

**Mining postsocialism:  
work, class and ethnicity in an Estonian  
mine**

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I confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## **Abstract**

My thesis is a study of what happens to the working class in the context of postsocialism, neoliberalisation and deindustrialisation. I explore the changing work and lives of Russian-speaking miners in Estonia, showing what it means to be a miner in a situation in which the working class has been stripped of its glorified status and stable and affluent lifestyle, and has been stigmatised and orientalisised as Other. I argue that a consequence of neoliberal economy, entrepreneurialism and individualism is that ethnicity and class become overlapping categories and being Russian comes to mean being a worker. This has produced a particular set of practices, moralities and politics characterising the working class in contemporary Estonia, which is not only a result of its Soviet past and nostalgia, but also deeply embedded in the global economy following the 2008 economic crisis, and EU and national economic, security and ethnic policies.

Miners try to maintain their autonomy and dignity. Despite stricter control of miners' time and speeding up of the labour process, workers exercise control over the rhythm of work. The ideas of what it means to be a miner and ideals of a good society create a particular moral economy, demanding money and respect in return for sacrificing health and doing hard work. Increasing differences in consumption patterns are levelled with leisure activities such as drinking and sport that are available to all. New management practices such as outsourcing labour and performance reviews assist class formation processes that increase workers' precarity and the differentiation between workers and engineers in a previously relatively equal community. Despite this, management practices often have unexpected outcomes in everyday situations in which actors with different worldviews and ambitions meet. Miners' labour politics might not correspond to Western ideas of strong unionism, but show that trade unions can take different shapes depending on local context.

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**Map 1. Location of Estonia**

**Source: Google Maps**



**Map 2. Location of the mining area.**

**Source: Google Maps**

# **Chapter 1. Introduction: Class, postsocialism and the changing miners**

## **1.1. Changing and remaking the ‘Two Sober Ones’**

In 1996, construction work was started around the monument ‘Glory To Work’ on the main square of Kohtla-Järve, a mining town in North-East Estonia. ‘Glory To Work’, or the ‘Two Sober Ones’, as it was better known among the locals, was a statue of two miners with serious faces, standing side by side, holding their pickaxes above their heads. The long tribune underneath the statue, from which Communist Party members had used to wave to the crowds during Soviet festivals, was falling apart. The city officials had decided to build a smaller, less prominent base for the statue, whose own relevance after the collapse of socialism was heavily debated. During the construction work, a metal cylinder was found inside the statue, which was due to be opened in 2046, on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the city. Inside the cylinder, there was a letter to the future residents of Kohtla-Järve. “Dear comrades,” began the letter. “We turn to you as you are celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kohtla-Järve, our city. In 75 years it will not be like it is today. But we are sure that it is there, that it will be there, nothing will destroy it. It will be much more beautiful than today. Also you, the residents will be stronger, more beautiful and wiser. You will be happier, individually and all together.” The letter, written on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the city in 1971, envisioned a beautiful future of communism lying ahead for future generations.

By 1996, when the cylinder was found, socialism had collapsed and the beauty of the city and happiness of its residents could be doubted as unemployment, ethnic tensions and the decline of industry had taken over the crumbling city. In 2011, when I finished my fieldwork, the surroundings of the statue and the tribune had been dug up again as the city’s roads were undergoing reconstruction funded by the EU. People still worked in the nearby mines and life was generally happier and better than in 1996. Nothing had destroyed the city and the new roads gave back some of its former grace to the wide and pleasant promenades. There seemed to be some hope that the ‘Two Sober Ones’ would see the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the city after all, with communism, or without.

This thesis is about the changing life of miners, the residents of Kohtla-Järve and nearby towns who continue their everyday work and struggles despite the vast political and economic changes around them, and dream about a better future for their children and

grandchildren in 2046. It is about different temporalities with different ideologies that the working class, the miners, experience, while still continuing their everyday lives and work.

My thesis started, on the one hand, as an interest in studying the Russian-speaking population of Estonia as something other than a problem, as they are often depicted by the media and social scientists. On the other hand, I was interested in the processes of class formation in an era in which, again according to the media and social scientists, was no longer a relevant concept in postsocialist Estonia. In this thesis, I argue that the everyday life of Russian-speaking miners in postsocialist Estonia is a complex mix of past practices and values and reactions to the changing political and economic situation that is best understood through the analysis of class relations. The questions that drove my study, and which I will aim to answer in this thesis, are as follows.

- What does it mean to be a Russian-speaking miner in contemporary Estonia? What does it mean in terms of shifting gender, class and ethnic identity, and the changing representation and political and economic importance of mining?
- What does it mean to work as a miner, in terms of physical work underground, and changing workplace and societal hierarchies?
- How are this experience, consciousness, class relations and worker politics expressed in everyday situations at work, at home and in the neighbourhood?

In the introduction, I will first present the background of the area to enable a better understanding of this particular space and experience in the Soviet and post-Soviet context. This leads to my theoretical framework in postsocialism and class, and at the end of my introduction, I will talk about my methodology.



**Illustration 1. The 'Two Sober Ones' through history.**

**A parade passing the statue 'Glory To Work' in the 1960s, with Party officials standing on the tribune by the statue, waving. (Photo courtesy of Kohtla-Järve Museum of Oil Shale.) In 2011, the tribune below the 'Two Sober Ones' is dug up again, due to EU-funded reconstruction of roads taking place in the city.**

## **1.2. History of Kohtla-Järve and Ida-Virumaa**

The city of Kohtla-Järve is situated in the county of Ida-Virumaa. Kohtla-Järve became a city in 1946 because of increasing production of oil shale. Oil shale is a sedimentary rock that releases oil-like liquid when heated and can be used for making fuel

and burning in power plants. Local inhabitants knew about the brown burning stone for centuries and used it for heating. There is also a well-known local legend about a farmer who built a sauna out of the light brown stone, and was very surprised when the sauna caught fire (Printsmann 2010:240). Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, academics from St Petersburg made the first attempts to extract oil out of oil shale, and officials in the Russian empire saw Estonian oil shale as a solution to their fuel shortages. Plans for mining did not start then because of the First World War and the Russian Revolution.

Estonia became independent from Imperial Russia in 1918 and the government-owned Estonian State Oil Shale Industry (Riigi Põlevkivitööstus) took over all the pits that had been opened by Germans during the war and started producing fuel for big industries. Besides the state-owned industry, there were smaller pits and fuel-producing factories owned by British, German and Dutch capital. Accounts from this period show that the area was very multicultural; engineers were mostly Russian- and German-speaking. Due to the reluctance of local peasants to work in the oil shale industry, Polish families were also brought in to work in the mines. According to the 1934 census, the rate of urbanisation was 35%, equal to other parts of Estonia, and Russians constituted 20% of the population, which was higher than the Estonian average (Vseviiov 2002:9). During the 1930s, local workers tried to organise themselves into trade unions, and due to low pay and hard working conditions, several strikes took place. The strikes were suppressed with the help of the corporatist authoritarian state.

The period of Second World War in Estonia can be described as a period of chaos and destruction. The Soviet occupation was followed by the German occupation, was again followed by Soviet occupation, and the retreating troops, who had tried to use the mines to alleviate fuel shortages, destroyed mines and factories, for the next power to build them up again. Due to war and deportations, Ida-Virumaa lost 40% of its population (Vseviiov 2002). Estonian industry as a whole lost 45% of its pre-war productive capacity. Some branches such as fuel, textiles, timber, woodworking, pulp and paper suffered losses of 60-90%. After the war, productivity was low and the enterprises of all-union subordination were not able to meet the industrial production targets envisaged in the Five-Year Plan for the ESSR (Pihlamägi 2010). Real investment was low, especially in technology, so recovery from the war took place only in the second half of the 1950s (Cinis, Dr mait and Kalm 2008).

As Holmberg (2008) notes, the oil shale industry after the war developed on the basis of two groups with different motivations: the Soviet efforts to harness the oil shale industry

for immediate energy needs, and the Estonian academics who sought to develop the industry in a knowledge-intensive direction. The mines were nationalised and a company, *Estoslanet* ('Estonian oil shale' in Russian), was established based on the two existing mines subjected to the People's Commissariat for Coal Industry of the USSR Western Territories (Pihlamägi 2010). In the 1950s, more mines were opened in Ida-Virumaa to produce electricity for St Petersburg, the homes and industry of the Estonian Soviet Republic and the Soviet Navy in the Baltic Sea (Varb and Tambet 2008). In the late 1950s, the emphasis in the oil shale industry shifted towards production of electricity in large thermal power plants. The fast pace of development in the oil shale industry demanded large labour inputs from the Russian-speaking population. Migration from the other Soviet Republics started in the 1950s and continued throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (Parming 1980; Vetik 2002).

Initially, poor living conditions also caused poor work discipline and high labour turnover (Mertelsmann 2007). In the mid-1950s, the general standard of living was considerably lower than it had been in independent Estonia (Mertelsmann 2005, pp. 31–44, cited in Klesment 2009). According to Pihlamägi's (2010) calculations, in 1950, labour productivity was 1.9 times higher than in 1946 but during the same period the average wages of industrial employees increased only 1.4 times. Hence, the growth of productivity was not reflected in workers' wages and they did not benefit from the growth, while the overall situation was one of shortage of housing and consumer goods. Poor living conditions were also one of the main reasons for increased immigration, as workers from the Soviet Union were invited to build new housing. As new mines were opened, new houses, schools, public saunas and cinemas emerged together with the city. As Cinis, Dr mait , and Kalm (2008) suggest, new industrial cities like Kohtla-Järve served as an important tool for integrating the Baltic States and their economies into the Soviet space. The purpose of such cities, they claim, was to

influence not only industry, but also the everyday life of people, their working and living conditions, the urban environment and mobility. Deviating from the historic pattern of settlement, they emerged as and, to a certain extent remained, somehow heterotopic to the rest of the countries in which they were situated (p. 227).

These towns were similar to company towns in capitalist countries. Kohtla-Järve, instead of having one centre, was built as a cluster of villages around particular mines, reaching 25 km from one end to the other.

In the 1960s, oil shale started to be used more for electricity production rather than gas and fuel, and the two large power plants were built, Balti in 1965 and Eesti in 1973. About 80% of the energy that was produced was exported to other parts of the Soviet Union (Järvesoo in Mettam and Williams 1998). As living conditions and salaries improved, mining became an attractive profession, glorified all over the Soviet Union and respected locally. 40% of the population of Kohtla-Järve worked in oil shale extraction and processing by 1989 (Valge 2005). The proportion of Russian speakers in the town continually increased and the proportion of Estonian speakers decreased (see Table 1). In the 1980s, oil shale became less relevant in the Soviet Union, as new nuclear plants had been built and cheap oil and natural gas from elsewhere made oil shale unprofitable (Holmberg 2008). Perestroika encouraged the Estonian national movement, which was often framed as an environmental movement (Auer 1998), portraying mining and Ida-Virumaa as an alien polluter. Together with the decline of the industry, the professions of miner and mining engineer also started to lose their popularity. Ethnic tensions arose between Estonian and Russian speakers in the region, culminating in the 1990s with a restrictive citizenship policy that excluded Russian speakers.

	<b>1959</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1979</b>	<b>1989</b>
<b>Estonians</b>	25,917	27,657	25,228	21,195
<b>Russians</b>	33,890	43,023	50,341	57,726
<b>Ukrainians</b>	-	2,240	2,770	3,493
<b>Belarusians</b>	-	4,360	4,268	4,409
<b>Finns</b>	-	3,484	2,362	2,117
<b>Tatars</b>	-	-	204	275
<b>Germans</b>	40	-	457	395
<b>Jews</b>	225	219	193	168
<b>Poles</b>	-	-	490	270
<b>Others</b>	9,042	2,575	1,159	1,396
<b>Total</b>	<b>69,114</b>	<b>82,558</b>	<b>87,427</b>	<b>91,644</b>

**Table 1. Population of Kohtla-Järve by ethnicity**

**Data from 1959, 1970, 1979 and 1989 census. Source: Valge (2005).**

In 1991, Estonia became independent again and had to adjust to new circumstances and execute the vision of democracy and liberal economic policy that the local intelligentsia held, including market reforms and privatisation of state-owned assets. Like many other Eastern European countries, Estonia chose the economic policy of ‘shock therapy’. The then 30-year-old prime minister Mart Laar, embraced the principles of liberal economics with full rigour. At that time, the young man, trained as a historian, had read one book on economics. As he later related in an interview about the beginning of his government in 1992,

I am not an economist. I am a practical man. I had read only one book on economics. This was Milton Friedman's *Free To Choose*. I must say that to my mind all the ideas which were presented there looked to be very practical. I was not too informed. I did not know that not many countries or rather no country at all had ever used the same policies. It looked very logical to me. Hence I introduced these things. They have worked very well in Estonia and are now being followed in lots of other countries (Belien 2005).

Among his policies was that of flat tax, an idea that he claimed he got from Margaret Thatcher, who he admired very much.

In short, Mart Laar was jumping on the bandwagon of neoliberalism, which Harvey (2005a:2) defines as “in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” The neoliberal project of shock therapy included fast privatisation, liberalisation, flat tax, fast closing of industries that used to produce for the Soviet market, fiscal austerity and benefit cuts. As Stenning (2011:5) points out, neoliberalisation in Central and Eastern Europe was one of the most radical projects of implementing ideas of free market, and these ideas were embedded in the wider notion of the ‘Washington Consensus’ derived from the policies of international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). This was expressed in increasing social and income inequalities, for example, in 1988, the Gini index that shows income inequality was 22.97, reaching 36 in 2004<sup>1</sup>. According to Eurostat, in 2007, Romania, Portugal, Latvia, Bulgaria, Greece and Lithuania were leading the table in the EU, followed by Estonia (with 33.4) and the UK. Nevertheless, to the outside world, Estonia was the success story of Eastern Europe where privatisation had been more transparent than in many other former socialist countries.

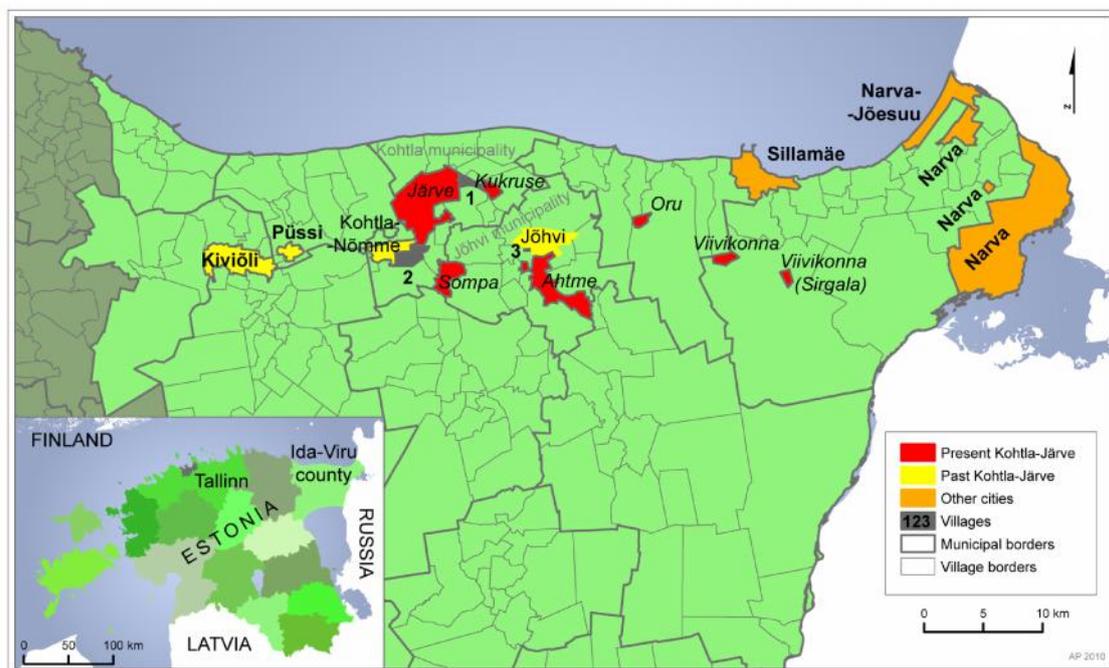
Despite widespread privatisation, the consortium of mines Eesti Põlevkivi and power plants were left under government control under the national energy monopoly Eesti Energia. In the second half of the 1990s, plans were made to sell 49% of the shares to a US-based

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<sup>1</sup> The Gini index measures the extent to which the distribution of income (or, in some cases, consumption expenditure) among individuals or households within an economy deviates from a perfectly equal distribution. A Lorenz curve plots the cumulative percentages of total income received against the cumulative number of recipients, starting with the poorest individual or household. The Gini index measures the area between the Lorenz curve and a hypothetical line of absolute equality, expressed as a percentage of the maximum area under the line. Thus a Gini index of 0 represents perfect equality, while an index of 100 implies perfect inequality. <http://www.indexmundi.com>

company NRG Energy. This generated heated debates and opposition among academic circles (Holmberg 2008) and resistance from certain government parties and the oil shale company management. As a result of revelations that NRG Energy was not financially sufficiently reliable, and in response to strong public opposition, the deal was not realised. Although nominally part of Eesti Energia, Eesti Põlevkivi was independent in its management until centralisation in 2007.

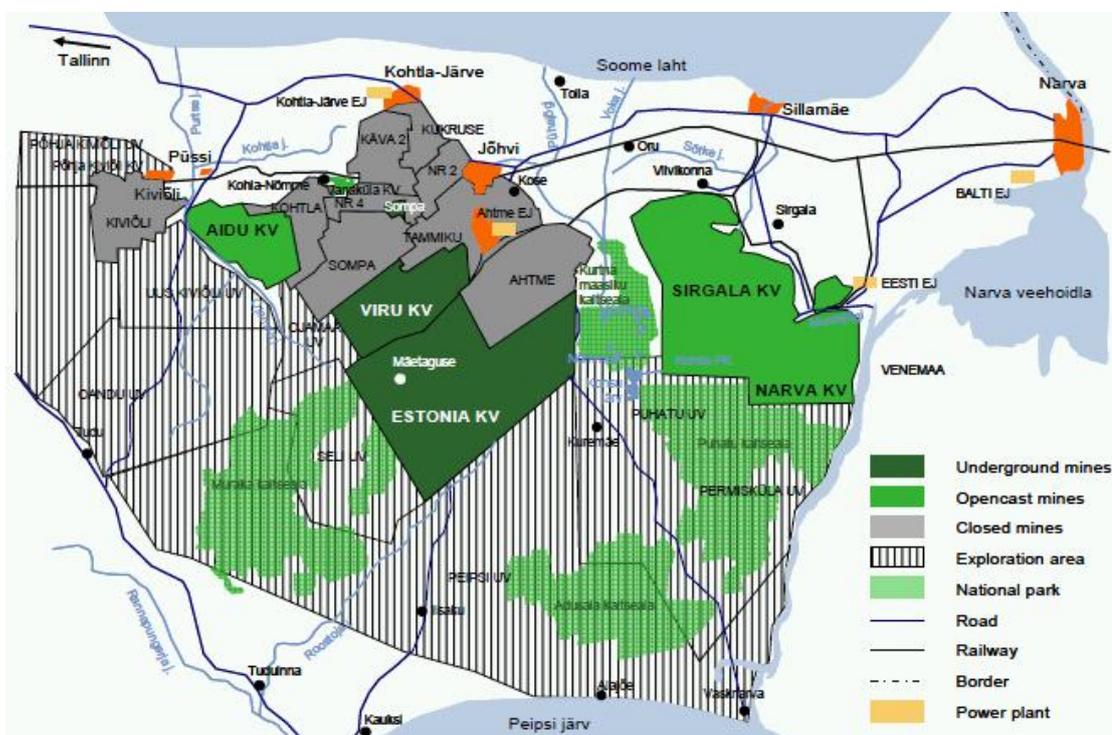
In 1991, Jõhvi became a separate town from Kohtla-Järve and is considered the most ‘developed’ of the region and the administrative centre of the county of Ida-Virumaa. The management of the mining company is also situated in Jõhvi. Kiviõli, Püssi and Kohtla, towns with larger Estonian-speaking populations, also separated, while the townships of Viivikonna and Sirgala slowly lost their inhabitants and infrastructure as mines were closed (see Map 1). Ghost buildings with nothing more than a skeleton of the houses they used to be can be seen in many areas of Kohtla-Järve. Inhabitants left as the county suffered deeper social problems and higher unemployment than other areas of Estonia, due to closing the former all-Soviet industry.



**Map 3. Composition of Kohtla-Järve.**

The spread-out city, where different parts of the town can be situated tens of kilometres away. Kiviõli, Püssi, Kohtla and Jõhvi have separated from Kohtla-Järve. Viivikonna, Sirgala and Oru are close to dying since the decline of industry, while most of the population lives in Järve and Ahtme. People also commute to work in the mines from Sillamäe where a chemical plant and a port is situated. The map was created by Anu Printsmann (2010) and used with her permission.

Estonia still produces about 90% of its electricity from oil shale and the country is completely dependent on it. Oil shale mining and power plants are the basis of the regional economy in North-East Estonia. Despite acknowledgment of its role as a major employer and keeper of social equilibrium in Ida-Virumaa, Eesti Põlevkivi had to close mines and lay off workers. The 10,000 miners of 1999 were reduced to about 3,000 by 2010. Out of ten underground and open-cast mines, four currently remain open, two of which will be closed shortly (see Map 2). Production that reached 30 million tonnes in 1980 has dropped to 11-15 tonnes, depending on the year, in the last decade (Holmberg 2008; Varb and Tambet 2008). At the same time, a private mine has been opened and the opening up of the European electricity market is slowly changing the monopoly position of Eesti Energia.

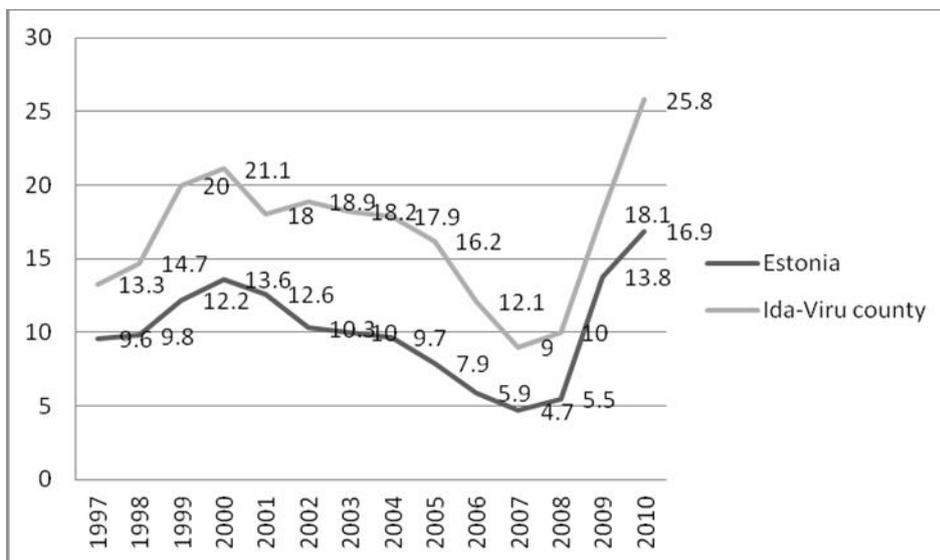


Map 4. Area of oil shale mining in Ida-Virumaa.

The map shows functioning mines as well as the earlier mines that have now been closed. The ‘Estonia’ mine, directly south of Kohtla-Järve, is where I did my fieldwork. The map shows the large number of mines that have been closed. The closed mines, marked in grey, were mostly situated close to the different suburbs that made up Kohtla-Järve. The map was created by Eesti Energia Kaevandused and used with permission.

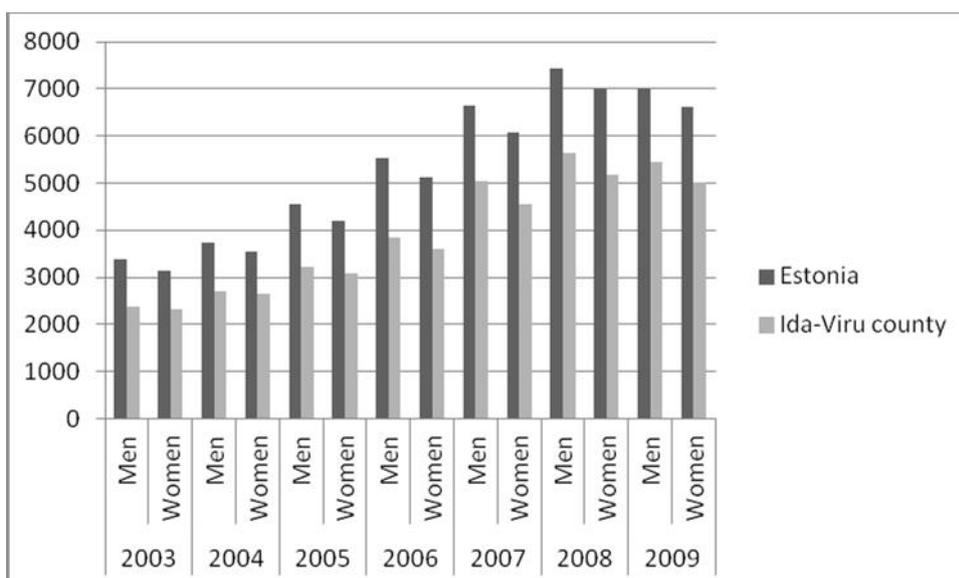
Unemployment figures have been significantly higher in Ida-Virumaa since 1991 than in the rest of Estonia. Unemployment fell significantly during the years of economic growth of the early 2000s and the construction boom in Estonia, but rose to 25% during the

economic crisis that started in 2008 (see Table 2). The average income in Ida-Virumaa stayed significantly lower than the Estonian average (see Table 3). Unemployment of the 1990s coupled with alienation from the Estonian state which required a language exam in order for Russian speakers to be granted citizenship. Social problems like drug addiction, high levels of HIV/AIDS and a high crime rate are all still significant. News related to social problems was the main information to reach the Estonian mainstream media, further deepening the negative stereotype about the Russian-speaking former industrial area. Russian-speaking miners had symbolically and materially moved from the top of the social hierarchy to the bottom, despite their role of supplying all of Estonia with electricity.



**Table 2. Unemployment in Estonia and Ida-Viru county 1997-2010**

Source: Statistics Estonia



**Table 3. Income in Estonian Kroons for men and women in Estonia and Ida-Virumaa 2003-2009**

Source: Statistics Estonia

## **1.3. Theoretical framework**

### **1.3.1. What is postsocialism and what comes next?**

As more than two decades have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall, anthropologists question whether using the term postsocialism is still useful. It is commonly agreed that postsocialism refers to the areas of the former Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites where socialist rule disintegrated in the years 1989–91 (Hann 2005). Despite regional differences, anthropologists agree that these countries shared a common experience of planned economy and Marxist-Leninist ideology, implemented by a very powerful bureaucracy (Bridger and Pine 1998:5). As Caroline Humphrey (2002:12) puts it, “even if the shared features of actually existing socialism were very unevenly distributed and moulded in diverging ways in different countries, those structures still had more in common than actually existing capitalisms—and ‘capitalism’ is a category that people go on using profitably, without qualms.”

After the collapse of the socialist system, again, despite the growth of even bigger divergences, postsocialist countries experienced certain common processes. For example, the withdrawal of state surveillance, collapse of long-established social and economic institutions and confrontation with the market (Mandel and Humphrey 2002), often accompanied by the economic policy of shock therapy prescribed by global economic institutions, gave the 1990s a certain unity. Thus, postsocialism as a region, or as a period, seems to be an umbrella term for the common policies and experiences of all the postsocialist Eurasian countries. At the same time, anthropologists have also been careful to point out the regional differences and criticise the model of transition that assumes a linear teleological journey from socialism to Western neoliberal capitalism (Bridger and Pine 1998; Burawoy and Verdery 1998; Verdery 1996). Nevertheless, ‘postsocialist’ as an adjective has often been used rather carelessly, meaning everything and nothing. As ‘postsocialist’ pressures contribute to problems in people’s lives, there are ‘postsocialist’ forces and constraints, and people practice ‘postsocialist’ complaining (Kideckel 2008). In an imprecise use, postsocialism starts to resemble a very powerful monster or a force that has worsened peoples’ lives and is the sole agent to blame for it.

Postsocialism as an approach, however, is useful for two reasons. Firstly, studying the postsocialist period or region, anthropologists have emphasised that old institutions and practices cannot immediately be replaced by new ones. Studies of privatisation and marketisation have shown how people's existing moral economies are incompatible with the new ways of doing things (Mandel and Humphrey 2002; Pine 2002b). At the same time, what might look like remnants of old mentality can be a direct response to the new market situation, while people may employ old familiar language and symbols to new configurations in politics and economics. Knowledge of what socialism meant and how it worked is crucial for understanding how some institutions and values change very quickly while others hardly at all, and whether these institutions are part of a socialist legacy or a completely new transformation. As a new generation of anthropologists like myself, who have had very little direct experience of socialism, are starting to study the region, the approach of postsocialism, as something that considers the socialist past (and the pre-socialist past) important, calls for new historically informed ethnographies to help to capture change.

Secondly, the approach of postsocialism is useful because it reminds us of an economic alternative. Today, as David Harvey (2005a:3) states, "neoliberalism has [...] become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world." The discourse of shock therapists in the early 1990s, preaching that to get the economy on track, some people just have to suffer, cuts have to be made, belts have to be tightened, and that austerity is necessary and inevitable, is still so prevalent in discussing austerity in Europe today in 2012. As Don Kalb (2002:321) points out, the fall of the Berlin Wall has given power to Western monetarists globally and

fostered a triumphant neo-liberalism as the single source for any agenda for social change and development, now vacuously dubbed as 'reform'. This agenda trumpets the triplet of liberalization, stabilization and privatization, and sells this policy package in the name of civil society and development (the 'Washington consensus').

He adds that societies are just as much defined by what they were as by what current elites dream they can turn them into. Neoliberal policies cannot simply be implemented in the same way everywhere, as economies are embedded in the local societies<sup>2</sup>. This means that besides

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<sup>2</sup> Anthropologists keep debating about what neoliberalism is and how to study this. Going into theories of neoliberalism in great detail is beyond the scope of this thesis, so I will stick with Harvey's definition and particular labour management practices that could be called neoliberal and that are further discussed in Chapters 2 and 6. Anthropologists have however agreed that the theory and implementation of neoliberalism tend to be messy, contradictory and heterogeneous processes that play out differently in different locations Goldstein,

looking at the socialist past, postsocialist ethnographies can look at the reactions to current neoliberal projects and show how the hegemonic ideology is not shared by all, and other moral systems are also still in operation. What has changed since the postsocialist writings of the 1990s is that on the political level, the uncertainty, the ever-shifting parameters that Burawoy and Verdery (1998) talk about are gone. On the surface, in Estonia it has felt for a long time that the End of History (Fukuyama 1992) has been reached – there were never any reversals, unlike in many other postsocialist countries in which former communists were completely wiped out of the picture and the only visible alternative was neoliberal capitalism. But on the everyday level, the uncertainty and negotiations of institutions and moralities continue, as was particularly visible during the economic crisis that coincided with my fieldwork. Thus, ethnographic studies in a postsocialist framework can lead to thinking about alternative social and economic arrangements. As Michael Burawoy puts it (2001),

Postsocialist theory could follow postcolonial theory. Just as disillusion with "national independence" led postcolonial theory to reject the very goals of liberation as themselves too tainted by the oppressor's ideology, so disillusion could lead postsocialist intellectuals to contemplate alternatives to the imported Western models. Just as postcolonial theory turned to subaltern studies and the search for opportunities and visions eclipsed in the colonial or even precolonial world, so postsocialist theory will perhaps exhume alternatives that were rapidly closed off when communism began to teeter (p. 1118).

Due to the nature of socialism, and particular approaches that anthropologists implemented in the 1990s, Thelen (2011) blames anthropologists of postsocialism for atypical emphasis on economy and rational actors, due to Verdery's use of the neoinstitutionalist framework of Hungarian economist Janos Kornai. This perspective, common to all postsocialist anthropology according to Thelen, underwent a shift from "focusing on inefficient institutions prior to the change to focusing on inefficient actors after the change" (p. 54). This excessive focussing on economy, and hence issues such as privatisation, labour and informal economic relations, created an institutionalist normative analysis that hindered the development of real anthropological concepts that would make postsocialist anthropology more significant in the general debates of anthropological theory. I think Thelen is not doing justice to a lot of postsocialist ethnography, although it indeed often

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Daniel. 2012. "Decolonialising 'actually existing neoliberalism'." *Social Anthropology* 20:304-08.. It is also noted that neoliberalism's relationship with capitalism has to be further studied Kalb, Don. 2012. "Thinking about neoliberalism as if the crisis was actually happening." *Social Anthropology* 20(3):318-30, Kalb, Don, and Gabor Halmai. 2011. *Headlines of Nation, Subtexts of Class: Working-Class Populism and the Return of the Repressed in Neoliberal Europe*: Berghahn Books.. I agree with these ideas and my modest aim here is to avoid talking about neoliberalism as a vague all-powerful monster, but rather to talk about specific practices that can be called neoliberal.

focussed on the difference between economic institutions in socialism and capitalism. In a response to Thelen, Verdery and Dunn state:

It was not Verdery or Dunn who initiated the focus on property rights or labor and industrial management: these topics were set by Marx in the first instance, and then made the subject of profound and often violent debate in Eastern Europe during collectivization, industrialization and the rise of dissident movements, particularly Poland's Solidarity. Issues of planning, property and labor were equally at the heart of postsocialist transformations in the early 1990s: shock therapy in Poland, for example, was premised on the need to dismantle the architecture of state planning rapidly (Sachs, 1993), while decollectivization was seen as a necessary step to transforming the system of property rights. Why wouldn't Western anthropologists study these things? Since the goal was to study socialism and postsocialism, it made sense to study those elements that defined the parts of social life Eastern and Central Europeans had decided were at the heart of the problem. (Dunn and Verdery 2011:252)

I agree that studying postsocialism calls for study of these aspects that were fundamentally different in socialist and capitalist societies, at least in discourse, and to trace the changes in these institutions. Furthermore, issues like labour and private property are key topics in economic anthropology, and postsocialist experiences can contribute to wider theoretical debates on these topics.

I can place my ethnography in the corpus of postsocialist studies because Estonia shares socialist and postsocialist commonalities with other countries in the region. Throughout my study I have strived for a better understanding of socialism and to make history an integral part of my analysis. For me, postsocialism first and foremost means doing historically informed analysis that is aware of the past, not only in the sense of economic factors but also, for example, of ideology, ethnic relations, and glorifying labour. I have tried to follow Chris Hann's (2007) call for studying multiple temporalities of postsocialism and paying attention to the past as "some things change much more slowly than others: more precisely, [...] norms, values, mentalities etc. have a force capable of defying the intended logic of legislative or economic changes" (Hann 2007 :6). Axel (2002: 3) believes that "Rather than the study of a people in a particular place and at a certain time, what is at stake in historical anthropology, is explaining the production of a people, and the production of space and time. This orientation engenders a critical interest in seeking to understand the politics of living the ongoing connections or disjunctures of futures and pasts in heterogeneous presents". My work has been inspired by that of Sidney Mintz and Eric Wolf (Mintz 1985; Wolf 1982), which focussed on the development of global capitalism and the changes it brought about to colonial locations in the global economy. Thus, postsocialism for

me does not mean simply studying the chaos and hangover after the collapse of socialism, but rather historically informed research in which particular topics such as different modes of production and organisation of labour can contribute to larger debates in anthropology. This is also why the title of my thesis is *Mining Postsocialism* – it refers on one hand to the profession of mining, but on the other hand, to the multiple temporalities or multiple layers, just as can be found in the mine as one seam replaces another, needing careful inspection.

But besides being postsocialist, Estonia is part of Europe and the EU, meaning I must also take account of certain economic ideologies that affect its foreign policy, energy security and the European common and open energy market, as well as understandings of ethnicity and citizenship. Anthropologists have started to focus on Europe as a research area fairly recently. The first collections on anthropology of Europe, such as *Anthropology of Europe* edited by Victoria Goddard and her colleagues (Goddard, Llobera and Shore 1994), focus mostly on Western Europe and the Mediterranean as a distinct culture area. They suggest that Europe should be treated as a unit of research because of increased economic interdependence and information exchange between the different European states. After the collapse of Eastern European socialism, they note, the principles of liberal democracy and market economy have become dominant, but they note that there is still a large economic differentiation between Eastern and Western Europe. Besides the economic difference, cultural prejudice about Eastern Europe as backward and barbaric persisted even after the iron curtain was gone, because the idea of Eastern Europe as the imagined Orient dated back much longer than the Cold War, to the era of enlightenment (Wolff 1994). The collapse of socialism further reinforced the idea of Eastern Europe as the backward Other, while the West has promoted the values of free market through institutions such as the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development. Adrian Smith has pointed out a sort of neocolonialism in which the European enlargement processes

bring with them a set of contradictory and problematic assumptions about the pathway that the countries of East-Central Europe should be ‘encouraged’ to take and the role that ‘the West’ should play. A clear set of agendas is at work, which revolves around an attempt to foster market-led capitalist transitions. The consequence of these moves is that East-Central Europe has found itself discursively situated in relation to perceived endpoints and outcomes that are theoretically expected to accrue from the ‘correct’ implementation of capitalist transitions (Smith 2002: 666).

He further argues that there is a monitoring and surveillance of progress towards achieving these defined endpoints, resulting in geographical imaginations of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ of the capitalist transition (Smith 2002). It is worth keeping in mind that the

hierarchies of ‘developed’ and ‘backward’ countries in Europe have also reached academia – Western anthropologists reproduce stereotypes about the ‘Wild East’ (Kürti 1996). They are sceptical about local ethnology which is considered nationalistic, infused with Soviet Marxism and uninformed about theories in the West, and while this is not true, native ethnology remains at the bottom of the disciplinary hierarchy of knowledge (Buchowski 2012). This picture has been further complicated with the increasing number of Western-trained ‘native’ anthropologists like myself.

The European Union has been studied by anthropologists in the context of imagining, building and experiencing it by its different citizens, treating the EU not as an institutional object but rather an incomplete project (Bellier and Wilson 2000; Shore 2000). Anthropologists have also strongly criticised the European Union, describing it as an agent of constitutionalisation of neoliberalism in Europe (Kalb 2012). Gavin Smith (2006) sees the EU as the creator of a particular category of regional economies as it attempts to build up flexible capitalism.

The establishing of *regions* as targeted sites where dispersed capitalist institutions become “flexible” in the form they take, the activities they engage in, and the way in which they use labour is especially well-suited to this programme. It is here that the “freedoms” of the so-called civil society combine with the notion of human capital to provide just the hegemonic leverage necessary for the regulation of people’s labours (p. 628).

Looking at workers in Europe in particular, Procoli (2004) confirms that the recent years have seen greater precariousness in Europe. New forms of work have appeared, such as part-time, limited in time, interim and subcontracting, in order for firms to meet the demands of free trade and the logic of competitiveness, cutting down on labour costs.

