

For an anthropology of the demoralized: state pay, mock-labour, and unfreedom in a Serbian firm

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Recently, the leitmotif of much anthropological writing became that of the virtue of precarity: the belief that people continue to exercise their ethical imagination in the most trying circumstances. While refreshingly non-deterministic, the Foucauldian approach to freedom that guides this vision neglects those situations in which people see their ability to be moral as irreparable, and structurally compromised. Such is the case of a Serbian firm selling spare car parts, where policies of financing unprofitable employment gradually involved workers in everyday, ritualized performances of productivity for the state – what I call mock-labour. Unable either to meaningfully fulfil or to renounce the ethos of work, workers remain in an affective blend of nonchalance and failure, experiencing mock-labour as both a source of material security and an abandonment of their creative capacities – a mocking of moral self. I call for a reconciliation of the anthropologies of ethics and precarity through the notion of demoralization, as a state in which the deficits of structural agency and the limits of reflective freedom overlap.

Demoralize:

1. to deprive (a person or persons) of spirit, courage, discipline, etc.; destroy the morale of.
2. to throw (a person) into disorder or confusion; bewilder.
3. to corrupt or undermine the morals of.

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‘Do you even know where you are?’ Vladimir asked me.¹ We were in Zastava Spare Parts, a Serbian firm to which I was about to be given access. ‘You realize this is a *Sabirni centar* [a gathering point]?’ He was referring to an iconic ex-Yugoslav movie that depicted the deceased as stuck in a limbo-like place where nothing happens for the whole of eternity.² I laughed. ‘No, really, I have a problem explaining to people where I work, what we do here’, he said. ‘There’s nothing to research here’. He then guided me to his office, where I met five people, all between their mid-forties and mid-sixties. It was a sales department, and having done most of their work in the morning, they were waiting until 4 p.m. to go home, as every day. With only one working computer, surrounded by the firm’s prizes, old calendars, and a world map on the wall, this meant sitting face to face at the connected tables, discussing all sorts of matters to pass the time. Making some coffee, they explained their condition: a firm without property, using a sister firm’s premises, with no work to do, relying on state provision of wages until eventual final closure.

Marko, the eldest in the office with 41 years of service, whose pension contributions had not been fully paid by the firm, compared his situation with the quiz *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* ‘Forty years of service, that’s a “guaranteed sum”’, he laughed. ‘After that you continue to the next round’. He then started to quiz me. ‘Tell me, Ivan, what can a country which is surrounded from all sides, and blackmailed for one part of it that it can’t really control, what can that country do?’ Knowing that he alluded to the proclaimed independence of Kosovo, a former Serbian province and still a hot topic, I preferred not to answer. But as he urged me to try, I finally uttered: ‘Well, to be honest, I think nothing [can be done]’. With much amusement, he shouted: ‘Bravo – that’s the right answer! You progress to the next round!’ ‘Yes, as they say, “If you’re being fucked, then at least relax”’, Vladimir added. We all laughed. Sonja, a sales agent in her thirties, went even further: ‘If you’re being raped – then at least try to enjoy it’.

This banter encapsulates some of the affective contradictions I explore in this article. From my first day in the firm, my interlocutors expressed a sense of powerlessness. They were doing nothing, they claimed, because nothing could be done. The state could help them no further; the firm could do nothing to better their status; they could get no other jobs elsewhere. This, however, was not an altogether gloomy condition, but entailed a certain stance of abandon and nonchalance, or, as Vladimir said, ‘If you’re being fucked, then at least relax’. So besides the little work there was to do, people read newspapers, played Yahtzee, watched downloaded movies, or simply dozed off in the work spaces, and joked about their situation. And yet, in all these instances of giving in and nonchalant relaxation, of ironic laughter and joy, a curious sense of self-debasement lurked. It was as if non-reacting was simultaneously a wise thing to do and self-devaluing. Consider Marko’s evocation of Kosovo as something that was widely understood as the symbol of Serbia’s stalemate: a part not really controlled by the state, yet whose independence the Serbian leadership could not recognize if it did not want to lose voting support, so the only thing left was to *pretend* it was still Serbian territory.³ To compare his job to the status of Kosovo, then, meant to imply that they both relied on a state-run simulation he saw through, yet was part of. Vladimir’s evocation of the *Sabirni centar* plot was a very dark one, evoking a space of after-life where people had nothing to do, and no purpose for all eternity. Or to paraphrase Sonja’s remark: what kind of a subject tries to *enjoy* being ‘raped’?⁴

Antonio Gramsci was among the first to point to the intersection between citizenship, production patterns, and subjectivity. He analysed Fordism as a ‘psychic-political nexus’ (1997 [1991]: 302) that spread across American society, producing new men and women, with distinctive dreams, moralities, and rhythms in the bodies and minds of the working class. As Muehlebach and Shoshan put it, Fordism was an ‘affect factory’ (2012: 320). On the other side of the Iron Curtain, industry was as generative: factories resulted ‘in a deficit of goods but an overproduction of symbolic meanings’ (Todorov 1994: 10). Today, there is a growing body of research that shows how different forms of work and leisure are often crucial sites for structuring ‘ordinary ethics’ (Lambek 2010) and ‘ordinary affects’ (Stewart 2007) of vast categories of populations differentially positioned in global capitalism. These ethics and affects shape wider contours of accumulation, governmentality, and social exclusion, as they perpetuate the crucial knots of class, subjectivity, and value (Bear 2015; Bear, Ho, Tsing & Yanagisako 2015; Kalb 1997; 2013; Muehlebach 2012; Narotzky 2015; Narotzky & Besnier 2014; Richard & Rudnyckij 2009).

Following this broad link between citizenship, work, morality, and affect, and situating it in the context of the Serbian postsocialist, post-privatization economy, I

explore Zastava Spare Parts, one of the last automotive firms remaining on the state budget during my fieldwork in Kragujevac, Serbia, between 2011 and 2013. I show how, on a daily level, engagement in the firm's workplaces reproduced a relation between the Serbian state and one's citizenship of it, the changing types of labour that employees experienced in their working lives, and a chronic, if implicit, sense of moral failure. Instead of being abandoned by the state, anxiously lingering on the brink of survival, and still pursuing freedom to follow their own versions of a good life – a prevailing contemporary anthropological motif that I call 'the virtue of precarity' – Zastava Spare Parts employees became increasingly encompassed by the state, feeling somewhat safe and comfortable within its embrace, while being increasingly demoralized.

Central to my argument is the change of 'industrial citizenship' (Burawoy 1979: 113) after production slowdown in Serbian industry, from being based on mass productivity to being attached to the waged ritualized performances of it, or what I call *mock-labour*. An activity ambiguously between simulation and improvisation, mock-labour has haunted various scales of Serbian postsocialist economy, making an inherited industrialist ethos of work again critically important, yet impossible to clearly fulfil. A mixture of boredom and nonchalance, ridicule and shame thus became an affective register through which people recognized how larger state shifts have incapacitated them: not simply by devaluing their labour and expelling them from the welfare state, but by still partially encompassing their position and yet rendering it illegitimate, and reminding them of the creative selves they had to abandon. The resulting condition is not just dispossession, but *demoralization*. This in turn raises a question regarding the approaches to ethics we use. How, I ask, did we come to see precarity as a condition entwined with virtue?

