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FROM SELF-MANAGEMENT TO POSTSOCIALISM: INDUSTRIAL WORKERS' SILENCED EXPERIENCES OF DISPOSSESSION IN SLOVENIA**1

Abstract. *The article explores post-socialist political and economic transformations in Slovenia through textile workers' experiences. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research, a gap is revealed between dominant macroeconomic narratives and everyday experiences of being dispossessed. It is argued that self-management constituted a political economy rooted in collective labour, long-term sacrifice, and shared investment in socially owned property. Postsocialist restructuring dismantled the institutions and the material world people had built together. Deindustrialisation thereby functioned as structural violence, erasing class conflict from public discourse, and concealing the historical, social and affective dimensions of dispossession.*

Keywords: *industrial labour, postsocialism, dispossession, moral economy.*

INTRODUCTION

In this article, post-socialist industrial restructuring in Slovenia is explored by shifting the focus from macroeconomic indicators to industrial workers' experiences, particularly in the textile sector. While macroeconomic measures indicated a successful transition (Mencinger 2001; Ferfila and Phillips 2010), production workers expressed material and symbolic impoverishment, the devaluation of both their labour and themselves. The narrative of a "successful transition" was not neutral. It erased social conflict, legitimised new power relations, in turn silencing the voices of workers, dismissing them as outdated and nostalgic, while framing their suffering as a necessary price of progress.

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To challenge this framing, the article considers long-term ethnographic research (2002-present), with a focus on the closure of the Mura textile factory in 2009. It highlights emotional and social dimensions of economic transformation and argues for an anthropological understanding of the economy as socially embedded, shaped by values, norms and social relations, and not just markets and institutions. Workers' experiences of deindustrialisation reflect broader struggles over their value, recognition and belonging. Their claims of injustice are not backward-looking, and instead articulate ongoing social conflict and demands for the recognition of labour and structural dispossession.

The article delves into how these experiences have been interpreted, silenced or delegitimised in public discourse. It is argued that workers' loss should be understood as dispossession, a form of structural violence that has stripped them of their livelihoods, political agency, and the material foundations of their life; namely, what they managed to establish through collective labour in self-management.

While industry still employs nearly one-quarter of the workforce (Slovenska industrijska strategija 2021, 7), entire regions and sectors, notably the textile industry, have almost vanished. Even where it remains, workers describe a profound sense of decline, the erosion of working-class communities and severing of ties between factories and local areas.

To understand these complex experiences, the article takes an emic methodological approach to deindustrialisation, grounded in the experiences of those affected. Analytically, however, deindustrialisation is not considered to be an endpoint. It is a contested and uneven process, influenced by global capital, cycles of investments and disinvestment, and shifting geographies of development (High et al. 2017; Smith 2008; Vaccaro et al. 2016).

The article thereby contributes to anthropological and interdisciplinary debates on the affective and embodied dimensions of deindustrialisation and the structural violence of economic transformation (High 2021). It builds on post-socialist scholarship that critiques transition discourses as political and technocratic, and rooted in global circuits of power and capital (Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Kalb 2000; Podvršič 2023). Deindustrialisation studies that trace the long-term consequences of industrial decline on affected communities are also considered (Cowie and Heathcott 2003; Linkon 2018).

This article does not refer to all industrial workers in Slovenia, nor claim that the textile sector is representative of the whole industrial sector. Differences shaped by age, gender, class, region and ethnicity are acknowledged, while focus is given to a shared "industrial structure of feeling" (Bonfiglioli 2019; Byrne 2002; Strangleman 2012), formed from socialist industrialisation and self-management, which continues to impact workers' perceptions of dignity, value and loss. To grasp these experiences, the article explores the historical moral economies impacted by this structure of feeling and the transformations brought about by postsocialism and neoliberalisation.

The first section of the article outlines the methodological approach adopted. The second section investigates dominant narratives which have silenced workers' experiences. The third section presents a personal account of deindustrialisation to stress its emotional and embodied dimensions. The fourth section turns to the historical experience of factory labour and the socialist moral economy. In the final section, dispossession is explored as structural violence.

METHODOLOGY

The article is based on long-term ethnographic and historical research, including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and informal conversations with textile workers. Workers' subjective experiences are viewed as being socially situated and historically shaped. The material is not analysed through the decoding model since the analysis follows an ethnographic methodology, which emphasises interpretive and iterative engagement with the full body of material (interviews, life stories, fieldnotes). These are treated as situated accounts embedded both in each other and within broader historical, social and affective contexts, rather than isolated texts. The article also draws on social memory studies (e.g., Connerton 1989; Portelli 1991) to look at how workers' narratives – marked by the past, informed by the present, and oriented to imagined futures – are relational and context-dependent. Accordingly, the analysis does not treat memories as reflections of a fixed past or evidence of historical 'truth', but focuses on the meanings that emerge in contemporary contexts where anticipations of the future intersect with what Raymond Williams called "structures of feeling", that is, historically specific modes of feeling a particular period. The analysis thus underscores contextualisation and reflexivity with a view to understand how workers navigate competing ideologies and make sense of their experiences. The aim is not to seek a single, unified account but to highlight the multilayeredness of workers' narratives together with the tensions, ambiguities and contradictions that arise through lived experience.

