

# PIVNÍ POMOC<sup>1</sup>

Explaining working class solidarity under conditions of flexibilization  
in a peripheral small town in the Czech Republic

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<sup>1</sup> “první pomoc” – first aid, “pvní pomoc” – beery aid...

## **Abstract**

This essay studies how workers adapt to the flexibilization of employment structures with strategies for making a living in a small town on the periphery of Czech Republic after the end of socialism. Based on ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews, it takes research on flexibilization to the field of analysis of intra-class relations. It argues that for young workers in the town of Vejprty, who live under conditions of fragmentation of their working and family lives, frequent meetings with a group of friends and acquaintances in the local pub have become an important forum for being solidary – supporting each other as friends and informants about job opportunities. This informal form of solidarity, however, functions only at the price of strict boundary maintenance vis-à-vis outsiders.

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# 1. Introduction

The essay could begin with a moment in February, when I first came to Vejprty on the Czech-German border to take a look at my field: I enter into the large room of the pub, and feel the looks of people staring at me, “the lone stranger in the heart of darkness” (Salzmann 1994: 29). Once I have cleaned my fogged up glasses, I look around a bit – older and younger people sit at long tables and drink beer –, go to the bar and get one, too. I get into a talk with some weird drunkard. At first I am interested, but then he keeps telling me the same incoherent stuff all over. I turn away from him. Two men in blue-collar dress sit at a table next to the bar. I introduce myself: I am a student, I am interested in your place, the ways you live and work here. Can I sit down with you for a while? The young man responds: “No, rather not.” I insist, but he waives aside: “*Nezlob se* (don’t get angry), but rather not.” I wonder why they are so closed to me?

In April I return to the field and, approaching people on the streets of the 3,237 inhabitant town, introducing myself, asking for some time for an interview, I become an expert in the game of *Človeče nezlob se* (*Man, don’t get angry*).<sup>2</sup> In one of the “institutions” for mentally disabled and elderly people, established in the 1960s in this town in a no man’s land behind the Ore Mountains and directly at the border to Saxony, the director formally introduces me to the 27 year old nursing assistant Teréza. She was born in Vejprty, but then learned in the regional capital Ústí nad Labem, and came back to her home town, where she now works for a low salary caring for elderly people. Why did she not stay away in the city or go abroad, as many young people from Vejprty, once they have seen some other places? It’s about her boy friend and her other best friends, she tells me, who have all stayed in

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<sup>2</sup> This is the Czech name of an entertaining board game, and would have made a funny play on words in Czech... Information about number of inhabitants from Český statistický úřad 2008c.

Vejprty. I would like to meet them, and via SMS she tells her friend that I will come to the pub on Friday.

Back there for the second time, I am welcomed, as I was announced before, by a group of about twelve younger people who meet there three or more times a week – Monday Wednesday Friday. One of them is Pavel, who recognizes me from our first meeting in February – this time he has no troubles talking to me. “Don’t ask why we stay in Vejprty”, I am told right up front by Veronika’s girl friend, “we like it here a lot.” For a while, I am the attraction of the evening. One of the young men asks me to pull out my questionnaires then, but as I reply that we should meet for a longer, personal interview, they turn to their own interests again. Two young women talk about their work at the hotel on a nearby skiing mountain: how is work there, how do they pay? Who has to work which shifts, and get up at which time, and drive to which places? Two or three guys talk about their computers and computer games. With an enthusiastic loud voice, Tonda, at least five times during the long evening, tells the story how on the way back from work the snowplow almost smashed him from the road and he was sliding in his car. Two guys discuss the length of their penises and that in the end length shouldn’t matter. As one of them wants to go home because he has to work the next day early in the morning, they get into a longish argument whether or not it is legitimate to leave the pub to go to bed: ‘Come, and stay and drink with us!’ – But I really need to work. – ‘So what do you think, we all have to work, and still we go to the pub until late and sleep only two or three hours and are fresh and awake the next day at work.’ – So why do you tell me this, I also don’t sleep! – ‘Come on, you have been missing from the pub some times already!’ And yes, Petr stays on for some longer.

What is this group of young people hanging out in the pub all about? Why are the boundaries to outsiders so carefully maintained, as my first encounters suggest? And why does Petr not just walk off, but succumbs to group policing? For such disciplinary measures

to be effective, the young working class people in the group must have a real interest in remaining part of it. So what is it that makes them spend so much time together in the pub? A review of the theoretical discussion on flexibilization – mainly represented by Richard Sennett (1998, 2003, 2006) and Simone Ghezzi and Enzo Mingione (2003) – gives me the conceptual tools for explaining this group's coherence as an outcome of changed individual strategies of local workers and changed intra-class relations between them under conditions of flexibilization of employment conditions, which the transformation from socialism to capitalism has brought about in their particular place. I explain why and how local working class people close themselves in as a mutually solidary social group while employment conditions demand of them to be open for anything, at a time when their place has opened up to the world – since 1991 the border to Germany is open, since December 2007 it can be crossed without controls, and many people of Vejprty have taken the chance to move to Prague or even to the “Bohemian colony” in Chicago. Doing so, I contribute to the debate on flexibilization by taking it to the field of analysis of intra-class relations. Vejprty turns out to be an interesting research locality, because in this peripheral place uncertainty and fragmentation are quite pronounced.

The main body of the thesis begins with methodological considerations, followed by an exposition of literature on the subject of flexibilization. I then analyze in detail how conditions of working class life have changed in Vejprty and how this translates in strategies of making a living and ways of spending one's non-working time, by means of retelling personal life stories in the context of local history in its relation to wider political and socio-economic spaces. I conclude by summarizing that the coherence of the group of young local workers, meeting regularly in the pub, fulfills three important functions for its members: beyond being a place for socializing after the fragmentation of family life and organized leisure time activities, and beyond being a place where one can build up and maintain

confidence-building bonding relationships, it is an information exchange for jobseekers. As group coherence is not protected by formal organization, it needs to be maintained by various practices of boundary maintenance towards outsiders.

## 2. Methodology

In order to make the following empirical analysis accessible to informed critique, this chapter provides methodological considerations. Studying how ways of living have changed in relation to changing circumstances of working and living, I have relied on books and other written sources about Vejprty – mainly for telling the history of transformations from above – as well as on ethnographic observations, and 14 interviews with working people with lower incomes<sup>3</sup> who have worked and lived in Vejprty under changing circumstances. The interviewees, born between 1937 and 1985, have been working as employees of large factories as well as little shops and the “institutions”, the youngest one f85<sup>4</sup> has been self-employed since a few months in a cosmetic salon. The low income working people interviewed are similar with regard to their background in formal education and training: they all completed nine years of elementary school; and with the exception of f50 and f80, who completed 12 years of school and then followed a different path into working life, they all went to professional training of three years in an institute (which m78, m82 and m83 did not complete, f59 took a ½ course in sewing only). They learned the professions of metal turner, kindergarten teacher, vendor, cook, sewer, hair cutter, secretary, nurse for mentally disabled, mason, and cosmetics. Although this was not planned, it turned out that a majority of 11 out of 16 interviewees were women, which can possibly be explained by the fact that women tend to be the communicators of the family and are more accessible and more used to telling stories, as well as by the fact that I partly looked for people in shops, which are often operated by women, as opposed to closed factories and construction sites where men tend to work.

<sup>3</sup> Their gross incomes are between ~ 8000 and 13000 Czech Crowns, compared to the Czech average of 22531 Czech Crowns. (Český statistický úřad 2008b).