The statue of the ‘Two Sober Ones’ which I introduced at the beginning of the chapter is a great metaphor for postsocialism as well as Estonia in the EU. The glorification of work and miners is clearly a socialist legacy of the centrality of industrial labour, and the message for future residents shows the vision of the future that socialists had. Despite the change of the regime and the destruction of the large tribune, certain values like the importance of the work of miners have remained central to people who made sure that the statue remained in its place even when Lenin was removed in 1990. Life around the statue changes and new structures and institutions such as the EU, which paid for the reconstruction of the square, penetrate its surroundings. These changes shake the very basis of the statue, as society is shaken by the fast changes, but some ideas and values change more slowly than others, and to

understand this, it is important to know the history of the statue and the vision of the future, now in the past that was hidden inside the statue.

The object of the statue, miners, also deserves a brief explanation. Sociologists have paid special attention to miners as a single occupational community, whose militancy is explained by their dependency on one resource and fluctuations of the world market (Knapp and Pigott 1997; Lockwood 1966), or the original and quintessential proletarians (Harrison 1978; Orwell 1986). Metcalfe (1990) shows that throughout history, a dual picture of the miner has been painted. On the one hand, the miner is something less than human: “bestial, immoral, immature or sick. The language used to describe them would be called racist if their skin was black by nature rather than occupation” (p. 46). On the other hand, they are heroes, the vanguard of the proletariat who are expected to develop militancy and strong unionism. Metcalfe suggests that miners were vilified by the bourgeoisie through offering a moral worldview that legitimised capitalism and themselves as capitalists; miners’ savagery was celebrated as part of the story of capitalism as progress. This was also a tool for preventing miners from revolutionary action – if they took up a common cause based on their proletarian identity, this identity would already be deemed shameful and savage by the bourgeoisie, making miners a cautionary tale for the whole proletariat. In the Soviet Union, miners were officially depicted as heroes; the Stakhanovite shock work movement was initiated by a miner. It was accompanied by the ideology of progress, technological modernisation and increasing productivity, placing miners in the vanguard of the society, in contrast with Metcalfe’s description of English and Australian miners who were envisioned as backward. One of the principal goals of the Stakhanovite movement was the creation of a new image of Soviet workers, who, while not indifferent to material rewards, were largely motivated to work by ideological factors, by the desire to serve the cause of socialism and the motherland (Shlapentokh 1988). In the postsocialist and post-Soviet period, miners have lost their political and economic significance, and the heroes have become villains. To continue my project of historically informed study of workers and class relations, I will next turn to studies of workers in the socialist period.

### **1.3.2. Workers in socialism and postsocialism**

Socialist societies were supposed to be classless, comprised of two non-antagonistic classes of rural proletariat and workers. In reality, social scientists have offered different explanations, not always agreeing with each other and causing difficulty as the Western basis

of class analysis is not always helpful in the socialist context. As Hamilton and Hirszowicz put it,

A discussion of inequality and class under Communism poses a serious theoretical problem. None of the many class theories developed with reference to capitalist societies can be applied to Communist systems based on new social divisions and new forms of social inequality [...] In communist societies in Eastern European equalities associated with the capitalist economy largely disappeared while the new ones related to state socialism emerged (Hamilton and Hirszowicz 1993:236 quoted in Evans and Mills 1999)

Mostly it is agreed that classes in socialist societies were not necessarily based on the same principles as those in capitalist countries. Sociologists in Eastern Europe show that class antagonism existed between the two classes of the working class and the bureaucracy, or the working class and the intelligentsia (Szelenyi 1982). The intellectuals, as Konrad and Szenelyi argued based on Hungary, were a class in formation who were ruling the workers and organising the extraction of surplus (Konrád and Szelényi 1979). Simon Clarke (1993) claims that “the Soviet Union was, like capitalism, a system based on the exploitation of one class by another, and one in which the direct producers were divorced from the immediate ownership of the means of production, and were therefore compelled to work as wage labourers” (p. 12). However, socialist societies were based on ‘rank’ rather than ‘class’, and power and privilege were grounded in the possession of ‘political capital’ rather than economic wealth. David Lane distinguishes between the administrative class that had the executive control of the means of production and the institutions of reproduction (such as education and science), and an ‘acquisition class’ distinguished by its interest in enhancing its position through the exploitation of individual skills like education and qualifications through a market system. These classes, he claimed, played a major role in the collapse of the Soviet Union. A third class was the mass of the population engaged in manual and unskilled non-manual occupations (Lane 2005). Some scholars go as far as pointing out that due to Stalinist reforms and repressions, the working class as such seized existing altogether, changing “from working class to urban labouring mass” (Rittersporn 1994) or lost their language and spaces for political activity because the state had monopolised these (Siegelbaum and Suny 1994). Moshe Lewin (1994), however, vouches for the processuality of class formation and the need to look at particular circumstances and relationships between capital, workers and the state when studying the formation of the Soviet working class. I agree with his suggestion that rather than claiming that there was no class, we need to look at it as it is formed in particular places.

For the elite, be they the ruling class, the intelligentsia or the administrative class, to maintain power it was important to prevent working-class mobilisation in what was supposed to be a workers' state. Different explanations have been given to account for the worker compliance and quiescence. Ashwin (1999) has differentiated the three most common explanations, a division that I follow here. One of the most common explanations was that a social contract existed between the working class and the regime – the workers complied with the regime and the general rules of the game in exchange for labour security, social benefits and relative individual freedom as consumers (Cook 1993). For example, Zaslavski (1982) talks about 'organised consensus' whereby workers accept the existing power hierarchy in exchange for social mobility, some workers' rights, and a slow but steady rise in living standards (see also Pittaway 2005 for Hungary).

Other authors emphasise that the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union promoted worker atomisation. For example, Don Filtzer (1992; 2002) believes that the workers were unable to organise because of the atomisation of the labour process and repressive organs. According to Filtzer, the individualisation of incentives and the labour process prevented the emergence of workers' solidarity, which left workers only with individual forms of resistance like absenteeism or drunkenness. Additionally, Zaslavsky (1982) emphasises the Party's strategy of creating intra-class differences by employing skilled workers for better wages and social mobility but less freedom in 'closed enterprises' (involved in state or military secrets). At the same time, less skilled workers in traditional enterprises had to accept lower mechanisation and wages and their discontent was suppressed by state-encouraged alcoholism. Furthermore, studies like Baron's (2001) analysis of the 'Bloody Saturday' in Novocherkassk in 1962 show how workers' mobilisation was violently suppressed and activists executed, confirming the existence of terror and surveillance even during Khrushchev's thaw. A third explanation, used mostly by poststructuralist social histories of the Stalinist era (Kotkin 1997; Siegelbaum and Suny 1994), has focussed on the discursive role of class language in formation of class consciousness. As the state had monopolised the language of class, they claim, the workers could not express their interests in class terms and could therefore not form an effective opposition to the regime.

Ashwin (1999) and Clarke (1993) have both emphasised the simultaneous incorporation into the system and atomisation of Soviet workers. On the one hand, workers were incorporated into the system through the workplace and the labour collective which

offering loving and supporting relationships, while at the same time also being the mechanism for distributing benefits and goods like apartments. On the other hand, workers had to nourish individual patronage relationships with their managers to benefit from the distribution of goods. This made workers compete with each other, while the system's ability to maintain control over the distribution of resources helped the elite to maintain a position of power. Due to the constant shortage of resources in production, workers had to be inventive, and skilled male workers in particular could exercise autonomy on the shop floor and had more bargaining power in the labour process than their colleagues in the West (Burawoy 1988; Verdery 1996). Nevertheless, they were left to practise only individual forms of resistance and had little control over what they were paid or what they produced (Clarke 1993; Filtzer 2002).

Western anthropologists have traditionally studied rural areas of Eastern Europe and agricultural labour and the results of changing property relations after decollectivisation and privatisation (Annist 2011; Creed 1998; Lampland 1995; Rausing 2004). Postsocialist ethnographies of workers of the 1990s have dealt with people's strategies of coping with uncertainty and economic constraints both in the city and in the countryside (Bridger and Pine 1998; Bridger, Pinnick and Kay 1995; Pine 1998; Pine 2002b). Studies of postsocialist informal economies have focussed on various aspects of economic livelihoods, including domestic food production, self-provisioning and DIY (Ashwin 1999; Caldwell 2011; Clarke 2002; Pine 2002b), different ways of starting a business (Burawoy, Krotov and Lytkina 2000), state benefits as a source of income (Meurs 2002), foreign aid (Annist 2011), various forms of care work, and forms of black and grey economies (Burawoy, Krotov and Lytkina 2000; Humphrey 2002). The persistence of informal ties despite new economic relations has encouraged work on personal networks (Ledeneva 1998; Lonkila 2011), patron-client relationships and forms of bribery and corruption (Ledeneva, Lovell and Rogachevskii 2000; Ledeneva and Centre for European Reform 2001), and the impact of migration (Kideckel 2007). In more recent studies, cultural geographer Alison Stenning (2011) looks at the impacts of neoliberalisation of labour markets in Poland in the former steel town of Nowa Huta. She maps the trajectories of casualisation of labour and reskilling and migration that fit the general pattern of neoliberalisation of labour markets characterised by the demand for flexible entrepreneurial selves and precarious market conditions.

Regarding industrial labour, relatively few studies have been done on the area. Birgit Müller's (2007) and Elizabeth Dunn's (2004) studies have focussed on privatisation of former socialist factories by Western owners. Both of these ethnographies, in Poland and East Germany, study the different understandings of work, productivity, and personhood by Eastern workers and Western managers. Müller and Dunn study how in the new situation of market economy, new types of persons are being produced, hence mostly focussing on the managerial discourse of shaping workers, but not so much on workers' reactions.

The two studies that focus more on workers' reactions to postsocialism are, interestingly, both about miners. Miners have not been a special subject only in postsocialist studies, however. David Kideckel's (2008) study of Romanian miners in Jiu Valley presents a story of loss, of decline in miners' living conditions, health and changing expectations of gender roles. Miners have taken voluntary redundancy or hold on to their badly paid and dangerous jobs. Their wives work for a pittance to make ends meet and although families in which wives work are better off financially, miners believe that really the wives should be at home and they should be able to fulfil their role as the provider for the family. The social world has shrunk, as people cannot afford social occasions anymore, as has the physical space when trips to the Black Sea are out of the question and the rest of Romania regards miners as greedy, lazy, violent and backward obstacles to the progress to capitalism. Since the miners' marches to Bucharest in the late 1990s that ended in violence and the imprisonment of their union leader Cozma, miners are deprived of a political voice.

Kideckel's ethnography carries a deep political mission of showing the misery and decay of the former aristocracy of labour and political vanguard. He demonstrates his commitment to listening to miners and giving their grievances a voice in his ethnography. This interview-based approach, though, often does not go deeper than echoing the voices of miners, and besides misery, the reader sees very little of everyday life and the power relations in the community. Despite having done fieldwork during socialism, he seems to idealise it. His main trope is that workers have lost control over their own and their families' lives, which begs the question of how much control workers really had under Ceausescu. Sure, miners had jobs, but it seems biased to talk about losing control over their own bodies, compared to Ceausescu's time when pronatalist policy meant that women had very little control over their own bodies. Kideckel also seems to downplay communist repression of

workers who only had individual forms of resistance, and no opportunities to collectively resist.

Sarah Ashwin's *Russian Workers: Anatomy of Patience* (1999), focussing on miners in Siberia, is much more workplace-based. While Kideckel focusses on showing how miners have lost their political voice and ability to mobilise, Ashwin's whole book is built on the puzzle of why, despite appalling conditions and a revolutionary spark in the early 1990s, miners do not organise collective action. She paints a very detailed picture of the functioning of the mine, the village and trade union, showing the structural and personal problems of Russia in the 1990s that stop workers from mobilising. She explains that workers do not mobilise due to structural constraints in postsocialist Russia, where unions have to represent the interests of the enterprise to survive, rather than specifically workers' interests, and even if the structure would change, people are used to a particular way of doing things. People seek an individual rather than collective solution to their problems and do not mobilise outside the union either, rather hoping for a father figure to solve their problems. Nevertheless, Ashwin's otherwise detailed and sensitive ethnography defines miners and their organisations in terms of lack and deficiency, in their inability to mobilise. Although I very much appreciate her historically informed study that considers the past institutions as well as contemporary structural constraints, it seems to me that her ethnography is based on an imagined Western ideal of how a union should work, which is not suitable for all contexts. Thus, the two very good mining ethnographies of Eastern Europe, Kideckel's on the mining community and Ashwin's on the workplace, define miners in terms of loss compared to previous times and lack of mobilisation compared to an abstract Western model about how workers should behave.

My ethnography could be placed in the category of studies of changes at the workplace, like Müller's and Dunn's, but my focus is not only on how new types of workers are produced by managers: it is also on how workers respond to those processes on the basis of their own moral economy, values and their political and economic situation. Like Kideckel, I take seriously what miners have to say about their life and situation, but show how, beyond complaining about miserable lives, there are everyday ethnographic situations in which workers act to protect their rights and respond to situations, not necessarily in the way that a Western textbook on worker mobilisation would require, but in ways that are locally efficient and meaningful. Furthermore, I emphasise class as a useful analytic category

to look at miners' experiences and struggles. Like Ashwin (1999; 2003; 2004; Ashwin and Clarke 2003), I have paid particular attention to trade unions, which despite their declining membership fulfil an important role in workers' lives. Despite sometimes being frustrated by the ineffectiveness of the union, I have tried to analyse it not in terms of lack but in terms of local meaning and significance.

### 1.3.3. Postsocialism and class

The takes on class in postsocialism can be divided into roughly three groups. There are the neo-Weberian studies of class as a statistical entity, which try to see if the methods of calculating class position based on income, job autonomy and a number of other factors work in postsocialist countries as they do in the West (Evans and Mills 1999). For these kinds of studies, the working class is there because being working class simply means holding a particular place in a statistical construct. These kinds of social stratification studies have also dominated in Estonia, and while the topic of classes has otherwise been taboo, there is one exception: the enthusiastic search and waiting for the emergence of the middle class<sup>3</sup>. When the middle class is finally formed, one can talk about a stable wealthy and happy society, went the message of local sociologists.

These kinds of studies do point out some important trends in the society. For example, Raimo Blom, who was comparing the class positions in the three Baltic countries in the 1990s, found that differences between groups have increased a lot, more so in the presumably more successful capitalist Estonia than in Latvia and Lithuania. According to this study, the main losers were labourers and lower white-collar workers, and the winners are managers of more generally well-educated people in leading positions (Blom 1995). The second approach

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<sup>3</sup> In Estonia, sociologists talk about stratification, but not about classes. Presenting my fieldwork data and class model at the Estonian Social Scientists' annual conference in Tallinn, professor Raivo Vetik bluntly responded that we now live in postmodernism, in which individual identities prevail and class is an outdated model. Furthermore, the keynote speaker for the conference was sociologist Piotr Sztompka, who is mostly known for preaching transitory. There are a few notable examples, however. "Why are we not talking about classes and the emergence or existence of class society? Why is this topic completely hushed up while the emergence of the middle class is a very popular topic?" asked the Estonian sociologist of stratification Ellu Saar, at the annual conference of Estonian Social Scientists in 2000. No one has so far responded to her call and picked up the topic; the concept of class seems to be a taboo among Estonian social scientists. Ellu Saar gives her own explanation in the same paper Saar, Ellu. 2001. "Kas Eestis on kujunemas klassiühiskond? [Is Estonia becoming a class society?]." Pp. 23 - 35 in *Eesti sotsiaalteaduste aastakonverents*, edited by Raivo Vetik. Tallinn: Tallinna Pedagoogikaülikool. She points to the neoliberal ideology of the transition in Estonia, which sees class society as something belonging to the past and, since everyone is responsible for their own success, it is redundant to talk about classes. Secondly, as class is associated with Marx, and Marx is associated with socialism and the Soviet occupation, then this is an extremely politicised topic that people in Estonia want to avoid.

is voiced by sociologists, who did see classes in socialism but claim that the working class does not exist anymore in postsocialism because workers have demobilised, lost their solidarity and fail to organise, thus equating the existence of classes with the existence of class consciousness. As Gil Eyal and her colleagues put it: “at present, there is nothing but a demobilized, disorganized mass of workers! We are not looking for ‘revolutionary consciousness’ – ‘trade union mentality’ would do, but it is nowhere in evidence” (Eyal, Szelenyi and Townsley 1998). It has however been noted that the demise of class as a theoretical concept has also taken place in the West, as scholars have mistaken the decline of the traditional Fordist working class with the end of class itself. This might be because cultural images of particular classes last longer than actual class formations within capitalism (Kasimir and Carbonella 2006). A third body of literature in political science, industrial relations and anthropology focusses on the mysterious quiescence of workers who, despite their deteriorating conditions, have not organised major unrests or strikes in any of the Central and Eastern European countries (addressed in more detail in Chapter 8). Not everyone has ignored class in Eastern Europe, though: for example, Michal Buchowski’s (2001; 2003; 2004) work on Poland has attempted to sketch out class relations in the rapidly changing postsocialist urban and rural environments. Furthermore, the 2008 economic crisis and the right-wing mobilisation of the working class in Central and Eastern Europe have brought about a new body of literature on class in Eastern Europe. Kalb and Halmai’s (2011) recent collection aims to explain the reasons behind working-class populism and offers a starting point to class analysis in the region. Some essays in the collection, like Eszter Bartha’s (2011), have explicitly stated that their aim is to bring class analysis back to Eastern Europe and criticise its previous underuse by local social scientists. The collection of essays offers a wonderful ethnographic insight into the post-crisis populism, but offers little in terms of developing the Eastern European model of class. Not everywhere is the forgotten Eastern European working class turning to populism, and also its other relationships, characteristics and dynamics will need to be sketched out. This thesis with its ethnographic, history- and place-specific treatment of class will hopefully be pointing to some potential new directions in developing a class theory for deindustrialising Central and Eastern Europe during the economic crisis.

My class analysis is based on the approaches of E.P. Thompson and David Harvey, and those who have developed their models. E.P. Thompson (1980), sees “class as a “structure”, nor even as a “category”, but as something which in fact happens (and can be

shown to have happened) in human relationships” (p. 9). For him, class is a fluid historical relationship, that cannot be stopped to study its structure, but must always be embodied in real people and situations and

class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily (p. 9).

David Harvey (2005b) focusses on how class always creates its own external Other who is continually recreated in capital expansion and dispossession in places previously outside the reach of capitalism. Kasmir and Carbonella (2008) emphasise that Harvey’s focus on dispossession as a recurrent process in the lives and cultures of working classes allows for capturing the mutability of class relations, and confirm E.P. Thompson’s understanding of class as a fluid movement of real people in real contexts. “Harvey’s analysis of the connections between the accumulation strategies of expanded reproduction and dispossession can provide the opening we need to move beyond oppositional types, as well as the simultaneous nostalgia for *classes past* and dismissal of *classes present* that has long hindered the study of class and inequality” (p. 7).

As Don Kalb (1997) suggests, class presupposes that human interests simply and realistically begin with the ways in which people try to secure their livelihoods by performing their daily work. Work is never just the act of earning a living but rather the social and cultural crux around which whole ways of life become maintained and organised. Class points, at the same moment, to the people’s intentional efforts to make the best of their world, as well as to their unchosen need to find the friction-ridden alignments to do so (Kalb 1997). Narotzky and Smith (2006) find class as a concept underlying their analysis important for two reasons. Firstly, because social reproduction, in capitalist conditions, creates structural contradictions that are solved by temporal or social fixes, or through outcomes of social conflicts centred on control of property, extraction of surplus value and necessity to sell labour. As long as

“[...] the reproduction of daily life depends upon the production of commodities produced through a system of circulation of capital that has profit-seeking as its direct and socially accepted goal” (Harvey, 1985: 128), and it therefore seems to us that anthropologists have a responsibility to address this fundamental characteristic of social reproduction under capitalism (Narotzky and Smith 2006:9).

Secondly, they agree with E.P. Thompson that there is a strong link between class as expressed in collective action and possibilities to change capitalism. They show how such working-class mobilisation did not happen in their field site in Spain because of constant attacks on such class collectivities throughout history to the present. This, however, points to local circumstances rather than the absence of class.

In the people's democracies, class was not an agent of its own making, as in the English industrialisation that E.P. Thompson observes. As Ngai (2005) points out, in China class was formed without its corresponding subjects; its power had been taken over by the Party. While she agrees that labour movements and mobilisation are important for constituting class consciousness, this is not the only way that class consciousness is created. Ngai's work, like my own ethnography, shows that class consciousness can also be created through the everyday practices at the workplace. Class is part of the conflict of the young female Chinese workers, where gender, rural-urban disparities, pressures of kinship and consumerist culture also contribute to the model of domination over workers.

I do not find the approaches of those who claim that class stops existing when it is unable to mobilise very useful, especially if mobilisation has to take place in a particular prescribed Western way. Class has not emerged in different societies in similar ways, and has seen different contributions to its own making in socialist and capitalist societies. As Fantasia and his colleagues (1991) point out, working classes have been revolutionary in some countries and have not been in others, depending on the historical circumstances, but this does not mean that there is no conflict between different classes. It can instead be channelled into union activities that prevent revolution. These activities differ in time and space depending on how a particular economy is inserted into a global marketplace, how international class relationships shape relations of accumulation, and the configurations of class-state relationships (Feldman in Fantasia, Levine and McNall 1991 p.6 ).

Power relations based on ethnicity, gender and age also intersect and overlap with class relations. Strict typologies reduce our ability to understand the fluidity of class relations and experience, especially important in a rapidly changing postsocialist situation. Therefore, class relations need to be historicised and we need to look at their dynamics in particular places that have created different class hierarchies and alliances and different strategies in the struggle against dispossession (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008). Rapid changes in the political and economic order call for special attention to the fluidity of class relations in the former

socialist countries, which are not changing in isolation but as part of global capitalism and neoliberal ideology. I believe the history of class relations will, however, affect the way the struggle is played out in different contexts.

I adopt a concept of class that is dynamic and looks at relationships over time. It considers power relations between the different groups; it believes in joint experience stemming from a similar position in relations of production and does not expect instant articulated class consciousness and revolution for the class to exist. It emphasises the importance of local history and specificity of place while keeping in mind the larger national and global context and the questions of conditions of social reproduction in capitalist systems.

In my thesis, class consists of the relational aspect of a particular social group like miners in relation to other groups in the society, and tries to track changes in this relationship. Through my ethnography, I trace relationships of workers to the the national and managerial elite. I start by showing how the history of the Soviet working class is played out in the labour process in which the piece rate system continues to create atomisation within the working class, but shared experience is nevertheless created through the experience of work and controlling its tempo. In Chapter 3, I show how in Estonia, the history of class formation is intimately linked with the story of migration and ethnic relations in which class and ethnicity often overlap. The Estonian citizenship policy can be interpreted as a class project of the elites. Besides material struggles, Russian-speaking workers have had to face symbolic struggles whereby they are dispossessed of their pride and status as they were depicted as the 'Other'. In Chapter 4, I look at how the common material and class experience is expressed by miners in their moral economy. I look more closely at what miners share with other members of the working class and what is particular to their profession. Their egalitarian moral economy should not be seen only as a Soviet legacy, but also as something that can partially be explained through current economic constraints. Chapter 5 looks at miners' leisure practices that are still fairly egalitarian despite growing social differentiation. In Chapter 6, I look at management's attempts to implement new management strategies, and local response to the new management strategies that aim to further differentiate between segments of the working class and separate the worker and the family. Chapter 7 looks at the trade union as the site of class struggle. In Chapter 7, I emphasise the need to look at local uses and meanings of unions instead of a given Western model of unions and worker

mobilisation, and trace the emergence of class consciousness among trade unionists during collective employment agreement negotiations.

My class model grows out of my ethnography (see Illustration 2): as I show, firstly, class formation processes are dynamic, related to a particular history, but also take shape in front of our eyes during the period of rapid changes. Secondly, class is relational and based on the capitalist model whereby workers need to sell their labour power to those who own the property. This relationship can be expressed in the everyday work situations as well as in union activities. Thirdly, it contains the cultural distinctness of the particular way of living, including self-identification as a member of a particular class, and certain moral economy, values and ways of behaviour that correspond to it.



**Illustration 2. Ethnographic model of class relations in an Estonian mining community.**  
 The numbers on this graph correspond to the chapter numbers in this thesis.

## 1.4. Methodology

I spent 12 months in Ida-Virumaa, living in Jõhvi. My initial access to the field was facilitated by my family networks. I grew up in Tallinn, and my parents, who have a humanities background and grew up in Tallinn and Tartu, initially seemed not to know anyone in the industrial Russian-speaking region. In Estonia, however, one is never too far from people they know. My mother, who works in the field of human resources, put me in

contact with the HR manager of the mining company who later organised my access. My father contacted one of his former classmates who worked for the local newspaper. She found me the apartment where I stayed for the first months of my fieldwork and introduced me to the local journalists who helped me with some initial contacts and publicised my project. I had never before thought about the fact that my grandfather, who died in 1985, had studied mining engineering. He was one of those country boys from a very poor background who was attracted to study mining because it was a prioritised industry in which students received a higher than average stipend. Since his parents had no means to support my grandfather during his studies, this was his only way of accessing university education. He never worked in the mines, and became a communist official instead, but some of his classmates later became mine directors. Now retired, they took special care of me after they found out about my grandfather, telling me stories that helped me to better understand running the mines in the Soviet period.

I started my fieldwork in late October 2009, a dark, dirty and depressing time of the year in Estonia, which is not the best for moving to a new town and trying to understand its life and people. I started meeting the key people in the company and the trade union, and in November gave a presentation to the management board of the company, explaining my research plans. I spent the initial months looking through old newspapers and employees' personal cards and meeting memos in the company archive to understand the background of the company, area and people, while hoping that the management would think of a way to use me in the mines. I also contacted the local Museum of Oil Shale to see if I could use their archival material. Their very energetic director Ainar picked me up from Jõhvi the next day after I had called him to take me to the museum, and quickly, during our 10-minute car ride, hired me as a researcher for the museum. My job was to conduct life history interviews with miners for the museum archive. The 20-odd interviews that I did and that were displayed in a local exhibition hall during the European Museum night titled 'There Are Stories In The Night' made me feel that I had given something back to the community, left them with something tangible.

Ainar thought that it was particularly important to collect these personal stories as the archive consisted mostly of official documents. I spent weeks in the archive housed in an old village cultural centre. The old archivist had retired and no one quite knew how the system of finding anything using the catalogue would work, especially as the folders with material had

to be constantly moved around when the roof started leaking in the archive room and the shelves had to be moved. The chaotic archive, full of technical documents, impenetrable speeches full of socialist clichés and flyers from old cultural events in the area mostly frustrated me. So impersonal, so full of clichés of socialism was the archive, itself a monument to the system rather than a neutral collection of historical documents. Working in the archive, I tried to follow Stoler's (2002) idea of reading an archive along the grain and treating the archive as an ethnographic object in its own right. "If a notion of colonial ethnography starts from the premise that archival production is itself both a process and a powerful technology of rule, then we need not only to brush *against* the archive's received categories. We need to read for its regularities, for its logic of recall, for its densities and distributions, for its consistencies of misinformation, omission, and mistake – *along* the archival grain" (p. 100). This kind of reading, according to her, would consider the failed proposals, utopian visions, and improbable projects because they were 'non-events' (Stoler 2002).

The photo albums in the museum gave an idea about how miners spent free time, the collective agreements of the mines helped me understand the Soviet welfare system, the schedules of tourism trips to the twin town of Outokumpu in Finland gave an insight into the surveillance of Soviet tourists abroad, and in the museum I came across the text hidden in the metal cylinder below the 'Two Sober Ones', a failed utopian vision. Furthermore, the museum staff helped me to actually start speaking Russian. All connected with mining in one way or another, they shared their stories of the histories of their families and the town.

My first months were spent in the archives, trade union meetings, interviewing people and trying to get access to the actual mine. I was also trying to find a mining family to live with. It is not common in Estonia to take someone to live as a lodger; people also mostly lived in small apartments with not much extra room. The main response that I heard, however, was that no miner's wife would agree to have another young woman living in the same house. In January, I gave an interview to the local newspaper talking about my research, in which I also mentioned that I was looking for a family and I was very happy to help with children's Estonian and English homework. Soon after, Sveta called me. Her husband's family was a real mining dynasty and they had a spare room since the older daughter had moved out to study abroad. So I moved in with Sveta and Andrei, their two children, a cat, two turtles, two mice and tropical fish. It was not a typical mining family, but a family with a

long line of mining engineers and very strong middle-class aspirations. Nevertheless, they helped me get an insight into both the work and domestic life, understand kin relations and relations in the community and understand the problems of youth and education in the area.

After a few months in the field, it became clearer that the HR managers of the mines had a difficult time finding a job for me in the mine. In a time of crisis, when they have to lay off people, it would be hard to explain to the workers that ‘some new chick’ is hired. I seemed to be running into a closed door over and over again when trying to discuss possibilities with HR. Finally, someone suggested talking to another person, in charge of mine surveying in the mines. I approached Lyudmila with my question and her response was, “Would you like to go to an open-cast or an underground mine? When would you like to start?” I was not able to get a job in the mine, but together with Lyudmila, we drafted a schedule according to which I would spend around a month each in different departments, observing people’s work and helping when I could. The day when I was given my own set of work clothes, a helmet, miner’s lamp and a chip to check in and out of the underground area, was the day when I felt that my fieldwork had really started. After that, I spent most of my days in the mine. Nevertheless, following trade union negotiations, attending trainings of trade unions, conducting interviews with the management of the company, unionists and politicians took me to Tallinn, Tartu, Narva, from the Parliament building in the capital to the deepest forests of South Estonia.

Doing fieldwork in a very small country in a monopolistic state-owned company that provides key services to the population, it is useless to try to anonymise the company. Without revealing the crucial characteristics of the company, much of the field data also loses its significance. In a small country, everyone knows which company I am talking about, while for the academic community abroad, the name should not matter. Therefore, according to my agreement with the company, I am using real names for the energy company Eesti Energia (Estonian Energy), the former name of the oil shale mining company Eesti Põlevkivi, and one of their mines in which I did my fieldwork, ‘Estonia’. Without the quotation marks, I refer to the country, Estonia, while ‘Estonia’ in quotation marks refers to the mine. I decided not to change the name, to be consistent in keeping the real names of parts of the company and also because I did not want to lose the irony of the name.

‘Estonia’, the mine’s name, is reminding us that it is in the country with the same name, but is somehow the complete opposite of what the country is imagined to be. If the

country is supposed to be clean, green, individual success-oriented and Estonian-speaking, the quotation marks ironically reverse the meaning and take us to a place that is based on a polluting heavy industry, has more collective egalitarian values, and is Russian-speaking. My thesis explores which image is more real and where the two – Estonia and ‘Estonia’ meet.

To protect the individual identities of workers, office staff, managers and unionists, I am not using their real names. But I have replaced Estonian names with other Estonian ones, Russian names with other Russian names and Ukrainian or Tatar names with others from the same region. I have not changed the names of former directors of the mining company, because they were public figures, and people’s periodisation of the changes in the company is based on the rule of different directors. I have used the Library of Congress transcription system for Russian words, but the Estonian way of writing Russian names, e.g. Juri instead of Yuri, because this is how the names are written in Estonian documentation and media and how Russian speakers themselves would mostly spell their names using the Latin alphabet.



**Illustration 3. The yard of ‘Estonia’**

I was very aware of my own position when entering the field as an Estonian-speaking woman. My family connections allowed me to gain access to the first gatekeepers, other Estonian speakers. Interviews with office staff of Eesti Energia in Tallinn took me to my childhood friends, university colleagues and others with very similar – Estonian-speaking, middle-class, Tallinn-based – background to myself. It was very easy for me to make contact with them. I was much more worried about establishing rapport with Russian-speaking

workers because I assumed that our backgrounds would be very different and they might not necessarily like an Estonian-speaking scholar snooping around in their life. Due to this fear and my initial shyness about speaking Russian, it took me some time to understand that this was not the case. Doing their monotonous jobs, most women were delighted to have someone around to chat with, and for men underground, I was an interesting curiosity, a woman insisting on helping to repair mining machinery.

Russian speakers are quite used to Estonians who speak poor Russian, and did not make a big deal out of that. To my great fortune, Russians are also much more talkative than Estonians and even if I felt shy or lost due to language problems, my informants would keep talking. Many of them allowed me to use the dictaphone, and I used the help of transcribers who were able to point out regional dialects and unusual language use to me. Rather than treating me like a suspicious Estonian girl from the capital, workers quickly picked up that I studied in London. In an area with significant out-migration to Western Europe, everyone had a family member or friend working abroad, often in England. London became a common point of reference, with those who had worked there and returned, those who were dreaming of going or whose children were living there, and those who were curious about the conditions of workers in the West. London let us overcome any differences, to not get personal about questions of ethnic conflict. I can never be sure that the workers told me everything that they really thought about Estonians, because of who I was, but then again we had enough long conversations about this topic for me to feel I got a good overview about this question. In any case, I never wanted to make ethnicity central to my research. It seemed to me that my class background was not creating much social distance between my informants and I, since older miners usually took a caring parental role when talking to me, and the younger ones were simply happy to chat with someone. But again, I can never be quite sure.

As an unmarried woman of nearly 30, I was unusual in my field site. Russian speakers tend to marry earlier than Estonians and I was often told off for not being married yet. The more generous informants promised to find me a miner husband but soon I knew how to respond to them – the truth was that by the age of 25, most young miners were married already, some even for the second time, so finding me a husband would be a difficult enterprise. Having found out that I have a partner in London, I was again told not to bother with the degree but to get married quickly. Unless my informants were older, I very rarely

received any invitations to people's homes, and I think both Russian men and women do tend to be more jealous than Estonians – the miners' wives would not be very happy if the miner showed up with another woman. Chatting with miners at public events like the Miners' Day party or in a bar, I was sometimes confronted by really angry women. At the same time, people were often surprised that my partner would *let me* move and do fieldwork on my own.

Women do not work underground as miners. The law banning women from underground was introduced in the Soviet Union in the late 1950s and although now abolished, there are no women miners. The only women underground are mine surveyors and geologists. This is one of the reasons why the mine management found it difficult to find anything meaningful for me to do, and why it was somehow logical that the first department that took me underground and whose work I observed for a month was that of mine surveying. Later when I joined a production department, it seemed as if miners thought that I had seen what women do underground, and survived that, so I could join the men. Fortunately there are no superstitions about women underground in Estonia; it is simply seen as a job that would not be very good for their health. Generally, my presence underground was accepted.

In 'Estonia', as in other mines in the region, in general language use, all employees of the mine call themselves miners. This applies to workers, as well as to administrators and engineers, women as well as men. One simple and clear visual difference distinguishes workers from engineers and managers, however. Workers wear yellow helmets and engineers and managers wear white helmets. Among workers, there are miners proper and auxiliary workers. Miners proper work in the actual mining process, either tunnelling in new areas of the mine or extracting oil shale. Auxiliary workers work both in the mine and on the surface in various jobs, including maintenance, loading and running the processing plant. Engineers and managers usually have specialised education in mine engineering and are involved in running the production process, as well as holding down office jobs, for instance in planning, accountancy and HR. Anyone wearing a white helmet is often called ITR, standing for engineer-technical staff (*inzhener-tekhnicheskiiy rabotnik*) in Russian. As the general demographic of the mine was older, most of my informants were in their mid- to late 30s, 40s and 50s. Due the lack of regular contact with younger people in the mine, my work about values, class relations and everyday work mostly focusses on older workers. Due to the rapid changes in the society, 20-year-olds, who have never experienced the Soviet period, already

carry different values. The comparison of different generations will hopefully be my next project.

But for my older informants, age, like class, ethnicity and gender, was one of the crucial characteristics that shaped their everyday life and experience, and their position in the labour market. Their memories of being the vanguard of the Soviet working class and of the dramatic drop in their status as workers and Russian speakers shape their experiences as workers and humans in a rapidly changing society. Despite these changes, miners still do their work, the statue of 'Glory To Work' is still on the main square of Kohtla-Järve, and 2046, when the city will celebrate its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, is not so utopically distant anymore.

## **Chapter 2. Into the mine: the nature and speed of work**

### **2.1. Introduction**

Fifteen minutes to seven in the morning, people start gathering in front of the Jõhvi town library. Women in high heels and elegant coats quietly talk to each other, older men with leather flat caps, dark coats, moustache and plastic carrier bags, young men in tracksuits wait and smoke a cigarette. They are waiting for the bus that takes them to 'Estonia', the mine where they work. In April, May and June, the sun is already high, while from the end of October until March it is completely dark in the mornings. Everyone is there well before the bus arrives a few minutes before seven: if you miss it, the next one will only be in four hours, when the next shift goes to work.

A slightly worn-out bus approaches. The bus is already half full of people from the town of Sillamäe, who started their journey more than half an hour ago. The elegant ladies and men with moustaches rush to the bus doors and find a seat. Women in the front of the bus, men in the back. It is too early in the morning to talk to each other much. In the spring and summer months, it is light enough to read, so some do that, while others listen to their music players, stare out of the window or sleep. On Mondays, more people tend to be sleeping, still recovering from the weekend.

The bus leaves the city and drives out to the countryside, past slag heaps that decorate the mining landscapes, past the fields and the forests. In about 25 minutes the bus reaches the little kiosk of the security guard and barrier that is lifted up when the bus approaches. Within another minute, it is in the car park of the mine and everyone rushes off the bus, walking to their workplace, leaving thick cigarette smoke behind for those following them. On the way, one of the mine cats is likely to greet the workers. The cats have their favourite places near some hot water pipes that keep them warm. Miners coming to work sometimes bring them food, in addition to what they get from the leftovers of the canteen, so they look fat and happy.

People go past the other two car parks closer to the mine buildings: they are full of fancy Mercedes and Jeeps, ordinary Volkswagens and Soviet Ladas. Fifteen years ago the car park would have been nearly empty, apart from the few Ladas belonging to the management

of the mine and the most productive and loyal miners. In front of them is the White House, a four-storey building that is actually grey and where the engineers, planners and management work. On the left of it is another four-storey building that contains offices of production departments, changing rooms, the canteen and the lamp station. At the back of the lamp station is the garage for the cars and minibuses that drive underground. Walking past the lamp station, there is the door to the processing plant. From 11am to 8am the factory is in operation and making a lot of noise.

Behind the mine yard and the building with changing rooms, there are three railway lines with little cabins where women load carts with oil shale that comes from the processing plant in a constant flow. Further back, there are heaps of brown oil shale dust that comes from the factory and is kept for later rather than loaded onto train carts immediately. A huge yellow and green excavator with a rusty bucket is shovelling the oil shale from one pile to another. Parallel to the railway, huge trucks are driving up a limestone hill, filled with limestone that they take to the massive limestone heap further down. Standing on top of the heap, one can get wonderful views of the forests surrounding each side of the mine. On a clear day, it is possible to see Kohtla-Järve town, where many miners are from, and a Russian orthodox monastery in a village south of the mine.

In the morning the mine yard is buzzing with people moving in different directions. No wonder, because about a thousand people work at the mine, of whom about 700 work under the ground, in the mine. They work in three shifts, but mornings, when the office staff also come to work, the yard is the busiest. Nearly all the employees here are Russian-speaking; the Estonian language is rarely heard in these morning conversations.