I start by situating Zastava Spare Parts in relation to other firms in the locale. I describe why the 'heroism of stuckedness' (Hage 2009: 101), a motif of much literature on precarious life, misses the point here: staying relatively encompassed by the state, workers felt they lacked the ability to reflect autonomously on the value of their choices. I then examine the structural processes that de-centred the meaning of waged labour towards performance in Serbia, in the politics of state coverage after deindustrialisation. Finally, I turn to the life of performance in Zastava Spare Parts, through the firm's strategies of simulation and an everyday affect of boredom and longing for eventful work. Engaging in mock-labour for the state becomes an ongoing activity of *mocking oneself*, and the values one holds. This sheds a new light on the persisting role of the work ethos in the post-industrial 'politics of distribution' (Ferguson 2015), and on the wider link between agency, freedom, and ethics (Laidlaw 2014).

Falling, yet more slowly than others: self and ruination after Yugoslavia

The story of Zastava Spare Parts (hereafter: Spare Parts) is inextricably linked to that of its founder, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Rising out of the debris of the Second World War from an antifascist partisan movement, Yugoslavia developed through massive youth volunteer construction actions that made labour a centrepiece of collective progress, agency, and reciprocity (Matošević 2016). Throughout the decades of its existence, it created industrial 'giants' that turned millions of peasants into urban proletarians and, in a distinctive form of market socialist 'self-management', made workplaces into crucial nodes of social identities, political loyalties, and distributional rights (Woodward 1995). After its foundation in 1953, the enterprise Zavodi 'Crvena Zastava' (hereafter: Zastava) became one of the most iconic of such giants, producing



Figure 1. The former warehouse, now owned by FIAT Automobiles Serbia, 2013. (All photos by the author.)

cars, arms, and trucks for the Yugoslav market and, thanks to the country's non-aligned position, exporting across the Cold War bloc divides.⁵ Although a major debt crisis and unemployment surfaced in the 1980s, Zastava's production consistently increased, employing over 50,000 people in the Serbian town of Kragujevac and half a million more in connected supplier and sales operations across Yugoslavia. Within this system, Spare Parts managed the wholesale of replacement components, boasting a massive warehouse (Fig. 1) and an absolute monopoly in the supply of the Yugoslav car brands.

With the outbreak of conflict in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the Zastava complex was cut off from its network of suppliers across the former republics, now war zones. This was further complicated by a UN embargo on foreign trade and the resulting hyperinflation. Productivity and usage of capacities dropped to between 5 and 10 per cent from their 1989 record, and, as with many other enterprises, remained at this level for more than a decade (Sretenović 2013: 210). With most workers placed on forced leave and scraping by through selling contraband, Spare Parts itself improvised by buying parts from new low-quality manufacturers and, ultimately, losing them to private sellers. After the NATO intervention bombings of Serbia destroyed much of Zastava's infrastructure in 1999, the entire complex almost completely ceased production.⁶ Milošević's regime was toppled in 2000 and the complex became the first to be targeted in new market reforms, laying off around 14,000 people. Spare Parts was decimated, reorientated to retail, and on the verge of bankruptcy.

Finally, in the mid-2000s, the firm rejoined Zastava Vehicles Group and gained the status of a 'firm in restructuring'. A tool of the privatization agenda in reformist Serbia, restructuring meant a status of exception from market accountabilities: it protected firms from forced debt while making the regular provision of wages a state responsibility until a 'privatization partner' could be found. For Spare Parts' workers, this meant the delaying of closure and the avoidance of massive job losses in 2010, when the car factory was sold off to Italian FIAT, and there was a renewed wave of large redundancies. Not officially a part of the car plant but instead part of the Group, Spare Parts' workers remained untermiated. At the same time, all their premises were converted into new FIAT assets and closure was expected at any time.⁷



Figure 2. The empty and unused part of the bottom floor of the building.

By 2012, the firm had around ninety employees, mostly between their mid-forties and mid-sixties, the majority of whom were based in one half of one wing of an otherwise empty building that they used to inhabit (Fig. 2). Employees arrived through what used to be a back entrance, conducting their smoke breaks in front of a wire fence that separated them from the rest of their former yard. The firm was formally propertyless, using a part of the building belonging to the sister firm, Zastava Trucks; it stored only small amounts of car parts, which were mostly decrepit and scrap; and people had very little or no work to do, whilst being on state support and receiving regular monthly salaries, in some cases better than those at FIAT. They could try to find another job, but there was a pervasive impression that nobody wanted to employ anyone older than 35. As a result, many believed it would be best if they stayed in the firm and waited.⁸

This half-privileged, half-abandoned position became evident one October afternoon in 2012, while I was strolling in the yard with three office clerks to kill time. Jovan, a salesman in his fifties, recalled how another colleague present, Nikola, got his nickname *Kamionče* (Little Truck). Jovan recalled banter from the workplace, excursions that the firm once organized, and funny colleagues no longer living. Sighing, he concluded:

Back then we worked a lot, but there was still time for jokes. People were more cheerful. And now, there's nobody anywhere, everything is ruined . . . We don't have a job to do. It is as if we fell through some funnel of everything that existed before, and we don't know where we are anymore.

The other two men murmured in affirmation. We passed a pile of scrapped car parts at the back of the yard (Fig. 3), which seemed to embody Jovan's allegory. But then, he qualified it:

Jovan: But you know what? We didn't fall as far as others. We're falling somewhat more slowly, so to speak . . .

Nikola: Yes! It's as if that funnel has a crack in it, and we're hanging on to it.

Jovan: Yes, we're hanging on so as not to fall!

Padati ('to fall') and *propadati* ('to fall through') are verbs commonly used to describe the moribund status of many decaying enterprises in Serbia in the ambiguous condition between scraping by, being on state aid, and anticipating shutdown. As in



Figure 3. A pile of scrap metal and old car parts at the back of the enterprise.

the neighbouring town's cable factory studied by Petrović (2010), nostalgic feelings materialized out of the decayed landscape: the park's silence reminded one of the past noise of roaring trucks; its emptiness evoked scenes of busy packers. Jovan thus articulated a more tacit and pervasive sense of ruination, the 'postsocialist affect' (Schwenkel 2013). And yet, as this interaction shows, there were different levels of abandonment and decay. The three men believed they were 'falling', yet more slowly than others: hanging on to a crack in the funnel, they dwelt in an insecure yet accommodating place in an agonizing environment. Furthermore, decay was not only economic, but also *psychic*. 'We're not just a ruined firm, but ruined people as well', a warehouse packer told me some months later. He was mocking his supposedly lost ability to womanize at work – something he attributed to years of idleness. In such jocular reflections, people regularly connected the passing of a system of productivity with the death of an agentive subject: one who works, socializes, and enjoys sex.

Such laughter at one's own sense of moral failure has been a hallmark of a long-standing sense of lack of agency in Serbia. This is a context in which, as Greenberg has shown (2011: 89), people often perceive themselves as 'not normal' – a condition seen as lacking 'moral and agentive capacities' and attributed to the loss of Yugoslav sovereignty and the new state's inability to instil order and predictability in everyday life. Lacking the structural conditions for transforming their desires into actions, Greenberg's student interlocutors depicted themselves as no longer ethically capable agents, but figures of circumstances and wider machinations. This widespread entwinement of structural and moral failure (Jansen 2015: 150) emerges in rampant jokes about lack of agency, as something 'we remember we used to have, but we don't anymore' (Spasić 2013: 292; cf. Petrović 2015). But while my interlocutors understood their condition within this wider agentive impasse, they specifically tied it to a sense of lost productivity, despite jobs being retained. How to understand this peculiar relation between job security, ruined structures, and 'ruined' selves? In the following, I critically situate self-undoing in relation to a much-discussed framework: the politics, affects, and ethics of precarious lives.

