

## **'Leb I Sol' (Bread And Salt): The Meanings Of Work In The Changing Society Of Macedonia**

*Ilka Thiessen, St. Thomas University*

"When I got the job I did not really know what I was supposed to do and I still do not know; I do a little bit of this, a little bit of that. Basically I can do whatever I feel like. The boss is never there anyway and he does not care. When I started I always came at 8 in the morning. One day my supervisor came and told me I was making others feel bad. Why couldn't I come a bit later, like 11 am. Now I come around this time. I talk to my colleagues and then we go to the café. Only when the boss is in then he should not see us sitting in the café." (Anonymous Informant 1995)

There was a peculiarity about the meaning of work in Skopje during the time of my fieldwork. From 1988 to 1996 I spent my time in Skopje, capital city of the now Republic of Macedonia and Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia, following the lives of young women and men entering the faculty of engineering at the university in Skopje, following their years at the university and their eventual search for employment after finishing their degrees. This search for work became a frustrating experience in a world that they had not anticipated in 1988. This paper is a reflection on this experience, an experience that identifies conflicting ideologies about the meaning of work in a society that was held to have changed from socialism to capitalism. This paper will question the adequacy of speaking about Macedonia as a post-socialist society moving towards capitalism and instead suggests that Macedonia might choose a different solution.

### **Work Ethics**

My friends in Skopje discuss work as a matter of work ethic. They have established that people in the Balkans do not work as hard as people from Northern Europe or the United States, disregarding the fact that their parents worked very hard to pull Skopje out from the ashes when it collapsed in 1963 under a devastating earthquake. In such a perception of Balkan work ethic there is also no place for recognition of the hard, bone-breaking work my friends' grandparents performed in the villages in order to raise their children. I argue that this negative perception of Balkan work ethic points towards how "the outside perceptions of the Balkans has been internalized in the region itself" (Todorova 1997, 39). The outside - represented by government agencies, NGO's, UNPROFOR, and Western journalists

covering the events of the region - are seen to suggest that a 'traditional' concept of time can be found in the Balkans (see Thompson, 1967). Members of foreign agencies in Macedonia often commented on the 'Balkan work ethic' and its socialist 'time conception' that hindered their work in Macedonia, suggesting the strict implementation of liberal market economy principles in the new emerging society. (This argument is based on numerous representatives of Western authorities in Macedonia, such as members of the German embassy, UNPROFOR officials, American evangelists, Austrian Jehovah witnesses, French businessmen, and American NGO members). In coming to Macedonia, Western agencies attempt to replace the so-called 'real socialist state of affairs' with liberal market economy (Firlit, 1992, Pawlik, 1992, Wedel, 1992). Wedel (1992) argues that when the degree of synchronisation demanded was slight, task-orientation was still prevalent, as in former socialist societies, where waiting for materials and other delays were common. Thompson concludes that "unpurposive passing of time would be behaviour which the culture approved. It can scarcely find approval among those who see the history of 'industrialisation' in seemingly neutral but, in fact, profoundly value-loaded terms, as one of increasing rationalization in the service of economic growth.... there is no such thing as economic growth which is not, at the same time, growth or change of culture" (Thompson, 1967: 96-97). As such it is concluded that Macedonia, in order to gain access to Europe, needs not only to turn to democracy but has to turn to liberal market economy. This in turn means dramatic social change. Citing Nane Ruzin, MP of the Macedonian Assembly (May 1995):

"People expect that the free market would solve all their problems and lead people into a Western life. However, reality is quite different. We are lacking three substantial factors of Western democracy: 1) capital 2) tradition 3) a democratic and civil society. The post-socialist paradigm and its characteristics cause specific anomalies, and despite the fact that we have democratic institutions, they do not function."

Nane Ruzin, referring to the lack of tradition, is referring to the lack of the Western protestant work ethic (see Applebaum 1992). Skipping over the socialist period where 'one only waited to work' (Ana 1991) in the past Macedonian peasants worked for 'bread and salt' (a expression taken from a popular Macedonian

music group) and today, because of the lack of institutionalised work ethic as found in industrial societies, Macedonians again work for bread and salt. I argue that these definitions of what work is, how it is and should be performed, and what implications these different definitions raise are at the forefront of social change in Macedonia that has come with the disintegration of Macedonia and its independence. However, some consequences have been overlooked by Western agencies and authorities (see for example the discussion on Albania by Lemel 2000). Because my informants reject this outside perception of the Balkans, they frame work in terms of the ethnic divisions that resurfaced in the 1990s.

