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The Absence of Workers in Slovenian Industrial Heritage

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The article points at the importance of (re) interpreting industrial heritage through the lens of workers' experiences. After identifying difficulties in shaping industrial heritage in the context of post-socialist and post-industrial transformation, it examines industrial workers' experiences of the closure of the Mura garment factory. Industrial heritage is presented as a potential site of value creation for the labour invested, where workers could regain their self-esteem, social respect and recognition, and where their dispossession could be acknowledged.
▪ **Keywords**: industrial heritage, production workers, class, tacit knowledge, socialism/self-management, deindustrialization

Članek opozarja, da je industrijsko dediščino pomembno reinterpretirati skozi vidik delavskih izkušenj. Po opredelitvi težav pri oblikovanju industrijske dediščine v okviru postsocialistične in postindustrijske transformacije se avtorica osredini na delavske izkušnje ob zaprtju tovarne oblačil Mura. Industrijska dediščina je predstavljena kot potencialni prostor ponovnega vrednotenja vloženega dela v preteklosti, ki bi delavcem povrnilo samo- in družbeno spoštovanje. S tem bi tudi družbeno priznali njihovo razlastitev.
▪ **Ključne besede**: industrijska dediščina, proizvodno delavstvo, razred, tiho znanje, socializem/samoupravljanje, deindustrializacija

My first contact with industrial workers is connected with my internship in the textile department of the Technical Museum of Slovenia near Ljubljana. One day in 2000, when I was working at the museum, I received a call from a textile factory in Maribor that was to be closed down. A man asked me if the museum was interested in old machines. I already knew that Maribor had been called the Yugoslav Manchester in the past because of the traditional and intensive development of the textile industry since the 1920s. In the first decade of the post-socialist transition, Maribor was one of the cities most affected by deindustrialization, as the largest factories and employers were closed. So I went to Maribor, where I entered a production hall for the first time in my life and started talking to production and maintenance workers and managers. I was surprised by the enthusiasm and pride with which everybody spoke about "their" machines and "their factory" (Sln. *naša fabrka*). The factory they introduced me to was not only a place of technology and the production of goods, but above all a place of sociability, solidarity, hard work, and knowledge production. The encounter left its mark on me and influenced my future research, even if I did not know it at the time. I ended my visit to the factory by collecting not only the old machines, but also the workers' stories. Just before I left the Technical Museum, when my one-year contract expired, I set up an exhibition with production workers demonstrating the work on the

machines and talking about life in the factory. The aim of this exhibition was to show that production work is a social and not just a technical process (Vodopivec, 2000).

After Maribor, I visited several other textile factories in Slovenia. I changed jobs but continued my studies of the experiences and lives of industrial workers. I found that despite the many differences between the workers and factories, the workers shared an incredible enthusiasm for factory work. Some workers tried to show the size of the industrial halls, the power of the machines, and the wonder of production with their open hand gestures or posture. The affective industrial narrative of mastering technology in huge industrial halls and producing new goods conveyed power and pride (Mollona et al., 2009; Smith at al., 2011; Smith, Campbell, 2017; Strangleman, 2007, 2012, 2017). In the socialist, self-managed context, the production and management not only of technology and assembly lines, but also of factories, conveyed an even greater intensity. My interlocutors communicated much with their postures, fingers and hands, trying to encompass the industrial miracle that was part of Slovenia's socialist history. It took me some time to realise that they were communicating to me with their bodies, expressing, sharing the implicit knowledge they had acquired through years of sensory learning and production work in the factories. Their narratives about their work and past investments were not only about the past, but also about their present experiences of devaluation, they were a response to contemporary public misrepresentations.

What has troubled me most over the last 20 years[1] has been the enormous gap between the narratives of industrial workers, i.e. the way my interlocutors described their experiences of factory work and devaluation, and the way they were portrayed in the media (reports of factory closures in daily newspapers or on television), addressed or even dismissed and forgotten in public. This article is thus a response to contemporary misrepresentation, as it argues that former industrial workers do not yearn for a return to the past, but for recognition for their past hard work and commitment in the present. Industrial heritage is presented as a potential site of value creation for the labour invested, where workers can regain their self-esteem and social recognition. By exploring tacit knowledge and sensory learning, I present production work as active learning and full engagement. Such a perspective helps us to better understand production work in factories as it is based on the investment of knowledge, skills, and care. The perspective also allows us to explain the workers' attachments which materialised in the embodied connections that had the power to connect bodies, workers, machines, and factory walls.

[1] I conducted interviews with retired, dismissed, and still employed production workers, managers, directors and other professionals, including trade union representatives, working in textile factories all over Slovenia. I studied historical material: archives (minutes of workers' councils in two textile factories) and past media reports (daily newspapers, factory bulletins, critical magazines, film material) on the development of the textile industry and representations of textile workers and their transformation. In 2004 and 2005, I worked as part of a field study in the production hall of the Litija spinning mill.