In this chapter, I introduce the space of the 'Estonia' mine and different types of labour on the surface and underground. Based on different types of work and different pay systems, I will explore the different rhythms of work and industrial time in the mine. I will first introduce the overall production process and then have a closer look at women's work in the processing plant and men's work underground. Next, I will explain the piece rate system and have a closer look at miners' relations with technology, the pit and the tempo of work. This chapter aims to set the scene for the following ones, since many of the situations and conversations that are to follow take place in the mine. By following an ordinary workday of men and women in the mine, I aim to capture the rhythm of the everyday work.

## 2.2. The labour process debate

My analysis follows the tradition of the labour process debate in industrial sociology and the factory floor ethnographies that started in the 1970s with Braverman's (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism*. Braverman claimed that the production process was undergoing deskilling and it was a way of achieving further control over workers. Braverman's thesis criticised the earlier ideas of jobs becoming cleaner, easier and more pleasant. *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism* provoked a lot of reactions and case studies that both confirmed Braverman's thesis in the most varied settings and those that criticised the idea of deskilling (Wardell 1999; Zimbalist 1979). Those studies show that the division of labour on the shop floor is never neutral, and focus on the main questions of who – labour or capital – controls the labour process and which are workers' main strategies for fighting control or consenting to it (Burawoy 1982; Thompson 1989). Since capital is always interested in increasing productivity and profit, it always aims for more control over workers. Many studies focus on the assembly line, for example social relations within the piece rate system and workers' control of their earnings (Lamphere 1979). Burawoy (1985) has pointed to different types of factory regimes, despotic and hegemonic, to achieve control over workers. Lee (1998) has taken Burawoy's thesis further and showed how in two factories owned by the same company in China and Hong Kong, two regimes of localistic despotism and familial hegemony exist due to different social organisation of the labour market.

Feminist scholars have shown how assembly line work and technology is not independent of gender and reproduces gender ideologies (Cockburn 1983). Anthropological work such as that of Ong (1987) and Ngai (2005) show how technology is used to discipline women in the labour process. On the other hand, women's informal shop floor culture and ties of solidarity provide a basis for resistance (Lee 1998; Westwood 1984). The labour process debate and case studies have been criticised for being studied in isolation from the more general conflict between social groups and classes. Instead, the labour process should be used to understand the more general development between workers and employers (Brecher 1979). Wardell (1999) believes that the studies of labour process have mostly focussed on the management practices and social and technical relations at the workplace, but have ignored human resources practices and industrial relations. He suggests that for a more conclusive study of the labour process, all these four aspects should be studied as different arenas of struggle for control. Some more recent critique has tried to break out of the Marxist framework of struggle and control, and suggested turning more attention to the

phenomenological aspects and subjective experience of work. As Leitch (1996) points out, the labour process debate has focussed largely on deskilling and has ignored the experience of work. Work in marble-cutting, as she demonstrates, is also about skill, relating to the nature and the material that workers try to control, and producing masculinity. Jamie Cross (2011) suggests re-theorising technology in the labour process. Rather than seeing it as a tool of management control, a stable external force, he suggests looking at skill, embodiment of knowledge and learning to handle and interact with certain tools, and the symbolic meaning that tools have in constructing a particular gendered identity.

Despite having peaked in the 1970s, the questions about the control of the labour process by workers and capital are still important, precisely because they reflect on larger class relationships not only between workers and managers but also between workers themselves. I would, at the same time, like to turn attention to aspects of the labour process that have been analysed less. Many studies note playing with work speed as workers' main instrument of control and resistance. In my analysis, I will go further and pay explicit attention to the rhythm of different work in the mine. Below, I will move to men's and women's work in the mine to try to capture the rhythm of the everyday and later analyse the rhythm in relation to piece rate and time work.

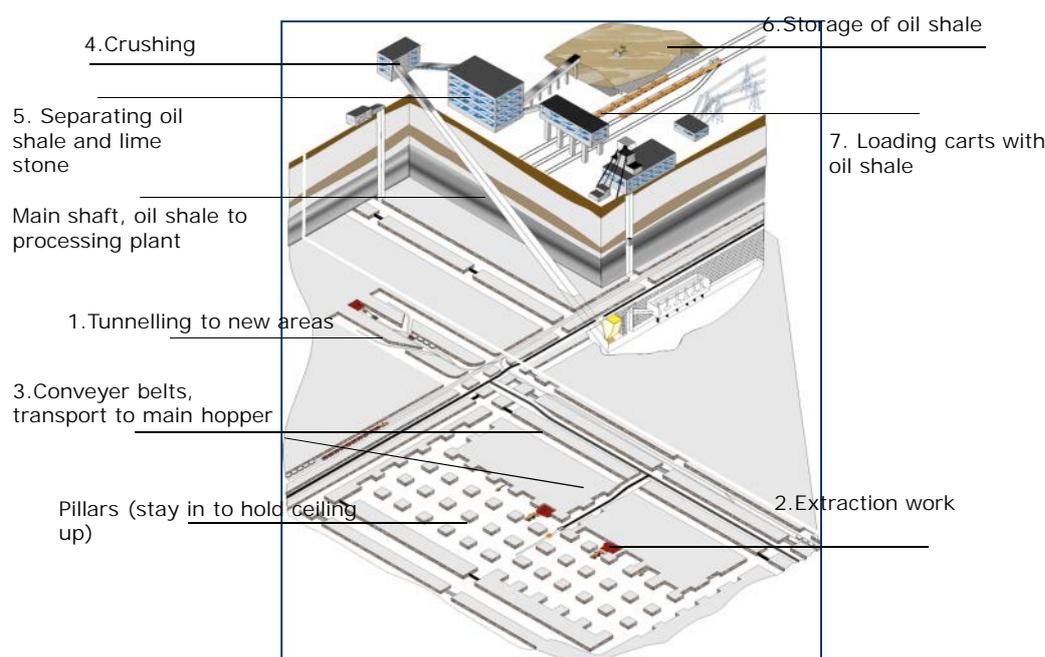
Furthermore, I am going to contribute to the literature on the labour process in the mine. Most of the case studies on the labour process focus on work on the assembly line and factories. Leitch (1996) thinks that mining might be overlooked in the labour process debate because labour process theories assume both uniformity in the development of capitalism and industrialism as well as homogeneity in this development across cultures. She suggests that despite mining communities' centrality in the great narratives about capitalism and class, they might be overlooked in the labour process debate precisely because of their lack of cultural, historical and geographical homogeneity that better characterises shop floor production. I believe that there is a lot of historical variation in terms of workers' control, also in factories (Wardell 1999), but mines are often more difficult places for anthropologists to observe. In terms of management practices, the mine is different from the shop floor because of opportunities of reduced surveillance. Workers in the mines, although also being controlled by management, have more autonomy and freedom due to the spatial layout of mine work compared to the assembly line. Furthermore, the darkness of the mine means that miners can control whether or not they are seen, by turning off their spotlights, while an approaching

foreman is seen from the distance because of the same spotlight (Yarrow 1979). The space of the mine is different from the factory because it requires intimate engagement with the natural environment as well as technology.

### **2.3. The production process in the mine**

The production cycle in the mine is as follows. First, the projects of the expansion of the mine are drawn up and the mine surveyors conduct measurements showing in which direction the new tunnels should go. Then the preparatory work is done – blasting and digging tunnels in the oil shale seam, installing corridors for ventilation, electric lines and conveyer belts and driveways for transport of people. There are two departments in the mine that do the preparation work. This is one of the hardest jobs due to very wet conditions, no infrastructure and a specific smell in the work area before ventilation is installed. Next, after the necessary equipment has been installed, the extraction work starts. The four production departments, each working in their own section of the mine, extract sections of oil shale, using the room-and-pillar method. This method means that miners cut a network of chambers into the seam, leaving pillars of oil shale behind to hold up the roof and avoid the sinking of the ground. Different extraction workers bolt the roofs, drill holes for blasting, blast, and load the material to the conveyer belt, which takes it to the main hopper and up the main shaft. It then reaches the processing plant.

In the processing plant, the material coming up from the mine is prepared by crushing and sieving it, after which the chemical process of separating oil shale and limestone in magnetite suspension takes place. The concentration of limestone is too high in the material mined and therefore its calorific value is too low for consumers. To separate the limestone, the material is put in a separator bath with a suspension of magnetite powder and water. The suspension's specific gravity is higher than that of oil shale and lower than limestone, and during the process, limestone sinks to the bottom while oil shale remains on top. In this way they are separated and sent to consumers or dumped in the nearby limestone dump. The large pieces of oil shale are loaded onto carts that are sent to the oil factory for producing oil, while the carts with fine oil shale go to the power plants where electricity is produced from it. Oil shale that is not immediately needed is kept near the plant and cart loading station, on the ground resembling a hilly beach with brown sand. If one part of the production cycle stops, the whole production process cannot continue. For example, if the processing plant cannot work at its full power, the miners cannot mine as much oil shale to send to the plant.



**Illustration 4. Key areas and processes in oil shale production.**

**The number in front of the activities indicates the order they are done in. The diagram is used with the permission of Eesti Energia Kaevandused.**

## **2.4. Women’s work: processing plant and cart loaders**

The processing plant is a big noisy white building with nearly no windows. It stands to the left of the White House and the building that houses changing rooms and the canteen.

The management of the processing plant consists of the director, his secretary, the plant head engineer, the head electrician, and the mechanic. As the plant is in operation almost 24 hours a day, there are three shifts of other workers. That includes three operators of the main switchboard, two foremen for each shift, mechanics, electricians, and about ten women each shift: the conveyer belt operators (*apparatchiki*) and the plant labourers (*mashinisty*).

The female workers start their day in the changing room, saying hi to the night shift that has just finished, chatting – discussing the news, domestic events, the workday ahead. Occasionally, women get upset with each other because of issues at the workplace, like not leaving the equipment in the correct place, or for personal reasons, and then very loud and fast yelling is heard in not so polite Russian. After dressing in their blue overalls and jackets,

putting headscarves under their helmets to protect their hair, they head to the plant. The plant is the most amazing world of its own. Entering and turning left, there are the offices of the management, with schemes of the production lines, staff lists and other important notices on the wall. But walking forward, there is a high building with a maze of metal staircases leading to different levels of the plant, conveyer belts, machinery, little hidden rooms or glass cabins with operator switchboards. There are colourful telephone kiosks for line operators or mechanics to call the main switchboard. When people come to work in the morning, it is all quiet, the plant is not running, the air is relatively clear and clean.

The shift foreman and the switchboard operator go to the main switchboard room, the *dispecherskaya*, to take over from the previous shift and hear if there have been any problems in the operating of the factory. The line operators go to their little cabin with a big glass window and have breakfast. The plant labourers go and get instructions about where they are needed and what the work plan for the day is. Then, they have their instant coffee and pastries in their tiny room. Then, the cleaning work begins. Because of oil shale dust, the factory needs constant cleaning. Women put on their rubber aprons, take long hoses and each goes to her own allocated area that she always cleans. The metal floor has holes in it so that water can trickle down to lower floors, and it needs to be cleaned before brown mud covers them all. At 11am, the factory starts operating. One after another, all production lines get switched on from the main switchboard where operator Valeria is sitting looking at a mixture of computer screens, blinking green and red lights from the ancient parts of the switchboard and screens with cameras that are placed in crucial places for the oil shale flow.



**Illustration 5. The main switchboard**

**The main switchboard operator, behind, is training one of the *apparatchiki* to operate the switchboard in case a replacement is needed. Although it looks like a lovely and clean work environment, the picture fails to capture the constant noise and vibration coming from the factory.**

Line operators are each switching on and checking their individual conveyer belts. The mine starts sending the material up soon. The transmission belt from the main hopper, where oil shale is stored in the mine, starts working and suddenly the plant is filled with noise caused by many conveyer belts moving pieces of brown rock. They communicate with the *dispecherskaya* and the hopper controlling area about flows of oil shale, and with mechanics if something is not functioning properly. If everything runs smoothly after the conveyers have been switched on, it is more peaceful for a while. The air is full of dust, and earplugs are the only way to block out the unbearable noise. That, of course, makes talking to other people rather impossible too. The *mashinisty* keep washing the plant floors, some of them secretly listening to their mp3 players under large earmuffs. At around 12, it is time for a lunch break. There is a little hidden room by the conveyer belt 1215, and some metal steps climbing up parallel to the tilted conveyer belt lead to a metal door on the left. Natasha unlocks the padlock guarding the door so rusty that no one could suspect it hides anything. We enter the tiny room with a bench and two chairs, an electric heater and a table with a kettle, cups, tea and apple jam.

The plant labourer (*mashinist*), Natasha, is in her fifties, born in Estonia, in the mining town, and went to university in Tallinn to study economics. She had to leave her previous job as an accountant to take care of her daughter after her car accident. Natasha subsequently could not find a job in accounting or economics, being already older and not knowing the Estonian language. After two years of taking quality samples of oil shale in another mine, also a manual job, a new automated technology was introduced and she was made redundant with five other women. “I was lucky enough to find the job,” she says as we drink tea and have fresh bread with homemade apple jam. It was hard at first, but she has gotten used to it, although her fingers ache from physical work. The boss is good, she says: he understands that we are women of a certain age and we cannot work that hard.

This truly is physical work, because in the afternoon we clean oil shale from the surroundings of a conveyer belt that it has fallen off. We use spades and metal spatulas to scrape the oil shale dust and pieces of rock from around the conveyer belt and shovel it back onto it. While Natasha and her colleague Masha, a woman of about the same age, can both lift a whole shovelful of oil shale back onto the conveyer belt which is at chest height, I can barely fill my shovel with one third. They are large women who have acquired the most efficient techniques for doing this work. The miners have sent us wet oil shale again, they complain. That’s why it is so heavy. After an hour’s work, we have a little break. Masha will not let me work with the shovel anymore. You are too young, let us do it, she says. I find out that she was sixteen when she started working in the processing plant, but that does not convince her to give me back the shovel. After the conveyer area is cleaned, the women are supposed to do some cleaning outdoors around the plant. They find however that it is too windy; the wind picks up all the oil shale dust and makes cleaning pointless. “We will do it tomorrow then, we were lucky today”, they say and go back to the little room by the 1215, drink tea and chat until the end of the shift. Earlier, they used to get women’s magazines from Russia to read when they did not have to work, but now these are hard to get, so the women read crime and romance novels they have borrowed from the local library.

Other women to leave the changing room in the morning head to the passageway that leads over the railway tracks to a little building that houses the office of the manager for railway transport, a resting room for the Belaz truck drivers, the office for the manager of the loaders and a little room for the women working at cart loading. The morning shift is the best as it gives them the opportunity to drink tea and chat a little bit before they go to clean

railway tracks, check on the cart-moving equipment and get everything ready for 11 o'clock when the factory starts operating and producing oil shale that the women then load into carts and trucks. There are three jobs; working on the second rail track is the easiest one. Anna, who is in her early fifties, used to work as an engineer and is originally from Siberia, is working here today. This job is loading second-grade oil shale, large pieces of oil shale that go to a chemical factory on carts. She climbs into a little cabin above the rail tracks, equipped with an ancient switchboard, a little desk, a microwave, a radiator for when it gets cold in the winter and two old broken chairs.

The rest of the shift is spent operating the switchboard, turning different switches, counting the number of carts loaded and keeping an eye on the loading process all the time to move the carts forward when they are full. They must not overflow: if they do, there is nothing else to do but get out and take a spade, but they should not be under-filled either. If something happens in the processing plant so that the oil shale is not flowing down, the loaders have to communicate with the switchboard operator in the processing plant. Every hour, she calls the head of the shift in the mine and reports how much has been loaded. In the loading of the second sort, the flow of the stone coming from the processing plant is not as fast; one has a chance to relax a little bit. It is worse when working on the third track, loading thin powdery energetic third-grade oil shale that goes to the power plant for producing electricity. The flow of material is faster in the third grade and the operator has to keep an eye on the carts all the time. On the night shift when there is no one else around, you cannot even go to the toilet because the processing plant keeps working and carts need to be loaded. It gets very hot in the little cabin in the summer, but you cannot open the door because of the oil shale dust flying around. In the winter, it is freezing in the little room. Another loader, Olga, who is in her early forties, has six children, and speaks very good Estonian because she lives in an Estonian-speaking village, goes to the third loading station. There, leftover limestone from the processing plant gets loaded onto the Belaz trucks that take it to the limestone dump less than a kilometre away on the mine's land. Although this job is also very monotonous, at least there are several different Belaz drivers to look at and wave to. It is also the only entertainment for the drivers, who make the same trip to the loading station and to the limestone dump many times during their shift.

A little bit before four, the next shift arrives at the processing plant and the loading stations. It is time to hand over, pack up and get showered and changed before the buses

leave at 4.40. If the boss does not see, the women can sneak off a little bit earlier than four to make sure that they have enough time to shower and get dressed. The women who leave the changing room look completely different to those in the plant – removing the helmet and the headscarf reveals nicely done hair; work clothes are replaced with elegant coats and high-heeled boots, accentuated with make-up and gold jewellery.

I have started with the descriptions of women's work because the mine does not consist only of men working underground, the miners proper, but also numerous low-paid auxiliary workers like the women in the processing plant. They are not a part of the public face of the mine, but their work – low-paid, physical, and hazardous to health – is crucial for the running of the mine. I will return to women's work at the second half of the chapter when I analyse the tempo of work.

## **2.5. Men's work: a day with the First Production Department**

The First Production Department, one of the four production departments in 'Estonia', consists of about seventy people. The white helmet employees are Misharin, a tall man in his mid-fifties who is the head of department, his deputy, the head mechanic, an electrical engineer and four underground foremen. There are six mechanics and the rest are miners. Three other mechanics are not formally on the payroll of the department anymore since restructuring, but still work side by side with the other mechanics. Some of the people, like the deputy head, were appointed to Estonia after studies at the St Petersburg Institute of Mining; others, like the department head, already come from local mining dynasties and finished their education in the nearby mining technical school, which has now been closed. There are three Estonian workers in the department; the others are Russian speakers, like the mechanic Grisha whose mother was a Tatar and his father Estonian, and who enjoyed speaking in Estonian with me because he had learned the language living in an Estonian-speaking village as a child. The department head thinks that his department is running very well because everyone has been there for a long time and they have learned to work together. The workers generally respect him and the deputy and the head mechanic, and they like the deputy best, because he is honest and says everything directly if needed.

A day at the First Production Department looks like this. At about 7.20, the men of the First Production Department gather on the ground floor of the White House, where the offices of the head of the department, the assistant manager and the head mechanic are

situated. Without taking off their coats, and keeping their plastic carrier bags close to them, ten or fifteen miners and mechanics sit down on the long bench for the *naryad*, the instructions for work from the head of the department. The underground foreman of the night shift has already given the manager all the data about the progress of the work of the night shift. The manager tells the miners where the previous shift has left off and in which of the three panel entries the workplace of a particular worker will be, and those who are on miscellaneous jobs are told which particular job needs to be done that day. If someone has done something wrong, mishandled the machines, or wasted too much machine oil or other materials, the head of the department tells him off, in a calm and peaceful manner (which is quite uncommon, especially among the Russian-speaking managers), and the worker usually tries to justify himself a little bit or simply keeps quiet.



**Illustration 6. The *naryad* at the First Production Department**

The head mechanic gives orders – which mining machines need to be serviced or repaired on that particular day – and gives the list to one of the mechanics on a piece of scrap paper. Men also look for new information on the wall: on the stand above the long bench, one can see charts which show when people are on leave and how much leave they have left over, work schedules for the current week and the following one, letters of reprimand signed by the manager of the department for those who have misbehaved at work, notices from the mine in general – the new conduct of ethics that the HR department has just distributed; a notice about a theft of a cable that has recently taken place with a request for all those who know

anything to report to the Head of Production. And finally, the infamous table that shows the units of work done by each man on each working day of the week – the table that helps to estimate the pay at the end of the week, stirs up competition and helps everyone to see who has been working more, and to whom the manager has given some extra work.

When the orders are taken, at around 7.45 at the latest, the men leave the office and go to the changing room. After 15 minutes, they appear in the lamp station, dressed in their work clothes: older blue ones with the logo of the company as it was called before, Eesti Põlevkivi, and some with new grey and green overalls and jackets with the new name and logo of the company, Eesti Energia. Men check in with their chip and go through the turnstile to the lamp station where rows of lamps and miners' rescue boxes are kept. They go to the shelf of the First Production Department, take their lamp, attach it to their helmet and tie the battery of the lamp to their waist. The miners put the metal rescue box, the size of a large coffee cup, on their shoulder, as it should be carried around in the mine all the time, while the mechanics put theirs in the plastic bags where they keep their other valuables. Working in the underground garage, carrying a kilo's worth of dangling equipment would be simply too uncomfortable.

The car park for the underground cars is full of yellow Mercedes minibuses that take miners to their workplaces, ordinary four-seater cars for managers and mine surveyors, and big yellow trucks for taking equipment to the mine. Workers enter from the two doors on the side of the minibus, sit on four benches facing each other and wait for the bus driver to appear. "Vsjje?" Is everyone here? asks the bus driver. It is a long drive to the 14<sup>th</sup> panel where the first department works, about 20 minutes, and to pass the time better, the miners and mechanics play cards. While the minibus leaves the car park, waits in the queue to the mine entrance and drives to the darkness of the mine, you can hear cards thrown onto each other, workers making fun of each other, and cries of disappointment as players lose or win.

In twenty minutes we are there, at the 14<sup>th</sup> panel. A big metal gate is opened and the group of men gets off the minibus and enters their 'headquarters'. We are 60 metres deep, in the dark underground where the walls of the tunnels are decorated with alternating oil shale and limestone seams, brown and white. The heart of the underground quarters of the department consists of the garage and office of the underground foreman.

The office and the garage are temporary and are moved every couple of years, so the construction is not very solid or thorough. The bricks separating the underground foreman's

office from the garage do not block out the voices of the mechanics having their breakfast in the garage on the other side of the wall. Walking from the office to the garage, you can see miners taking their protective gear from their storage spaces – old rusty carriages left over from when there was still a railway in the mine, and heavy robust metal lockers secured with padlocks. Miners take their earmuffs, respirators, and gloves, and drive their mine vehicles from the garage area to their workplaces in the *zaboi*<sup>4</sup> or the conveyor belt. Miners do not have breakfast before starting their working day – they are paid piece rate and they want to spend every moment working in the mine to ensure a decent salary.

Mechanics, whose pay system is time-based, are meanwhile gathering around a long table in the garage. They boil kettles and while the boiling water fills a corner of the garage with steam (it is only 8 degrees), they retrieve their food boxes from their plastic carrier bags. Sandwiches that their wives have prepared for them, hot soup in a thermos flask, yoghurt, fresh garlic for preventing colds, all gets spread on the long table made of rough boards and covered in a dirty oil cloth decorated with Christmas trees and Santa Clauses, barely visible under the layer of oil shale dust, machine oil and the remains of previous breakfasts. Tea, coffee and sugar are already on the table. Some guys find their own cup and spoon in a plastic bag hidden somewhere in the garage to keep the oil shale dust and other miners away. Others rinse the cups already on the table with hot water that they then throw on the garage floor. This is the time for chatting about news in the world, in the region and in the company, and for starting to discuss the work plan for the day. Then soon, one after another, the mechanics leave behind the garage room, the dirty table, last year's Christmas tree in the corner, the shelves with spare parts and the computer corner. The First Production Department is the only one that even has internet access in its underground garage. It does not work every day – in fact, I never saw it working – but they are proud of it nevertheless. Usually the computer is used only for typing up orders of spare parts and playing mahjong solitaire when the day's work is done and there is still time until the yellow Mercedes bus comes to pick people up again.

But now, everyone goes to their workplace in the garage area where mining vehicles are kept. The big mining machines need constant servicing and fixing, so the mechanics are

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<sup>4</sup> *Zaboi* (in Russian) is the area of the mine where tunnelling and excavation works are currently being done, where miners are actively working, extending the tunnel and extracting the material. In English, the area would be called 'coal face' in the case of coal mines, which does not work in the case of oil shale mines, so it is best to use the native term.

busy most of the time. Each has their own type of machines to take care of. The big loading machines, Toros, are the speciality of Mihhail and Evgeni, who change their tyres and ball bearings, make sure the brakes work, and oil the parts that need to be oiled. There is something constantly breaking and needing changing or servicing, because miners need to work as fast as they can to earn their money, and they do not always care about the machine that much. Trouble starts when there is no spare machine to give them – for example, if all Toros are out of order, then miners cannot work for their wages, and mechanics are under a lot of pressure, with grumpy miners on their back. Sasha is an expert on Boomers – face-drilling machines and machines that drill long steel bolts to the mine ceiling to hold it up. Dimitri is in charge of checking the oil levels of the machines, while other mechanics are also in charge of the conveyer belt and the electrical system in their department in the mine.



**Illustration 7. Mechanics repairing an engine in the underground garage**

By the time the mechanics are finishing their breakfast, the underground foreman, Dimitri, a serious older man with a fine moustache, has already started his rounds in the mine. He checks all the chambers where work is done, whether the blasters have already been to certain areas, whether the explosive gas is gone after the blasts, whether it is okay to start supporting the ceiling, taking out the rock and doing other tasks, whether the mine surveyors have marked the directions where the tunnels should go next, and whether the conveyer belt

is working and all miners occupied. He will do another similar round in the afternoon, walking through the dark shafts, through places where water is coming down from the ceiling, where water on the mine floor is nearly up to the edge of his gumboots, where the blasters have been so recently that the gas detector attached to his overalls starts beeping. Only his mining lamp lights the way and illuminates his notebook when he is drawing a plan marking the progress of work in each place. Underground foremen walk so many kilometres a day that they do not usually do any more sports in the evening after their shift.

## **2.6. Miners' work**

There is a certain order to the different work that the miners do. Miners work in three main shifts, each always working on one particular type of machine or activity. First, the roof of the mine needs to be secured. Although pillars of oil shale left in during excavation hold up the roof, layers of rock above the oil shale seam might still fall if not bolted to the roof with metal rods which might be up to two metres high, anchoring the ceiling to the upper rock layers. If the rock above is unstable, wooden logs are also used for extra safety. The roof-bolting is done mechanically by a roof-bolting machine operator drilling a certain number of bolts into the ceiling of each chamber. There are usually three miners on that job per shift, each working on a different panel. Roof bolters get paid individual piece rate by the number of bolts that they fix to the roof every shift. Then it is time for some drilling. First, the large hole-drilling vehicle operator drills six 'cut-holes' the size of a large plate to the back wall of the room. This helps to create extra space for the rock to fall into after the explosion. After that another miner will come and drill small holes for the explosives: about 24 holes, each four metres deep. Both of the drilling jobs create a lot of dust and are extremely noisy, therefore the vehicle operators wear respirators and earmuffs, at least during the day shift when more supervisors and managers are around. The drillers are also paid per number of chambers that they have prepared per shift.

Then it is time for the blasters to arrive. Unlike the previous jobs which are very solitary, there are three blasters in the explosives car. The explosives car, owned by the nearby explosives factory, is manned by one man from the factory and two blasters from the mine. They place explosive shells, the blasting agent and the electric detonators in the blasting holes that the drillers have prepared. The components turn into an explosive only in the drilling holes, and the right amount is inserted based on the data that the blasters have fed into the blasting machine computer. Only the man from the blasting factory has access to the

explosives in the car. To reach the holes higher up, the blaster climbs onto a hydraulic lift that is part of the blasting car which lifts him up to the holes. Each chamber takes about 70 kg of blasting agent. After the chamber is prepared, the explosives car drives away and the blaster goes to a safe distance with his detonator to set up an explosion.

Blasters are asked to prepare a certain number of chambers every shift. Usually two blasters do 20 chambers each and the blasters of the next shift do the same. They get paid the same amount for each piece that they do. Although they are paid piece rate, counting each electric detonator that they use, they try not to rush to get better rates. Blastors have to work carefully and not rush. A blaster can make two mistakes in their life: the first when choosing the profession and the second when they blow themselves up, as the saying goes. Blastors are still considered the elite of the miners. They were under the surveillance of the KGB in Soviet times and are of special interest to the Estonian security police, KAPO, these days. Earlier, they say, they could drive home when they had finished their work for the shift, but now the manager finds them other jobs if they are ready before the end of the shift, so they work at a measured, moderate pace. At the end of the shift, blasters fill in many forms about how much material they have used. After the blasters have done their job and pushed the button of the detonator from a safe distance, some time is needed for ventilation, for the explosive gases to be replaced by fresh air.

When the air has cleared, or in reality shortly before that, the miners who operate large wheeled loaders start their work. They take the mined rock from the chamber and drive it to the scraper conveyer where larger pieces of rock get crushed and transported into the unloading hopper. Back and forth they drive between the chamber and the scraper conveyer. The huge machine fills the whole tunnel and the loaders are going as fast as they can, without turning around. Forward gear, reverse gear back, and forward again. From the scraper conveyers the rock moves to the conveyer belts of the main inclined shaft that takes it to the processing plant.

When the chambers have been emptied and no more work is to be done in that particular direction, the metal bolts are taken out from the ceiling again to be reused. Leaving them in would make the price of oil shale too high. After that, it is forbidden to go there because the ceiling will eventually fall. Taking out the bolts is one of the last few manual jobs in the mine. Using a special tool holding up the ceiling when the rods are removed, the miners unscrew the rods. Even though there might be noisy work taking place nearby, they

are not allowed to use earmuffs because they need to hear if the ceiling is cracking. When they have taken off the rods in one chamber, they move to the next. Other miners' jobs include cutting drainage trenches for water to the rock bottom of the chamber, which is done with the trench cutter machine Ural, the only Soviet machine that is still used in the mine. A normal amount of work per shift would be about 60 metres. Miners also lengthen the conveyer belt and clean the conveyer area.



**Illustration 8. A blaster whistling as a warning for everyone to leave the area before he sets off the blast from his detonator**

The head mechanic and deputy head of department come underground at around 11, to check how the work is going. The mechanic checks which machine parts are needed, whether there is enough oil, how worn the tyres of the machines are, and what needs to be changed. At 11.30, a new shift comes in, blasters and loading machine drivers. The conveyer and the processing plant are switched on at the same time, so this is when the three loaders need to start 'giving the stone' to the plant. At lunchtime, around 12.30, the mechanics gather around their table for another round of tea and sandwiches, jokes and chat. Sometimes someone has brought some newspapers or construction shops' advertisements with special offers that then get discussed, sometimes the mechanics talk through some current events like the changing traffic rules or the potential restructuring that might take place the following year. Some miners who are on miscellaneous work nearby, or who are waiting for their machine to be fixed, join the mechanics for lunch.

Then work continues. Sometimes the mechanics' work for the day is done before the bus is there, and they gather in the garage for a chat, to play with the computer, or to clean and organise some tools and spare parts. Miners who have finished their shift leave the *zaboi* and come to the underground foreman to report how much they have done. The underground foreman notes it down. At around 3.30pm the yellow bus comes, bringing a new shift to work. Twenty minutes later, the bus approaches the surface. In spring, summer and early autumn, when it is still light outside, it is quite a shock when the mine door opens and the sun and blue sky are visible after eight hours of being in the dark. In winter, it is already dark outside and the miners will not see any daylight until the weekend. Everyone gets off the bus, washes the brownish oil shale mud off their boots in the underground buses' parking area, puts the lamps and rescue boxes back in their place to charge, and checks out by touching the turnstile with their personal chips. They go to the changing room to take a shower, change and head to their car or the bus that takes them back to one of the mining towns where they live. Many miners do not want to wait another minute in the mine territory, and drive home in their private cars, while other, more cost-conscious workers wait for the company bus.

## **2.7. Piece rates, Estonian style: the system of remuneration in 'Estonia'**

Piece wage, as Marx observed, "tends to develop on the one hand that individuality and with it the sense of liberty, independence and self-control of the labourers, on the other their competition with each other" (cited in Burawoy 1982). Don Filtzer (1992:88) suggests that for the Soviet elites to preserve their power in the Stalinist period, they had to maintain political control over labour which was achieved by atomisation of workers by encouraging individual competition against each other through individual piece rates and individual record-breaking. The regime promoted deskilling in the labour process, meaning breaking down the labour process into small, repetitive tasks, and impoverishing the curricula of vocational schools similarly to the processes observed in the West by Braverman (1974). This increasing atomisation and individualisation in the general atmosphere of fear and economic shortage weakened workers' solidarity. It allowed workers only individual forms of action like "absenteeism, insubordination, job-changing, and – what eventually became the most important of all – by controlling the speed and quality of their work" (p. 225).

Despite their atomisation, workers maintained control over the labour process due to the flexibility and autonomy needed to organise production in a shortage economy. Workers, and machine-tool operators in particular, had to make their own tools or components when they were in short supply, or redesign a job when the drawings were faulty or the required materials were not on hand (Filtzer 1992). This required substantial expertise about materials, technologies and designs. This opportunity to show expertise and skill gave more power to skilled production workers in key industries, compared to women and auxiliary workers (Ashwin 2000).

Burawoy compares the piece rate systems in the capitalist factory in the US (1982) and a socialist factory in Hungary (1988), and shows that although the socialist system is supposed to make workers lazy and slow, this is actually not the case (Burawoy and Lukács 1992). In the capitalist factory, workers were guaranteed a comfortable base salary that they got even if they did not perform up to standard. In the socialist factory in Hungary, workers were paid only piece rate with no guaranteed minimum wage, and had to work very hard to earn a basic salary that they could afford to live on. If a worker in a capitalist factory did 70% of the work he was expected to do, he was still paid 100%, while the socialist worker who did 70% actually got paid for 70%, and it was impossible to meet the living costs in this case. The same observations were confirmed by Hungarian dissident Miklós Haraszti (1977), who critically describes his gloomy personal experience in the Red Star Tractor Factory. In the Hungarian factory in the 1970s, the production norm was so high that, following the work and health and safety instructions, it was still impossible to reach 100%. Furthermore, even reaching 100% did not guarantee a living wage, and workers had to invent their own shortcuts in production to earn enough (see also Lamphere 1979; Shapiro-Perl 1979 for shortcuts).

In 'Estonia', the system of pieces, or '*palka*', had changed very little over the last thirty years. After every shift, the miner went to the underground foreman and reported how many pieces he had done. Some jobs were counted strictly on the basis of individual work. For example, a miner cutting trenches into the mine floor completed one piece after cutting 30 metres of trench. A normal amount of work per shift was about 60 metres or two pieces. The miners removing bolts from the ceiling, working in pairs, would remove bolts from a maximum of six chambers during one shift, resulting in about three pieces per shift. How much work one piece meant for a driller, blaster, or loader was fixed. For some miners

working on machines, the number of pieces was divided by everyone who worked on the same machine. For example, the five drivers of loading machines added up their pieces and divided them by five, each getting the average of their collective work. Miners got a bonus that was based on three indicators: fulfilling the plan, quality of work (including the amount of explosives used) and no work-related accidents in the whole department. The head of department could add a coefficient to the piece. For example, if miners were working in particularly wet or otherwise difficult conditions, they received 10-20% more for the one piece. Their pay could be reduced if they broke some equipment due to carelessness.

Mechanics of the same department were on a fixed rate of 2.64 for each full workday that they had done, plus a bonus decided by the head mechanic and head of department based on performance. The price of one piece became clear only at the end of the month when the head of department calculated how much oil shale had been produced in the department. The piece rate was based on a ton of oil shale produced. During my fieldwork in the department, the price of one unit was between 19 and 22 euros. For example, October 2010 was a full working month with 21 workdays. If a miner did on average three pieces a day, his salary would be around 1,386 euros. In addition to that, the bonus can be maximum 20% of the salary, adding another 277 euros, totalling 1,657 euros. The mechanic's basic pay would be  $21 \text{ days} \times 2.64 \times 22 \text{ (price of piece)} = 1,220 \text{ euros}$ , plus bonus. The income tax in Estonia is flat rate 21% for everyone. In comparison, female auxiliary workers were earning around 450 euros.

Individual competition among workers, such as that referred to by Filtzer (1992), also continued. In the First Production Department, there was an unwritten rule that no one should have a higher salary than the two wheeled loader drivers, Zhuravlyov and Podolsky. The head of department was legally obliged to display the number of pieces worked by each member of staff every day. There was a table on the notice board of the department office, showing how much work each worker had done every working day of that month. This meant that miners could keep an eye on their own results and see how much they had done, although they did not know yet exactly how much money it would result in. I never saw this live, but several miners complained to me that conflicts emerged with the two miners when they thought that someone else was getting too much. Peeter, especially, whose name was just before Zhuravlyov's on the list, was constantly getting grief from Zhuravlyov, who thought that Peeter's piece rates should be reviewed because he was getting too much. The only people

who had to earn a lot, according to the loaders, were other loaders because their piece rates were divided between them.

The system of remuneration in 'Estonia' was a hybrid of the socialist and capitalist piece rate systems that Burawoy described. On one hand, it guaranteed an income to miners even when there was little work, as per the system that Burawoy observed in a capitalist firm, but motivated fast work because piece rates allow significantly greater earnings than the base salary. The system, on the other hand, applied a lot of pressure on those whose earnings were shared between shifts, and caused competition and envy among executors of different jobs whose earnings were not shared. When a manager allocated an extra shift or a higher quota to a particular worker, this also caused envy and dissatisfaction among others. Furthermore, it caused tensions between time-waged mechanics and piece-waged miners, as miners thought that mechanics worked too slowly and were paid too much.

Explaining the creation of a particular type of worker in the neoliberal era, Jason Read (2009:30) writes,

The contemporary trend away from long term labor contracts, towards temporary and part-time labor, is not only an effective economic strategy, freeing corporations from contracts and the expensive commitments of health care and other benefits, it is an effective strategy of subjectification as well. It encourages workers to see themselves not as "workers" in a political sense, who have something to gain through solidarity and collective organization, but as "companies of one."

It seems to me that in characterising neoliberalism, Read ignores the mechanics of the Fordist production process and the Fordist working class, who are assumed to be unified and capable of collectively organising. Emphasising the characteristics of neoliberalism ignores the atomisation effect that piece work had on Fordist workers, who at least in the Soviet Union formed 'companies for one' before neoliberal management ideas had even been heard of. Currently, the casualisation of labour (discussed more in Chapter 6) further enforces individualisation, but as Lenin took the piece rate system over from Taylor, the new capitalist management of the mining company was happy to take over the piece rate system from socialism, building on the tradition of one-man companies while adding the capitalist competition in the labour market. "Everyone is on his own. Alone he pursues a daily battle against machines and time. Defeat cannot be shared; how could we want a common success? The worker on piece-rates is accountable only for himself, for his successes or failures," Haraszti (1977:66) wrote about 1970s Hungary. Solidarity with mates was impractical, since everyone was competing for better jobs and needed to get along with the foreman. In a

situation where not even a basic wage was guaranteed, workers were divided and knew little about their comrades in the factory (Haraszti 1977). In capitalism, this competition continues.

Yarrow (1979), who describes the labour process in coal mining in West Virginia, USA in the 1970s, notes that since the 1920s the focus had shifted from controlling the miner with piece rates to controlling the work process in general. The shift from paying miners by ton to paying them by the hour resulted in contradictory processes of rationalisation of the production process and reduced control over miners. The company tried to resume their control by hiring more supervisors, banning wildcat strikes and increasing job fragmentation. Miners, in their turn, could use slowdowns in the situation of limited surveillance opportunities, and appeal to health and safety regulations. Despite deskilling, mines remained dangerous places to work where specific knowledge was needed, thus the managers could not send untrained scabs to work in the mines. This was also why wildcat strikes remained an effective way for miners to prevent dismissals, disciplinary actions or changes in the work process. The company tried to reduce miners' power by introducing incentive bonuses and creating divisions based on statuses and seniority of miners. Because of the integrated labour process where everyone's work was needed and miners depended on each other, and organisation of work where miners have breaks and lunch together to talk to each other, Yarrow believes that it was still hard to fragment miners and destroy their unity.