According to Allcock, three dominant general themes may be distinguished in Western representations in the Balkans: the marginal status of the Balkans vis-à-vis the Orient ("the Balkans as incompletely Oriental"); the ancient (Greek and Roman) heritage of the peoples in the peninsula; and the preservation of ways of living and folk traditions close to nature despite the increasing tendencies for modernization that may be observed in the peninsula in the beginning of the twentieth century (Allcock and Young 1991:179). They view Albanian women in particular as steeped in traditions, non-emancipatory, peasant like, uneducated, and *ne kulturni* (Bringa 1995).

#### The Image of the 'Balkans'

Finishing university and starting employment, my informants entered a new phase in their lives, at a time that coincided with the political changes from Yugoslavia to The Republic of Macedonia. Their parents had come to play an important part in Macedonia's society after 1945 through hard labour and the responsibility of transforming it from a peasant society towards an industrial nation. The graduates in their time, in the last years of Yugoslavia, saw themselves as the elite because of their advanced knowledge and 'Western' attitudes - bridging the gap, in their eyes, between Northern Europe and the Balkans. As their parents changed their society through socialist ideology, my friends intended to change their society through their credentials, qualifications, and skills. They saw their parents' generation still bound to Balkan principles within Yugoslav socialist ideology. In the same way their parents wanted to better the lives of their parents, whom they viewed as downtrodden and oppressed peasants who had to be brought into modern, industrial Yugoslavia, my friends wanted to move their society away from the notion of Balkans as the backward, non-European side of Macedonia, instead aspiring to become more like Western Europe. In 1991, my friends celebrated the 1989 event as a sign that Macedonia soon would be part of the European Union.

As such, they saw work as far more than just working for bread and salt, aiming to have successful

careers as electrical engineers inside Macedonia as well as inside Europe. A career was seen as something that Northern Europe and the United States offered its citizens. A career demanded changing positions, challenges at work, a work community, and leisure time. However, times were very volatile. The fall of Yugoslavia and Macedonia's subsequent independence then had obvious dramatic economic consequences for Macedonia. One of those consequences was that Macedonia's industry was halted since Yugoslav-Macedonia's main industry, the production of parts that would be assembled in other Yugoslav Republics, was now unable to ship parts to assembling factories in Croatia or Slovenia because of high custom duties that had to be paid to Serbia. Plus, the embargo on the rogue state of Serbia at the time led to massive smuggling activities that, according to my informants, were 'overlooked' by UNPROFOR's border controls in order to not exacerbate the situation further. This was financially counteracted by the European Union and the United States, who feared further instability of the region.

Not surprisingly, however, this aid came with an ideological price tag: a liberal market economy and a de-valuation of the socialist past. It became impossible for Macedonians to seek an identity that built upon the experiences of the socialist past, a socialist past that was, for example, marked by the principles of brotherhood and unity, and a socialist past that had been the source of pride for many Macedonians, especially in Skopje. I argue that very specific images of socialism and the Balkans, those introduced by the West at that time, exacerbated ethnic conflict in Macedonia. (Similar to the notorious television cartoon in 1990 in Germany of the first West German chancellor Conrad Adenauer teaching his dog - and East Germans - about liberal market economy). My friends had been proud Yugoslavs with the freedom to travel anywhere, seeing themselves still in 1991 as "soon becoming members of the European community." In 1992 this dream had been taken away from them, as Macedonians they were landlocked and were not able to travel anywhere in Western Europe without a visa which was nearly impossible to obtain. Simultaneously, many NGO's and foreign companies sprang up in Macedonia, treating Macedonians as cheap labour. In order to prove to 'The West' that they were worthy world citizens, many of my Macedonian friends developed strategies that ranged from starving themselves to excessive shopping (Thiessen 1999). As a consequence, Macedonians viewed themselves firmly as 'Western' while recreating Albanians as 'Balkan,' those uneducated, violent peasants that the West saw as primary inhabitants of Macedonia.