I have been inspired by authors who pay attention to how the past is mobilized and used for the present and the future (Petrović, 2013, 2016; Smith, 2006; Smith et al., 2011; Smith, Campbell, 2017), and who view memories and nostalgia as acts that "actively and self-consciously aim to use the past to contextualize the achievements and gains of present day living and working conditions, and to set a politically progressive agenda for the future" (Smith, Campbell, 2017: 613). Heritage is a process (Harvey, 2001; van de Port, Meyer, 2018) that should not be considered in isolation from class, economic, and social inequalities and power relations. This article therefore aims to contribute to research that questions the exclusion or misrepresentation of industrial workers in shaping cultural heritage (Berger, Wicke, 2017; Matošević, 2011; Petrović, 2013, 2016; Smith, 2006; Smith et al., 2011; Smith, Campbell, 2011, 2017). It points to a strong claim to self-esteem and legitimacy that industrial workers' narratives bring forth. It considers the political and social significance of heritage formation, which builds on explicit claims of political legitimacy in a pragmatic politics of recognition (Fraser, 2005; Smith, Campbell, 2011, 2017).

In the first part of the article, I link the representations of industrial workers to the post-industrial and post-socialist paradigm that defines industrial heritage in Slovenia. The section draws on comparative studies of industrial workers' experiences, deindustrialization and industrial heritage making in the West, but also recalls the experiences of socialism and self-management in Slovenia and Yugoslavia. The second section uses a case study of the Mura garment factory, which closed in 2009, to show how industrial heritage making can respond to experiences of deindustrialization and dispossession. This idea is further developed in the third section, where tacit knowledge in production is explored in order to present the factory as a site of knowledge production.

Industrial heritage in Slovenia

The oral historian Alessandro Portelli wrote that there are few songs about deindustrialization in Italy, in contrast to the United States, where such and other kinds of cultural production abound. In Italy, he argued, there was not much talk about the loss of industrial workers in public, cultural and academic circles because society viewed industrial workers as political-ideological constructs rather than persons (Portelli, 2005).

I found a similar situation in Slovenia: Industrial workers were treated as remnants of the socialist past and thus as the ideological Other. The socio-political attitude towards them was shaped by the prevailing attitude towards socialism (and Yugoslavia), which was characterised by political instrumentalization and a retrospective economic evaluation that saw socialism as a failure. The transition from industrialism

to post-industrialism in Slovenia, as in other post-socialist countries, ran parallel to the transition from socialism to capitalism. Production workers as ideological figures and symbols of the value of labour in socialism disappeared from public space, they became silent political subjects with no means to articulate their demands (Petrović, 2013). Moreover, their demands were dismissed as nostalgia, which prevented them from "moving forward" and transforming themselves into employable, self-acting, entrepreneurial and self-responsible subjects (Vodopivec, 2021a). Nostalgization of industrial workers was an integral part of contemporary modernization, post-socialist and neoliberal cultural othering (Boyer, 2010; Lankauskas, 2016; Senjković, 2021), which constituted industrial workers in opposition to the modern, future-oriented entrepreneurs.

In post-socialist countries, nostalgization, historicism and non-modernity of industrial labour is linked to the socialist past, but authors in capitalist countries also write about similar representations that symbolically impoverish industrial workers (Clarke, 2015; Haylett, 2001; Munt, 2000; Russo, Lee Linkon, 2005; Skeggs, 1994, 2005). They point to the disappearance of class and labour from the research. Similar situation is noted in the field of heritage studies. Comparative heritage studies show that the development of industrial heritage is (also) in the West tightly linked to politics and capital (Berger, Wicke, 2017; Blackmar, 2001; Petrović, 2013, 2016; Smith, 2006; Smith et al., 2011; Smith, Campbell, 2017). It was easier to create industrial heritage where economic restructuring was perceived as successful, for example in the Ruhr[2] area as opposed to Dortmund and Glasgow (Berger et al., 2017; Richter, 2017). In addition to the economic aspects, the authors point at the politics towards industrial culture and class. The American philosopher Nancy Fraser explained the disappearance of class from political and public discourse in the West and East with the transition from the socialist imaginary of economic redistribution to the political imaginary of national identities. After 1989, post-socialist politics was primarily about ethnic culture and national identity, not poverty and economic exclusion. Identity politics displaced the concept of class (1997, 2005).