Most of the interlocutors were women given that they formed the majority of the textile workforce in production. However, men were also interviewed, including foremen, maintenance workers, managers, office workers, and retired, laid off, or still employed professionals. The research began in 2000 in Maribor, a city then strongly affected by industrial decline. The initial contact was unplanned. While working at the Technical Museum of Slovenia, the author was approached by the Tabor textile factory which was offering to donate some machinery. When visiting the factory, the author was struck by the workers' deep sense of belonging, which profoundly shaped the future direction of the research.

Between 2000 and 2024, the author conducted interviews in various textile factories – some already closed (e.g., IBI, BPT, Svila, MTT, Mura, Tekstilana), some in the process of shutting down (e.g., Jutranjka, Delta (Ptuj)), and others still operating at the time of research (e.g., Novoteks and Induplati before their bankruptcy, Predilnica Litija). The author revisited several interlocutors over the

years. In addition to interviews, the research draws on minutes of workers' council meetings (Dekoratívna and Pletenina, Ljubljana), local and national newspapers, factory bulletins, magazines, and film footage from archives of the national broadcaster RTV.

INDUSTRIAL WORKERS AND THE POLITICS OF POSTSOCIALISM

The dominant macroeconomic and public discourse in Slovenia has long framed the postsocialist transition as a largely successful process defined by democratisation, privatisation, stabilisation, and limited foreign ownership. Rooted in modernisation theory, this perspective assumes a progressive, linear shift from socialism to liberal democracy and capitalism. Socialism is portrayed as repressive and inefficient, while the transition appears to be natural and necessary. The collapse of Yugoslavia is hence attributed to internal failure rather than global economic restructuring.

The mentioned perspective has shaped public, policy and academic debates. Since this article draws primarily on research in history, sociology, and especially anthropology, the following remarks are limited to these fields. Early historiography focused on political democratisation, privatisation, and national sovereignty, yet rarely questioned the implicit assumption of the transition paradigm that democratisation and market liberalisation were necessary, inevitable, and progressive breaks from socialism. Such a framing obscured the social and cultural dimensions of socialism and the complex experiences of dismantling it. More recent scholarship has broadened the picture by examining diverse actors, political multiplicity, and social conflict. Nevertheless, it has still not directly confronted the ideological assumptions of transition discourse, particularly regarding class and dispossession.

Industrial sociology tends to prioritise labour policy, labour market participation, and trade unions, while pushing aside those excluded from the new order. Anthropology and ethnology in Slovenia drew on international postsocialist studies and have made some interventions by challenging the dominant macro narrative and foregrounding everyday life². Yet, attention to class and the political economy of labour has largely been sidelined in favour of identity, nationalism and migration.

Since the late 1990s, international scholarship on postsocialism has regarded transition as a politico-economic project embedded in global capitalism and development paradigms, challenging its apparent neutrality. Rejecting linear notions of progress, it has highlighted ruptures, continuities, and unequal power relations (Burawoy and Verdery, 1999; Kalb 2000). This article aligns with such a critique by considering industrial workers and deindustrialisation. It shows how the transitional discourse in Slovenia based on a post-industrial paradigm

² On the development of postsocialist studies in Slovenia, including the post-Yugoslav space, see Petrović 2015.

developed with an antisocialist orientation, casting industrial labour as backward, and legitimising new hierarchies.

Following EU accession in 2004 and the Lisbon Strategy, neoliberal discourse has come to dominate development agendas, labour and social policy, and public debate, reinforcing earlier technocratic and depoliticised logics. Accentuating self-responsibility, flexibility, and entrepreneurship, these frameworks further obscure structural inequalities, shift risks over to individuals, and weaken collective agency. Vulnerability is reframed as a personal failure (Kovačič 2008; Leskošek 2011³), reshaping institutional practice and workers' self-perception.

Despite these powerful discourses that individualise the effects of economic transformation and the social and emotional consequences of deindustrialisation, the topic remains largely underexplored. Macroeconomic explanations stress the loss of Yugoslav markets, restructuring failures, and global competition, while neglecting the lived effects on workers and their communities. Deindustrialisation is framed as natural and complete.