Beyond the virtue of precarity: encompassed, nonchalant, demoralized

The last few decades have witnessed increasing efforts to theorize the dissolution of the so-called ‘Fordist social contract’ that aligned the state, capital, and labour, while enabling relatively stable jobs, welfare protection, and future expectations in post-Second World War economies. In this context, the notion of ‘precarity’ (or ‘precariousness’) came to signify new forms of insecurity created by the deregulated market and flexible labour conditions, most famously in Standing’s notion of the ‘precariat’ as a new social class (2011). But ever since Bourdieu (1998: 82) pointed out how precarity was spreading ‘everywhere’, the notion has been gradually understood ever more broadly as both a social and an ontological condition, and recently became a shared anthropological denominator for ‘the multiple forms of nightmarish dispossession and injury that our age entails’ (Muehlebach 2013: 298). Un(der)employment, forced migration, and living with violence and chronic disease became analysed as prime sites of precariousness (Allison 2013; Molé 2013; Neilson & Rossiter 2008; Stewart 2012).

Recently, the universalization of post-Fordist insecurity has been criticized as Eurocentric. Not only is precarity not new, uniform, or simply an effect of neoliberalism – as evident in perspectives from the Global South (Breman 2013; Munck 2013) – but it is also a highly situated phenomenon, as specific histories and experiences of capitalism ‘differentially shape the articulation of precarious labor with precarious life’ (Millar 2014: 50). While the case of Spare Parts should not serve as yet another generalization on the nature of contemporary insecurities, it is good to think with when interrogating some of the most pervasive analytical tropes that continue to define them. Here I examine the three aspects of what I see as a widespread conceptual complex: the economic argument, namely the connection between precarity and state withdrawal; the ‘affect’ argument, namely the equation of precarity with an agonistic movement for survival; and the ‘ethics’ argument, namely the suggestion that precarity activates an ethos of endurance.

Firstly, precarity has been linked to the notion of ‘state withdrawal’. Privatization of national industries, welfare cuts, and market deregulation are said to create groups ‘ejected from the state’ (Bourdieu 1998: 5). Most visible in ethnographies of ‘coping’ in early postsocialist Eastern Europe (e.g. Bridger & Pine 1998), the withdrawal image became popularized through the notion of ‘social abandonment’ more generally, as a late capitalist condition of being shunned out of technologies of care, left to survive through one’s own efforts (e.g. Biehl 2005; Povinelli 2011). But while attuning to the frailty of many today, such accounts inadvertently reproduce normative definitions of liberalism as market fundamentalism. This obscures the fact that neoliberalism has not simply erased but actually reconfigured welfare apparatuses, often producing new forms of social protection in its wake (Collier 2011; Ferguson 2015). In Eastern Europe, governments kept interfering after socialism in highly contingent ways, making large parts of the population increasingly *dependent* on their support after privatizations – not least in order to maintain voting support (Read & Thelen 2007). In the Serbian public sector, liberalization left various ‘pockets’ differentially exposed to the full force of market influence, in what people saw as hierarchies of state withdrawal *and* re-engagement (or ‘falling’ at different speeds, as Jovan put it). To place abandonment within a more holistic framework of social security, I utilize the notion of state encompassment (Ferguson & Gupta 2002; Jansen 2014) to signify the relative extent to which people saw themselves as still embedded in the ‘state’, covered by it, and granted distribution and care.

Secondly, precarity has often been imagined through visceral, vertiginous images of ‘teetering on the edge’ and ‘falling through the cracks’, as an affective presence of a looming threat that creates an agony of attempts to move for survival. This is what Berlant, in her writings on ‘post-Fordist affect’, termed as ‘struggling, drowning, holding on to the ledge, treading water, *not-stopping*’ (2011: 169, original emphasis). Precarious subjects, we are told, cannot afford to stop the constant race to secure ‘nearly-normal’ lives (2011: 160). Jovan’s and Nikola’s remarks about falling through a funnel surely echo such a precipitous imaginary. However, to reduce them simply to insecurity would miss the double meanings of *hanging* on so as not to fall: that is, being suspended *between* safe and unsafe, in and out of grace. People in Spare Parts understood their status between survival and decay, both the *comfort* of being subsidized and the *threat* of an imminent closure. The provisional dwelling form they thus occupied was not simply one of agonistic loss of control, but rather a more complex affective blend of worry and carelessness, the everyday stress of anticipating joblessness and nonchalance and indulgence in what one still has (cf. Jovanović 2017; Malaby 2012; Reeves 2015). This was Vladimir’s ‘If you’re being fucked, then at least relax’.

And this brings me to my most important concern here: the new anthropological interest in the ethics of precarious lives (see Muehlebach 2013). I find Hage’s writing on ‘the heroism of stuckedness’ greatly illuminating here. He notes how, as the US and Australian middle classes feel trapped by the lack of opportunities for social mobility, they start to glorify their ability to simply endure the crisis. This makes major shifts in how heroism, agency, and freedom are imagined:

This is what the notion of endurance implies: asserting some agency over the very fact that one has no agency by not succumbing and becoming a mere victim and an object in circumstances that are conspiring to make a total agent-less victim and object out of you. In this way, a certain nobility of spirit and an assertion of one’s ‘freedom as a human’ oozes out of the very notion of ‘endurance’ which comes to negate the dehumanization implied by a situation of ‘stuckedness’ (Hage 2009: 100-1).

I suggest that in the last decade, anthropology has been inclined to replicate this popular, romantic, and class-specific ‘heroism of stuckedness’ as its own analytical lens, which I call the *virtue of precarity*. In other words, at about the same time some of our interlocutors, according to Hage, stopped resisting and started to endure ‘the crisis’, anthropology abandoned its previously criticized ‘romance of resistance’ (Abu-Lughod 1990) for a new preoccupation with morality, now portraying various forms of being ‘stuck’ and living precariously as ultimately *ethical* projects. This was at the core of Robbins’s call for an ‘anthropology of the good’ that would describe not simply oppression and suffering, but ‘struggling’: culturally contingent ways people strive to achieve good amidst (or aside) suffering (2013: 459). Living in the seemingly more and more uncertain worlds of financial crises, ecological catastrophes, and rising violence, our interlocutors seemed to engage even more decisively, in the face of danger and uncertainty, not in protesting power but in self-fashioning their lives as *good* lives – or at least as attempts at good lives. From Kleinman’s characters who struggle to sustain their values in the face of adversity (2006) through Al-Mohammad’s ‘labour of being’ in post-invasion Iraq as both existential and ethical effort (2010: 434), to the burgeoning field of happiness and well-being studies (Kavedžija & Walker 2017), accounts have abounded that show us how precisely in the state of uncertainty, we find what it means to be a human; and that it means to struggle for values that cannot be reduced to capital or power.