In Slovenia, for similar reasons (see also Petrović, 2013), including the aforementioned attitude towards the socialist context that shaped industrial work, there was no interest among scholars to study industrial workers' experiences 20 years ago. In the last decade, the topic has gained some attention (Černelič Krošelj et al., 2011; Kosmos, 2020a, 2020b; Kosmos et al., 2020; Oder, 2015; Petrović, 2013, 2016), especially more recently among the younger generations of students, who are often themselves connected to factories through family members or the local environment. The situation

[2] Authors however point to the problematic touristification and depolitization of labour in the Ruhr area, industrial heritage serves above all to the identity making of the middle class and lacks critical stance (Berger et al., 2017).

is gradually changing among the cultural producers[3] and in local[4] and regional museums. However, the question remains who gets to play part in industrial heritage formation and how the account is presented.

Andrea Matošević (2011) in his research on industrial heritage in the Labin area (Croatia), and Tanja Petrović (2013, 2016) in the study on museumization of Yugoslav experience rightly noted that longtime production workers, the protagonists of the socialist industrialism, remained absent from museums. Public representations preferably focused on the stories of successful entrepreneurs from before the Second World War or on products, brands which justified the continuity between past, present, and future (see also Vodopivec, 2021a).

In a critical reflection, Tanja Petrović (2013, 2016) dealt with the absence of socialist industrial experiences in the studies on industrial heritage in Europe. She referred to Kerstin Barndt's (2010) critique of the reduction of industrial experiences to archaeological sites that show the natural cycle from the birth to the death of industry. Such a linear representation reduces the experience of industrialism to a purely "natural" evolutionary step in the development of capitalism, which erases the experiences of the working class. Apart from the problematic representation, the socialist industrial experience does not fit into such a framework, as Europe could not accept socialism as part of its historical legacy. Petrović opposed the exclusion of the socialist experience from the industrial heritage in Europe and the exclusion of industrial socialist modernization from the cultural heritage in Slovenia. She also critically emphasised that linearization erases the affect of (socialist) industrial modernity, social protests and conflicts, as the discourses on cultural heritage strive to detach themselves from the current political processes.

It was precisely this absence of the socialist industrial experience and detachment from the current social conflicts in cultural heritage discourses that also influenced my work. When I had a chance to organize a bike tour through the industrial ruins in Ljubljana, my aim was to challenge that.[5] About 50 people participated in the tour, and together we cycled and discussed the importance of socialist industrial experiences for

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[3] A play in Maribor, *Was ist Maribor* in 2012, problematized deindustrialization in the city; the play *Paloma* in 2020 questioned the consequences of postindustrialism in the town built by the sanitary paper factor; and *Ahti Šiht* in 2014, a play by the Theatre of Work (a youth group, Sln. Gledališče Dela), dealt with how the youth experience the post-industrial changes in the industrial and working-class community of Ravne na Koroškem (Vodopivec, 2021a).

[4] In Kamnik, curator Marko Kumer from the local museum (Medobčinski Muzej Kamnik) devotes special attention to the experiences of industrial workers. Together with the cultural producer Goran Završnik, they are organizing several actions that call for more attention and a revaluation of the abandoned industrial sites.

[5] I was invited by RogLab (initiated by the European project Second Chance) to organize the tour in 2014, which I prepared together with Sonja Ifko, professor at the Faculty of Architecture. The tour was part of the Goodbye Factory (Sln. Adijo, Tovarna) action initiated by the newspaper *Delo* and the reporter Mojca Zabukovec, with whom I also collaborated (Zabukovec, 2014). As part of the campaign, stories from workers about various factories in Ljubljana were collected and published, and an exhibition was organized at the City Museum.

the construction of modernity that forms an essential part of our lives today. My idea was to draw attention to factories as sites of workers' efforts, struggles, and knowledge production while problematizing their contemporary representations, the political disorganisation of the working class, the dismantling of workers' rights and precarization in the present. Rather than aiming for a neutral representation of industrial heritage, I have argued that talking about industrial workers and labour has, and should have, a social and political meaning.

Studies on deindustrialization from the West show that deindustrialization is a process which needs a temporal distance (Strangleman et al., 2013). Three decades after the factories closed, former industrial communities in Europe and the United States are still struggling because deindustrialization is not over. Sherry Lee Linkon described the deindustrialization in Youngstown, the former steel town in Ohio where 50,000 people lost their jobs after the factories closed in 1978, as "radioactive waste". The effects of the radiation can still be felt long after the factory has closed, even though the workers have already found new jobs. The traces of industrialization are visible in the city's landscape, in people's memories, aspirations, ideas and values (Lee Linkon, 2018). Studies on deindustrialization show that the "industrial structure of feeling" – the feelings that constructed "ways of life" (during the industrial period), the way of doing things, the sense of not only personal but also collective identity – has survived beyond industrialism (Byrne, 2002). Deindustrialization, then, is not an event, but an ongoing process that affects the present and the future, including larger local communities or regions.