This view draws on the post-industrial paradigm, which assumes an unproblematic shift from manufacturing to a knowledge economy. Like transition discourse, it presumes a total break with the past and the beginning of something entirely new, obscuring persistent inequalities and the afterlives of industrial labour, traces that endure in memory, infrastructure, and social ties (Vaccaro et al. 2022). The paradigm also overlooks that manufacturing has not disappeared, but transformed.

In Slovenia, the post-industrial paradigm became institutionalised during the late 1980s and early 1990s, tied to market reforms and a clear antisocialist stance. Industrial labour and the working class became associated with the discredited socialist past, while managerial and entrepreneurial knowledge was promoted as modern and future-oriented. This shift reconfigured social hierarchies, valorising cognitive and managerial work and devaluing manual and industrial labour, in turn reinforcing new exclusions.

These frameworks obscured the ongoing social consequences held by factory closures and industrial decline. For the workers interviewed in this study, deindustrialisation was not a past event, but an ongoing disruption. Linkon's (2018) metaphor of deindustrialisation as "radioactive waste" highlights this aspect by showing that even when workers do find new jobs the absence of the factory continues to shape their values and futures. Walley's (2012) account of her father's layoff captures the intergenerational trauma and persistent search for meaning in the wake of industrial collapse. These works show that industrial work was more than an economic transaction and instead embodied dignity, skill and belonging. Its loss led to material insecurity along with identity crises and social disintegration.

³ On orientation to self-activation policies in the labour market, see Svetlik and Batić 2001.

Williams' concept of *structure of feeling* explains how industrial worlds shape subjectivities even after their material base has started to erode. Williams emphasised lived meanings and values that are felt and endure beyond the political economic changes, forming a generational and collective experience (Williams 1997, 249–56). This concept is employed in deindustrialisation studies (Byrne 2002; Bonfiglioli 2019; Strangleman 2012) and provides a lens for understanding how workers interpret ongoing changes through attachments to industrial social and moral worlds.

Such a framework helps to interpret three prominent themes emerging from the interviews in this study: a strong sense of belonging, deep investment in labour, and feelings of betrayal and dispossession. Often dismissed as nostalgia in public discourse, these feelings represent a shared experience with roots in the self-management and ongoing post-socialist transformations. The following chapters show how such entanglements of past and present disrupt dominant transition narratives that depict the shift from socialism to capitalism as linear and unidirectional. Yet, the public discourse has largely ignored these lived experiences. Since the 1990s, the media's coverage has focused on the financial aspect, business, profits, and managerial expertise at the expense of workers' voices. With such a focus, strikes became cast more as a problem than political acts and striking workers not as agents but as burdens of transition or its passive victims. Even when they were acknowledged, their criticisms were reduced to nostalgic grievances, sentimental expressions of the 'good old days' of the bygone socialist era, and not as grounded critiques of structural injustice. Within this framing, workers' struggles became seen as collateral damage in the narrative of progress that viewed factory closures as inevitable steps toward modernisation.

Portrayals like that described above were not neutral. They were ideological, shaping public perceptions, and workers' self-image. Structural inequalities were recoded as classed narratives which portrayed industrial labour as backward and inflexible (Munt 2000; Skeggs 1997). In postsocialist Slovenia, this devaluation was intensified by associating industrial work with socialism, excluding workers from the new imaginaries of progress. These processes had a profound impact on already damaged communities and further eroded workers' social- and self-respect.

Seen as remnants of a past era, industrial workers were subjected to retraining programmes intended to 'modernise' them. The author witnessed one such course in the production of the Litija Spinning factory in 2004 while conducting the fieldwork. Another programme was described to the author following the collapse of Mura in 2009 (Vodopivec 2021, 161–63). Only a few useful skills were offered by these programmes. Their primary goal was to reshape workers' subjectivities, often in infantilising and humiliating ways. They resembled dispossession masked as rehabilitation rather than empowerment, illustrating how neoliberal policies had sidelined workers' voices and were actively seeking to remake their identities.

The author's reading of media and public discourse treats nostalgic depictions of workers' emotions as political interventions. Following Dominic Boyer's critique (2010), in this article postsocialist nostalgia is approached as a political symptom. While Boyer focuses on East–West dynamics showing how Western discourses framed Eastern European nostalgia as sentimental, regressive, and merely a coping mechanism, similar logics structure Slovenian public discourse. Here, nostalgia attributed to working-class subjects acts as a form of economic and cultural violence. It silences critique by recasting resistance to deindustrialisation and systemic injustice as backwardness or emotional overreaction. In this way, nostalgia becomes a political tool that legitimises entrepreneurial transformation and reinforces the marginalisation of industrial workers.

Anthropology plays a key role in countering such narratives by focusing on experiences. As the section below shows, deindustrialisation is not a closed chapter. It is an ongoing, contested and emotionally charged process.

