



Goran Musić. 2021. *Making and Breaking the Yugoslav Working Class: The Story of Two Self-Managed Factories*, Budapest/New York: Central European University Press (Work and Labor: Transdisciplinary Studies for the 21st Century). 288 pp., 2 tables, 28 photos, ISBN: 978-963-386-339-8 (Hardcover), € 71.00

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Could the self-managed bodies have stopped the expressions of nationalism that tore Yugoslavia apart? Why did the workers seem so eager to support market reforms, and abolish the very institutions that gave them so much power? In this long-awaited monograph, *Goran Musić* seeks to answer such questions by underlining the agency of the working class—not simply as a heroic actor, as the communist party depicted it for so long, nor as just a pawn in the hands of the elite, as decried by liberal critics. Instead, as Musić describes, workers act through the shifting alliances between factory management, the party apex, and their own occupational communities—which are themselves segmented according to age, skill, gender, and origin. The result is a dense and lucid analysis that pays equal attention to the institutional changes, class relations, and the shifting common sense that framed Yugoslavia’s labor politics from 1945 until 1990.

Musić compares two automotive giants—*Industrija Motora Rakovica* (IMR), a motor producer on the outskirts of Belgrade, Serbia, and *Tovarna Avtomobilov Maribor* (TAM), a truck manufacturer in the Slovenian province of Lower Styria. The choice is apt because these two companies both collaborated with and competed against one another—both emerging from World War II manufacturing into the years of “socialist competition”—but also because they exemplify what the author sees as the two faces of self-management: the collectivist and the liberal one. The former pictures the market as the main danger and underlines the freedom of direct producers to decide over the products of their labor. The latter portrays the alienated state as the main culprit, and evokes an image of a united factory, free from internal antagonisms. Which of these two understandings of self-management dominated, Musić shows, depended on whether “economic particularism” or “bureaucratic centralism” were seen as the greater evil in a given moment, and on the particular constellation of forces that prevailed in the enterprise at hand. In IMR, which had been an urban partisan stronghold, blue-collar workers developed strong class-based identities, opposing the managers and white-collar workers, and utilizing Tito’s symbolical leverage against the management. In TAM, peasant commuters were much slower to create an

organized front, and as a result the directors were more successful in co-opting them into a hierarchical, “micro-corporatist” pact against federal policy. However, as Musić shows, this was not an essentialized distinction, as the IMR workers were opposed to mergers with weaker firms, just as TAM workers questioned income disparities. Their histories can be read as an antagonism between blue-collar attempts to accommodate self-managed bodies with the aim of channeling class grievances, on the one hand, and white-collar attempts to reframe such grievances as a narrative of collective sacrifice for success on the market, on the other.

Musić’s starting point is the dawn of self-management in the early 1950s, when the first worker councils were formed, encompassing a huge proportion of skilled professionals. This tendency became more pronounced during the “market socialism” of the 1960s, when “self-centered firms competing against each other on the market” (53) caused dramatic growth in regional and class disparities. Fearing the rise of liberal “techno-bureaucracy” and popular revolt, the party apex introduced a new constitution in 1974 and an Associated Labor Law in 1976, instituting grassroots consensus-making on all levels. However, as Musić illustrates, associated labor was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it gave blue-collar workers unprecedented powers and rising standards. On the other, it atomized the enterprises and, paradoxically, strengthened the managerial groups—the very phenomena it was supposed to counter. Many state functions were outsourced to local self-organized bodies, but one driver of inequality—decentralization of federal economic policies to individual republics—remained unquestioned. By the 1980s, blue-collar workers began to see the administering of the so-called Basic Units of Labor as being time and resource consuming, turning the factories into political bodies at the expense of productivity, and only providing them with opportunities for symbolic participation—with national-level political leaders and white-collar workers making the actual decisions. What is more, the blue-collar workers’ arguments started to resonate with the agendas of the top management, who called for a revival of 1960s market policies as a way of avoiding the impending debt crisis.