However, the transition of industry to a new identity as "heritage" is a complex and difficult process (Smith, Campbell, 2017). A curator of a US museum told Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell in the 1980s that he felt like the undertaker when he was transforming an old industrial site into a heritage site (Smith, Campbell, 2017). Such a transformation is underpinned by loss and grief, especially in places where the sense of belonging and industrial workers' subjectivity is still very much alive and present (Smith, Campbell, 2011, 2017).

In many places in Slovenia, these processes have yet another dimension: the bankruptcy proceedings have not been completed, there are hardly any alternative options, no new identifications (see also Petrović, 2013, 2016). The socialist industrial experience still functions as an experience of loss and, above all, of dispossession that occurred through privatization during the post-socialist transformation. I address the concept of dispossession, which comes from Marxist literature and claims that capitalism can only function (accumulate) through the dispossession of the other (Harvey, 2003; Kasmir, Carbonella, 2008, 2014). If we apply the concept to the post-socialist transition, we see that privatization (after the Enterprise Act in Slovenia in 1988/89, especially in the 1990s) and capital accumulation came about through the dispossession of working people (especially the industrial working class), through privatization and the demolition of what

they had built through the self-management system. Deindustrialization was thus not a politically neutral process, industrial restructuring was part of the disorganization of the working class (cultural and political disorganization), it was a violent act that led to (material and symbolic) impoverishment and social suffering (Vodopivec, 2021a, 2022). Dispossession did not only capture the withdrawal of labour rights, welfare arrangements, job security, the devaluation of industrial workers and their labour, "wild privatizations", management takeovers and the exhaustion of companies that ended in bankruptcy and left workers on the streets, but it also tore apart the means of social reproduction, and such an act was not socially or politically recognized as such (Vodopivec, 2021a).

A comparative perspective in recognizing similarities between the socialist and capitalist projects of industrialization and deindustrialization is important. In different parts of the world, experiences of industrialism are about pride, agency, belonging, achievement, solidarity and camaraderie but also hard work and exploitation, about building modernity and a better life (Barndt, 2010; Bonfiglioli, 2020; Byrne, 2002; Clarke, 2015; Hann, Parry, 2018; Kosmos et al., 2020; Kwon, 2015; Mollona et al., 2009; Petrović, 2013, 2016; Russo, Lee Linkon, 2005; Smith, 2006; Smith et al., 2011; Smith, Campbell, 2017). Nevertheless, we should not neglect the nuances arising from the respective historical contexts, since production workers had in socialism, in particular in the self-management in Yugoslavia, an even more significant role to play in industrial modernization than in the capitalist West (Petrović, 2013; Vodopivec, 2021a).

Socialist ideology constituted the true value of labour in production which was the base for building social and public services. The production workers in self-management were building "their factories", as well as social standards and local community infrastructures (Bonfiglioli, 2020; Musić, 2021; Vodopivec, 2021a). Although workers in production had no executive power in the factory (despite the proclaimed workers' self-management), they were normatively recognized as the key actors whose work and professional opinion mattered and could be articulated to some extent (Archer, Musić, 2017; Vodopivec, 2020), and who were involved in the distribution of profit and wealth. The latter was rarely the case in practice, yet the right to the distribution of wealth remained part of the workers' moral economy to which they were entitled. The particular experience of self-management also involved participation in the construction of modernity outside the factories, and indeed much of the local infrastructure (including kindergartens, schools, and medical centres) was built with "voluntary" contributions from the population, whether in the form of labour or finances (taxes), including self-imposed contributions (Duda, 2023; Kladnik, 2022; Piškurić, 2022). The privatization of socially owned enterprises and infrastructures co-created by workers was therefore experienced all the more intensely as dispossession.

In the next section, I will use the case of the closure of the Mura garment factory, which I followed immediately after its collapse, to show how industrial heritage could respond to the experience of deindustrialization and dispossession.

Mura Garment Factory (1925–2009)

The collapse of Mura in 2009, which left 2635 people unemployed, affected the entire Prekmurje region, a region that was already economically devastated before the financial crisis. Based on my studies on the experience of the closure (Vodopivec, 2021a), I argue that for the people who had worked in the factory for years, as well as for their family members, their predecessors, the closure was a traumatic experience that affected not only their professional identity but also their personality. Despite a very long process of psychological and physical exhaustion, the bankruptcy was experienced as a shock, a powerful and traumatic event. The sudden loss of the factory and the job meant not only a financial loss, but also a social loss, a complete social disintegration and disorientation; the employees lost their self-esteem and social respect. I argue that the inability to articulate the shock after the bankruptcy due to paralysis, accompanied by shame due to humiliation and fear, was followed by the non-acceptance of such feelings in the wider society. Workers were not allowed to grieve publicly, as they were urged in the public to "move on" and change their professional and personal selves in the labour market. The social conflict was not acknowledged and the emotional reactions, the calls against fraud and dispossession, were dismissed as nostalgia preventing people from moving on (Vodopivec, 2022).

