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Psychic Landscapes, Worker Organizing and Blame. Uljanik and the 2018 Croatian Shipbuilding Crisis

Abstract. This article analyses worker narratives of discontent in relation to a series of crises at the Uljanik Shipyard in Pula, Croatia, over the course of 2018. It draws on five months of fieldwork conducted in the period between two worker protests at the shipyard surrounding the late payment of wages, the second of which developed into a large-scale strike. The author describes the crises, provides historical details about the shipyard and about trade unions and other forms of worker organizing, and offers notes on the political context. He analyses the psychic landscape of the most recent crisis period, with a focus on how anxiety, fear and suspicion were manifest. Finally, he discusses rumours and the blaming strategies adopted by workers, relating them to the importance of personalized relations in the regional political economy.

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Introduction. A Shipyard in Crisis

In mid-January 2018, workers at the Uljanik Shipyard in Pula, Croatia, did not receive their monthly wages. The shipyard's management, struggling to pay suppliers and to complete orders on time, had asked the Croatian government to secure a state guarantee for a ninety-six-million-euro loan in order to keep the business running during the planning stage of a restructuring initiative. The shipyard workers and trade union representatives threatened a strike, which was narrowly averted due to the European Commission

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approval of the loan.¹ Nevertheless, the day before wages were dispensed, around two hundred workers mounted a protest in front of the management building at one of the shipyard's main entrances. The tense situation and atmosphere of concern for the shipyard's future affected trade union activities and resulted in a self-organized workers' initiative, the 'Headquarters for the Defence of Uljanik' (*Stožer za obranu Uljanika*). In late March 2018 the management declared their choice of 'strategic partner' for the shipyard, and announced the impending restructuring, although its starting date would continually be pushed back. Many workers were furious at the shipyard management for choosing the Croatian tycoon Danko Končar and his firm 'Kermas energija d.o.o.' because Končar possessed the concession to a large amount of land in Pula's bay and owned several luxury hotels. Končar's footprint in Pula was widely understood to conflict with the prospect of large-scale industry remaining in the city centre, and so the tycoon's appointment consolidated circulating rumours about a planned downsizing of the shipyard and a concomitant expansion of tourism. In the summer of 2018, interim funds ran out and Uljanik's workers once again did not receive their wages. A full-blown strike ensued, both in Pula and at the '3rd of May' shipyard in nearby Rijeka, owned and operated by the same company.² Striking workers demanded the resignation of Uljanik's management and sought assurances from the regional authorities and ultimately the Croatian government to ensure the survival of the ailing shipyards. Many workers felt heightened fear and anxiety during this in-between period, as it was clear that the shipyard was in serious trouble. Končar's arrival was imminent, which meant that action—namely the implementation of a strategic plan—had to be taken soon if Uljanik were to survive.

This article focuses on workers' narratives and feelings towards Uljanik and its management during this in-between period. It is based primarily on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Pula between the two worker protests, that is, from March to July 2018. My knowledge of the larger context, based on previous ethnographic fieldwork in Croatia between 2011 and 2018, shaped my understanding of how workers experienced the shipyard crisis. The ethnographic fieldwork was supplemented by two sets of interviews. The first set comprises interviews conducted in March with various stakeholders in Uljanik, such as Pula city officials, representatives of the various unions to which Uljanik's workers belonged, experts on shipbuilding, and managers of institutions such as Jadranbrod who were involved in coordinating Croatia's

¹ European Commission, Press Release, State Aid. Commission Clears Rescue Aid for Croatian Shipbuilder Uljanik, Brussels, 22 January 2018, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-391_en.htm. All internet references were accessed on 13 February 2018.

² For an organizational ethnography of the '3rd of May' shipyard, cf. Sanja Puljar D'Alessio, *Mi gradimo brod, a brod gradi nas*. Etnografija organizacije Brodogradilišta 3. Maj, Zagreb 2018.

shipbuilding industry. The second set consists of interviews conducted in June and July, primarily with Uljanik's workers and ex-workers, including manual workers and members of lower and mid-level management—but none of the top-level management.

In the following, I offer an ethnographic account of how workers in a large enterprise respond to a crisis period, and how the various aspects of the crisis's sociopolitical context coincide with (or not) a 'psychic landscape' made up of interrelated elements in order to produce collective worker action. I first provide historical details about the shipyard and discuss relevant features of its sociopolitical context. Second, I assess worker organizing at the shipyard, especially trade union representation, and relate these activities to the people/politics binary in frequent circulation throughout the Balkans.³ In relation to the literature on path dependency, I then consider the question: Does a newly founded workers' initiative constitute a critical rupture? The paper's first half describes the crisis and its political context, yielding to an analysis in the second half of the situation's particular 'psychic landscape', drawing on a concept developed by the sociologist Diane Reay.⁴ The final sections address the blaming strategies employed by various actors during the crisis and make links to the regional political economy. The article concludes with a discussion of the full-blown strikes of August 2018.

Some Notes on Uljanik

The Uljanik shipyard, by its workers and its management alike, is widely understood to have long enjoyed a reputation for high quality work, both in Croatia and internationally. Founded in 1856, the shipyard has endured a variety of geopolitical configurations: Pula has been a part of Austro-Hungary and (fascist) Italy, and was occupied by Nazi Germany (1943-1945); it was situated within Zone B of the Free Territory of Trieste (1945-1947)—designed to reduce tension caused by competing Italian and Yugoslav claims—and was a part of socialist Yugoslavia from 1947 until the 1991 secession that resulted in the Republic of Croatia. Uljanik was one of the first Yugoslav enterprises to switch to social ownership, as part of a pilot programme in 1950. The shipyard steadily employed ever-increasing numbers of workers during the decades of Yugoslav socialism, including more than 8,000 workers in the late 1980s,⁵ along

³ Stef Jansen, First as Tragedy, Then as Teleology. The Politics/People Dichotomy in the Ethnography of Post-Yugoslav Nationalization, *Conflict and Society* 2, no. 1 (2016), 164-180, DOI: 10.3167/arcs.2016.020115.

⁴ Diane Reay, Beyond Consciousness? The Psychic Landscape of Social Class, *Sociology* 39, no. 5 (2005), 911-928, DOI: 10.1177/0038038505058372.

⁵ Igor Stanić, Feljton: Hrvatski radnik u zlatno doba Titova socijalizma, *Nacional*, 13 October 2017, <https://www.nacional.hr/feljton-hrvatski-radnik-u-zlatno-doba-titova-socijalizma>.

with several thousand temporary workers granted fewer labour rights (*kooperanti*). While this latter arrangement may sound unusual for a socialist state, it was an artefact of the 'liberalizing' nature of middle and late Yugoslav socialism. These workers, paid lower wages and putting up with conditions worse than what workers directly employed by Uljanik experienced, were 'loaned' to Uljanik from other local companies. Many jobs in the shipyard were stereotyped as 'male' given the extent of heavy work required, considered by some to be unsuitable for women.⁶ Labour provided by a second major source of employment in Pula, the textile factories, was likewise gendered: as 'women's work', it paid lower wages than Uljanik and was the 'female' half of a socialist division of industrial labour in the city.⁷ In the postsocialist period, as labour historian Chiara Bonfiglioli has noted, across the former Yugoslavia, 'in the textile sector, the closure of previously socially owned factories has been accompanied by high unemployment and by a growth in informal and irregular textile labour'.⁸ In this period Uljanik's workforce has shrunk and precarious labour has risen. Over the years, Uljanik has also become known for its wider social role and influence in Pula, including on the music scene and through the organization of sports societies.⁹

The shipyard has also sustained a tradition of worker protest. There were strikes during the socialist period in the mid-1960s, after the shift to a more liberal version of Yugoslavia's market socialism.¹⁰ Layoffs and worker dissatisfaction led to conflict, including one well-known incident in which the shipyard's manager was thrown into the water.¹¹ During the 1980s, echoing the wider situation in socialist Yugoslavia, Uljanik, unable to fulfil its credit obligations to suppliers, endured a series of crises not unlike its current difficulties.¹² During the war following Croatia's secession in 1991 some members of

⁶ Andrea Matošević, A Lot of Sweat, a Little Bit of Fun, and Not Entirely 'Hard Men'. Worker's Masculinity in the Uljanik Shipyard, in: David W. Montgomery, ed, *Everyday Life in the Balkans*, Bloomington/IN 2019, 179-187.