<sup>4</sup> Except for the interviewees I introduce as persons in the empirical chapter (there names have been changed for reasons of anonymity), I have replaced names with formulas composed of “f/m” for the sex and the birth year in two digits: f85 is a woman born in 1985.



To allow the interviewees to set their own preferences in the talks, I did not follow a strict list of questions, but designed semi-structured interviews, which included the following elements: I introduced myself and my research interest and asked for the story of the person's working life; after an initial narrative I asked, in chronological order, for clarifications; whenever the flow of the conversation appeared to allow for it, I asked for theoretical and value judgment about the purpose and value of working (What does working give to you?), of being in Vejprty, about the unemployed, about the relation of the interviewee to time – in particular life planning, free time and working time, and about their private relations with family, friends and acquaintances. The interviews were taken partially at work (in the library, in pre-school, in a cosmetic salon and in a book shop) and partially during leisure time (in the garden, at home in a flat or house, in a pub over a beer or a cup of coffee, and while painting a new flat); they differed as well with regard to the degree of formalization – while many of them were produced upon appointment of interviewee and interviewer, one was more of a group discussion by happenstance among some comrades, and one was joined by the neighbor for a chat over coffee. All interviewees consist of uninterrupted, flowing narratives by the interviewee as well as more dialogic parts.

While the interviews were conducted as semi-structured, in the following analysis I tried to be as open as possible to what I was told, and thus to first disregard the prestructuring by the interviewer, approaching the interviews with a grounded-theory style coding. For a close initial coding I chose three interviews which, based on intuition and headnotes, appeared somehow 'typical', and which I expected to be rich and contrastive in respects such as age, structure of biography, and working life. These are the interviews with Mrs Vymejšlená, a 71 year old former metal turner, with Markéta, who has had changing jobs and has been unemployed for several months, and with Teréza, an ergotherapeut in one of the "institutions" of Vejprty. The categories arrived at from coding them, which I used as a frame

for coding the remaining interviews, are: working biographies (structure, personal relation to it), horizontal and vertical relations at work, talking about work and unemployment, dealing with things, relating to ethnic others, experience of time, here and there, domestic life, and leisure time. I present the resulting argument in the form of a narrative structured around the life histories of few of the interviewees.

### 3. Flexibilization...

This chapter introduces the debate on flexibilization, which I use for understanding changes in workers' lives and in their relations vis-à-vis each other. Going beyond a discussion of existing research, I show how this essay enriches the research by studying consequences of flexibilization for intra-class relations. As in many places in the former socialist block, the post-socialist transformation in Vejprty brought with it de-industrialization and a break-down of the formal hierarchies of socialist society, and a fragmentary rebuilding of economic structures thereafter. Under the new conditions, my working class informants change their place of employment and kind of work frequently, taking whatever is on offer. In a word, they need to be flexible to make a living, i.e. "adaptable to changing circumstances yet not broken by them" (Sennett 1998: 46). Their experience of capitalism does not point towards a new phenomenon in capitalism, but has been studied for more than twenty years already. According to Meric S. Gertler, the term "flexible" was popularized in academic discourse by David Harvey:

'Flexible accumulation', as I shall call it, is marked by a direct confrontation with the rigidities of Fordism. It rests on a startling flexibility with respect to labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption. It is characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial and business services, new markets, and above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological and organizational innovation. (Harvey 1988: 8, quoted in Gertler 1988: 421).

The concept is commonly linked to transformations beyond Fordism and has been used to study business strategies under conditions of deregulation and increased competition on fluctuating markets (e.g. Eng 1997), restructuring of business sectors from large, hierarchically organized firms to networks of smaller units (e.g. Storper/Christopherson 1987), and industry structures in peripheral regions (Simmons/Kalantaridis 1994). Richard Sennett, Simone Ghezzi and Enzo Mingione have widened the debate by focusing on what the changed conditions mean for those working under them. Sennett has drawn together main

aspects of the discussion in an account of what he calls the transformation from social to flexible capitalism. His discussion is useful because, despite differences between the specific, post-socialist locality of Vejprty and Sennett's abstractum "capitalism", several issues of the transformation he described can be seen in Vejprty, as well. According to him, social capitalism emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in a turn towards long-term planning and ordering. It was "composed equally of structuring institutions and shaping social connections" (2003: 162, 2006: 21). In its big, formalized hierarchies managers commanded enterprises like a general his army, from the top of a pyramid of authority (2006: 25). Every employee was attributed a strictly defined function, was rewarded for executing orders from above and "punished for stepping out of the line" (2006: 29). Since the 1970s this system has been flexibilized. Shareholders with an interest in short term profits have, as a tendency, gained the upper hand over owner-managers with an interest in longer-term gains (2006: 37-40). The shrinking of the time-horizon between investment and return, further shortened by the use of new communication technologies, has raised the importance of constant adaptation to the changing demand of the day, while at the same time new manufacturing technologies (e.g. lean production) have freed production from the necessity of rigid assembly line routines. More often than not it has paid to disassemble formalized pyramids into looser networks which get together with other networks on a case to case basis, and which, at least in theory, survive the shedding of any of their component parts – except for the central management. As intermediaries between this center and the smallest units disappear through delayering, power is concentrated, while responsibility is obfuscated by informalization, and decentralized by delegation to project managers (1998: 10, 48ff., 2006: 43ff.). For workers, fragmentation means that they cannot organize their professional and domestic lives in the long run, as the institutional frameworks for planning have been disintegrated. Instead, flexible capitalism

demands of them to adjust to fragmentary social conditions, to network to secure the next engagement, and to live with normalized uncertainty about the future.

Simone Ghezzi and Enzo Mingione go beyond Sennett's discussion in reminding of the importance of local dynamics in studying flexibilization as a set of "complex processes of transformation and adaptation" to "general hegemonic trends of the global economy", rather than as a linear transition from one capitalist mode of production to another one (2003: 102, 92). What is common to all these processes is that they have furthered "the rise of various forms of temporary, precarious and atypical jobs" (2003: 101), which make "occupational careers increasingly unstable and heterogeneous" (ibid. 88f.), are typically not protected by strong regulations and trade unions, and may not be compatible with "households' strategies and needs when the family life cycle requires stable revenue" (ibid. 96f.). As examples of such jobs Ghezzi/Mingione name unregulated work, self-employment, and sub-contracting, to which, as they assume, employees will react not only individually, but in *social groups*. Yet they do not take this possibility to the empirical level, and it is this point where the present essay can contribute to the debate on flexibilization: It analyzes the consequences of particular types of flexible work for workers in a particular place and in a particular class position; it shows how workers live with the circumstances and how, as a result, intra-class relations change. As it turns out, the openness in taking different jobs does not imply a greater openness in social relations outside the workplace, but, on the contrary, can produce retrenchment.