ETHNOGRAPHY OF RESTRUCTURING

Silva Mlinarič worked for 25 years as a seamstress in Mura's menswear department in Ljutomer. When we met in 2011, 2 years after the company went into bankruptcy, she described how feelings of being exhausted had long preceded the closure, chaotic reorganisations, increasing quotas, unbearable heat, noise, and tension. "We were like chickens under light bulbs"⁴, she said, recalling the 42-degree heat in production department. As pressure mounted, relations soured, and conflicts spread beyond the shop floor into the community in which most workers were living.

Silva refused to stay silent. She confronted supervisors over the unsafe conditions, but was ignored. As her fatigue grew, she sought medical help, where she met other Mura workers struggling with similar problems. They, too, were grappling with the outcomes of changes typically described as work intensification. A psychologist from Ormož Hospital told me in an interview in 2011 that she had been treating Mura workers individually since the 1990s. These were, however, not isolated crises, but embodied expressions of a structural breakdown; devaluation, disrespect, and fear of the future. Yet, they were treated by politics, managers, the broader public, society at large, within the neoliberal discourse as personal failures, not as collective consequences of systemic transformation.

Silva developed carpal tunnel syndrome – a seamstress injury shaped by repetitive labour and the intensified, reorganised work during the factory's final years. Her pain was dismissed by factory management and the occupational doctor⁵. She paid a private specialist who immediately performed surgery. During medical leave, she was surveilled by detectives hired by the factory. Upon

⁴ Interview, Murska Sobota, June 2011. All interviewees provided informed consent. Several chose not to be anonymised, and their requests to use their real names have been respected.

⁵ Despite binding EU regulations, Slovenia lacked a legal framework for occupational and work-related diseases other than asbestosis, a legislative void that persisted until 2023 (UL RS 25, 24.2.2023).

returning to work, the conditions remained unchanged, and her injury eventually affected her entire left side, making her increasingly unemployable.

Nonetheless, the dominant discourse shaped by the self-responsibility paradigm insisted it was up to her to 'reinvent herself'. Within neoliberal logic, the body is expected to be self-reliant, mobile, and flexible. This logic obscures the structural contradictions between labour and health. Workers like Silva were stripped of employment but also of their body and capacity to work, deindustrialised in the most literal sense (compare Storey 2017, 60–62).

After the bankruptcy, Silva, then 42, returned to school and excelled. Her confidence was renewed and she felt a sense of belonging to the new 'knowledge-based' society. She dreamed of studying gerontology, although age (she was considered too old for the labour market), chronic pain, and lack of resources prevented that. Becoming 'just a housewife' was hard to accept. For women of her generation, paid work meant independence. Its loss signalled a return to being dependent on husbands, parents, or the state, which was experienced as going backwards.

By the time Mura closed in 2009, the workers were already depleted financially, physically and emotionally. Wages had long been low, savings minimal, credit inaccessible. The closure, while having its own specificities, echoed broader patterns of factory shutdowns. Notwithstanding years of accumulated strain, the final collapse came as a traumatic shock. Workers described paralysis, fear, shame and humiliation. They felt injustice and dispossession, but public discourse urged them to forget and "move on" (Vodopivec 2021, 70).

The closure was publicly framed as a tragedy, yet the outrage focused on the symbolic loss of Mura as a national brand, not the workers. The official economic discourse saw Mura as socialist relic unfit for a modern, competitive economy (Tajnikar and Pušnik 2009, 12, 13). The rhetoric of inevitability depoliticised its closure, framing it as a rational step toward progress.

Still, for workers like Silva, it was a violent rupture. Most lost their jobs, while a 'healthy core' of 600 was retained, implicitly suggesting the rest were expendable. The term "healthy core" is a corporate metaphor that treats workers like an infection to be removed for the sake of the organisation's survival (Stein 1998, 8)⁶. The restructuring fragmented the workforce; some received severance, others were rehired on precarious contracts, and many were discarded. This division fostered competition and conflict, eroded solidarity, deepened feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Even though many workers blamed Mura's management, the state, a part owner of the company, was seen as the ultimate betrayer. While the state plays a crucial role in all my interlocutors' narratives across Slovenia, with Mura its betrayal was far more severe. It not only failed to protect workers' rights, but its active involvement in the bankruptcy raised suspicions of intentional

⁶ For similar observations, see Vogrinc (2009) and Močnik (2010).

negligence. Moreover, some workers were transferred to a newly established company without any capital just before the bankruptcy, without an explanation or clear criteria for their selection, which caused a financial loss. The author's interlocutor, entitled to €14,000 in severance pay, never received it. Like about 1,900 others, she filed a lawsuit, only to learn there was no legal basis for their claims. In effect, the workers had paid for their own dispossession because the state not merely failed to protect their rights but had a significant role in their exploitation (Vodopivec 2021, 213–40).