Ethical self-formation thus became a source of new, if ambiguous, ‘moral optimism’ (Trouillot 2003: 136) of anthropology. Recognizing all existence as inherently charged with questions of value and purpose (Das 2015; Lambek 2010; Venkatesan *et al.* 2015), the ethical turn has shown that today ‘the world is also speaking to us in a *heightened* ethical register’ (Muehlebach 2013: 299, my emphasis). But it has also, at times, reinscribed freedom of self-conduct into what were hitherto considered radically precarious conditions. For example, Povinelli has suggested that there might be an emerging ‘global division of ethical work’ between those who reflect on ethical substance and ‘those who conduct their lives in relationship to it – or perhaps *are* it’ (2011: 110, original emphasis). Her reinterpretation of Foucault’s concept is telling here: it signals an increasingly popular portrayal of the dispossessed and frail in global capitalism as being more and more agency-less, yet remaining committedly *ethical* (whatever ethical projects they might choose to endure). So how did we come to see precarity as a condition entwined with virtue?

Although he has not been specifically interested in the ethics of *precarious* lives, I find Laidlaw’s influential separation of the notions of structural agency and reflective freedom decisive for this shift (2002; 2014). For Laidlaw, the thinkers of structure-agency debates such as Giddens, Bourdieu, and Ortner defined agency in terms of structure-modifying ability – a power to resist, modify, or alter social frameworks. Therefore, they ‘smuggled in’ their own visions of what people should be doing with freedom into their theoretical frameworks (Laidlaw 2014: 5–6). But freedom, Laidlaw contends, does not necessarily refer to structure-modifying at all, but to the ability to consciously reflect on the Socratic question ‘How ought one to live?’ and choose a specific stance on it. Laidlaw follows Foucault’s later work (1985; 1997a), which defines freedom as a means of ethics, a socio-historically shaped ability to reflect on the issue of virtue and fashion one’s self into a specific project. Working in ‘the medium of relations of power’ (Laidlaw 2014: 98), not outside of it, such freedom comes in contingent forms as well as various ‘degrees’, but ultimately exists even when forms of ethical life are externally shaped, imposed, or radically self-negating, as long as people perform them intentionally and reflexively. Laidlaw thus shifts the meaning of freedom from structure-changing to responsibility-taking: ‘a self that is to a significant degree self-constituting and self-responsible is, on this reading, to that extent free’ (2014: 148–9).

I agree that such a reading avoids some of older sociological determinisms – what Laidlaw (2014: 3), quoting Bauman (1988: 5), calls ‘the science of unfreedom’. However, I find that the Foucauldian assumption that reflective freedom is the a priori given, universal material of power obscures the connections that our interlocutors often do make between their ability to live virtuously, on the one hand, and their practical embeddedness in a social structure, on the other. More precisely, it becomes difficult to understand the relation between material security and moral reflection, or to say who can afford what kind of reflective ‘thought’ and ethical responsibility.⁹ In contexts of precarity, I suggest, we can distinguish two extreme poles of ethical arrangements. On the one hand, there are feelings and situations embodying a *lack of agency*: for example, Scott’s famous account of risk-averse peasants (1977). These are rooted in the unstable life position of the dispossessed, yet may coincide with freedom to exercise some autonomous ethical imagination of life, in the heroic attempts to ‘snatch’ agency to which Hage alluded (e.g. Day, Papataxiarchis & Stewart 1998). But, on the other hand, there are specific situations and feelings embodying precisely a *lack of freedom* to pursue what one finds good, sometimes because one has some other stake

in the situation, and because one is (if partially and ambiguously) encompassed by the dominant technologies of security.¹⁰ Though my interlocutors in Spare Parts often expressed both of these feelings, I suggest that it is through the latter that they framed their own *moral* 'stuckedness'.

When I asked one of the employees of Zastava Cars – then a small leftover firm with a status similar to Spare Parts – what he and his colleagues thought about their situation, he grinned a little, and asked me a counter-question: 'Well, what can a child say when you give him a cookie? It eats it and it is happy, and it can think of nothing else'. His self-description as a child, I argue, did not suppose an ethical actor who was struggling to assert his values in the midst of insecurity. Rather, it implied one who was morally unaccountable, caught in an inability to tell what was good and to be an ethical actor, precisely because he was 'eating a cookie' – seduced into a sense of comfort in an otherwise dubious system. 'How can you think if you are receiving money?' the man seemed to be asking, joking about his own irresponsibility. There were many similar moments where people seemed to express that they were aware of their problematic dependence on the state, and that they found it both understandable and risible, laughable and shameful. Rather than heroically 'snatching agency' to assert some form of virtue, I suggest that they underlined their very inability to achieve ethics as 'the practice of freedom' (Foucault 1997b: 284) and attributed it to their semi-encompassment by the state.

What therefore emerges is a very different economic, affective, and ethical arrangement from the one commonly seen in the literature on precarious life. Rather than being abandoned by the 'state', insecurely lingering on, but committed to their ethical projects nevertheless – a popular anthropological vision of the virtue of precarity – we find Spare Parts employees partially incorporated by state distribution, feeling somewhat safe and comfortable within it, and yet describing themselves as ethically de-subjectified. Instead of the resilience of the abandoned, we find the demoralization of the encompassed. And instead of being an inspiration for anthropological romance with human freedom, ethics becomes a medium through which people recognize not only their lack of agency, but their lack of reflective freedom too. I call this state *demoralization*: a condition in which one recognizes the structural limits to one's own ethical striving.

In what follows, by focusing on labour as a primary site through which new subjectivities are created after socialism (Dunn 2004), and which not only makes a living, but 'makes a life *worth living*' (Narotzky & Besnier 2014: S4), I turn to the problems with value it posed, and the comfortable yet demoralizing form of social citizenship experienced in Spare Parts.

The politics of 'buying social peace' and labour-scarce citizenship

Serbia's transformation in the 1990s has been described through variations of Marx's 'primitive accumulation of capital' thesis. However, while 'hijacking' the state and asset-stripping the remnants of socialist industry amidst war, the regime of Slobodan Milošević also re-socialized employment, and tried to stimulate economic growth. It imposed a legal ban on sacking people during the period of UN sanctions, which, with the rapid decline of industry, made about two-thirds of all employees in the country *de facto* redundant yet formally employed, rotating on long-term leave for years, and engaging in the informal economy. The 'fictional preservation of jobs' (Orlović 2011: 267) was just a part of the wider state clientelism. From big-shot party leaders

who could rely on illicit deals and large profits, through middle-positioned members who could count on undisturbed running of their businesses, to workers and pensioners who received meagre but steady payments (Lazić & Pešić 2012: 14), people were materially encompassed by the 'state' to various degrees.

This vast yet uneven social contract was one of the crucial problems for the post-Milošević market reforms in the 2000s, which had to balance market liberalization with its social consequences. Instead of a 'big bang' shock, an early tactic of 'gradualism' was employed. The government prioritized pensions and kept increasing wages exceeding the rise of productivity, out of money obtained through privatizations and foreign credits. It transferred the costs of redundancy payments for massive layoffs from privatizers onto itself. And for the big enterprises that could not be sold at once, it introduced a status of restructuring. Instead of producing their own incomes and being occasionally supported by the state – the predominant policy in Yugoslav worker-managed social property firms – the firms were now on the full state payroll, freed from paying taxes, and exempted from paying debts to other public firms.¹¹ The number of such firms increased from 28 in 2002 to 170 in 2011, with restructuring often leading to prolonged under-productivity and further state borrowing to pay salaries (Arsić 2012: 73).