#### The Identity Paradox and the History of Work

As my friends finished university and struggled to make sense of the life that stood before them, some

peculiar paradoxes were introduced by what was called in Macedonia 'The West' (Europe and the United States). With respect to work, my friends perceived the 'unpurposive' passing of time as identifying Macedonia as a place of origin belonging to the Balkans, whose people "know how to live life." Simultaneously they rejected time spent in this way in the attempt to present Macedonia as European and modern. In its nationalistic discourse, Macedonians are faced with the same paradox of seeking the peasant past as place of origin, finding this peasant past occupied by the Albanians living in the abandoned Macedonian villages, and rejecting this peasant past as being symbolised through the Albanian population as 'Balkan' and non-Western (also see Thiessen 1999). Such definitions are endorsed and reflected upon in Skopje, creating a very specific history. In this history, Macedonia is portrayed as a generally unproductive, non-industrialised country. Small farm-holders have worked the rugged land through centuries of exploitation by the Ottomans, gaining just enough from the land to sustain the family. At the turn of the century, Europe, Australia and the United States appear as dominant economic forces attracting thousands of 'workers' in the wake of heavy industrialisation. Macedonian men started to leave Macedonia in search for 'work; going on '*pechalba*,' leaving their villages and wives, returning home only once every few years, sending home money and otherwise disappearing in the factories of more 'advanced' societies.

Then, after the Second World War, Tito brought 'modernity' to Macedonia by building factories. With the earthquake of 1963, Skopje attracted young people from the countryside who worked hard to pull Skopje out of the rubble, creating an icon of socialism. Here 'work' as a concept is portrayed in a historical development: working in the fields as subsistence and oppression; work abroad as disruptive and lower status; and socialism as working together. What my friends then expected from post-socialism was a career. Proud and oblivious of the fact that they lived in a 'deceased' world (according to Western media), my young friends travelled through Europe. They felt young and equal to their fellow Germans or French colleagues. Interestingly, my friends even felt superior to their European counterparts, they felt Europeans and Americans did not know how to live life, how to pass time appropriately. They were proud to be from Yugoslavia, where they could achieve the same things as their friends in Europe, but with a 'South-European' flair. With the disintegration, the knowing-how-to-live-life became a 'Balkan' attitude towards work. As such, knowing-how-to-live-life had to be re-defined. Albanians and Gypsies were defined as exhibiting a 'Balkan' attitude towards work, as well as former members of the socialist cadre that had refused to change. However, my friends also were faced with

their own ample amount of 'passing-of-time,' which became re-defined as leisure time.

#### The Images of 'Western' Work Life in Macedonian Discourse

With the disintegration of Yugoslavia, my friends, as striving engineers, sought a new world that would reconnect them to Western Europe and give them access to a world they felt belonged to them. Without physical access to this world any longer, visas denied, borders re-adjusted, they discussed the perception of this world as seen on American and European television pirated through satellite dishes. Of great interest for my friends, and commented on many times, was that this world was not portrayed as a world in which one worked to make a living, but a world that endorsed a very specific image of 'Western work life' captured in the two TV shows *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Ally McBeal*. In this perception, work itself was identified as a manual activity, manual labour denoting lower status. Thus, the modern status of my friends had to be achieved by passing time as seen on television and not through work. However, this created a paradox. As professionals, my friends felt strongly connected to the world of *Ally McBeal* and *Beverly Hills 90210*. They refused to see themselves as cheap labourers of Europe, even though some of them worked for foreign agencies for \$500 to \$1000 a month (a fortune in Macedonia, but exploitative by European standards).

