” female skills and women’s nature of being not only harder workers, but also being more tenacious. Some foremen and managers I talked to mentioned that certain jobs could never be performed by men because men would not want to do them. Yet, their main argument followed the dominant explanation: gender division of labor was and is the result of the type of work itself and is thus related to the nature of women.

On the shop floor, skills are essentialized and intensely intertwined with “the female nature” – her nimble fingers, which legitimize her position and work (compare Simonton 1998: 265). A skill on the shop floor is not related to qualifications and does not entail an institutionalized knowledge. A skill in the textile industry overlaps with “the female nature” and this naturalization of a skill downplays its value. It is not even a “real” skill that would be learnt or acquired; rather, it is considered an extension of female bodies and part of their nature.

Skills and Nimble Fingers

The notion of nimble fingers, mainly presented in relation to female textile workers, is not valued in the contemporary global world. Albeit not valued highly in today’s labor market, nimble fingers are still relevant at the shop floor level. Workers’ definition of nimble fingers is however different and extends beyond purely bodily explanations: it is not merely about fingers, it also implies the knowledge to adapt quickly and be flexible. These characteristics are all interdependent, intensively interconnected and relate to one’s ability and knowledge to “know the machine,” to know the way it reacts and also potential reactions of different material processed through it. The knowledge of how to operate machines and long working hours are important factors on the shop floor.

In this section, I would like to present how such evaluations relate to the way knowledge to operate machines is gained on the shop floor, the way working processes are learnt. This knowledge is not passed down by talking or listening, reading or writing but strictly through body imitations; new employees learn how to work by observing and imitating the movements of more experienced workers. Learning body discipline on the factory floor by imitating demands active participation of the individual and includes embodied knowledge, not verbal communication.

When I was talking to retired workers in their kitchens, they simply used their hands to explain the various processes involved in their previous jobs; not using words, but with their bodies and hands. It was only once I entered the shop floor in the spinning factory that I understood what they actually meant. The labor process is literally inscribed in workers' bodies. Retired workers explained that they dreamt that they were still standing behind machines binding knots. Despite not working in the factory for the last 20 years, they were convinced they still knew how to make the movements with their hands.

For me, it was difficult to learn in this way and I also had problems experiencing the relation of dependence: as a newcomer I was totally dependent on an older and more experienced worker, dependant on whether she would allow me to see all the moves or not, and whether she would correct me when I was doing something wrong. It was only then that I completely understood what workers meant when talking about "traumatic experiences" they had experienced with older and more experienced workers. If nobody corrected them they learnt the whole process the wrong way. It could be a while before a shop floor manager noticed this and corrected them, scolding them at the same time. The way they learnt to manage the machine could also be time-consuming, which made it impossible to produce as much as they could if they had learned the process correctly.

The relation between an older, experienced worker and a beginner is important during the first stage of training. The older worker is the one who knows what is the best and the quickest way to manage the machine. The power an older worker could use through this training process was exercised to legitimize and strengthen her position on the shop floor; it was the way she coped with faster and younger female workers. Despite the redefined labor organization on the shop floor introduced after 2000, the training process remains pretty much the same, as does the significance of this experienced worker - apprentice worker relationship.

When workers manage machines independently, it is the relation between a worker and a foreman that is most relevant. The foreman is the one who has the machine fixed

when it breaks down by calling the technician, and in doing so enables the worker to continue her work and meet the norm faster. Nevertheless, almost everybody on the shop floor, including most of the foremen, would say “textile workers know how a machine reacts and behaves,” “they know their own machine better than anyone.” Workers managing machines are sometimes even asked by technicians and foremen for their opinions regarding a problem with the machine. This relationship between a machine and a worker is important and is acknowledged as such on the shop floor. This informally structures hierarchical relations in a very specific way, assigning certain power to workers who manage machines, despite the changes introduced in the factory following new management strategies and international standards.