## 4. ...in Vejprty

The young workers of Vejprty, whom I first got to know in the pub, follow a significantly different trajectory, i.e. historically specific, class-typical life-path (Bourdieu 1984: 110), than the generations that worked in Vejprty before the end of socialism. They make a living under conditions of break-down and transformation of a whole mode of production. The changes in their lives and emerging new relations between them conform to the expectations from the literature on flexibilization: with privatization, which here meant the selling out of means of production to outsiders, formal and life-structuring hierarchies of employment and organized spending of leisure time have broken down. Working lives and expectations of a normal biography with full time full employment of parents of normal socialist two bread winner families have given way to frequently and flexibly changing, often temporary, precarious and “atypical” jobs on a peripheral labor market with high unemployment, to coping with uncertainty as responsible human beings, and to making a living between the poles of the “day to day” and wishes for the longer term. Young workers in the small town of Vejprty, in dealing with these circumstances, rely on each others’ support as friends and informants about job opportunities, about which one gets to know rather through “acquaintances” than through the official employment agency. From their strategies of mutual support a social group of bonding relationships – those young people meeting in the pub and hanging out together – has emerged whose boundaries are asserted and protected vis-à-vis the Gypsies in a lower class positions, as well as vis-à-vis those who have made their way up by accumulating economic capital. To some extent, being together with friends is a replacement for family life, which has fragmented after 1989.

One sees the whole significance of the flexibilization of their lives in contrast to how life was “back then”, under socialism, in the very same place. This is why, in the first section

of this chapter, I retell a life story from socialist times as exemplary of how workers made a living and related to each other. Mrs Vymejšlená's life story touches upon many aspects of working class life in the borderlands at the time, and thus helps in understanding broader transformations.<sup>5</sup> As my other older interviewees' stories resemble her story in many aspects, I allude to them only for illustrative purposes. I intersect Mrs Vymejšlená's story with remarks and comparisons to more general phenomena and developments. Against the background of this account of socialist working class life in Vejprty, I then, in the next section, write about working class life in Vejprty after the end of socialism.

#### ***4.1 A worker's life under socialism***

This section tells the life story of Mrs Vymejšlená, embedded in accounts of developments in Vejprty, as the 71 year old worker told it to me in her flat over Turkish coffee, fat cake and pictures from her younger days, and as I reassemble it from the interview transcript. Mrs Vymejšlená was born in the Czech town of Hradec Králové in 1937 as the third oldest child into a family of later ten children. During the German occupation of Bohemia and Moravia her father was forced to work at the train station in Adamov and then in Liberec. Her mother was working in changing professions and was caring for the children. "When the war was over" the family followed to the father's workplace to Liberec. She recalls that her mother was as afraid of moving as were Mrs Vymejšlená herself and her older sister: Her mother came from the Bohemian-Moravian region Vysočina and did not want to move into the borderland, because she did not speak German, and many Germans had not been expelled yet from the surroundings of Liberec; they were working as forced laborers in the woods. But then her father decided that they, as many other Bohemians, Moravians,

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<sup>5</sup> If not specifically mentioned, the non-biographical information in the following account is based on Binterová 2003, 2007; Bína 2004; Bürkner 1996; Grygar/ Spalová 1995; Lozoviuk 1998; Mehnert 1998, 2004; Meinhof (ed.) 2002; Řezník 2007; Scherm 2003, 2006, 2007; Schmidt 2006; Türp 1975; Urban 1964; Zich 2000; as well as on the interviews with my informants, and on additional talks with locals.

Slovaks, Hungarians, and Germans from southern parts of the country, would use the resettlement as a chance for their own life. The family moved into a house already emptied from its inhabitants. “It was stupid“, Mrs Vymejšlená says, “you know for instance that somebody lived in that house, and now you have to move in. You know that they had to leave from this house, and you...”

Thus from eight years of age Mrs Vymejšlená spent her childhood in a small house with three rooms nine kilometers from Liberec. Her parents raised their children setting them a good example: They were, as Mrs Vymejšlená recalls, very industrious, honest and modest people. The beginning, she says, was a “terrible time, but we were never demanding“. And things worked out, as everyone in the family had some chores to do: They went on the small family potato field, cared for the two cows they had. Mrs Vymejšlená was responsible for closing in the geese and for cutting grass and making hay for them. Her older sister and brother had to wash clothes and cook. “And in the evening my mum came and said ,I go to relax in the garden‘. The whole day she was working hard, and then instead of putting her feet on the table she ironed all our sweaters, or sat there in the flowers and ‘relaxed‘.“

After visiting nine years of elementary school, she went to a professional training center for metal production to become a metal turner. According to her medium grades in school, she had been offered three professions to choose – her choice was to earn money soon. Like all her siblings, she went into “the crafts“. She decided not to become hair dresser, because it was badly paid, and her father forbade her to work at the train station. The remaining option was to become a turner. In her memory the time at the training center was a pleasant experience: “You cannot even imagine today how it was then, we went on brigades<sup>6</sup>, into the potatoes that they planted at the center, to collect hop, to collect hay, and we were looking forward to doing all this. It was not compulsory. We also always got the big loafs of

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<sup>6</sup> Voluntary work in groups, mostly in agriculture – for students at university and highschool sometimes compulsory.



bread there and had lots of fun. When I was trained, food was still for coupons, for bread and meat, when we went to have lunch for instance. We took it differently then.“

In 1955 she married a colleague from the training center and moved with him to Vejprty, where her husband's father had been offered a job at the train station, where her husband found work in the nearby Russian uranium mines of Jáchymov, and where they lived in the flat of his parents. Eighteen years old, she says today that she did not reflect much upon her life then. Willy nilly she was placed on the solid tracks of an upward trajectory of a normal family, normal employment and a normal biography. As she remembers, she started almost from scratch (“We just got the feather beds made from our geese by my mum“), but from there on began a modest, incremental, and predictable rise in terms of living conditions: From the beginning she was paid “beautiful money“, more than her father, and “we were earning money for everything and had to save for everything. In the beginning we had one bed, and then step by step we were saving for and buying everything else.“ Vejprty was a special place, situated directly on the Northern side of the mountain range of the Ore Mountains and on the Bohemian-Saxonian border, with a twin town on the Saxonian side. As in all German-inhabited settlements in Czechoslovakia, many Germans had to leave after the war. Vejprty was closed off from the neighbor town Bärenstein in Germany and firmly enclosed in the nation state space of Czechoslovakia. All houses in a 50 meter strip along the border were demolished, except for several factory buildings which were turned into barracks for soldiers. The border was secured with barbed wire and a three meter strip of even earth, and all unofficial creek crossings as well as the official former border crossing at the bridge were closed. In practical terms the other side of the border river was removed to a distance of over 100km to the next border crossing point in Hřensko/Schmilka and was reachable only after considerable bureaucratic struggling to get a permission. As in the rest of Czechoslovakia, in an effort to reassert and consolidate state power in the half-emptied

borderland, German owned property in houses and means of production were nationalized already in 1945, some years before the nationalization of practically all means of production under the Communist regime.

Yet nationalization was less consequent in Vejprty than in other places, as about 2,000 of the former 10,200 inhabitants stayed (or returned after some time), which were kept as they were needed as workers in those factories which were not disassembled and rebuilt in Slovakia; or managed to stay as they were married or related to Czech people. Even though Czech, Slovak, Hungarian and even German workers (from the Bohemian-Bavarian border) workers were attracted with “working plus flat” offers in newspaper advertisements to gradually replace the local German workforce of the paper, machine, instruments, and textile factories, it took decades for the population balance to change significantly. The population, which had dropped shortly after the war to 1,200, slowly rose again to 3,546 in 1970 (Binterová 2007: 90). In 1955 the textile factory TOSTA still had only one Czech employee, which may serve as an illustration of the speed of ‘Czechoslovakization’.

