

ACKNOWLEDGING PRECARITY: YOUTH SELF- PERCEPTION AND LABOR CONDITIONS IN A SMALL TOWN IN VOJVODINA

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with youth self-perception in relation to the available wage-labor relations and conditions in Crvenka, a small, agriculture-oriented town in northern Serbia. Data was gathered mostly through interviews with young people who live in and around Crvenka. This topic has been chosen in order to illuminate the connection between the economic circumstances related to neo-liberalism in post-socialist space, including the economic and political subjectivity of youth in this place. The issue has been approached through the lens of multilayered concept of working class fragmentation, which entails the fragmentation of labor conditions, job opportunities, as well as imagined prospects. The argument is that such fragmentation is reproduced through nuanced and sometimes contradictory understandings of those, mostly precarious, labor conditions, but in a way which leaves space for construction of politicizing and emancipatory narratives. This has important implications for theoretical understandings of shifts in work-related self-perceptions by accounting for the array of different experiences and interpretations; while pointing toward the emergent trends which can lead to less fragmented and disoriented understanding of social life by youth on the periphery of individual nation-states.

Key words: Fragmentation, labor conditions, precarity, self-perception, post-socialism, neo-liberalism

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Introduction

The Serbian economy has experienced harsh decline during the post-socialist transition, like most of the former socialist states in Europe. This has been reflected throughout the society through various crises and a shared feeling of permanent discontent which was, however, variously interpreted from different ideological positions. The economically dominant and hegemonic position in Serbian society was composed from a broad coalition of pro-capitalist discourses. Unlike some of the other post-socialist countries, such as Slovenia or Poland, that have been hailed as "transition winners", Serbia never received such recognition. However, after the end of the rule of Slobodan Milošević, what Mladen Lazić (2011) calls a "period of blocked transformation", it was recognized as a country which has finally joined the unavoidable path of "transition". The story of transition, however, never made much sense outside certain confined groups, which were interested in reproducing that discourse. This paper is dedicated to abandoning the discourse of those groups.

Even if the word "transition" is not as prominent as it was, especially since the global financial crisis of 2008, the need for a grand ideological narrative for the government remained. This need was sustained through the discourses of "attracting foreign investments" (Mikuš 2016:224), and "personal initiative", which is commonly used to justify the successes and failures in capitalism (Lampland 2002:41). The current executive political elite relies heavily on such discourses in justifying its hold of power, for which it, on a rhetorical level, envisages proper subjects as well: entrepreneurs, and diligent workers who would be an obedient and high-quality work-force for the coming investors. Of course, rhetorical level differs from practice. Practice is, if anything, more complex and multileveled, but this rhetoric

serves an important role in political dynamics, since it is, in the conditions of non-free media, influencing the imagination both of its supporters and dissenters.

The opposition to the current government in terms of political parties is fragmented, and on a rhetorical level mostly accepts neoliberal aims of government, which are contained in adherence to foreign investment, and promotion of small and medium local enterprises as a solution for social policies.¹ It could be argued that the differences between the various parties lie more in the particular variety of capitalism (Hall, Soskice 2001) or a variety of Eastern-European capitalism (Bohle, Geskovits 2007, 2012). Since they are proximate in their rhetoric, the relations on this level tend to be concerned with uncovering the illegal activities of the government, while the rhetoric itself remain mostly untouched.

A central term with which one can mark the social backdrop of that rhetoric is dispossession (Harvey 2005:159; Kalb 2011:14-15). Dispossession, starting from the early nineties, in the form of etatization of social, privatization of etatized and state-owned properties, which was done through “theft privatization”, left many people without jobs. Their enterprises were deliberately brought to liquidation, since they served as mortgages for the loans taken from various banks and the state. The newly formed political and economic elite was further established by fostering strong war and anti-western sentiments in order to constitute a "proper" nation-state along the *jus sanguinis* lines in the aftermath of socialism.

As exemplified in the volume edited by Kalb and Halmai (2011), that process, in the post-socialist countries of central and eastern Europe have led to a formulation of oppositional discourse of nation-based populism, which stresses the need for an ethnic-based sovereignty.

¹ This consensus is exemplified by the support of oppositional movement "It's enough" for the Labor Law which was proposed by Vučić's government and adopted in the assembly. "It's enough" is headed by a former Minister of economy, who was a part of Vučić's cabinet, and who initially pushed for the new Labor law, but clashed with Vučić and resigned. He became Vučić's fierce opponent, but this did not prevent him of supporting the similar version of Labor law brought up after his resignation. This can be seen in the text of another leading member of the movement (Dušan Pavlović 2014).

As the case of northern Serbian town of Kikinda shows (Vetta 2011), similar trends could be observed in Serbia, at least during the first decade of 21th century. Things however got significantly different when a part of the leadership of the main nationalist party, Serbian Radical Party, abandoned the party, and started a new one, called the Serbian Progressive Party. That party is currently in power, and its president, the prime minister, is the main exponent of the rhetoric described at the beginning. Since then, no nationalist party has achieved similar electoral result. This development leaves a gap to whose filling this research can contribute, since it looks at the potentially politically charged outlooks of youth in a small town of Crvenka, marked by the consequences of dispossession.

Nationalism remained one source of oppositional discourse to the current government, but with the above-mentioned development, even that option lost its appeal and power, at least for several years. New nationalist parties base their economic policies on the alliance with non-western emerging powers, mostly Russia, and the promotion of domestic capital as a remedy for the evils brought by capital portrayed as exclusively foreign. Another source of opposition comes from a more leftist viewpoint, the one which stresses fight for the diminished rights of labor, or uses the terms such as “the right to the city” (Harvey 2008) in its vocabulary. This scene is composed of some leftist-leaning organizations, as well as trade unions. In 2014, this side managed to start a debate in the public sphere over the new labor law which allegedly further diminished the responsibilities of the employers to the workers. However, at the protest which should have been a culmination of the movement against that law, saw only few thousand gathered people. This pointed toward the weakness of the institutionalized mechanisms for protection of workers' rights.

Unemployment rate in Serbia has in the first quarter of 2016 officially been estimated at 19%. In Vojvodina, the region where the place of my research is situated, it was 19,2%.

Youth unemployment (from fifteen to twenty-four years of age) at the level of the state was 44,2%. While overall unemployment rate rose, the youth unemployment rate fall (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2016). These statistics, unfortunately, cannot encompass all the forms between formal and informal work, paid and non-paid work, and similar phenomena. Trade unions are mostly not present outside of public sector, and even where they are present, their effect is not perceived as significant. The figures regarding unemployment rates should be taken with caution, since there is a significant sector of informal work. All of this points to the conditions of low wages and precarity in which most of the employees - younger ones included - find themselves. Keeping in mind this discrepancy between the level of union organization and precarious labor conditions, question emerges of what are the causes of this weakness of organized labor, and through which mechanisms it is perpetuated.

This problem seems to have multiple causes. One of them is the heritage of the institutional trade union submission to the instances of executive power which was developed in socialism, where there was only one, state allowed trade union. This was perpetuated in the period of blocked transformation when the trade unions served as means for opposed political parties which clashed over the war and question of international allegiance, but not labor issues (Lazić 2011:220). Aside from a few short waves of increased union activity in the first decade of the 21st century, unions remained marginalized.

Unions in their activities remained attached to calling for the return to previous general state in the labor relations. This seems not to resonate with the population in general, even though there is a widespread resentment toward the overall state of affairs. This resentment is channeled through political apathy, general hatred toward the “politicians” as a distinct and homogenous social category (Greenberg 2010), and for some, adherence to

national ideals (as already elaborated in Kalb, Halmai eds. 2011). However, all these generalizing claims seem to hide what is going on in the existing production sites, that channel the discontent into politically impotent expressions. It is not clear to what extent such claims resonate with the aspirations and perceptions of the workers. Furthermore, it is uncertain to what extent are the workers themselves pushed into a position from which they cannot really use those claims in their political articulation.

This is especially valid since the current lines of political debates in Serbia obscure the division between urban centers and the periphery of the country. During socialism, the approach to development consisted in spreading the production facilities throughout the places of various size and location. Therefore, the dispossession processes hit especially severely those places that relied heavily on production facilities which were mostly liquidated or privatized during the transformation. That created a large pool of cheap labor, which could then serve as further reinforcement in the imposition of capitalist relations of production and primitive accumulation during the nineties, but especially after the 2000, when the transformation process was unblocked. The social conditions in this setting of a large pool of cheap labor have not been thoroughly investigated since the focus of post-socialist research in Serbia mostly was on urban processes (e.g. Greenberg 2006, 2011; Simić 2013; Hirt and Petrović 2011), or if they dealt with small places, did not deal with the issues of labor (e.g. Diković 2014; Jovanović 2016; Naumović 2013).