⁷ Chiara Bonfiglioli, Gendered Citizenship in the Global European Periphery. Textile Workers in Post-Yugoslav States, *Women's Studies International Forum* 49, no. 2 (2015), 57-65, DOI: 10.1016/j.wsif.2014.07.004.

⁸ Bonfiglioli, *Gendered Citizenship*, 60.

⁹ Joshua Kalčić, Subkulture mladih u Puli. Od *punka* do rasapa alternativne scene, *Narodna umjetnost. Hrvatski časopis za etnologiju i folkloristiku* 49, no. 2 (2012), 71-94, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/93664>.

¹⁰ Saul Estrin, Yugoslavia. The Case of Self-Managing Market Socialism, *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 5, no. 4 (1991), 187-194, 189.

¹¹ Igor Stanić, One of the Most Difficult Days in 'Uljanik'. The 1967 Strike in the Uljanik Shipyard, *Problemi sjevernog Jadrana* 15 (2017), 73-94, DOI: 10.21857/9xn31cvkzy.

¹² Daniel Todd, *Routledge Revivals: Industrial Dislocation* (1991). The Case of Global Shipbuilding, Abingdon 2018. Cf. also Peter Wegenschimmel, *Ohne Geld keine Autonomie. Die lange Organisationsgeschichte zweier unrentabler Werften*, PhD thesis in History, Universities of Regensburg and Vienna, forthcoming.

the shipyard's workforce left to join the fighting, while others sought work abroad. A few strikes took place, as detailed in an online archive of workers' struggles compiled by the workers' rights organization *Baza za radničku inicijativu i demokratizaciju* (Organization for Workers' Initiative and Democratization, BRID).¹³

There was no armed conflict in the Istrian region during the 1991-1995 war, but the generalized war conditions in the former Yugoslavia exerted a negative impact on the shipyard, including the cancellation of several orders for ships. Following the war and amidst a wider policy shift oriented towards market reforms, Uljanik continued nonetheless to receive significant state aid, in part thanks to the manager Karlo Radolović's skilful negotiations with the ruling political party, the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, HDZ). In interviews conducted in March 2018 with various stakeholders in the Uljanik shipyard, several interlocutors highlighted the importance of cultivating an understanding and awareness of the specifics of shipbuilding among the politicians and state officials who make decisions on such matters. It was important for them to grasp, for example, why shipbuilding receives large state subsidies even in booming regions such as Southeast Asia.¹⁴ Representatives of the government had to be informed about shipbuilding and persuaded that support of a 'failing' company was worth their while. This goal was achieved by drawing attention to wider positive economic effects across the supply chain, since many local businesses in Istria were shown to be reliant on Uljanik. Following Radolović's retirement in 2012, his successor, Antun Brajković, had to deal with the shipyard's large debts. These problems were compounded in the mid-late 2010s, the extent of the shipyard's liquidity crisis having remained hidden for some time. In 2012 Uljanik was floated on the stock market and workers were invited to purchase shares.¹⁵ Workers' and small shareholders' ownership came to 47% of the company's shares, but as a fragmented group they ultimately had little say in decisions about the shipyard. Two separate entities were floated, 'Uljanik d.d.' and 'Uljanik Plovidba d.d.' As the smaller of the two, the latter performed well in the stock market and remained profitable, unlike the larger entity, which crashed. In 2013,

¹³ The database is searchable, cf. Arhiv Radničkih Borbi (Archive of Workers' Struggles), <http://arhiv-radnickih-borbi.org>.

¹⁴ Cf., for example, Costas Paris, Asia State Players Wield Subsidies to Dominate Shipping, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 December 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/asia-state-players-wield-subsidies-to-dominate-shipping-1543763689>. This article contrasts the argument for state aid with the liberal argument that state aid provisions have a negative overall effect on the world market in shipbuilding by distorting the market and disrupting usual rules of supply and demand.

¹⁵ Uspješna privatizacija. Radnici Uljanika upisali sve ponuđene dionice, *tportal.hr*, 23 July 2012, <https://www.tportal.hr/biznis/clanak/radnici-uljanika-upisali-sve-ponudene-dionice-20120723>. Some interlocutors suggested that workers had been forced to buy shares.

Croatia joined the EU, and the extent of the shipyard's requests for state financial support and guarantees conflicted with EU competition law. At the same time there were further headwinds caused by a neoliberal media offensive. Periodically journalists on news sites such as *index.hr*, including during the 2018 Croatian shipyard crisis, made the blanket argument that a government supporting a floundering company was 'socialist', and for ideological reasons the 'taxpayer' population should not be supporting failing companies.¹⁶ In these discussions, the trope of 'buying the social peace' (*kupovina socijalnog mira*) was also present, expressing fears that the government would seek to keep Uljanik solvent to prevent social unrest.¹⁷ A restructuring process was announced in late 2017 and a new strategic partner was sought in early 2018.¹⁸ By this point, many workers feared for the shipyard's future. One result of this anxious uncertainty was the small workers' protest in January 2018, followed by the full-blown strike in August 2018.

Uljanik's Political Context. Trade Unions and *politika*

During my fieldwork, three trade unions represented the workers at the shipyard. Such fragmentation reflected the broader nature of Croatia's political opposition. Two unions were long-established organizations: the first, the *Sindikat metalaca Hrvatske* (Metal Workers' Union of Croatia), was based on the industrial sector to which its members belonged; the second, the *Sindikat Istre, Kvarnera i Dalmacije* (Trade Union of Istria, Kvarner and Dalmatia), was based on region.¹⁹ Representatives of these two unions sat on Uljanik's supervisory board (*Nadzorni odbor*) beside members of Uljanik's management. The third and largest union, the Adriatic Trade Union (*Jadranski sindikat*), was formed after a disagreement between two leading members of the regional trade union. It was widely perceived as being the most militant of the three unions. For many workers, to have seats on the company's board represented a conflict of interest. One heard the phrase *žuti sindikati* ('yellow trade unions'). Board membership might be interpreted as a continuation of the role played

¹⁶ For example, see Matija Babić's comment, written from an economically libertarian perspective. Matija Babić, Uljanik je zaključna priča o cijeloj Hrvatskoj. Parazituum mobile je propao, *Index.hr*, 28 August 2018, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/uljanik-je-zakljucna-prica-o-cijeloj-hrvatskoj-parazituum-mobile-je-propao/2020220.aspx>.

¹⁷ Ivan Rajković, Concern for the State. 'Normality', State Effect and Distributional Claims in Serbia, *Glasnik Etnografskog Instituta SANU* 65, no. 1 (2017), 31-45, 39, DOI: 10.2298/GEI1701031R.

¹⁸ Milan Pavlović, Markulinčić: Sad je pravo vrijeme za restrukturiranje brodogradilišta, *Glas Istre*, 23 November 2017, <https://www.glasistre.hr/ca6d2564-2e6b-4a26-824c-9538fab9c912>.