Mrs Vymejšlená’s arrival in Vejprty forms part of this process. When she started working in a formerly German-owned metal production factory in the town part Nové Zvolání four kilometers from Vejprty, she was the only Czech-speaking employee. When she became pregnant at age 21, the young family was offered a flat in the house of the former owner of the factory, which was “wonderful”, “everything made of wood”, and considerably above the standard she had known before. That they founded a family, she did not even think about: it was expected, it was common and the conditions for reproducing this tradition were advantageous. The state supported young families, in later years also with family loans for young couples. Her son went to the crèche, so that after half a year at home she was back at work.

For over twenty years, Mrs Vymejšlená recalls, she was doing hard work in the metal factory, standing behind the turning machine: “You put there for instance a piece of metal and then you produce according to the drawing flails or whatever else.” It was physically demanding to lift the heavy metal pieces, she got dirty and exhausted, but she liked it. Her relations to other workers, intra-class relations, were centered upon hierarchically organized collectives of work, sports, and going on holiday together. For her, these relations were not adumbrated by the ethnic boundary between herself and her colleagues: “We had nice relations“, she remembers, “even today we meet even though some now live in Chomutov. When I came I didn’t know any German. They did not speak Czech, the older people not at all, the younger yes. But I cannot complain, they welcomed me nicely.“ Her free time she spent together with other workers, who were at the same time her *kamarádi*. The guys were playing soccer together, and sometimes she also played, but in general she was more into gymnastics. She trained in the gymnasium of Nové Zvolání twice a week. They trained, in Nové Zvolání as well as together with other groups, for *spartakiada*, which took place every five years in Prague. Gymnasts performed beautifully composed mass figures to music, e.g. Bedřich Smetana’s *Vlast’* (*Home Country*). The colleagues and sportswomen and sportsmen also went dancing into Vejprty, where every week one or two parties were organized, or they walked the four kilometers to go to the movies. On the weekends and during their holidays they went on excursions together: They had friendships with other clubs and visited each other (sometimes they went to the nearby Saxonian Sehma for soccer), they were supported by the factory director who provided a bus for the trips; and they earned some extra money with cutting hay and the president of the sporting unit organized trips to the Baltic Sea in Germany, to Hungary, and twice to Yugoslavia. Once they spent an entire month with their colleagues at a recreation center in Hluboká in southern Bohemia.

After some years she started to train the children of Nové Zvolání in gymnastics. She accompanied them on summer camps in the vicinity and sports trips to other places in the Czech Republic. In 1977 the director of the institutions for mentally disabled persons, who knew her personally, as everybody knows everyone in a small town, asked her to change her profession and become a caretaker for such children, as they were lacking employees. As she liked being with the children a lot, she decided to participate in a free retraining course and change her profession. Her change of profession teaches several points about Vejprty's special situation in the economic and social spaces of Czechoslovak society. Like Mrs Vymejšlená, other women from Vejprty, born between 1949 and 1967, changed their profession, supported by requalification courses. Typically they had married at age 17 to 19, got children, and after some years realized that they wanted to "become somebody" themselves (f49) and to be independent. And within the general upward trajectory of the working class, there were chances for these women to emancipate, to lead a life of their own. For instance, f50 began as a waitress and, after some requalification courses, became the boss of the kitchen unit at the state-owned restaurant chain's outlet in Vejprty. Like Mrs Vymejšlená, two of these women began working in the "institutions". As I was told by their director and as is common knowledge in Vejprty, these homes for mentally disabled and elderly people were founded in Vejprty after the war to get these undesired people out of vision. In Vejprty, they were indeed locked away from the world, and were, until 1989, not allowed out on the streets, as f63, a nurse at the institution, told me. Vejprty was used, in this perspective, as a social dumping ground for those which were of no use in socialist society. The fact that these institutions had problems in finding employees points to the general lack of employees in Vejprty. It was caused by two factors: First, to many people from the region and from larger and more lively places, including some interviewees, the prospect of living in this place in no man's land, "where the dog dies" (f49), did not appeal to them very much,

when they first thought about it. But beyond this, the mismatch between work force and machinery, caused by the resettlements after World War II, was perpetuated by the fact that German inhabitants continued to move out of Vejprty, once they were allowed to do so after 1965. Many, who were following Western German news and had stayed in contact with relatives who left after the war, now followed them as soon as the state issued allowances. Not only did this open opportunities for workers like Mrs Vymejšlená, it also raised the power of local economic elites – vis-à-vis the state and the party. This explains why the longer term process of combined Czechoslovak and Communist consolidation, lead from the center in Prague through the hierarchies of command of civil administration, the military, and the party, met with resistance.<sup>7</sup> To give an example, the German, non-Communist director Hans Josef Hasenöhrl of the precision machinery factory AMATI in Vejprty exerted considerable local control over the means of production and had leeway to act as a patron of Vejprty's Germans, whom he favored as apprentices, and otherwise. After all, "his" technicians and employees were the only ones who knew how to make such instruments and machines, which were needed for export to Cuba during the build-up of its socialist economy. This explains that even during the 'normalization' which followed months of civil disobedience after August 1968, director Hasenöhrl managed to mobilize support and remain in his post for several years, before fleeing with his family to Frankfurt/Main in 1973.

Mrs Vymejšlená stuck to her second profession for the rest of her working life. Like other employees of the "institutions" and different from most factory workers, she did not lose her work after 1989 and kept working until leaving to pension in 1995. Looking back at her youth and working life she finds that "we lived through a more beautiful life. I have something to remember." As a gifted story teller, she can make sense of her life in a narrative, because of the extraordinary events and steady developments she lived through.

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<sup>7</sup> Compare Smith 1994.

The story makes sense: she emerged from the chaos and poverty of the war, built up a life of her own, earned her possessions through honest work and delayed gratification, and thus became someone, more than her parents were. Today she lives with her dog<sup>8</sup> in a flat near the border bridge to Bärenstein in Saxony.

On the day of the interview chaos is reigning, because construction workers are replacing the windows. One of the Vietnamese, who came to Vejprty since the 1980s and sell miscellaneous items mostly to Germans near the border, has bought the house recently. House owner Pepa, she tells me, moved out the Gypsies<sup>9</sup>, who stayed in the house before, by giving each family 30.000 Czech Crowns for leaving; and moved in Vietnamese people instead. As I did not want to risk my reputation among the “whites” by talking to the Gypsies, as the Czech inhabitants of Vejprty do not have much contact with them, and as they do not appear in any of the books published about the local history of Vejprty, it was difficult for me to find out more about the local Gypsies and how they came to Vejprty. Someone told me that many arrived as construction workers in the 1970s, when the municipality built several new blocks of flats to accommodate newcomers from a near-by town, which was drowned under a storage lake. Anyway, the only non-Vietnamese left in the building today are Mrs Vymejšlená and her granddaughter, who lives in a flat with her boyfriend. With the Vietnamese Mrs Vymejšlená gets along a lot better than with Gypsies, who, she complains, partied until midnight, got into fights, slept until ten in the morning and littered on the corridor. “But with the Vietnamese I don’t have problems. Now there is order in the house. Only the food stinks from their spices. They leave early in the morning and then work until nine in the evening and, then after a while they lie down and sleep. They are very modest and do not make disorder, like the gypsies did, Jesus Christ. That was terrible. No, that was terrible.”

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<sup>8</sup> Her husband has died of cancer after working too long in the uranium mines.

<sup>9</sup> Throughout the essay, I use the term Gypsies – “cigáni” – for those people which multicultural discourse calls Roma and liberal discourse avoids naming at all. It is the common descriptive name used in Vejprty.