Yarrow's points about the integrated production process, relatively large autonomy, and highly skilled nature of miners' jobs, are all valid in the context of Estonian mines. As I show in Chapter 7, miners use slowdowns and wildcat strikes to enforce their demands. There is however one large difference. While American miners were time workers who could afford to have lunch together and felt that they relied on each other's work, Estonian miners are piece workers in competition with each other, and thus have far less solidarity and are easier to control by the management. Next, I will introduce the means of control over labour process that miners still had. For this, it is important to note miners' special relationship with technology and the pit.

## **2.8. Of machines and men**

I would have never paid so much attention to the machines if miners had not constantly raised the topic, not only within the context of exploitation, but also of skill, tempo, and the changing meaning of work. In an ambitious project bringing together the

archaeology, social history and anthropology of mining, Knapp (1998:3) notes that anthropologists, in contrast to archaeologists, pay too little attention to material culture, such as technology. “Technology is not simply a scientific force but also a social process that involves human behaviour and negotiation, a complex ideology, and the extraction and manipulation of resources—human and material.”

For miners, technology signified a story of skill and reciprocity. Miners working in ‘Estonia’ loved to emphasise their knowledge of the inside of the mine and the mine machinery. Miners talked about their machines and their own skill in handling the machines with great pride. Many of them were happy to let me try drilling, loading or roof-bolting and operating their machines, to show how complex it was and how much skill was needed to do their jobs, which initially seemed easy. The Hero of Socialist Labour, Aksel Pärtel, who started implementing mechanised mining machinery in the 1970s, described a capricious machine sent from a Soviet factory that made equipment for coal mines. It took him and his brigade weeks of work to rebuild the machine so that it was suitable for oil shale mining. Nevertheless, the machine had the habit of breaking down just as important officials were visiting. Over time, Pärtel and his colleagues mastered the stubborn machine and even when new and better machines were introduced, the old one still remained the most comfortable and dearest to them (Pärtel 1972). Many older men, who had to invent new ways to make the machinery function better, love their work for the creativity that improving machines allows. For example, in a local newspaper interview, the head mechanic of the mine was explaining how to invent something new, and that improving the repair and maintenance of mechanisms is his real vocation. He added that if he was not so attached to the machines, he would be a doctor and repair people the same way as he now repairs machines.

Besides being skilled with the machines, miners emphasise their skills related to the natural environment. Kamoche and Maguire claim that a particular ‘pit sense’ stems from the everyday embodied experience of working in the mine (2011). Walking around the wet tunnels, miners and foremen were always pointing out dangerous ceilings, warning me not to go too close to the mine walls but to keep to the centre of the tunnel, and showing me the best ways to hide from the rushing Toros. At the same time, the way post-Soviet miners talked about the machine and the pit was different from the way Bolivian miners assign supernatural forces to the pit (Nash 1979) or the way Leitch’s (1996) marble miners in Italy talk about fighting with nature and imagining the mountain as alive. It seems to me that in ‘Estonia’, the

Soviet miners had already conquered the space with science and technology, the ghosts had been exorcised, the mine was a realm under the power of humans. If something happened, there was an engineer, a geologist or a careless worker to blame. Ceilings fell down because of geological faults or the wrong technical specifications for the roof bolter, rather than due to moral misdoings or hungry supernatural beings. One time when Boris laughed in a particularly loud and scary way, his high pitch travelling across the echoing mine tunnels, it seemed that it was possible that ghosts really lived in the mine. Other miners quickly explained that it was only Boris with his famous laugh, and shrugged their shoulders when I told them about the supernatural powers inhabiting the mines of Bolivia.

In addition to skill and ‘pit sense’, the machine was also the feeder of the miner and helped him to earn his living, working piece rate. Therefore, miners pushed the machines as much as they could, occasionally breaking cables or other parts in the rush to earn more money. The miners also thought that the underground servicemen were never repairing the machines fast enough and that it was terribly unfair when part of their salary was cut when they had repeatedly broken the machine. They were bitter about the wearing out of the machines, something they expressed sometimes quite visibly. For example, a miner had written “*Bez tormazov* (Without brakes)”, on his loading machine, which had a problem with brakes wearing out and not being as sensitive as they used to be in the beginning. Besides being the mechanised extensions of bodies to which the workers apply embodied skills (Mollona 2005), they seemed to have a mind of their own, which the worker needed to tame to make the machine cooperate. The machine could be a miner’s best teammate or the unreliable comrade, breaking down in the middle of the greatest rush.

## **2.9. Tempo of work**

If you were to enter the mine on a random afternoon, and look at how men work, the tempo of the work would really seem daunting to you as an onlooker. The loading machines, Toros, drive along the tunnel connecting the *zaboi* and the conveyer belt at an incredible speed. Seeing the big machine driving towards you, its bucket full of oil shale, pieces falling off, falling under its wheels and then bouncing off in every direction, the machine kicking up dust, you would want to be careful and stay out of their path – especially when they are driving back from the conveyer belt, because they drive in reverse gear, without seeing what is behind them. In this section, I analyse the tempo of work in the mine.

Looking at the rhythms of gift-giving, Bourdieu (1977) focuses on the time between a gift and a counter-gift. Reciprocating too early or too late can lead to the breakdown of the social relationship. “Even if an action is heavily ritualised, as in the dialectic of offence and vengeance, there is still room for strategies which consist of playing with time, or rather tempo, of the action.” It is even truer in less strictly regulated situations where agents have many possibilities of manipulating the tempo of the action, “holding back or putting off, maintaining suspense or expectation, or on the other hand, hurrying, hustling, surprising and stealing the march....” (p6). In other words, even in the most stringent social situations, the agent can play with tempo for his own benefit. I use Bourdieu’s tempo similarly to Michael Herzfeld (2004) who, looking at artisans’ or chefs’ work, sees it as rhythms of bodily movement, the artisan’s control of the rhythms of work to cultivate a display of unhurried competence. Herzfeld focusses on the aspects of playing with time as a strategy used in the production of objects.

Time and motion studies experts, managers and underground foremen usually told me that miners had no way of controlling the production process, because all parts of it were inextricably connected to each other, and for the mine to work, all tasks had to be done on time. I was also told that due to the piece rate system, miners always wanted to work more, and came and asked for extra work when they had finished something. But in reality, in a tight environment regulated by the production process and pay system, there was still room for playing with the tempo.



**Illustration 9. Drilling holes**

Miners calculated their speed carefully. If they did too much, the management would see that they were doing well and would reduce piece rates or warn them by decreasing the monthly bonus. Neither could miners work fast until they had done a certain number of pieces and then slack off, because the underground foreman would then encourage them to work more or find them another task, often some manual work which they hated. Therefore, it was important to calculate how quickly to work. It needed some experience and careful calculating to balance the good salary and keeping the piece rates as they were. Even if a miner wanted to take it easy and do less, maybe on a Monday after a weekend of drinking, it had to be done at a measured constant slow pace, so as not to be caught by the underground foreman. A common strategy was to work hard during the first half of the month to ensure a decent salary, and then relax a bit but to keep a certain tempo so that no one could assign any additional work outside the miner's own task on a particular machine. The act of balancing, controlling the micro-tempo, was what miners had control over.

Michael Burawoy (1982) shows how in a factory in Chicago workers are drawn into the game of 'making out' where they try to achieve the production rate over 100% to receive better pay and compete against each other. An important aspect of the game is working faster on an easier job where it is possible to build up a 'kitty', and working slower on more difficult jobs where achieving the norm requires too much effort, and therefore to settle for the guaranteed basic wage. Similarly, Haraszti (1977) describes good jobs that allowed 'looting', taking shortcuts in production that allowed speeding up the production. In contrast, there were bad jobs where cutting corners did not produce an effect of speeding up and earning a good number of pieces. In this case, machine operators worked slower. Since the miners of 'Estonia' always worked on the same machines, their speed did not depend on the particular assignment. But similarly to piece workers in factories, they regulated their tempo based on the particular time of the month and the day, pitching the pace between good salary and reduced piece rate.

In the case of time workers, the unhurried pace used to be common in the Soviet period. In his book *Men, Stone and Machines* (1972), the Hero of Socialist Labour Aksel Pärtel, who worked in a mine near Kohtla-Järve, describes his problems with workers who were not paid a piece rate but a fixed salary based on time. When experimenting with the new mechanised way of mining, a brigade of five time workers was sent to him to set up a conveyer belt.

They knew how to work at exactly one tempo and balance on the edge that differentiates idling from the kind of work which has a small but perceivable benefit for society. The first thing they did at the start of the shift was have a thorough rest. It is not easy to sleep with eight degrees and underground dampness. One has to have very strong health or be completely drunk. The second option was not likely. It was not possible that all the members of the brigade were pissed every morning. One tipsy guy might somehow sneak into the mine under the cover of others, but not a whole bunch. Therefore, we can deduce that they had strong health and their bodily functions had adapted to the underground conditions overly well.

Studying work processes in the 1960s Soviet Union, Filtzer (1992) refers to surveys that indicate considerable time losses in the production process. The miners of Kuzbass regularly lost 25-30% of their work time due to work stoppages. This was due to faulty design of machinery which meant that, for example, coal-cutting combines were not working for 50% of the work time, because to move the machinery to a new place in the seam, it had to be dismantled. Despite this, combines were still more productive than older ways of mining, and unmechanised jobs were the main reason for low productivity. In Donbass, “workers operating coal combines lost 40 to 60 minutes out of each six-hour shift waiting for roofing jobs to be completed, at the same time as auxiliary workers – who made up more than half of all coal workers – themselves stood idle from 40 to 50 per cent of shift time” (p. 139). Lost work time was made up by storming, which in turn damaged the machinery and caused downtime in production.

While some of the production time was lost due to inefficiencies in technology, poor organisation of the labour process and shortages of material, time loss also occurred because workers regulated their own time: they showed up late, left work early, and took long breaks during the work time. Workers on more mechanised operations were held up by auxiliary workers whose work was more labour-intensive and who had greater freedom to regulate the speed with which they worked (Filtzer 1992). In an attempt to speed up work, socialist competitions, rewards for labour heroes and record-breaking brigades were used to motivate men to work quickly in the Soviet period. Shortages of raw materials and spare parts caused rushes at the end of every month (Ashwin 1999; Burawoy 1988; Dunn 2005; Müller 2007; Verdery 1996).

The mechanics’ workdays in ‘Estonia’ were usually busy and fast but due to fixed salary, they could afford breaks, meals, occasional joking and chatting. They knew exactly how much time a routine job should take them. If no unplanned emergency repairs were needed, they had enough time for both work and leisure. If something happened to a machine,

a conveyer belt or electrical system, the steady rhythm of mechanics' work was broken. They needed to rush to repair and stay for an extra shift if a repair was urgently needed. However, during my fieldwork, some mechanics were transferred to another department formally, to cut their salary. They still kept working in the same department side-by-side with their colleagues, but for a smaller salary. To express their anger and dissatisfaction, these men were doing the bare minimum they could, as slowly as possible, slightly reminiscent of Pärtel's time workers from the 1970s.

Women's work in the processing plant was usually less rushed, characterised by surges of hard physical work punctuated by breaks for meals and chats. The everyday routine could be broken when the processing plant was not working properly and repair works were needed or the weather outside did not permit outdoor work. While miners got frustrated when the production process was halted, because they could not earn, the women were happy about their extended breaks. The rhythm of the work depended on the shift. The morning shift was quiet until 11am when the factory started operating. The night shift was sleepy and monotonous. For the cart loaders, it depended on which loading station they were at. The fast flow of oil shale on the third railway line did not slow down and needed constant attention throughout the shift, while the second track was slower and more relaxed.

In his classic work on industrial time, E.P. Thompson (1967) claims that modern machine production and capitalism introduced new ways of perceiving time and new ways of organising work discipline. In the pre-industrial world, time was task-oriented, dictated by the rhythms of nature. Intense labour alternated with long periods of idleness, and no strict line was drawn between work and life. New industrial time, together with puritan and bourgeois ideologies that encouraged the use of every minute, new stricter time discipline and a stricter differentiation of work and life, gradually changed the life of the 18<sup>th</sup> century English. As in factory production, a greater synchronisation of tasks was needed; this required a new approach to time. As people were not working for themselves but were employed by others, there was a shift from task-orientation to timed labour, making a distinction between employer's time and private time. This also resulted in a stricter division between workplace and home, work and leisure, public and private spheres of life.

Observing the rhythm and speed of work in 'Estonia', we can see different work being disciplined by the clock to a different extent. The beginning and end of shifts are strictly regulated and separate home and work for everyone, as the buses that leave on time

bring workers to the mine. If you miss the bus, you are in trouble. The *naryad*, at which work tasks are allocated, starts when buses have brought workers in, and then miners have to get ready for the underground bus that carries them to the workplace. Time workers were recently given chips to register their leaving and entering the workplace as well. Besides, there were managers who kept an eye on workers and reported even to other managers when they saw their workers in clean clothes before the shift had finished.

During the shift, piece workers who theoretically have the power to stop the whole production process if one part of the chain refuses to work, are the most tied to the clock and to the fast tempo of their work. Money motivates them to work fast, without taking any breaks. Nevertheless, they are left with the small strategies of slowing down and speeding up when they please. Time workers both on the surface and underground cannot spend their time sleeping as they did in the Soviet period. Impatient miners, who want their repairs quickly, leave mechanics little time for rest. Working more slowly or taking breaks is still their way of showing who is in control. Women, whose work in the processing plant is less mechanised and less crucial to the overall flow of the production process, are more task-oriented: there are certain things they need to do every day and when they feel like it, they can take breaks. The more mechanised and central to the production process the work, the less time constraints there are. Also the tempo of work is faster in the core production than for auxiliary workers. The tempo, besides being faster, is also more even and rhythmic for miners whose whole workday flows at the same speed. Nevertheless, as machinery, conveyer belts or equipment in the processing plant regularly break down, even the most monotonous, rhythmic work is often disturbed by breaks in the process.

Piece rates also mean a struggle over the control of technology and health and safety. This struggle was prominent also in the Soviet era, particularly in the record-breaking brigades. The 'fast-tunnelling brigades', those tunnelling more than 140 metres of new tunnels a month, had an agreement with the health and safety inspector that on the record-breaking months the inspector would not visit them. "At this kind of tempo, it was impossible to follow the health and safety rules," wrote one of the staff of the Sompa mine (Kaup and Nugis 2008). "There was even a quiet agreement that on this month the inspection would not visit the brigade of Rooden. Nevertheless, 545 metres was tunnelled without accidents. People worked on the borderline of risk and clearly sensed the border that they could not transgress." On the one hand, mine managers felt the pressure to fulfil the quota and

guarantee good bonuses for themselves and their workers. On the other hand, if a serious injury or death occurred in the mine, it was higher-up managers who were punished – they were forced to leave their position and even imprisoned. Therefore, for both workers and the engineer-managers, ignoring the health and safety rules meant fine balancing of the abundant bonuses and honour and risking one's life or position. The general consensus was that breaking certain rules was acceptable but this had to be done without seriously endangering lives.

Now, as well, miners' work is about balancing how much one can take out of the machines versus how much to follow health and safety rules, *tekhnika bezopasnosti*. It is the set of rules that miners have to follow to work without putting their own or others' lives in danger. They include basic ones like wearing a helmet and life saver, not going to certain areas where loose rock might fall, not smoking, and operating the machinery according to the rules. There are some rules that are accepted as reasonable and if someone has an accident after ignoring them, other miners say that the person's own stupidity or carelessness was to blame. There are however rules that no one follows; the most common one is ignoring the ban on smoking underground. To drive the wheeled loader Toro back to the *zaboi*, according to *tekhnika bezopasnosti*, one would have to turn around the machine to drive it back. This would however slow down the loading process considerably, and no one does that. One young miner who did was forced to leave his job rather quickly, as the salary of loaders is divided between everyone on the shift and the experienced miners did not want to see a drop in their salary because of some slow person who stuck to the rules.

Similarly, blasters are supposed to mark the area of blasting with plastic cones to forbid anyone to enter the area. "When there is no management around, to be honest, I simply do not use the cones, because it takes time to lay them out and pick them up again later, but I am paid by the amount of blasting that I do in my shift..." a blaster confessed. Such rules are ignored mostly to speed up the production process. The balance between earnings and adherence to health and safety rules is something that miners feel they need to have control over.

The best way to find out when health and safety rules were ignored was to take the film camera to the mine. Miners were not happy to be filmed when they were breaking the rules but were happy to explain how it saved them time and how their managers and health and safety inspectors were completely aware of these processes. Despite the fact that to

produce profit for the company and earn a higher salary, miners were putting their own health at risk, it was important to them to at least feel as if they were in charge of decisions about which rules to ignore and which risks to take, hence also controlling the tempo.

## **2.9. Conclusion**

This chapter introduces the spaces of the mine. The workdays of ordinary men and women can be read in the framework of the labour process debate where different management mechanisms allow different amounts of control on the surface and underground, in time and piece waged jobs. Piece wage is one of the most powerful ways for the management to control miners. The tool for extreme atomisation of workers that was fully developed in the Soviet period was taken over by the post-1991 management of the company, who, in a situation in which high unemployment was added to the piece rate system, could continue to take advantage of the atomised labour force.

I have attempted to show with my description that the labour process in the mine is more complex and varied than just the struggle over control of the production process. It is also about underground workers' special relationship with the pit and the machinery. It emphasises their skill and masculinity and highlights the contrast with women's work on the surface, which is less mechanised (elaborated more in Chapter 4).

The pace of time workers is usually slower than that of piece workers, but nevertheless not similar to the slacking that was possible in the Soviet times. It is less regular, with surges of work punctuated by long leisure breaks, reminiscent more of E.P. Thompson's (1967) task-oriented time than industrial time. The piece workers' rhythm is more regular as they have to adjust their pace of working to keep their piece rate the same. Nevertheless, they have opportunities to play with the micro-tempo of their work, not working as fast to bust their piece rates, working slower towards the end of the month or on difficult mornings, but doing it in an even tempo. This playing with tempo requires intimate knowledge of not only the machinery, as in factory settings, but also of geology, the particulars of the mine that miners acquire only over years of working in the dark underground tunnels. This intimate knowledge of the rock and the machine allows miners to feel that they are part of the narrative of progress where the natural environment has been conquered by humankind and miners are the rulers of work tempo in their own small, precise and limited ways.

Women have no control over their fixed salary. In the loading department, the constant flow of oil shale also steals their opportunity for playing with tempo. Sneaking off slightly before the shift has finished, to ensure they have time to shower, is the most they can do while loading. Women in the processing plant cannot control their salary but can control their pace. Both groups of women have an easier time when the factory conveyer belt is broken, or it is too windy to work outside, if the production process is not functioning properly. Their task-oriented time is synchronised with the punctuated time of the production process. Men, in contrast, have their power of time and wage management taken from them if the production process is not functioning smoothly. In the next chapter, I will link the questions of production process and the broader issues of class relations and connect the work of miners to that of the wider society.

## **Chapter 3. We are all miners? Changes in ethnic and class relations**

### **3.1. Introduction**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of Estonia's independence in 1991 the status of Russian speakers and workers, including miners, was reversed from being on top of the societal hierarchy to being on the bottom, both in terms of prestige and material conditions. Generally, this was related to the restructuring of the economy and the new neoliberal ideology that valued entrepreneurship and saw manual workers as backward, and to the new nationalist romanticism that saw Russian speakers as occupiers. The story of those 'occupiers' is however more complex, as are the ethnic relations in the everyday work and neighbourhood. They were shaped by the projects of the Soviet and post-Soviet state, but also expressed in ways that highlighted the specificity of miners and the working class in general. In this chapter, I explore the ethnic relations in the mining area. I argue that the ethnic question is much more complex than 'Estonians' versus 'Russians' and that in contemporary Estonia, ethnicity often overlaps with class. I will first introduce some theoretical literature on ethnicity, class and nationalism. Then I will show the complex history of migration to Ida-Virumaa, and ethnic relations in the Soviet period and Perestroika. The second half of the chapter concentrates on ethnic relations in the mining area and their relationship with miners' class position.

### **3.2. Ethnicity, class and Estonia**

In my analysis, I use what Richard Jenkins (2008) calls the basic anthropological model of ethnicity. The model is based on the classical model of Fredrick Barth. Barth (1969) emphasises that ethnic groups are maintained through the process of boundary-creation with other groups by emphasising certain cultural features and social actions. In other words, it is not cultural content or differences that distinguish one ethnic group from another, but certain cultural differences that the groups use to make boundaries. These cultural differences do not need to be significant and can change over time, but nevertheless act as tools of boundary-making. Barth also emphasises that these boundaries persist despite, or even because of, interaction with other ethnic groups. Jenkins' model consists of four points: firstly, ethnicity is a matter of 'cultural' differentiation (bearing in mind that identity is always relational, and always a dialectic between similarity and difference). Secondly, ethnicity is a matter of

shared meanings – ‘culture’ – but it is also produced and reproduced during interaction. This point can be understood through Barth’s idea of boundary work where understandings of the ‘cultural stuff’ of a particular group are created in interaction with other groups. I see this as not only a tool for defining one’s own group but also a tool for exclusion of the others. Thirdly, ethnicity, rather than being fixed or unchanging, is, depending on situation and context, to some extent variable and manipulable. To emphasise further the point about cultural construction and the historical situated-ness of ethnicity, I would use Stuart Hall’s (1996) words. He talks about black experience, but this understanding of ethnicity can be extended to other ethnic groups. He states,

If the black subject and black experience are not stabilized by Nature or by some other essential guarantee, then it must be the case that they are constructed historically, culturally, politically—and the concept which refers to this is ‘ethnicity’. The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual. (p. 447)

I am not emphasising only the constructivist and discursive side of ethnicity, but rather pointing out in my analysis that the meanings of ethnicity change in history. The way that ethnic categories are represented forms a politically and socially significant constitutive, which is formative and not merely reflexive or expressive, or after-the-event (Hall 1996). Finally, according to Jenkins (2008), ethnicity is both collective and individual, externalised in social interaction and the categorisation of others, and internalised in personal self-identification. Here Jenkins emphasises the dialectic of ethnic self-identification by a particular group and categorisation of that group by others. Similar to my model of class, I see ethnicity as dynamic, historically situated and relational to other groups. Its political significance, like that of class, can be discursively emphasised or downplayed in different periods and circumstances and its consequences are more real than changing representations.

For my analysis, it is not only important to highlight the similar features of class and ethnicity, but also their overlap. It has been noted recently that anthropologists have paid relatively little attention to the relationship between ethnicity, on the one hand, and class and stratification, on the other (Jenkins 2008). Nevertheless, it has been increasingly recognised that understanding this interrelationship is important in understanding socio-political conflict (LiPuma and Meltzoff 1997). One anthropologist who has looked at the interrelationship between ethnicity, class and gender, in a Trinidadian factory, is Kevin Yelvington (1995). He presents a typology of the most common approaches to dealing with the three categories

together. The most common one, he notes, is the 'additive approach', where the three characteristics are added to one another, for example, black Caribbean women are exploited on the basis of their gender, then colour, which is overlapping with class. The second approach, which he also finds problematic, is the approach that considers gender, ethnicity and class as coequal variables. In this approach, all three are seen as socially constructed but separate; they affect each other but are given equal weight. The third approach looks for an underlying phenomenon that determines both ethnicity and class. In this approach, authors either focus on one aspect in particular or say that one, e.g. gender, is more salient than the others in determining social action. This approach often reduces race relations only to class relations or lumps them together rather than seeing how they each influence the person but in an interlinked way.

Yelvington claims that there are two main issues with the three approaches: first, that they try to fix once and for all the relationship between ethnicity and class and gender. This makes these approaches ahistorical. Instead, the relationships between ethnicity, class and gender are linked in particular ways in particular circumstances. Secondly, these three approaches consider class, ethnicity and gender as external to each other. Instead, as Yelvington's study shows, the three are internally linked in the construction of each of these aspects of identity. In the factory, gender, class and ethnicity are united and forged in a particular labour process of a particular type of capitalism (p. 238).

I agree with Yelvington about the fluctuations in the relationship between class, gender, and ethnicity depending on the time and place. To illustrate this, I will look at an example of miners in a completely different setting: black miners in West Virginia in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Trotter (1990) shows how black miners' progress was hindered as American-born whites usurped the most favoured supervisory positions in the coalfields, enjoyed the major fruits of welfare capitalism (especially expanding educational opportunities), and placed critical ethnic and racial limits on the progress of immigrants and blacks (Trotter 1990). Blacks were left with the hardest and most dangerous jobs, poor living conditions and lack of educational opportunities. Nevertheless, at different points in time, black miners developed links of solidarity when during the big strikes of 1919-22, they joined the United Mine Workers of America and submerged their ethnic and racial differences in a broad display of class unity. Interracial solidarity was very volatile and hindered by racism, and black miners also developed strong interdependent relationships based on race with the

emerging black bourgeoisie. In this setting, it was hard to separate the dynamic class and ethnic relations. Black union men talked about their experience of mistreatment because they were former slaves, as well as because they were black. Trotter finds that black miners developed a range of responses to the intensification of racism in the coalfields. “Their actions displayed a complex mix of class and racial consciousness that cogently addressed their precarious position between the hostile forces of white capital, labour and the state.” (p. 264). He finds debates over the primacy of class over race unfruitful, and quotes historical sociologist Edna Bonacich who says,

The issue isn't a choice between the dominance of race or class, or the way the two intertwine complexly, but rather the way in which the capitalist development shaped the interests and actions of various class-race segments, and how those interests and actions in turn shaped the directions capitalist development took (Bonacich 1989 in Trotter 1990:267).

I would further add that it is also important to note which one characteristic, such as gender, ethnicity or class, is emphasised or downplayed in the discourse of those in power, for example, in Estonia the political and intellectual elite has concentrated on the ‘problem’ of ethnic identities while trying to conceal their relatedness to social class. This is in contrast with the Soviet Union where class was the most significant political discursive tool. For my purposes, it is not so important to calculate the exact relationship between class and ethnicity or to figure out whether it is a causal relationship, how much one influences the other, or what came first. My point is, rather, that issues that are framed in terms of ethnicity are very often also linked with class. In the case of Russian-speaking Estonians, the public discourse frames them as a problem in terms of ethnicity while in reality it is also about securing the new class hierarchy of the national elite and suppressing certain class sentiments and moralities as invalid.

The recent rise of right-wing movements in Central and Eastern Europe has made some anthropologists turn their attention to the relationship between nationalism and class. Kalb (2011) notes that in Central and Eastern Europe, right-wing nationalist populism is replacing traditional left-wing politics in the situation of dispossession and uncertainty when elites have turned to cosmopolitanism and left the narrative of nation behind. In the largely monoethnic settings, the dispossessed working class is finding its voice again partly through racialising the underclass of the Roma and Jews. Kalb talks about the working classes’ reaction to the situation, whereby they live in uncertain and desolate conditions and the elites have abandoned the nationalist project. What he pays less attention to is the dialectical

relationship between working-class nationalist reactions and the politicians' strategic use of nationalist discourse. In other words, it is a political tool of the elite as much as an emotional reaction of the working classes, and although the elite themselves might be cosmopolitan, they are at the same time playing on that populism. This can certainly be claimed in the case of Estonia where the fundamentalist populism of presenting Russian speakers as dangerous was one of the main tools of the elites in establishing the particular economic order they envisioned. The narrative of dangerous Russians and endangered Estonians was easy to establish due to the historic continuity of understanding what constitutes the nation, from the period of Estonia's first independence in the 1920s.

The construction of the idea of Estonian people and the Estonian state was an elite project, based on invented traditions (Ranger and Hobsbawm 1992) and particular ideas of the time. As Toomas Gross (2002) has explained, 19<sup>th</sup> century Baltic Germans, who were the main initiators and developers of Estonian culture, were influenced by German romanticism and especially by Herder. Herder emphasised language as the basis of a people; the ancient origins of language were supposed to prove the ancient origins of a particular nation (2002: 345). Lack of written sources made the constructors of 'Estonian culture' draw on the oral traditions found in folklore and in the romantic peasant way of life and attachment to land (Gross 2002). Land in Estonia, as Abrahams (1994) describes, has the dual meaning of being partly a symbolic system of moral and social values, and partly a commodity. Living on the land became one of the primary characteristics of Estonian identity<sup>5</sup>. After assuming dictatorial powers in 1934, Konstatin Päts, the Estonian State Elder and later President, further reinforced this idea of nationalism; he initiated cultural campaigns for Estonianising names, and promoted Estonian culture and love for the homeland (Von Rauch 1987). The idea of Estonian nationhood was based on what Brubaker (1992) calls the German type of nationalism, which presents itself as an organic phenomenon integrating ethnicity, language, culture<sup>6</sup>, and race. It was further enforced by the spread of Estonian language schools and

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<sup>5</sup> As Buchowski Buchowski, Michal. 2010. "Nie rzucim ziemi sk d nasz ród". Polish contemporary discourses about soil and nation." Pp. 23-46 in *The Post-Communist Condition. Public and private discourses of transformation*, edited by Aleksandra Galasi ska and Dariusz Galasi ski. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co. notes, a similar Eastern European understanding of the nation as a community of blood, tied to the land, re-emerged in Poland during the debates on whether foreigners should be allowed to buy Polish land after Poland entered the European Union.

<sup>6</sup> Wimmer Wimmer, Andreas. 2002. *Nationalist exclusion and ethnic conflict: shadows of modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. points out the largely forgotten uneasy relationship between nationalism and anthropology. Both, he emphasises, have common intellectual ancestors in Herder and other such writers such as Gustav Klemm. Franz Boas, who was influenced by Herder, introduced the idea of 'spirit of people' into American anthropology where it came back to inspire scholars on the continent. Although

print media (Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983). As Narotzky (1997:177-189) has pointed out about the emergence of nation states in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, the new ideas about nationalism were bourgeois policies trying to produce a new organic hegemonic social space to counterbalance other potentials for restructuring of the society based on the emerging industrialisation and class struggle. Estonian nationalism in the 1930s must have been a way to create unity and a hegemonic discourse while workers' movements, for example in the mining region, were violently suppressed. This nationalism was conveniently picked up in the 1990s, as part of the restoration project of Estonia.

### **3.3. History of migration to North-East Estonia**

“Nothing seems more obviously opposed to the purposes of government than the unnatural enlargement of states, the wild mixing together of different human species and nations under one sceptre,” Herder wrote (1788 [1784-91]: 384, quoted in Wimmer (2002:59). Partly due to the idea of the nation state based on one people and one language, there have been discussions among Estonian historians about the extent to which the Russification of Estonia was a deliberate project of colonisation. Misiunas and Taagepera (1993) claim that settling Russian speakers in Estonia was a deliberate project. Kukk (2005, in Klesment 2009) also defines the Soviet Estonian economic system as a colonial economy because of the use of Estonia's natural resources for all-union industry, including heavy investment in oil shale industry for Leningrad's needs, and simultaneously the destruction of an independent economic structure. David Vseviiov (2002) shows how local residents were not allowed to resettle in the border town of Narva because of a nearby uranium mine and factory, while Russians were encouraged to move in to repopulate the city after the war. In contrast, Olaf Mertelsmann (2007) claims that the reasons for bringing in foreign labour were more related to the economic situation, and not a political Russification project. Heavy industry development was a priority in the Soviet Union and the mines of North-East Estonia needed more labour.

David Vseviiov, who has studied the demographic processes of Ida-Virumaa in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, gives a thorough overview from a statistical point of view, as much as it was possible to rely on Soviet statistics. Vseviiov's (2002) study shows that the Russian and German occupations during the war changed the population of Ida-Virumaa and,

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anthropology has moved away from the homogeneous concept of culture, this discourse is still alive and well among nationalists.

by 1944, less than 60% of the native population remained in the area. Soviet economic policy and priority areas of industrial development later determined the population formation of the area. Growth of population after the war was supported by organised recruitment from other parts of the Soviet Union, mostly of unskilled workers, to supply construction organisations with labour. Labour recruitment from the countryside started to be successful when people left the countryside due to collectivisation and famine. Most workers came from the countryside in Russia. Besides being recruited, people left independently; Vseviiov points out that so many people left the Slantsy region on the Eastern border with North-East Estonia that the local leaders of the area had to send a letter to the central Party Committee of Estonia asking for help in sending back the people who had left without permission. Young men were sent to the mining area instead of doing army duty. After going through three months of training, they had to work in the mining area for three years.

Other forms of recruitment included inviting people to local vocational and technical schools or appointing graduates from other regions to work in North-East Estonia. From 1945 demobilisation from the Soviet Army generated additional population, as did the re-evacuation of those who had first been evacuated to Russian territories during the war, and the influx of young communist shock workers<sup>7</sup> who came to rebuild the area (Vseviiov 2002). According to Pihlamägi (2010) in 1945 there were 38,000, and in 1946, nearly 46,000 prisoners of war, including Germans and Austrians, as well as ethnic Estonians, working on rebuilding mines and the secret uranium plant in Sillamäe. After the prisoners of war were freed, they were replaced not only by economic migrants, but also by detainees of correctional labour colonies. As Mertlesmann emphasises, the region of Ida-Virumaa was not only militarised but also part of the Gulag system after the war. Later, released criminals and prisoners from Gulag camps were sent to work in oil shale mines, thereby earning the region its nickname, Estonian Siberia (Mertelsmann 2007). The area population kept growing because of immigration as the industry kept expanding and new housing was built. In 1946, the population of Kohtla-Järve was about 10,000, by 1970 it was 82,000 and by 1989, 91,000. According to the census of 1989, 44% of the city's population was born in Kohtla-Järve (Valge 2005).

My conversations with people who had migrated to the area basically confirm Vseviiov's data. Kohtla-Järve was a new home for many different people. The migration

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<sup>7</sup> This term refers to workers who were supposed to perform especially arduous or urgent tasks, and was later extended to all workers who exceeded their planned quota.

stories show many lives going in unplanned directions due to the war. It was a place of memories of war, destruction and deportations for the local Estonians, and one of new hopes, bright future and youth for the newcomers. The first thing that I need to stress is that during the life history interviews and conversations in the mine, I met very few Russians. Despite the mainstream policy and social science shorthand of talking about Estonians and Russians, the ethnic mix of the area was much more complex. Many of those who spoke Russian as their mother tongue were actually Ukrainians or Belarusians. Workers who were carrying Russian passports would proudly announce that they were Polish and Finnish, Lithuanian, Tatar and Estonian, Karelian, Latvian or Ingrian.

Many of those now considered 'occupants' had escaped the starving collective farms, had fought on the side of the Whites in the Russian Civil War, had ended up in the territory of Germany after the war and were trying to hide their previous identity. The Estonian speakers also had very mixed backgrounds. Besides local peasants, there were many who had had to leave their previous homes during the war, those whose parents had been working for the Estonian Republic and were now deported, those who had been fighting on the German side in the war or those who had illegally returned to Estonia after deportation to Siberia. The growing industry needed them all, and former mine directors admit that they hired people with very suspicious pasts. In the 1950s, besides the local workforce, there were a number of German prisoners of war who were working rebuilding the mines and the city. Soviet prisoners from labour camps elsewhere were brought in to work at the secret uranium plant at the restricted-access town of Sillamäe, 30 kilometres from Kohtla-Järve. Those who had been displaced and sent to Estonia against their will sometimes returned home. Many of them, however, verified that economic conditions back home were worse, and decided to stay at their jobs in the mines of Kohtla-Järve, marrying and settling down. Emphasising the fact that not only Estonians were afraid of Stalinist terror, Valya, a Russian-speaking woman in her 50s who grew up in a mining village built straight after the war, explained that "Everyone who migrated after the war had some issue with the Soviet power."

My mother, she was from the Russian hinterland. When collectivisation started, her family did not join the collective farm. My mother's father was sent somewhere in Siberia, then he was in a penal battalion in the army during the war and died somewhere in Latvia; we do not even know where he is buried. My father was from the Novgorod region. During the war, his battalion was hijacked in Germany and they sat in camps in Germany. Then they were somehow returned and were held in camps here. Without a passport, he could not go anywhere and was hiding here. And this was in every family who came here after the war; they had problems with the Soviet power.

When encounters between the two worlds of after-war rural Estonia and the Soviet migrants are recalled, they are now painted in romantic terms, emphasising the lack of ethnic conflict. A woman who moved to Estonia from the St Petersburg area with her family after the war recalled:

I was four years old then, I remember everything. There were little farmhouses, it was interesting for us. There were very beautiful national clothes, skirts with folds, and big wooden swings. I remember the smell of bread that they baked themselves. And where we now have the hospital, there was a manor house and a village. We climbed through the fences, to get peas. And what good dance parties we had, and Russians, and Estonians together. Everyone going on foot, together, singing songs, red cheeks glowing...

Younger people to whom I talked, who had migrated during the 1960s and 70s, were mostly specialists who had been sent to work in Estonia after finishing a mining speciality somewhere else in the Soviet Union. Many of these people came from other mining regions in the Soviet Union, like Donbas in Ukraine, Bashkiria, the Northern area of Vorkuta, or had graduated from the prestigious St Petersburg Institute of Mining. The local engineers were often poor country boys like my grandfather who graduated from Tallinn Technical University. Workers who had migrated later were usually following a relative who had already made Estonia their home. Due to the better economic conditions in Soviet Estonia, being given a job in this region was an opportunity offered to only the best graduates. The level of education in the mining region was also generally higher than in the rest of Estonia, due to the high number of mining engineers (Vseviiov 2002).

### **3.4. Ethnic relations in the Soviet period**

The Soviet Union took note of people's ethnic groups, which then carried a social and often a political impact. For example, there was a requirement that local ethnic groups be represented in the *nomenklatura* and among students, but they also experienced repression and discrimination (Hallik 1998; Zaslavsky 1982). The ethnonational organisation of the Soviet Union and other federations in the socialist bloc was institutionalised, creating the main form of 'collective consciousness' in socialism (Verdery 1998). The only group that did not have an obvious national homeland and national institutions was the Russians, who were encouraged to think about the Soviet Union as their homeland (Smith 1999). This, in turn, made nationalism attractive after the fall of socialism as well, as it represented a strategy that no political group could avoid. Nationalism varied only according to the degree it was exercised in the different countries of the region (Verdery 1998). As Hallik (1998) points out,

the salience of the 'Russian question' in the internal politics of post-Soviet countries and in their relationships with Russia has been influenced by the ethnopolitical structure of the Soviet Union.