¹⁹ These two trade unions have websites: *Sindikat metalaca Hrvatske-industrijski sindikat*, <https://www.smh.hr/>; and *Sindikat Istre, Kvarnera i Dalmacije*, <https://www.sikd.hr/>.

by trade unions during socialism as a mediating entity between workers and the Communist Party: 'the trade union was viewed, in the constitution and laws, as a subject carrying out state policies, not one offering support to workers' rights and the autonomous organization of workers themselves'.²⁰

However, the unions' fragmentation seems directly related to the fractured nature of Croatia's political opposition, and the history of personalized relations and/or conflict between the established unions and particular centre-left political parties: the Social Democratic Party (*Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske*) for the Metalworkers Union, and the regional Istrian Democratic Assembly (*Istarski demokratski sabor*, IDS, in Italian: *Dieta democratica istriana*, DDI) for the Istria and Kvarner trade union. These two parties, broadly committed to social democratic platforms, had sought out positions in government and had renounced the more extreme forms of 'populism' that critiqued the political class, so it is unsurprising that these unions acted to be in dialogue with management through participation in a supervisory board. Their presence on the board may reflect the dynamic between political parties and organized labour during the 2000s, a time when social democratic parties were stronger but were heavily constrained in the direct help they could offer to the union movement due to the World Bank's restrictions on Croatia.²¹

Some scholars have criticized the 'legacy' thesis that the unions' weakness and fragmentation during postcommunism are a socialist inheritance born out of the trade unions' formerly close relationship with the Communist Party.²² Citing the example of Slovenia—with its strong trade unions—as running counter to this theory, Miroslav Stanojević has argued that the region's capitalist orientation is attributable to 'the systematic and decisive impact of strategic political interventions in these societies at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s'.²³ In a 2012 ethnography focusing on worker unemployment following the bankruptcy of an ironworks in Sisak, Croatia, the ethnologists Sanja Potkonjak and Tea Škokić similarly blame the ironworks' fate on the particular mode of capitalist restructuring that has taken place in Croatia—and not on some socialist 'legacy', e. g., of soft-budget con-

²⁰ Mario Reljanović, 'The Normative Position of Trade Unions and the Ideals of Self-Management', in: Vida Knežević / Marko Miletić, eds, *We Have Built Cities for You. On the Contradictions of Yugoslav Socialism*, Belgrade 2018, 61–80, 62.

²¹ The relationship linking capital, labour and the trade unions is covered in greater detail by Marko Grdešić, 'Mapping the Paths of the Yugoslav Model. Labour Strength and Weakness in Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia', *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 14, no. 2 (2008), 133–151, 143, DOI: 10.1177/0959680108089187.

²² Stephen Crowley / David Ost, *Workers after Workers' States. Labor and Politics in Post-communist Eastern Europe*, Lanham 2001, 7.

²³ Miroslav Stanojević, 'Workers' Power in Transition Economies. The Cases of Serbia and Slovenia', *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 9, no. 3 (2003), 283–301, 284.

straints in a market environment.²⁴ Consequently, rather than asserting the sorts of causal implications inherent in discussions of ‘path dependency’,²⁵ this article frames the changing situation in terms of (dis)continuities and occasional critical ruptures. Such a framework contextualizes the ever-changing social milieu in terms of evident shifts in worker organization rather than reifying institutions or focusing excessively on socialist legacies or the fallout of the recent wars. The latter approaches figure significantly as tendencies in the post-Yugoslav academic literature.²⁶

I spoke with many workers who believed the trade unions to be largely ineffective and who regarded their representatives as *uhljebi* (‘spongers’) living off workers’ dues, drawn from workers’ wages as a small percentage of their compensation. They also decried tangible benefits of union membership, such as the small year-end gifts they were given (the powdered soft drink Cedevita, for example). Such attitudes align with an oft-noted hegemonic operator in the Balkans contrasting ‘the people’ (*narod*) with ‘(elite) politics’ (*politika*).²⁷ On this view, anything associated with elite politics—the sphere of political parties and even, as here, trade unions—was to be maligned, whereas the ‘people’, subordinated, were frequently absolved of moral responsibility.²⁸ This despair towards *politika* also reflects an exhaustion with the extensive politicization that accompanied the wartime mobilizations in former Yugoslavia during the nineties and afterwards. More recently, those few who live well off the current system are set against the much larger mass of people who are ‘scraping by’, often in debt and feeling themselves to be powerless.²⁹ This lopsided binary opposition has fostered the view among workers that the trade union’s representatives were ‘political entrepreneurs’ who achieved political success at everyone else’s expense. One also encounters this perspective in discussions of Croatia’s supposed ‘egalitarian syndrome’, which manifests itself in pervasive resentments towards economic and status differences among people—

²⁴ Sanja Potkonjak / Tea Škokić, ‘In the World of Iron and Steel’. On the Ethnography of Work, Unemployment and Hope, *Narodna Umjetnost* 1, no. 50 (2013), 74–95, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/105399>.

²⁵ Ákos Róna-Tas, Path Dependence and Capital Theory. *Sociology of the Post-Communist Economic Transformation, East European Politics and Societies* 12, no. 1 (1997), 107–131, DOI: 10.1177/0888325498012001005.

²⁶ Cf. for example Miha Kozorog, The Ecosystem Ideal and Local Neoliberalism of the Young Entrepreneur. The Millennials’ Entrepreneurial Environment in Slovenia, *Etnološka Tribina: Godišnjak Hrvatskog Etnološkog Društva* 48, no. 41 (2018), 259–280, DOI: 10.15378/1848-9540.2018.41.10.

²⁷ Jansen, First as Tragedy, Then as Teleology.

²⁸ Jessica Greenberg, ‘There’s Nothing Anyone Can Do About It’. Participation, Apathy, and ‘Successful’ Democratic Transition in Postsocialist Serbia, *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010), 41–64, DOI: 10.1017/S0037677900016697.

²⁹ Srećko Horvat / Igor Štiks, Welcome to the Desert of Transition! Postsocialism, the European Union, and a New Left in the Balkans, *Monthly Review* 63, no. 10 (2012), 38–48, 38.

a state of affairs that liberal commentators call a 'syndrome' out of the belief that this tendency hinders Croatia's development and growth.³⁰

Field conversations suggested that the shipyard's management, aware of the *narod / politika* opposition, sought to manipulate the perception of the unions in this regard. One worker described how the management had 'smeared' a leading figure of the Adriatic Trade Union, which as noted was perceived to be more militant. This leader had been allegedly living in one location but was registered at an address outside Pula, which made him eligible for travel reimbursement. It is not unusual in Croatia to be registered at a different address than one's current home or residence and to claim travel expenses. The practice was easily justified, too, because wages were low. However, accusations of corruption had been levelled at individuals in positions of power who had committed such acts—including, famously, a government minister who was forced to resign his post.³¹ My interlocutor believed that the shipyard management's efforts to expose the union leader as a man claiming to speak on behalf of the 'people' while engaging in a 'corrupt' practice represented an attempt to alter how workers perceived him.

To summarize, there was often a confusion of the two main understandings of the people-politics hegemonic operator. First, any association with 'politics' was characterized as a movement away from 'the people'; the desire for a depoliticized social reality was given voice, and politics per se was emphasized as bad. Second, this emphasis on the inherent badness of politics was reiterated through the critique that organized political structures were exclusively meant to enable the *uhlebljivanje* (sponging) of political cadres. Certain left-wing activists writing about the Uljanik crisis, including those on the workers' rights website *radnicki.org*, implicitly discussed this distinction, stressing that 'politics as such is not to blame for everything, nor for the situation in shipbuilding, but a particular kind of politics with its particular representatives, who defend particular interests'.³² This critique was directed at one variety of elite politics—which they viewed as bourgeois politics.