Mura's story was not surprising for global capitalism; it even seemed inevitable, since such a large labour-intensive enterprise did not fit into the framework of the modern economy. However, this "naturalization" concealed the material, symbolic, and physical dispossession of workers, including the fact that bankruptcy took place in a very problematic way (Vodopivec, 2021a). As I have noted, it matters how the story of a factory closure is told. Linear narratives naturalize the industrial landscape and disregard the grievances and demands of workers (Clarke, 2015). This was also highlighted by Jackie Clarke in her study of the Moulinex bankruptcy in France. She has shown how the public treatment of workers' grief and nostalgia as pathologizing and an obstacle to progress obscures the manifestation of social conflict (2015). She presented the struggle for justice after bankruptcy as a struggle against the interpretation that portrayed the factory's collapse as "an inevitable result of impersonal historical forces and positioned those most affected by it as part of the past" (Clarke, 2015).

After the closure of Mura I came across similar efforts, but they lacked public support. My interlocutors pointed to the need to articulate dispossession and fraud, they demanded recognition of their work, their knowledge, their past investments and their importance in society. Their narratives expressed both social conflict and the need to actively grieve and acknowledge loss. The loss was not publicly recognized as dispossession, although it should have been. It was political (withdrawal of workers' rights during the post-socialist transition), material (impoverishment), social (loss of social recognition), symbolic (devaluation), and physical dispossession. The latter included

both physical injuries from working in industry and the psychophysical consequences of bankruptcy or the so-called restructuring of industry (Vodopivec, 2021a, 2021b), as well as the violent dissolution that severed the attachments between people and their environment. Such attachments, which my interlocutors strongly emphasized, should be taken seriously in our research and considered in their materialized form, as also pointed out by Jong Ben Kwon (2015), who studied the embodied connections created by proximity and duration between people, machines, tools, and materials in the Korean automotive industry. His study revealed that the violent dissolution of these attachments due to bankruptcy meant not only the loss of the supportive environment and surroundings for the individual, but also the actual loss of the self, as the industrial workers' selves were created through attachment to the machines and factories.

I consider industrial heritage as a site where such material attachments can be represented and the act of violent detachment and dispossession can be recognized. I follow Smith and Campbell who argue that acknowledging fraud and dispossession is as important as recognizing the past investment (Smith, Campbell, 2017), knowledge, skills, and hard work of workers. Heritage making has political implications and can affirm identity and self-recognition, provide a sense of belonging and esteem, and reclaim self-respect and social respect (see also Smith, Campbell, 2011, 2017). This aspect of industrial heritage making is extremely important as I found that dispossession of social respect and self-esteem affected my interlocutors the hardest. They described feeling like *"garbage"*, a *"dirty carpet"* or *"a zero"*. Respectability (Skeggs, 2005) was highly associated with their work, especially for the generation of women I spoke to in Mura.

In contexts where individuals and communities have been socially and economically marginalized, self-esteem becomes a powerful demand that seeks political recognition (Sayer, 2005 quoted in Smith, Campbell, 2011). Moral concerns should be taken seriously as a sense of injustice underpins class struggles and also urban and regional redefinitions in post-industrial times. The closure of factories where the majority of the urban or regional population was employed is closely related to the loss of infrastructure, the social fabric and structure, the out-migration of people, especially young people, and the search for a new urban or regional identity.

Murska Sobota, the town where the large Mura plant was located, does not quite correspond to the image of a former typical socialist industrial town, as it is a small town in the middle of a rural area. During socialism, the Prekmurje region was only gradually industrialised, and the infrastructure built up (Lorenčič, 2020). The Mura clothing factory was of crucial importance in this process. The importance of the factory lay not only in the organisation and structuring of the workers' lives (different generations and several members of the same family were employed), but also in the wider community. With the construction of road infrastructure and the development of bus transportation, the factory penetrated even deeper into rural areas, as people who lived on farms found work in the factory. Despite the scattered lives of the semi-proletariat,

socialist industrial modernization strongly shaped people's identity and expectations, as working in industry was directly linked to creating a modern future and raising living standards.

At this point, the gender dimension should also be considered, as the majority of production workers in the textile industry were women (80% in Mura). Employment in socialism became the norm and normality for women, and women's work experiences were strongly associated with agency, emancipation, and autonomy (Bonfiglioli, 2020; Vodopivec, 2021a). Women workers' insistence on hard work, harsh conditions and their active participation should therefore be taken seriously and analysed in a specific historical context; living and working conditions were improved only gradually and with the active participation of women workers. As mentioned above, the workers' participation in the self-management system went beyond the factory walls, and the efforts and life in the factory were closely intertwined with the local communities and the region.