In order to explain how female textile workers’ skills are understood and defined by the workers themselves I will describe briefly the situation on the shop floor during socialism. By referring to the idea of negotiations and bargaining between factory management and state authorities in socialism proposed by Katherine Verdery, an analysis of industrial labor organization captures another analytical perspective and manages to depict the shop floor (disciplinary) dynamics in a very particular way.¹¹ In Yugoslavia, tax policies, increasing import prices, loans, tax duty and other administrative measures were constant restraints on operations in socialist factories.¹² Shop floor workers were the ones who helped socialist managers to overcome technological drawbacks as well as shortages of stocks or materials. The managers simply relied on workers to make adjustments in time.

The result was a very particular relation between shop floor managers and workers, by way of which workers enjoyed security and employment stability – in addition to financial, material or symbolic rewards – for working harder over time. This particular ‘mutual dependence’ provided workers some autonomy and flexibility in the organization of production by deploying their skills, knowledge, creativity and experience. Even though improvisations at work were otherwise strictly forbidden, at certain times they were not only overlooked, but also encouraged. These improvisations were valued and publicly acknowledged, which significantly contributed to social positions of workers and their relations with management (especially with shop floor management, yet also higher ranking managers). Workers still refer to their improvisations and inventiveness from the socialist past to present themselves as being flexible. And why would they do this?

Flexible Bodies

Flexibility has become one of the most contested terms on the shop floor today as well as in the broader public sense. Industrial workers are presented as the very opposite of flexible by managers and economic political elites – as inflexible remnants of the past socialist times who failed to transform. Workers themselves, however, use exactly this reference to flexibility to prove these elites wrong. Yet, managers and workers define and understand flexibility in different ways.

Besides responsibility and quality, flexibility has become a new key imperative of present day production, emerging not only in postsocialist states and societies but in a global sense. International standardizations were developed to make production regimes consistent across various countries around the world by determining the exact ways products were manufactured: thus not only making products alike, but also companies. They aimed to define labor processes and were also an attempt to generate new modern workers.¹³ By “correcting” some fatal flaws of socialism (Dunn 2005: 176), these standards were particularly important in East European countries, not only because they changed workplaces and organization of labor, but also the minds and bodies of workers.

Many researchers in labor studies, addressing the reorganization of factory regimes, have highlighted ideological and political effects of production regimes. By exploring the ways in which managements’ discursive strategies contributed to the constitution of workers’ subjectivities as well as modification of their bodies and minds, they have illustrated that international standards implied in strategies and techniques actually enforced the transformation of employees into flexible and self-monitoring workers (Martin 1994).

Following such ideas I would, however, support the argument made by social anthropologist Angela Procoli, who identified training for a multi-skilled, flexible and mobile labor force as places of institutional violence against workers, yet, on the other hand, also as places where individuals shape their identities (2004: 84). I think it is important that we do not present workers merely as passive subjects simulatenously accepting management strategies in their totalities; likewise, their subjectivities cannot be considered only as a result of market- orientated discourses. By addressing workers in terms of agency, I don’t wish to glorify the resistance of subordinated and marginalized groups, but rather am pointing to workers’ perspectives - their explanations and interpretations, contradictions, oppositions, struggles and failures. It is the perspective of addressing any individual as an agent, an active protagonist, yet in a non-deterministic way. In such a context attention is paid to how workers

themselves construct and reconstruct their identities and how they try to legitimize their positions as shop floor textile workers.

On the shop floor managing machines is considered to be important and the way a skill is defined directly influences the way work is understood and valued. Nimble fingers is a much broader term than in the way we understand it in the global sense. In the minds of the textile workers when recalling the socialist past, it also refers not only to the hands that do the work but also the meaning attributed to being flexible, being willing to work hard and go the extra mile.

Workers use their memories and experiences of socialist constraints and shortages to present themselves as being flexible and a more suitable labor force for a capitalist enterprise. They refer in particular to their ability to adapt to scarcities of stocks, bad quality of material, as well as working extra hours in tough conditions and on old, worn-out machines. By referring to the socialist past, workers do not claim that the socialist organization of work and production was better, but that their experiences from times of socialist constraints legitimize their contemporary status of being better workers in a capitalist enterprise (such were also the observations by Elizabeth Dunn 2004). Through the construction of their memories of socialist shop floor relations and labor systems, workers directly or indirectly question and contest new authorities of efficiency implied by international standards. By addressing their skills and experience, they argue for their flexibility to legitimize their positions and construct their subjectivities at present.