³⁰ Josip Županov, *Poslije Potopa*, Zagreb 1995; Ivan Burić / Aleksandar Štulhofer, 'In Search of the Egalitarian Syndrome. Cultural Inertia in Croatia?', *Financial Theory and Practice* 40, no. 4 (2016), 361-382, DOI: 10.3326/fintp.40.4.1; critiqued by Danijela Dolenec, 'Preispitivanje 'egalitarnog sindroma' Josipa Županova', *Politička misao. Časopis za politologiju* 51, no. 4 (2015), 41-64, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/135833>.

³¹ See Ivan Pandžić, 'Iselio iz barake. Mijo Crnoja se prijavio na adresu u Zagrebu', *24 sata*, 5 February 2016, <https://www.24sata.hr/news/iselio-iz-barake-mijo-crnoja-se-prijavio-na-adresu-u-zagrebu-459845>.

³² Dimitrije Birač, 'Što može ljevica naučiti iz štrajka u Uljaniku i 3. Maju', *Radnički portal*, 7 September 2018, <https://www.radnicki.org/sto-ljevica-moze-nauciti-iz-strajka-u-uljaniku-i-3-maju>.

Pula residents also discussed widely the shipyard management's relationship with the regional political party, the IDS, not least because the previous head, Ivan Jakovčić, had in 2010 infamously spoken about downsizing the shipyard to increase the city's potential for tourism. The IDS's political programme was based on 'decentralization, antifascism, liberal democracy, European identity, and cross-border multiculturalism'³³ and indeed the key ideological tropes I came across in the regional media concerned the promotion of local patriotism, 'liberal antifascism', and multiculturalism. Although the party was declaredly left-wing in its support of antifascism and adopted a broadly positive stance towards socialist Yugoslavia, a significant number of people with whom I spoke believed that the IDS conducted itself like Croatia's main right-wing nationalist party in Croatia, the HDZ, via gatekeeping access to paid employment, public funding, and explicitly politicizing identities.³⁴ There has been strong opposition to the HDZ in Zagreb over the past twenty years due to alternative sources of funding and, at times, the strength of the opposition Social Democratic Party. From the mid-2010s onwards, however, the HDZ began to assume an overpowering role that recalled its influence during the nineties. Empirically, I noticed some slight differences with the IDS, which are arguably more a question of 'milieu' and the circles one moved in. As one interlocutor put it, 'with the IDS it is enough if one person in your family is a member, rather than you having to be a member'. This difference may have been due to a combination of the party's particular ideological platform, the lack of direct experience of war in Istria during the 1990s, and the relatively abundant opportunities for small-scale earning via tourism, resulting in decreased dependence on party political connections for small-scale employment. The war, especially its atmosphere of fear, was crucial in cementing the ideological narratives of Croatian national identity on which the HDZ rely. The IDS were 'softer' in this aspect. One Uljanik worker, also active on the alternative cultural scene, emphasized that in a city of Pula's modest size the IDS was able to exercise relatively tight control over the media and the NGO scene, which was facilitated by their allotment of spaces to civic organizations in the *Rojc* social centre.

³³ Dražen Hoffmann et al., *Naša zarobljena mista. Istraživački izvještaj studije kvalitete lokalnog javnog upravljanja u Hrvatskoj*, Zagreb 2017.

³⁴ For a discussion of the IDS's regionalist approach in Croatian politics and contrasts with the HDZ, cf. John Ashbrook, *Buying and Selling the Istrian Goat. Istrian Regionalism, Croatian Nationalism, and EU Enlargement*, Brussels et al. 2008, 120-123.

Workers' Self-Organizing as a Critical Rupture?

Following the first wave of workers' protests in January 2018, a group of self-organized Uljanik employees who had been radicalized during these demonstrations founded an initiative called *Stožer za obranu Uljanika* (Headquarters for the Defence of Uljanik, SZOBU). This group consisted of an alliance between four workers, none of whom had ever been political activists. They went on to seek help from similar initiatives and workers' rights organizations. Unhappy that trade unions were doing little to save the shipyard, they wanted to do something when the crisis deepened in January 2018. SZOBU's four founding members, unwilling to invite others into their inner circle due to fears of infiltration by management informants, agitated among the workforce. Eschewing party affiliations, they sought simply to gain worker support for efforts to save the shipyard, to ensure the maintenance of current levels of production without significant workforce reduction, and to engage in dialogue with whomever would listen to their demands. The sociologist Marko Grdešić has highlighted how such initiatives have frequently emerged in Croatia and Serbia but not in other parts of Eastern Europe following the fall of socialism.³⁵ He argues that these efforts reflect the deeper emotional bond connecting workers with the companies they work for, which he interprets as a legacy of a specific variant of worker organization under Yugoslav socialism, namely the self-managing variety.³⁶

Importantly, this form of protest is well suited to an initiative that seeks to challenge predatory privatizations. Owners and managers, faced with a traditional strike's effects on production (namely, stoppage), can take advantage of the situation to fulfil a wish to simply shutter the firm and sell off its land and other assets; thus the 'Headquarters for the Defence of the Company' has taken a form that is designed to ensure the company's survival. The founding of SZOBU brought these worker-activists into contact with other workers and with political activists, including members of the Workers' Front (*Radnička fronta*), a radical left party, and the 'populist' party Human Blockade (*Živi zid*; lit. translation: living wall), each of which were gaining ground in Istria.³⁷

³⁵ Marko Grdešić, 'Uspon i pad stožera za obranu kompanija u Hrvatskoj', *Revija za sociologiju* 38, no. 1-2 (2007), 57-69, 63-64.

³⁶ See also Anna Calori / Kathrin Jurkat, 'I'm Both a Worker and a Shareholder.' Workers' Narratives and Property Transformations in Postsocialist Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, *Südosteuropa. Journal of Politics and Society* 65, no. 4 (2018), 654-678, DOI: 10.1515/soeu-2017-0043.

³⁷ Dino Knežević, *Analiza Živog Zida kao populističke stranke*, PhD Thesis, Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, 2018; Alessandro Albertini / Dina Vozab, 'Are 'United Left' and 'Human Blockade' Populist on Facebook? A Comparative Analysis of Electoral Campaigns', *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 4, no. 2 (2017), 1-19, DOI: 10.25364/02.4:2017.2.1.

Because they consulted rather than aligned themselves with political parties, they could avoid being marked as *politika*.

During the fieldwork period, they were largely ignored by two of Uljanik's trade unions and met only with the more militant Adriatic Trade Union. In May 2018, I interviewed three members of SZOBU's four-person team. Two were crane operators and the third worked in a warehouse. Before the meeting, they had checked my credentials by communicating with leftist activists on a labour news portal in Croatia, mentioning the names of those involved in the portal to me. Throughout the interview, they often used items in front of us, such as sheets of paper or beer mats, in the making of their arguments, for example when they showed how to move things with a crane or sketched a map of Uljanik and the surrounding bay, demonstrating a strong visual and spatial orientation that had been developed through their work with the cranes. Their stated goal was to save the shipyard from significant downsizing or closure, and their approach could be described as embodying 'radical transparency', in contrast to their perception that the management's actions were shifting, non-transparent and unclear. 'Radical transparency' here encompasses their practices of publicly seeking help from all actors willing to enter into dialogue with them, and of opening up their political meetings and events, many of which otherwise took place behind closed doors at the shipyard or at various government ministries. These occasions included a meeting with the vice-mayor, and they sent several meeting requests to the shipyard management, as well as to different trade unions, Croatian government ministries and media organizations. Not all actors, however, perceived them as legitimate, and they recounted to me that some simply saw them as *uličari* (street hustlers) or *huligani* (hooligans) rather than a legitimate channel for voicing workers' critiques. As described on *radnicki.org*, a website set up and run by a small Marxist organization based in Zagreb:

'Perhaps the most important part of this struggle is that Uljanik workers should share all work-related secrets and information with the public because that is the most efficient means of exerting pressure on the politico-management structures. It is wrong to believe that it is in the workers' interest that various agreements with the management or government are kept private for one reason or another. For this reason, it would be best if [...] crucial information is made public via Facebook (via any one of the trade unions, or via a new page), communicating with the public and other workers in this way.'³⁸

SZOBU were in contact with this portal, and in pursuing this strategy they were brought into conflict with the unions after leaking the discussions of a meeting on Facebook. There ensued an angry reaction and pejorative dis-

³⁸ See Dimitrije Birač, Stožer za obranu Uljanika, *Radnički portal*, 23 January 2018, <https://www.radnicki.org/stozer-za-obranu-uljanika/>.

cussion of 'Facebook activists' in the regional newspaper *Glas Istre* (Voice of Istria), with the headline 'Facebook Activists Lead to a Fallout between Trade Union Activists in Uljanik: Two Trade Unions Do Not Want to Be the Hostage of a Third'.³⁹ Though small, SZOBU became an important voice for workers over the course of my fieldwork, as evinced by one of their members being placed on Uljanik's Supervisory Board following the Summer 2018 strikes.⁴⁰

SZOBU's approach can be compared with what has been described in the discussion of automotive workers by the social anthropologist Ivan Rajković in various after-sites of the Zastava industrial complex in Kragujevac, Serbia, with whom he conducted fieldwork in 2011. Given the similarities in products produced, and the shared Yugoslav history, it is interesting to compare the kinds of distributional claims and understandings of the state's role conveyed respectively by the auto workers and by members of SZOBU. Reflecting on their low wages, those auto workers who had recently lost their jobs made moral claims, critiquing the functioning of the state and its functionaries' role. Rajković summarized these claims as follows: 'As I am more morally fit to impersonate the key state functions than the very statesmen and bureaucrats are, I am more useful to the state, and deserve a better position in its niches.'⁴¹ In other words, these workers suggested that although they had been excluded from benefiting significantly from state niches, they were of more value than the politicians, and consequently 'more valuable for the state, and thus deserving of its help'.⁴² SZOBU went beyond these 'moral fitness' claims voiced by the Kragujevac workers and wanted to demonstrate such fitness through their practices, especially through the focus on radical transparency mentioned above. In so doing, they sought to embody the kind of logic that they desired from groups who 'manage' hierarchies—whether state officials or private business owners. Their narratives showed no strong nostalgia for socialism. However, they expressed their dislike of the new economic inequalities that had emerged over the past thirty years. They asserted a redistributive claim: they would be happy if the money in their paycheques amounted to a few Croatian kunas more, and the managers' a few thousand less.

³⁹ Facebook aktivisti posvađali sindikaliste u Uljaniku. Dva sindikata ne žele biti taoci trećeg, website of the Sindikat Istre, Kvarnera i Dalmacije, 21 March 2018, <https://www.sikd.hr/index.php/iz-medija/869-glasistre-hr-facebook-aktivisti-posvadali-sindikaliste-u-uljaniku-dva-sindikata-ne-zele-biti-taoci-treceg>.

⁴⁰ Uprava Uljanika predlaže Hadžića i Svečarovskog za nove članove Nadzornog odbora, *Jutarnji list*, 22 October 2018, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/uprava-uljanika-predlaze-hadzica-i-svecarovskog-za-nove-clanove-nadzornog-odbora/7969905/>.

⁴¹ Rajković, *Concern for the State*, 41.

⁴² Rajković, *Concern for the State*, 41.

In the case of the Kragujevac factory, the state appeared to view many workers as superfluous. Not so at Uljanik: the shipyard's historical success, the high levels of technical skills required of its workers and its frequently full order book were all regarded as proof that something was amiss in the looming plans for restructuring and downsizing. These measures were likely part of an agenda determined by the wants of actors such as the IDS, which hoped to focus on tourism in Pula, and the EU, which had put in place restrictive laws governing state aid in support of industries. An approach based on 'radical transparency' both proved SZOBU's 'moral fitness' and sought to isolate the elements in the wider business environment that opposed the shipyard's survival. Their strategy certainly garnered legitimacy: in autumn 2018 after the end of the fieldwork, one of its members was placed on Uljanik's new supervisory board, following the resignations of the old management and of trade union members.

The Psychic Landscape of the Uljanik Crisis

In exploring the 'psychic landscape' of the shipyard crisis, I borrow a concept from sociologist Diane Reay's work on the psychic landscape of class. Reay, writing about the class system in the UK, argues that 'there is a generative dynamic between thinking, feeling and practices' and that 'emotions and psychic responses to class and class inequalities contribute powerfully to the makings of class'.⁴³ Reay's analysis focuses on the sociology of education, where she describes relatively sedimented and enduring psychic class dispositions, such as feelings of middle-class guilt or entitlement, and working-class envy or resentment. This is separate from the more traditional disciplinary tendencies either to construe psychic responses as individualized reaction, or, in sociology, to show concern with whether 'the working classes exhibited class consciousness in the sense of a politicized awareness of their social positioning'.⁴⁴ Her approach also contrasts with a significant tendency in the Anglo-American social science literature on affect⁴⁵ and 'affective atmospheres'.⁴⁶ In this literature, affect commonly refers to pre-personal and/or transpersonal qualities that emerge as bodies come together, in

⁴³ Reay, *Beyond Consciousness?*, 912.

⁴⁴ Reay, *Beyond Consciousness?*, 912.

⁴⁵ Notably, the work of Brian Massumi, cf. for example Brian Massumi, *The Autonomy of Affect*, *Cultural Critique* 31 (1995), 83-109, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0882-4371%28199523%290%3A31%3C83%3ATAOA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-W>.

⁴⁶ Ben Anderson, *Affective Atmospheres*, *Emotion, Space and Society* 2, no. 2 (2009), 77-81, DOI: 10.1016/j.emospa.2009.08.005. This has recently been applied to discussions in Croatia about hate speech in public. Cf. Jelena Marković, *Silences That Kill? Hate, Fear, and Their Silences*, *Etnološka tribina. Godišnjak Hrvatskog etnološkog društva* 48, no. 41 (2018), 122-143.

a paradigm that assumes that feelings emerge prior to and independently of cognition.⁴⁷ Reay's view, similar to my own, understands affect and emotional dispositions rather as emerging from a cognitive appraisal of one's surroundings and situation, in which social class and other differentiations play a role. Furthermore, in contrast to the ephemerality of the 'atmosphere' metaphor, 'landscape' connotes relatively clear-cut and enduring dispositions, resulting from individual and group appraisals of their situations and surroundings. In this case, such underlying moods, conditions and emotions relate to the interplay among broader structural conditions underpinning the work regimes, and the particular features of the concrete situation faced by the workers, as described in the earlier sections. Although several features of this landscape are not specific to Uljanik, they were experienced in intensified form due to the crisis, and their interplay with worker inaction and alternately with organizing is important, particularly with regard to the workers' increased collective self-understanding as a social class.