At the time of my fieldwork, many of my interlocutors used the popular idiom *kupovina socijalnog mira* ('buying social peace') to understand this double movement situation. Employed widely in the media, this idiom implied that the state financing of many unprofitable firms was merely a populist simulation of economic revival, made to please large parts of the population who would otherwise become jobless. In Kragujevac, where Zastava was a centre of many pioneering and often exceptionally beneficial redundancy plans, many were simultaneously critical of the state's 'social peace' orientation and shaped their own sense of entitlement in relation to it (Rajković 2017; cf. Jovanović 2016). But aside from assuring relative social security for the superfluous workers, the politics of 'buying social peace' channelled an undisputed commodification of labour. In other words, when people lamented how factories had become 'social (welfare) institutions', they did not mean that they were nodes of social security (they were that even during socialism), but that they had become *only* that (instead of also producing something). Keeping their jobs for years, many employees of the defunct firms started realizing that they owed these jobs not to their labour but to being a part of a larger social contract, which boiled down to the voting schemes of the ruling parties. In such a way, people stayed incorporated, but were rendered illegitimate, and were very self-conscious of their own role in the state act of 'buying social peace'.

'I don't like Džada, but I must admit he is a really good player', said a vice-director of a Spare Parts' sister firm under Zastava Group control about the Group's CEO. 'He knows how to "play" with the state. He knows when to ask it for something, when to beg, and when to become aggressive. That's really important, and without that, we would not make it'. And if Džada was praised for successfully 'playing' with the state, the subordinate director of Spare Parts, called Mile, Džada's brother-in-law, was praised for being on good terms with Džada. Mile's protégés claimed that all employees should be thankful to him, because he had found a way to 'hook' the enterprise onto the Group, acquire the status of restructuring, and hence postpone the closure.

In other words, people explained their firm's status in terms of skilful dependence and favourable happenstance. They came to imagine the economy of Serbia as a system of graded vicarious clientelism, in which employment was a system of rent-seeking,

and the good life of people was predicated on an ability to climb partisan hierarchies to assure gains (cf. Brković 2017). And yet they contrasted this with an image of a system where success was based on labour. According to Goran, a technician in his fifties and a father of two unemployed graduates (one of whom was a young GP), there was ‘no labour anywhere’ (*nigde nema rada*) in Serbia. This led him to question his own fortune:

We were once well off because we had a monopoly. If we still had it, we could continue. But we don't, and we don't do anything there, you saw it. All we do is *sviranje kurcu* [lit. ‘playing music to a dick’ – idiom for pointless but pompous activity]. And if the state wants to close us tomorrow, it can totally do it. We can only say: thank you, thank you for giving us even this!

Goran here voiced the demoralizing inclusion that firms in restructuring shaped. As in so many liberalized economies, many people became surplus, ‘not worth subjecting’ (Ferguson 2013: 231) to the market. But rather than discard them altogether, the Serbian state still incorporated some of them, for reasons other than the value of their work. For them, the politics of restructuring implied a new kind of labour-scarce citizenship, where membership seemed to be based not on work, but on its performance. As the phrase ‘*buying* social peace’ implies, this seemed in contrast to an imagined (and remembered) system where social peace was not bought, but *earned*. Simultaneously in and out of the market, the jobs of Spare Parts employees came to be seen as an illegitimate *gift* from the state – one that, as Goran’s words suggested, could not be reciprocated or debated about, but only be thanked for.

Mocking labour, performing productivity

‘We knew it led nowhere, but we had to do it . . . As if, to get some help from the state, to make it seem that we were not ruined, that we still did something, that we were still making cars’. This is how, with an awkward expression, one of Zastava Cars’ manual workers described the company’s improvisation strategies of the 1990s in the documentary *Yugo – A Short Autobiography* (Đukić 2010). Her allusion to Zastava making an appearance of labour is typical: it refers to various strategies that Zastava Cars, and other factories of the time, developed to produce a public image that they were still operating against all the odds, and hence entitled to some state support. Workers I met had used to strip parts from completed cars in the parking lot in order to finish new ones on the assembly lines, to fulfil the quotas. They allegedly participated in the management’s forging of exports to Republic Srpska (the Serb-controlled entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina) for the media. One of them told me how he acted wounded in the war for TV coverage of a local hospital. The management’s aim, it seems, was to stage a balanced performance of productivity for the state ministries: between too low a profile, which could support the image of Zastava as a big do-nothing parasite, and too much production, which would shut off state financing as unnecessary.¹²

In Spare Parts, wholesale was decimated for over two decades, and individual products were periodically sold through two retail shops. Most of the work was done over a couple of hours in the morning, or in one-hour shifts when, usually in autumn, small batches of anti-freeze packing were organized. For the rest of the time, employees were free to organize their activities as they liked, which often involved reading newspapers and books, watching movies on the Internet, sleeping, gossiping, or playing games. However, the status of being ‘in restructuring’ put pressure on the director of the enterprise, as Spare Parts was among the last of the subsidized firms of former Zastava. His argument was that if someone were to see people from Spare Parts roaming around



Figure 4. Tables that people frequently gathered around to smoke during the day.

during working hours, the rumour would spread across the town, and state institutions would find out that the firm was idle, and close it. As a solution, the management imposed disciplinary measures to enforce the performance of busyness for the public: removing a bench in the garden where people sat and smoked (Fig. 4), and insisting on a full working day.

How can we understand the simultaneous rise and diminishment of the work ethos? As a number of authors have suggested, labour is not just being increasingly priced out of systems of capital accumulation. Rather, it is facing an evaluative disanchoring, and starting to look like the ‘ritual of a missing dynamic’ (Forrester 1999: 2) or a performance, a *simulation* of the forms and meanings it had in industrialism (Shershow 2005: 12). This does not mean that past industrial employment, capitalist or socialist, was free from performativity (Yurchak 2006: 93-8). Rather, it is to argue that when employment becomes seen as a social policy end in itself – one that exists simultaneously with the proclaimed norms of neoliberal efficacy – many jobs start to appear as sheer simulation. From London lawyers who speak of their positions as ‘bullshit jobs’ (Graeber 2013) to the Krisis-Group’s critique of welfare programmes as ‘state-run labour-simulation’ (1999), there is a pervasive contemporary feeling that work has lost some of the essence it is believed to have had in industrialist society.

My take on under-productive work is inspired by Roberman’s (2015) ethnography of the labour activation programmes for Russian Jewish immigrants in Germany. Her interlocutors oscillated between seeing state-sponsored jobs as just a simulative ‘ersatz’ for proper employment, and endowing them with a sense of utility and meaning – thus blurring the line between ‘*performance of the seriousness of work* and *serious acts of work*’ (2014: 335-6, original emphasis). I found a similar ambivalence in how labour was valued. On the one hand, my interlocutors saw their activities as an imitation of some ‘proper’ work, usually located in Zastava’s fully operational socialist past; they ridiculed their activities as simply simulations of productivity. But this cynicism around simulation existed along with various forms of practices that developed as attempts to make do, to improvise in a depleted company setting. Such improvisations

often reintroduced physical labour, commitment, and craft into what had previously been spaces of smoother automatic production, creating new forms of ‘toil’, ‘skill’, and ‘sacrifice’ with contested importance. To tackle this ambiguity, I use the term ‘mock-labour’ as a play on the double meaning of ‘to mock’ as between ‘to ridicule’ and ‘to mimic’: that is, to counterfeit and to model (as in ‘mock-up’). In contexts where ‘real’ productivity is seen as missing, I argue, mock-labour stands for the ambiguous, wavering value of its substitution, between simulation and making-do, both less and more than ‘proper’ work. In Spare Parts, it became increasingly hard to discern between the two, and to say whether what one does was ‘work’ or not.

