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BOOK REVIEW

Chiara Bonfiglioli, *Women and Industry in the Balkans. The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Textile Sector.* (I.B.Tauris 2019, 230 pages, 1st ed.)

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“For us it was much better, for us personally, for people it was much better during socialism than it is today, in any case.” (p. 1) This quote from a textile worker opens Chiara Bonfiglioli’s book, but the story presented is by no means a nostalgic tour exploring collapsed factories or reproducing homo-sovieticus stereotypes. This is an engaging and complex read that allows us to enter the world of individual experiences entangled in political, economic and social processes. The book intervenes in debates about global work relations, intersections of gender and class, as well as an alternative socialist welfare project and its collapse. However, it does not only use these references—but it also makes a strong case for including the often ignored Second World perspective on socialist modernization as an integral yet specific case of transnational industry transformations. The case of Yugoslavia tells a story of socialist modernization with advanced cooperation with the West, workers’ self-management policies, and difficult relations between privilege and control—a story of one of the fastest-growing economies in post-1945 Europe.

Chiara Bonfiglioli, an Italian-born scholar, spent years researching the 20th-century textile industry in Yugoslavia. She was mainly interested in the ways in which female workers experienced the rise

and fall of state-socialist modernization. The book includes over sixty interviews with former and current textile workers from contemporary Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Slovenia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, along with visual materials, including from TV-series, fashion magazines, and workplace periodicals. This archive allows the reader to get an insight into the complex social reality of a changing industry in the whole region. The Yugoslav socialist system was trying, on the one hand, to live up to its promises of class and gender equality, while on the other hand it was failing to do so on many levels. The working class stood at the centre of the modernisation, project and factory jobs offered female textile workers job security, welfare entitlements, and sociability networks. At the same time, difficult work conditions, strict piece-rate regimes of labour measurement, and the double burden of workplace and domestic labour placed on women were an inseparable part of the story as well.

The book is organized into a short and informative introduction, five chapters, and a brief conclusion. The first two chapters cover the history of garment factories and textile workers in the interwar period and the socialist era, respectively. The first chapter ‘Industrializing Yugoslavia...’ introduces a key-concept for the whole book, Raymond Williams’s “structure of feeling.” Bonfiglioli suggests that “post-Yugoslav nostalgia for labour and welfare rights is rooted in the specific structure of feeling that was created in industrial workplaces during the socialist era, at the intersection between ideology, socio-economic transformations and workers’ everyday lives, as well as in the process of deindustrialization that accompanied the collapse of socialism” (p 1-2). In the second chapter, the author investigates the figure of the female worker in official discourse and popular culture and historicizes tensions between productive and reproductive work, trying to answer the question of whether those two spheres were valorised and naturalized at the same time.

The three remaining chapters deal with the post-socialist period and how the structure of feeling changed over time. The third chapter examines deindustrialization in post-socialist and post-conflict Yugoslavia. It traces the worsening of working conditions, precarization, and the rise of the private sector. As a result, the previous structure of feeling was undermined and changed, which is examined in the following chapter, ‘Workers’ Structure of Feeling after Deindustrialization: Loss, Nostalgia and Belonging.’ Workers’ complex attachments to the space of the socialist factory are reconstructed by tracing ambivalences and contradictions in current and former workers’ memories. The final chapter focuses on textile workers’ resistance and fight for social justice. In the conclusion Bonfiglioli introduces textile workers’ “survival kits”—strategies used by workers to adapt to the new capitalist reality (such as subsistence agriculture, handcrafting, informal work, migration to Western countries, and handcrafting).

Considering that the book is only 200 pages long, it is very impressive how much insight we get into diverse groups, changing contexts and historical periods, traversing from the national and global scale to particular cases and individual stories. As its aim is to make the story more nuanced and go beyond overused and oversimplified concepts to focus on women’s complex life experiences, I agree with the author that there is no better method than oral history to achieve it. With these methodological gains come limitations, however, including most visibly the absence of conflicts, as we learn nothing about any intergenerational tensions such as, tensions between rural migrants and urban dwellers, or how ethnicity and religion played a role in these dynamics; and we also experience a sense of timelessness, which could have been problematized more by the author.

It would have been useful to see more sociological data about the interviewees as well, which would help the reader understand

their structural positions better. Similarly, the choice to use oral history instead of biographical analysis pushes fragments of the interviewees' narratives into a merely illustrative role.

Can we fully capture a structure of feeling from prior periods in the present? And if not, maybe we can talk only about post-socialist structures of feeling here, since all materials were gathered in the 2010s. The term “structure of feeling” seems so central to the book that it becomes autotelic and the reader might find it difficult to distinguish between the socialist and industrial structure of feeling used in the text, which blurs its explanatory role. Other frequently used terms that I found problematic are “normality” and “nostalgia.” While both need a more concrete definition, the latter term is almost as problematic as “homo sovieticus” – naive and even untrue, and soaked in liberal interpretations. A stronger criticism of the concept of nostalgia would have allowed the author to introduce the (post)socialist structure of feeling as a competing lens of interpretation.

On a more general level, the book might be located as another voice in the never-ending totalitarian/revisionist debate (Fitzpatrick, 2007; Kotkin, 1998). Generally speaking, the welfare achievements of state socialism can only be understood in reference to both the interwar and transition periods and evaluated within their scope of possibilities, resources, and historical trajectories. After the collapse of socialism and the Yugoslav Wars, most textile and garment factories closed and high unemployment rates as well as the precarization of remaining jobs followed. What the book shows is how greater symbolic and material recognition of women's labour during socialism provided women with both considerable resources and a sense of dignity. Indeed, the post-socialist transition was a moment when this could be finally seen—in contrast to the hegemonic narratives of a “return to democracy,” “building civil society,” and the “homo-sovieticus” narratives of the 1990s. The shared socialist ex-

perience helped build solidarity, express resilience, and preserve personal dignity during the difficult times of the post-socialist transition, which pushed many workers into invisibility, precarity, and exploitation. Bonfiglioli also shows how the “re-traditionalization of gender roles had as much to do with the precarization of welfare and labour rights as with nationalist rhetoric in the public sphere” (p. 11). Those are extremely important findings, which also allow us to see the consequences of state-socialism more clearly—both on an empirical level and with respect to the academic production of knowledge.

I highly recommend Bonfiglioli’s book both for readers interested in labour and gender studies as well as an interdisciplinary study of the Yugoslavian and Eastern European history. Despite a growing amount of work on roles of female workers in postwar industrialization and, especially, in state-socialist countries, this is a much-needed work that not only enriches our understanding of social reality but also proposes well-documented arguments about the role of gender in state-socialism and later in the transition into capitalism.

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