Discourses used in criticizing the economic governance especially render invisible the youth, who do not have historical memory of socialism, but nevertheless inhabit the space that is partly structured and conditioned by the process of post-socialist transformation. There is a lack of research which deals with the relations between youth in peripheral areas in Serbia and the specific economic labor market processes, and what the political implications of that

relation are. A recent research on youth in Serbia by Tomanović and Stanojević (2015), offers an overview of youth expectations, experiences and perceptions. However, in order to assess the possible points of their interaction with the various ideological instances, a more interpretative approach should be taken, which is advocated through this paper. This is important in order to assess the state of affairs in sites like these, which act as pools of labor for urban centers and foreign countries, without much knowledge on the attitude of the people who compose those processes. What are the consequences of these invisibilities, and what goes beyond it, remains unclear. In order to assess those processes, hidden from political articulation in the public sphere, I conducted fieldwork in the small town of Crvenka, in the northern province of Serbia called Vojvodina. My research consisted from spending time with, and interviewing youth with working experience, mostly in seasonal agricultural labor, but also in local or nearby factories. I tried also to go beyond the superficial level of complaining at the local circumstances, and unearth how they are, in spite of that, trying to enjoy life.

In the literature which deals with the relation between the current processes in political economy and work-related subjectivities, there is a tendency to portray the workers in recent times, subsumed under precarious work and life, as “opportunistic” (Standing 2001:9), or tolerant toward the fragmentation (Sennett 1999:62). Existence of jobs with clear career paths is assumed to be characteristic of western welfare – and eastern socialist - states. Departure from this starting point implies a clear-cut phases of transition of work-related subjectivities, something that I will try to counter with this research. It is implied that their disorientation detaches them from work as a possible anchor of their identity (Bauman 1998). However, in this paper I argue that the labor relations remain a point over which potentially political narratives are shaped by the youth, even in the conditions of fragmentation, at least in this small, peripheral town in Serbia. I will use the analytic lens of fragmentation of working class

in order to organize the findings from my fieldwork, and with that try to assess the emerging self-perceptions in relation to work, and capture the varieties of those self-perceptions, in order to set the ground for following the hidden histories of work-related subjectivities.

The concept of working class fragmentation, in this paper is understood in multilayered ways so that it can encompass local economic infrastructures and the ways in which the people affected by them understand those processes. It is useful for multiple purposes. The first being that through looking at fragmentation one can differentiate between the different ideologies which are at the play in the local circumstances. Other is that it offers a more open overview of the narratives from the point of which potential political and even emancipatory positions could emerge. Also, such views of fragmentation need to follow as closely as possible developments in the realm of economy, by which it can look at the points where current ideological positions and the activities on the levels of tactical and structural power are interacting. Through this lens, it can be argued, and that will be the main claim of this paper, that work-related experiences, even though fragmentation is reproduced through them, still can serve as one of the anchors for political stances, with potentially emancipatory aims. This means that the dominant discourses do not fully resonate with the youth in Crvenka. This reflects the existence of several layers of power inside the state, which simultaneously, but in different ways, constrain the movement of my respondents. However, the fact that the discontent is voiced, that the interviews on the work-related topics usually lasted an hour, and that my respondents were interested in proposing different, even though vague, solutions for the present conditions in their place, points toward a development of political and emancipatory positions.

In the introduction I tried to locate political and theoretical relevance of this research. Following chapter lays down the conceptual and methodological framework through which I

analyzed the gathered data. I take a look at post-socialism as a specific type of unfolding of neoliberalism. After that I will take a look at some views of the transition of work-related subjectivity in recent capitalism. Then I will develop the concept of fragmentation and how it can be brought into relation with the surrounding political and economical processes. After that, in ethnography part, I present and interpret my findings. In the conclusion, I sum up them and reflect on the shortcomings and possible further research directions.

Chapter One: Theoretical and methodological framework

1.1. Conceptual contextualization: neo-liberalism in post-socialism

The concept of neoliberalism has been present in academia since the mid-eighties. Usually it is understood as a movement by primarily Western ruling class to reinstate its political power (Harvey 2005:203). Reasons for this activity are manifold, and still debated: between declining rates of profit, and the activity of various labor and other social movements. Regarding the wider swats of population, this was accomplished mostly through diminishing the provision of social welfare and lowering the level of the protection of workers in Western countries (Harvey 2005:23). However, as Ferguson points out (2010:182), there is no neat fit between neoliberalism as a project of ruling class, and neoliberalism as a coherent set of policies, even if it has meant further social and economical marginalization for many people across the globe. This necessitates us to take a closer look at the regional specificities of this project, and for this scholarship on post-socialism presents a starting point.

Post-socialism denotes an area and period, of Central and Eastern Europe after the years of 1989/1991. For Kalb (2002:322), it is a frame within which interactions between local and global histories has to be placed and examined. It encompassed different elite reconfigurations (e.g. Walder 2003), property relation reconfiguration (Verdery 1999, Hann 2003), as well as specifically shaped processes of dispossession - privatizations, liquidations, and indebtedness, which continues to characterize post-socialist landscape, at least in Serbia. This makes a characteristic post-socialist economy, characterized in the periphery by coping strategies along with personal and institutional networks to which the costs of reproducing the cheapened labor could be externalized. This, combined with sporadic references to socialist period (e.g. most of the street names in Crvenka retain their socialist names; my young

respondents did, although rarely, refer to that past), produces a neoliberal post-socialist landscape within which Crvenka is positioned.

1.2. Work-related subjectivities and self-perception: their transition in recent capitalism

In understanding the social position of youth through their accounts of their work experiences, attention should be paid to literature concerning the relation between work and subjectivity. Here the role of state ideological apparatuses (utilizing Althusser's (2006) and Agamben's (2009) vocabulary) should not be ignored. For that, one concept which is a bridge between individual's experience of work and inherited discourse for articulating that experience is the one of work ethic. According to Bauman (1998:5), work ethic serves to sustain work as a value in its own right. In “mature industrial societies” (E.P. Thompson, in Ingold 1994:10) work is understood as something opposed to life, which more precisely translates into an opposition between the work time and leisure time. This entails the possibility for a construction of work-related identity, built upon reliance of variously interpreted work-ethics. However, according to Bauman, work-related identities are diminishing in the present, consumer society. Richard Sennett (1997) notes a similar trend, but he places it under the heading of “new capitalism”.

Richard Sennett deals with the impact of what he terms flexible capitalism on the perception of self and time, or what he calls more broadly, the culture of new capitalism. New capitalism, according to him, is characterized by increased flexibility in production which renders previous stable government and corporate bureaucracies less stable (1997:161). While he deals primarily with the western world, in my case his insights were important, because of the way he laid down the approach to the workers experience in new capitalism; which to a significant degree resonates with what I experienced during the fieldwork. Central tenets of the development of culture in capitalism, both relevant for this study, are those that the value

of work gets impoverished - meaning that work is not a point of self-reference any more, while the value of the place for self-perception has increased (1997:162). The former claim will be refined in this paper, since I argue that in different types of employment, work possesses certain aspects relevant for self-reference, and that in any case, work experience still serves a purpose in self-perception, since the workers, in our conversations, evaluated and used the experiences of the workplace to create certain social categories and position themselves within them.

In his book *The Corrosion of Character* (1999), Sennett follows several anecdotal and ethnographical examples through which he aims to arrive at a more general interpretation of the changes in work-related subjectivity in relation to the recent developments in capitalism. He notes that the quality of expectations has changed and that for adults with established families and careers sense of insecurity is much more built in than before (1999:19). In the case of workers, the volatility of the global economy is reflected in their tolerance of fragmentation - they do not believe in relying in each other (1999:141). However, Sennett (1999) points out, the salience of place increases in new capitalism, and it could be a point of organizing resistance to fragmenting and exploiting aspects of economy.

What could be problematic in the approaches of Sennett and, to lesser degree, Bauman - not ignoring all their essential differences in their outlooks - is that they tends to portray a rather linear picture of transition in structuring of work-related subjectivities. That is underlined by their reliance on the notion of the somehow new capitalism. What Sennett claims is that work was a central thing through which a life-long career was to be built, and that then this transferred into instability and uncertainty of recent capitalism, which then lead to "tolerance for fragmentation" (Sennett 1999:62). Here as well applies Ferguson's (1999) proposal for a development of alternative ways of thinking about the changes in strategies

over time, in which one would not look for a typical representative, but would rather look at the richness of variations and then try to look at the interdependence of those variations. Therefore, in my research I am trying to focus on differences in the accounts of my respondents. Specifically I examine how they are employing different frames for understanding the local circumstances and their place in them, as well as how this opens possibilities for various, potentially mutually conflicted, work-related and political subjectivities.

