
DIMITRA KOFTI:

Broken Glass, Broken Class: Transformations of Work in Bulgaria
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Labour is a complex social phenomenon – or, more precisely, a web of interconnected phenomena – surpassing mere activities of organised (wage) work. Notwithstanding its almost transcendental nature, thorough shop floor ethnography is a prerequisite for a deeper understanding of workers' lives, global economic and political processes, and multifaceted social transformations. Dimitra Kofti's anthropological monograph *Broken Glass, Broken Class: Transformations of Work in Bulgaria*, published in 2023 as part of the Max Planck Studies in Anthropology and Economy, represents an ambitious venture into the lived realities of labour amid tumultuous post-socialist neoliberal transformations. It is a product of relatively multi-sited ethnographic fieldworks in industrial working-class settings of Sofia and Pernik in Bulgaria, spanning a fragmented period of roughly 4 years (2007-2009 and 2013-2015). Relatively multi-sited, because while the focus of the book is the Mladost Glassworks factory on the industrial outskirts of Sofia, it can be seen as a robust case study not confined by the walls and fences of this industrial complex, which has existed through the interwar period, socialist regime, and post-socialist privatisation by a Greek multinational company.

Throughout six analytical chapters, Kofti explores various aspects of post-socialist labour transformations: dynamics of coercion, consent and resistance in a privatised and globalised work environment; motivations for working under precarious conditions; ideologies of multiple temporalities, continuity and change; politics of divisions and solidarities; gender relations and household reproduction; and spatial experiences of the workforce. My main intention, however, is not to evaluate the details of every dimension and the complexities of argumentation in which they are grounded, but rather to examine their methodological foundations and implications. For now, it is worth noting that the research methodology, although based on qualitative ethnography, resists easy characterisation, which aligns with the similarly dynamic nature of the phenomena under scrutiny. Kofti employed a wide palette of methods and strategies for data collection, marked by dialectics between “objective” empirical and “subjective” experiential data.

The author's analytical presentation favours the perspective(s) of conveyor belt workers concerning their workplace, households, daily paths, kinship and friendship ties, histories and futures. It clearly reflects her methodological anchorage in bottom-up data collection among the factory's actors most affected by (the fear of) redundancies and structural changes. Life story semi-structured interviews played a central role in this process, giving a voice to employees and connecting their work experiences with other present and past dimensions of life, relationships, expectations and attitudes. Kofti's position in the field can be described as that of a partial insider, since she obtained a job at the “Cold End” (glass bottles packing sector), and became an integral part of factory's everyday life, which allowed her to directly and deeply engage with the experiences she researched. Consequently, participant observations and informal conversations with her new colleagues in various settings – on the conveyor belt, in the canteen, the factory's yard, staff rooms, or at bus stops in the vicinity could be conducted daily in harmony with the workers' rhythm. However, information on quantity and frequency of data collection activities is not provided in the monograph.

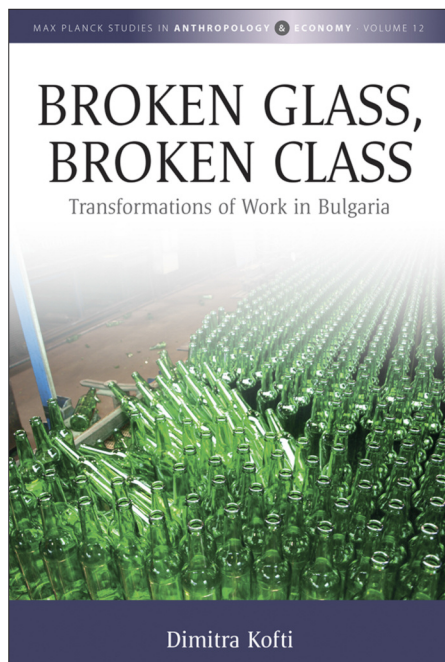
Thus, we can only speculate about the actual dynamics between the factory as a workplace and as a research site, which has broader implications for the anthropologist's rela-

tionship with the research participants. Kofti described the initial period of gaining machine-operating skills by the help of other, mainly women, workers as an important trust-building process, accompanied by storytelling and the sharing of diverse personal information. Her exceptional closeness to the packing workers is suggested by passionate and vivid ethnography of the working body, microscopically attentive to the movements involved in operating the machines and the anxiety induced by both the unbearable pace of the production line and the electronic system overseeing production efficiency. In this manner, a macroscopic picture of global political-economic processes characterised by the politics of flexibilisation, outsourcing and transnational control merges with ethnography of the conveyor belt.

The focus on precarisation, marginalisation and exploitation certainly creates the impression that Kofti's approach is activist. However, I hesitate to label it as such – at least, the book doesn't disclose any intentions of actively supporting workers' interests or impacting the factory's organisation. I understand her statement of challenging the validity of dominant ideas of *Homo economicus* in real settings (Kofti, 2023, p. 144, p. 224) as part of critical re-evaluation of neoliberal transformation. The emphasis on its precarious effects on workers' sense-making, marked by their frequent comparisons of "old" and "new" times and a strong feeling of being trapped within unchanging power structures, unfairness and unrealised promises, reflects ethnographic explorations in the realm of post-socialist morality, or liminal "situation" (Simić, 2019, p. 127). Of course, this critical methodological-analytical stance can serve as a basis for subsequent activism and shifts of perception. This reminds us that boundaries between our roles in the field are often blurred, and maintaining a "pure" academic perspective based on depersonalised observations is questionable in the context of intensive relationships with social actors acutely and actively aware of their marginalised position.