## **4.2 Working life under capitalism**

Mrs Vymejšlená's life under socialism in Vejprty followed the upward trajectory of a normal working biography, embedded in the formal hierarchies of the socialist welfare state of Czechoslovakia, and specific to the place in the formerly German-speaking borderland: After marrying and moving in with her husband and founding a family – which was expected, unquestioned and supported by the state – she experienced her first employment of almost twenty years as a considerable enhancement in comparison with the life of her parents. She found satisfaction from hard and appreciated work and spending active free time in the collective of her colleagues. She appropriated the stability of the institutional framework of working life – employment relations were administered from above and workers had little choice but to take part – for saving and working her way upwards incrementally. As other interviewees, she found and used chances for upward mobility that resulted from the special lack of (Czech) labor in the borderland.

Comparing the life and life prospects of my younger interviewees with this trajectory of socialist working life, one finds significant differences in almost every aspect: Privatization and restructuring of the economy to the advantage of non-locals have brought unemployment and a precarization of employment relations to Vejprty – most employees cannot know today if and for how long they will have a job. (Working) Life has become fragmented: instead of having the certainty of being integrated in a stable and formal hierarchy for years (decades), workers now have to deal with normalized uncertainty from day to day. As nobody ensures that they will have a job, and as there are not enough jobs for all of them, they are forced to assume personal responsibility for running after scarce work and making a decent living. Responsibility under conditions of uncertainty is one of the reasons why the young people are not founding families anymore: just one of my informants

between 23 and 32 years of age has a child, and one is married – while the generation of their parents were long married and parents at this age. Instead, they find themselves and each other hanging out in the pub three times a week: Hanging out gives them valuable social contacts and information about employment opportunities, gives them the confidence of being at home and among friends, and satisfies a basic desire to socialize and tell each other stories. These bonding intra-working class relationships are protected against outsiders and especially against the lower class Gypsies. In this section I describe and analyze all of these transformations in greater detail, organized around the working biography of 27 year old Markéta.

#### **4.2.1 Once there was a normal family...**

Markéta was born in 1977 in Kadaň, a larger town near Vejprty. Until 1991 she lived there with her parents, who got divorced after the father lost his work in a machinery factory and started drinking. With her mother she moved to Vejprty to the quiet of the countryside. There she finished elementary school in 1993, after which she was trained one year at the construction school in Kadaň to find out that this was nothing for her. So she changed her professional school and was trained for three years as a food vendor at a large training center, where also hair cutters and car mechanics were educated. Thereafter, and unlike most of her class mates, she decided to go on studying in secondary school and to finish her *maturita*<sup>10</sup> by 1998, and to continue studying German at a language school. Afterwards she decided that she would stay in Vejprty to help her mother, who at that time had fallen chronically ill: as she says she wanted to care for her, especially because she felt indebted after her mother had supported her alone after the divorce of her parents and had helped her during her years of

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<sup>10</sup> Diploma of secondary school education, precondition for going to university.



studying, when she paid her fees for accommodation and food at the training center and tuition at the language school.

As a study by Joseph Hraba, Frederick O. Lorenz and Zdeňka Pechačová suggests, such break up of families during the post-socialist transformation in the 1990s was quite a common phenomenon in the Czech Republic, which the authors trace back to economic stress (2000). The younger generation of my informants, coming of age after the end of socialism in Vejprty, has not returned to orthodox family structures but perpetuates fragmentary forms of family life: They live with short and long term partners, mostly without children, or as singles. Markéta has lead such an unorthodox family life, as well. Since she finished school she has lived in a flat with her ill mother, and has been together with several boy friends. Why is it that for the young workers “the family” indeed appears as what Ulrich Beck called a “zombie category” (Beck/Beck-Gernsheim 2000: 207)? It appears plausible to relate their way of family life to the economic conditions under which they make a living, as proposed by Hraba/Lorenz/Pechačová: The fragmentation of family life may be an outcome of the break-down of social expectations about the normal family under conditions of fragmented working lives with shortened time horizons, and economic uncertainty (I discuss these conditions in detail in the next sections). As an older interviewee suggested, the young people, growing up under these conditions and without the “givens” (f63) of socialism, have learnt to think a lot more about their life, have learnt to take responsibility for their lives, and know that founding a family would mean taking a great risk under conditions of constant uncertainty. Other than the result of such conscious decisions, not founding a family can also be the unintended outcome of a strategy to wait and see that things “turns out as they turn out” (f80), or that “that what happens, happens (m78, m82). Mrs Vymejšlená’s granddaughter, for instance, who is 28 years of age would like to have a baby “before that 30”; and whose plans for a family life are manifest in the fact that she has moved into a large

enough flat with her permanent partner, which she decorates with care. But at the same time – who knows what will happen? – she says she lives from day to day, and does not plan a lot.

#### **4.2.2 Atypical jobs at the periphery**

When Markéta went about finding some work in Vejprty in 1999, she discovered that there were very few opportunities for young and inexperienced workers like her, who had no personal agreements with employers beforehand. This was so, because the economic situation in Vejprty had rapidly deteriorated after the end of socialism. In the early 1990s, much of economic life fragmented by privatization and bankruptcies. During the first years all enterprises were privatized. It turned out that many of them were not competitive, either in comparison with high technology production in countries like France and Germany, or in comparison with the cheap, labor intensive production of textiles in Asia. As a consequence several companies closed down in town or reduced their production. Small shops, cosmetic services, car repairs, a video rental and similar small enterprises were opened up instead and, in most cases, closed down after some months or years, as they were not profitable to support their holders. This was different only with the small shops operated by Vietnamese, who have shown a greater willingness for self-sacrifice and self-exploitation, which shows for instance in the long opening hours. Apart from them, only one local shop has managed to survive and grow since the beginning of the 1990s, which its owner explains with the fact that he knows everybody and everybody knows him, so that shopping at Mařinec is a valued personal experience. As a consequence of economic decline unemployment has returned, which was last known in Vejprty before World War II. Different from other regions in Czech Republic, the place did not quite get out of the post-transformation crisis until today.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Today unemployment officially reaches 19,2% as of end 2006 (2000: 19,9%), compared to a Czech average of 4.7% (Český statistický úřad 2008a, 2008d).

In this environment, Markéta did not find any work, and registered at the office of unemployment. The office sent her on a qualification course for working with computers, after which she was employed for a year in 2000 at the office for social aid of the municipality of Vejprty. Her work was a “publicly beneficial work”, which was provided by the state in order to get people back into work. Several of the young interviewees are well acquainted with this type of work. At the office, she helped clients fill out the forms for receiving children’s support and living aid. Doing this work for a year she has become an expert in welfare matters, and has observed that mostly Gypsies with many children receive this kind of aid in Vejprty. After a year Markéta was dismissed and found herself looking for work again. She found “atypical” jobs without a contract or only for several months here and there, for instance at the reception of a skiing hotel. Thus, as other young people she has started into a fragmented working life instead of into a “normal biography” of a life-long career in one or two professions, as workers under socialism. The fragmentation of young workers’ biographies is not only conditioned upon the prolonged economic crisis in peripheral Vejprty – the absence of normal employment, but is a consequence of the kind of work on offer – the presence of “atypical” employments.