In the case of the post-socialist context, one should understand in relation to what state of affairs do the subjectivities develop. During socialism, job position was not only about the wage, but also served an important role in constructing the individual in relation to a wider community, through being a channel of other, social, economic and cultural relations (Pine, Bridger 1998:8). This was not always recognized by the workers, and in that respect, drive for “privatization” of enterprises could differ from the meanings of “privatization” as understood by the liberalizing elites (Kalb 2014:265). This more broadly means that the meanings of the same words can differentiate depending on the class or other group which utilizes them. While the strength of these ties present in socialism has diminished, I argue that the youth still use their work experience or job positions to construct some kind of wider community, which is however characterized by instability, fragmentation, but retains a certain sense of place.

1.3. Fragmentation of working class

In assessing the weakness of organized labor in the post-socialist period, Kalb points toward acceleration of social cleavages, especially among labor - which disable collective action of workers as workers (Kalb 2015:23). While it is debatable to what extent the socialist states provided the conditions for fragmentation, through e.g. “atomization of working class”

in socialism (Lazić 2011), the idea that fragmentation of working class in post-socialism is a present condition retains a wider acceptance.

A useful way of thinking about the relation between local economy and people's attitudes can be found in the work of Frances Pine (1998). In her comparison between two Polish regions, one around Łódź, and another called Podhale, she discusses the attitudes toward recent economic changes. In doing so, she brings the term “fragmentation” into relation with the patterns of fragmented economy. In the case of the place where I did my research, it is more convenient to compare it to Łódź, since the two are similar in respect with their economic positions during socialism, when both were integrated into what she calls central economy. In the area around Lodz, the changes after socialism pushed toward the changes of survival-strategies which lead in the direction of fragmented economy, which refers to “fragmented labor, migration and entrepreneurial activity” (1998:119). This she uses for two things: on the one hand, through this lens the economic activities and survival strategies can be viewed. On the other, elements of economy viewed in this way open the question of local historical circumstances which render them more or less viable, acceptable, or compatible with the local memory of previous times. The elements of local fragmented economy, and local history, play out in the hopes and perspectives of the local people, which can be seen in what they take for granted and what do they perceive as an aberrant state, as a rupture, etc.

Another, but related, meaning of fragmentation can be found in the work of sociologist Mladen Lazić who deals with post-socialist transformation in Serbia and employs a class-analysis perspective. In his book, *Waiting for capitalism*, when discussing the transformation in the patterns of class formations after socialism, Lazić defines class fragmentation as

“deep and mutually crossed divisions within a certain class, along the different dimensions - including material position, recruitment patterns, organizational forms and value orientations - whereby those divisions disable, or considerably aggravate and limit, collective class action for the protection and advancement of its own class interests” (2011:208).

While he expands on the forms of working class atomization and fragmentation during socialism, he points out that fragmentation underwent a transformation during the post-socialist period. He defines working class as manual workers without or with minimal management responsibilities in the labor process, across all sectors and branches of economy (2011:211). In the case of Serbia during the nineties, in what he calls period of “blocked transformation” - nationalist mobilization by the ruling regime, civil war, and one-sided international pressures, lead in direction of ethnic collectivist orientations, as well as authoritarian and traditionalist values (2011:209). These values, which play role in the processes noted in post-socialist space, were articulated through patriarchal and ethnic discrimination (Pine and Bridger 1998:10), all of them solidifying a new form of working class fragmentation, and disappearance of class as a rhetorically utilized term in politics.

Sampson in his analysis of the elite reconfigurations in the post-socialist Balkans uses fragmentation to point toward the divisions of society along “class, ethnic, regional, or social lines” (2002:302). While he locates fragmentation on the level of society rather than that of working class, he offers some ways in which it is still useful to think about fragmentation of the working class. He suggests that fragmentation is a metaphor under which it can be talked about different types of conflicts, diverse income generating strategies, and differences in life projects and the ways they are pursued. These lines cut through working class, which leads to fragmentation in terms of differences in life projects and currently pursued strategies.

In analyzing the conversations with the respondents, a starting point is that one noted by Pine, that people in Poland with whom she had done her research held mutually opposing images of capitalism - both the one of idealized Fordism, and other of an unsafe and uncertain world (1998:109). Both of these images were simultaneously held by her interlocutors, in attempts to make sense of the surrounding social world. In the case of my research, holding mutually inconsistent outlooks concerning various issues was taken as a manifestation of the fragmentation of perspectives, marked by the mutual existence of different ideologies. Such perspectives are partly influenced by the local history, partly by the local economic circumstances which present a meeting point between the ways of generating income and embodiment of various social and cultural categories. These perspectives are then utilized in self-perception and justification of different plans and attitudes by my respondents. In this paper one further step in identifying the ideologies is taken. It is looking at the imagined positions which the respondents take when reasoning about a certain topic. For example, a laborer can justify the behavior of a group leader, through presenting a perspective of a group leader, which renders group leaders behavior understandable, and in effect, justifiable.

1.4. Articulation and critical juncture

Once the fragmentation is described and understood, questions remain concerning what are the relations between those, ever-shifting, fragments. In order to try to locate open possibilities for further development in that respect, I will look at whether there are occurring some alliances, or is there a possibility for construction of alliance, since such thing “is not guaranteed by how those forces are constituted in the first place” (Hall 1985:95). Articulation, according to Hall, is constructed between certain social or economic forces, on the one hand, and certain forms of politics and ideology. These forms of politics and ideology can facilitate or hinder intervention of those forces into history, in a progressive way. In this research, I

tried to locate whether there is some ideological basis, in the understanding of the fragmented/fragmenting society and economy; for forging alliances over those lines of separation, and how do they stand in relations to lines which are excluding the possibility of solidarity or joint action between variously formulated social categories.

In order to assess the possible impact of these articulations on the local or national political economy, I will treat these developments in relation to critical junctures. Critical junctures, according to Kalb,

“are multilevel mechanisms that link the global levels of what Eric Wolf (1990) called structural power with the respective institutional fields of tactical power on the scale of the national state and with the agential power of “common people” in situated everyday circumstances. Such critical junctions, moreover, have a path dependency, a historical weight and a direction of their own that cannot always easily be turned around.” (2014:255)

Fragmentation is seen as an unrecognized local part of such a mechanism, which reinforces macro-economic movements and policies, or even is its unavoidable part. There are certain points at which fragmentation corresponds with local history, and then corresponds with national, regional, and global political-economical developments (in terms of Eric Wolf, 1990: levels of organizational and structural power). The points of interaction between local history and larger levels of power are located in the legal codification of seasonal labor, processes of mechanization and land concentration, and similar mechanisms which influence the relations between various class positions, such as owners, labor recruiters, and laborers themselves.

Chapter Two: Ethnography

In this chapter I lay out and interpret the results of my research in Crvenka. This chapter is concerned with how the work experience of my respondents produces mutually conflicted social categories, leading to fragmentation. Those categories are developed in order to grapple with such precarious circumstances which are translated into fragmented economy and fragmented experience of such economy. They are employed in understanding and explaining the present labor conditions. The saliency of these social categories as potential means in organizing social relationships varies. This provides an open space, in which some emerging political and even emancipatory narratives can be seen. During the conversations, my respondents were trying out different explanations, none of which was able to fully account for all the perceived present conditions. This was visible when different registers would emerge during the interviews, trying to offer answers for the same questions from different angles. This points to simultaneous presence of multiple ideological strands. This means that clear ideological positioning should be seen as a type of privilege, or a well established position certain about its reproduction, which was not the case in Crvenka. Also, it is my claim that this multiplicity of ideologies could potentially narrow down depending on its interaction with the instances of higher power levels - or critical junctures. In first sub-chapter, I present a short overview of the research and economic history of Crvenka in socialist and post-socialist times, with the corresponding social changes. In the sub-chapter dedicated to fragmented economy, I am presenting the possibilities for work and how their fragmentation translates into uncertain perspectives and imagined futures of my respondents. In the following sub-chapter, I portray the array of social categories implemented in understanding their labor experience. The various ways of understanding the labor relations were inconsistent, but coexisted, pointing toward the possible axis of division whose saliency varies. In the fourth sub-chapter, I present how these categories relate to perception of self and

the others, and are therefore utilized in planning future. In the fifth sub-chapter I focus more specifically at the narratives which possess certain political potential focused on protecting workers and improving labor conditions, and in the final sub-chapter I am pointing toward the relation of fragmentation and those narratives to the points of interaction with larger levels of political and economical power.

2.1. Overview of data and local social and economic history

I visited Crvenka three times and spent fourteen days there: two in December of 2015, eleven in April of 2016, and one day in May of 2016. In total I conducted eight recorded, and three unrecorded interviews. The age of my respondents varied from twenty-eight to eighteen. All of them had at least some working experience, and all except one had experience in agricultural seasonal labor. The majority of people with whom I did the interviews, used the income from the fields for covering personal expenses, such as clothes, or going to festivals, or spending leisure time with friends. Most of them, but not all, relied primarily on their parents' income, which however was not very high, rendering some kind of work more accepted among them.