The idea of labour as working for others was now dressed in ethnic terms. Albanians were guest workers in Germany, seeking careers on the international market to create enough free time to pass the time fashionably. The truth was that Macedonians in Skopje barely made a living, earning, like their grandparents, through hard labour working the soil, only enough to afford 'leb i sol' - bread and salt. Thus, working for 'leb i sol' contrasted with work as fulfilment, as a career. At the same time, work connected to 'modernisation,' 'industrialisation,' and 'progress' was contrasted with the heavy, non-rewarding peasant work to simply sustain life, which was far from rewarding. My informants rejected this life very much, the life of their grandparents, the life that they felt was still led in Macedonia by Albanians and in which they seemed to be thrown back again. They rejected this world, the world of their grandparents at the very time Macedonia needed to define itself to the world and especially to its neighbors. Since Macedonia was classified now as a new emerging democracy, as post-socialist, the only reference available for nationalists and my friends alike was their identity as Macedonian, which derived, ultimately, from their peasant past and 500 years of Ottoman oppression. Songs were sung recounting these days, Christian celebrations and traditions were revived and connected people to their peasant past, stories were enacted that all recounted the lost and

found past of a people that did indeed exist. It was problematic, however, that the past that was recounted was 'occupied' by a people defined as 'those people we are not.' Today Albanians were seen as living in the villages that once had been Macedonian but had been deserted when Macedonians moved to the cities. Albanians were seen as living lives similar to the lives of Macedonia's grandparents, a peasant life in which people were uneducated, *ne kulturni*, women had no rights, families had numerous children, and people lived close to poverty, according to their emotions instead of reason. This image was also being carried forward by the West (see for example Rebecca West 1982). My friends positioned themselves as belonging to the West, occupying the negative image of the Balkans with the Albanian population. They re-defined their 'belonging' through manipulations of meaning.

### The Meaning of Work

In Macedonia during my research, the meaning of work defied a universal concept of work (see Schwimmer, 1984), but created a new form of 'colonisation', the 'colonisation' of what is called the post-socialist world. As such I am arguing that the definition of 'work' itself was an agent in this 'colonisation.' Today, my friends in Skopje pass time at work for a living, or they work abroad for high-powered companies. 'Colonisation' might be a strong term, but by using 'colonisation' I am pointing out a very specific power relationship my friends identified: USA-Europe-Macedonians-Albanians. This hierarchy has been justified by economic achievement and in turn by the attitude towards work. By 'attitude towards work' I refer to the investigation into what work is and what value it has, depending on the type of work. Work as seen by my friends was given a specific measurement of power. Manual labour has less power than white-collar-labour, professional more than white-collar labour, and so forth. I argue that the value of 'work' in Macedonia is determined by an evaluation of time. This points away from a definition of work as the opposite of free time and towards a discussion of work intensity. Work that allows for much free time (by virtue of intense production) is valued higher than work that requires more time for similar production and therefore gives less free time. I argue that it is this calculation that underlies my friends' definition of the Western World and modernity, as well as provides an explanation for ethnic tensions within Macedonia.

I first observed this while watching Beverly Hills 90210 with my female friends in Skopje. They loved this show and would even watch it in Italian, with none of us understanding what was being said. The first thing that one notices in this show is that none of the protagonists worked in any visible form, but instead had a lot of money and lived more or less happily among friends and family. Watching German advertisements through pirated satellite television, my

friends were very intrigued by the production of efficiency. By intensifying the efficiency of laundry detergent, Germans seemed to be able to stroll along washing lines leading into nature accompanied by an energetic dog that had been fed with super-powered dog food.

### The Paradox of Work

The paradox of work in Macedonia lies in the fact that my friends want to be young, modern Europeans, passing time leisurely with short intervals of intensive (yet hidden) work which they also identify as a 'Balkan attitude' - pretension of work - and which they see as reflecting the Albanian and Rom populations. This creates a difference between ethnic groups in place of the former difference between socialism and liberal market economy.

When those young engineers started to work, they complained of being introduced to a work culture that neither gave them the experience of "really making a living" nor taught them a role they would like to perform. They thought of themselves as aspiring to a 'West-European' work ethic and they voiced their frustration at meeting only a 'Balkan' style of work. The contrast that was offered was termed 'liberal market economy.' Though they saw this as something that they should be striving towards, at the same time, they saw it as being impossible to achieve in a former socialist country. Accordingly, stories circulated that some foreign agency gave Skopje a Radar System for its airport but that this money was used to build a beautiful house for the airport manager on Vodno, with the result of four airplanes crashing within a year. (Causing the headline in Albania, "Albanians killed in Macedonia," since the planes were bringing Albanian guest workers home or flying them to their guest country.) Another told of a ministry of government receiving a gift of 10 million dollars that was used to buy computers from the cousin of the Minister, computers that were never used since they did not have the personnel to operate these computers or train current staff. These were seen as stories from 'The Balkans' and the 'liberal market economy' as my friends termed it.