German companies, especially after the Czech Republic’s entry into the European Union, the opening of the border bridge for cars in 2005 and even more facilitated by the end of customs controls with the entry of the Czech Republic into the Schengen area, use Vejprty as a reserve production place in flexible specialization.<sup>12</sup> For instance, a furniture restoration firm – sometimes, upon customer demand – brings old furniture to the place, which is then restored by working men in short term jobs. Markéta herself has worked for a German company that had Christmas decoration “handmade from the Ore Mountains” produced in the Czech Republic during the fall and winter months. The wooden pieces for the

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<sup>12</sup> At the same time, despite freedom of movement without controls, the German labor market will remain closed to most Czech workers until 2011.

*Räuchermänner* (incense smokers) and *Weihnachtsbögen* (Christmas arches)<sup>13</sup> were mechanically pressed from wood in a large factory in Chomutov, and then brought to Vejprty. The wooden boards came to Vejprty, and the workers sat down and took them apart into pieces and put them into carton boxes. The only thing she did not like about the place was the fact that employment lasted only for three months until after Christmas, and workers were taken in only the next autumn. The former Czech manager of the assembly place in Vejprty had a different experience. As she told me, the company rented a building at the border river that had until the 1990s been occupied by the military, hired some workers and herself as a manager, and began producing without installing any heating for the winter time, without any tables or workplaces, with rotten windows. She put all her energy in making this a bearable place, and after half a year was replaced by someone else, for reasons unknown to her.

The situation of Vejprty directly on the now open border has added further places of flexible employment: Germans come to fill their cars at the gasoline station, which employs shifting employees – among them one of the young women I know from the pub; the Germans go shopping in the supermarket BILLA, which was opened up as part of an Austrian chain in 2005. BILLA, through a regular exchange of most employees which is *de facto* subsidized by the Czech state through premia for the creation of new places of employment, is another driving force behind the fragmentation of many workers' lives in Vejprty. Vietnamese families were in the border business even earlier: Since the 1990s they operated informal market stands with cheap textiles and miscellaneous articles like garden dwarfs. In police controls regularly large parts of their goods are confiscated as illegal, but they are able to refill their stocks soon. They have appropriated their informal conditions of work with more discipline than most Czech workers, and managed to work their way up, as is

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<sup>13</sup> These are the translations used by the producers selling their goods online – they should know best...

attested by the fact that one of them recently bought and renovated the house of Mrs Vymejšlená.

Such short term and more or less regulated work is not just typical of production strategies of foreign companies and of border business, but is part of a wider pattern of shortening of employment relations: Young men I interviewed frequently work in masonry and other tasks on construction sites, shifting every few weeks or months, and with interruptions by phases of unemployment, usually without a contract. Markéta judges that “black work” has become “a sport of the Czechs even more than living on social aid“. For young people, the start into a working life in Vejprty, on a labor market which offers many atypical jobs and few typical workplaces (such as in the institutions), is even complicated by the specificity of the Czech professional training system with its large education centers: employers, oriented to the short term, cannot afford to train their employees, and demand people who are first of all experienced and can be used right away, which gives freshly-baked skilled workers a competitive disadvantage. Where should they take experience from right after the end of their formal education?

Apart from the special situation of Vejprty in the peripheral borderland, which has brought with it specific patterns of flexible specialization and employment, working relations have become even more informal and flexible after the end of socialism through the practical break-down of trade unions. Today there is either no formal protection of employees – as in small shops with employees and low income self-exploiting shop owners – or it is informalized, as in the supermarket BILLA: There, the employees are assembled by the local management on an informal and irregular basis to decide issues like the shift organization. As a supplement, an “inspector” comes from the national management of the Austrian enterprise in Prague, who is to help the employees, but, according to one supermarket worker, rather controls the operations of the shop. Informalization means a weakening of employee power:

whereas under socialism, workers had the freedom to work at their own speed, to resist employers' demands to some extent, or even to quit your job and find something else, they have lesser chances to do any of this today because it means becoming part of the "whole row of people waiting in front of the door" (f59), struggling to earn a living. The rules of struggles between employers and employees have changed, as employers have gained power to do otherwise which employees have lost.

The story of Mrs Vymejšlená's granddaughter, who lives below her in the house at the border bridge, illustrates what working under precarious, fragmented, and informalized and stressful conditions typically means for the workers – apart from the fragmentation of their biographies. For seven years in the 1990s she was selling food in a small shop, while she was into a relationship with the shop owner's son. When the privilege of this special relationship ended, she slid back onto the trajectory of her mates from the pub: For some time she was unemployed, then, through an acquaintance and with the help of her sister found a job in a nearby medicine production, where she packed up homeopathic medicine for export. After some more time without work, during which she was supported by her new boyfriend, a mason who earns good money in informal and shifting workplaces, she was asked by another acquaintance to join him as an employee in opening up a new bar behind the central pub of Vejprty, which she gladly accepted. Comparing her current work with previous ones she appreciates that "here I don't have a boss. I am not controlled. I just do the work that I have – I have my quiet and free space. Mates/friends come by as well." Quite different from her grandmother's working experience under socialism, working for the granddaughter means in the first place to be controlled and not to enjoy bodily activity, to have stress, to have a relation with your boss in which problems cannot be voiced, but only avoided by loyalty or exit. It also means to "comrade" outside and not at work. In other words: intra-class relations have changed in nature, from the collegiality and friendship of the collective, embedded in

stable hierarchical organizations to more competition at the workplace and being with friends outside work, for instance in the pub.

For my young informants the fragmentation of working biographies means calculating and living with the short term. They do not know today what will happen with their work place even in the immediate future. m70 describes the situation: “I don’t know if tomorrow I will have work at all.” Other interviews, especially with younger people, confirm this experience (f77, f80, m78, m82, m83). This volatility of employment means insecurity about how one will continue to make a living, because unemployment is high and welfare benefits are not enough for reaching desired standards of decent living – having a flat, eating, and having a bit money extra for free time activities. As m83, a half-skilled mason who works on different construction sites, puts it: “Being without work was for shit, living with the minimum of 3300KC was shit, my mother helped me, without her I would be in the ass.” Like Markéta my other informants have learned to be modest and flexible in taking jobs: Of the younger interviewees, four have never worked in a profession for which they had an institutionalized training (f80, m78, m82, m83), while four have done so for a shorter time (f76, f78, m80, f85). Among them, Teréza is a telling exception: she has been employed for the last two years as a nurse in the “institutions” – which appear as an island of stability in the volatile working environment of Vejprty.

The need to find a job yourself under the precarious conditions makes my informants go and dig it up from somewhere, and to assume that what matters in finding work is personal will and taking responsibility: As f76, who has worked as economic secretary, operator of an money exchange booth and waitress puts it: “Back then it was ‘You have to’, today it is ‘I want’.” Then working was obligatory and one was threatened to go to prison, today nobody is forced to do anything. Despite high unemployment, it is thus not far fetched for the interviewees to believe that finding work depends in the first place on the will of the

individual (e.g. for m70, f50, f59, f63, f76, and m78/ m82/ m83). Such belief is not only embodied in practices of seeking work, and is not only reproduced as a means of distinction of the workers vs. non-workers, but is also supported by the doctrine of freedom of choice, which finds its practical and institutional back-up in elementary education by liberal teachers<sup>14</sup>, in the everyday practice of choosing among a wide range of options as a consumer on real and virtual markets, and, last but not least, through media, especially television.

In this situation the pub comes into play as an important forum not only for socialising, but for information. Talking about work with one's friends and mates in the pub is a way of getting information where to go to find some work. Thus, for instance, when I was there they were talking about how working conditions are like at the large electrical company which always needs some skilful construction workers – how much stress is there, how far do you have to drive (some thirty kilometers or as far as to Prague?), and how much do they pay? Also, a young woman gave a report about the end of the winter season at the mountain Klínovec, meaning that now there will not be any work anymore at the skiing lifts and less work in the hotels with Dutch and German tourists.