Not all interviews were one-on-one conversations. Several of them were group conversation, so the total number of my respondents was fifteen. Unfortunately, it was much easier to get in touch with male than female respondents, so only three out of fifteen respondents were female. Another material I used were the field notes that I kept during all three stays. These concerned everyday experiences and conversations that were not necessarily held only with youth, but also with older people, parents or older friends, who also would get easily engaged by the topics I was researching.

Crvenka is located in the West Bačka district, in a municipality of Kula. The town itself has around ten thousand people, but in recent censuses the population level has been falling. Most of the jobs available to the youth were informal, and the formal ones were precarious, although in different ways. Petty sales and services, migration, working in the fields, usually in a form of unregistered employment or (a string of) temporary contracts, emerged most often as the income generating opportunities.

During socialist Yugoslavia (1945-1992), Crvenka had several factories and agricultural combines (*kombinati*), which together with widespread private ownership of land (Srećković 2015:540; Swain 2000:5), presented the economic infrastructure of this and surrounding places. A few of those factories were strong and recognizable across Yugoslavia. A part of industrial infrastructure was inherited from the period before socialism, which rendering Crvenka integrated in the “central economy” (Pine 1998). The ethnic composition of the place changed after the Second World War, with the expulsion of Germans, and arrival of colonists, mostly from Bosnia and Montenegro. However, the place remained relatively prosperous throughout socialism, and was remembered as such by most of the older people that I met. This does not mean that there were no other, more informal economic activities as well during socialism, but rather that reproduction of households could be pursued on the local level, and that a sense of certainty was established and attached to the local economic infrastructure.

The post-socialist transformation was marked by the emergence of a more fragmented economy. This happened through various processes of dispossession, mostly lay-offs, privatizations-turned-liquidations, and credit-indebtedness, and a start of the process of land privatization and then concentration. During socialism, there were brick, alcohol, sugar, and biscuit factories, and three large agriculture enterprises. At the time of research only sugar and

biscuit factories still worked, with a diminished number of employees. Agriculture has been privatized through the process of return of the land collectivized during socialism, and etatized from previous social ownership (turned from social into state ownership, or ownership by some administrative unit). Etatized land got leased under circumstances which were often controversial both in the municipality, and in Serbia in general, representative of “fuzzy property” of which Verdery wrote (Verdery 1999). Seasonal labor on the land was almost exclusively informal and unregistered. From the employment in the factories and enterprises, labor is now mobilized through labor-contracting agencies and individuals, known as “group leaders”. While the official unemployment rate as an indicator has its flaws, one of them being registering only people registered at the National Bureau for Employment, who can be in informal working relationship, it is significant to note that in 2016. according to the data from the Serbian Development Agency, unemployment rate was 46% (Serbian Development Agency 2016).

2.2. Fragmented economy

The economic conditions during my research were characterized by increased precarity, importance of heterogeneous field of coping strategies, migration, and rare attempts at entrepreneurship, within which both younger and older people whom I met tried to navigate, and make sense of their personal and collective practices. Precarity was visible in the variety of working conditions and possibilities, as well as the instability of any longer-term plans. The existing formal labor relations, at least for youth, moved from permanent contracts and collective bargaining to a series of short-term contracts, which made removing the problematic workers easier for the employers. Within this, a fragmented understanding of labor relations and conditions which I witnessed was produced and reproduced. This was visible in different and sometimes mutually exclusive ways through which my respondents

interpreted those conditions and relations, roles of various social and cultural categories in it, and their own prospects and relations to them, with different implications for their self-perception and relation to locality.

Layoffs have been brought up as a topic in several of my interviews. This was a part of a wider narrative of general lack of perspective in the place. My respondents, around twenty years of age, told me that layoffs in the biggest local factory were to come. Their awareness was illustrative of the present state of economic uncertainty coupled with a sense of lack of reasons to stay in the town. Young people with whom I spoke were aware that most of their older co-workers in the field were the laid off workers of various state and social - turned private - enterprises. With those layoffs, prospects of living in this place certainly were not improved, since the symbolic status attached to the available jobs further diminished. This, coupled with other mixed and confusing experiences, was representative of the overall fragmented economy in the area. The effect of that economy was characterized by the inability for long-term planning and the necessity to make tough choices about one did not feel strongly, which could impact the rest of their lives, such as migration. If they stayed, it seemed that there are only petty sources of income, mostly in sales or services.

Fragmented economy was experienced both in a sense of uncertainty in organizing future time, and in a sense of the quality of once embraced activities. According to Peter, an unemployed twenty three years old, “here you can work only in the fields, or illegally”. Another respondent, Kate, summarized the problem as “impossibility to earn enough even to think about some goal... because you can't, until you don't have initial capital, you are not allowed even to imagine something or dream, I mean, it is allowed, but the reality always somehow... slaps you in the face”. Current sources of income, such as work in a field, allow for a specific short-term type of planning, which then has to take certain aspects for granted,

such as a belief in the stability of the place, and role of parents in continued provisions, while a young person can contribute to maintenance of the household and some leisure activities, but not much more. Short-term type of planning was sometimes accepted as part of what they were, but at the further inspection, people did not feel it was a sustainable pattern. Steve, a prospective teacher, twenty-five years old, voiced his concern half-jokingly, half-bitterly:

“We, the younger ones, do not care. We have that tiny bit of cash, but no huge expenses, I mean, we don't have to pay for bills and that, but, bro, I am afraid that it doesn't turn into a habit for me.

To work there?” [in the fields], I asked,

“Yes, to stay there. Because when I was a kid, like, I start to work in order to have some cash during the summer, and then, as years pass, everything, every day, every month bro, more and more often I am there bro.”

The average salary for this unregistered work per day is around 1000 RSD (8 EUR).² Young people usually avoid working there every day, citing harsh weather conditions and required time (A worker can lose up to three hours traveling to and from the field). The prospects with such money, if one still lives with their parents who provide for food, the bills, and credit debts, are mostly for going to a nearby place for a party, or saving money for couple of days for nearby festival, and similar short-term plans. Therefore, all of my respondents imagined themselves as not working there for much longer, but there was a certain awareness that it is possible that there will be no other option. Responses to this were migration, working in some factory, adherence to a vocational group (such as teachers or policemen), or, rarely, entrepreneurship, as perspectives which provide some goals. Talking about individual business pursuits was a rare instance in which a state appeared as a factor, and a negative one

² Minimal consumer basket for a three-member household in March of 2016 was 34.961,15 RSD (less than 300 EUR). Average one was 67.036,72 (around 560 EUR). Important expense that is not included in the consumer basket are the debts owed to the banks by the members of the household (Ministry of Trade, Tourism, and Telecommunication, 2016).

at that: people were overburdened by the taxes required to legalize their small businesses. On the other hand, it was not uncommon that if someone were to run an unregistered business, they would be reported and fined. Therefore, formal or informal work for someone with greater political or economical influence was a more acceptable and stable option.

My respondents mostly had experience with agricultural labor, but some of them also worked in industry and in the services sector. For most of them it was not unusual to evaluate the work place, whatever it was, first as very bad, with harsh conditions, but after that, quite often some positive perspective on the workplace would emerge. For example, Kate, a twenty eight year old, was employed in a nearby clothes factory, and she summarized her experience of the factory in these words: “pace of work was such that it could not be endured, wage was low, below any, any... [meaningful level].” However, later in the conversation, when we spoke about her experience in that factory with more detail, at one point she said that it is actually a good factory, and that depending on luck, you could get a starting payment of between thirty five and forty thousand dinars (300-330 EUR). Also, mutual help between the workers was mentioned, which rendered the whole working experience better at that point of our conversation. However, it remains that she herself moved from the factory because her wage was constantly deducted because of too high norm, and that she described that most of people look at that job as a temporary solution. I heard similar reasoning about agricultural employment: while it remained a job to be avoided, Peter pointed out, regarding the working process, that, “when you get into series, when you work, it becomes as if, you think of yourself like you are a full-time worker, you just go, it does not bother you”.

Kate herself was caught up in the fragmented economy. She was high-educated, and her income, after quitting that factory, consisted of giving private German lessons, for which there was an increasing interest. She intended to finish another course in German herself, and

apply for a teaching position in some of the primary schools in or around her place of living. A month later, when I visited the place again, I found out that she was heading to Slovakia, to work in a factory of electronic devices for three months, together with her boyfriend.