The distribution of material rewards did not seem to be based on ethnicity and did not raise conflicts in the mining area. This is confirmed by Janek Valge (2005) who has studied segregation in late Soviet Kohtla-Järve, based on the census data of 1989. His analysis of housing segregation shows that the proportion of Estonians was smaller in newer buildings because new apartments were given to new migrants, specialists from elsewhere in Russia, and it was hard to change apartments or move once something had been allocated. Lower education was more common in the older parts of town (people who could not finish their education due to the war belonged to earlier waves of migration). In the state-built new buildings in Kohtla-Järve, people with higher education and Estonians had bigger apartments than people with less education and non-Estonians. More Estonians were living in private (non-state) housing with fewer facilities like running water and central heating. This analysis shows that due to the prioritisation of migrants, more Russian speakers lived in the newer houses, but in terms of flat size, there was no difference between the ethnic groups. Valge also compares groups working in different economic sectors in the city where 40% of the population was engaged in oil shale mining or processing. He concludes that the Party executives had the highest number of square metres per family member, followed by miners. Agricultural workers and construction sector workers had a lower number of square metres per person in the state sector housing. Based on these calculations, it seems that although Estonians were generally not living as comfortably as new migrants, miners were a privileged group, among whom the differences based on ethnicity do not seem as large<sup>8</sup>.

People, especially Russian speakers, talked about the Soviet period with certain nostalgia in terms of ethnic relations. When I asked about this, people described common celebrations and work situations. Former miners stated that there was no 'class difference' at that time between different ethnic groups, and no one was left aside because they were Russian or Ukrainian. The workers seemed to believe the Soviet rhetoric of the friendship of

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<sup>8</sup> One area where ethnicity did count was that of assigning the title of Hero of Socialist Labour, the highest honour that a miner could be awarded in the Soviet Union. The title was supposed to be given to an Estonian speaker and a Russian speaker on alternate years. In a population where at least 80% of miners were Russian speakers this meant an unfair division of the honour. I often heard stories about an Estonian miner who had not been a particularly good worker but had been a Party member with the right number of children and belonged to the right ethnic category, and was therefore given the award.

nations: every mine counted the number of different ethnic groups working in the mine (commonly over ten), and the retired miners counted the ethnic groups when talking about ethnic relations and how they were 'like one big family'. As a miner put it,

I honestly cannot say that I had issues, or negative attitudes or arguments with anyone. Workers were invited from Belarus and everywhere. There were such tough conditions in the mines straight after explosions, when water was dropping down, the shafts were full of gas and we were stripped down to our undershirts, bodies steaming. In such situations there was no room for ethnic difference.

In reality, outside the workplace and work-related events, the two groups must have lived fairly separate lives. Some of the Russian speakers told me how they had recently learned about some Estonian traditions and customs, including the fact that Estonians actually celebrated Christmas during the Soviet period, even though it was forbidden. This indicates that despite the manifested good relations at the workplace some spheres were kept secret from other ethnic groups. Once I was interviewing an Estonian-speaking former miner who had later made a career as a sports official in the local city government. His recollections of life both as a miner and as a bureaucrat did not hint at any problems about being Estonian, although his father had been deported to Siberia as a *kulak*<sup>9</sup>. Halfway through this conversation, his daughter joined in. She had trained as a nurse in Tallinn, then been allocated a job in Kohtla-Järve. She passionately described her struggles when working in a hospital where no doctors spoke Estonian and she lacked Russian language skills<sup>10</sup>. The Russian speakers that she encountered during her career treated her as a second-class citizen, she felt, and deliberately made her life difficult. Accounts of being ignored, given a lower salary than Russian speakers, and having fewer career opportunities were the main theme of her story. Her father rather pragmatically concluded that it was indeed hard if you did not know the language properly, which seemed to be the main issue that the daughter had.

Estonian cultural geographers and folklorists have studied the memoirs of Estonians in fights between Estonian and Russian schoolchildren in Kohtla-Järve (Jaago, Printsman and Palang 2008). Printsman (2011) emphasises Estonians' view of Russians as

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<sup>9</sup>*Kulak* is an early Socialist term for rich peasant, member of the exploiting classes.

<sup>10</sup> In the mines, which were mostly male collectives, people knew Russian better because of their two- or three-year experience in the Soviet army. Russian was certainly the dominant language of the workplace. In the home, it varies. In mixed marriages of Estonian and Russian speakers, Russian seemed to be a more dominant language. But, for example, two Estonian women, Miralda and Loreida, both married Latvian men. Loreida spoke Estonian with her husband, while Miralda and her husband chose Russian as a common neutral language of communication.

opportunistic and their discomfort with particular habits such as scattering sunflower seed shells in public places that offended Estonians' sense of cleanliness. Estonians had also made fun of the Russian habit of placing flower pots on windowsills, mockingly called flowerbeds. The young Estonian-speaking researcher who had grown up in Kohtla-Järve, however, had difficulties understanding the flower pots as a Russian and alien phenomenon. To her they seemed "a quite European phenomenon and not so ugly altogether" (Printsmann 2011: 240). Her comment shows Estonians' perceptions of the categories of Russian versus European, but also the confusion about what actually is considered Russian in the first place. Printsmann believes that school fights should be read as an aspect of youth culture among people who cannot understand each other's language and therefore communicate through fights, but which should not be necessarily interpreted as ethnic conflict. Thus, there were conflicts and separate communities of Estonian and Russian speakers during the Soviet period, but relationships at the workplace are talked about as being friendly.

Russian speakers in particular, dominant in the region, sensed no confrontation from the Estonian side until Perestroika. In their narratives, we can see the two distinct spheres: the hostile public sphere of ethnic conflict-ridden society and the more intimate and friendly sphere of the workplace. A former engineer now retired, Russian speaker Pavel, explained,

We played volleyball together, went on excursions in Russia, no one publicised their ethnicity, we did not have any idea about the real feelings that emerged later. It all started when we had to take an exam for citizenship... I did not think then about what would happen in politics, I thought about how to feed my family. But it was then that I encountered this aggressiveness that was not based on anything in some of the Estonian guys.

Pavel felt shocked that some Estonian speakers in the neighbourhood that he had known for years changed. He described his Estonian neighbour, Auntie Kati, shouting at a young Russian shop assistant for not being able to talk to her in Estonian. Auntie Kati had become a nationalist. At the workplace, Pavel did not however feel any conflicts based on ethnicity. There were very few Estonians working in the mine, and those who did not discriminate against anyone on the basis on ethnicity, and tried to express their thoughts in a non-conflictory way.

After Estonia became independent in 1991, a citizenship policy was adopted which gave citizenship to only those who had lived in Estonia before the Soviet occupation, or their families. It left a large proportion of its Soviet migrants stateless. This choice was justified in terms of achieving social closure after the Soviet occupation and a desire for reinstating a

monoethnic national state, a return to the pre-occupation ‘normality’ and the ideal of the First Estonian Republic that I described above. Wimmer (2002:65) drafts a model of the relationship between the elite and the rest of the population in the creation of the nation state. The elite can legitimately expand its control over various aspects of public and everyday life while among the general population, everyone can claim economic rights, political participation and equality before the law. In a fully developed democracy, the state can guarantee more security, predictability and participation to its members than other types of communities. These rights, however, are “tied to nationally defined citizenship, thus establishing a difference between those who are privileged and those who are not.” In many cases, however, Wimmer notes, the elite practises ethnic favouritism and the “ethnicisation of bureaucracy”. Modern state building, he argues, instead of unbinding ethnic ties, strengthens them and gives them new political meaning. Ethnonational representativeness becomes central and violations of the axiom of representativeness lead to political scandal and strife. “Ethnic membership is no longer a secondary distinction, but a central criterion for discriminating between the in- and the out-group. The borders between groups solidify; the categories are cleansed of pre-modern ambiguity and fluidity” (Wimmer 2002:68). The new postsocialist states like Estonia, that prevented a significant number of their residents from voting in the elections, have been labelled constitutional nationalisms, where the legal rights of one ethnic group prevail over others (Verdery 1998). “In several cases, then, the national self-determination that gave birth to the new state became a privilege of the majority group alone; other groups would now have to live as second-class citizens in ethnocratic states, their civil, political, and social rights curtailed by a stigmatizing cultural identity that invariably had racist overtones” (Verdery 1998: 294).

Anthropologist Gregory Feldman has studied the policy side of the citizenship discussion and how the new Estonian elites managed to achieve the restrictive citizenship law by constructing Russian speakers as a problem that requires a particular policy solution. To legitimate its role as a protector of the nation, the state needs to regulate the contact of the majority and the Other, and to construct its identity as a territorial imaginary that is threatened by cultural difference (Feldman 2005a). The others who might destabilise this imaginary become an international problem because they can potentially destabilise the borders and the nation state’s identity as an international actor (Feldman 2005b). Therefore, other EU countries did not object to the making of an internal Other, and helped to fund the ‘integration’ programmes “based on the assumption that an (inter)national security risk is at

hand if the ‘alien’ population—even if it is from the country in which it lives—does not reproduce the language and culture of the national majority” (2005a:689). Through the public discourse and policy, the state produced a particular category of ‘Russians’. This citizenship policy meant excluding a significant part of the population who did not manage to take the citizenship exam with the Estonian language test. There were also, however, those who did, despite the negative attitude of the public.

Anna, who worked in the same mine as Pavel, saw Estonian independence in a positive light, even the Estonian language requirement for the citizenship exam. “There was no question for me about whether to stay in Estonia or go. Although I was born in St Petersburg, I moved here when I was two years old. My children have grown up here, so when there was a question whether I am going to take the citizenship exam, I thought immediately, yes, I am going to get Estonian citizenship.” Anna was very thankful that the director of her mine, another Russian, organised Estonian courses and that her Estonian-speaking workmates were very supportive and helpful with the language studies. She studied for three years, passed the exam and got her citizenship, as one of the first people in her mine. Being from a well-educated family from St Petersburg, she told me with pride how she read and enjoyed some Estonian literature classics about the hard life of peasants, and even took a trip to the writer’s birthplace, a farm turned into a museum in Central Estonia.

Of course when all the newspapers started writing that we were migrants and occupiers, of course it hurt. But our language teacher was a wonderful person who said that we should not think that we are learning Estonian, we should study it as if it was French [a neutral language]. And maybe she was right. But I must say that *our* Estonians who were working in the mine were very positive towards us and helped us, they even talked to us in Estonian and helped us with this horrible partitive case.

Anna and her husband both passed the test and although they do not speak Estonian, her husband could at least read documents at work in the mine and Anna could help her grandchildren with Estonian homework.

These narratives show that behind the mainstream Estonian narrative of labelling all new migrants as occupants, there were different family stories of people who were also oppressed, or thought that they came to build a better life and future. Not all these people were Russians; they came from different ethnic backgrounds and were incorporated into the Soviet system where ethnicities were noted and ethnic quotas applied in some areas without necessarily leading to discrimination in the mining industry. In the narratives of changing ethnic relations, Russian-speaking mine workers distinguish two spheres: the hostile relations

with the new Estonian government and the mainstream society and the media, and the personal relationships at the workplace which are presented as being fairly untouched by the wider reconfiguration of ethnic hierarchies and relations. These narratives also show the sudden reversal of Russians, whose ethnicity was the default ethnicity, whose homeland was everywhere in the Soviet Union and whose language was spoken everywhere, into a minority group whose language and ethnic identity suddenly became a problem in the new situation where a new elite was taking over. What has, however, been neglected so far, and what I want to emphasise here, is that the project of constitutional nationalism is not related only to the idea of ethnic restoration, but is also linked to a class project.

### **3.5. Ethnicisation as a class project**

Studying the recent political history of Estonia, there are very few historians who do not fall into the hegemonic state discourse of national security. One of a few political scientists who gives a more nuanced account of creating ethnic categories and a particularly dangerous category of ‘Russians’ is Rein Ruutsoo (1998). Looking at the early 1990s, he traces the emergent dominant discourse of the right-wing parties: that anyone who was against fast privatisation (backed by businesses and exiled Estonians from the US) was against the interests of the Estonian Republic. This meant that the restitution of the economic interests of a particular group was presented as being in the interest of all. Anyone against it, like the Russian speakers, was seen as anti-Estonian. To maintain power, the socialist and centrist parties had to go along with the restrictive citizenship policy, despite their preference for a more inclusive policy. The national romantic ideas had become the desire to ‘chase away the greedy non-Estonians’.

Ruutsoo explains that Russians were seen as a potential threat, primarily in developing economic relations with Russia, but their ‘socialist mentality’ was also seen as a threat to the liberal economy envisioned by the state. The main aims in establishing an ethnocentric citizenship law, he states, were to detach Estonia from the Russian economy and secondly to connect the economy to the West by enforcing (neo)liberal economic policy (p. 159-160). In other words, Estonia’s citizenship law is inseparable from a project of crystallising the power of a particular class who were to execute their vision on liberal economic policy. Bohle and Greskovits (2007) also point out that in the Baltic States the transformation from socialism started with identity politics, redefining the Baltic nations in time and space. The authors claim that identity politics also shaped the form of capitalism and

democracy that these countries undertook – due to the importance of Estonian identity politics, economic choices were seen as less important and allowed the political parties to make economic decisions that did not immediately bring about economic progress. This, however, led to exclusionary democracies, while radical economic reforms excluded the Russian-speaking population economically. Thus, the citizenship law was not so much about ethnic fear but also about envisioning a certain economic policy that did not fit with the Other, who would have voted differently.

While not intending to write off twenty years' work of the Estonian community of sociologists and political scientists, it is important to note a huge gap which exists in most of their work. Although carried out from different viewpoints and changing from the 1990s to the 2000s, this work very often starts from the same premise as that of policy makers – imagining the Russian speakers as a potentially dangerous mob whose identity has to be studied to make sure that they are loyal to the Estonian state, or even more to the Estonian ethnic group. Sociologists rightly claim that Estonians and Russians live in two separate communities (Heidmets 1998; Semjonov 2000; Vetik 2002). Many studies fall into the discourse of danger, even if the underlying intentions of a multiculturalist state are well meaning. “The Russian problem is a problem for Estonian society also in the late 1990s,” states sociologist Mati Heidmets (Heidmets 1998:7), who continues, “it is clear that the crystallisation of the model ‘two societies in one state’ contains obvious dangers, including those of security policy.” Raivo Vetik justifies the Estonian citizenship policy by presenting statistics that show that only 25% of Russian speakers voted for Estonian independence in a referendum in 1991 and therefore they could not be considered loyal. There have, however, still been some positive developments, since according to survey data Estonian Russians do not identify themselves with Russians in Russia (Vetik 2002:92-93).

More recent work often focusses on the identity of Russian youth as a category who could potentially become the new loyal Estonians but whose morality fell under suspicion after the riots following the removal of the Second World War monument in Tallinn in 2007<sup>11</sup> (cf. Kirch et al. 2008; Vihalemm and Masso 2005a). Sociologists who aim to be more

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<sup>11</sup> The Bronze Night refers to riots in Estonia in April 2007 when the Estonian government decided to relocate the bronze statue of an unknown Soviet soldier, a memorial to those who fought on the Soviet side in the Second World War. The statue was of emotional significance and an important gathering spot for the Russian-speaking population. The Estonian government's abrupt removal of the statue was officially explained as an attempt to avoid conflict between Russian speakers and Estonian nationalists, but was also a populist move to gain the Estonian speakers' vote before the elections. The relocation of the statue initiated demonstrations

forward-looking and discuss identities based on markers other than ethnicity, such as a new form of civic identity (Vihalemm and Masso 2005b), conclude that these new identities are highly unlikely to develop due to the general atomisation of Estonian society. More likely future identities would be ethnic identities based on exclusion, local identities, individualised and further atomised identities based on consumption and the new media (Vihalemm 2007).

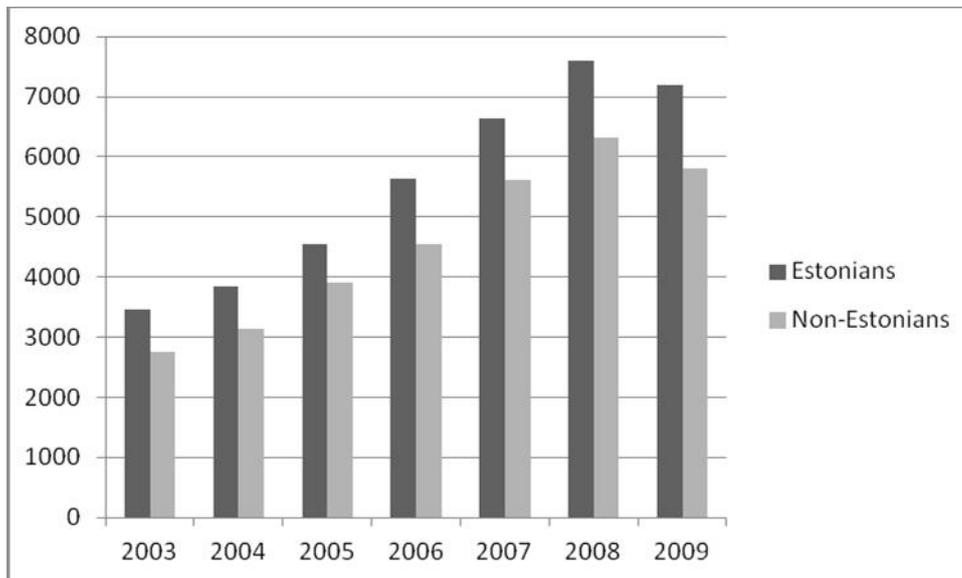
The question of ethnicity-based identity creation and mobilisation is also raised by Graham Smith and Andrew Wilson (1997) who found that the political opportunity structure and political resources of the Russian-speaking community are too weak despite a shared diasporic identity and sense of alienation. Thus, Estonian sociologists have studied Russians' identity to ensure that there would not be any kind of mobilisation, while Smith asks why they do not mobilise. The latter is reminiscent of the whole body of literature of trade unions in Eastern Europe that similarly asks why unions are so weak and do not mobilise, as I discuss in Chapter 7. The problem with this question is that it assumes universal models of behaviour, ways that a certain group should act in a particular situation, without looking at the local circumstances or alternative ways of organisation. Despite this, Smith and Wilson's work points to something that the majority of work on Russian speakers completely ignores: that the Russians constitute something that he calls ethno-class – besides ethnicity they share a similar class background, as I will discuss below.

The approaches that focus only on citizenship and the state make the mistake of treating the state and capital as separate from each other. The state project of not giving citizenship to a number of its residents and implementing a particular privatisation and economic policy meant the opportunity of capital accumulation for the elites and resulted in accumulation by dispossession for Russian speakers who, without citizenship, had less access to the process of privatisation. Furthermore, excluding Russian speakers from national politics meant that they could not vote for left-wing parties and disturb the course of the young neoliberal government formed of the new Estonian-speaking elite. Steen's (1997) study of the elites in the 1990s shows that 90% of the elites were Estonian-speaking and 8% Russian-speaking. Estonian speakers dominated particularly in the parliament, political parties and juridical system, while the highest percent of Russians (15%) was present in the leadership of state enterprises where, as Steen states, the privatisation process had been hampered due to the old nomenclature interests (p. 105-106). Tiit (2006) observes that while

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among Russian speakers, which escalated into violent conflict with the police and looting that took place for three nights.

in the 1990s and 2000 there was no difference in poverty risk in Estonian- and Russian-speaking households, in 2006 the poverty rate among Russian speakers had increased from 14 to 17% and was larger than in Estonian-speaking households. The table below shows differences in the incomes of Estonians and others in Estonia, displaying that Russian speakers' income has been continuously lower than Estonians'.



**Table 4. Average income of Estonians and non-Estonians in Estonia in Estonian kroons 2003-2009<sup>12</sup>.**

**This table shows that the average income of Russian speakers is lower than that of Estonians. Both groups felt the impact of the 2008 economic crisis when their average salaries dropped. The data is from the Estonian National Office of Statistics and besides the income differences also shows how categories are created based on the antagonism of Estonians and everyone else who is defined negatively, in terms of lack, as ‘Non-Estonians’.**

### 3.6. Creating ethnic boundaries

While the state was creating categories of people based on citizenship, people of Ida-Virumaa had their own vision about what ‘Estonians’ and ‘Russians’ were like. Living side by side, the residents of Ida-Virumaa had certain stereotypes or ethnic labels about each other that serve as boundary-makers. When explaining the everyday interaction among the locals of different ethnic groups in Ida-Virumaa, Barth’s (1969) model of ethnic boundary-making is helpful. Also, as Jenkins states, ethnic identity is based on both self-identification and ethnic categorisation by outsiders. Both Estonian and Russian speakers agreed that Russian speakers

<sup>12</sup> I am using euros and Estonian kroons (EEK) in parallel throughout the thesis. The Estonian krown was the official currency in Estonia until January 2011 when it was replaced by the euro. 1 euro equals 15.6 Estonian kroons. I have not modified data from statistical tables or people’s quotations when they talk about kroons, but have used euros in my own calculations because it is the currency currently used in Estonia and the fairly similar exchange rate of euro and British pounds would be better understood by a British reader.

were more open, said what they thought immediately and had denser social networks. Estonians were seen as colder, more closed and envious of each other. Russians were said to be more jealous and to worry about whom their wife or husband is cheating with, while Estonians were said to focus more on who possesses what.

These self-proclaimed labels about different temperaments and ways of expressing emotions were also recognised by the other ethnic group, along with the acknowledgement that this is something that the other group did, but ‘we’ did not. For example, Russian women would be the first to get out on the dance floor at the reunions of old miners, and then they would drag the Estonian men to get them dancing. The old Estonian miners would then nod to each other knowingly and comment, “The party is already at that stage where Russian women start getting us to dance.” Despite the encouragement from the ladies, the men were however ‘being typical Estonians’ which served as an excuse for not going dancing. Calling Estonians to dance was not done however to challenge them but simply because of a general lack of men in the retired miners’ reunion because miners die young.

The Russian speakers did not identify with Russians in Russia very strongly. Most of them confirmed that they were already so different from Russians in Russia that they had a ‘different mentality’. There was no nostalgia for life in Russia since everyone was aware of the economic difficulties and widespread corruption there. “Russia is ill,” Maria explained, while she was doing the ironing and I was pouring her wine on one of our domestic evenings. “It is how you feel when your mother is drunk. It is not your fault but you still feel a bit awkward. But why should I be responsible for my parents?” Maria was probably more open with me about ethnic issues than many other people I interviewed. While not strongly identifying with Russia, it was still something that made them different from Estonian speakers. She recognised a fear in Estonians, who had been serfs, killed and deported. “But Russians are not afraid because they feel that there are millions of them. If something goes wrong, there is always Russia to escape to.”

Russians felt part of a bigger Russian cultural sphere that Maria and many engineers referred to, remembering the art and music scene in St Petersburg, or great Russian writers. Nevertheless, they saw themselves as only partially embedded in the wider Russian culture. Similarly to Pilkington’s (1998) Russian repatriates from other Soviet Republics, Estonian Russian speakers did not particularly identify with Russians in Russia and saw themselves as somehow superior, while Russians in Russia, in turn, also see them as different, as no longer Russians. They, however, used the idea of being cosmopolitan and part of the big world

culture as a way of differentiating themselves from Estonian speakers. This cosmopolitanism could be expressed in the appreciation of Russian culture as part of the recognised world culture, and denouncing loyalty to any state as in the case of Maria. Therefore, these boundaries were ways of differentiating ethnic groups and excluding others to a certain extent. Nevertheless, these boundaries were never as clear-cut as Estonians versus Russians. Laura Assmuth (2005), who studied the Estonian-Latvian-Russian border areas, similarly shows that ethnic identities are not clear-cut, especially in the border areas. These identities are tied to the everyday practices like border crossings that are influenced by the states. When the states are reconfigured, and new borders and border regimes applied, this also influences the movement and identities of residents of the border region, who used to feel so international, but now feel they live in the margins of a particular state.

Estonians of Ida-Virumaa quite proudly told me that they were more like Russians than Estonians elsewhere, that they were ‘immersed with Slavic ethnos’, meaning that they were more straightforward and open in their responses. At the same time, this made Ida-Virumaa Estonians more like the Other to Estonians elsewhere. Estonians from elsewhere associated the region strongly with negative stereotypes; a daughter of one of the mine staff who went to university in Tartu was apparently asked by fellow students to show whether she had injection marks on her veins, because students from elsewhere thought that everyone in Ida-Virumaa was a drug addict. Her roommate in the halls said that had she known that the girl was from Ida-Virumaa, she would have requested a room change. Thus, the boundaries of ethnicity are to some extent porous and shifting; those considered ‘Estonians’ in Ida-Virumaa are seen as being contaminated by dangerous Russianness elsewhere in Estonia.

Despite working side-by-side with Russian speakers, the young Estonian speakers who regularly came together to cook and discuss world and local issues never invited any of their Russian-speaking workmates. The only Russian speaker incorporated in the group was a young ministry official from Tallinn. Similarly, local Russians stated that they have no interest in what Estonians do in their free time, and their social circles consisted of other Russian speakers. Thus, the ethnic boundaries, constructed based on the different ‘mentality’ of the Other, also served as a justification to exclude the others from their everyday life. This is how ethnic categorisation by outsiders worked simultaneously with self-categorisation. I tend to also agree with Jenkins that the content, the ‘cultural stuff’ inside these boundaries, matters, in the case of language use, memory practices and political preferences.

The main general issues, not related to the work in the mine, were problems with language, history and politics<sup>13</sup>. Workers often complained that the Estonian language was now required everywhere, but they were not taught any in school or the level of teaching was very low. Also during the 1990s, when Estonian was starting to be taught through EU-funded projects, workers felt that it was unfair that they had to pay for the courses upfront and only then be compensated, or that the money meant for language studies had been possessed by someone illegally. The most common worry was however that there was no one to practice the Estonian language with and therefore they could not really learn it. Generally, women with higher education were more likely to know some Estonian language and take an interest in learning it than men or yellow-helmet female workers.

In the mine, ethnic conflict was not a significant issue in everyday situations. Since every department or unit had a couple of Estonian speakers at the most, conflicts rarely emerged and Estonians were rather a rare curiosity. In the First Production Department, there were three Estonians and 65 Russian speakers. The two Estonian miners Peeter and Märt usually worked together, but if one of them was on holiday, they worked with someone else in the department. A younger Estonian miner who also worked in the department worked on a loading machine and the nature of his work meant that he did not need to pair up with anyone. The common language in the department was Russian, but Peeter curiously used Estonian swear words even in his Russian. When I was walking around with an underground foreman once and got into Peeter and Märt's workplace, we started speaking in Estonian. The foreman felt a little bit offended, told Peeter to speak "normally" and was very suspicious that we were saying something bad about him. All board meetings and department meetings were held in Russian. For Estonians it was a place where speaking Russian was absolutely necessary.

Once, when walking around during the Miners' Day celebrations, drinking beer, Peeter was trying to help me make sense of the ethnic relations in his department and

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<sup>13</sup> Studies of different memory communities and different ways of understanding history, mainly whether the Second World War was about 'occupation' or 'liberation', proliferated in Estonia after the conflicts over the Bronze Soldier. One of the most competent and comprehensive analyses about different ideas of history, memory and monuments is a collection by Pille Peetersoo and Marek Tamm Peetersoo, Pille, and Marek Tamm. 2008. *Monumentaalne konflikt [Monumental conflict]*. Tallinn: Varrak.. In the collection *Monumental Conflict*, they have invited scholars to reflect on the historical, architectural, sociological, legal and media representation aspects of the clash of Estonian- and Russian-speaking 'memory communities'. Nevertheless, the collection contains the work of only one Russian-speaking academic and has paid no attention to economic or class aspects of the culture. I have chosen not to focus on the aspects of history and memory, since they have been covered more extensively Rausing, Sigrid. 2004. *History, memory, and identity in post-Soviet Estonia: the end of a collective farm*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press., and because, frankly, I found the conversations about completely different ways of remembering difficult as an Estonian speaker.

explained that Ukrainians and Belarusians could not stand each other; that Belarusian Zhuravlyov could not work on the same shift with Ukrainian Timoshenko. According to him, it depended, of course, on whether it was Ukrainians from Western or Eastern Ukraine. “Belarusians are the greediest. The wheeled loader drivers whose income goes to a common pot for all loaders always complain when someone has done less, especially Zhuravlyov.” Just as Peeter was finishing with his ethnographic insight into ethnic relations on the shop floor, Dima from the same department joined us, heard Peeter’s theory and responded: “Zhuravlyov is not Belarusian, it is a totally Russian surname. He is actually from the other side of Lake Peipus, but his wife is Belarusian. Zhuravlyov is simply a greedy person, nothing to do with ethnic specifics.”

During my fieldwork, I could not detect any conflicts between the different ethnic groups from the former Soviet Union. Friendships and conflicts emerged, rather, based on how well someone worked, or whether people had been to school together or were neighbours in the city or the allotment. The fact that Peeter thought that Belarusians were greedy shows that he as an Estonian was somewhat distant from the rest of the group and did not know the ethnic backgrounds so well. Since Zhuravlyov really was a difficult and bossy person who kept a close watch on others’ earnings, I am not surprised that Peeter had never asked the man about his background and felt that it might be a negative ethnic character trait. The Ukrainian Timoshenko did not want to work on the same shift with Zhuravlyov because Zhuravlyov was giving a difficult time to everybody.

Between Estonians and Russian speakers, relations were usually neutral, but Estonians kept themselves separate. Issues rose to the surface during bigger political events like the Bronze Night in 2007 and the Russia-Georgia war a year later. Estonian speakers described how, in this case, they felt that there was too much listening to their colleagues’ political opinions for days and then sometimes, uncharacteristically, they exploded. They said something in the style of “If you do not like it here, go to Russia,” or kept quiet until their colleagues gave up talking about politics. The mine was still the place where the Russian speakers were a majority, their opinions prevailed and the Estonian minority usually avoided discussions about politics. It seems to me that although ethnic boundaries were firmly in place also in the mine, they did not seem to be as relevant in the everyday interactions among workers who all spoke Russian. Since most miners were Russian speakers, problems were based on work rather than politics. On the rare occasions when politics came into play, the few Estonians underground knew to keep relatively quiet. Underground was the realm of

work, earning money and speaking Russian, and that was rarely challenged. The workplace was rarely a place for ethnic stereotypes; people seemed to maintain the friendly working relations that they remembered from the Soviet period and kept politics out of the mine.

### **3.7. Passports, class and migration**

In the second half of this chapter, I will explore what this overlap of class and ethnic categories means for people and how it affects their everyday life in the neighbourhood and the workplace. Above, I showed how people like Anna, who had lived in Estonia all their lives, had to take a citizenship exam. While Anna passed, her son, an engineer in the mine, had always been too busy to learn Estonian systematically while developing his career, building a house and taking care of his wife and three children.

The question of passports and citizenship is much discussed in Estonian literature, often with the assumption that those who have the Estonian blue passport are somehow more loyal than those with the ‘alien’ grey passport allocated to Russian speakers who did not take the citizenship test, or even worse, those with the red Russian passport. These are the three main types of passports held. Those whose ancestors were born during the first Estonian republic, and people like Anna who had passed the citizenship exam, held blue Estonian passports. Those who had opted for Russian citizenship had red passports. Since the Estonian government had somehow to legalise the mass of people who had not opted for either, they were given local residence permits and identity documents that showed that they were residents of Estonia, but not citizens. The majority of Russian speakers in Ida-Virumaa opted for such grey, or Alien, passports, meaning that they were not citizens of any country.

The passport rules sometimes seemed quite illogical on the ground, as in the example of two women who were both working in the processing plant. One of them had been born in Russia in an Estonian village to an Estonian mother and was therefore entitled to the blue passport. The other, who was actually born in Estonia to Russian parents, could not get the passport without taking the citizenship exam. It was also quite common that family members would have different passports. For example, mine survey labourer Krakowski’s mother was a Finn who held a Russian passport. Krakowski himself, born to a Finnish mother and Polish father, had a grey passport while his children had blue passports. In real life, people’s colour of passport has nothing to do with their loyalties to a particular state. When dealing with ethnic identity among Russian speakers, anthropologist Aivar Jürgenson (2008) has shown

that the question is more complex than the dichotomy of loyal/not loyal, and that also location and individual biography has an impact on a person's identity. Studying Siberian Estonians who have returned to their parents' or grandparents' homeland in Estonia, Jürgenson shows that people's ability to settle in and create meaningful relationships in a new environment, or instead fall into ethnic stereotypes, is related to the biography and background of the particular person.

Generally, those who could not take up learning a new language to pass the test said that they initially felt very offended that they had spent their life working for the country and were now left without citizenship. But by the time of my fieldwork in 2010 this issue was not urgent anymore, as, since 2007, travelling in the Schengen area had become visa-free for grey passport holders, and since 2008 they could travel to Russia without a visa. This meant that not having any citizenship, opting for grey, did not constitute a problem for them anymore.

Robert Kaiser (2010) points to the same issue, arguing that contrary to the intention of the Estonian government to finally reduce the number of 'stateless people', this plan has not succeeded because nothing motivates the non-citizens to apply for a blue passport anymore. Furthermore, his interviews with young people in the border town of Narva showed that statelessness had become a political position to contest the idea that as young people born in Estonia they should take a citizenship test at all. I did not encounter this political stance in the mining area much. Grey passports were a matter of convenience rather than a political stance. Although I met a significant number of people who had settled for a Russian passport, this was mostly done to facilitate visa-free visits to parents and relatives in Russia before 2008. Only in a few cases did people state that they were born Russian and therefore opted for a Russian passport, or that they felt somewhat awkward not belonging to any state and travelling around with an obscure grey-covered document that stated that the holder of this passport was not a citizen of the Estonian Republic. The colour of passport still however determined some migration pathways, as grey passport holders had a more difficult time obtaining a visa for the UK and those who did not have a red passport could no longer afford to study in Russia, now charging high tuition fees from foreigners.

A serious implication of having grey passports is that as the holders of grey passports are not Estonian citizens, they cannot vote in the national elections. They can participate in the municipal elections but are completely cut off, formally at least, from national politics. The workers of the mine often read national news in Russian, were aware of what was

happening in politics, and were paying their taxes, but due to their lack of citizenship, often had a resigned and even alienated attitude towards politics. The exclusion of a significant part of the working class from national politics has been one of the guarantees of continued success of right-wing parties at the elections. These parties have on one hand preached joining the European economy and neoliberal economic policies, and on the other hand played on the fear of Russia and Russians. The citizenship policy has been a major factor contributing to the crystallisation and reproduction of Russian speakers as a politically muted underclass which has no legal opportunities to express its support for left-wing parties. Thus, while in the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, there has been a rise of nationalism and right-wing extremism among the working class in recent years (Kalb and Halmai 2011), in Estonia constitutional nationalism has been in place for the last twenty years. The working class, which in Estonia has mainly left-wing attitudes (see next chapter), is however blocked from the political arena<sup>14</sup>.

Another big difference between Estonian and Russian speakers is larger migration among Russian speakers. Despite the grey passport restricting travel until 2007, the people of Ida-Virumaa have been mobile. The citizenship regime has stopped people from participating in politics, but the region's economic problems have not stopped people from migrating. High unemployment and restricted opportunities at home had driven many miners abroad. Younger miners had worked in factories or construction in the UK or Finland until the 2008 economic crisis shrank work opportunities or until their wives started missing home too much. Even more people talked about their children who had migrated. The switchboard manager Valeria could never quite forgive her son for moving to Finland, marrying a Russian-speaking Karelian, and even worse, taking the wife's Finnish-Karelian surname. Vera, who worked on another shift on the switchboard, was happy to see her daughter and grandson during the holidays. The daughter now lived in London with an Albanian husband. But she had not seen her son for ten years because he was an illegal immigrant working in an airport hotel somewhere in the US and could therefore not travel. Those whose children were still young also declared that their sons and daughters wanted to migrate, often to start a career related to sport. Many mothers complained that the children paid much more attention to studying English than Estonian in school. "But it is not that they do not feel that this is not their home country; there are simply no jobs around," Valeria explained.

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<sup>14</sup> I think part of the reason is that while neo-communists have been prevalent in major parts of Eastern Europe, in Estonia they have hardly been in power since 1991 and thus have had few opportunities to disappoint the electorate.

Due to deindustrialisation, a lack of coherent regional economic policy and the stigmatisation of the region, young people found it difficult to find jobs in the mines. If their parents' connections did not help to get a job in the mine, construction was the main opportunity, but after 2008 when the Estonian real estate and construction bubble burst, this was no longer an option. In everyday life, being a marginalised group in an economically marginalised region meant that people were more mobile and there were few young people around. Due to the lack of social mobility, Russian speakers' geographical mobility increased. The newest census data, published in May 2012 (Eesti Statistikaamet 2012) showed that the population of Ida-Virumaa had decreased by 30,458 people or by 16.95%, which was one of the biggest decreases in Estonia, alongside counties that had lost their agricultural base after decollectivisation and also suffered from high unemployment. This has had a particularly large impact on Russian speakers who were mostly working in heavy industry.

### **3.8. Ethnicity and class**

It is hard to untangle what comes first, ethnic- or class-based discrimination. When I asked explicitly whether the workers felt discriminated against because of ethnicity, a few of them gave examples of family members who could not find jobs because they did not speak Estonian. Much more frequently, though, their grievances were related to the working-class experience more generally, and highlighted that being Russian often meant being working class and more working-class people were Russian-speaking. When I asked Dasha and Aljona from the loading department about discrimination, Dasha replied that discrimination takes place on the basis of salary, that Estonians would not come and work for pennies. She went on to describe how hard it was for her to manage to make ends meet, bringing up her son on her salary. Despite the general perception that Russian speakers feel discriminated against in Estonian society, this discrimination was not based only on the fact that the victim was Russian. It was also about the deterioration of the status and quality of life for the working class in general. It is hard to separate class and ethnic discrimination because Russian speakers were more likely to be workers, because of their history of labour migration for heavy industry. With the decline of the status of the working class, all members of the working class felt its loss, but since Russians were the majority and were also facing difficulties due to language and citizenship laws, it was especially hard for them.

The new language requirements meant that Russian speakers felt more fixed or enslaved to the position of being workers in heavy industry because lack of Estonian skills

barred them from service or office jobs. Interestingly, the dissatisfaction was not framed in terms of the small number of Russian speakers working in white-collar jobs. Instead, I was often asked why there were so few Estonians working underground. One day we were repairing mining machinery with Jura when he asked me the same question. I asked what he thought the reason was. "I do not know. Maybe they like warm offices better." Ljosha joined our conversation and added that on the surface everyone uses the Estonian language. And there are more Russians here in Ida-Virumaa. Jura did not quite agree. "Well, maybe half of the population in Ida-Virumaa is Russian, but how many Estonians do we have in our department? Three out of 70." The men continued discussing whether all Estonians had migrated to Finland or were simply working in shops on the ground. Then Kolja the foreman joined in with his own take on things. He blamed the other men for not studying enough in school and making cigarette rolling papers out of their textbooks while he was studying. "And now, look at me, white helmet." He pointed to the fact that he had studied and was now a foreman rather than a simple worker. It seemed as if he was suggesting that his colleagues were workers because they had not studied enough, rather than because they were Russians, and also that Russians could build a career (albeit underground) if they studied enough. Jura got upset and responded, "Did you not hear the question at all? Studying is not relevant here. But why do Estonians not want to work in the mines?" "Because it is very dirty," Kolja then replied nonchalantly.

Besides feeling pride for doing the hard and dirty work of a miner (discussed in more detail in the next chapter), workers also saw dirtiness linked to Russianness and their oppressed status. De Genova (2006) notes that Mexican migrants in Chicago alternate between discourses of dirty work being related to masculinity and endurance, but also recognition that Mexicans are given dirtier jobs than English speakers, linking Mexican-ness to a lack of English skills and hence a lower status in the job hierarchy. A similar tension is present among Russian-speaking miners in Estonia, who on one hand admit the unpleasantness of their work conditions and recognise that only Russians are doing such jobs, but on the other hand also link those conditions to the idea of hard work, dignity and masculinity.