Anxiety and Fear

Upon my arrival in Pula, I contacted Marko, an acquaintance who worked at Uljanik as a technical designer, and explained my project's focus to him. 'Good luck', he replied. 'Uljanik will be going into administration (*ići u stečaj*) on Friday'. I asked him to clarify, because my understanding was that the EU bailout would keep the company solvent until the following summer. He explained that there were also issues with the Zagreb stock market, which was threatening not to allow some of the company's shares on the market, and stated that there were possible complications with certain shareholders. He also described how the management was moving workers such as himself from one Uljanik-related legal entity to another, implying that one of these entities was going to be disbanded. Ethnographically speaking, the particular details given by Marko are not as important as the fact that these sorts of accounts occurred regularly over the course of the fieldwork, with different dates mentioned and then revised as 'day X' for Uljanik. These included dates for deciding on a strategic partner, for revealing the restructuring plans, for beginning the actual restructuring and so forth. This technique has been described by the social anthropologist Vanja Čelebičić, in her discussion of Bosnian bureaucratic techniques, as a means of inculcating 'institutionalized unpredictability', a powerful strategy often employed by state or state-

⁴⁷ Cf. Ruth Leys, *The Turn to Affect. A Critique*, *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011), 434-472, DOI: 10.1086/659353.

like institutions to disrupt everyday social reproduction.⁴⁸ On a more general level, such modes of state operation, and features of the political context such as the fragmentation of political opposition, likely compounded the anxiety and fear felt in Pula.

In this context, such unpredictability created an atmosphere in which the goalposts were constantly being shifted and many workers lacked a firm sense of where they stood and of management's ultimate intentions for Uljanik. Such an environment led to a state of ever-heightened fear and anxiety. Some workers left or tried to leave the firm. Many of those who remained, albeit fearfully, were divided among those hoping to accrue the necessary time to receive a pension and those who were simply waiting to be fired. Marko, who was in his mid-thirties, said he was waiting for the right moment to leave Uljanik. However, he told me that if he chose to terminate his work contract (*sporazumni raskid*), he would receive no unemployment or welfare benefits. He was therefore waiting for an 'extraordinary dismissal' (*izvanredni otkaz*), which he stated he could receive if he failed to be paid for a day's work, which was a violation of his work contract on the part of the employer. Marko, being relatively young, had successfully developed a side business in which his artistic and technological skills were devoted to tourist activities. He had opportunities to work outside of Croatia, and he had diversified skills to offer on the labour market. Nevertheless, he spoke about Uljanik using a tone that led me to believe that the shipyard was an important part of his life. It was painful to consider moving on. But he saw no future at Uljanik and was also excited about the possibility of doing other things.

Towards the end of the fieldwork, I met up with a longtime Uljanik worker, a machinist also active in the local punk scene who sometimes moonlighted as a bouncer. He described the atmosphere in his workshop. Everyone had to be present every day, but there was no work to be done. In the past this dead period was normal enough if it lasted only for a few consecutive days. But the situation had now been like this for several months and was contributing to the atmosphere of fear and anxiety-inducing confusion. Some workers, demoralized, had asked to be put on the *tehnoški višak* (lit. technological surplus, i.e. redundancy) list. The shipyard's uncertain position heightened such a sense of anxiety, which was arguably intensified by the logic expressed by the company's bureaucracy and the management's actions. SZOBU members also emphasized to me that many workers were scared. They might agree with SZOBU in principle but were unwilling to take action—and indeed, some workers took holiday or sick leave when strikes were scheduled. Because the

⁴⁸ Vanja Čelebičić, Institutionalized Unpredictability and Café Routines. The Case of Young People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Glasnik Etnografskog Instituta SANU* 65, no. 1 (2017), 111-123, DOI: 10.2298/GEI1701111C.

management had to approve holiday leave, the question arises whether granting such leave was an act of support for the ambivalence these workers felt towards striking.

Suspicion and Rumours

I first felt suspicion directed towards me as a researcher when I attempted to negotiate access to the shipyard. I began fieldwork in Pula during the week beginning 19 March 2018. That week a meeting with a representative from Uljanik's management was arranged; I was hoping to be granted daily access to the shipyard. I attended this meeting with the head of the German research institute where I was employed, a historian who also had a senior role on the project. Throughout the meeting the management's representatives were guarded. They expressed discomfort when I told them that I would be spending several months in Pula. It quickly became clear that I would not be given the access I wanted, and that other kinds of access that had been informally negotiated by historians—the availability, for example, of the company archives—had to be discontinued so that Uljanik employees would be shielded from potential trouble. When I mentioned the interviews I planned to conduct, they asked to be sent the questions in advance and refused to be interviewed themselves. They stressed that it was a sensitive time for the shipyard: there might well be layoffs during the restructuring process and the as-yet-unannounced strategic partner would have to agree to our presence. Their suspicion was somewhat understandable. The current management had been criticized not just by workers but also the Croatian government. As the public relations representative put it, our project was 'too big' to fly under the radar. Clearly seeking to control the flow of information, he sternly instructed us at the end of the meeting not to speak with any of the trade unions' representatives. By calling the project 'too big' he implied that certain kinds of collaboration would have been allowed as long as they were small-scale and thus would not be noticed, implicitly pointing to the shipyard's extensive networks of personalized relations. His remark also suggested that his PR role differed from what one might expect from a Western European or North American firm, and entailed—as Jovanović similarly noted in the case of the Bor copper mine in Serbia—management of patron-client relations within the wider community.⁴⁹ These relations include interaction with the various cultural, sport and pensioner organizations that received funds from Uljanik, and with other significant institutions in the surrounding area such as the municipal authorities, the university, and museums. This man's attempts to control infor-

⁴⁹ Deana Jovanović, *The Politics of Simulation. Fake Repairs in a Serbian Industrial Town, Südosteuropa. Journal of Politics and Society* 66, no. 1 (2018), 27-44, DOI: 10.1515/soeu-2018-0003.

mation about the shipyard's current situation went far beyond his role as a PR representative, and he was repeatedly mentioned to me. He was linked with all the various social clubs (football, pensioners' club etc.), and I was even asked that he provide his seal of approval to interview requests. Yet people in other networks within the shipyard granted me permission to speak with Uljanik workers and with members and participants in the various social clubs relating to the firm, which suggested that the shipyard contained multiple networks. Although these networks surely overlapped, there was nevertheless no single individual or group that exclusively held sway over the shipyard. Half-way through fieldwork, I met with a friend who had family connections to Uljanik. She said that the people who ask for official permission from the PR representative were in fact not so interesting, as they were likely to have close connections with Uljanik's past and present management and would merely provide the 'official account'. She likened these people to 'party apparatchiks' during socialism. Nevertheless, the guardedness of many employees seemed related to a desire not to endanger the company.

Among workers, I encountered a strong suspicion of tycoons and heard rumours about their intentions. A local tycoon, I heard it said, was more likely to rob 'the people' (*narod*) than an outsider. Western countries were idealized as places where one was expected to 'do things by the book'. In Pula, the most extreme comment shared with me concerned beliefs about money extracted from the state by members of the Croatian political elite. They were said to be highly skilled at doing this and very proud of their abilities. Given the sweetheart deals and predatory privatizations of the last thirty years, such distrust in the motives of the political class was unsurprising. In the case of Uljanik, there was also suspicion because of the firm's current predicament, which media commentators likened to that of the failed agricultural conglomerate Agrokor, once the supplier of Croatia's leading supermarket. Its collapse led its chief executive—who had been close to the HDZ—to flee the country.⁵⁰ The atmosphere of suspicion at Uljanik was perfectly encapsulated in the epithet 'Muljanik' that was sometimes used to refer to the firm, a mashup of the firm's name and the word *muljanje* (suspicious activities). This uneasy climate manifested itself in the workers' suspicions towards management and others deemed to be responsible for Uljanik's situation, and in the way that various people—including the PR representative—read my intentions as a researcher from 'the outside'. In such an environment, it was hardly surprising to have encountered various conspiracy theories.