Schemes for temporary labor migrations to the EU countries were not uncommon, but were insecure on multiple points. In December I met Peter, who at the time thought he would leave for Slovakia in matter of days, but when I met him in April he told me that he had heard that the previous contingent of workers had been deprived of some payments, so he had decided to stay away from it. Ethan, a twenty year old currently employed in a local bar-restaurant, who in April voiced his intent to either migrate to a nearby town or to start seasonally migrating to Italy, abandoned both plans a month later. He did not have enough money to go to Italy, and he had no one with whom he could migrate to the nearby town and share the costs of living. My respondents recognized the insecurity of migration and therefore did not embrace it as an option. While it remained as a possibility, not many people entertained that idea seriously.

Another source of income often mentioned were several local factories, or factories in the vicinity. However, getting a job there was mostly perceived as being gained through knowing the right people, or through the connections of the parents who could then secure the employment for their children. Also, my respondents cited the lack of possibility to get a permanent employment as an obstacle. Jimmy, a twenty five year old, had already been working under temporary contracts in a local factory for several years. On the one side this politicized his account of his experience in the factory, but he still expected to get a permanent contract at some point.

Mechanization, for some respondents, threatened seasonal agricultural labor as a local economical sector. For others, who thought that mechanization was not an approaching

process, there could be two reasons for resilience of human labor - its cheapness (sustained by the influx of laid-off workers, among other things), or the inability of the locals to invest into it (this answer did not account for larger land owners). This, coupled with factors which will be discussed in the following sub-chapter, was illustrative of a vague perception of the property developments in agricultural sector, in spite of agriculture being the main economic sector in Crvenka. This was also a point of practical division between parents and their children. Leasing the land, if they had it, was a strategy undertaken by parents, and my respondents, their children, usually were not sure to whom the land was leased. Most of my respondents were indifferent to the property status of the land, whether their families possessed or didn't possess some land. This indifference to the property status of the land and the surrounding ownership relations points that for the youth, job, rather than land, was a notion which served to organize their plans. Now I move to the social categories which are more immediately produced and reproduced by the work experience.

2.3. Fragmentation of working class

In the workplace, where my informants faced work-related encounters, some social categories got reproduced, such as age categories, while some new ones emerged, or gained prominence, such as those of ambitious or lazy workers. Those social categories were related to categorizing the people in relation to the work: their skill, the motif for their work, and their work attitude or ethic. Other social categories which they encountered concerned other positions relevant for the work process, such as controllers, forepersons, group leaders, managers, supervisors, “bosses” (gazda), and owners (vlasnik). In interaction with the attitudes concerning a life outside of work process, these social categories produced various patterns of judging the labor conditions and prospective development of local economy, and the place of my respondents in or outside of it. These patterns could presuppose various

standpoints from which they could be held, and it was not uncommon for my respondents to switch between different positions during the conversation. Resting on the experiences with variously constructed social categories, these patterns cut through the division in the labor process, usually, but not always, rendering class distinction pointless.

One phenomenon where this was visible regards the sources of conflicts and tensions at the workplace. There was an idea among my respondents how a foreperson should behave in the fields, and that did encompass a certain degree of strictness. While overall, or initially, the respondents would characterize forepersons behavior at least as “bothering”, it could often be accompanied by further rationalizations and understandings. For instance, several respondents mentioned how in different situations, some forepersons clarified that their harsh attitude should not be taken personally, and that it was their job to ensure that the work was done. This could fit well with the recognition that every one directly engaged in the labor process, workers and forepersons, could do their job “as it should be done”. Therefore, the existing positions were accepted, and the anomalies were located at the personal level. Some forepersons were “excellent”, relaxed, and they would help the workers, while there were others, excessively harsh. Those harsh ones were usually described as “thinking they are bosses” - that they took their authority too seriously and started abusing it. However, this was not a distinction between workers and forepersons, but a distinction between normal or relaxed, and stupid people. Therefore, it was not surprising that, when describing how exactly a bothering foreperson behaved, Mike, a first-year student in computer programming, pointed out that “one comes, a peasant [“peasant” is often used as a derogatory term] comes who has three teeth in his head, three years of primary school, and he starts bullshitting - sorry for that - ‘why you did this, why that’, and he is not right. And you know he is not right.”

A development parallel to this acceptance of the positions in labor process concerned the possible lack of cooperation between the workers. Several reported theft of crates with picked fruit. Some ascribed such behavior to Gypsies, but some claimed that it was not characteristic of them, and that the Whites also did it. When this racial/ethnic boundary was not present, lack of cooperation between the workers came in the shape of selective foot dragging, which would then lead to more work for other workers. To me, it seems that I did interviews with both those who did drag their feet, and with those highly critical of that practice. Of course, probably most of them did both at different times. This however, further established an outlook in which the position in the labor process is less salient than the personal traits of the occupant of a given position.

The acceptance of these positions was further strengthened by the wage-labor nature of that work. It was primarily treated as an income generating strategy, and that was the interests of the workers. Therefore, the interest in wider economic topics was treated as a characteristic of the position of group leaders and owners. This was further reinforced by the lack of clear knowledge who the owners are, what do they do, and where do they come from. In Vojvodina, there is a significant variation in the sizes of the fields. For instance, “private owner” (privatnik), was used by some respondents to refer to smaller landowners, while the bigger ones could be known by their names, large enough that they do not need a specific term. Viewing the work on the field through the lens of wage, and therefore detaching from the knowledge of trends in land ownership probably points toward a certain historically grounded ideology, for which there is no space further to develop in this paper. Here however, it should be noted that large owners usually are not present at the fields, while it is not uncommon for the petty owners to be engaged in the work process together with workers. Those petty local owners were sometimes interpreted as local success stories, starting with just “half of a tractor” as Peter explained, and building up throughout the years a formidable

business. Even some, but not all, large landowners were sometimes treated as success stories, while at other times as “thieves”. What is more, even being a “thief” was not always straightforward negative trait, but could be rationalized as a coping strategy of an able man in the chaos of recent history. This was part of Steve's attitude toward the owner of the main field where he worked. On the other hand, the relationship with visible owners was described in terms of personal traits and experiences. Therefore, this part-accepted, part-imposed ignorance is a cause for fragmentation of perspective on the fields, since this variety of representations of owners, as close or distant, as small or big, as good or bad, made a clear understanding of the local economical processes difficult. This conforms with what Pine (1998:111) described in Poland, that her respondents held different images of capitalism in order to account for different aspects of it - uncertainty on the one hand, and sporadic success stories on the other.

Another mechanism of fragmentation was more immediate, imposed “from the above” and concerned the organization of labor which followed the aims such as those described in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1995). Workers were divided and organized into groups, lead by different group leaders. Even a group under one group leader could be broken into smaller parts, which would then be assigned a different row in the field. This resulted that workers mostly when they made pauses did not gather on a same spot, and usually did not communicate much with each other. Socializing happened on the bases of friendship, or locality ties, which would lead to consequences which will be discussed later. Similar things happened to Kate, who worked in clothes factory. She never got acquainted with the entire factory plant, being further encouraged to view herself in individualistic way, as a person who is there only because of her temporary interest. Jimmy, a local factory worker in a self-described status of “permanent seasonal worker”, however, had a perspective much more embedded into his workplace, which was, among the other things, illustrated by his claim of

the knowledge of a whole, complex, factory plant, the knowledge in which he surpassed even the older workers.

Making a distinction between young and old, often fitted into a distinction of who is pressured to work in the field, and who does not have to do that for living. Because of this, most of my respondents were usually able not to work a whole week and were easy on themselves in that regard. Moreover, this was a specificity of working in the field for youth which gave them the possibility to control the organization of time on week basis. One could easily work several days, and then take several days off. This type of flexibility was appreciated by some of the respondents, or more often taken for granted as an escape from too harsh conditions. Most of my respondents said how they avoid working more than four days in a row, and wondered how the older people, “those that live from that work”, cope with constant work in the extreme conditions. Also, they were aware that most of those people come from lay-offs in various factories and enterprises, and that among them are even highly educated people in some instances. Those people were struggling for survival, according to my informants, which was always accompanied with a bitter feel that those people do not deserve that. However, when all of the above mentioned distinctions are taken into account, it is no wonder that instances of conflicts between the workers and forepersons were only sporadic. Only Lucy described once how there was a collective strike in the field, when the forepersons abruptly demanded that the workers stay several hours longer. She reasoned that they were mostly older people, with established households, who maybe have other social, domestic obligations and therefore do not want to be treated that way. Also, she said, it was towards the end of the season, when everyone was, according to her, extremely agitated and sensitive.