It is this major realignment of forces that the book interprets so well, zooming in on the insidious liberalization of the late-Yugoslav common sense. For many blue-collar workers, it became clear that the only way out of the crisis would be with unified guidance, which would require the abolishment of a central tenet of Associated Labor: decentralized consensus-making. The drive for market deregulation now seemed to continue the struggle for self-management in new ways. The old socialist slogan of “distribution according to labor,” which had always oscillated between redistributive and productivist claims, was reframed as autonomy of an enterprise to earn its income on the market—free from the influence of the redistributing state. As Musić points out, this was because,

unlike private property in capitalism, social property appeared elusive, undermined by a plethora of disparate idlers. In the productivist race to the bottom that raged during the 1980s, everyone, whether top party members' bodies, white-collar workers, cleaners, or poorer regions, appeared to be extracting the value that the workers' generated. The reforming voices from above, in turn, rehashed the old specter of "technobureaucracy" into simply "bureaucracy"—criticizing the ossified state, while absolving the directors, managers, and banks. So once again, economic liberalization was presented as "the victory of 'workers control' over political forces as well as the path towards higher wages" (40). As an IMR party activist put it in 1987, "Give us back our income and we will hand you back self-management" (156).

In light of all this, were the workers ultimately nationalist? Or were they liberal? The strength of Musić's analysis lies in refusing to use such easy labels, opting instead for a fine-tuned microhistorical account of the shifting meanings and contextual alliances that shaped the new hegemony. He argues that most workers saw nationalism as a second-order problem, caused by party disintegration and embezzlement by the highest cadres. Until the late 1980s, blue-collar workers continued to call for a return to Titoism and integral Yugoslavism, but increasingly gave up on these demands as lost causes. Thus, IMR workers backed Slobodan Milošević in 1988 not because they were mesmerized by him, but because he seemed like a figure who was strong enough to defend their interests against the disunited federal leadership. For his part, Milošević reframed workers' grievances in line with his vision of a liberalized economy, with productivist Serbia at the center. This process was not without tensions, however: IMR workers pleaded for the formation of a Federal Chamber of Associated Labor in 1988, and TAM workers asked for redistribution beyond the much-stigmatized accusation of "income leveling" (*uravnilovka*). Episodes of workers resistance occurred side by side with their interpellation into new hegemonic formations. By describing these approaches, Musić effectively illustrates how different ideological discourses became meaningfully connected in the experience of the working class during the "hybrid" 1980s, and how notions of (un)productivity were at their moral center. At the same time, he focuses his attention on the chasms between different Basic Units of Labor, trade unions and workers' councils, skilled and unskilled workers, men and women, socialist veterans and newly nationalized youth.

Some questions remain open, however. First, for a book that treats the many shades of blue-collar workers, the designation of the pro-market stance of white collars comes as somewhat self-explanatory. A subtler focus on the experiences of those who switched from shop floors to offices could have helped avoid depicting the technocracy as an essentialized historical agent. Second, as the author is inspired by E. P. Thompson's credo that working classes shape themselves,

Thompson's other core concept—that of “moral economy” as a pact between the dominant and the dominated—is surprisingly absent. The bond between Tito and the workers, on the one hand, and management and the party leaders of the republics, on the other, seems to suggest that Yugoslavia was based on two reciprocal moral economic arcs that collided in the 1980s. Third, the author is at his most daring when he suggests that self-management made work collectives into communities of fate, which the managers could use to raise workers productivity in line with their entrepreneurial agendas. However, the implication that sacrificial ethos and self-dedication were merely tools of co-optation in the hands of the managers is somewhat at odds with the author's own premise—that workers' agency should be considered beyond its instrumentalization by the elite. Finally, certain aspects of Yugoslavia's collapse—such as productivist critiques from below and their reframing from above—invite broader comparisons. The fact that Milošević's liberal nationalist consensus could present market reforms as a continuity of self-management, for example, is reminiscent of Stuart Hall's analysis of Thatcherism as a formative hegemony—one that not only co-opts the working class, but effectively redefines what its interests are believed to be. The time seems to be ripe for repositioning Yugoslavia's last decade within a much broader interregnum of the global 1980s, in West and East alike.

Musić's book is one of the most important recent contributions to the study of the political and moral economy of socialist Yugoslavia. It will shape discussions on class agency, hegemonic liberalism, and distributional conflicts in South-eastern Europe and beyond for years to come.