These were not just economic losses as they also amounted to deep political experiences. Still, they were individualised and stripped of collective meaning. Public discourse, and much of academia failed to take them seriously. The privatisation of suffering reflected broader patterns of depoliticisation in Slovenian postsocialism. Even when suspicions of fraud emerged, they were quickly overshadowed by the celebratory discourse of economic regeneration, one that focused on firms and not the people left behind. Prime Minister Borut Pahor praised Mura's "healthy core" as a phoenix⁷ rising from the ashes (Gerenčer 2010, 1).

Clarke's study of Moulinex (2015) shows the importance of public interpretations of factory closure for working-class communities. In France, workers and their local communities, including academics, activists and lawyers, challenged the dominant narrative of the closure. The political mobilisation led to securing compensation and providing an alternative interpretation. In contrast, such efforts in Slovenia were fragmented. Competing interpretations of factory shutdowns nonetheless remain a persistent, latent problem that continues to divide former industrial communities.

A study by the Clinical Institute for Occupational Health confirmed long-lasting physical and psychological harm (Draksler et al. 2018) caused by Mura's restructuring, warning of cumulative effects and structural dangers. In any case, these findings triggered no policy changes. The economic need for restructuring continues to justify mistreatment while social suffering is individualised and depoliticised. Workers' emotional experiences are typically dismissed as excessive sensitivity or attributed to their class, gender and age, and not recognised as expressions of structural violence.

There was little interest in exploring the deeper causes of Mura workers' experiences, leaving the structural conditions of their suffering invisible and their emotional pain misunderstood. This points to the need to study the historical context behind these experiences.

⁷ The phoenix metaphor originates from corporate language and in Slovenia was promoted by Maks Tajnikar (2000, 264–66).

SELF-MANAGEMENT AND THE MORAL ECONOMY

To fully consider the emotional and social dimensions of deindustrialisation, we must consider the historical role of factory work in shaping workers' identities and their sense of belonging. The analysis builds on ethnographic attention to how self-management was lived and understood in everyday practice. The phrase "our factory" deserves closer attention as it does not directly reflect ownership in the sense of private property regimes. It refers to a deep sense of belonging rooted in experiences of self-management, influenced by commitment, solidarity, collective effort, and shared sacrifice. As the Litija Spinning factory's former director noted⁸, this sense of belonging did not come into being by itself; it had to be developed and nurtured through meetings, bulletins, celebrations, and welfare arrangements.

Recent anthropological debates have revisited the concept of moral economy to stress how political and economic relations are always embedded in social expectations, obligations, and shared understandings of legitimacy and deservingness (Palomera and Vetta 2016; Yalcin-Heckmann 2022). Rather than treating moral economy as an ideal grounded in justice, fairness or morality, these approaches emphasise the way it emerges from historically situated economic practices, institutional contexts, and experiences. This article draws on the concept to show that the moral economy in socialist Yugoslavia was shaped by practices and ideologies of labour and self-management, becoming central to how workers understood their role in the factory and society. These frameworks were not merely ideological or abstract, but lived and negotiated in everyday practices, impacting workers' understandings of what was legitimate, deserved, and socially valuable. The factory was not just a workplace. It was a moral and social world where ideas of recognition and social value were actively negotiated in everyday life.

To grasp why the loss of work and recognition was experienced so deeply, we must look at historically rooted expectations of social contribution, legitimacy and reciprocity. Although the interlocutors rarely mentioned self-management explicitly, they spoke of "having a voice", "having a place" and "being considered", reflecting ideas promoted by the system, particularly as regards "participation" and the "criteria of labour investment" on which social property was based. These expressions reveal an experience of participation shaped by formal structures, such as workers' councils, and everyday practices of collective effort, solidarity, and mutual dependence. While sociological studies at the time (Arzenšek 1981; Rus 1985; Rus and Adam 1986) noted gaps between worker power and director control, they also showed that workers valued transparency and fairness more than decision-making. The experience of self-management was, apart from the institutional design, also influenced by the expectations that arose from lived relations of labour, effort, and long-lasting norms.

⁸ Interview, Litija, September 2003.

Participation took many forms. Factory bulletins, workers' council records, and interviews show that despite differences concerning class, regions, gender and age, workers generally used the workers' councils to raise concerns about their immediate work and living conditions. Numerous grievances in these reports reveal tensions in socialist production, at the same time as showing that workers' councils served as mechanisms for articulating and addressing workplace problems (Vodopivec 2025a).

In practice, directors relied heavily on workers, especially in labour-intensive sectors like textile, which faced material shortages. The dedication of workers in these situations, which demanded hard work and overtime, fostered a factory collective. Workers in self-management often identified more strongly with their factory, calling themselves "Muraši" (for a similar case, see Musić 2021, 81), than with class, an identity that extended beyond factory walls, deeply shaping local life and economic well-being. Factory labour was widely seen as the foundation of local development.