Unfit and Written-off Workers

References made to the socialist past, as described in the previous section, are, however, situational. Workers embody certain mainstream discourses whilst they contradict others, also by referring to the socialist past. Irena, a worker who has been employed in the spinning factory since 1991, took up the dominant discourse of the new European standards used by the economic elite and factory management. "Now you have European worker standards, and this is why the relations have changed. There's less freedom." It seemed only natural to her that changes were introduced. However, she continued in a moral critical tone, saying: "Further to this, you are only valuable to the management and factory as long as you're healthy. But workers who are on a sick leave have serious health problems. All of a sudden you have become a sort of a second-grade worker. It's ok as long as you're fit, but if you're not, they sort of think you're a write-off, somehow less wanted." Irena internalized

certain parts of the new economic political discourse on flexibility and EU standardization, yet, she challenged notions and treatment of unfit, written off workers, pointing out health problems they had been struggling with.

As already mentioned, working in a factory is literally inscribed in workers' bodies. The everlasting effect on textile workers' health and their bodies has not been openly discussed in Slovenia. It is related to the issues of disability, disease and old age. Old age is in workers' minds connected to physical exhaustion and body deformation and has much to do with working in a textile factory. Said a former shop floor worker in Litija: "Everybody in Litija knows that retired textile working women have problems with their backs and ears." "Now I talk more loudly. As people say, factory women talk loudly. It is how you were used to; in the factory we had to shout. Then when I came home, my daughter said, mummy, please lower your voice." Then she actually lowered her voice and continued: "I'm still under that impression, and I often say to myself that I am not supposed to talk so loud."

Besides deafness and spine disorders, textile workers in the 1990s started struggling with anxiety, stress and psychological problems. The physical state of workers is simply not addressed. Disability, sick leave and industrial diseases are within the wider society considered in purely economic terms. They are discussed and referred to as a loss for the company. Health effects on textile workers (allergies, bisinosis, muscular and skeletal disorders) remain a totally undiscussed and underestimated subject in society. Although some doctors pointed to the risks and actual danger that individuals and groups of workers were and remain exposed to, the physical and psychological effects continue to be individualized and hidden "behind walls," not discussed in public at all.

Even though some international researchers have indicated that enterprise restructuring can have a significant detrimental effect on the health of employees (not only on dismissed workers but also on the "survivors" – those who are left in the enterprise), in Slovenia (as well as other countries in the EU, compare Kieselbach 2009) only economic indicators are taken into consideration.

The detrimental health effects may occur before the actual closure or other form of restructuring. Many health conditions were caused and worsened by the labor market's demands for flexibility, mobility and precariousness of work (as for example anxiety and stress because of instability and unpredictability of work). In socialism, a person could not be dismissed once a job was secured. Compared to the West, as emphasized by politicians, Slovenia is still considered to have more protective labor legislation. Protective policies are,

however, applied only to permanent employment and not to sub-contracted work. Since sub-contracting is widespread in Slovenia, many workers face constant precariousness of work.

In Slovenia, there is no register of occupational diseases. In addition, the verification of occupational diseases is not covered by the State but should be financed by employers. As this might engender potential loss or damage for the employer and the company, nothing actually happens. Employers do not cover the expenses and workers do not start the procedures.

Workers usually discover they have been dismissed when they come to work and read their names on a list pinned on the notice board. This is not only stressful but also incomprehensible. Workers not only struggle to get by, but also to make sense of the changes they simply don't understand. "Nobody is engaged with workers. Nobody helps us understand, nobody is there to stimulate us," complained a factory worker at the beginning of 2009 (from *Prevent factory in Slovenj Gradec*). Workers' voices not only remain unheard and ignored but also socially disregarded. They feel alienated and such social alienation materializes in poverty.