For example, one day Marko asked me what people from the redundancy classes I followed thought about Spare Parts. I told him that they usually did not know Spare Parts was still working, and when they did, they usually thought of it as well ‘tucked in’ and privileged. Marko protested: ‘Why don’t you tell them that’s misinformation? We are working full steam, you should write that down and make those “above” prolong our stay here until 2018’. He seemed serious, as if expecting me not to circulate information that the firm was without much work. And yet the time we shared observing precisely a lack of labour and joking about it made such seriousness impossible. So when I said ‘let’s make it 2020’, Marko started joking again, asking Vladimir (in his forties) how much he needed to reach his pension, so that the state could plan according to that. Soon after, we started the tedious task of cutting and revamping self-adhesive labels for anti-freeze bottles. This job was usually done by machine, but now it included manually cutting the tiny prints of dates from one set of labels and putting them onto another set (so as to cover past expiry dates and save material). These were to be attached to bottles which we had previously filled, in one-hour shifts. After two hours of such work, and several hundred labels redone, I asked Sonja if we knew how many labels we were supposed to do. ‘Of course! There is a quota! You, my boy, seem to think that it is easy to earn bread’. I got the impression that she was criticizing me for the previous remark regarding the classes. And yet when we completed a hundred labels more, she became sceptical about it. ‘All of this, we should not have even started. It’s silly’, she said.

The scene illustrates how mock-labour imposes new imperative of a work ethic, and its limits. Referring to various activities they still needed to do in order to get a wage, Sonja and Marko tried to present their activity as valuable. Yet they were both aware that though palpable and creative, such efforts hardly translated in market terms, as the whole of the annual anti-freeze production barely covered the utility bills (and hence the activity of salvaging old labels would save nothing). Their labours never amounting to an unambiguous notion of ‘work’, they both ended up deprecating them. In this process, they questioned not only their legitimacy in the Serbian state, but also their very creative selves – a point to which I finally return.

Undoing creative selves: boredom, idle bodies, and longing for activity

If mock-labour made people question the value and meaning of their productivity in the firm, it even more frequently operated through a new experience of time and the sentiment of boredom at the workplace. The director’s strategy of insisting on a full working day in order to preserve the image of a busy firm meant that the day ended with long collective waiting in the queue in the yard where the doorman would finally, at exactly 4 p.m., open the gate for people to leave. Being allowed various leisure activities, as long as they did not cut short their working time, made people feel that their loitering was forced. A crucial factor of the new work-discipline revolved around ‘the dolorous

labor of having nothing to do' (Graan 2012: 181), often bringing an insight that what people were being paid for was not really their commodified labour, but the *time* they spent at the firm. Or as one of them noted, 'It's not an issue of what work you do but where you sit'.

Frequently, the historical transition to industrial work is discussed through E.P. Thompson's notion of work-discipline (1967), describing a shift from agricultural task-orientation to the clock-time of the shop floor. But industrialization did not always eradicate task-focus. In a Soviet-modelled Indian plant, Parry observed, work consisted in 'long, fallow periods of comparative idleness punctuated by bouts of intense activity' (1999: 110). This staccato rhythm marked the planned industry of socialist Eastern Europe as well, where factory tempo depended on the availability of supplies, and frequently alternated between days of stoppage and days of frenzy (Burawoy 1985: 163; Dunn 2004: 16). In Zastava during Yugoslav socialism, it was not only the shortages that disrupted the shop-floor flow, but also the annual employment quotas imposed by the state authorities (what the Human Resources director once termed 'unproductive employment') and the controversial nature of punishing indiscipline in a context recognized as worker-run. Sleeping and sexual affairs at the workplace, absenteeism and seasonal work in the fields were common, and the national attitude to work (especially office work) became notoriously described by the phrase 'Radio ne radio, svira ti radio' ('Whether you are working or not, your radio is playing').

Idleness, therefore, was not unknown in the socialist past. Nor was the sense that employment had a primarily social role and was highly performative. However, new to mock-labour was the sense that work-discipline revolved around clock-time *alone*, irrespective of whether any activity was being done or not. In the workers' experience, this made the work practices of the past seem not only *relatively more* task-orientated than the present ones (as they had depended on actual production needs), but also more flexible (as people could exit when production was slower) and more meaningful (as jobs had produced more than security). Through forced bodily activities of sitting, waiting, loafing, and sleeping, people constantly brought into focus the notion of labour as critically missing, and engaged in biographical reflections on how they had become less valuable than their own previous working selves.

Take, for example Gruja, a witty warehouse manager in his fifties. One afternoon, I was drinking a coffee in his office, in many ways a typical one: a desk and a chair, an old car seat on the floor, a poster with a nude girl on the wall, and a window for passing orders to the next office, now remade into a cutlery shelf. And as with every time I saw him there, Gruja sat with no computer or catalogue on the desk, just looking ahead and smoking. We spoke about his career in Zastava, which was paradigmatic for a man of his age and qualifications. Gruja finished a degree at a polytechnic in 1979, and quickly found a job in an outlet of 21. Oktobar (one of Zastava's production chains) in neighbouring Batočina. He worked on installing German machines there. Some five years later, married and with two small children, he decided to move back to Kragujevac, and took a position as manager of packing big lots in Spare Parts. In the early 1990s, his wife died and he was put on forced leave, so, to support his children, he started smuggling Milka chocolates and Shock chewing gums from Bulgaria with a friend. Throughout this narration, Gruja recalled many hard times he had to endure: the day when his team was ordered to pack 10,000 disks for the next day or times when the Serbian police would make him pay customs, so his whole trip turned out to be

profitless. And yet, all those labours, both exciting and annoying, formal and informal, seemed far away now, contrasted with the sheer emptiness of the moment we shared. ‘Years passed, and a day won’t’, Gruja said, slowly breathing out smoke.¹³ He was looking at the clock on the wall: even though we had smoked half a pack of cigarettes each, drunk a couple of shots of plum brandy, and discussed his past in great detail, there were still three more hours left until the end of the working day. He was bored, and he was not the only one.

An emerging body of ethnographic work has investigated how large parts of the world’s unemployed organize their time and achieve self-worth without work (Mains 2007; O’Neill 2014; Ralph 2008: 18). Boredom and ‘killing time’ figure prominently in such literature, not as a bourgeois privilege but as a trace of new structural exclusion. For the homeless men of Bucharest studied by O’Neill, boredom was ‘an affective state that registers within the modality of time the newly homeless’ expulsion to the margins of the city’ (2014: 11). Becoming ‘unnecessary producers’ (2014: 19), under-consuming and confined to a shelter, the men were nostalgic for a status they once had as workers in the Romanian socialist state, and felt entrapped in a repetitive cycle of roaming, sleeping, drinking coffee, and masturbating, experiencing boredom as a sign that their lives no longer had any meaning. Understanding boredom as another side of social abjection, this literature treats longing for labour as primarily a longing for *employment*, a work membership status that would guarantee the social belonging that was once had in the national state (cf. the discussion of ‘post-Fordist affect’ in Berlant 2011; Muehlebach & Shoshan 2012).