Factory life involved navigating various forms of discipline from assembly lines and strict hierarchies to self-management practices, alongside generational, class, and gender expectations, all while balancing family and personal aspirations. Making up the majority in textile production, women were placed in dependent positions, although they could negotiate authority through institutional mechanisms. These challenges were often unwelcome, particularly when they disrupted group dynamics, mutual reliance, and the ideal of a hard-working woman. Interviews show that production work was far from alienating; it involved tacit knowledge, deep engagement, and embodied investment, creating value through the practice of work.

For many, self-management was an abstract concept, yet their interviews reveal meanings impacted by the ideology and lived realities of work. Workers understood their labour as vital for the factory as well as for wider social and economic life since factories funded welfare, housing, and social services. These issues were frequently discussed at various meetings, making industrial labour a cornerstone of daily life, preserving its value even as knowledge-based work became more prominent after the 1970s. Looking beyond formal structures reveals how self-management produced a moral economy grounded in lived norms and entitlements.

This moral economy was shaped by the increasing autonomy of factories from the 1960s onward, and articulated and negotiated through work and discussions in workers' councils. While choices over wages and investments were constrained, these ongoing discussions and everyday rituals embedded self-management in experience. These interactions influenced the sense of obligation and entitlement, providing a moral framework in which they could assess and criticise the system and its practice. Workers sometimes accepted lower wages to fund modernisation. Even though such decisions could be influenced by directors, the key was their involvement in the process. Even when discussions

entailed disagreement, frustration or protest, the very fact such debates emerged was significant. What today might seem like a loss was then experienced as an investment in the future, deepening attachment to both the factory and the community.

Already limited by taxes and administrative constraints, participatory practices even weakened during the period of austerity in the 1980s. The textile industry was systematically underfunded, underpaid (Glas 1987, 29, 30), and more heavily taxed “for the common good” (Bešter and Bregar 1977, 59). This led to persistently lower wages. While workers partly embraced their role in local development and the Yugoslav “common good”, they were also aware of the uneven distribution of the burden. Women, in particular, carried multiple burdens; undervalued at work, contributing more toward social standards, while also caring for families and households. Over time, this logic of giving without adequate return caused exhaustion and disillusionment.

Yet, at the time these investments held meaning. Value was not only material. It was also created through long-term engagement, collective work, solidarity, and sacrifice. The latter should not be seen as passive endurance but as productive, future-oriented action. Such ideas of contribution and entitlement affected how workers understood their economic role and expectations. The idea of social property, though abstract, was rooted in such an embodied meaning of factory labour. It was grounded in the right to manage based on one’s labour, meaning that those who worked had the right to decide on income distribution, internal and external investments, and wages. While the actual influence of production workers may be debated, they were included in procedures. They also claimed this right. This fostered a sense of entitlement central to the moral economy, generating expectations that workers’ investments would be recognised.

These moral claims became visible in strikes, which besides wages addressed violations of shared norms and rights (Thompson 1971), with workers protesting against “illegitimate accumulation” (Rudi Kyovsky et al. 1968, in Kavčič et al. 1991, 101), and expressed concerns about entitlements, obligations, tolerable inequalities, and dignity. The concept of moral economy helps understand the dispossession discussed in the following section as a break in expectations formed through the experience of self-management.

DISPOSSESSION AND DEINDUSTRIALISATION

Using the concept of dispossession, this article presents deindustrialisation as an ongoing process that fragments working-class solidarities and marginalises their political claims. Grounded in practices and promises of self-management, these claims did not disappear overnight, and have influenced how workers have made sense of what was taken from them.

Rooted in Marxist theory (Harvey 2003; Kasmir and Carbonella 2014), dispossession describes how capitalism accumulates wealth through expropriation from peasants and Indigenous peoples to industrial workers. Although contexts

differ, a common thread remains: dispossession is a form of structural violence that severs people from the means for their social reproduction.

In Slovenia's post-self-management context, dispossession was not only about job losses. It was also deeply political and material, with workers being stripped of their nominal roles in factories and of futures they had helped to build. To fully understand this, we must consider the moral economy of self-management, workers' understanding of how they built their factories and communities through labour and sacrifice. The dismantling of factories therefore unravelled these political and social arrangements. In the postsocialist market transition, past collective achievements became devalued within the new moral and economic order.

Dispossession, in this sense, extends beyond the immediate consequences of failed or corrupt privatisations, 'wild' privatisations, managerial exhaustion, or buyouts, the forms usually understood as robbery. It was more than the loss of jobs or assets, and instead marked a deeper social rupture, highlighting a broader political failure, the new economic order's inability to recognise or incorporate the value, worth and sacrifices of workers' labour and investments that had defined the moral economy of self-management. This was not simply an economic shift but a profound cultural and political rupture, one that disorganised and displaced the working class by eroding its political, social and symbolic recognition. Workers' investments became illegible and irrelevant. What was once a shared accomplishment and a material foundation was erased or devalued, leaving workers materially and symbolically dispossessed.