### Liberal Market Economy

In 1994 I was sitting in a café one afternoon with a friend when three girls burst in, the one girl in tears, all of them obviously upset. When we inquired about their distress, we learned that the girl in tears had just finished at the university and had started to work for a private computer company. Such companies were springing up everywhere. Since the factories were closing down, primarily the private businesses or ministries were hiring engineers. She had worked for three months with much of the work being over-time. No contract was signed and payment was promised after three months of observing her work performance.

After three months, she was laid off without any payment and someone new was hired.

Stories such as this fed the idea of what a liberal market economy meant in Macedonia, reinforcing the idea that Macedonia was not ready for a liberal market economy because of its socialist history and its location in the Balkans. This idea was perpetuated by many of the NGO's and Western government organisations present in Macedonia. Being placed in this situation, my friends felt it was even more necessary to convince the Western World that they could work and were not from the Balkans. My friends came to see the Balkans as represented by Albanians and Rom and by some old conservative people from the country, but not by the young generation of Skopje.

The conclusion of my friends was that a 'good' future could only be pursued outside their country. Immigration forms were filled out. They did not live with the hope of a better life by virtue of their new position as a 'post-communist' country. To them, Macedonia did not have the capital, the tradition or history to relate to or be recognised under, or the democratic and civil 'knowledge' that would form a society they could live in.

#### Conclusion

There are specific changes in the social life of Macedonia that are directly linked to its political fate, changes such as the ideology about 'work'. In Macedonia today, the young urban generation see themselves as unable to change their society and believe that they can only obtain the means and security that would enable them to change their society through emulating a Western-style attitude towards work that is marked by leisure-time. Paradoxically, this leisure time is also identified as genuinely 'Balkan,' attributable to those they see as representing either a peasant or socialist past. Young, well-educated people in Macedonia are hired for their capacity to 'seemingly work' in many companies that are involved, according to general belief, in money laundering or illegal weapons trade. Since they cannot find an identification of themselves in this new liberal market economy, they seek it outside of work, but not void of a definition of work. The value of their work becomes defined by their leisure-time. The more leisure-time, the more high-powered the work they 'do': this they identify as 'Western.' The Balkans, as represented by the West as un-stratified peasant society marked by hard manual labour, is assigned to a rural past and to a specific ethnicity, the Albanians.

Essentially, in my friends' eyes, it is the Albanian with his Balkan attitude that holds Macedonia back from joining Europe in its liberal market economy. In a world that does not offer many rewards, only offers condescension, my young friends try to share in this condescension by associating ethnicity with economic strategies. The outcome of this has been amply

documented. To work hard in order to earn money, to provide your family with bread and salt, is not seen as a reasonable survival strategy today. My friends have decided either to emigrate (some very successfully), or they have stayed behind seeking their fulfillment in the café life of Skopje or in family life by emulating a Western life-style of consumption and leisure. The question remains whether or not this 'change of culture' brings about economic growth. Essentially, the West is supposed to realise how European Macedonia is. By embracing sameness with the West my friends seemingly embrace economical and political survival. The political consequence of such action is, however, that by trying to be like the West, 'the other Balkan' has been created and this, in turn, has entailed an explosive volatile political situation. Maybe liberal market economy is not a solution for Macedonia, but instead an embracing of its socialist past in order to develop new economic strategies supported by the European Union. But it seems that it is already too late for this.