In the factories, it seemed that it was somewhat different. Fragmentation in the factories confirmed the noted developments underpinning the development of international division of labor in the last four decades, which were focused on advancing the possibilities for fragmentation of the production process (Froebel et al. 1981:13). This current in fragmentation is more visible in the case of the local factory: when describing why there were lay-offs in the factory, Jimmy, a factory worker in a self-described status of “permanent seasonal worker” - accepted the redundancy of various positions, talking from the perspective of the owner: “I have 25 electricians. 25 electricians! what are 25 electricians to do [...] I will diminish their number to minimum, and if I need, I will bring someone, I will pay. [The owner] doesn't want to hold anyone on the wage list [i.e. to employ].” The owner would rather call “someone”, such as a specialized agency, in case of need, and Jimmy, at that point of our conversation, showed full understanding for such reasoning. Further, this distinction was concerned with the relations within the factory: Jimmy made distinctions between the capable and the redundant workers, and between the workers more and less engaged into the labor process. This was to some extent reproduced in the accounts of agricultural work.

Other dimensions of fragmentation which are more discussed in the literature, concern gender, age, ethnicity, and labor market segmentation. However, fragmentations of those kinds were more latent and reproduced through practices, rather than reflected in the accounts. They rather structured my experience during the fieldwork, which is most pressingly seen in the discrepancy in the number of male and female respondents. However, those lines did not imply conflicted interests, unlike the fragmenting lines caused by the work experience, and therefore could be bridged through some alliance-building narratives. For instance, gender division of labor in the fields or factories was on the one hand accepted, but was not used to diminish the problems that different genders could encounter at work. Those distinctions

where conflicting interests could emerge, were reproduced rather in the realm of everyday life, which would deserve a separate research.

Some respondents mentioned that the people working in the fields were of varying educational status. Inability to correlate education with career outcome probably acted as a further fragmenting factor, since it did not provide an economically relevant reason to pursue higher education as such. Also, it did not provide a reason to treat higher education as a mark of higher status, something which ran contrary to the ascribed social status of higher education. Therefore, my impression was that different educational performances did not present an obstacle in socializing, which was further confirmed by varying educational paths of people present in the same group conversations. However, education and working in the fields maintained mutual exclusivity in some moments. While they were aware that some highly educated people work as seasonal laborers, they took it as an aberrant state. That became apparent in my conversation with Mike, when I stated my plans to work in the fields after I graduate. Himself a first year student, he was surprised by my plans: “you, instead of taking your diploma and searching for a job, you want to go to the fields!?”

It should not be put out of sight that Vojvodina is a multiethnic region, and that I did research in a Serb-majority place. The topic of ethnicity did appear here and there among my respondents, who were not all of Serb ethnic background. However, it was not particularly intense. In a single case of negatively-charged account on Croats, it referred to the artificiality of that nation and its hostility, but I got the sense that it refers more to Croats as a distantly placed ethnic group, not to Croats in Vojvodina. Moreover, that person had a partly Croatian heritage, as pointed by his mother who was listening to our conversation.

Most of my respondents, if they voiced explicitly their general attitude toward the national question, took a more open stance. Sometimes it was mentioned in informal contexts

of hanging out as well, related to various topics. According to the people who voiced that attitude, it did not matter what your ethnicity was, as long as you were able to hang out - which can be phrased as a "good" or "normal" or "nice" or "laid back" (opušten) person. In one way, this was confirmed by practice as well. Two of my respondents were ethnically defined, by themselves and by others, as Hungarians (even though they came from mixed marriages), which did not seem to hamper in any way their social life. Since I spent a significant amount of time with one of them, that impression got even stronger. However, there were certain differing mechanisms which here cannot be expanded, but have to be mentioned. First one concerns the relation with the Roma. Second one concerns a nearby settlement with different ethnic composition. It seems to me that the name of that place figured least often in the everyday plans of my respondents. Even more, Christine, a temporary worker in another local factory who was in a relationship with a man from that place, mentioned that those people had problems when going to other, Serb-majority places. Even though the sense of inter-local mobility was not very salient overall, this distance also probably has to do with ethnic dynamics which here cannot be expanded more.

All of these lines of fragmentation were shifting, and of varying salience during our conversations. They were representative of the multiple possible fragmentary explanations for the current state of desolation in the place, while trying to look toward the - at least personal - future. This resulted in a bundle of personal perspectives and self-perceptions which will be presented in the following sub-chapter. After that, the openness for political perspectives caused by instability in explanations will be assessed.

2.4. Fragmentation of perspectives, ideologies and self-perception

The fragmentation of economy is coupled with the precarity of labor conditions which individualizes one in pursuit of income, since one has to navigate through the chaotic

circumstances either on one's own, or with a group of friends, building up a narrative of individual struggle for better life. This was mostly observable in how all the respondents claimed to have got to the fields mostly on their own initiative, and that each person gets into personal contact with a group leader who organizes work, which then makes the ground for individualized self-perception. When it is not individual initiative, it is then an initiative of a group of friends.

While on the surface everything relating labor conditions and general perspective in the place was bad, things would get more complicated once the questions became more precise. Making a discourse on the seasonal agricultural labor, as well as working in the factories, resulted in heterogeneous field of experiences, outlooks, and relations among the people. Some common threads persisted throughout doing the fieldwork, such as overall negative role of forepersons, and the low status of seasonal agricultural work, but interpretation of those threads became challenged by those themes which only emerged after the start of the interviews, or after I became more acquainted with the local conditions. These challenges, in shape of various inconsistencies, were tied to different self-perceptions in relation to work.

Low status of seasonal agricultural labor was tied to the fact that it mostly was not perceived as a real job, and that it had no place in long-term plans of my respondents. Generalized image of agricultural work as low paid, “while someone stands behind your neck”, as one respondent put it, rendered the whole job of low status, in absence of an articulated narrative or movement for improvement of those conditions.

Most often expressed motive for working in the fields was money. After that, the possibility to make money while actually socializing with the friends, and only then, in very few cases, a certain need to test oneself, get engaged in the work process, and demonstrate a

certain work ethic. Several of my respondents admitted to not being very diligent when working in the fields. When asked what his experience of uprooting maize tassels in a nearby place was, Mike said: “[it was] awesome, it was really good, I worked there for three, four days, the rest of the days I rested, but just to tell you, I literally didn't do anything there, I was fooling around...” The very possibility of fooling around and not being forced to pay close attention to the work, rendered the workplace “awesome”. There were similar observations in other conversations as well. Peter, for instance, told me that in general, he goes to the fields more in order to hang out, than to make money. This personal criterion for whether a workplace is a good one, was contrasted to the criterion of the level of organization of the work place. A well organized work place was that one in which a worker was tightly controlled, which however, rendered personal experience much more unfavorable. Therefore, two perspectives mixed in the accounts of my respondents. One was of a well established capitalist ideology, which accepts as obvious the impetus of the owners and managers to exploit and closely monitor the workers in order to raise productivity. Another served to describe one's personal standing, one which looks to earn some money while socializing with friends, in order to have a money for enjoying the pastime.

The example presented above is only one in a row of inconsistent evaluations of workplaces that was present in many conversations. On the one hand, most of the young people put into their plans to cease working in the fields, citing low wage and harsh conditions as primary reasons, but on the other hand, some of them would later point out that it was a decent job, and that you could make for a living “in the village” doing that. These conflicting evaluations were however voiced as part of different registers, with different assumed perspectives, and differently divided social categories. For instance, Steve claimed that one can make enough money from working in the fields while he explicitly did not intend to remain a seasonal worker. When he claimed that one does not need more money “here, in

the village”, he was talking from an assumed perspective of the people “who did not go to the university so they don't have where to find a job”, mentioned during discussing the same topic. Steve, who put his hopes into becoming a teacher in one of the local schools, in that sense accepted the wage of agricultural work, but not for himself. Through this, he could also exclude himself from a consideration of wider circumstances that he encountered in his experience of working in the fields.

Making personal plans indeed acted as a means of - or a reason for - detaching from local circumstances for other respondents as well. Lucy, who used the language of work ethic the most among my respondents, mentioned how she tried to “switch off” in the case of harsh foremen, and to do her job as well as possible. She embedded this into a larger narrative of her ambition to lead a life of hard work and entrepreneurship. No harsh foremen should stand between her and her hard work. However, since she had uneasy experiences with fellow workers as well, she made a narrative which emphasized her personally, and her family to some extent. She intended to sell the land her family owned, and build a greenhouse in her garden, in which she could cultivate various crops throughout the year, selling them at the local farmer’s market earlier than other producers. While she mentioned that she was asking her parents for advice regarding the plans, she phrased that initiative as a personal one: “I plan to make a greenhouse in my garden, I will sell that land, or maybe I will put a greenhouse on that land as well, I am still thinking about it, I am discussing with my [parents] what I would like.”