The collapse of Mura was therefore not only associated with the loss of jobs by my interlocutors, *"it was about the loss of the factory"*, as a former fashion designer emphasized in a 2019 interview. She said:

> *Mura was not just about producing high-quality clothing. We had... what we had! We had our own clinic, our own dentist. Everything was in the courtyard of Mura, everything was there. Apartment blocks were built, associations organized, for culture, sports. Everyone benefited from it.*[6]

After the 1960s, Mura built 700 apartments for its employees and gave loans to workers for 1,700 individual buildings. The company subsidized meals for workers, built a health clinic, financed cultural and sports halls, partly two kindergartens, and built transportation infrastructure after opening new plants in the countryside (as did other factories). Mura was considered a giant of the garment industry in terms of the number of employees, and its reputation extended beyond the borders of Slovenia and the former Yugoslavia. For the people of the region, Mura embodied industrial (socialist) modernity (Vodopivec, 2021a).

The economist Suzana, who worked in Mura, repeated several times, with open hands and an upright posture, that *"Mura was synonymous with progress and development"*. She spoke with pride of the modernity that the factory has brought to the region and beyond, as well as the knowledge it has developed *"not only in production, but also in design, science, information technology, advertising and marketing"*. Suzana contacted me on her own initiative when she heard that I was talking to laid-off production workers. She told me that she wanted to pass on *"the legacy of Mura"*, which she had

[6] Fashion designer, interview, Murska Sobota, 2019.

"helped to create". She wanted to contribute to and participate in the creation of Mura's legacy by presenting the factory as a place of knowledge production and a driver of progress and modernity in the region. She wanted to fight against oblivion, but also to participate in industrial heritage formation. I have identified various people and actors who have asserted this right and claim. The question of who can be involved in the process of shaping heritage and how the heritage is presented is crucial.

One of the actors in shaping the Mura heritage in the region was the Pomurski Muzej, a regional museum in Murska Sobota. During the European Capital of Culture Maribor 2012, the museum, together with several other museums in eastern Slovenia, developed a joint work project titled Wow, Industry! However, the exhibition about Mura, titled *Mura Open* (Fujs, Ščančar, 2012), was not primarily about the production workers in the Mura factory but about fashion creations and brands. Mura was very well known for its fashion designs. Parallel to the exhibition, a documentary film was made in which retired older production workers talked about their work experiences (Pšajd, 2012). The curator who prepared the exhibition later told me that the production workers were disappointed with its design, because they felt excluded.

Most of the people I spoke to did not mention the exhibition, only one of them said she wished the whole event had focused more on *"the factory as such"*. Before I spoke to the curator, my own interpretation of the exhibition design was that the focus on successful brands fits well with current hegemonic discourses and the modern economy. However, I later learned in conversation with her that the exhibition, which could not be realised as planned, was created as a response to public discourses that portrayed the Mura factory only as an employer, as a social provider in the region. The aim of the exhibition was to challenge this portrayal and present the factory as a place of innovation, creativity and knowledge production. The curator, who prepared the exhibition together with a fashion designer, built up Mura's legacy in knowledge production in the field of fashion design. The presentation of a socialist company as a modern enterprise built on knowledge, development, innovation, marketing, informatics, advertising, and fashion design was intended to debunk the prevailing image of a socialist factory, especially in the textile sector, as a place with poor technology and manual, repetitive operational work. This got me thinking about how the creation of industrial heritage needs to be read in specific socio-political contexts, as these play an important role.

On the other hand, as the case shows, the creation of heritage is full of struggles over which histories matter – factory, design, knowledge, production labour – and who belongs to the collective: fashion designers, managers or production workers or other local inhabitants, who is included and who is excluded. Class plays an important role in such heritagization processes (Byrne, 1991 quoted in van de Port, Meyer, 2018; Smith, Campbell, 2011, 2017). Heritage creation is about belonging and selection, which always depends on which communities we, the creators of industrial heritage,

have in mind or who we consider as a community. Heritage formation also depends on who is speaking: professionals, the state, international professional communities (authorised heritage discourses), NGOs, activists, or ordinary people from different communities (Fakin Bajec, 2020a, 2020b; Habinc, 2020; Petrović, 2016; Smith, 2006; Smith et al., 2011).

Based on my studies, I posit that knowledge production could be a common denominator linking the experiences of the different classes in heritagization, since it was emphasised by all of them. Not only fashion designers claimed their knowledge for themselves, but also production workers. However, the professionalism and knowledge they claimed for themselves was not based on professional qualifications and formal education, but on the embodied knowledge they had in their muscles, fingers, noses, ears. In the next section, I will show that production work, as represented by production workers, is not simply to be understood as a motorised, operational and repetitive activity, but as active learning full of worker engagement.