#### References

- Allcock, John R., and Antonia Young. 1991. *Black Lambs and Grey Falcons: women travelers in the Balkans*. University of Bradford: Bradford, England.
- Ana 1991. Informant. Personal communication.
- Applebaum, Herbert. 1992. *The Concept of Work: ancient, medieval, and modern*. State University of New York Press.
- Bringa, Tone. 1995. *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: identity and community in a central Bosnian village*. Princeton, N.J.; Chichester: Princeton University Press.
- Firlit, Elzbieta, and Jerzy Chlopecki. 1992. *When Theft is not Theft*. In *The Unplanned Society: Poland during and after communism*. Pp. 95-109. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lemel, Harold. 2000. *Rural Property and Economy in Post-Communist Albania*. New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Pawlik, Wojciech. 1992. *Intimate Commerce*. In *The Unplanned Society: Poland during and after communism*. Pp. 78-95. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ruzzin, Nane. 1995. Interview, Member of Parliament of the Macedonian Assembly in 1995.
- Schwimmer, Eric. 1984. *The Self and the Product: concepts of work in comparative perspective*. In (s. Wallman, ed.) *Social Anthropology of Work*. Pp. 287-315. London: Academic Press.

Thiessen, Ilka. 1999. *T'ga za jug - Waiting for Macedonia: the changing world of a group of young female engineers in the Republic of Macedonia*. Ph.D., London School of Economics.

Thompson, Edward P. 1967. *Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism*. *Past and Present* 38:56-97.

Todorova Mariia, Nikolaeva. 1997. *Imagining the Balkans*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wedel, Janine. 1992. Introduction to: "Enterprising Inner Circles" and "Reclaiming Responsibility." In *The Unplanned Society: Poland during and after communism*. Pp. 73-78/153-158. New York: Columbia University Press.

West, Rebecca. 1982. *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: a journey through Yugoslavia*. London: Papermac.

---

## Work and Love: The Limits of Autonomy for Female Garment Workers in India

*Johanna Lessinger, Barnard College*

### Introduction

Throughout a scholarly career devoted to the framing of work as a distinctive subject of anthropological study, Herb Applebaum had two constant themes, which I would like to elaborate and comment on via a study of women's work in urban India. First, Applebaum insisted that the concept of work be contextualized, both socially and historically, if we are to understand both the cultural conceptions and the practice of work (Applebaum 1984a, 1992). Second, he emphasizes the importance of occupational cultures in particular areas of work (Applebaum, 1981, 1984b, 1999).

I would like to use these as points of departure to examine the situation of a group of women factory workers in the South Indian city of Madras, now called Chennai. As India becomes part of a global economy, and develops an export-oriented form of industrialization, which draws heavily on female labor, the young women who work in Madras' export garment factories, known as "garment girls" or "sewing girls," are emerging as an identifiable new occupational group. This occupational identity constructs these workers in several ways: as dutiful breadwinners for their families, as transgressive and threatening women out of place, as socially mobile young moderns. The garment workers themselves, as well as their families and communities, have multiple and often conflicting understandings of their roles and of the meanings of their work.

### Women's Work in the Global Assembly Line

The typologies of work which Applebaum delineated are today somewhat limited. It is no longer enough simply to categorize India as a market-based, "transitional," partially industrialized society, as

Applebaum did in 1984 (1984a: 24); today we must talk about India's relationship to a rapidly evolving global capitalism. What is also missing from Applebaum's writing is the whole stream of feminist scholarship which has considered the meaning and impact of women's work and which began, early on, to consider the role of a global economy in creating new forms of feminized work - work in which women's unequal social statuses are crucial to their constitution as workers in labor-intensive, assembly-line manufacturing (Some of the classic ethnographies of this phenomenon are Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Safa 1986; Ong 1987; Beneria and Roldan 1987; Wolf 1992; Kim 1997). The focus on globalization and the focus on gender are both essential if we are to understand a new form of work as it emerges all round the world. As Aihwa Ong notes, "The literature on export-industrialization and the feminization of industrial work challenges theory to catch up with lived realities." (1991: 279)

India's decision in the 1970s to plunge into the vortex of global capitalism, in the role of supplier of skilled but low-wage labor-power is part of a larger economic restructuring which has remade the agricultural and industrial workforces, shrunk the public sector which once employed so many urban workers, and altered production processes. Inevitably this "economic liberalization," as it is known to the Indian elite, brings in its wake social changes which are just beginning to be widely felt (Amin 1990). Indian planners and politicians have turned to both foreign investment and intensified export production to offset India's outmoded industrial infrastructure, its lagging industrialization and widespread poverty (Vanaik 1990).