Two major factors influenced some biases of my respondents, which pushes this paper more in the direction of an interpretive than a generalizing study. One factor was that all of them had work experience: all the respondents with whom I spoke, if asked, confirmed that not all of their peers had work experience. This conditioned a creation of separate social

categories for those not working, and through that, a certain patterns of self-perception. Another factor was in line with Sennett's insight that "not to gamble is to accept oneself in advance as a failure" (1999:90). In this particular case, none of my respondents presented themselves as failures, but while some had articulated plans, others were less certain. The implications of this were twofold - one was a way to leave the openness of possibilities for themselves. This sometimes prevented them from talking about constraining circumstances. On the other hand, since they perceived harsh circumstances and the lack of perspective in the place, sometimes they were inclined to account for the grievances of the others in terms of their personal failures. More importantly, the perpetuation of bad circumstances was interpreted as the failure of others to express the concern over the present situation. That failure was usually phrased in terms of more or less ambition during the interviews. Then, this failure could be connected to the upbringing of those who failed - they were lazy because they were spoiled. In contrast to that, my respondents could use their parents' approval of their work, or the fact that they are earning money like their parents are, as a kind of symbolic legitimation. However, the salience of that distinction in actual social relations that I witnessed was not very high. It was one among the possible explanations, that was not further pursued.

A case in point would be portraying the young males who spent their time in betting bars as failures: going to a betting bar entailed avoiding laboring in the fields, and since betting could not be a viable source of income, those people were pushed deeper into lack of perspective. In this case, some of my respondents made a distinction between them who are working in the fields, or working in general, and those who avoid working and spend more and more time in the betting bars. However, accusing someone of being responsible for his or her own failure was rather rare, and if present, confined to people (mostly peers) that the respondents know. Usually those opinions were accompanied with providing a more macro

interpretation which included the general economic uncertainty, a lack of decent jobs, etc. After all, the topic of betting bars in the conversation followed here was introduced as one income generating strategy, which unfortunately did not yield results. My respondents also engaged in betting, so they were able to make a more nuanced account, which was not consistently judgmental of their peers. Also, having in mind that the primary motive of my respondents was to make some money for spare time, they were not really interested in genuinely criticizing their peers who do not work. The betting practice of their peers could be interpreted as an indicator of general lack of perspective, or a character trait of those people which rendered them unworthy. This also remained open.

When talking about the possibility of resisting the causes of overall local feeling of desolation, the usual answer was either that people would complain, but were afraid of losing the job, or that they embraced their low position. This other answer could be justified either in terms of their personal character, or in terms of pointing toward the constraining effect of outer economic circumstances, both justifications within a same conversation. As one respondent pointed out, he did not know a person that was not indebted. These were the two possibilities he allowed in answering the question “why are people disinterested in talking about the local conditions?” - something which manifests as a disinterestedness of a person and therefore looks like a personal trait, but which is also easily connected to the political-economical conditions: indebtedness and layoffs of complaining people.

I think that this variety of perceptions of oneself and others points to a certain degree of openness of possible developments in ideological stances of my respondents, but dependent on the broader political-economic circumstances. This openness will be assessed in the next sub-chapter, and its relation to broader circumstances in the final sub-chapter.

2.5. Political attitudes, emancipatory narratives, and challenges

Articulation, as defined by Stuart Hall, refers to a link, co-functioning of two practices, which is not given, but requires particular conditions of existence, “which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, [...] has constantly to be renewed, which [...] can disappear” (1985:113). In this sub-chapter I will present some narratives that rest upon articulation between different actors, practices and ideological stances, which lead toward a more oppositional narrative to the witnessed economic developments. This follows another clarification made by Hall, which is that articulation is constructed between certain social and economic forces on one side, and certain forms of politics and ideology. Even though fragmentation rests on production of social boundaries, the question through what they are articulated remains open. Also, the salience of those boundaries varies, and in that rests the openness for the discourses on local political and economical conditions, as well as the room for interaction with wider instances of power.

Since my fieldwork consisted primarily from talking with people about the local labor conditions, I asked my respondents how they think the overall situation could be improved. However, it is important to note that many of the following observations were voiced spontaneously, throughout the interviews. These narratives usually rested on an articulation of discontent through certain ideological narratives, which could be mutually incompatible, in accordance with the multilayered process of fragmentation.

One such issue was that of the announced formalization of the sector of seasonal labor. Interestingly, Steve claimed that he will avoid working under the contract, because he felt that then he would have to give up his freedom. Therefore, Steve articulated his stance toward the introduction of contracts through stressing his personal freedom, which fitted well with his lack of wish to continue working in the fields. However, some other respondents, who were

also not interested in permanently working in the fields, saw that process in a more positive light. According to Mark, it was normal that worker should have such protection, and that the owners should accept it. In this case, a rather harmonious relation between the workers and the state was articulated.

Articulating the discontent through criticizing the conditions at the work places was very common. Most commonly, the objects of discontent were low wages, group leaders, and forepersons. In spite of all the variety in the actual behavior of those people, in general terms they were described through derogatory terms, and their approach was overall characterized from bothering, to terrorizing. This usually applied to agricultural labor, where it would imply the low standing of it. However, even for that work most of my respondents claimed that the wages should be higher, and the health coverage better, especially for the older workers, who would often faint.

Since agricultural labor had a low standing, on a more general level, my respondents proposed greater wages in general, as well as opening of new factories, and creation of jobs. They were not interested much in who should open those factories or create the jobs. Regarding the wages, for the work in the field it was mostly noted that the group leaders make unreasonably high profits, since they take a part of the workers' wage aside from their own wage paid for by the landowner. In the case of factories, the idea for how to rise the wages was less clear. Related to that was the proposal by Jimmy that the seasonal laborers should form their own trade union, and that the existing trade unions should be more tightly controlled by the workers. In one instance though, Jimmy's friend and peer who listened to our conversation pointed out that the wages for the seasonal workers in one local factory cannot rise, since "the wages are low at other places as well, they can't overpay them, such is the labor market, it can't, the wage forms in that way." However, the acceptance of the

mechanism of labor market did not prevent him to agree with the need for higher wages. In this example we can see a young worker standing before a dilemma of acceptance of the workings of the labor market, and the assessment that the wage is lower than it should be.

Common place was to voice discontent both over the behavior of the politicians representing the state. It should be noted that my April stay, the longest one, took time during the campaign for local, regional and parliamentary elections, and in the immediate aftermath. Most of my respondents were marginally interested for the elections, and their voting practices on the election day differed significantly. Adherence to different parties did not prevent them from hanging out together. During one conversation, an exchange of opinions happened between Ron, around twenty years old, who is active in the ruling party, and two of his friends and peers, one of whom - Ethan - was particularly concerned over the described practice of buying the votes:

“Ethan: I got depressed, bro, for example, boss rented the space to some party, that one, [name of the party], whose votes go to Vučić [the prime minister]. And because, some guy who worked here this summer as a waiter, like, somehow managed to get into that office and work there, and then we talk when there is no work to do, and, [he told me that] for every vote they provide to Vučić, Vučić gives them fifty Euros for that vote. So now you look at it realistically, he like talks here, sells me some story, like, it will be better tomorrow, like they are fighting against corruption and all that, and then he gives 50 Euros for one vote. And somewhere, some children, they don't have what to eat, and they are sick, and they don't have [the money] for the medicines, you get it.

[...]

Ron: Well fuck it, it is like that everywhere. [...] Who wouldn't accept now, say I give you five hundred or thousand dinars, wouldn't you give your vote? You don't give a shit, and for one thousand dinars, everyone would...

E: But bro, look at it realistically...

R: Whoever comes to power - same shit...

E: Look realistically...

R: You won't sign, but two other will. It gets all the same whether you do it or not, so why wouldn't you...

[...]

E: Bro, I for example...

R: You get it, so everyone look at it that way, better to take that thousand dinars than nothing, because of one [unclear].

E: And that is some stupid petty party, bro [...] it doesn't exist, you get it. Literally, it exists only to gather the votes for Vučić. And now I wonder - they give him say ten votes, and he gives them five hundred Euros for those votes. How much does he get for it if he is ready to give easily five hundred Euros? And...

R: Well all of that comes from the state budget.

E: Well bro, where does the state go then?!"

Even though Ethan got passionate about this topic, it should be noted that he voiced the strongest readiness of all my respondents to leave the place for good. Therefore, "voting with

the feet” remained an option for a balancing between explicit political grievances and interest in personal path.

Ethan was actually the lone respondent who wholeheartedly accepted the possibility of leaving the place. This confirms what Sennett has been pointing out since the late nineties (Sennett 1997, 1999): the increased salience of place - need to belong and be grounded, which could then be articulated through the fondness for Crvenka, which my respondents often stressed out, or adherence to the state, which happened rarely. My respondents reluctantly accepted the need to leave the place, and most of them devised for plans that would allow them to return, or to remain in the relative proximity of the place. Lucy explicitly lamented the fact that many young people are leaving the country, instead of trying to stay and fight for improvement on a local level. This does not mean that she did not show understanding for migrants when I asked to clarify her position, justifying their decision by larger wages they could earn, and therefore start a family or embark on realizing some other long-term plan. However, their commonly voiced wish to stay, fostered by shared time filled with interesting experiences and, to a small but existing extent, mutual help in coping strategies, stood against the voiced fear of what will happen to the place since the further decrease in available jobs was expected, and working in the fields was, as described earlier, not a future enthusiastically accepted.