Tacit knowledge

Looking at the photo of Mura's production facility, we see women sitting behind their machines, bent bodies in the production halls. Sewing was a sitting job, women could not leave their positions, they were constantly pressured by the speed of machines and norms. They only moved away from the machine when they were fetching the required material, taking a break or helping their colleagues. Such organization of labour in industry generated many injuries and illnesses (Vodopivec, 2021b).

In socialism, too, the organization of work in production was based on strict hierarchies, discipline, and on the piece work system – the *norma*. It was determined individually how many pieces or how much one had to produce per hour/day, and the wage depended on it. There was a constant pressure that forced the workers to work faster. Narratives about *norma* are narratives about fear, speed and anxiety, but also autonomy and professionalism, as most workers considered that one was paid according to the work invested.[7] The worker was much dependent on how well the machine worked, how the material ran, and how workers before them prepared the goods. At the same time, a worker also operated the machine with her knowledge, skills, body, and her experience.

The assembly line created frustration and antagonism among workers, since one was dependent on other workers on the line, there was competition yet also interdependence that made all workers indispensable and created a coherent unit. Stories about the

[7] Not all of them, however, because it was easier to meet the *norma* in some workplaces than in others, and assignment to workplaces depended on the foreman.

work behind a machine in production are stories about cooperation, pride and power, fear and frustration, skill, ingenuity and mutual care: the workers took care of their machines, just as the machines took care of them; not hurting their fingers, bringing them bread – achieving the expected *norma*. If the machines *"ran well"* (Sln. *je dobro laufala*), a worker earned more money. The relationship between the worker and the machine was experienced reciprocally. The machine was not a dead thing; my interlocutors were in relationships with them. Such experiences oppose the thesis of final alienation. "The law of irreducibility of skills" (Sigaut quoted in Ingold, 2000: 19) points to the constant adaptation and redefinition of skills that are an integral part of workers' attitudes towards technological innovation. As I found out during my ethnographic work in the still-operating Predilnica Litija spinning mill in 2004 and 2005,[8] the experience of working with a machine remained fundamental in maintaining the position of an experienced production worker, despite the restructuring and the new management strategies that privileged formal education. Working behind machines required particular skills, physical reactions, postures, sensory abilities and attention.

When I visited older, retired workers at home, they communicated work processes with their hands and body postures, and linked the movements with many descriptions as *"here"*, *"there"*, *"up"*, *"down"*, *"like this and then like this"*. Much remained verbally inarticulate in the interviews. It was only when I entered the Predilnica Litija production I understood what the former spinners meant. I also understood why the textile workers communicated their work with their hands and not verbally. The work in production is done with the body, and learning did not take place through conversation or verbal expression, but through experiential learning, imitation and repetition, through practice and learning sensory-perceived meanings.

"You needed time to ...", said Marjana from the Mura factory, complementing the words by rubbing her fingertips together. In the garment industry, the sense of touch is very important, the sensitivity that the worker has acquired through years of experience is the knowledge in the fingertips. The sense of touch absorbed the pressure of the body, the working environment and the tools. Lizika told me that she felt under her fingers whether the fabric was flowing well or whether it needed to be stretched, moistened, turned so that the edges were not visible. Although the work could be repeated countless times, it was not exactly the same, because the environment changed, the working conditions changed due to different types of material, humidity and air temperature, etc., which required improvisation and adaptation. In the same manner, the voice of the machine in production is not to be understood only as an obstacle ruining hearing and communication, but also as information that the work process ran correctly. This required not only hearing but listening that was learned over time. The same went with

[8] Part of my fieldwork experience involved working on the production floor of the Litija spinning mill (2004–2005) which provided me with valuable insights into the embodied dimensions of labour.

the sense of smell. Ana said[9] how she learned to recognize different materials by smell: *"The technologist taught me how the material smells, how the cotton smells, how the silk smells. After I learned, when I went to the warehouse I just followed my nose."*

The sensory understanding of skills and work indicates that production work can be understood not only as the obedient, motorized execution of learned activities, but also as active learning that took place in contact with machines, tools, materials, the environment and people. The sensory aspect of production involved observing the environment, recognizing information and processing it (see also Ingold, 2000). As people entered production, they learned to observe and perceive the signs in the environment, interpret them, make sense of them and react to them. Sensory knowledge involves the concentrated observation or perception of the environment based on training through sensory practices. These processes often remained unreflected. Production work involved physical activity, which eventually became a habit, but physical activity should not be seen as opposed to mental work but in conjunction with it (Vodopivec, 2021a).

The sensual and physically intense perceptions had the power to connect. The workers "tuned in" to their working environment, their tools and machines (Ingold, 2004). This attunement involved synchronized action in which they entered into the same experiential flow of the assembly line. Jong Ben Kwon drew on the concept of entrainment (Game, 2001 quoted in Kwon, 2015) to emphasize the reciprocal experience of the assembly line in a Korean automotive workshop. He described how through vibration and rhythm, movements or bodily skills were learned and connections between humans and non-humans were established and embodied. He emphasized the bodily incorporation of these connections (Kwon, 2015).