This generalized suspicion, combined with attributions of blame, took its most extreme form as outright paranoia. I should point out that I view para-

⁵⁰ Cf. Croatian Tycoon Ivica Todoric to Be Extradited in Agrokor Fraud Case, *Deutsche Welle*, 23 April 2018, <https://p.dw.com/p/2wWDC>.

noia here not as a pathology but rather as a set of reasonable human responses to a condition of crisis. As social psychologists have noted, paranoid social cognition is often a by-product of situations in which anxiety, fear and blame are combined with a sense of powerlessness, and 'constitute, in short, attempts by social perceivers to make sense of, and cope with, threatening and disturbing social environments'.⁵¹ Rumours are one mode that enables such paranoid social cognition to come to life, and here their circulation was heightened by the shifting deadlines, deliberate ambiguities, and attempted control of information flows at the shipyard.

The most basic rumours concerned the intentions of the Croatian government and especially of the regional political party (IDS) regarding the future of shipbuilding in Croatia. As mentioned earlier, the leading figure in the IDS, Ivan Jakovčić, has stated on several occasions over the past twenty years how the city's tourist potential could be vastly expanded through projects such as a planned luxury marina.⁵² Such development was at odds with the continuation of a strong industrial presence in the city centre. In addition, one of the trade union representatives with whom I spoke proposed that Istria's recent tourist boom made the present time an expedient moment to offset lay-offs related to the downsizing or closure of the Uljanik shipyard. Rumours abounded of possible connections linking Danko Končar, the Uljanik management and the IDS, as well as the extent (or not) to which they had been coordinated and the stance taken by the central government, dominated by the HDZ. The number of actors and the diversity of circulating rumours added to the sense of ambiguity, which thrived on shifting interpretations. To give just one example, in May 2018, when the top-league football club in Pula, NK Istra 1961, was threatened with relegation and seemed close to losing their licence to play in the top two Croatian leagues due to a lack of funds, Končar stepped in at the last minute, offering bonds to keep the club going for a critical period. This gesture was widely regarded not as a purely magnanimous act but rather as a 'sweetener' designed to win over Pula's residents, so that he would not be viewed exclusively as a villain responsible for the shipyard's downsizing. A month later, Spanish businessmen stepped in to buy the club and Končar's bonds were returned without him having spent a single penny. This development fed rumours that his bond offer had been nothing but a patron-client public relations ploy and that Končar did not really care about Pula. Končar,

⁵¹ Roderick Kramer, *Paranoid Cognition in Social Systems. Thinking and Acting in the Shadow of Doubt*, *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 2, no. 4 (1998), 251-275, 254, DOI: 10.1207/s15327957pspr0204_3.

⁵² Stari plan Ivana Jakovčića ipak se ostvaruje, Uljanik Arsenal nestaje!, *Kamenjar.com*, 6 October 2018, <https://kamenjar.com/stari-plan-ivana-jakovcica-ipak-se-ostvaruje-uljanik-arsenal-nestaje/>

according to such rumours, had planned this move in concert with the town council and the IDS.

Crucially, it was not always clear whether the motivations of Danko Končar, the IDS and/or the Croatian government were aligned, and the media broadcast conflicting messages about the proposed future of the shipyard. Precise attributions of blame were thus difficult, and because the 'opponent' was not clearly defined, calls for collective action were not as likely as they would have been in the presence of a more cut-and-dried adversary.

Blaming Strategies in Uljanik Workers' Narratives

Workers commonly engaged in blame to account for the situation at Uljanik. Encoded within such blame, and accordingly within attributions of responsibility, were specific orientations and inclinations in the political field. Blame also played a role as part of a call for action when the crisis escalated. In late June I met Ivo, a pensioner, at the Veruda market, a hive of activity on Sunday mornings. Ivo had been at Uljanik his entire working life, moving up the ranks to a foreperson (*poslovođa*). He was visibly emotional when speaking about the firm, and although he repeatedly insisted that he lacked the knowledge to talk about the current situation, he kept bringing the conversation back to the present. Two points, repeated several times, stood out. Regarding managerial changes, he insisted that Uljanik ought to have 'the right people in the right place' (*pravi ljudi na pravom mjestu*). To be a foreperson one should have made one's way through the ranks, and thus know and be able to carry out the tasks that forepersons demand from lower-ranking workers, who in turn will respect them. The social anthropologist Ognjen Kojanić encountered precisely the same narrative in his fieldwork with primarily blue-collar railway workers in Zaječar, Serbia.⁵³ This shift, from the sourcing of managers 'from below' to their formation as a separately trained group, can be understood as a form of alienation relating to the creation of this separate managerial class. Yet Ivo also suggested that 'perhaps the state is guilty too' (*možda je država također kriva*) for Uljanik's fate. His elaboration of this point echoed his discussion of managerial changes: Uljanik's relation to the state should be analogous to that of an honest worker. If Uljanik uses its resources well but still shows a loss on its balance sheet, then it should receive the state support necessary for its survival. But if it behaves like a naughty child, wasting money and misusing resources, as rumours suggested had been the case, then it should not be able to count on such support. Ivo also emphasized that the firm was now much smaller than before and that the relationships within it

⁵³ Ognjen Kojanić, 'Nostalgia As a Practice of the Self in Post-Socialist Serbia', *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 57, no. 3-4 (2015), 195-212, DOI: 10.1080/00085006.2015.1090760.

had changed: young people either could not survive on, or chose not to work for, the pay being offered, and many were leaving to work abroad. Ivo's narrative is at odds with market definitions of success, which are focused on making profits rather than 'using resources well'.

Ivo was not alone in stressing how the older managers and forepersons knew the production process thoroughly and had worked their way up the ranks, in sharp contrast with the new managers, who often had little or no insight into their tasks and were rather members of a separate class who had simply 'come in'. This managerial shift paralleled changes to the supply chain: many materials had previously been sourced from within Yugoslavia, but in recent years the shipyard relied more heavily on globalized imports and was 'assembling' ships rather than constructing them 'from scratch'. From certain Marxist perspectives, this view could be interpreted as workers describing the presence of increased alienation emerging in the production process as a response to the insertion of more commodity relations because of the purchase of readymade parts and the generalized social shift towards a capitalist work regime.⁵⁴ Alternatively, it could be regarded as a form of alienating disorientation that came about because managers no longer possessed a hands-on grasp of the extended production process. The customary forms of workplace respect formerly directed at superiors were now withheld.

The shipyard followed a post-Fordist path similar to what we encounter in Kofti's study of a Bulgarian glassworks factory named *Mladost*.⁵⁵ There, too, one finds significant downsizing, the increased presence of a subcontracted workforce that has been granted fewer labour rights (*kooperanti*), a reduction in the social services offered to workers, and a situation where there is less control over the supply chain and the production process due to the increased reliance on imported materials. However, in contrast to the Bulgarians discussed in Kofti's study, 'communists' was not a pejorative trope in regular use among workers with whom I spoke, likely due to a fairly common positive valuation of socialist Yugoslavia in Istria. Nevertheless, in other parts of Croatia, the HDZ was criticized because of the continuity of its high-ranking membership and the former Yugoslavia's 'red bourgeoisie', and some right-wing political actors advocated lustration as a solution. But here 'communists' were not blamed for the shipyard crisis, with the exception of certain politicized media outlets who promoted the argument that a government that supported a failing company was therefore 'socialist'.

⁵⁴ Karl Marx, *Estranged Labour*, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, Marxist Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm>.

⁵⁵ Dimitra Kofti, 'Communists' on the Shop Floor. Anticommunism, Crisis, and the Transformation of Labor in Bulgaria, *Focaal* 74, no. 1 (2016), 69-82, DOI: 10.3167/fcl.2016.740106.