#### **4.2.3 Leaving or staying?**

After some time of unemployment and short time jobs, Markéta's mother was called by acquaintances in the United States. They had fled from Vejprty to West Germany under socialism and, meanwhile, were living on Hawaii. They invited Markéta to come for a year, possibly longer, and to work as an au-pair for their small children. On Hawaii Markéta got to know "an entirely different culture". She liked the dances and the relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Everyone seemed to have more calm there, while at the same time Hawaii was an employment paradise, in comparison with Vejprty: There, she says, it is no problem for

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<sup>14</sup> Judging from an interview with the director of the elementary school of Vejprty.



the locals to find work in any of the large hotels for the tourists, and make enough money to earn a living, make savings and gradually buy a house, a car and even more stuff. She would have liked to stay in the States, but her working permit was not prolonged and she returned to Vejprty and her mother. Her experience is not unusual for the people of the place: my host's son lives in Chicago today, where there is a "colony" of about forty people from Vejprty; one of the younger informants, the friend of Mrs Vymejšlená's granddaughter, went to Holland and Israel to plant tomatoes and other vegetables. For this young man, Vejprty is boring, and he would like to leave again, even if only to Karlovy Vary to have "some more culture". Yet somehow he got stuck in Vejprty. Earlier they were still making something of the place – he shows me a youtube video of the former skating hall, in which one also sees one of his emigrated friends riding the New York subway – but now he hangs out in the pub mostly. He says he stays because his partner wants to stay. They are gradually furnishing (he) and decorating (she) their flat together, and she, the bar tender, says that she "is not the type" to leave. She feels at home here, and she likes being with her friends.

The world is open for flexible young people today, even for less educated young people with a working class background from the peripheral mountain place Vejprty. Many other young people, who have once seen the world, and have made friends there and have no reason to return, stay for good. But to be flexible in one regard does not make one flexible in all regards: those who stay, even if they show a high adaptability to different jobs and working conditions every few weeks or months, tend to be very inflexible when it comes to their friends. Meeting regularly with a group of well-acquainted mates gives a sense of stability and certainty under conditions of precariousness – especially when one lives without a normal family and is not pre-occupied with caring for them. Thus, being part of the group in the pub means more than relaxing after work, and more than getting information about job opportunities. Beyond this, it is also an important forum of sociability for young people of

Vejprty who have in common a specific class position. One of the young men, a mason and manual worker for anything that needs to be done and is paid, with whom I had an interview while he and his friends were painting the new flat of one of them, puts this relation to the place in a nutshell: Thinking about leaving Vejprty or staying, he tells me that he simply could not imagine to come to another place, to go into the pub and not to know anyone.

#### **4.2.4 Unemployed – bored and ashamed**

Coming back from the USA, Markéta was, again, unemployed, this time for longer, until the summer of 2007. It was then that she realized the importance of work for her, which goes beyond the financial aspect, even if money is a central concern to her. Without work, she would have only something over 3500 Czech Crowns for herself, of which she would need to pay, in theory, 5000 Crowns for renting a flat. The minus means dependence on her mother and her boy friend, and this she has come to dislike: She wants to stand on her own feet, to be an independent human being. Even though unemployment had definite advantages for her – she could sleep long hours, and was free to arrange her time as she needed it –, she felt “locked in between the same four walls and people“ all the time, which got on her nerves. She got bored, as well, because she had nothing to do. She likes reading a lot, but she could not read all the time. Also she writes secret novels when she has time in order to get along with her problems, as she says, but even this was not enough. Markéta’s experience of unemployment is somewhat typical for what other informants say about the meaning and value of working: Throughout the generations and patterned according to sex, what they profess to value about working is to be active (f37, f67, m70, f80, m80, f85), to gather experience and skills (f78, m80, m82, m83) and to be in contact with people (f49, f50, f67, f78, f80). In a word, what they value in work is no more than what they can get from work – they all make a virtue out of necessity, but unemployment crosses this unconscious strategy:

Markéta, when she was unemployed, felt that it “pushed down her self-consciousness”. She felt ashamed and guilty. This experience for her had a social side, too: “Everyone looks at you as if you did not want to work. But here in Vejprty there is just nothing, and I cannot afford a car, and the bus connections do not allow going down to Chomutov for work.”

#### 4.2.5 Excluded through having too little, or too much

Being unemployed mattered to her, as well, because she was not able to participate in pub talks with the others: “They talk about money and what beautiful new things they have. ‘See, I have such and such a salary, I have such a salary, I bought this and that for me.’ And I was on social aid and simply could not afford those things. When someone said ‘I bought these jeans for 1.200 Crowns I answered well I found these for 400 at BILLA. That makes a lot of a difference, when you get ashamed after a while that they can afford to have such things and you are simply without work and look like a lazy bum. You cannot keep up with them and feel like an outsider. So I went and took loans, and then again got into trouble paying back the loans, and there was no money left for the rent.”

Having money, *inter alia*, matters because it allows to possess things. With the takeover of capitalism, having things has been introduced as a new, capitalist mode of distinction into the practices and relations of workers in Vejprty. Back then, under socialism, people had a different relation to things. Mrs Vymejšlená had very little when she began her own life in the post-war 1950s, and the feather beds she got from her mum were *handmade*. She herself was also making things with her own hands, as, for instance, the skirts for the children that participated in gymnastics. She then started to have more and more things, but accumulation was spread over years. Under socialism, the vast majority of people in Vejprty had about the same things. So things, back then, were less a matter for distinction, as anyway everybody had the same old Škoda.

Today, things are different. They are in ample supply and their unequal distribution makes them useful as a resource for distinction. One can always have more and nicer things than the others. And one is enticed to take up loans to participate in the game of “Who has the most?” As pub talks about computer games, computers, cell phones and other items have shown to me, the logic of things has entered working class discourse in Vejprty. As the experience of Markéta shows, it matters much to her. Yet having things is not only problematic for those who have less and worse of them, but also for those who have come to have more. Many older people have told me that an important change from socialism to what came after was that back then, people were less *envious*. Usually this statement was accompanied by the add-on: “Of course not I am envious, but the others.” (e.g. f50). What makes people envious is the fact that somebody else, all of a sudden, acquires a thing and one does not know how she/he got it and where it came from. Things have lost their history. Mrs Vymejšlená was *making* things and *saving* for things, but today young people say they do not save a lot, and the connection between earning and having is obfuscated. Even though used by the informants, envy is probably the wrong term for describing the feeling they have towards the possessions of others. If they have earned them, every thing should be fine. What they do is to suspect the others: Where does she/he take the money for this? And why does she/he show off like this? Who does she/he think he is, just because she/he has some more stuff? – these are the usual questions that my informants asked when talking about things today. As this shows, talking about things is not just a means for establishing oneself as part of “us local workers“, but is also a means for negative boundary maintenance towards “dishonest riches“ of those who have become something more. The boyfriend of Mrs Vymejšlená’s granddaughter understood this logic of suspicion well, when he told me that “if we had a new car we would have to move out from here.“ Anyway, for showing off or suspecting, things are a topic in the pub, and they have become a matter for constantly re-

negotiating who is part of “us local workers“, and who is out – because he has nothing, or because he has too much. Discourse on things is, among other things, an instrument for boundary maintenance, it closes the group off towards richer and poorer strata.