The feeling of not having a good enough wage or the respect that miners used to have, and doing work that Estonians considered too dirty, sometimes brought racial undertones to the miners' discourse, as they called themselves 'Afro-Russians' or 'Russian Negroes'. Sometimes this did not only mean Russians, but anyone who was working underground. The

two white helmets of the First Production Department were telling me about their experiences with other Soviet mines, when one of them taught me that the deepest mine was in South Africa, three kilometres deep, and there, engineers do not go to the deepest levels at all, there are only Negroes [*negry*] working there. “Negroes?” I asked, to verify that I heard correctly. The mechanic was laughing. “Well, those Negroes probably get a better salary than Estonian Negroes. Everyone who works here is a Negro. Only Estonian white-skinned Negroes.” The head mechanic was referring to the fact that now everyone working in the mines was the underclass. Thus, anyone working underground was doing dirty and underpaid work, and could consider themselves ‘Negroes’ regardless of their ethnicity. But as the angry women of the processing plant expressed, it was not only that they were cheap slave labour: there was an army of bureaucrats, Estonians, who were sitting on their backsides while only Russians were doing real production work. The issue was expressed in class terms, but it was also noted that those who sat in the warm offices and did not produce anything tended to be Estonians. Jenkins (2008) has emphasised that ethnicity is based on both self-identification and categorisation by external groups. Race, he reckons, is typically rooted in categorisation rather than group identification, in ascription and imposition rather than subscription, in the external rather than the internal moment of identification. “Power in this context is the capacity to determine for Others, not just the consequences of identity, but also their nominal identification itself” (p. 170). Stuart Hall (1996) adds that

Racism, of course, operates by constructing impassable symbolic boundaries between racially constituted categories, and its typically binary system of representation constantly marks and attempts to fix and naturalize the difference between belongingness and otherness. Along this frontier there arises what Gayatri Spivak calls the ‘epistemic violence’ of the discourses of the Other—of imperialism, the colonized, Orientalism, the exotic, the primitive, the anthropological and the folk-lore. (p. 446)

In the current Estonian political situation this racism has been imposed on the dangerous and different Russian speakers that the Estonian-speaking elite and the media depict as the Other. What the miners’ statements above show, however, is that besides the violence of imposing racist categories on the Other, race is also becoming part of the group self-identification, a self-subscribed identity with strong racial overtones. Furthermore, this racialisation and orientalisation of Russians is not taking place only on the basis of ethnicity, but is also based on class.

Everywhere in Central and Eastern Europe, the working classes have lost their status and have become the internal enemy. As Stenning (2005b:984) describes, both urban and

rural working-class communities are depicted as “hopeless, redundant, aggressive, miserable and pathological”, characterised by passive and dependent poor who lack entrepreneurialism and responsibility. Miners in Romania are depicted in a similar way, as backward blockers of Romania’s rapid development (Kideckel 2000). Aet Annist (2011:92) describes how Estonian rural agricultural workers, who were a central symbol during the fight for independence and even during the Soviet period, became pariahs after the decline of agriculture in the 1990s. In a country fixated on liberal economics and individual success, agricultural workers or rural people in general were depicted as a group with a socialist benefit-focussed mentality who could not keep up with the rest of the country. As Buchowski (2006) explains, the degree to which certain groups have embraced free market ideology determines whether they are grouped together with the elites or orientalised as the internal Other. This divides people based on “capitalism and socialism, civility and primitivism, and class distinction into elites and plebs” and “urban vs. rural, educated vs. uneducated, and winners vs. losers of transformation” (p. 466). It seems that the stigmatisation of the working class is not only a postsocialist phenomenon but a wider post-industrial tendency. Owen Jones (2011) shows how the working class in England were depicted as dangerous and ignorant, demonised, feared and ridiculed by policy makers as well as the media. Diedrich (1999) talks about his difficulties interviewing Welsh miners, who were fed up that journalists represented them as morally deficient and exotic in a negative way, interested in stories that would sell rather than stories that miners wanted to tell. Metcalfe (1990) believes that miners, more than any other members of the working class, have been particularly stigmatised. “For centuries they have been seen as less than fully human, either because they are bestial, immoral, immature or sick. The language used to describe them would be called racist if their skin was black by nature rather than occupation” (p. 46).

In the case of Estonia, the orientalising was similarly directed against workers, and rural populations, but Russians were an especially easy target for orientalising. Estonian intelligentsia bought into Huntington’s (1996) idea that the border of civilisations runs along the Narva river between Estonia and Russia. Therefore, it was easy to not only orientalise the poor and lazy, but even more so those who should have really moved back to the other side of the civilisational border, where they culturally belong. This is where the mix of ethnic- and class-based stigmatisation created a particularly potent cocktail. As Buchowski points out, ‘Others’ are characterised by harmful or dangerous characteristics of displaying solidarity, resisting market economy, rejecting social inequality (2006:474). The danger, it seems, is not

so much about belonging to a particular group like the rural poor or the Russians, but displaying particular modes of thought which contradict the hegemonic liberal capitalism. Particular characteristics of a mode of production are assigned to people, as Römheld (2004:198) shows with Russian-speaking German repatriates to Germany who are 'Easternised', "often assumed to represent undemocratic, clientelist, or resourceless authoritarian work values due to their professional participation in socialist societies." I will return to the questions of orientalisation at the workplace in more detail in Chapter 6.

The ethnic-based division of labour was an issue not only for workers but also for engineers. Since Estonian independence in 1991, all external documentation in the mine had to be written in Estonian. This meant that Russian-speaking specialists could advance their career to a certain level inside the mine where the documentation was still in Russian, but could not then go to work in the regional or national office. Any position higher up in the hierarchy that required communication with various ministries, reading and producing documentation in the Estonian language, was not available for those who did not know Estonian, however good an expert the person was. As I was told, in the 1990s, there had been an unspoken policy within the company of preferring to hire Estonian speakers. Although the regional managers told me that this was not the case anymore, Russian speakers sometimes felt that this preferential treatment was continuing. The Russian-speaking engineers explained to me that the Estonian-speaking mine director had been appointed only because he was *natsionalny kadr*. This expression referred to a policy started in imperial Russia whereby some staff were appointed because they were from a local ethnic group, regardless of their competence. It is a slightly derogatory term, indicating that the person does not necessarily deserve to be in the appointed position. It is interesting also in relation to the Soviet quota of local officials that was required in each of the republics and how, despite the changed power relations between the ethnic groups, Russian speakers kept experiencing what they saw as the unjust preferential treatment of the local ethnic group. Lower-level managers and engineers felt as if they were cursed to stay underground, their poor knowledge of the Estonian language stopping them from escaping, and they had to maintain the status of the 'white-skinned Estonian Negroes'. It is important to highlight that these workers and engineers who felt like an underclass did the same job and were similarly paid in the Soviet period. The nature of their work had not changed, but the attitude of the society towards their work had.

Nevertheless, if I were to ask again how this system of Russian working class and Estonian middle class is reproduced, a large part of the answer is in education (Bourdieu and

Passeron 1990; Willis 1977). In the vocational education centre of Ida-Virumaa, the mining profession was opened again in 2006 and I saw interested young men participating in their classes, fighting sleep to arrive for their internship in the mine in early mornings, to have an opportunity for a stable, well-paid life in the place where they grew up. When I asked the boys whether they would be interested in pursuing higher education and becoming mine engineers rather than miners, the answers were vague. “Possibly,” one said. “Yes? Or not really?” I encouraged them. “We’ll see,” one said. Another young man admitted that for those who were good with languages, it could be an option. The young men admitted that they would like to speak Estonian but the level of teaching in school was weak and therefore it would be hard for them to take up engineering studies in Tallinn Technical University. They knew well that to drill holes in the mine face, the Estonian language was not needed, while to be an engineer, it was. I am not saying that all these boys, who were mostly interested in earning good money to buy a car to impress girls, would become engineers, but that nevertheless, if they wanted to, their pathways would be blocked, since Estonia is operating a two-tier education system, where working-class boys can get a working-class education in Russian, and higher, engineering education is reserved for Estonian speakers.

### **3.9. Conclusion**

In this chapter I have tried to show that looking at the complicated web of ethnic relations in a particular place can give a much more nuanced picture than that of the more simple confrontation of natives and potentially dangerous migrants or occupiers. After suffering severe damages and population losses after the war, the collapsed mines and chemical plants surrounded by farmhouses were confronted with new migrants from various walks of life, communist youth shock workers, those escaping famine elsewhere, or others who, due to their past, preferred to hide in the periphery and be swallowed by the mines always hungry for new labour. The Soviet system of noting different ethnic groups, accompanied with the strong propaganda of friendship of nationalities, created an atmosphere in which, providing that one knew Russian, ethnicity was downplayed in the everyday workplace relationships, while life outside work continued separately for the two language communities.

Relaxing the grasp of Soviet power in the late 1980s gave Estonians an opportunity for the national reawakening movement. This was accompanied by increasing suspicion of Russian speakers. The introduction of the restrictive citizenship policy, however, should not be looked at only in terms of romantic ideas about restoring the pre-occupation ideal of a

monoethnic state. Excluding a significant proportion of the population was also related to the elites' particular ideas about implementing liberal West-oriented economic policy and a fast privatisation process.

As a component of this development, Russian speakers, who were comfortable being the working class and the default nation in the Soviet Union, sensed the racialisation and orientalisation on the basis of ethnicity and class. This ethno-class system is being maintained by excluding Russian speakers from national politics and higher education, while the regional economic problems encourage greater migration. The picture I have tried to paint emphasises, firstly, that it is misleading to talk about 'endangered Estonians' and 'dangerous Russians'; secondly, that it is misleading to talk about nationalist policies without talking about class. I have tried not to show Russian speakers as only poor victims, but also as a group which has its own mechanisms for creating its ethnic boundaries in relation to others. In the current situation, however, these ethnic and class boundaries often overlap. This is due, on the one hand, to the history of a particular demographic of workers in Estonia during the Soviet period, and on the other hand to the policies that Estonia implemented after 1991. The policies were not only a way to exclude the ethnic Other, but an ethnic Other with a particular worldview and a vision how a fair society should work. I will discuss this more in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4. The moral economy of miners

### 4.1. Introduction

After the local political elite in Kohtla-Järve, miners were the most materially privileged group in the city by the end of socialism (Valge 2005:74). They were the socialist vanguard of workers, and one must not forget that the model Soviet worker and the Hero of Socialist Labour who constantly exceeded production targets, Stakhanov, was a miner. Miners' Day, celebrated every last Sunday of August, was established in his honour. In the region of Kohtla-Järve, where in 1989 40% of the population was engaged in oil shale mining and processing, miners were very well respected. In the region, as the locals told me, miners were always the kings, with the most money to spend, the most girls wanting to marry them.

Despite their 'elite' standing in the Soviet period, mine workers currently share a fairly egalitarian worldview with other blue-collar workers and other Russian speakers. Survey data from the 1990s shows that there were more supporters of state socialism among Russian speakers (Vöormann in Ruutsoo 1998). Ellu Saar's (2002) study shows that the 'winners' of the changes in 1990s, especially Estonian-speaking men from the capital, thought that social stratification had not increased in the 1990s, or that if it had, it was justified. Russian speakers from the capital and the north-eastern region, as well as Estonian-speaking women from the countryside, noticed increased social stratification and believed that it was not right or justified. The 'winners' thought that to be successful, one had to be entrepreneurial, show initiative and have particular abilities, while the 'losers' said that to be a good entrepreneur one had to be callous and arrogant and have social connections. According to the survey data, Russian speakers usually blame poverty more on structural rather than individual reasons, as do blue-collar workers and those at the bottom of the income hierarchy more generally (Plotnik 2008).

Based on the same dataset, Lindemann and Saar (2008) show that in the mid-2000s, there were actually no significant differences between Estonian and Russian speakers' attitudes towards the legitimacy of income differences. Statistically significant differences occur based on respondents' perceived social position and education, whereby blue-collar workers regard income differences as the most unfair. What these surveys show is that regarding attitudes towards politics and economics, Estonian and Russian speakers' attitudes

are not as different as the politicians who were trying to ‘Other’ the Russian speakers were trying to show. Rather than pointing to the ethnic Other for different ideas about the economy, the surveys actually show that ideas about social justice are fairly similar between Estonian and Russian speakers of similar socioeconomic standing. Differences are bigger based on class, rather than ethnicity. This is not to say that there are no attitude differences between the two ethnic groups, but rather that there is a common shared moral economy that applies to the working class in Estonia despite ethnic belonging.

In what is to follow, I explore this moral economy in more detail. While the survey data above focusses on workers and Russian speakers, I will focus on miners in particular. They share many of the opinions stated above but also have their distinct features as ‘migrant’ industrial workers. I will start by showing how the concept of moral economy is a good tool for showing the miners’ worldview which is centred on the workplace. I show how this worldview is expressed in everyday complaining, and shared by men and women. Nevertheless, particular gender hierarchies exist in this masculine miner world, and define whose work is considered hard and considered worthy of high salary. My analysis in this chapter mostly focusses on middle-aged and older people who have some experience of the Soviet Union themselves, as they represent the majority of mine workers and I had the most conversations with them. Despite this, I could recognise particular aspects of this moral economy, like gender hierarchies, also among miners in their 20s. My central argument for this chapter is that miners share a particular moral economy in which, based on their hard and dangerous work, they are entitled to respect and a high salary. This belief, further accentuated by hierarchical gender roles, is partially based on the accustomed privileges of miners in the Soviet period, but just as firmly situated in the economic circumstances and class relations that miners experienced in 2010. This chapter is structured as follows: I will first introduce the framework of moral economy. I will then explore the particular genre of complaining to express miners’ views, then outline their model of a fair world in which hard work and health should be reciprocated with money and respect, and then place gender relations into this model.

## **4.2. The framework of moral economy**

For my analysis, I draw on E.P. Thompson and Scott’s analysis of the moral economy of the poor and the peasants (Scott 1976; Thompson 1971). Moral economy, as they use it, refers to particular relations of reciprocal exchange between the elite (the landlord, the

rich, or the state) and the subaltern class. Moral economy describes the notion of economic justice and what the expectations and ideas of entitlements towards the elites are, what is fair to be expected from the elites in terms of economic subsistence or other forms of support. Violations of this normative reciprocal contract by the elites can lead to outrage and riots. These riots are not about greed or hunger but moral indignation and righteous anger (Scott 1976:188). Peasants' resentment was not so much about inequality but about the rich's lack of charity and their belief in the right to subsistence. If the traditional exchange loses its balance, peasants are upset because the stability and security of these arrangements have been taken away (Scott 1976:178-180).

The moral economy of the peasant does not mean that peasants were somehow more moral than anyone else. Rather, the term refers to particular moral expectations of the poor. Ethnographies that show how peasants reject capitalist arrangements, or deem them as immoral, also emphasise the particular worldview of the peasant in the face of capitalism (Ong 1987; Taussig 1980). Often anthropologists emphasise the morality of the domestic, kin-based economy and its relations to the commodified market-based labour relations (Carsten 1989; Parry and Bloch 1989). Also in the studies of Eastern European peasants, for example, Pine has emphasised the importance of the house as the centre through this personhood, and meaningful relations are constructed while the state is viewed with great suspicion (Pine 1999; Pine 2002a). However, as Pine has argued elsewhere (Pine 1998; Pine 2002b), kinship morality emphasises the collective good while work relations allow women in particular to realise a sense of individual autonomy and value.

The framework has also been used for studying industrial workers. Charles Sabel shows how the migrant workers in Europe appeal for decent treatment and fair pay for their work. In these outbursts, the object of anger is clearly defined but does not result in organised negotiations as in the case of sanctioned industrial strikes (Sabel 1982:133). Swenson claims that trade unions operate in two spheres of influence: moral economy and political economy. In the sphere of moral economy, unions can establish distributive norms for wage setting and they are part of an institutional apparatus that enforces moral economy when market forces disturb it (Swenson 1988). Posusney (1993) is convinced that the moral economy approach best explains labour protests in Egypt in the 1960s and 1970s when workers were trying to maintain the rights inherited from Nasser's paternalist politics, while Chen (2003) thinks it

best describes the uprisings of workers in China in the face of restructuring and capitalist penetration.

The moral economy framework has also stirred a lot of debate and critique in anthropology. Tom Brass (2000) sees the recent work on Third World peasants, like that of Scott's as well as the Subaltern Studies Group, as new populist frameworks. He notes that theories that look at peasant mobilisation, as well as that of other identity-based groups, often deny the existence of class struggle as they look at mobilisation on another basis and hence produce a depoliticised analysis. It obscures the different class interests of, for example, poor and rich peasants, as it focuses on ethnic solidarity instead of class and legitimises the role of nation states and nationalism. Brass is correct in emphasising the necessity of class analysis and pointing out the depoliticised and pessimistic or populist outlook of much postmodernist analysis. This however does not mean that moral economy framework is of no use whatsoever. Rather than reproducing the identity-based nostalgic framework of moral economy, it is more useful and feasible to embed it in class relations which are present in E.P. Thompson's analysis.

Looking at the dilemmas that trade unions in Britain face today, Mollona (2009) notes the dialectics between the economy and the society as expressed in different strategies of trade unions. In his model, the 'economy' side focuses on economic redistribution, the commodification of labour in the factory and on the narrow, often ethnocentric framing of class relations on the shop floor, maintaining jobs characterised by business unionism. In contrast, moral economy is related to the cultural recognition of the working class and recognition of the wider exploitation that takes place in the society, solidarity outside the factory and grass-roots activism. This is manifested in community unionism that draws on the wider community and moral principles. It requires union representatives to "expand politics beyond the realm of 'the economical' and provide symbolical and cultural understandings of class struggle in tune with the imagination of the whole of society, rather than from the narrow perspective of the working-class" (p. 660). Mollona suggests that the unionists' focus only on the moral economy conceals the experience of labour under capitalism, as community unionism is the result of financialisation of the economy under New Labour. The 'social' and the 'economic' need to be seen as dialectic and the temporal and geographical movement between the two poles must both be studied for a complete analysis. In my analysis, I have tried to follow this dialectic and show how the miners' moral economy is

deeply rooted in the regional history as well as in particular practical economic circumstances.

When applying the moral economy framework to miners, it is most important to emphasise that miners believe that they have made a contract with the state and that contract has been grossly violated: the state does not perform its part of the reciprocal contract anymore. In the Soviet context, Linda Cook (1993) has argued that the Soviet working class made an agreement with the state in the post-Stalin regime whereby the state provided economic and social security in return for the workers' political compliance. As Scott and Thompson have emphasised, riots or other expressions of a particular moral economy are often movements that are backward-looking and want to maintain the existing arrangements that are about to change. From this backward-looking stance stems part of Brass' (2000) critique to the moral economy framework: that it romanticises and naturalises the peasant past, sees no opportunity for human emancipation through socialism and denies the existence of classes and class struggle. The paradox with post-Soviet miners is that their backward-looking moral economy is based precisely on the ideas of socialism, coming from a society that was built on the idea of class struggle. It has been strongly influenced by the conditions of labour in the Soviet Union, but is an active, valid political view rather than something to be labelled a relic or nostalgia.

Gudeman and Rivera (1990) describe Colombian peasants' models of the household economy that do not correspond to the model of the market. Model conflicts can lead to violence, to the transformation and disappearance of one of the models, but they can also persist side by side, and "models are made and remade through use. Never definite, never finished, they are experiments in living" (p. 15). Drawing on the same discussion, Buchowski (2004) depicts postsocialist Polish peasants as "gravitating towards traditionalism" and not adapting to the model of the market when the folk model of the household economy is incomplete (p. 184), while Romanian miners are trapped in hopelessness, "unrealistic nostalgia", "arrested in their dreams" (Kideckel 2008:63). Even accounts that seem to support the emancipation of workers often treat the moral economy-based riots of workers as relics illustrating workers' inability to effectively deal with the new market situation (cf. Chen 2003).

Instead, postsocialist workers' visions about how the economy should work and what they find is fair deserve more attention than just being seen as an outdated economic model or

depoliticised nostalgia. It forms a basis for who they are and how they think the world should work, as well as the foundation for their political actions or other ways of voicing their dissatisfaction and challenging the existing economic order. I will look at how a particular group of people envisage a moral economy and what they expect in reciprocal relations from the state. This vision includes all spheres of capitalism, how workers feel that the economy should be run, how they think about the just distribution of the profits of the company, salaries, or resources within their particular departments. It also includes miners' own justifications about *why* they think they deserve these entitlements, and what they have given as their part of the exchange.

The moral economy and its reasons are very much embedded in the particular geographic and historical circumstances that Mollona mentions, and hence are very much situated in the existing class relations. The moral economy is related to the particular regional policy, EU energy and open market policies, increasing precarity of the working-class jobs and the particular post-Soviet history. My focus on the moral economy and caution about expecting revolution as the ultimate aim and the role of the working class does not mean that my analysis is depoliticised. I show how the moral economy is firmly situated in the economic relations. It provokes reactions like the day-to-day grumbling about the injustices but is also expressed in attempting to control the labour process (Chapter 2), using the trade union for financial and emotional support or relying on collective legitimate activities like collective labour contract negotiations as well as occasional more serious angry outbursts like the wildcat strike in 2007 (Chapter 7).

Expressing a particular moral economy helps to construct class boundaries based on certain values that a particular group shares and that are different from the elites. A particular moral economy, or morality of workers in general, deserves attention because it is a large part of their class identity. Michele Lamont (2001) argues that class identity remains an important part of workers' identity. Workers create moral boundaries around people who share their values (of being caring, or hard-working, for example) and identities, whereby they contrast themselves with those above them and below them. "Moral boundaries on the one hand, and class and racial boundaries on the other, often work together to provide them with a space in which to affirm their worth and reserve their dignity, a space for expressing their own identity and competence" (p. 4). I agree with Lamont that people's attitudes about the world around them, about questions of value of work, gender roles, how the country should be run, should

not be studied as attitudes isolated from the general identity of workers, but that such attitudes are also tools for constructing class boundaries and a way through which workers aim to gain dignity and respect. This, Lamont believes, is as important in the formation of class consciousness as explicit class struggle or just looking at relations of production. Also workers' sense of worth, social identification and group identification is important. These moral boundaries are constructed differently based on different histories, political-economic conditions and cultural features of ethnic groups. For example, French workers have more socialist, egalitarian views than American workers, and while white American workers value the hard-working self, black workers emphasise their caring side. This chapter is based on the premise that the moral economy of Estonian miners is a part of their class consciousness that is shaped by their socioeconomic conditions, specificity of miners' work and the history of the region.

### **4.3. Complaining and moral economy**

In the next section, I will look at the moral economy of miners as it came across in the everyday situations. In this chapter, I mostly look at how people talked about their expectations of the state and their company and what they believed that they, as mine workers, were giving in return. In the following chapters, I show how the same moral code was expressed during reorganisation in the company and during the trade union negotiations. This chapter, however, is mostly based on chats in the mine during work hours. Most of these visions of better life and dissatisfaction were expressed in vocal complaining. When I was asking miners about their lives, the response mostly came in a discursive genre that first shocked and surprised me, and later in my fieldwork annoyed me and demanded to be challenged. After my question, both men and women would explode in anger and start talking about the misery of their lives. Workers in particular, though they were not the only ones, would start listing their problems in an aggressive, angry manner, spitting and swearing, sometimes continuing for ten minutes seemingly not even pausing for breath and certainly not for long enough for me to get a word in. Engineers would sometimes express the misery of their lives in similar words, but in a more peaceful, melancholic tone, looking at me with eyes full of disappointment, as if they had lost all hope.

The content of this angry complaining was similar, varying slightly depending on the particular nature of the job. The main complaints were about the danger and hard conditions in a particular job, low pay, poor health, general economic conditions in the region and the

poor consequences of the reorganisation of the company. I carefully noted what the mine workers were telling me, but found the genre and tone slightly distasteful. Challenging the men only made them talk about their misery more passionately. Only through re-reading my interviews have I come to understand the cultural significance of moaning, which is not unique to Estonian miners.

Nancy Ries (1997), who studied the discourse of Muscovites during the Perestroika era, identifies a genre that she calls litanies or laments. I immediately recognised the genre, uniting the intelligentsia in Moscow and miners in Estonia, and found her interpretation helpful. She explains,

Litanies were those passages in conversations in which a speaker would enunciate a series of complaints, grievances, or worries about problems, troubles, afflictions, tribulations, or losses... a sweeping, fatalistic lament about the hopelessness of the situation, or an expressive Russian sigh of disappointment and resignation. (p. 84)

Ries explains litanies as a vehicle through which people conveyed their social concerns, a culturally patterned way of expressing fear, anxiety, disappointment and frustration (p. 110). Ries noted that one of the main themes of the Perestroika litanies was the relationship between powerful forces and the powerless objects of those forces, dividing the society into two, the victim and the villain. The speakers' group of victims was depicted as morally superior and innocent due to the suffering that they had to endure. This also indicated their strength and stamina in the face of hardships. They were expressions of hope for transformation, to be saved from these hardships, similarly to Orthodox litanies and a way for people to show that they were 'good people' because they were suffering and not doing well economically. Ries recognised that laments about everyday issues actually referred to much larger questions of political and social changes that people were experiencing (p. 91), but besides the recognised functions, these laments also had unintended consequences of reinforcing the feeling of despair and cynicism and powerlessness among the speakers, separating people from the political process and strengthening the sense of hopelessness and futility of trying to change anything (p. 115).

Despite the sense of recognition of the genre, I do not believe that this passionate complaining is only characteristic to Russians. The importance of the discursive form of complaining is noted also by David Kideckel (2008) among Romanian miners. He explains that since getting by is becoming increasingly harder, narratives of getting by are replaced by collective "narratives of complaint about the circumstances of worker lives and labour." He

notes how the miners' *plângere* (complaint) unifies miners with others in Central-Eastern Europe who are complaining through hard times. *Plângere* is a narrative about concerns about life and health with grievances about superordinates. "*Plângere* defines suffering, woe, loss, and grievances small and large, whether at home or in labour" (p. 16). He suggests that since worker complaints are ignored by the rest of the society, they become amplified beyond their actual significance; they are then transvalued and become deep and existential, ridden with hierarchical tensions (p. 17). Similarly to the powerlessness of Russian complaints during Perestroika, the Romanian complaints are filled with hopelessness, finding "dozens of reasons why they will not overcome the obstacles that they face" (p. 61).

Both Ries and Kideckel are right to point out that complaining refers to anxiety about bigger changes in the society. I, however, see it as a more positive and powerful force than the two authors. My strategy for reading complaining was to turn it into something positive. If miners constantly talked about their concerns with certain issues, it meant that these issues were important to them and needed to be paid attention to. When they complain in negative terms about the lack of something, or the malfunctioning of something else, it also gave an insight to what they would like instead, what their alternative would be, what the just world in their vision would consist of. For example, if they complained about the lack of job security, it was clear that what they desired was job security.

Filtering miners' mental picture of a good society out of the complaining resulted in a vision that united mine workers of different levels. This vision, expressed in a culturally meaningful way of angry complaining, drew the moral boundaries of what the mining community saw as a good life and moral economy, in contrast to those who did not share the view. The basic requirements that miners had were that there would be work for everyone so that children did not have to migrate, that the work would be stable, and that they could be certain of their pension after retirement. They wanted a more egalitarian pay system in which the pay difference between the head manager and the cleaner of the company would not be 25 times<sup>15</sup>. That both workers and managers would be recognised and given a bonus, that their effort would be noted. Women wished that the pay difference between miners underground

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<sup>15</sup> The annual salary of Sandor Liive, the chairman of the board of Eesti Energia, was 2,458,397 Estonian kroons, compared to 90,000 earned on average by the female auxiliary workers, which means that the chairman earned 25 times more. The differences are even starker when Mr Liive's salary is compared to that of the outsourced cleaning staff, earning the Estonian minimum wage, 52,041.60 kroons, who are earning 47 times less than the chairman. I would emphasise again that Eesti Energia is a nationally owned company and such pay differences comply with the government's neoliberal ideology.

and female auxiliary workers would not be three or four times. That management and government cared about workers' health. That Estonian assets were not sold off, particularly not the forest and the chocolate factory. That industrial production would not be closed and moved to China. In summary, mine workers expressed a fairly egalitarian worldview that valued work, especially industrial production, and a state that despite the problematic citizenship policy would be looking after its people.

Many left-leaning thinkers, and also many anthropologists, share similar values. It would be cruel to brush aside the moral economy of these miners as futile dreams that do not result in change, like some ethnographies of postsocialist misery do. Furthermore, this vision of a better life that they were entitled to was not simply Soviet nostalgia. Workers were quite aware of the inequalities between the elite and workers in the Soviet period. It was rather a certain imagination of how life was elsewhere in Europe and what workers should deserve in exchange for their labour. The life of miners in Western countries was imagined as more secure, affluent, with better and safer working conditions, earlier retirement, stronger trade unions and cheaper food.

In these conversations, workers expressed their shared vision of a more equal society and portrayed the elite as the villain, the suspicious Other who did not share their worldview and created new inequalities in the society. In this complaining, their class consciousness as workers versus the capitalist and political elite emerged. Workers felt like the ministers were stealing money that should have been allocated to improve the economic situation and health care in the region, and that even when they could vote, their vote did not count for anything because the government was doing whatever it pleased without consulting the public. They felt that the labour laws were taking their rights to strike, that there was no heavy industry left in Estonia and that blue-collar work was not appreciated. Mostly, the government however got the blame. As the women from the processing plant were discussing, it was the government who set up Estonians against Russians. Simple workers, simple people suffer, they said. "And pensioners," the second one said. "Both Russians and Estonians," the third woman added. In this complaining, we can recognise Ries' unintended consequence of lamenting, which was to reinforce the sense of powerlessness. Nevertheless, I believe that it was more strongly reinforcing the sense of moral goodness and unity of the complainers.

Complaining helped to create a community of mine workers who were complaining about similar issues and through this drew moral boundaries to separate themselves from the

villains who had a different idea of how the economy and society should work. Surely, they were sometimes exaggerating as Kideckel suggested, but the repetitive acts of voicing their concerns to me signify that they had not given up, that they discursively recreated and maintained their moral worlds, and were not resigned or ashamed of voicing it to others. It was also an everyday way of letting off steam. As Scott (1976) admits, not all violations of the moral economy of the subaltern result in revolts. Miners sometimes organised more political actions, they had control over the labour process or went to the unions with their complaints. But the everyday complaining to colleagues, managers and an odd anthropologist was a strong statement about who miners are, what they care about and where the boundaries of their moral community lie. When listening carefully, complaining helped to construct the moral economy of miners, which shaped and was shaped by their class position and identity.

#### **4.4. Work as the centre of the moral universe**

In the Soviet period, miners were part of a labour collective which formed the centre of their lives. The Soviet labour collective (*kollektiv*) was the social focus of workers' lives that they were genuinely attached to, which brought an "escape from the drudgery of home and a welcome opportunity for 'communal sociability' in the cramped Soviet housing situation" (Ashwin 1999:21; see also Clarke 1993). The labour collective constituted the main social network for the workers, especially for those who had migrated from other parts of the Soviet Union (Lonkila and Salmi 2005). As all the social benefits, housing and holidays were distributed through the workplace, workers were also incorporated into the society through the goods that they received from the workplace; the collective was "the focus of almost every aspect of the social existence of its employees" (Clarke 1999:57).

In the new regime, the workplace is no longer such a centre of life. As workers are free to buy their goods and services elsewhere, there are fewer leisure activities for the labour collective and people's work is not recognised by non-monetary means in the way that it used to be. Nevertheless, because of this strong attachment to the workplace, which is nationally owned and hence to the state, workers feel let down as the workplace is not fulfilling its part of the moral contract. Although first feeling let down and excluded, and later indifferent, about national politics and the government, workers feel that they are still contributing to the state through their labour and consider the state and a state-owned company a more trustworthy contract partner than a private company would be. Triin Vihalemm points out

that Russian speakers who are tied to the big companies have a stronger identification with people from the same neighbourhood than the rest of the population.

In the sub-sample of Russians, the category “ordinary working people” forms a common structure with local community identity categories. We have to bear in mind that Russians reside mainly in districts comprising blocks of flats in industrial cities, and thousands of them are employed in large enterprises, such as the electronics manufacturing company Elcoteq in Tallinn and the oil shale company Eesti Põlevkivi in north-eastern Estonia. The main local employer, especially in north-eastern Estonia, hugely influences the quality and range of social services and also arranges activities for its employees. Thus, knowledge of their common employer is an important source in the creation of community identity among the Russians (Vihalemm 2007:487)

Work is the centre of mine workers’ moral universe for several reasons. When I asked miners about the meaning of work, the first reaction of many was that work was just something they needed to do to earn money. On further enquiry, it became clear that this earning money did not simply mean material survival. Work and earning money also gave both men and women self-esteem. For older workers, it means the possibility of helping children and grandchildren financially, which was important regardless of whether the children were working. It became absolutely crucial at the time of the financial crisis when many families were relying on the salary of one person. For some men, their work gave them the opportunity to be the proud male breadwinner of the family and to keep their wives at home. This was however not very common. Women who worked in the mine saw work as a big part of their personality, and said that they would feel like second-class citizens if they did not have work and were unemployed. The workplace and capability to earn money made workers feel as if they were productive people with dignity and means to spend that money. The meaning of money earned by one’s labour was then placed in kinship or gender relations expressed in the capability not only to reproduce oneself as a worker but to help the family or to confirm one’s status as the head of the household.

Besides money, women emphasised the importance of interaction at the workplace. Older women, like Zina, who lived alone, said that they could not imagine retiring and missing out all the communication at the workplace. There were some things that simply could not be discussed at home, and colleagues at the oil shale processing plant then also became irreplaceable friends. Some of those who did more solitary work like loading carts in the evening, and the night shift when women were sitting at their little loading station alone for seven hours, regretted not having others around to make the work more social, having someone to chat with. The women doing the loading were always happy to have me sit with

them and sometimes I did not even need to speak very much to hear the most amazing stories about their lives, stories they did not have an opportunity to share during their solitary workdays and nights and busy domestic lives.

At the same time, people admit that since socialism, social relations in the mine have changed and people are more closed. Women from the processing plant were telling me that since everyone had difficulties, it was hard to support others. As Galja, a woman in her 50s, was explaining,

Sometimes you come with your problems from home, but I have difficulties, why would I care about you? Sometimes I can, for example, sympathise, and other times I do not want to even talk to anyone. Because it is very hard. People have become more closed, well, why should I tell someone about myself? Then others will tell everyone, there will be all sorts of gossip. But then again there are people who you help, support, everything. So it depends.

She fondly remembered her time working in the medical room of the mine, when everyone came together with families, visited each other, went to parties, children's and grandchildren's birthday parties, dacha evenings, excursions. Everyone was close, she remembered, but later it all disappeared. She explained that life changed after socialism and capitalism changed people.

It completely changes people. It changes your view on life, everything. They began to close down companies, people became more anxious, people without work. It is terrible to be unemployed. Even when men were made redundant, they were crying because they had loans they had to pay. Everything changed, we did not get used to it, it was a very sharp transition, really. Well, people like me, I adapted very quickly, it is good for me. Everything is good for me and I am not hiding it. Everything is available, no *blat*, no shortages. Everything is fine. I speak from my heart.

There are several important points to Galja's account. For her, like for many others, work was the place where friendships were created, support was received from colleagues, and family was something incorporated into the workplace. She admitted that this changed as life became harder and more uncertain in the 1990s. This is not difficult to imagine, knowing the job losses, financial problems, health issues in the family, drinking problems of husbands and drug problems of children that the women of the processing plant had experienced. And on top of this, there was uncertain citizenship status and ethnic tensions. The women did not seem to have enough strength anymore. At the same time, Galja's complaining is more nuanced when she says that there are still people who help and support. The end of the litany takes a completely surprising turn as she says that she actually embraces capitalism and is happy with her current situation. Buchowski (2003), who has noted a general complaining

labelled “It was better under communism” does not actually mean that people do not acknowledge the positive changes that have taken place. The lament rather refers to the current situation rather than any political statement in the past, and also Galja’s account is more nuanced, on the one hand, she seems to imply that everything was better under communism, but then admit that for her personally things are not that bad presently either.

Although the work collective as it was known in the Soviet period has broken down, people are not as close to each other as they used to be, and capitalism has altered social relations, people are still there for each other. What I witnessed, especially among women, were still strong friendships and ties of emotional support at the workplace. Postsocialist ethnographies describe the complete breakdown of even the strongest ties of workers’ solidarity (Kideckel 2000; Kideckel 2008). Russian workers have experienced the decrease in the support from the work collectives and their diminished relevance in everyday life (Ashwin 1999), and although they remain important at some workplaces, they cannot provide help in the face of the dangers of capitalism, for example in finding a job (Lonkila and Salmi 2005). In Estonian mines, the workplace has lost some of its prominence but still creates meaning and meaningful relations among people. Furthermore, Galja’s appraisal of capitalism shows that workers do not live in some dreamworld of Soviet nostalgia twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They miss the good things like the collective and work solidarity but are completely aware of the shortcomings of the socialist system, as well as of capitalism.

Compared to Pine’s (1999; 2002b) postsocialist peasants whose moral sphere has always been the household, for migrant urban workers, the workplace was the centre of their life and kinship relations. Through mining dynasties and family events, the whole family was incorporated into the workplace rather than separate from it. Despite changes in workplace organisation and relations, the workplace is still important in creating a full personhood, either through professional pride or simply by the capability to earn money, and a network of meaningful relations. Even those who do not like their job very much are strongly tied to it due to the economic crisis or their professional skills. This is why miners’ expectations of exchange and reciprocity are so much focussed on the workplace. Since they work in a state-owned company, a fact that is immensely important to them against the backdrop of all the privatisation that they have witnessed, the moral expectations of the workplace are often

synonymous with those of the state. I will next explore what miners think that they are giving to the state as their part of the deal that legitimates their perceived entitlements.

#### **4.5. Justifications for moral entitlements**

Ethnographies about mining often highlight the special nature of miners' work. It is dangerous and despite competing with each other, miners also have to look out for each other; certain bonds of camaraderie are formed that transgress ethnic or other boundaries that would matter on the surface (Kideckel 2008; Nash 1979, Chapter 3 of this thesis). The special nature of the work and the Soviet propaganda of miners as the vanguard of the working classes gave miners a strong shared consciousness and sense of entitlement of appropriate rewards. The justifications for the benefits that they felt they were entitled to circled usually around ideas of danger, sacrifices to health, and hard work.

Tõnu Kiiver, a former miner who worked as a guide in the mining museum of Kohtla, was taking excursion groups to see the old shafts and mining machinery. When he stopped at the shaft displaying the area with the mining equipment of the seventies, an electric drill and a chain conveyer, he would tell the audience, be it comprised of Estonian families, a Russian tour group or some determined independent travellers from Western Europe, about the life of the miner in the Soviet times.