Forty-year-old workers, listed at the Employment Centre, were written off and told they were too old to get another job. In addition to actual unemployment and the fear of losing a job, textile workers have to sue for their past salaries. "We built the factory with our own hands, we bought the machines, factory apartments by the sea.... I am entitled to 5 million compensation (in tolar, the previous Slovenian currency; about \$ 8,000-9,000). But I have to sue for the money," said a worker in 2003. She highlighted what at present still remains one of the most burning (but often neglected) issues: workers have to fight in court to receive wages that they earned through their hard work and which rightly belong to them. She also pointed out that workers in the past helped to build the factory infrastructure, at the start of socialism in a literal way by helping to build it with their own hands and later by giving up part of their income.

"Directors came and went, everything was sold off, wages were reduced, and there was no money. But... we didn't know anything about it and just kept on working," said a textile worker in 2002. "Funny though," she continued, "there was always enough money for the director and his salary. What has happened is the fault of legislation. If the people in government saw how a worker has to live, they might say a good word for textile workers. There are evermore impoverished people waiting for jobs, minimal wages, no privileges left, you can't pay the bills – how are you supposed to live?" Her words reflected the fear and insecurity for the future. The factory where she had been working went bankrupt three years

later, and the whole workforce lost their jobs. Stories about exploitation and corruption are ever more present in conversations with workers. Yet, frequently, rather than blame individual managers, workers blame the legislation and the State because it enables managers to misappropriate the money, to get rich and to close down the factory: it quite simply allows them to get away with it.

The state occupies an important role in workers' narratives. Workers expect the state to take the responsibility and ensure them jobs; they expect to be treated as active citizens and as such as being entitled to certain rights. Work is experienced as a right that should be made available for everyone. Workers expect the state to fulfill its part of the deal: they assert their right and their own legitimacy by emphasizing their resignations and efforts invested in the factory, as well as by their contribution to the state.

Conclusion

In the view of managers, economic and political elites, and the broader public, industrial workers are equated with Socialism. By way of attributing a Socialist experience to workers, they become naturalized to Socialist subjects, who find it more difficult to adapt to change. However, female textile workers carry an additional meaning; though, as previously stated, the majority have gone, those left are portrayed as old and worn out. They are presented and used as an allegory: emphasizing hard work with extremely low wages or when talking about being exploited by the government or by a director. These representations overlap with gender ideologies and discourses of a "female nature:" it is assumed that as women they were able to endure more. On the other hand, the "nimble fingers" no longer belong to Slovenian women; these "nimble fingers" are in Asia now. Race has become an important constituent of this skill in the Slovene public mindset and forms part of discussions about globalization.

Following such transformation, and due to the fact that work in the textile industry has lost its meaning in Slovenia, textile workers are supposed to disappear. The presence or absence of industrial workers in the public discourse plays a very important role. According to interviews conducted with workers, their perception and identities were significantly shaped by the meaning publicly attributed to industrial workers in socialism and the meta-narrative of their importance. Although workers did not relate uncritically to communist categories, they did have a long lasting influence on their perceptions and identity construction. This is particularly so nowadays, because they have lost all the space. Female

textile workers consider the present - with increased unemployment, corruption and decline of textile factories - as a time of enormous social loss. Yet, the meaning attributed to the female textile worker in socialism still plays an important role in legitimizing female workers' present identities. Female workers share the idea that they lost out, yet, there is the desire to be recognized that leads them to recollect the historical significance of their role in the factory and in society.

At present, workers no longer feature in political and economic macro accounts or in academic scholarship. David Kideckel rightly refers to the situation as capitalist triumphalism - a transitional model that dominates contemporary social sciences and humanities. Researchers are interested in managerial elites or macro economic accounts, but there is not much interest in industrial workers among anthropologists of postsocialism (but see Pine 1998, Dunn 2004, Kideckel 2008).

Female textile workers in Slovenia do not dismiss and oppose all the postsocialist changes wholesale – the changes themselves are not so much of a problem; rather it is the lack of transparency and the proliferation of social differentiation, together with the corruption that cause these gaps between people, and the changes of meanings they struggle to understand. Another important complaint is also the loss of any kind of public social space assigned to them.