A concept of embodiment (Csordas, 1994, 2009) that calls for the body to be seen not only as a result of disciplinary regimes, but as a subject and lived experience, helps us to better understand the work experience and professional knowledge that emerges through engagement with the environment, in contact with machines, tools, materials and people. This means that when the body was trained, it changed. After twenty or even thirty years of almost daily work in the factory, the rhythm of the assembly line and the factory itself had become an integral part of the workers' bodies and selves. Such an analytical perspective helped me to understand the bodily metaphors used by my interlocutors by taking them literally; e.g. Ana, who started working at the age of 17 (like most of my interlocutors), said: *"I grew up behind the machine, in the factory. The factory is in my blood."* Or Silva: *"The factory gets under your skin"*, or other physical metaphors used by my interlocutors such as *"we breathed with the factory"*, *"the factory becomes a part of you."* Most of my interlocutors got a job in production

[9] The interview was conducted in 2013 by Nina Luin, a student of cultural studies, as part of her Master's thesis; Luin kindly shared her interviews with me. All other interviews quoted in the article were conducted by me.

at a young age, they developed physically and personally with the machine. These attachments that occurred over time changed them physically and psychologically.

Attachments were established through workers' investment as they put their bodies, knowledge, care and energy into the work. Their physical and emotional investment (in work) created new values, expectations and relationships based on reciprocity. These values were not only functional and related to products, but also emotional and social. They created specific bonds. Such a view contributes to a deeper understanding of factory work narratives based on engagement, care, and exchange. Exchange, which in this context means not only the exchange of labour for money, but also of knowledge, experience, views, skills, time and energy, and also mutual help and cooperation, was constitutive of social relations. Socialist paternalism is often portrayed as a factory and the state taking care of the workers, but my interlocutors understood their relationship to the factory as an intersubjectively constructed one, as the workers also took care of *"their factories"*, *"their products"*, *"their machines"* and *"their employees"*. Narratives about *"our factory"* embody such relationships of commitments and care, a sense of belonging, entitlement and rights.

Conclusion

The article explores how heritage can respond to misinterpretations of industrial workers' grievances, their experiences of dispossession, and their claims to regain social and self-respect. A case study of the experience of the closure of the Mura garment factory is presented. The article argues that the exhibition, which built on the knowledge of Mura's fashion designers to deconstruct the dominant problematic representations of socialist factories, could be extended to the knowledge of production workers that remains hidden in the body. By exploring tacit knowledge and sensory learning, production work is represented as active learning and full engagement. Such a perspective helps us to better understand production work in factories as based on the investment of knowledge, skills, and care. The perspective also allows us to explain workers' attachment, which materialised in the embodied bonds that had the power to connect bodies, workers, machines, and factory walls.

The article argues that industrial heritage formation could serve as a potential site of value creation for invested labour, where workers can regain their sense of self-worth and social recognition, and where their earlier commitment, care, and investment are recognised as much as their later dispossessions.

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Odsotnost delavcev v slovenski industrijski dediščini

Članek temelji na dolgotrajni etnografski raziskavi izkušenj dela proizvodnih delavk in delavcev ter deindustrializacije v Sloveniji. Namen avtorice je raziskati, kako lahko dediščina odgovarja na problematične interpretacije industrijskega delavstva v družbi, na njihove klice proti razlastitvi ter zahteve po povrnitvi družbenega in samospoštovanja. V prvem delu so obravnavane težave oblikovanja industrijske dediščine v kontekstu postsocialistične in postindustrijske

transformacije. Sledi poglavje o izkušnjah industrijskih delavk in delavcev ob zaprtju tovarne oblačil Mura. Z raziskavo tihega znanja in čutnega učenja je proizvodno delo v zadnjem razdelku predstavljeno kot aktivno učenje in sodelovanje. Slednje pomaga bolje razumeti poudarke v pripovedih ljudi, vključno s pomenom tovarniškega proizvodnega dela. Ta se je ustvarjal desetletja z napori ljudi – z vloženim znanjem, spretnostmi in skrbmi. Navezanost ljudi na tovarno gre tako v raziskavah obravnavati resno, saj se je materializirala v utelešenih povezavah med telesi, stroji in tovarniškimi stenami.

Industrijska dediščina je v članku predstavljena kot potencialni prostor, kjer lahko preteklemu delu proizvodnega delavstva povrnemo vrednost, delavkam in delavcem pa družbeno spoštovanje ter samospoštovanje. Dediščina bi tako priznala tudi razlastitev industrijskega delavstva.