The work was very hard. Very dangerous. Here the ceiling is nice and smooth but after an explosion everything can fall down if geological conditions are difficult. One time, 40-50 metres of the shaft ceiling fell down. One person died. So everything has happened, miners' work is really dangerous. Often the water was higher than the edge of your gumboot. But the salaries were fairly high. To compare, if a schoolteacher earned 60 to 70 roubles, then miners got 500 or 600. One zero more than an ordinary person. There were medical checks every year; after ten years of work underground, you could retire ten years earlier than others. Paid leave was more than a month and all the sanatoria from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea were ours.

The museum visitors who tried out using the electric drill or heard the loud and irritating rumbling of the chain conveyer agreed with their guide that a miner's job was a tough job and that high pay for the job was justified. Tõnu Kiiver was not the only one who represented the miners' work as very hard and this was not a made-up narrative to make the museum more attractive. All the retired miners and engineers talked of how the Soviet miners survived very tough, wet, dirty, dusty and dangerous conditions and were paid for it accordingly. This is also exemplified in Kiiver's talk in which, after describing dangerous

work, he immediately shifts to the topic of salary and other benefits that matched the hard work and sacrifice.

The same kind of attitude prevails today. Whenever I would start my first chat with someone in the mine, be it a miner, another underground employee or an engineer, the first thing I would hear was that miners' pay was too low. The logic of the lament usually went like this: "The conditions here are hard: dust, dirt, gas and vibration. The miner is working in these kinds of conditions. Furthermore, he gives up his health for it: miners do not live long after they have stopped working. Therefore, they should be paid more." The same story, narrated in a complaining manner over and over again, resembled Ries' Muscovites, who talked in poetic heightened language about iconic objects, the building blocks of the story that were always repeated (Ries 1997:127). In the miners' talk, the repeated chorus was "low salaries, dust, gas, noise," or in a different workplace, "low salaries, dust, dirt, vibration." The salaries were always measured against the particular hardness of work, expressed in the presence of elements like dust and gas and health-damaging conditions like vibration.

Mine workers saw themselves as those who did the real work, those who worked hard, as opposed to white-collar workers. Being a worker and working hard were synonymous for them and formed the basis for their entitlements. These entitlements were based on the hard work that their parents had done and that they did in the mine. Hard work was emphasised in the narratives of arrival to Estonia. Depictions of Russians as lazy by the mainstream media hurt the workers very deeply. Miners did not usually refer to a particular newspaper, journalist or news article, but felt that the general media was against them.

My parents worked in the mine, how could they be lazy?! My husband worked in the mine, what laziness? Valya from the processing plant lamented.

Valya, this is just how the media presents it, Lera calmed her.

We work normally [*normalno*].

Mostly Russians worked in the mine, right? And this is the same now. In the construction industry there are only Russians. They are where the work is hardest.

The workers emphasised the strong work ethic of anyone who worked in the mine. If their parents had come all the way from Russia to rebuild the ruins after the war, surely they must have worked hard. Their migrant status both in the Soviet period, as restorers of the country, and as those with fewer opportunities than Estonian speakers during the last twenty years, allows Russian-speaking workers to construct their image of not only miners as hard

workers but also Russian speakers as hard workers. This is comparable to Mexican workers in the US who represent themselves as hard-working, compared to Puerto Ricans who are seen as 'lazy' because they were not taking advantage of their opportunities and US citizenship. Being hard-working signifies respectability and creates a counter-narrative to the mainstream idea of Mexican migrants as helpless and undignified (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003:57). In a similar manner, the discourse of hard work allows Russian speakers and miners to maintain their respectability in the neoliberal atmosphere in which the mainstream values rather depict 'hard work' as something that is only done by 'lazy' people who are not smart or entrepreneurial enough to go into private business. Against this mainstream understanding, miners represent themselves as hard-working. This is partially related to the objectively hard working conditions, partially the glorifying Soviet discourse that miners were used to hearing, and partially a reaction against a different regime of values in which hard *physical* work was no longer valued but was nevertheless the main tool for reversing the mainstream thought that labelled Russians and miners as lazy.

Women workers had huge respect for miners and no one ever challenged whether miners worked hard. Women working in the processing plant and cart loading, doing physical work in cold and dusty outdoor conditions, always presented their work as hard. In the conversation above, the women also touched upon the overlap of class and ethnicity that I discuss in Chapter 3, stating that Russians mostly do the blue-collar work which is the hardest. Mine workers, men and women, were also proud of their identity as workers, meaning those who do the hard work, despite simultaneously feeling like a downtrodden underclass. One day I was standing in the windy and dusty yard between two railways with some women from the loading department who were having a little break. They had just signed a petition against a new regulation that introduced annual bonuses for managers but not for workers. As always, the women were complaining about their hard work and poor pay.

Raising the kid alone, I only have money for basic food, I cannot travel, I cannot afford to fix my teeth, said Anya, a militant young loading operator.

But who wouldn't have these problems? asked Masha, an older woman, trying to calm Anya down.

Those who have education don't have these problems, Anya replied.

Well, in that case, you should have gotten some education, Masha said.

But Anya was not happy with this response: If we all become educated, who is then going to do the work?

Masha had qualifications from a mining institute, valued education, and always came up with moderate statements, in fear of losing her job before she had put her own children through university. Anya, despite being in her mid-30s, with little experience of the Soviet Union, had quit school when she was 16 and done different blue-collar jobs after that. She, like many other unskilled workers, firmly believed in the value of physical labour. This dialogue shows Anya's understanding that blue-collar workers were the ones who were actually working hard, while the activities of the educated classes were seen as dubious and non-productive. Workers were needed so that some *actual* productive work would be done in the country. No doubt, that work was physically hard and required recognition.

Sometimes the discourse of hard work and entitlement had been transformed into a discourse of taxpayers, which workers themselves stated was more 'fashionable'. Another woman from the processing plant told me during a group interview:

We have worked for so many years, we pay tax. We taxpayers are conscientious, honest people. We also want to live like in Europe and wish that the attitude towards us was like towards normal taxpayers, that everything was transparent and open, that information was not concealed anywhere and that it would be the same for all.

The women's imagination reflected on the one hand their moral economy from the Soviet period, whereby the women stressed that they worked hard and paid their taxes and deserved something in return from the state. On the other hand, rather than looking backward, their vision lay in what they imagined Europe to be, transparent and fair, treating all taxpayers well. In their perception of the everyday, Estonia was not quite in that Europe yet, because workers were not treated as valued taxpayers. Rather than nostalgia, their view was anticipatory, about how things ought to be in the future, a utopia.

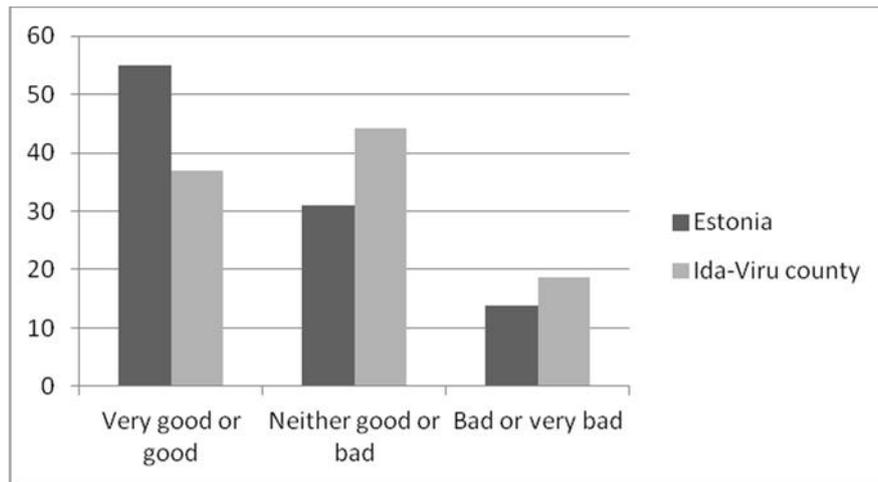
Besides giving the society their hard work and skill, miners feel they are entitled to more recognition and higher salaries because they sacrifice their health in the mines. Miners were not selling only their labour but also their health<sup>16</sup>. Their lives are shorter than others', but at least they should be shown that their work is appreciated, and it is best when this is shown in money. The hand-drills that are now in the mining museum caused vibration

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<sup>16</sup> A very similar account of sacrificing health over money and comradeship in the British mines is given by McIvor and Johnston McIvor, Arthur, and Ronald Johnston. 2007. *Miners' lung: a history of dust disease in British coal mining*. Aldershot; Burlington, VT: Ashgate., who also emphasise the importance of earning well and the masculine identity that miners cultivate.

disease among miners; miners have a higher rate of cancer than the Estonian average; being in the damp, wet and cold gave them joint aches and arthritis; back problems from sitting and operating machines were common. In 2000, the old technology that had used electric power was replaced by new technology powered by diesel. Although miners admitted that work was physically easier after the new technology was introduced, they pointed out that new diesel-fuelled machines produced much more cancer-causing fumes, which the weak ventilation system of the mine could not cope with and the miners breathed in diesel fumes. It is easier to work but harder to breathe, the men told me. “Especially on Monday mornings,” a miner told me, “because they switch on the ventilation only on Monday morning, but our shift starts at midnight on Sunday night. So there have already been the drillers and the blasters and when you come to work in the morning, you feel as if you are in a bag, cannot see or breathe anything.”

Another recurring theme in my chats with miners was that that when a miner retires, he dies very soon after. Change of work regime: the body that has been working so hard for a long time is starting to relax and that was why they died, the miners explained. Some of the workers even went as far as saying that they did not know any retired miners: all of them died as soon as they retired. Miners in general tried to avoid their retirement at 53, to maintain their high salary, and I also suspect out of the fear that they would very soon have the same destiny as their retired mates who had died. Although it is difficult to find data about miners’ life expectancy, the average male life expectancy of men at birth in 2010 in Estonia was 69.93, while in Ida-Virumaa it was 65.96, four years shorter than the Estonian average, and people in Ida-Virumaa were also less satisfied with their health (see Table 5). As miners were prepared to die as soon as they retired, they wanted their short lives to at least be financially comfortable and their hard work recognised.



**Table 5. Assessment of health among those over 18 and older in Estonia and Ida-Virumaa in 2012.**

Source: Statistics Estonia.

#### **4.6. Miners' basic demands – respect and money**

As I have shown, miners feel that the basis of their entitlements is hard work, expert skill, sacrificing their health and living a short life. In return, miners want respect and money. The Soviet order idealised the noble proletariat, and miners who were doing hard work and risking their lives became the ideal representation of the worker. Miners represented pure socialist masculinity, the socialist idea of a man bound up in the image of a miner, embodied most famously by Stakhanov (Ghodsee 2011). Kohtla-Järve had its own heroes. The Heroes of Socialist Labour were well-known and respected men in the area; everyone especially remembered the Estonian hero Aksel Pärtel, who worked hard in the mechanisation of mining in the 1960s and 1970s and later became a journalist, a writer and a deputy in the Soviet Supreme Council. Miners who knew that Aksel Pärtel only had a modest funeral among family in the early 2000s regretted this and blamed the mining company for not looking after their former heroes better. Artur, another hero, had been the leader of the company trade union, sat in the Estonian Parliament, was politically active and well respected in the community.



**Illustration 10. Konstantin Mihhailov's oil painting 'Miners', 1965.**

**Estonian artist Konstantin Mihhailov's socialist realist works depicted workers in the kolkhozes and mines. His miners look very serious, have wide shoulders indicating manual work, and seem tall and heroic in the painting. It has been hard for miners to let go of their own image as heroes. Painting courtesy of Kohtla-Järve Museum of Oil Shale.**

Changing traditions that honoured miners was seen as a threat to the whole moral world of the miner. The question of respect is very well exemplified by the case of Miners' Day. Miners' Day, a Soviet holiday, was always celebrated on the last Sunday of August. The first director of the company after independence decided to abolish the day as it was considered too Soviet. It was re-established in 1999 by the next director, and it was one of his most popular moves. The day was celebrated in the beautiful and spacious park at the seaside not far from the mining towns and involved activities for children, various sports competitions between teams from different mines, honouring the best workers, a lot of grilled meat-eating and vodka-drinking, a concert with the miners' favourite stars and even fireworks at the end of the night. The event was open to all local inhabitants regardless of whether they worked in the mines or not.

After the merging with Eesti Energia the event was renamed 'Eesti Energia Summer Days' and the date of the event was changed and brought forward to the first half of August, apparently in the hope of warmer and better weather. The format of the party remained relatively similar to what it was but all other employees besides the mine workers were also invited, from the power plants in the border town of Narva, power engineers, managers and

customer services staff from other parts of Estonia. Instead of being an open public party, it was closed to the public until 5pm, after which the people from the nearby towns could also join it.

These changes seriously offended miners. Many decided not to go and started calling it the Day of Power Engineers [*den' energetiki*], to make a strong point that the party now belonged to the power plant workers. As one of the miners explained, "No one went to the Day of Power Engineers. It is as if teachers would start to celebrate the day of tank drivers." The fact that after the takeover, the company name had changed and Miners' Day was no longer Miners' Day was very often part of the litany about hard work and poor pay that I heard. Miners were respected in the local community. Since every family had at some point had at least one member working in the mine, everyone felt connected to the profession and Miners' Day was an occasion for mine workers to meet their colleagues and neighbours and confirm to each other that they were still around, they were still important locally, and at least they respected each other's work although the rest of the country knew nothing about it. It was the public display of what miners were and how they partied.

Changing this to a corporate event meant that miners felt that the focus shifted from them as miners to the corporation. Calling it the Day of Power Engineers made a really strong point emphasising that miners' work underground was much harder and had a different nature to that of *energetiky*; they felt that there was no reason to share their special day with someone else who did not understand the hard work of a miner. Furthermore, as the party was now organised by outsiders who, again did not understand their work, the day was taken from them. The changes signified that the stigmatisation of miners that had taken over the rest of Estonia was creeping in to their own region. Closing the event to the rest of the local population meant that there was no one to worship miners, to confirm their local importance and build a local sphere in which miners were still respected. The fall from the Soviet vanguard to the marginalised, excluded and forgotten had not been an easy one. This is why Miners' Day carried such importance. The lamenting about the abolishing of the Miner's Day, that I heard nearly every day, spoke of wider issues than merely one celebration. It was about merging miners with a corporate world that they did not agree with and symbolically pushing them to the private sphere, to an even smaller circle in which miners were respected.

A good and practical way of showing respect towards miners was giving them a good salary, miners thought. Low salary was the central theme in the litanies. This was voiced both by auxiliary workers and miners proper who worked in the production teams underground. The salaries in the mining sector were higher than average salaries in Estonia. A miner proper, earning piece rate, would earn around 1700 euros gross a month. In comparison, the average monthly gross wages in Estonia during the last quarter of 2010 was 814 euros and a lecturer at the anthropology department would be paid 705 euros monthly, a senior teacher in the mining town of Kohtla-Järve 738 euros. In the mine, besides the head engineer and other top managers, the salary of other employees was usually lower than that of miners in production departments. The lowest-paid workers – women in loading and the processing plant, and women in the lamp station – received about 570 euros a month. Despite miners having a high salary compared to other sectors and other workers in the mine, every initial interaction I had with a miner or other mine employees started with a thorough complaint about the shamefully low salaries of miners.

Because miners' work was harder than anyone else's, their pay also had to be higher than anyone else's. An important aspect of miners' pay that the guide Tõnu Kiiver pointed to was that it was just high compared to everyone else's salary in Soviet times. Several people with engineering education decided to take the position of miner rather than engineer after university studies because they had families to feed. Miners' salary allowed consumption that was not available to anyone else. There is a stereotype in Estonia that in Soviet times, there was plenty of money but nothing to buy, while capitalism means plenty of goods but no money. This is not true, as most people's salaries were rather small. My grandparents, a museum researcher and a university lecturer, would earn 120 and 180 roubles a month and could just about cover their everyday needs. Miners, on the other hand, earned several times more than others. "The first person in the village to buy a TV was uncle Kolja, a miner; the first person to buy a car was uncle Vanja, another miner," one of the managers who grew up in a mining village remembered from his childhood. The main issue seemed to be that the differences between the salaries of miners and others are not so radical anymore. The mining guide Tõnu seemed to take a certain pleasure in talking about the nearly tenfold difference between their salary and that of the ordinary people. This was read as the recognition of miners as really doing the hardest work there was.

For miners, money and respect are intimately tied and if they are those who do the hardest work, the productive work in the region, this should be shown in their salaries. Salaries, in turn, confirm that they are the most respected people in the region. Veronika, who worked at an office job in the mining company local headquarters, had a hard time explaining to her father, a miner, that people in the office are also actually doing work and deserve a salary. Veronika's salary was lower than her father's, but not low enough to satisfy the miner, for whom working with one's head was inferior to manual labour. Maria, the wife of a mine engineer, complained about the salary differences being out of proportion. "When my husband's coursemates from the mining institute found jobs on the surface, he decided to work in the mine so that he could earn a decent salary. But now long-distance truck drivers earn as much as a mine engineer!" Working underground, in the local understanding, was harder than anything else and certainly it was unjust for a long-distance truck driver, or even worse, a power engineer, to earn as much as a miner. When I tried to explain that the difference between the salary of a university lecturer and a miner is still huge – a miner still earns maybe not three times, but still 2.5 times more – miners usually did not believe me that a lecturer's salary could be that low. The best cure for that, in their opinion, was to find a rich husband with a higher salary.

Arguing against the litanies or trying to evoke a more positive mood was futile. This was because litanies, as I now understand, stood for wider issues. Part of the litany about low salaries stood for loss of respect and the status of miners falling nearer to that of other workers, rather than being the 'kings of the region'. Part of it however actually signified the everyday anxiety of getting by and being able to support the family.

Behind this feeling of miners' hard work and entitlement to high pay, there was a whole range of issues that had nothing to do with prestige or Soviet nostalgia. In the region, where women had also always worked, albeit in lower income jobs, losing one income in the family was a serious economic blow. Miners' wives had lost their jobs, there were children and grandchildren to support and there was no stability. In the region of 20% unemployment, miners did not complain about their salary only because it was higher in Soviet times or in some Western wonderland. They were often the supporters of the whole extended family and felt the pressure to help. With the whole family depending on their ability to sell their health and labour, there was an acute sense of uncertainty. Although the salary is an important symbol of bygone better times in itself, it is also a cry for help from the workers who were

simultaneously struggling with the threat of shortened annual leave, rising retirement age, deteriorating health care, increasing unemployment and the overall economic decline of the region. The feelings of entitlement were related to real economic issues and the understanding that the state should guarantee at least the basic economic survival of them and their families, as well as yearning for respect and recognition. In this sense, miners' everyday experience can be seen in the dialectic of the social and the economic, as the moral economy on the one hand is based on memories of how life used to be more stable and miners were better off, and trying to claim back these past times, but on the other hand is situated in the global marketplace where the miners sensed their vulnerability in the economic crisis, like other workers. Their moral economy echoed the results of the everyday neoliberalism as experienced on the ground.

#### **4.7. Gender relations and moral entitlements**

The moral economy is strongly based on the idea of the hard work of miners and their entitlements to recognition and a decent salary. This is certainly partly tied to the special status that miners had in the Soviet period, and partly to the belief that physical work is harder, more productive and should therefore be better recognised and better paid than white-collar work. Miners want basic social guarantees that the elite is stealing from them; miners think that they work hard and are fulfilling their moral duty to the state, and should therefore be paid well. Not only because they were former heroes but because in the situation of high unemployment in the region, they have many people to take care of and they are scared and worried about their income, the future of the whole industry and their own fragile bodies.

Another significant reason behind miners' desire to earn more than anyone else is a particular understanding of gender roles. This is partially linked to the Soviet system of gender roles. Soviet women were expected to be mothers producing the next generation and taking care of the household as well as being workers. In return the state offered them protection in their role as mothers and independence through paid work. Men's role in society was defined more narrowly: they were expected to be the key workers building up the communist system. The state had assumed the role of patriarch and provider for both men and women. As this traditional role in the family was taken from men, they were expected to express their masculinity through service to their state, through their work (Ashwin 2000; Kukhterin 2000; Verdery 1996).

Nevertheless, the man could still feel like the provider for the family, because women's salaries were lower because women worked more in light industries in which salaries were lower in general. In heavy industries women usually had the lower paid unmechanised auxiliary jobs, and even if women and men worked at the same job, women were usually confined to lower skill and wage grades with little prospects of promotion. Thus, women became proletarianised but their domestic burdens were not lifted. As Filtzer argues, women's subordinate role at home reinforced discrimination at work, and their low-skilled position at work undermined men's faith that women could assume a position of authority in any setting in the society. Furthermore, domestic and work burdens did not leave women any time for study to advance their skills (Filtzer 1992). The idea of the male breadwinner, and that it was natural for men to earn more than women, was never challenged in the Soviet Union, as women were encouraged to work but the state officials were also aware that men were not happy in the society with 'masculinised' women (Kiblitckaya 2000). The Soviet idea of gender was based on natural sexual difference: it was natural for mothers to take care of the household and children, also influencing the way women were incorporated into the labour force as second-class workers, and what was expected of them as mothers.

The collapse of the Soviet Union further evoked a trend of emphasising women as mothers and wives in the new nationalist discourse. In the context of Russia, this has been seen as a way of removing women from the long list of job seekers but also as a continuation of another state project that uses women as its ideological tool (Bridger, Pinnick and Kay 1995). Contemporary Russian men are trying to re-establish patriarchal relations in their own, postsocialist families (Kukhterin 2000). Similarly, in Estonia, abolishing compulsory employment for women resulted in ideologies of women staying at home and restoring the interwar Estonian Republic ideal of the bourgeois family. In the reality of the economic decline of the 1990s, some were forced into this bourgeois model as unemployment increased, while few working families could financially afford to take part in this model and live on one salary, though it became a dream for some.

Women who were working in the processing plant and cart loading did very hard physical work in conditions that they thought were too cold, or hot, and always dusty and physically straining. As in the Soviet period, their work was not mechanised, while men were all operating new machinery. These women would tell me that their pay was low and their

work conditions hard. But miners' work was harder than theirs, and they thought it was justified that miners earned three times more than them. They were dissatisfied that men who were doing similar work to theirs in the processing plant were getting paid more than them, but the miner working underground was something sacred for them. These women imagined that the miners' work was more physical than theirs, and confirmed the idea of the miner as a hero working in the hardest conditions. In fact, the women were not familiar with the contemporary technology in the mine, most of them had never even been underground, and they were not aware that in many cases men's work was now less physical than theirs.

At some point, I started challenging the miners, telling them about the women's work conditions in the processing plant and how the hardness of women's work was not reflected in their salaries. Some miners then admitted that indeed, as the processing plant was part of the same production process, maybe the women should be paid a salary more equal to that of miners. The justification came from the fact that women were also seen as producers, rather than auxiliary workers who were not producing anything. The prevalent opinion however was that working in the factory doing physical work with the spade is simply not women's work and women should not be doing it in the first place. As the role of women taking care of the home and children was seen as 'natural' in the Soviet period, miners saw women doing physical work as something unnatural that should not happen.

Women agreed with this discourse and wanted to be treated like women, rather than as hard workers. This can be exemplified by a conversation between two women in the processing plant. A woman from one department complained to a colleague from another department that the boss did not treat her and her colleagues "as women". She recalled that there were some difficulties at work and she was telling her manager to be more understanding, because they were women after all. "You are not women, you are workers," the manager had replied. Her colleague listened sympathetically and responded that her boss, on the contrary, was very good because he understood that they were women doing physical work and that it was hard for them. Another woman from the processing plant, who thought that the management's attitude had worsened over the last few years, explained that it was expressed in the manner that the management did not call them *zhensiny*, women, but *tyoty*, which is a word for slightly older, possibly less educated and respected women.

Women saw their hard physical work as a curse, something that was necessary to do because there were no other options. But they did not think that their pay should be higher

because they do physical work. Instead, they appreciated if one of the male workers came and helped them out. Masha did not see her aching back or Olga her ailing kidney as a great sacrifice undertaken to earn the money. Rather, women saw their own bodies as letting them down, putting them in uncertain situations in which failing health might cause temporary or permanent time off work that would stop them from holding on to the only source of income they had. Compared to men, the former miner-heroes, there was nothing explicitly heroic about the work of these women; no one had ever publicly framed them as heroes and that seems to be one of the reasons why they did not feel their salary should be higher or that the sacrifices they made to their health needed to be generously compensated.



**Illustration 11. The most common tool for a female worker – a spade.**

To further illustrate the case about gender, hard work and pay, I will introduce three underground bus drivers. Underground bus drivers consider themselves ‘miners’ in the wider sense of the word; they take miners to the workplace and back. Vadik was a young Russian-speaking man in his late twenties. He was happy with his work and salary because he also had a private business to top up his salary. He was also satisfied that his girlfriend did not have to go to work and could take care of him. His girlfriend cooked really well, he always told me. Lembit, a middle-aged Estonian speaker, did the same job, driving the big yellow bus with miners to their work site and back to the ground again. He was not satisfied with his salary, which was 700 euros, and talked about the times when he got 500 roubles and his wife who worked as a medical nurse got 70. It seemed that Lembit took pride in the fact that he

earned so much more than his wife. The third bus driver, Jaak, also a middle-aged Estonian speaker, only got the job recently, when he was laid off from a door and window factory after the economic crisis ended the construction boom in Estonia. His salary at the factory was only around 100 euros at the end when business stopped coming in, and he was very happy with his pay at the mine. His wife worked in a newspaper kiosk.

Jaak talked more about getting by financially than about who was earning more in the family. It seemed that Vadik and Lembit, who had worked in the mine for longer, had stricter ideas about women's role, women's pay and believed more strongly that men should be earning more than women. Lembit's idea was based on the Soviet model in which women were allowed to work but had to earn less, while Vadik was trying to restore the new bourgeois model with a stay-at-home girlfriend who would take care of him while he was working two jobs, and providing for the family was his way of constructing his masculinity. For Jaak, who had previously worked elsewhere, this gendered view of pay was not as important. It points to the historical position of miners who were able to express their hyper-masculinity through their hard work and high pay, and this was not necessarily so in other economic sectors in which men and women's pay had been more equal and families recognised that both salaries were needed to get by. In the economic situation of 2010, living according to the male breadwinner model was possible only in the case of Vadik who actually had another job besides his job in the mine. The cases of the three underground bus drivers show different gender attitudes and class aspirations.

Jane Humphries (1988) shows the complexity of different motivations for banning women from working underground, in her exploration of the 1842 Mines Regulation Act in Britain. She concludes that male miners' support for this act was not motivated by keeping women in the domestic sphere, as additional family income was needed, but miners did not want their wives to work in the hard conditions of the mine. The bourgeois fear of women's sexual promiscuity and challenging patriarchy, which helped to establish the act, was less of a concern for the working-class folk. In this case, Lembit and Jaak were happy with their wives working in a sphere different from mining, while Vadik, who was slightly younger, represented the bourgeois desire for a housewife.



**Illustration 12. Gender relations in the mine**

**Miners did not usually agree that women should work in the mine doing hard work. The only, slightly unusual job in which women were accepted and respected underground was mine surveying. Women were never accepted as equals as workers or engineers, but mine surveying, the only underground socialisation that women could qualify in, allowed education to take privilege over gender, at least at the workplace.**

In the mine, women were however never considered workers of the same worth as men. When I told women in the processing plant that some miners would like their wives to stay at home, they explained, “This was probably told to you by miners who have bad wives. A good wife manages to do it all, go to work and also prepare meals and look after the home.” These older women had also internalised the Soviet idea that the double burden of women was somehow natural. Carole Pateman (1988) has argued that women cannot become workers in the same way as men because the whole premise of constructing men as workers is based on the idea that the worker is a man who has a (house)wife to take care of his daily needs. She claims that Engels’ assumption that once women enter paid employment they are equal to their husbands, that the category of ‘worker’ is universal and applies to everyone who sells their labour power, is faulty. Since woman’s labour power and her own person is owned by the husband, she is not free to sell her labour in the way that men are.

Even as workers, women are subordinated to men in a different way than men are subordinated to other men. Women have not been incorporated into the patriarchal structure of capitalist employment as ‘workers’; they have been incorporated as *women*; and how can it be otherwise when women are not, and cannot be, men? (p. 142)

The sexual contract between men and women, and sexual domination, is present both at work and at home, and while men are also subordinated as workers, they occupy a position in the civil society that women do not, making a working man what Pateman calls an *unfree master*.

The women in a post-Soviet workplace are proud to be workers, and call themselves workers, in comparison with other ethnographies in which working women still felt they were housewives, brides or mothers, even when at work (Lee 1998; Pollert 1981; Westwood 1984). The women internalised the Soviet discourse of being workers, but also prioritised and naturalised their role of women and wives before their role as workers. This was not so much related to the idea of being housewives (because a good wife can do both) but to the particular nature of physical and dirty work that was not seen as suitable for women. If the hard and dirty work of miners emphasised their masculinity, women doing similar work was considered unsuitable for women and made female workers appreciate the bosses who nevertheless recognised their femininity. The Soviet production model with female low-paid auxiliary workers had continued, while the double-breadwinner family model, in which the male earns more, was often no longer the case. For many of these women, the time of being a 'good wife' was now gone, as their husbands had died of drinking or cancer, and their low salary was the means of keeping them alive. Those whose husbands were still working, were lucky.

For miners, as I emphasised earlier, the need for higher salary was not only based on the need to show their masculinity or be the patriarch of the family, but also to support the unemployed wife or children. The idea of a male breadwinner who earned a high salary by working hard was still very dominant and was accepted by women, who never challenged the supreme position of miners. This family model was influenced by Soviet ideas and employment structure, but also by the fact that the mining company had precisely reproduced this employment structure in the market economy, never challenging the existing hierarchies. The new ideologies, popular both in Estonia and Russia, together with high unemployment in the region further aggravated by the 2008 economic crisis, made the miner *the man*, one of the few who still had earning power in the region.

## 4.8. Conclusion

The miners' moral universe is built on the contract with the state and their company that belongs to the state. Miners give the state and society their hard work and sacrifice their health and lives in the difficult cold, damp, dusty and noisy underground conditions. In return for their sacrifice of seldom seeing sunlight and dying young, they want money and respect. These entitlements are partly based on the days of the glorification of miners and an attempt to hold on to their former status, but largely determined also by the current socioeconomic conditions that make the miner the sole breadwinner. Thus, the justification of the entitlements is not only based on some patriarchal desire but because of high unemployment in the area. The material deprivation, however, reinforces the sense of entitlement based on male work. As the economic entitlements are unstable and not the highest in the region, and symbolic displays of respect like the Miners' Day are disappearing, miners feel the basis of their profession and their moral world threatened.

Men and women both share the ideology of hard work, of glorifying manual work in production and being suspicious of white-collar workers. They have a generally egalitarian worldview (admittedly based on the gendered division of labour), and distance themselves from the elites who are seen to represent market ideology and individualism, which do not match the workers' moral economy. This clash of worldviews is expressed by vocal complaining that, together with particular ideas about how the economy should work and what workers are entitled to, constitutes the moral boundaries of miners as part of the working class. These boundaries are shared both by Estonian- and Russian-speaking miners and, as survey data shows, are similar to the egalitarian worldview of the poor in the countryside, blue-collar workers in general, other Russian speakers and both Estonian- and Russian-speaking women.

Gender plays a defining role in what it means to be a miner. The discourse of deserving rewards for hard physical work only applies to men. While women's hard work is grudgingly acknowledged, it is seen as unnatural and the same principles of hard work and high pay do not apply to women, who should look after their men or work in another economic sector for a lower salary. Don Filtzer, who was analysing the labour process in the Soviet Union in the Khrushchev period, believed that men's privileges at home and at work at the expense of women atomised the workforce, which formed the basis for the elite to stay in

power. This atomisation undermined workers' ability to "act as a self-conscious collective historical agent and challenge the elite for power" (Filtzer 1992:208).

Eurostat statistics for 2010 showed that the gender pay gap of 30% in Estonia is the largest in Europe (Eurostat 2012). This shows continuing Soviet practices, as capitalism has continued to exploit the existing inequalities to extract surplus. Nevertheless, in the case of miners, this is not the cause of fragmentation of the working class, since women have internalised their roles as women and agree to the supremacy of miners whose high salary they see as legitimate. Men and women both see themselves as the underclass in opposition to the Estonian-speaking elite; they share the morality of hard work and both conform to the particular gender hierarchies. As Carole Pateman (1988) demonstrates, the values of liberty, equality and fraternity only apply to the fraternity, the brothers who are men. Although both men and women of the mining community share the values of equality, they exist alongside a patriarchal gender hierarchy. This, however, does not hinder their struggle as workers, as long as women accept that their role in the moral community is to be wives or women rather than workers, and as long as women appeal to the shared class experience rather than the inequalities between genders. How this egalitarian worldview is maintained in leisure practices in the face of increasing inequalities, and how gender roles are played out outside the mine, is explored in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5. Stratifying spending, levelling leisure: miners' consumption and free time**

### **5.1.Introduction**

“The miner spends a third of his day underground,” writes the Hero of Socialist Labour and miner Aksel Pärtel (1972).

Seven hours of work, half an hour to go to the [underground] workplace and the same to go back. Going home also takes some more minutes. The rest of the time belongs to the miner. Most of all, one needs to eat a lot and sleep well... Then there are also domestic chores. This does not leave a lot of free time, especially for a family man. It is a different story with the weekend. A two-day weekend is a good thing. But these two free days have seriously raised the problem of leisure.

Pärtel goes on to describe men for whom the introduction of the two-day weekend seems a burden. They are too bored to watch TV, have already read the newspaper, find nothing to talk about with their wives, then go for a walk, find a mate who is also bored, go and get some alcohol, start drinking, and drink until a severe headache wakes them up on Monday morning in the sobering-up station. Pärtel talks about the problems of drinking and finds it especially wrong because “Soviet order has guaranteed – for the first time in the history of humankind – opportunities for dignified life, work and rest for every member of society” (Pärtel 1972:66). Books are cheap, there are libraries and schools for adults, and workers' clubs provide an opportunity to learn to sing, dance or take up another hobby, like sport.

Since Pärtel's writings in the 1970s, the situation has changed. The two-day weekend is still too long for some miners but instead of the Soviet order that guaranteed equal leisure opportunities for everyone, neoliberal capitalism with high social costs of restructuring the economy in Ida-Virumaa have increased the differentiation of leisure and consumption that are available to different members of the community. In this chapter, I first highlight the differences in consumption patterns among the employees of 'Estonia' to show the increased inequality in consumption. In the second half of the chapter, I show how despite this, miners' most loved leisure activities are still those that do not require large financial means, and level the social inequalities in the community. The secondary aims of this chapter are to sketch the emerging class differences and highlight the importance of and dependence on family in the mining community, themes that will be unpacked in the next chapter when I return to the context of the workplace. The chapter continues with the themes of moral economy as shown

in the previous chapter, but moves from the workplace to the sphere of leisure, which is still however intimately connected with miners' work.

## **5.2. Income, education and consumption: the fragile differentiation of lifestyles**

The paradox of the socialist state was that to legitimate its power it needed to redistribute goods to the masses while accumulating things in the centre. The socialist system of consumption was based on satisfying people's basic needs rather than their every consumption desire (Verdery 1996:26-29). The inability to satisfy these desires turned consumption into a political act as people rioted against increasing food prices in the Soviet Union (Baron 2001) or created a second economy based on prestige goods like Western clothes and music (cf. Pine 2002a; Yurchak 2006). According to Borneman (1990), capitalism creates specific desires and specific goods to satisfy them, while socialism creates a more general desire for goods that cannot be fulfilled.

Postsocialist studies of shifting consumption patterns emphasise the shift from the ideology of, or focus on, production, to that of consumption (Berdahl 2005; Creed 2002). For many people, this shift from the importance of production to that of trade and consumption seems somehow immoral (cf. Kaneff 2002), sometimes also associated with other ethnic groups (Shevchenko 2002). Consuming particular goods allows people to express their distinct identities and reject others, for example Lithuanian evangelist Protestants reject vodka and embrace Coca-Cola so as to express their modernist and transnational identity (Lankauskas 2002). Sigrid Rausing argues that villagers in an Estonian kolkhoz centre preferred to buy more expensive Western goods, to confirm the normality of Estonians belonging to Western or Northern Europe, in opposition to anything Russian or Eastern that represented the 'not-normal' of the Soviet past (Rausing 2004). Consumption is also related to patriotism as Lithuanians "viewed Lithuanian-made foodstuffs and beverages – dairy or meat products, baked goods, beer, vodka, and the like – as natural, pure, better tasting, and of superior quality" (Lankauskas 2002:324; see also Pine 2002b) while some foreign products are domesticated and given another meaning, such as the McDonalds in Russia which is treated as something inherently Russian (Caldwell 2004a).

The question of consumption is not related only to patriotism and ethnic identity but also to questions of citizenship – as Berdahl points out, socialist citizenship was based on

production. Following the Comaroffs, she suggests that the culture of neoliberalism is “a culture that [...] re-envision[s] persons not as producers from a particular community, but as consumers in a planetary marketplace” (2000:304).

Nevertheless, authors like Gerald Creed (2002) have warned against overemphasising the new opportunities of consumption, as many ethnographic subjects, instead of starting lavish consumption, have to minimise market participation in order to survive economically. He suggests that we need “to reverse the common analytical formula that assumes socialist limitation and capitalist opportunity, and instead situate contemporary consumption practices vis-à-vis their socialist predecessors and capitalist restrictions” (2002:19). Furthermore, as Berdahl shows, the new order, besides creating new consumers, also creates the ‘losers’ of postsocialism who cannot afford to consume and are therefore excluded from the citizenship based on consumption. For those who cannot participate in the new forms of consumption, rejecting consumerism and retreating to household-based production and consumption practices is a politicised act (Pine 2002b), similarly to how participating in particular consumption was political under socialism.

Furthermore, Pine (2001) points to the complex relationship between production and consumption and its changed relationship in postsocialism. There are regional and historical variations in the value of production work outside the home. Products made in Poland were less valued under socialism, while work in production was highly valued in old industrial areas like Łódź, but in postsocialism local products are valued and producing commodities for export reduces the value of particular labour. In other regions, work seen as not prestigious at home, is seen as valuable when done abroad for wages in foreign currencies and helps to materialise consumption at home. In industrial work in postsocialism, she concludes, production and consumption became more separate, while in the domestic sphere the two were drawn closer together. Pine’s work points to the shortcomings of the ethnographies that announce a shift from production to consumption or focus on only one of those aspects, when in fact they are intimately linked. My aim here is not to follow in the footsteps of anthropologists who argue for the prevalence of consumption and leisure practices over that of production in the postmodern world. Rather I am trying to show the sphere outside the workplace as one important aspect in the formation of miners’ identity and class consciousness.

The interlinked relationship of production and consumption of goods and free time is also visible among Estonian miners. Miners in Soviet Estonia were wealthy and many had access to networks of scarce goods. Income differences between miners working in production, auxiliary workers and engineers/managers were not huge. Differentiation in income and prestige of the different positions has only occurred during the last 20 years of Estonian independence, challenging the previous egalitarian consumption practices. On the one hand, different jobs in the production process are valued differently (in terms of money and respect), which is echoed in varied consumption practices, but on the other hand the nature of miners' work and their previously fairly homogeneous social standing mean that miners keep levelling leisure and consumption practices available for everyone. I suggest that this is partially related to the nature of miners' work and production, which requires them to look out for each other and cultivate solidarity. To understand the different trajectories of consumption, consider three case studies of workers in 'Estonia'.

