

Connecting ethnographies:
Working-class anthropology in Central and Eastern Europe from the end of
the Second World War till today

*Call for paper of WG Workers, Labour and Labour History in Modern Central-
East Europe for 6th ELHN Conference, 16-19 June, Barcelona*

Organizers: Eszter Bartha, Tibor Valuch

The idea behind the planned session grew out of a decade-long cooperation between the two organizers and our common interest in re-connecting with both the East-Central European “native” traditions of labour anthropology and the new, global perspectives on labour history.

It is common knowledge today that even though working-class studies enjoyed a privileged status in state socialist Eastern Europe and received distinguished attention and institutional funding from the Communist regimes, the discipline also stood under strict ideological control, which impacted on the actual academic production and the local academic communities. While in the aftermath of “actually existing socialism”, for understandable reasons, the stress has been put on the question of academic control, resistance or collaboration with the Communist regimes, there has also emerged a need to re-read the old ethnographies through a new lens and a new attention to the actual ethnographic work rather than the question of the scale of compliance to the ideological narrative that the “client” state wanted to hear. Labor anthropology had a particularly strong school for instance in Poland, but sociological and ethnographic studies also flourished in countries such as Hungary, where the re-established sociology enjoyed a very high social and academic prestige.

In the 1990s, academic interest in Central and Eastern European labour radically shrank, as the working class was often uncritically associated with the Communist past that both the public and academic communities sought to leave behind. With the transformation of Communist industries, the main losers of the regime changes belonged to the postsocialist working class, who

en mass lost their jobs and temporarily or in most cases permanently fell out of the labour market, suffering all the predictable consequences (material and social insecurity, impoverishment, the decline and eventual ghettoization of their living habitats, the disintegration of the old communities and often even the families, the loss of the dignity of work, and the pressing need to redefine their social, gender and personal identities). This nourished a sense of socialist nostalgia, which had an uncanny resonance with the Communist past, rendering labour studies even less attractive for the new, democratically elected governments in East-Central Europe. Unsurprisingly, much of the postsocialist labour anthropology has been written by Western scholars, who brought with themselves not only their academic interest and moral commitment but also novel perspectives and new academic methods.

By now, a new generation of scholars grew up, who were born after the regime changes or only have distant childhood memories of the late socialist period. The old political-ideological fights and Cold War divisions that determined the lives of the older generations are – optimistically – foreby. The kind of global ethnography that Michael Burawoy advocated seems to be a “natural” choice for many researchers, who can cross – or are even pushed to cross – borders. It is also common knowledge that the globalization of labour has many negative aspects – Western scholars already in the 1990s spoke of the colonization of Eastern European labour. It can be, however, also argued that this colonization has also become global as dire consequences such as the informalization of employment, the weakening of trade unions, gendered poverty, growing material and social insecurity are no longer postsocialist specificities.

Despite all odds, we believe that there is a continuing need to “connect” our ethnographies – both socialist and postsocialist, and the Eastern and Western perspectives. We therefore invite papers which are engaged with working-class ethnographies in Central and Eastern Europe from the end of the Second World War till the present day. We welcome both contemporary case studies or comparative papers and papers, which are engaged with the *history* of socialist ethnographies. We also welcome studies that examine the everyday life of workers, their life, adaptation, and work strategies, the system of work,

workplace and private relationships, and networks from a complex ethnographic, anthropological, and social history perspective.

Studying different regions, scholars from the new generation of global labour historians such as Görkem Akgöz or Leda Papastefanaki proposed to re-focus on the workplace, and they published ground-breaking studies embedded in the factory. A contemporary scholar in East-Central Europe would only see enviously the voluminous literature *inside* the socialist factory – commissioned by the Communist state. Much has been rightfully said about the Communist misuse of the “working class”. It is, however, also important to re-discover what kind of mirror the contemporary scholars held to the “client” state.

We hope that this session can contribute to contemporary debates on the future of labour and labour ethnographies.

Abstracts (max. 300 words) should be sent by 30 September 2025 to Tibor Valuch (Email: valuch63@gmail.com)