Don Kalb described dispossession in Poland as rooted in the collapse of the intellectuals–working class alliance, and the transfer of social property to transnational capital (2009). In the Slovenian case, however, such an alliance is less clear and would require careful historical investigation. What can be observed is a more fragile and complex alignment between workers and critical intellectuals that began to emerge in the late 1980s, united by their critique of the federal state, austerity measures, and bureaucracy. Notwithstanding this shared discontent, their underlying agendas diverged.

The massive strike movement after 1987 was not a call to abolish socialism or self-management but an expression of frustration with its implementation, especially inefficiencies within the Basic Organisations of Associated Labour (BOALs). These strikes mainly resisted austerity measures imposed by external creditors, which introduced wage freezes, inflation, and fiscal burdens with disproportionate effects on productive sectors (Prinčič and Borak 2006, 437–85). Austerity policies also reduced workers' participation in self-management (Podvršič 2023, 62–87). Discontent targeted federal policies, bureaucratic systems, and internal distributive arrangements, such as subsidies to unprofitable firms and underdeveloped regions.

The industrial working-class critique resonated somewhat with intellectuals and reformist politicians, yet at other points clashed. While workers framed their struggles in moral-economic terms rooted in socialist legacies, arguing for

efficiency criteria based on industrial labour, critical intellectuals, who formed a diverse alternative scene at the end of the 1980s⁹, could neither understand nor support the socialist iconography emerging in these protests (Vodopivec 2025 b), promoting alternative visions that challenged labour ideology itself. The ideology of the new social movements was “sharply oriented against the labor movement, and this negation became a constitutive part of their self-definition, while simultaneously remaining blind to the legacies of older movements” (Kuzmanić 1994, 161).

Many industrial workers supported the formation of an independent Slovenian state, hoping it would offer solutions to the deepening economic and political crisis. Yet workers’ hopes were soon dashed because they were increasingly relegated as the new social and economic order took shape. Although transitions differed across postsocialist states, the symbolic and material displacement of the working class was similarly profound. Liberal regimes reshaped class relations, and dispossession unfolded via this reconfiguration and the transfer of social property into individual ownership. The marginalisation entailed was accompanied by significant shifts in social values and political discourse.

A 1988 opinion poll revealed growing hostility toward inefficient firms, while, for the first time, efficiency overtook equality as the dominant value. Most Slovenians supported “a new model of democratic, market-oriented socialism grounded in political and ownership pluralism” (Frančeskin 1988, 8). These ideological shifts were, however, not spontaneous reactions. One study by the Criminology Institute observed how they were actively promoted by managers, politicians and intellectuals, who framed labour discipline as essential for the market transition (Vodopivec 1991, 211). Yugoslav sociologists were among those reinforcing these values, legitimising the restructuring efforts and strengthening the emerging post-industrial paradigm (Cvek 2021). This coalition impacted the ideological and policy framework of the postsocialist transition, driving labour reforms that ultimately marginalised industrial workers.

In this context, it is argued here that the then defenders of labour were not critical intellectuals or new political parties, but the reformed Confederation of Trade Unions of Slovenia (ZSSS), established in April 1990. Until then operating under the umbrella of the Alliance of the Socialist People, ZSSS had already started to act as a workers’ organisation even before being formally restructured (see also Mesmann 2012). The confederation’s transformation was driven by political pressure from both the emerging intelligentsia and workers themselves, responding to the rapidly shifting political and economic landscape.

We should move beyond a binary view of trade unions as having been either Party-affiliated or independent. The emergence of labour representatives, notably the reformed independent unions, was a complex political process involving

⁹ Martin Pogačar (2025) challenges the singular understanding of ‘alternative’ as a term and movement (see also Mastnak 2023).

multiple hierarchies and coalitions on different levels, including workers, professionals, managers, intellectuals, and members of former socialist institutions such as the League of Socialist Youth, who promoted new unions (independent of the Party and opposed to formal trade union structures), as well as representatives from the older union apparatus.

Even prior to the reforms, the editor of *Delavska enotnost*, a journal published by ZSSS, criticised the draft Enterprise Act for “dispossessing workers by depriving them of their formal power... while intellectuals were busy debating tactics for their own struggle for power” (Kavčič 1988a). The editor was also critical of the haste with which the law was being adopted, warning that it was pushed through so quickly that “workers wouldn’t even have time to read it, let alone respond” (Kavčič 1988b, 4).