Women perceive and experience changes differently. In the Introduction, I challenged the idea that silence accompanied textile factory closures. I would like to end with stating that not all workers have kept silent. Some collect documents and go to court to sue managers, directors or also the State. Some have lost all hope as well as faith in any institution. In November 2008, in the midst of the economic recession, an employee in a textile enterprise in the small town of Kranj told a journalist: "I only have faith in my own two hands. Nothing but my hands." ¹⁴Once again: hands and fingers play a significant role and remain important for workers, as they are their only capital and remain an important part of who they are.

Notes

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³ Marija Cigal, Tiho umiranje, Dnevnik, 23. 11. 1995, p. 2.

⁴ Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Slovenia 2008, <http://www.stat.si/letopis/2008/12-08.pdf>.

⁵ In the 1970s, 76 % of employees in this industry in Slovenia were women (Maver: 1978).

⁶ The political dimension is clearly vivid at the end of Ivanka's story. Party speeches, published in the post-war newspapers that accompanied post-war communist celebrations, always referred to the need for resisting Nazism, Fascism and for a National Liberation war. Ivanka didn't just fight her boss; she fought a foreign owner – a "harsh German." In Slovenia, mass resistance against German and Italian occupiers was organized by communists who later moulded the national liberation struggle into a Communist revolution.

⁷ The post-war demographic conditions and a deep-rooted social (patriarchal) mentality were certainly the major reasons behind such a specific state-women relation. Another, as pointed out by historian Marta Verginella, was related to the powerful Catholic heritage. The role of the post-war mother figure (1999: 78), the self-sacrificing and subordinated woman-and-mother figure of the post-war iconography, based on the image of the Virgin Mary, was actually in complete contradiction to post-war women's ideological commitment.

⁸ Stories about textile workers who literally left their children alone to go to work are well known in Slovenia. According to some elderly people, during the first years after the Second World War in particular, "one could hear babies' cries coming from textile workers' apartments." A stereotypical image of a textile worker who abandons her children to go to work was quite common in various accounts on female involvement in early industrialization throughout Modern Europe (Collins 2003: xi). Jane Schneider noted that in the Rumpelstiltskin story, in which in return for her firstborn child, a daughter turns to a demon/spirit for help to fulfill her father's demands to spin straw into gold, we see a representation of the dilemma peasant girls experienced when entering industry: better chances of wealth but jeopardy for their children (1989: 7,8; cf. Collins 2003: xi).

⁹ On the other hand, the mere fact that workers hold some shares in the company doesn't carry much weight. The question to be addressed is who are the majority shareholders and the pertaining implications in the context of power. It is also important to consider the participation, as well as the number of workers' representatives, on the supervisory boards.

¹⁰ However, the managerial staff encompasses almost the same people as prior to 1990/1991, which is relevant for detecting and mapping various modes of negotiations between new forms of management and practices of the past.

¹¹ By using the economy of shortage concept (Kornai 1980), Verdery presents socialism as a system of various modes of negotiation between administrative politics and a factory (1991, 1996). Enterprises found their own ways to identify loopholes in regulations, thereby producing half-hidden stocks. In spite of general declarations to the contrary, many of these actions were silently backed by certain local and republic political authorities.

¹² The very foundation of the Yugoslav social system encompassed decentralized state government, common property and 'self-management.' The policy of the so-called 'workers self-management' was adopted in 1950. Despite the declarations and standpoints, the ruling Communist Party underwent changes only gradually and continued to operate in a hierarchical and authoritarian manner. In spite of workers' management, the Communist Party remained the top executing agent in power..

¹³ In 1997, Slovenia signed an association agreement to adapt its legislation to that of the EU. This has entailed the introduction of a range of international standards and measurements in production regimes aimed to ensure the quality of the manufacturing process.

¹⁴ Uroš Škerl Kramberger: "Zaupam Le Še Svojim Rokam" (I only have faith in my own two hands), *Dnevnik*, 15.11. 2008.

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