Rather, the situation was blamed on 'crony capitalists' (*ortački / kumski kapitalisti*) and corrupt practices, which recalls Ivo's insinuation that Uljanik has not behaved like an honest worker. For example, the workers chosen to take on particular roles did not always bring the necessary experience or skills to the job. A foreperson, say, might employ friends and then slack off. I met Ivo's son, who also worked at Uljanik, at the Veruda market one week after speaking with his father, and he told me that workplace bonuses were not always dispensed to those who had worked the hardest; sometimes supervisors nominated workers for such awards with the understanding that they would split the money. In this kind of atmosphere what was rewarded was not hard work but connections, political views or party membership, which enabled people to get away with doing less even as they raked in more for themselves. The neoliberal reforms of recent years, Ivo's son explained, had worsened the situation through spurious subcontracting. He described how a few years ago the price of certain subcontracted tasks, such as the painting of ships, suddenly jumped to more than double what it had cost. When the new rate was questioned—with the aim of saving the company money—such queries were either criticized or ignored. Despite his critique of such practices, however, Ivo's son was positive about the shift to capitalism as such. He emphasized that *crony* capitalism and nepotism were the biggest problems facing Croatia.

Interestingly, very rarely was blame attributed to everyday workers' practices—only twice did I come across a negative horizontal appraisal of a group. This is in stark contrast with anthropological studies in places such as Northern Ireland, where unemployed workers defined themselves as moral subjects deserving of state support by contrasting themselves with other, 'undeserving' groups of workers.⁵⁶ In the first of the two instances, one relatively young worker said that the big problem facing the shipyard was its lack of large orders. Uljanik, which currently completes work on an average of one ship per year, needed to finish three to four ships annually to make a profit. Its technology was becoming obsolete; tasks that could be done quickly by computer were taking two weeks. Yet when I asked if this was one of the shipyard's most serious problems, he said that the larger issue was the 'lack of interest in new technology' rather than the aging technology currently in use. 'Worker mentality' was at fault, as his team's older members were more interested in waiting for their pensions than adapting to changing circumstances. Their mistakes could be very expensive, however—for example, if someone writes down the wrong size for a motor and that motor is ordered, the work is delayed for two weeks. He used the phrase *to će drugi riješiti* (somebody else

⁵⁶ Leo Howe, Scrounger, Worker, Beggarman, Cheat. The Dynamics of Unemployment and the Politics of Resistance in Belfast, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, no. 3 (1998), 531-550, DOI: 10.2307/3034160.

will sort it out) to describe their attitude, reflecting the view that Uljanik's problems are derived from a lack of individual accountability and a refusal to take the responsibility of doing one's job correctly. This abdication of responsibility is directly related to the lack of consequences if tasks are not completed correctly and on time, a situation as much attributable to existing nepotistic relations as to non-competitive economic behaviour.

Second, I encountered people casting aspersions on the Workers' Front, the mentioned radical left party, by accusing it of including numerous socialist *neradnici* (non-workers) or *narkomani* (narcomaniacs) among its ranks. The *narkomani* specifically referred to a class of workers, many of whom were drug users or alcoholics, that firms such as Uljanik had employed for social reasons in the Yugoslav era. Apart from these two negative sorts of references, worker deficiencies were more frequently individualized and explained in terms of individuals' character or temperament (e. g. a colleague being described as a 'difficult' person). These attributions aside, while there was rough agreement that crony capitalism was the source of the problem, there was no strict consensus about which actors were primarily to be faulted. The horizon of blame encompassed individuals—e. g. the shipyard owner, the leader of the IDS, the strategic partner—broader processes—e. g. clientelism, nepotism, the formation of a separate management class, the alienation of workers from the work process—and collective actors such as the HDZ, the IDS, and the EU, along with wider systemic factors, including Croatia's 'wild' capitalism or capitalism in general. Generally speaking, blame was externalized and travelled 'ambiguously upwards', and the precise content of particular attributions of blame revealed key social cleavages in the political field. Pervasive ambiguity made it more difficult to pin responsibility for the crisis on specific actors, which in turn made it harder for workers to act collectively. As Deborah Lynn Javeline has noted, in her study of workers' payments in arrears in Russia:

'Intentional confusion of blame, like repression, is a proactive tool available to the regime and other state and non-state actors to diffuse potential protest. Confusion of blame may also result not from a conscious mechanism to diffuse protest but from blame-avoiding strategies, such as agenda limitation, scapegoating, and passing the buck.'⁵⁷

In short, ambiguity in attributions of blame—whether a conscious mechanism or not—is demobilizing, complementing the specific demobilizing effects of the crisis. A growth in worker consciousness and a sharper delineation of blame (for instance on the shipyard management) only occurred after 'watershed events' such as the late payment of wages in January 2018. In coming

⁵⁷ Debra Lynn Javeline, *Protest and the Politics of Blame. The Russian Response to Unpaid Wages*, Ann Arbor/MI 2009, 26.

to recognize a set of common grievances through simple events such as the withholding of rightful pay, the workers' protests and strikes constituted workers as a class 'in itself'—albeit not a class 'for itself', as they still largely refrained from acting, despite self-organized workers' attempts to undo these ambiguities.

Concluding Remarks. The Summer Strike

On 22 August 2018, the streets of Pula and Rijeka came alive. Roughly 4,500 workers went on strike, with 1,500 striking workers marching in protest on the streets.⁵⁸ July's wages had not been paid, and the workers had been pushed into action. The Croatian government became more involved in the situation, and the national media followed the events closely. The Adriatic Trade Union called for the management to resign and demanded the establishment of a new supervisory board, which ultimately occurred in the autumn and included, as mentioned, a member of SZOBU.⁵⁹ Yet Danko Končar remained the strategic partner—despite seemingly severe reservations on the part of Darko Horvat, the government minister for the economy, entrepreneurship and crafts. A temporary agreement was reached in the autumn, with the government using special powers to make a small number of salary payments before offering several months of wages at a minimum level, the momentum of the protests having diminished somewhat by this point. Uljanik continued to lose workers and Končar's plans for converting the centrally located part of the shipyard (Arsenal) into a luxury marina and hotels became public, along with his intention not to invest money in saving Uljanik, leaving his future as a strategic partner in doubt. During this crisis, the key factor motivating workers to protest was an overt attack on the material conditions of their very existence, in this case through the late or unpaid wages of January and August exacerbated by rumours, and concrete evidence of deep crisis at the shipyard. Deliberate ambiguity, compounded by a pre-existing complexity and by blame-avoidance strategies on the part of key actors, was cultivated around possible causes of blame, and this helped to hinder workers from acting earlier. While the catalyst of late/unpaid wages may have been too little, too late, the fieldwork period was marked by workers' development of

⁵⁸ Štrajk u Uljaniku, radnici na ulicama blokiraju promet, traže ostavku uprave i isplatu plaća, *Glas Istre*, 22 August 2018, <https://www.glasistre.hr/pula/poceo-strajk-u-uljaniku-568549>.

⁵⁹ Cerovac: Uprava mora odgovarati za ovo stanje u Uljaniku, Rossandra: Umoran sam i svega mi je dosta, *Glas Istre*, 23 August 2018, <https://www.glasistre.hr/pula/cerovac-uprava-mora-odgovarati-rossandra-umoran-sam-i-svega-mi-je-dosta-568586>; Nikola Sućec, Trgovački sud imenovao Hadžića i Svećarovskog za članove Nadzornog odbora Uljanika, *tportal.hr*, 29 October 2018, <https://www.tportal.hr/biznis/clanak/trgovacki-sud-imenovao-hadzica-i-svecarovskog-za-clanove-nadzornog-odbora-uljanika-foto-20181029>.

strategies (SZOBU), theories (rumours/conspiracies) and dispositions (anxiety/fear/suspicion) that later resulted in a large-scale strike. Whether this action represented a turning point, and whether the shipyard can be saved in its current form, remain to be seen.

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