Implementation of the Act triggered widespread layoffs, bankruptcies, and the erosion of production workers’ rights and status (Žnidaršič Kranjc 1994). In this rapidly changing context, it was the trade union (and that was even before its formal transformation) which advocated minimum wage legislation, standardised layoff criteria (e.g., for technological redundancies), and minimum labour standards. After the legalisation of strikes in 1988, union representatives increasingly stood with workers during bankruptcies, offering legal aid, supporting collective and later individual lawsuits, fighting for unpaid wages and contributions or, in the case of the 1990 Lilet strike in Maribor, joining the occupation of the factory. These efforts laid the groundwork for collective agreements and union demands in the 1990s. Wage disparities and the loss of labour protections added to workplace and regional inequalities, intensifying dispossession despite the emerging alliances between the state, capital, and trade unions in the 1990s.

This process unfolded within the broader context of parliamentary democratisation and the formation of tripartite bargaining structures in the 1990s (Stanojević 1994, 2000), a discourse that often masked the ongoing economic exclusion and social marginalisation. On one hand, trade unions were helping workers in concrete situations and mobilising labour power. On the other hand, they negotiated labour power while accepting the dominant post-industrial and postsocialist transition narrative. The erosion of working-class power occurred through negotiation, with trade unions at the centre of these compromises especially in relation to the rising national bourgeoisie (Bembič 2018).

CONCLUSION

Understanding of the postsocialist transition cannot rely solely on macroeconomic indicators and capital calculations. It must consider people’s experiences, class reconfigurations, inequalities, and the diverse contexts of workers, places and regions. Only by including these perspectives can we grasp the complexity of social transformation.

This article argues that postsocialist transformation should be framed via the lens of dispossession, not simply as the loss of employment or assets, but as the erosion of social life, a moral economy rooted in collective labour, long-term investment, and socialist visions of futurity. Moral economy should be understood as a political economy grounded in specific norms, values, and social arrangements. In this context, deindustrialisation is not a natural endpoint of economic activity but a form of structural violence characterised by political invisibility, social devaluation, material and bodily dispossession. Ethnographic narratives, such as Silva's story, reveal how dispossession included bodily and symbolic loss, and reflected a deeper social rupture.

The presented research shows that dispossession in Slovenia unfolded in multiple, intertwined forms. It exposes a broader political failure, the new economic order's inability to recognise or incorporate the value and worth of (industrial) labour. The concept of moral economy helps with understanding dispossession that goes beyond the material, as a rupture in historically grounded expectations of entitlement, recognition and reciprocity, expectations influenced by the experience of self-management.

The loss was uneven given that the transition evolved in different ways. Factories restructured even within the trade union negotiations, and while some sectors continued to negotiate, labour-intensive sectors like the textile industry were gradually dismantled. This was driven by a prevailing discourse of globalisation, presented as inevitable, neutral and unquestionable. Such understanding impacted public narratives and structured how the economic restructuring, and the dispossession it entailed, was carried out.

These complexities call for ethnographic and anthropological approaches attentive to the moral, embodied and situated dimensions of dispossession and sensitive to diverse cultural understandings and local explanations. In line with anthropology's commitments to reflexivity and situated knowledge, this research critically reflects on the discursive fields and knowledge regimes that affect both the object of study and the researcher's position. It challenges the political, institutional and disciplinary frameworks underpinning key concepts like "transition", understood not as a neutral but as a historically and politically situated category shaped by normative and epistemological assumptions. Such a critical perspective is essential for revealing the experiences of dispossession and the moral economy of industrial labour, offering a nuanced understanding of the cultural and political ruptures of the postsocialist transformation.

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OD SAMOUPRAVLJANJA DO POSTSOCIALIZMA: UTIŠANE IZKUŠNJE RAZLASTITVE INDUSTRIJSKIH DELAVCEV V SLOVENIJI

Povzetek. Članek raziskuje postsocialistične politične in ekonomske preobrazbe v Sloveniji skozi izkušnje tekstilnih delavk in delavcev. Na podlagi dolgotnega etnografskega raziskovanja razkriva razkorak med prevladujočimi makroekonomskimi naracijami in vsakdanjimi izkušnjami razlašanja. Poudarja, da je bilo samoupravljanje oblika politične ekonomije, utemeljene na kolektivnem delu, dolgoročnem odrekanju in skupnih vlaganjih v družbeno lastnino. Postsocialistična prestrukturiranja so razgradile institucije in materialni svet, ki so ga ljudje gradili skupaj. Deindustrializacijo gre zato obravnavati kot strukturno nasilje, ki je izbrisalo razredni konflikt iz javnega diskurza ter prikrilo zgodovinske, družbene in afektivne razsežnosti razlastitve.

Ključni pojmi: industrijsko delavstvo, postsocializem, razlastitev, moralna ekonomija.