In Spare Parts, however, boredom communicated a significantly different condition. Firstly, people took boredom as a sign not of exclusion, but of a peculiar *inclusion* in the Serbian welfare state. Secondly, they longed not for employment as a basis for recognition (they already had jobs), but for *labour*, an activity understood as creative and meaningful, engaging both body and spirit, and producing events. They remembered their previous careers that way. In contrast, they experienced the present as an empty time of loitering, which they had to endure even if it did not produce anything clearly valuable. In such a way, boredom functioned as an affective background through which people recognized not just the accumulation of Zastava’s historical drama of decline and stagnation (‘a long illness, a slow death’), but also the differences in meaningfulness and value between their former and current, desired and realized selves. From an elaborated collective strategy of simulating busyness for the state, mock-work membership ended in a widespread, taken-for-granted feeling of ridiculing one’s own values, of mocking one’s creative self.

Take, for example Vanja, another engineer in her fifties, who used to work in the Technical Service which systematized car parts. Vanja frequently found herself forgetting that there was ‘no work to be done’ and engaging in actions that, in its absence, turned out to be pointless. When it started raining, she would run out into the yard to cover some parts, only to see that ‘there was nothing left, only us, people’. Formerly, Vanja dealt with thousands of car-part specifications and numeric codes, many of which she knew by heart. So when she had stopped working on this task, she spontaneously started to memorize the surnames on the gravestones in the graveyard she passed by on the way to work. ‘Once I memorized codes, now I memorize graves’, she mocked herself. The experience not only reminded her of the seemingly moribund status of the enterprise, but also highlighted an absurdity in her relation to labour: as if her propensity to work was a residual habit in her body, a reflex compelling her to react to her environment

in ways that no longer had any meaning. This is what others meant when saying they were ‘walking zombies’ and ‘talking automatons’.

Similar was the case of Marija, a graduate chemist in her mid-thirties, who claimed she learned only ‘to cheat, gossip, and avoid work’. This was in contrast with her work ideals, as every day she felt further removed from chemistry. But she stayed because the job was easy, and her husband was unemployed. She often played Yahtzee and strolled around the warehouse, saying, ‘I always find myself something to do’. And yet that activity was somehow unfulfilling, and Marija often complained that ‘it was sad that people had to be in a firm without work’.

Jahoda (1997) noticed as ‘latent functions of work’ that it creates the day’s structure and enforces a sense of activity and meaningfulness. This corresponds to Thompson’s (1967) insight that changes of work and its tempo shape particular types of social actors – or undo them (cf. Millar 2015). It is through the everyday, chronic and affective lack of bodily movements, eventfulness, and remembered rhythms that Spare Parts’ employees like Goran, Gruja, Vanja, and Marija experienced the lack of ‘real’ labour, and moreover, the undoing of their creative selves. Boredom and longing for labour articulated an uneasy recognition that people were forced to make *themselves*, their knowledge and productive capacities unused and meaningless, for economic security. So at the end of many afternoons in the office, when the newspapers were long read, their political implications deciphered and ridiculed, visitors had been received, been supplied with *rakija* (domestic plum brandy), and left, some people would doze off, others would refrain from talking, and I would often find myself looking at the clock and being bored. Nikola, sleeping at the table, would occasionally wake up, spot my fidgeting, and say: ‘Why don’t you go? At least you can’. The fact that he could not, I suggest, implied a sense of both a physical and an ethical entrapment. Even in such naps, people experienced both nonchalance in their somewhat comfortable inclusion in the state, and an insight that life without work was not simply precarious, but morally diminishing.

For an anthropology of the demoralized

In this article, I have traced the intimate connections between state interventionism, changing valuations of labour, and an experience of demoralization in a firm in postsocialist Serbia. In the absence of an economic revival, and the simultaneous commodification and exception from commodification of labour, performance became a frame through which people understood the continued state financing of dilapidated industry and their firm’s strategies to stay on the public budget. But as long as they distinguished between ‘performed’ and ‘real’ work, gifted and earned, they experienced what Weber called a modern theodicy of fortune: that to feel good, the fortunate need to believe that their position is deserved. Without an unambiguous justification of ‘labour’ for their status – and yet having no economic alternatives to achieve a more righteous position – they came to see their semi-encompassment as lucky yet illegitimate, comfortable yet flawed. Redundancies therefore do not only differentiate the dispossessed (Kasmir & Carbonella 2008). They also make people doubt *their own* deservingness, rekindling desires for the ‘conduct of productivity’ (Bear 2015: 18) in their wake.

Here, one is tempted to follow many accounts currently in vogue that see the ‘will to work’ (Rudnyckij 2014) as a part of neoliberal ethos, where ‘subjects are lured to identify work as the culmination of the self, then are stripped of the possibility of this actualization’ (Molé 2013: 38). Although the Serbian public has recently witnessed a

surge of work ethos rhetoric (Mikuš 2015), I suggest that labour's continuing significance lies primarily not in discourse where it is denied, but in the meanings, practices, and body rhythms that surface in its lack. Waiting for the end of the working day with little or no activity, recalling the work schedules they knew from their past, or witnessing their bodies' seemingly autonomous attempts to kill time, people experienced their killing of time as something that gave them relative material security, while at the same time making them abandon their creative capacities. Staying employed clashed with *working well*; making a living undermined *making a life worth living* (Narotzky & Besnier 2014: S4). Through an affective blend of self-mockery and boredom, nonchalance and shame, people recognized their lack of freedom to stay in line with their moral projects – of which productivity was one.

But how can one lose the freedom to pursue the ethical? Through the notions of moral breakdown (Zigon 2007), ambivalence (Sykes 2009), compromise (Laidlaw 1995), and self-torment (Robbins 2004), a new anthropology of morality and ethics has described moral life as 'something more internally complex and ironic than the execution of a consistent project and the achievement of a self-consistent moral will' (Laidlaw 2014: 169). But curiously, in all their conundrums and failures, our interlocutors never seemed to lose the freedom that the new social theory afforded them. A *relative* freedom is always assumed for actors to 'draw on a particular socio-historical-cultural, as well as personal, repertoire in order to work-through the specific ethical dilemma of the moral breakdown' (Zigon 2007: 137). For those following Foucault, freedom is a necessary constituent of any power relations that do not rest on immediate, physical force (Laidlaw 2014: 97); while for those inspired by Weberian ethics, it is precisely through the choice between the conflicting values that freedom from mere 'reproduction' is achieved (Robbins 2007). So couldn't one simply say that Spare Parts' employees were never forced to do what they did, and that in a conflict between productivity and security, they simply chose the latter, thus exercising their reflective freedom to do so?