#### 4.2.6 If I were a Gypsie...

The same is true, in a more obvious way, with talk about the Gypsies.<sup>15</sup> My younger informants agree very much that the Gypsies (“the blacks“, “rats“, “cockroaches“) are lazy, steal, and do nothing but to produce children. When I had my only group interview with four young men painting a flat, I was welcomed with a warning against the Gypsies: “We saw you talking with a Gypsie. Don’t talk to them. Don’t talk to the Gypsies. They steal from you before you know it.” Gypsie discourse is a matter of keeping up social distance and one’s own honor and self-respect as white working people.

When we were talking about unemployment, and because she had already gossiped about ‘those lazy people‘, I asked Markéta to imagine her situation if she were a Gypsie: Do they not live off the same little money that she had when she was unemployed? Do they not face the same dilemmata in their relations to others? Markéta was very clear in her answer: “As a Gypsie I would not even be expected to go on requalification, to look for work. They just do not go there, and they are fine with it. If I were a Roma, I would not need to work and just get children, and the state would finance my life.“ From her perspective, and she is comparatively well informed through her working experience at the office of social aid, the injustice is that the Gypsies do not even loose their face by being perceived as lazy.<sup>16</sup> Even if

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<sup>15</sup> While the Gypsies are a hot topic, the Vietnamese and the Germans are not. I assume that this is so, because 1. the difference to the rich Germans is naturalized, as it would rather be humiliating to look up to them, who lost the war and are better off now; and because the Vietnamese have established themselves as different, but very hard working people. German capitalists are mainly understood as capitalists, not as Germans (e.g. m70).

<sup>16</sup> A condition of possibility for such a strong and dichotomic differentiation between “white workers” and “lazy Gypsies” is that the interviewees really do have only minimal contacts with Gypsies (less than with Germans), even though they live next door. The social separation is most effectively perpetuated through education: officially children are separated at age six according to their “educational maturity” *de facto* this

some of the informants see through it and do not like the reality of prejudice and exclusion of Gypsies, they tend to still participate in it: getting in contact with Gypsies or even talking of them at best means risking one's reputation as an honest worker, which means risking valuable social contacts. I assume that for the young people who need their friends from the pub, this prospect is not reassuring.

In the summer of 2007 Markéta has found a new job in a bookshop next to the post office. It is badly paid, as she says, and as there are very few customers, she knows that the owner may have to close this branch of her small chain of shops sooner or later. As she does not know how she will make a living tomorrow, Markéta, 31 years of age, says she does not make plans for the future. Paradoxically, working in this bookshop is the job of her dreams – here she can do what she wants: be among some people, chat with the young cosmetician from the shop next door, who also has little work, be employed and independent, and still find enough time for her most loved hobby, reading: “I have almost read the whole shop.” After work she cares for her mother, and on Saturdays and Sundays she tries to visit her boyfriend in Berlin, whom she got to know during a summer job at a fast food restaurant there. Will they live together and have children one day? A good topic to chat about over a glass of beer in the pub...

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means that 80% of the children at the special school are Gypsies and very few Gypsies visit elementary school.<sup>16</sup> The interviewees did not go to school with Gypsies. From the beginning they had social distance between each other, even though they often live next door.

As one usually does not know the Gypsies well, as indeed many Gypsies do not work in formal relations of employment, and as they can be seen sitting in front of their houses in the streets, the prejudice can be flattering that the “Gypsies are lazy but we are not”. As I experienced myself, the social boundary is actively reinforced by white workers. One day I was chatting with a young man, a Gypsy, and we were walking for about 200 meters through the village. The next day I went on an interview with m78, m82 and m83. The first thing they insisted on telling me with emphasis was: To give another example, Teréza, the daughter of a teaching assistant, says that her parents would have not been happy had she been friends with special school pupils as a child.

## 5. Conclusion

In the introduction to the essay I raised questions about the group of young workers in the pub of Vejprty: what is this group about? How come they spend so much time there? Why are its boundaries so carefully maintained? And what are the interests of its group members in being part of the group? I explained the group's coherence with changing intra-class relations as a consequence of the flexibilization of employment conditions after the break-down of socialism. The empirical analysis shows that much of what is described in the literature on flexibilization by Sennett, Ghezzi/Mingione and others is taking place in the peripheral economy of Vejprty.

As the comparison of young workers' life-paths with the trajectory of workers of Vejprty under socialism shows, the formal social hierarchies and stable institutions, within which young people then could start into a normal family life without ever questioning the prospect of leading a normal working life, living with a normal family of two parents and one or more children, and participating in leisure time activities already organized for them by others, have collapsed. Instead, young workers today typically have to take up personal responsibility for digging up atypical, temporary, rather less regulated jobs in a place with high unemployment. These jobs are common in Vejprty because of its situation in a peripheral region, close to Germany, and with opportunities for border business. Beyond these particularities, they form part of a larger process of complex "transformations and adaptations" to flexible capitalisms, as the literature on flexibilization suggests (Ghezzi/Mingione 2003: 102).

I found that the fact, that my younger informants hang out in the pub, is an outcome and part of adaptation strategies to their circumstances of employment. As they tend to have no families of their own with children, they have the time to frequently hang out together and

spend long evenings drinking beer. As I understand, they enjoy being there because the pub is a safe place in a precarious life; because they meet with their best friends; and because they have an economic interest in getting information about job opportunities from them. From frequent meetings in the pub a social group with bonding relationships has emerged. To be part of this group, and of the wider networks and the social category of local Czech working people, is a matter of existential security and economic survival for its members, who are engaged in various practices of boundary maintenance towards outsiders: Gypsies are othered as bad examples, which represent another way out of the difficult situation of precarious employment – i.e. not working at all, but rather founding large families and living off welfare. Furthermore, keeping them at symbolic and social distance is a matter of keeping one's honor as a worker. Workers who breach the rules by establishing rapport with Gypsies can expect to be stigmatized. Groups which are located above the workers in terms of economic capital, and who put their possessions on display, are suspected for their riches, because my informants' experience suggests that becoming rich is not easy for honestly working people. Finally, strangers like me, coming to the socially well-bounded small town, are suspected simply because they are strange, and may be welcomed once introduced by someone trustworthy and known to be harmless. All of these practices of boundary maintenance have the effect of keeping the group together against processes of internal differentiation in through better or worse conditions of (un)employment, and against the logic of individual competition for scarce jobs. Solidarity functions among these working class friends from the province even where it is not formally organized, but only at the price of strict boundary maintenance.

The analysis conducted is highly specific to the particular class and place. If there were alternative centers of sociability, as in a larger town, the pub might not be as central. If there were more alternative sources of information about job opportunities, and



unemployment were not as salient, as in less peripheral regions, one would not depend on acquaintances so much, and maintaining group coherence would not be a matter of necessity. In a word, place matters. So does class: Where not working class people are flexibilized, who need to sell cheap and flexible labor power, but for instance anthropology graduates, who rather need to sell cognitive skills, individuality and creativity, they might prefer other forms of networking and securing an income. As these hypothetical considerations illustrate, the consequences of the “general hegemonic trend” (Ghezzi/Mingione 2003: 92) of flexibilization on intra-class relations are likely to be complex and dependent on class, place and other circumstances. Exploring such relations further may be worth the effort if one wants to better understand the conditions under which today the interests of employees can be protected.

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