Nevertheless, far from being biased and ungrounded, Kofti's approach is multi-layered and challenges simple dichotomies (e.g. workers vs managers/owners, men vs women, socialism vs capitalism, young vs old). Detailed descriptions of Mladost's hierarchical structure interwoven with the biographies of persons occupying different positions (from the conveyor belt workers, cleaners and mechanics to sector managers, HR administrators and directors) enrich ethnography with diverse perspectives. Therefore, intersectional lenses can be seen as intrinsically linked to the long-term immersion in the factory's life, fostering sensitivity to distinct axes of identification and flows of power. For instance, the author was able to uncover dynamic conflicts and solidarities wrapped around the politics of blame beneath the surface of simple class division, arguing in favour of situational workers' class consciousness – an awareness of shared precarious position, yet continuously challenged by differences in employment status, wages, work pace and schedules.

Additionally, regarding the "objective empirical" end of the methodological spectrum, Dimitra Kofti utilised archival materials to reconstruct the socio-historical context of Mla-



dost, the processes of both socialist and capitalist industrial centralisation, discourse shifts between different modes of modernity, and the factory's workforce fluctuation. Notably, she didn't use historical and statistical data merely to provide background information or to uncover a "truth" devoid of subjectivism. Instead, it was part of multidirectional process of complementation and triangulation. Observations and interviews with both workers and managers added nuance to the seemingly linear transformation from centralised cooperation to decentralised competition. Meanwhile, comparing historical-statistical and other ethnographic data led Kofti to reflect on discrepancies between emic views and official records. Although the analysis could benefit from a more thorough engagement with the reliability and construction of memory, the uncovered inconsistencies (mainly in workers' recollection of periods of layoffs and managers' discourses of unproductive work positions in socialism) created a basis for speculating about the intense experiences of workplace and workforce restructuring, expressed through conflicting ideologies.

Kofti's commitment to ethnographic holism and the utilisation of every possible clue in the field is further demonstrated by in-depth engagement with Mladost's spatial dimension. This approach is not isolated from other methods but represents a conscious incorporation of material-architectural elements into them by means of direct physical observations, photographs of the factory's interior and exterior, maps, and a focus on their manifestations in participant observations and narratives. I view this as a post-socialist iteration of the ethnography of space and place (Low, 2017), more specifically in the realm of transformational politics and ideologies of social progress (Larkin, 2013). By semi-legally wandering through factory buildings officially designated as abandoned, the author uncovered a new world of workers' informal use of these places, simultaneously serving as an organisational extension of flexibilised production. Concerning narratives, microscopic scrutiny of various objects (e.g., chimneys or old offices) served as a means of fathoming workers' relation to the past, their understanding of post-socialist changes and their modes of social identification, as well as managerial ideologies of privatisational progress reflected in the contrast between new and old buildings.

Again, navigation through the hidden dimensions of the factory was enabled by the rapport built through shared work experiences. Furthermore, it allowed her to enter the sphere of private and intimate relationships, which she predominantly explored through the lens of gender dynamics. This is another aspect of her intersectional approach and implementation of "a broad ethnographic scope" (Kofti, 2023, p. 3). Detailed life stories of women workers, multigenerational interviews with members of workers' households, workplace observations, and conversations with male and female employees formed the basis for understanding the historical and present intricacies of lived gender relations both at work and at home – primarily the emergent shop-floor solidarities based on household reproduction interests, which, ironically, fostered the acceptance of workplace inequalities.

The author's journey into understanding women's power-reversing motivations to endure precarious work – such as escaping unenviable power dynamics at home, socialising at the workplace, and being valued for economic contributions – is particularly relevant for understanding personal fieldwork relationships. As a part of this realm, Kofti focused on intimate relationships between workers, expressed through practices like flirting, sexual jokes and gossip. While the existence of strong mutual trust could be inferred, disclosing missing methodological details concerning the trust-building process in these intimate instances and the precise ways of data collection (e.g., whether data was obtained solely through circulating gossip in her sector or also through private interviews) would be highly beneficial. Such details would not only enrich the analytical narrative but also inject more nuance into the understanding of workplace relationships and the dynamics of information circulation,

including modes of inclusion and exclusion from these flows (especially concerning the anthropologist as an initial outsider). These insights would further illuminate the researcher's attitude toward the scope of obtaining anthropological data, succinctly expressed by Malkki (1995, p. 51) as the opposition between an intrusive "investigator" and an "attentive listener". Based on other clues in the monograph – such as her only being shown the informal museum, a room with glass products from the past maintained by workers in one of the old buildings, at the end of her research when she was directly invited, or the "silences" in oral histories that she adeptly incorporated into her analysis – her approach aligns more closely with the "attentive listener". However, I consider it an ideal spectrum of being led by the will and perspectives of the participants while not shying away from scratching beneath the surface of everyday social experiences.

The monograph *Broken Glass, Broken Class: Transformations of Work in Bulgaria* – while advancing post-socialist debates through the analysis of multidirectional interconnections between post-socialist transformations, global neoliberal processes and quotidian labour experiences – also significantly contributes to the methodological grasping of labour. Dimitra Kofti's long-term ethnographic fieldwork is a convoluted journey of exploring shop-floor experiences within a complex web woven from local and global precarious regimes of work organisation, diverse and often conflicting memories of past times, ideologies and ideals of personal and social progress, relationships extending beyond the factory, power dynamics in the sphere of class and gender relations, as well as personal aspirations and motivations. An intersectional, multi-layered approach that employs diverse, mutually complementary "objective" and "subjective" methods is therefore not only suitable but, I dare say, necessary for grappling with these realities. While there are some shortcomings regarding the precision in reporting processual details of specific tools and rapport-building, which could further deepen the understanding of fieldwork dynamics and anthropologist's position, these do not detract from the value of Kofti's robust methodological foundation.

FILIP BOBERIĆ,

*Institute of Social Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences,
Comenius University Bratislava*

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