My argument is twofold. Firstly, employees of Spare Parts never experienced their working days as an exercise of choice. Rather, mock-labour felt like a chronic, unresolvable, while taken-for-granted state of being not-quite right, of claiming beyond one's limits, of living as a mockery of one's proclaimed beliefs. It is only through the encounters with outsiders and with an ethnographer, perhaps, that this situation could be rationalized as a 'conflict' of values, 'as if life offers us a set of commensurable values among which we can choose' (Das 2014: 490). Secondly, the moral failure did not originate in the contradictory assemblage of values people upheld, but in historical transformations of production and the structural incapacities people perceived to exceed them altogether. Unable to either meaningfully assert, or entirely dismiss, the ethos of work – while staying materially dependent on the status of a worker all the same – the case of Spare Parts' employees is one where deficits of 'structural' agency and of 'reflective' freedom inextricably entwine. I thus suggest putting issues of an 'anthropology of the good' back into the politico-economic frameworks it was meant to transcend. To take reflective 'freedom' seriously is to imagine situations where one is robbed of it, without reverting to the deterministic accounts of sociology as a 'science of unfreedom' (Bauman 1988: 5). Similarly, to acknowledge precarity fully means to go beyond the contemporary heroic representations of it in order to grasp how structural vulnerabilities can crush and alter the very 'ethical' aspiration at hand.

This simultaneous commitment to, and structural frailty to achieve, an integral moral self is precisely what various emerging ethnographies of the demoralized portray.

For example, while working among Syrian traders, Anderson (2013) found that in the overwhelming complicity in politico-economic schemes and the lack of any 'pure' position for social critique, his interlocutors developed 'narratives of involvement': self-scorning practices that drew attention to the complicit, embroiling, and morally diminishing nature of their participation in the Syrian state. If they put forward any notion of agency, it was by underlining their 'inability to say "I" without shame' (2013: 477). From Serbian sentiments of abnormality (Greenberg 2011), through to Moscow homeless acutely aware that in their lack of stable living arrangements, their moral claims are also inconsistent at best (Höjdestrand 2009), to the weakness of the will which Macedonian Roma dervishes connect with their marginality (Oustinova-Stjepanović 2017), what emerges is a world of people who claim to fail not because their ethical traditions are inherently unattainable, but because they see their own abilities to follow them as structurally and irreparably undermined. The resulting 'moral dispossession' (Hann 2011) is well caught by the double meaning of the word *demoralization*: a term that simultaneously refers to the lack of morale and lack of morals, being discouraged and being corrupted. Demoralization is a state where structural precarity affects one's reflective freedom as well; where one realizes the self-diminishing consequences of actions one grew to depend on; where one stays committed to the ethical stance one knows one is unable to fulfil.

To be demoralized, therefore, does not mean to give up. Rather, it articulates a moral imagination – of 'real' labour, 'pure' politics, and an 'integral' moral self – against which one's life is found wanting.¹⁴ Demoralization is therefore similar to Greenberg's concept of disappointment – a condition between former utopian notions of ethics and politics that are seen as no longer attainable, and the 'action that takes place nonetheless' (2014: 8). But while disappointed actors' awareness of contingency opens them to pragmatic experimentation in the present, demoralized actors stay demoralized in the face of the insight that they are fully involved in, and irrevocably changed by, the hegemonic relations they mock. In that sense, an anthropology of and for the demoralized would ask: under what circumstances does endurance turn into defeatism? How are confidence and hope sustained, and lost? What turns righteous laughter into 'laughter that has ceased to struggle' (Sloterdijk 1987: 305)? Demoralization seems to me to be inherently related to the slippery nature of life's ironies – to be an inability to tell whether one intentionally mocks the authoritative regimes of falsehood, or it is the circumstances that make people's otherwise serious attempts funny. In these conditions, one's moral self is ultimately surpassed by its circumstances, and 'the joke is on us' (Anderson 2013: 467).

In a recent review, Ortner (2016) has suggested that anthropologies of the 'good' make a refreshing complement to the 'dark anthropology' that has dominated since the 1980s, yet often erases issues of power and inequality altogether. While I argue against a distancing of structural and reflective matters, I am not suggesting that there is anything inherently depoliticizing in the 'ethical turn'. Instead, I propose that ethics might be the most privileged means through which we can observe the full spectrum of contemporary 'darkness', as well as any new lights. Because there is no pre-existing, morally intact actor onto whom empires exert their 'ruinous effects' (Stoler 2013: 2). People are aware of, participate in, and fully commit to the hegemonic processes they see as self-undoing. The insight of such ordinary defeat need not demoralize us, but can enable an analytical and political restart in the light of a premise that we are, first of all, *unfree* subjects. An anthropology of demoralization, involvement, and unfreedom

is deeply needed, as much as one focusing on endurance, freedom, and ethical striving.

NOTES

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¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout.

² Goran Marković's *Sabirni centar* (1989).

³ This was the main explanation for the Serbian state's politics regarding Kosovo's proclaimed independence among my informants and in wider Serbian publics in 2012.

⁴ I want to stress that Sonja's remark about rape was strictly metaphorical: although men and women alike used the phrase 'being fucked' as a synonym for powerlessness, there was no sign of actual sexual violence, or of anyone endorsing it.

⁵ Most famously by its export of Yugo cars to the United States in the 1980s.

⁶ NATO's intervention consisted of three months of air strikes on military, industrial, and public infrastructure targets to force Milošević's regime to withdraw from its anti-Albanian operations in Kosovo.

⁷ The company was *de facto* terminated in 2014.

⁸ On waiting as a wider mode of being after Yugoslavia, see Dawson (2009) and Jansen (2015).

⁹ This is especially so in the case of mass superfluity, where, as Ferguson (2015) has argued, dependency becomes a value that trumps (liberal or other) freedom.

¹⁰ As Ortner reminded us: 'In a relationship of power, the dominant often has something to offer, and sometimes a great deal . . . The subordinate thus has many grounds for ambivalence about resisting the relationship' (1995: 175).

¹¹ The creditor firms were promised a share in final sales.

¹² Such camouflage for state ministries continued in the 2000s as well: as a media planner from Kragujevac told me, a manager of a local firm in restructuring asked him to air his company's advertisements on stations and at times when they would most likely *not* be heard.

¹³ Gruja is here playfully alluding to the title of the Serbian bestseller *Godina prođe, dan nikad* (2011), written by the Serbian actor Žarko Laušević.

¹⁴ I am thankful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this suggestion.

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Pour une anthropologie des démoralisés : salaire d'État, simulacre de travail et absence de liberté dans une entreprise serbe

Résumé

La vertu de la précarité, l'idée que les personnes continuent à exercer leur imaginaire éthique dans les circonstances les plus difficiles, est un récent leitmotiv dans la littérature anthropologique. Bien qu'elle soit d'un non-déterminisme rafraîchissant, l'approche foucaldienne de la liberté qui guide cette vision ne tient pas compte des situations dans lesquelles la capacité de se conduire moralement est irréparablement et structurellement compromise. C'est le cas dans une entreprise serbe de vente de pièces détachées automobiles, dans laquelle les politiques de financement d'emplois non rentables ont peu à peu plongé les ouvriers dans des performances ritualisées quotidiennes de la productivité pour l'État : ce que l'auteur appelle un simulacre de travail. Incapables de parvenir à une réalisation significative de l'éthos du travail comme d'y renoncer, les ouvriers stagnent dans un mélange de nonchalance et d'échec, percevant leur simulacre de travail comme une source de sécurité matérielle en même temps que la renonciation à leurs capacités créatives, une caricature de Moi moral. L'auteur invite à concilier les anthropologies de l'éthique et de la précarité à travers la notion de démoralisation, état dans lequel les déficits de l'agencéité structurelle et les limites de la liberté réflexive se recourent.

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