Also, some large capitalists, from the area or well known on a national level were criticized, mostly as “thieves”. Moreover, some respondents generalized that attitude to the private owners in general, recognizing that their prime interest is to exploit the worker - take as much labor as possible for as low wage as possible. Foreign capitalists were not problematized, and in that respect my respondents overall remained silent. The ownership of the economic units in and around Crvenka was mixed, there were both domestic and foreign

capitalists, so my respondents probably were not inclined to draw a boundary between the two. Kate, even though she quitted the job in a nearby clothes factory in foreign ownership, noted that the factory was organized “like in Europe”. Here again the absence of interest in, or knowledge about the owners of the economic units becomes visible.

Another point of contestation was the duration of labor in the fields. Lucy told me of a rare instance of a “rebellion” in the field, mostly by the older people. She justified it because those people had other things to care of, outside of the field. This can easily be interpreted as a drive for re-embedding the economy, into the local social and cultural norms. Another way which also concerns with a more social/cultural values, is the notion that “one should know what does he or she work for”, meaning that one can establish some longer term plans, such as starting a family, with the received wage.

In the factories, labor relations could also be used in articulating discontent, but with certain differences. Here the prominence of the trade unions in fighting for better conditions, including the wages, was more prominent. At least that applied for Jimmy, “permanent seasonal worker”, who voiced a position which was reminiscent of the imagined older labor movements and aims of those movements. One was that he refused to be satisfied with what he has in comparison with the other. He described this in a vivid way:

“You know, you shouldn't comfort yourself, I am not in that mood like - 'it's fine, he has sour cream, but I have ketchup too'.[...] [Mom] says "it's good, son, how are the others"? I say 'mom, I don't give a shit how it is for them - to me, it is as it is to me'.”

If fragmentation, supported by the layoffs of disobedient workers, results in apathy, justified by the worse condition of others, here we can see a statement contrary to that, coming from a person included into precarious working conditions. Moreover, he was the one who voiced the need for a trade union for the seasonal workers. He also stated his general belief that every

passed law goes against the interests of the workers. However, this did not prevent him to claim that a trade union will be formed when someone of “a healthy mind” arrives, since he stated that his present co-workers lacked such ambition. Therefore, he was also at the crossroad between espousing a more emancipatory narrative for the protection and improvement of workers' rights, but on the other, could voice his self-narrative in more individualized terms if his disbelief in his co-workers persisted.

Here I showed how the discontent can be articulated through different ideologies, with some of them possessing a certain political, or even emancipatory potential. This emancipatory potential rests on the feeling of shared place and workers rights, but they are sporadically appearing. Other articulations of discontent are related to individualist pursuits of better life, which then are coupled with a discontent for the local people. This is however more rare. What of these potentials could realize depends on the developments at the critical junctures. Those junctures will be reviewed in the following sub-chapter, offering the view over some possible further ideological developments.

2.6. Critical junctures - meeting of local elaborations and higher levels of power

Through looking at the fragmentation I was able to organize the data in a way which allows for mapping the ideological discourses and attitudes among the youth with working experience in Crvenka. In this sub-chapter I want to see how the identified aspects and manifestations of fragmentation could interact with the economic relations, which are points of influence of larger levels of power. Fragmentation interacts with the prospects of mechanization, formalization of seasonal labor, land concentration, clashes within the fractions of ruling class, elections, and other present modes of capitalist accumulation.

Voicing discontent in terms of wish for more employment means that a potential activity on the side of municipal, regional, or national government could render such critique pointless. The current prime minister tries to attract foreign investments, and in his public appearances relies heavily on opening production plants and promoting the interests of foreign investors.³ However, the level of the wages was also problematized, coupled with the lack of trust in politicians among my respondents. This could point out that even in the case of opening of factories and job positions concern could remain, unless significantly higher wages are introduced.

Formalizing the seasonal work, which has been announced at the beginning of the 2016. by the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Issues, has mostly been welcomed by the workers. However, fragmentation which leads to unclear perception of ownership dynamics in the region obscures the changes in relations of production and exchange which the coping with that law will have to entail. Unclear perception of the owners acts as a part in the mechanism which can allow the conflict between the various fractions of the ruling class. Over the coping with this new law some old alliances will have to be breached, while some new will have to be forged. However, in order to assess in more detail what confrontational relations will emerge around this law, a separate research would have to be undertaken. What remains is that in the current state capitalist restructuring, with all the clashes between the different accumulator of capital can happen without taking the interests of the workers into the account. The development of situation regarding the group leaders and labor-contracting agencies will be especially important, since the further establishment of precarious types of employment, carried by these two types of actors, will clash with the still voiced expectations of youth for a stable job with decent working conditions.

³ In the beginning of 2016., a scandal concerning the labor conditions in Korean-owned factory in southern Serbia emerged. Stories of inhumane treatment of the workers surfaced. Prime minister downplayed those stories since, according to him, such concern over threatened further influx of foreign investments (nova ekonomija 2016).

One of the main axis of fragmentation which allows for this is the one between the youth and the elders, which roughly corresponds, according to what my respondents said, to the division between the workers for whom the seasonal work is and is not primary means of providing for livelihood. Dispossession creates a cheap pool of labor which was a condition for a start of primitive accumulation. It is further complemented by the practices locally relevant for constituting youth, such as working over the summer for allowance. Such reason for work is sustained mostly by the income of their parents, which can come from migratory work, land leasing, or indeed, working in the factories or the fields. However, some of my respondents already started working in order to contribute to the household income, and others were aware that it is a probable thing that they would do if they stayed. Factory, with its still pronounced role as a provider of longer term employment-turn-career, as seen in Jimmy's narratives, also offers possibilities both for organizing of the workers, and fragmentation along the lines of assigned skill (such as in the case of the opposition between skilled and unskilled workers in post-socialist Poland, see Ost 2005). Announced lay-offs and processes of mechanization and land concentration in agriculture however presented a challenge, with no alternative major source of income in sight. In spite of these tendencies which encourage uncertainty and fragmentation, a sense of compassion prevailed among my respondents for those in the predicament of working in bad conditions, which applied to the fields, and to some aspects of factory-work. It was recognized that those workers simply had no other choice, or at least my respondents presented themselves in such a compassionate manner. While any collective action remains improbable, this attitude points out that among the young working people there are narratives of critical assessment of the impact of wider economic processes. This attitude could, in presence of emancipatory critical junctures, play its local role in pursuing a political agenda concerned with the improvement of the rights at the work places and more equal distribution of profits.

Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to show that in spite of fragmentation, political stances and emancipatory narratives related to the work-place persist. Contrary to the expectations implied by the claim that work loses its relevance in the identity-making of the workers, youth in Crvenka still do not fully resemble that picture. Even though they are deprived of information on many important aspects of the local economy, mostly in the realm of actual property relationships, they were able to articulate some interests through the improvement of labor conditions and wages. This means that even in the conditions of working class fragmentation, conditions remain for articulation of concerns related to the worker places, which could provide a basis for a more systematic critique of those conditions.

Experience of work serves to reproduce various social boundaries. Across some of them, such as gender and age, alliances could be produced, while across others, such as the distinction between the lazy and the ambitious, could provide a line of division. How these lines of potential conflict and cooperation will develop depends upon many factors, which could not have been covered in this research, but could present directions in further research. Gender and ethnic dynamics related to labor should be more thoroughly investigated and in a multi-cited way, since they are not as visible on a local level but rather condition the locality. Inability to address them properly, knowing their importance in the recent history of the region, presents a significant shortcoming of this research.

Another important direction for further research would be to find out more about the group leaders and labor-contracting agencies. As Ortiz (2002) pointed out, they are not always the preferred option of the farmers or factories in mobilizing labor. Furthermore, the unfolding processes of land concentration and formalization of the economy will influence the local class relations, between the opposed positions in the production process. Therefore, the

fuzziness of property forms in Vojvodina will have to be addressed, as well as the legal forms of controlling the labor. Another important issue is that of debt, which also conditions the local economy but has not been properly assessed by hitherto research.

My positionality, as a researcher from the capital city of the state, with peculiar language and interests, certainly influenced what my respondents told me. This was further aggravated by the short time I had allocated for the research. Therefore, I think that short stays before and after the main stay in Crvenka turned out to be very useful, since they offered the possibility for this research not to be just a sample of discourses, but a sample of processes as well. Therefore, a longitudinal approach is fundamentally important both this thesis and in further research. Luckily, since access to the internet is widespread, the communication with the respondents remains possible and useful.

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