Igor was a miner in the First Production Department. He was 51 years old, divorced and remarried; both he and his wife had grown-up children. In the mine, he left a very militant impression, always complaining about miners' poor pay and conditions, cursing the company, the prime minister, the Estonian state. He was the type who was deeply disillusioned with capitalism and its consequences because of poor health care services and out-migration. When I asked him in the mine what he would do if he earned more money, in the presence of other miners, he said that he would buy a motorcycle. In reality, his consumption patterns were more complex than this and with his salary he could afford several things. For example, Igor had a collection of ancient swords and pistols that he demonstrated with pride, always keeping an eye out for new additions. He lived in a flat in one of the 1970s suburbs and owned a dacha near Lake Peipus. With his wife and himself both working (she for a significantly lower salary), they could afford a car that he drove to the mine, occasional meals in the fanciest restaurant in the area, and trips abroad.

Igor's biggest reason for wanting to earn more was, however, related to wanting to help his children and grandchildren. The shouting, spitting, swearing miner that I saw in the mine turned into another person when showing me the video of his grandchild. On the video, Igor, a short, well-built round man was bouncing a one-year-old little girl up and down on his palm, kissing her and talking to her gently. His eyes lit up when he talked about the little girl. The girl was the daughter of his wife's daughter, from her previous marriage. Igor however

did not care that she was not his biological grandchild and admitted that he might even love her more, because the girl was growing up without a father and had no other grandparents to look after her. The consumption activities that Igor thought were most important were to buy things for the little girl. Besides helping the young single mother with everyday expenses, Igor had already started buying his granddaughter jewellery. He had also bought a bottle of Cognac for her – the plan was to open it for her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. Igor could retire in a few years (53 for miners) but had decided to keep working to maintain the same lifestyle and help their children and grandchildren. “If only I had enough strength,” he told me, to keep doing his job and earning himself money that guaranteed comfortable living and helping kin. As soon as the miner’s body gives in, this style of consumption finishes.

Olga was working as a cart loader in the mine. She was in her early 40s, and married. Her salary was nearly three times less than that of Igor. She lived in a little village 10 km from the mine with her unemployed husband and children. Her husband did casual work and spent most of the time drinking. Olga’s salary had to cover the needs of the whole family. Her oldest son was in the army, earning his own living; the next one, 20 years old, had a girlfriend and a small child. Olga had to take a loan to build a second floor for their house for the young family to live on. The next daughter, 19, finished secondary school with very good results but Olga’s salary did not stretch far enough to send her to the university in Tartu. She went to a college of the university closer to home, where the university halls were subsidised. The younger children were still at home. Olga’s consumption did not reach much beyond the everyday needs – since the mine bus did not go through her village anymore, she had to pay a colleague from the same village for petrol as they shared the car to work. There was the loan to pay back for the second floor, children to be fed and clothed. One evening, walking from the changing room to the car park, she told me how her husband had just found out that she had bought trainers for her 16-year-old son, which were to be paid for in instalments. The boy’s feet were growing quickly and he had made a very convincing case that he needed new trainers. Olga did not have all the money but agreed to get them nevertheless, keeping it secret from her husband who, when sober, counted every penny and told her off for being wasteful. Unfortunately, the husband had been around when the trainers arrived, and was very angry about it.

Despite her small means, Olga still managed to keep her children fed and clothed and, like all women in the mine, took great care with her appearance. After changing from her

work clothes to go back home, she always reached for lipstick and perfume which she kept in her locker. Due to years of physical work, Olga had problems with her heart and kidney but could not afford to take time off work to have an operation. After her last serious illness, she got truly scared about what would happen if she could not work anymore. Sometimes she joked that she should go on disability benefit, but that she would not get it because she was Russian. Olga's meagre consumption, just like Igor's lifestyle, was very dependent on one income (the spouse's income being only a small supplement), which was available only as long as they had their strength and their health.

Dimitri was an engineer in his 40s who had started as an underground foreman and made his way up to an office job providing parts for the mining machinery. He lived with his wife and two children in a private house bought in the 1990s that the family had rebuilt themselves. His oldest daughter was at university in England. Dimitri's wife was working in a managerial position in the sphere of culture, as well as teaching in the local college on the weekends and running her own small company. The family leased two cars. Like other families, they complained that miners were paid too little for the hard work that they did. This family, like Olga's, was also constantly worrying about the shortage of money. A very big expense for the family was educating the older daughter in England, as well as English lessons, ballet and music classes for the younger children.

The family got financial help, as well as help with child care, from both grandparents, especially Dimitri's father who was also working in the mine. The family was trying to keep down the everyday expenses like money spent on food, trying to find cheaper products and relying on preserving mushrooms and other garden products. Instead, money was invested in children's education but also some prestige items – the family's cars were new; Dimitri kept tropical fish while the youngest daughter's pet cat was a hairless Sphinx. Every year, the parents tried to have a holiday abroad. Through trying to cut everyday costs, managing four jobs between the two of them, and receiving help from grandparents, it was possible to maintain that lifestyle. Financially, it became much harder for the family when Dimitri's father suddenly died. Not only could they no longer expect support from the grandparents, but Dimitri's mother found it very hard to change her rather comfortable lifestyle and only survive on her pension, and therefore needed help from Dimitri's family.

Different incomes and family circumstances allowed more varied patterns of consumption for different employees of the mine. Miners and engineers like Igor and Dimitri

had enough means to express their individual interests and passions, like ancient swords and tropical fish. Some of their leisure activities, like going on holidays or having meals out, differed significantly from Olga's lifestyle. Despite cursing capitalism in a strong manner, as Igor did, the opportunities of consumption that he had, with his swords and trips abroad, were very clearly an expression of capitalism and new ways of creating an identity based on particular consumption. Olga's story is a reminder that not all Eastern Europeans can start expressing their identity or citizenship through new means of consumption. They are not withdrawn from the market, but they only cover the basic needs of reproduction rather than building an identity based on particular consumer choices.

Nevertheless, there are significant similarities in the three stories. All three invested a lot in their children's and grandchildren's lives, according to their possibilities, either in terms of everyday subsistence or investment in their future, like education or jewellery. Besides the difference in salary, Dimitri's family was better off than Olga's because his parents were around helping him while Olga's parents lived far away in Russia. She had to rely on the occasional fictitious kinship links with Misha the trade union leader who gave her 'financial support' from the trade union hardship fund. All the stories show reliance on kinship networks and the importance of family. All three also show the fragility and temporality of a particular lifestyle. Igor's retirement would make him just an ordinary poor pensioner, Olga's deteriorating health could mean that her family would be pushed from getting by to severe poverty. Dimitri's family had to recalculate their finances and modify their lifestyle when Dimitri's father died, and on several occasions I found Dimitri's wife worrying about life if anything should happen to Dimitri.

Despite these differences in incomes and consumption opportunities, the everyday activities of an auxiliary worker, miner and engineer would still be fairly similar. Many engineers take the company bus home rather than spending money on petrol; the majority of people live in Soviet-style blocks of flats decorated with memorabilia from Eesti Põlevkivi. Miners and auxiliary workers are just as likely as engineers to have allotments or even dachas. Those with higher incomes have taken loans to modernise their flats or invest in newer fishing or hunting equipment, but the clothes, the cars, or the houses do not necessarily tell a clear story about the person's social position. On the street, you can recognise a miner by his walk or a few accessories, like a plastic bag or a flat leather cap, but even then there is no guarantee that he is not actually an engineer. Distinction based on a particular profession

is not as clear-cut as Bourdieu (1984) sees it in an established class society such as France, and both miners and engineers confirmed that particular leisure activities were still more based on individual interests than class position.

Classical sociological studies of Britain in the 1960s rejected the ‘*embourgeoisement* thesis’, showing that the affluent worker was still socially and financially distant from the middle class (Goldthorpe 1969; Lockwood 1989). Besides strong differences between middle- and working-class, Jonathan Parry (forthcoming) has shown how in an Indian steel plant permanent workers could be seen as middle-class while temporary workers have significantly poorer housing and consumption patterns, opportunities for social mobility and uncertain livelihoods. In the more familiar context of postsocialist Poland, Buchowski (2001) raises his doubts about the emergence of the new middle class in the Marxian sense, as a class owning the means of production and sharing a common consciousness. The postsocialist field is too dynamic and the new entrepreneurs come from various levels of social, economic and cultural capital to form a particular class. Consumption, in any case, he believes cannot be the basis of the formation of such a middle class, as particular consumption habits are shared by members of different social categories. The field of class formation, whereby new entrepreneurs share a particular ethos, is constantly in the process of making (Buchowski 2001). Also in Estonia, despite the increasing differences, the consumption patterns of engineers and workers are still similar and do not operate as markers of class distinction. Although the period of my fieldwork points to increasing social differentiation and new processes of class formation, leisure practices rather homogenised the emerging social differences. The levelling consumption and leisure practices were especially visible in the consumption of food and drink and sport.

### **5.3. Levelling leisure: mushrooms**

During my fieldwork, I saw miners run a busy life of working around the house and garden, taking care of children, going fishing, hunting or mushroom picking. For those who lived in a private house, there was always plenty of work around the house. Those with dachas on the northern shore of Lake Peipus or elsewhere in the vicinity would have even more work to keep their summer houses in order, extend and renovate and look after their allotments. Women were even busier, juggling work, children and household chores.

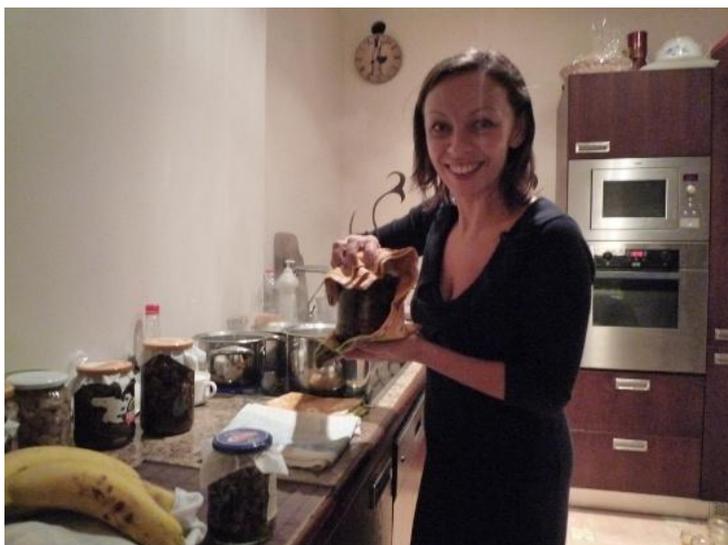
Looking at two villages in South Estonia, Aet Annist (2011) shows that due to newly emerged inequalities between the villagers, people preferred to avoid each other. Since the need for social networks to access goods had decreased, there was no longer a need to maintain these links. Being rich or poor both caused embarrassment and the need to create distance from others, while encounters in the workplaces, shops or school usually produced gossip and envy or critique about others, rather than a desire to help or communicate. In contrast, Melissa Caldwell (2004b) shows how Muscovites who use soup kitchens do not classify themselves as poor in material resources, but rather emphasise the need to invest in permanent and useful social relationships that they actively nurture. The miners of Kohtla-Järve are experiencing increasing social differentiation, similarly to the villagers in South Estonia. Their social networks have also decreased, but like Caldwell's Muscovites they do maintain certain practices that reinforce the solidarity of the miner community and try to overcome the feeling of discomfort caused by the increasing inequalities. Next, I will show how mushroom picking, drinking and sport acted as levellers of social inequalities in the mining community.

Mushrooms are a 'total social fact' that encompasses work, leisure and consumption, hospitality and gender relations. Autumn was the time when everything circled around mushrooms. In September and October my host grandfather would often be waiting for his son Dimitri and myself at the gate of our house at 7am to give us a lift to the mines. He himself, working on a different schedule, would drop us off and go to the forest near the mine entrance, take his baskets and buckets from the back of the car and spend hours picking mushrooms. Those not so lucky to have a day off would sneak out of the office or the factory at lunchtime to tiptoe around the mine territory with a sharp knife and a plastic bag. Workers complained that the manager of one of the departments was becoming stricter and forbidding workers to pick mushrooms during work hours, but generally it was tolerated. One could not let the good stuff go to waste. After all, everyone from workers to the chief engineer loved picking mushrooms. Weekends were the time when a whole family would go mushroom picking, the fathers teaching the children to distinguish between different types. Mushrooms were picked by both miners and engineers; everyone had their own secret spots to go to for the most abundant crop.

Nevertheless, as with many other leisure activities in the area, besides leisure, it was also hard work. In those autumn months I witnessed many domestic quarrels based on the

gendered division of labour around mushrooms. The house filled with more and more mushrooms that I had never even heard the names of. They appeared and started to take over the kitchen as my host father thought that he would go and pick some after work. Taking care of mushrooms after picking them was women's job. The growing number of baskets did not please my host mother Maria. Coming home after work, she had to check on the children's homework, make dinner, and now also go through the lengthy process of cleaning mushrooms before she could marinate, salt or dry them. Quickly, the kitchen was turned into a small factory where mushrooms were cleaned and cooked, glass jars scrubbed clean and sterilised with boiling water. The children's job was writing labels with mushroom types and sticking them onto the jars coming out of Maria's factory. It was nearly 10pm one evening when Maria ran out of vinegar for marinating mushrooms. Quickly, her 10-year-old son was asked to get his bike and cycle to his grandmother's to borrow more vinegar. In this case, the leisure of picking mushrooms that people described as a relaxing activity in the fresh air was followed by hard work that people, mostly women, had to take on after their own working day.

The mushrooms prepared in the autumn nevertheless made life easier throughout the rest of the year, as salted mushrooms found their place in a quick mushroom sauce with cream served with boiled potatoes, marinated mushrooms served as a great *zakuska* with vodka, and a handful of dried mushrooms made the vegetable soup tastier.



**Illustration 13. Preserving mushrooms.**

**My host mother cooking and preserving mushrooms and proudly displaying her work. As you can see from the modern kitchen behind her, this was not the poorest household. Mushroom picking and preserving was popular both among the wealthier and poorer Russian speakers in the region.**

As well as being something to serve the family, mushrooms also became a great way of showing off the hostess' culinary efforts to guests while comparing recipes. As a leisure activity and as a food it was available for everyone, an easy way to spend an afternoon with friends who might not be as well off, or a way to add something tasty to the birthday table without having to show how much or how little money was spent. Mushroom recipes were swapped between the women working for minimal salary on the oil shale railway tracks, as well as the between the white helmets and white collar workers. The only people who were left out were Estonians. Although local Estonians were also fairly passionate about mushroom picking and the same preparation work was going on in many Estonian families, the Estonian speakers admitted that they did not know as many mushroom types as the Russian speakers and that there were certain types of mushrooms that only Russians knew, picked and prepared.

In terms of social hierarchies, nevertheless, mushrooms could be seen as one of the great levellers in terms of class: mushroom picking and preparing is available for everyone, and showing off one's wonderful mushroom salad is a way to compete on a basis other than money (similarly to sport, as I will show later). Nevertheless, mushrooms drew ethnic boundaries, as Estonians were not as engaged in mushroom picking. Furthermore, for women, preparing mushrooms, although an opportunity to show their skills, also meant an extra domestic burden on top of their other work; while men got the leisure, women got the labour of mushrooms. It seems that continuing levelling leisure and consumption practices is an attempt, sometimes conscious, sometimes not, to erase increasing social inequalities but while doing that, it reinforces gender and sometimes ethnic hierarchies.

## **5.4. Drinking**

Two ways of relaxing to which Pärtel refers seem the most prominent and everlasting in the mining community. These are drinking and sport. After long, dark tiring days in the mine, especially in the autumn and winter, I myself experienced two reactions to unwinding from the day in extreme conditions – to go to the gym or park and run for a long, long time to clear my head, or to grab a bottle of wine and some chocolate and stay somewhere very warm and quiet. For miners who do the work for years, these reactions must be even stronger. “When it gets dark, it really makes me drink,” Peeter would complain. Others would join the mine volleyball team or go skiing. Besides the need for relaxation, these activities also fill an important role in community cohesion.

Drinking and sport are not as prominent among miners as they were in the Soviet period, but are still very important as levelling income differences and creating solidarity among colleagues. At first glance, these two leisure activities seem to be each other's polar opposites, and the miner who would choose one would not choose the other. In reality, they both serve as community-creating rituals and ways of relaxing after work in the dark and damp mine. Both sport and drinking are well regarded among miners; men who do sport and know how to drink are respected. Doing sport together creates communities for friendly drinking; drinking is the reward for sport.

The majority of literature on drinking in Eastern Europe and Russia, especially after the socialist period, talks about drinking in connection with increasing men's alcoholism, deteriorating health and failing families (Bobak et al. 1999; Carlson and Vagero 1998; Jukkala et al. 2008). Anthropologists have, however, shown that vodka has also other functions besides helping to drown the postsocialist misery, for example in the context of hyperinflation in 1990s Russia, bottles of vodka served as currency to pay for goods and services (Hivon 1994). The drinking that I analyse in the following section focusses more on special occasions, male bonding rituals and drinking to unite people. Although Pärtel was quite right to point out that there were men who periodically ended up in sobering-up stations, and alcoholism is a huge social problem in Ida-Virumaa, I choose to focus on the more mainstream drinking that seems to be part of mining communities everywhere (cf. Diedrich 1999; Metcalfe 2006 for Wales and England).

Attitudes towards drinking in the mining region were not as negative as the Hero of Socialist Labour Pärtel painted them. They were actually more ambiguous, or even positive. As many former miners told me, the work was so hard and so boring that one had to drink to stay sane. It was also believed that those who were heavy drinkers were also hard workers. I heard a story about the mine director who hired a worker after two questions: are you a hard worker, and do you drink? After the worker said that he was a hard worker and asked whether the director had any vodka to offer, the director was pleased. Apparently, true workers had to both work and play hard. A miner who now works as a guide in the Kohtla mining museum told me how some men managed to tour all the 12 mines of the area in one year. After every payday the worker would start drinking, and not show up at work for ten days. He then got fired and as there was a constant shortage of workers in the mining area, he would immediately be hired by the next mine, again to work hard for a month and then go for a

drinking spree. Although men were also drinking at the workplace or coming to work drunk, this was not regarded highly by other miners. Before mechanised mining, when miners worked in pairs throwing oil shale on the conveyer belt, a miner would be quite angry if his mate showed up at work drunk or badly hungover, because then he would not be able to do the work at the necessary speed.

Besides the punishment of workers with firing, other ways were tried to control miners' drinking. A miner remembers an all-Soviet official letter (probably from the 1950s) that obliged the managers of the mine to organise drinking sessions together with workers, as things tended to get out of control when workers were drinking by themselves.

To celebrate International Women's Day, a big party was organised in Sompá Club. Announcements were put up that everyone was welcome to attend, that men had to pay five roubles and women three roubles to get in. It was a lot of money at that time. Some women from the office were excused from work to prepare food. Big dishes with beetroot salad were carried to the club. Charly and I carried many boxes of alcohol from the shop. We made the hall lighting very cosy with colourful papers. For music, a tape player and tapes were brought from the dormitory. Everyone liked the party. Besides managerial employees there were a lot of workers. Later more of such parties were organised. But then after a while another all-Soviet official letter appeared in which it was ordered to stop the drinking altogether. If people reacted to the first letter quickly, things did not go as smoothly with the second one. A silent era started, in which we continued in the old way but in a quieter manner and separately. (Kaup and Nugis 2008:248)

It is not clear from this quote what the engineer means by "drinking separately", but it is most likely that he means that later the ITRs and workers were drinking in separate groups. Nevertheless, drinking as a practice was not reserved only for workers, but was also appreciated and practised by engineers and managers. It was a way of creating the unity of the collective as well as something in which both engineers and miners, who were fighting the hard conditions of the underground, found consolation. Other accounts also confirm that the ITRs were drinking together with workers, usually those who were more active, such as brigade leaders, musicians or sportsmen. Drinking was part of the collective events, like building shared summer houses and saunas, hiking and tourism.

The 1990s meant the collapse of any institutionalised parties and drinking with work colleagues. As people's incomes fell, it became less common to go out as a group to drink, eat and dance in the local restaurants. Many restaurants and bars were closed. As mines closed, those without jobs were cut out of socialising. Those who were able to keep their jobs now lived in different cities and took different buses home after the workday. Gradually, the

communities where everyone lived in one suburb near the mine, a short bus ride or walk away from their homes, fell apart, and socialising after work became harder. Men from Sillamäe have an hour-long commute back home from 'Estonia' and cannot miss their bus back home.

The very male institution of the garage is still used as a primary male drinking and bonding site. As elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, the city houses a line of garages for the inhabitants of blocks of flats. The garage was the place to spend weekends and evenings out of sight of women while repairing the Soviet cars that often broke down and needed the help of neighbours to make them run again. In Kohtla-Järve, garages are not as popular anymore, as the original owners have become old and have sold their cars, and other garages are used as storage space for smuggled cigarettes and alcohol from Russia. Nevertheless, on beautiful spring and summer evenings and on the weekends, the rows of concrete garages with wooden doors still attract people. The cars, if still kept in the garage at all, are driven out; the tables and chairs are found in the back of the garage and folded out to provide the setting for the makeshift party among mates.

Those gatherings, like Volodya's, which I was invited to attend as an honorary male, included dragging out the barbecue and placing it on the pavement in the middle of the two rows of garages. The barbecue was lit and sausages grilled while the men covered the little table with a newspaper and found some plates and cutlery, bread and ketchup, and small glasses for the beautifully clean-tasting *samagon* (moonshine) from Volodya's secret source. As we sat there drinking and chatting about life, Volodya periodically encouraged us to empty our glasses. Every time I forgot to bite on the grilled sausage after drinking, I was gently reminded to do so. There was a special kind of rhythm and proper way of doing things to the drinking ritual. Russian drinking is usually more ritualised than Estonian or English middle-class sipping of wine. The act of downing one's glass was done simultaneously in a group, usually preceded by a toast and followed by *zakuska*, a bit of food to wash away the taste of vodka. Even if there are no toasts, as in the case of mates drinking together on a Friday night, someone from the group dictates the rhythm when everyone should raise their glass. This makes drinking a more ritualised way of spending time together and affirms group solidarity. Dictating the same rhythm of drinking for everyone, it creates a similar control – everyone drinks the same amount – to that of buying rounds, which is widespread in Britain where being able to take large quantities of alcohol is seen as respectable (Wight 1993).



**Illustration 14. Drinking in the garage**

Volodya's garage was very similar to the one of Vadik, the mine surveyor, who hosted the head mechanic from the First Production Department on a sunny Friday evening after work. They tried to also convince the deputy head to join them, but he was building a terrace for his house and preferred to go home to continue his work outside the workplace. The garages, the tools and the sausages eaten differ very little despite the hierarchies in the mine and differences of income. They also transgressed the boundaries of helmet colour, as Igor the underground foreman was trying to convince Grisha, the yellow-helmet worker, and a friend to go drinking that Friday evening. The garage is a typical male space where white and yellow helmets are removed and friends enjoy the time of drinking and chatting together, until they get impatient phone calls from their wives who remind them to stop drinking and come home. In other postsocialist contexts, alcohol can increase social inequalities, as Jennifer Cash (2012) has shown in the case of Moldova, where paying day labourers in wine furthers exploitation and draws boundaries between them and the land-owning farmers. In the case of Estonian miners, I argue that the spaces and manner in which vodka-drinking is done lessen social distances between different mine workers. This nevertheless mostly only applies to miners who still have their jobs, as those who have lost their jobs often drift into isolation where even vodka-drinking with employed mates is no longer available (cf. Kideckel 2008).

Miners drink less than they used to; in present-day conditions it is easier to lose one's job due to drunkenness, and the piece rate system motivates men to work as hard as they can.

The heaviest drinking is scheduled for Fridays and Saturdays, to recover before the working week. Even for Miners' Day which is celebrated on a Sunday, people usually have parties with family and friends in dachas on Saturday, barbecue and drink until the early hours, and have a quieter day on Sunday when the official celebration takes place in the seaside park. There are drinking events that are confined only to men, like drinking in garages, after work or celebrating the Red Army day. The Red Army day, a socialist holiday, is not officially celebrated in Estonia anymore but is still very important to mostly Russian speakers, or anyone who was in the Soviet Army. During that evening, men gather in someone's house or hire a sauna with a bar and go out with colleagues or neighbours. This is a male-only bonding event with sauna, vodka and toasting. Nevertheless, the miners were quite happy when some of their wives and I crashed the party, since finally there was someone to dance with.

The Russian-speaking miners are also very happy that the Estonian Republic has been so forthcoming and given them a free day to nurture their hangover after the Red Army day. The next day is the Estonian Independence day, in the Russian community celebrated more as a day of recovery. Passing time drinking is certainly more a men's realm that women are often excluded from, while men reaffirm their solidarity, identity and masculinity as miners. These everyday rituals confirm hegemonic masculinity and the ideal of equality, often in spaces from which women are excluded, or should be excluded, ideally (Almeida 1996:90-91; Diedrich 1999:109-110). But there are other events when men and women drink and celebrate together, like family birthdays, Miner's Day, Midsummer Day and New Year. Women usually drink wine or sparkling wine while men drink vodka. Since workplace parties are less common and, since the takeover of Eesti Energia, also less popular, main celebrations now take place among kin.

## **5.5. Sport – building moral persons and communities**

Talking about sport in the mines, Pärtel (1972) concludes,

Due to sport, many bottles have remained unopened. After a hard shift in the mine, after a physically exerting working week, the body needs joyful, free movement and the lungs an oceanful of fresh air. The eyes demand open space, the ears long for the quiet whispers of the forest instead of the roaring of stone and steel. Never mind the beer shops and restaurants! (p. 68)

Sport is an important part of miners' leisure activities. In studies of miners and other workers, it is often considered an archetypical working-class pastime. As sport historians have emphasised, both organised sport and the working class were the product of modern

industrial capitalism. Workers became increasingly alienated from industrial work, and sport provided a channel through which to gain a sense of control and self-respect that was missing at work. As sport became more popular, employers started to see it as a way of distracting workers from labour politics as well as realising the productive benefits of healthy and strong workers. Slightly later, the representatives of the labour movement started to see the benefit of sport for developing a sense of pride and class consciousness. The worker sports movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century exemplified integrating socialist ideology and worker sport (Wheeler 1978). Sport, like popular culture in general, was a contested terrain in which capitalist entrepreneurs and leftist politicians fought for the support of the working class (Edelman 1993:55). As Metcalfe demonstrates, Victorian miners' leisure practices were very much determined by the preferences of the pit owner, for example giving land for a football field or encouraging education. As the same time, new sports like football were not imported from above but organically incorporated by the mining communities who then started to travel more for football competitions which expanded the miners' horizons (Metcalfe 2006). Sport as a leisure activity deserves special attention because it was very prominent in the everyday lives and memories of Kohtla-Järve miners as well as a battleground on which the state and, later, capitalist institutions tried to carry out their ideological programmes.

Sport was ideologically very important in the Soviet Union. It was part of the general ambition for *kulturnost* that became dominant in Stalin's time. Important aspects of this new culture that people across Soviet Union were trying to master were hygiene, good manners, literacy, knowledge of high culture and Soviet ideology (Boym 1994:105). Stakhanovites were particularly encouraged to become cultured Soviet people (Fitzpatrick 1999: 79-82; Kotkin 1997: 180-182). Rather than working all the time, the new type of worker takes part in cultural activities and sport as well as engaging in the production tasks (O'Mahony 2006:23). Lenin saw sport as an important part of developing a well-rounded young communist individual, and during the interwar period the Proletarian Culture movement promoted doing production gymnastics on the factory floor as part of the working day (O'Mahony 2006). The role of the sportsman was similar to that of a shock worker, to inspire the less able to greater efforts. Stakhanovites were encouraged to take up sports and sportsmen were sent to factories to encourage sports competitions (Edelman 1993:21).

During the Cold War, despite high military spending, stadiums, training bases, and sports schools were built in record numbers and people started to have more money and free

time to enjoy spectator sports (Edelman 1993:157). At the same time, the ideological importance of sport as the transformer of the Soviet citizen in art declined from the 1950s onwards. Participation in sport came to signify conformism, while the dissident youth avoided sport and their leisure activities focussed on jazz, rock 'n' roll, modern art and café culture (O'Mahony 2006:172, 177; Yurchak 2006; Zdravomyslova 2003). This however gives only a partial picture of particular segments of youth in large cities of Soviet Russia, while in the periphery the miners seemed to be happy to keep on doing sport and drinking.

The Perestroika period meant a decrease in sport funding also in Soviet Estonia. The 1990s changed the traditional order of the dialectics between sport and drink as people lost their jobs. People focussed on trying to make ends meet rather than sporting, as the cables and equipment from the lit ski-track disappeared and were sold to metal traders, and stadiums became overgrown. The good people of the mine, like a member of the mine rescue team, were trying to promote sport, finding rooms and equipment to train the youth for whom the new abundance of heroin from Russia was often a more tempting option than the old leisure activities of sport and alcohol. Siiri from the miners' trade union office voluntarily organised volleyball competitions among miners who still wanted to keep playing even after the sport instructors had been made redundant from the mines. In a 2004 employee satisfaction survey, the respondents pointed out the lack of sports facilities and opportunities as a big weakness of the company. The same year, the PR department re-established the tradition of volleyball competitions between different parts of the company.

In 2006, the company decided to organise sport more proactively and Siiri from the trade union also became the company's sports coordinator. Herself a devoted volleyball player, an Estonian woman in her late 50s who looks much younger (one could blame sport), she wrote a note to the *Estonian Miner* newspaper in 2006, announcing the new sports club. "Gymnastics is economically profitable due to the reduction of sickness days, increase of labour productivity and good atmosphere at the workplace. Thinking about this, we have decided to establish the sports club of Eesti Põlevkivi." There was no hiding the truth from the potential users of the sports club – Siiri was stating that the club opened to benefit the employer, in rhetoric very similar to the Soviet production gymnastics.

Although the idea that healthy workers are more productive is certainly present, it is not expressed in official company materials and is left for local enthusiasts like Siiri to spell out. The company can choose its workers in the situation of a saturated labour market and

does not have to use sport as a tool to keep its workers sober. Sport is now seen as a PR tool. For existing workers, sport is used to create solidarity with the company. It is one of the very few activities that the company agrees to support, to create productive, happy and conforming workers. Although both the Soviet state and the current company preferred healthy and active workers who enjoyed the sports facilities in their workplace, there has been a shift in the sport ideology. But after the decline of sport and sport facilities in the 1990s, the town now boasts two new sports halls, a roller-skating and cycling road, and slalom skiing slopes built on old slag heaps near the Kohtla mine which now operates as a museum. Miners still value sport, regardless of the changing and shifting state and company ideologies.



**Illustration 15. The volleyball team of the ‘Estonia’ mine playing the administration team**

**The volleyball team of ‘Estonia’ has continuously done well in the internal volleyball tournament Põlevkivi Volle (Oil Shale Volleyball). Photo by Anna Romanenko**

For miners, sport was part of being a good and moral person. Most people talked about sport as something really natural, an inherent part of their identity. They were proud to present themselves as keen and able sportsmen and were surprised when I inquired about Soviet ideology’s exaggeration of sport. A retired town sports official, a former miner, emphasised the mass nature of sporting, that almost all miners were involved in sport. Indeed, many informants were not only involved in one sport, but would, for example, be playing volleyball, football, table tennis and skiing, and taking part competitively in all these activities. The activity of sport was not questioned. It was considered natural that after a stressful day, a miner might want to relax while sporting. Sport enthusiasts also emphasised

that sport was so much more interesting than drinking and although everyone drank a little bit, sport kept the youth away from alcohol.

Sport remains an important part of how a moral person is imagined. Irina, a widow who was bringing up her 8-year-old son Dima, explained to me how she fills her son's days with after-school activities. While Irina was loading carts with the third sort, fine oil shale powder, feverishly pushing the buttons and moving the knobs of the switchboard, she was also giving instructions to little Dima over the phone. Dima was instructed to go home, grab his notebook for music school and his bag with gear for the swimming pool. "After the piano lesson, you will go straight to the swimming pool, understood?" Irina was instructing Dima. She also explained that on the weekends she goes cycling or roller-skating with him because a boy needs to move a lot and be good at sports. She had also taught him to ice-skate, "because otherwise it would be a shame when he is older. There will be somewhere to go with girls. Because so many youth are just hanging out on the streets, let them do something useful instead," she laughed. Irina herself loved light athletics, volleyball and skiing and thought that it was necessary to bring up the child to love sports too. Since Irina's husband had died, she was nevertheless worried whether she could bring up Dima to be a proper person by herself, without a man in the house, despite all the sport education. Therefore, she had saved up to allow the boy to go to a swimming camp in Croatia with his group, where the swimming trainer, a respectable, sport-loving person, could also act as a father figure. The idea of filling children's time with music and ballet lessons and sport was common among all classes in the mining region, reflecting, I suppose, the Soviet idea of *kulturnost* and the idea that ways of spending one's time culturally were available to all.

These days, sport is not only about an imagination of what kind of person one should be, but performs a function of keeping children safe. The mining towns are still not a safe or pleasant area for children to spend too much time on the street and many mothers like Irina fill their children's diaries with as many activities as possible while they themselves are working on their switchboards and conveyer belts. The biggest shift in the role of sport has been that previously it was the state and companies trying to keep men away from alcohol, while now it is more about the private worries of mothers who are trying to keep their children away from alcohol and also drugs. In areas where poverty and social inequality is high, sport provides a safe place away from the dangers of the streets, as Loic Wacquant (2003) has shown in his ethnography of a boxing club in an inner city poor black

neighbourhood in Chicago. It serves the same role of giving meaning to a youth's life in Ida-Virumaa.



**Illustration 16. Youth hanging out in Kohtla-Järve**

Sport creates a community and reinforces solidarity. Sport sociologists have used Durkheim's analysis of religious ritual to look at sporting events, that similarly to religion, create cohesion, solidarity, integration, discipline, and emotional euphoria (Riordan 1987) and reinforce the moral order of the community (Birrell 1981). Sport helps to build people's consciousness of togetherness (Lever 1995). It seems to play that role particularly in working-class communities where workers have little control over their labour and living conditions. Metcalfe, studying miners in 19th century England, shows how poor living conditions forced miners out of the houses and to engage with sport, giving them an opportunity for "expressing their independence, community solidarity, and their own masculinity" (p. 67). For some working-class communities, sport serves the same purpose of creating a shared consciousness that religious ritual creates in others, like in June Nash's (1979) study of Bolivian miners. I argue that also for miners of Kohtla-Järve, one important reason for doing sport has been the need for a community. Furthermore, sport has been seen as a levelling activity in which social class and ethnicity do not matter and people compete on a basis other than income or social status.

In the Soviet period, sport was one of the ways to nurture the shared identity of the labour collective. Besides light athletics, skiing and team sports, hiking was also a popular

sport among the miners. The hiking club involved people of different fitness levels, and also the family members of miners. It had its own uniforms and people now remember times of hiking together and then in the evenings sharing soup cooked in a large saucepan over the bonfire. It created a sense of solidarity and togetherness between miners and their families. When I asked about ethnic relations in the Soviet period, I often got a really surprised and spontaneous response, like how could there be any problems, we played football on the same team! When a Russian man talked about his Estonian chief engineer, he said that they respected each other because they were both reasonable men who drank moderately and loved skiing.

The Soviet Estonian miners, it seems, never got tired of sport. Many informants praised the mine directors for being generous in buying sport equipment and supporting sport by creating opportunities, hiring sportsmen and sport instructors and being an example of active sportsmanship themselves. The kind of sport that was done reflected the interests of the mine director. For example, in Kohtla mine, the director in the 1970s was very interested in motor sport and built a track for that. When he left, the new director, who was a fan of skiing, built a lit skiing track for miners to enjoy after work. When I asked the former mine director who had built the motor track what had motivated him to promote sport in the mine so much, he explained that it united people and made them bond, and as a young person himself, he simply had the energy to organise things<sup>17</sup>.

Also today, miners desire a community, to share a kind of working-class or professional solidarity. Since its establishment, the sports club has been fairly popular, especially as joining was initially free. Setting up a volunteer management board, coordinating the activities in each mine, helped to get things like volleyball tournaments, ski competitions, subsidised pool and gym access running. Many women were interested in aerobics, workers and their children used swimming pools, volleyball was very active and miner footballers had beaten the other power plant workers in all the tournaments of Eesti Energia. Besides that, there were many prominent marathon runners, skiers and weight lifters in the mine, mostly competing in the veterans' category. After the sports club started charging membership fees, Siiri got some very angry phone calls from miners who thought

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<sup>17</sup> His friend, another retired mine director who was sitting beside him during the interview, commented, "Well, and you got to travel around with them." The first mine director then admitted that as he bore the title 'the activist of social sport', he was given opportunities to travel in other socialist countries. After having travelled through all the socialist countries, he used his connections to even go the Olympic Games in Montreal in 1976, an opportunity that simple miners could not access.

that sport should be for free for everyone to join in. This showed miners' particular idea of the sport community being egalitarian and not based on the ability to pay.

Sport still has a uniting quality, as Estonians and Russians, workers and engineers compete together. As in the workplace, in sports teams ethnic tensions are also usually played down. Siiri sometimes complained that her volleyball team never made an effort to speak in Estonian with her, but for practical reasons and to avoid conflict, everyone continued speaking in Russian. On Miners' Day, when the miners' team plays football against another team, both sportsmen and spectators feel especially proud of their profession. On Miners' Day 2011, Miners of Eesti Energia Mines played against the team of a nearby private mine. There was a large number of spectators around the green field, shouting to support their team or commenting more quietly while sitting a bit further away on picnic blankets.

Despite being on different sides, the event also created unity between the miners of the different companies, especially as many of the private company miners were former colleagues of the workers of Eesti Energia Mines. Some younger people, who had joined the company recently and did not usually socialise with colleagues outside work, had an opportunity to do so when representing the mines on the Company sports days, competitions for employees of different companies in Estonia. While most of the Durkheimian analyses of sport focus on spectator sport like football, in the mine sports in which everyone can participate are also important. For example, the re-established tradition of the miners' skiing competition brings together whole families at the skiing track. Miners ski in individual and team skiing competitions, while showing off their children and grandchildren who also participate in the competition, and socialise with colleagues over a hot drink afterwards. Rather than projecting values onto select athletes, miners reaffirm the moral norms of their community by participating in the local sporting events. One of the basic norms that they are reaffirming is that it is respectable and good to be a sportsman.

## **5.6. Conclusion**

Miners' consumption practices around their payday in the Soviet period were always noticed in Kohtla-Järve – a new suit, long taxi rides, drinking, eating and dancing in the local restaurants. This has now given way to practices that express individual interests – the house, a car, ancient swords. The income differentiation is increasing and auxiliary workers, often women, are earning just enough to survive while miners and engineers can afford a more

luxurious lifestyle. This luxury is, however, an illusion when the kin networks of mine workers are looked at in greater depth. In almost every family there is someone who is not working, or has children in education and therefore needs help. Ida-Virumaa has constantly been the county with the highest unemployment, reaching 20% in 2009, and even the seemingly rich miners are not untouched by this. The dependency on one body and health for income has taken over from the joy of flashing roubles around and living to the full after payday.

Differences among families are still emerging, and engineers who are in a safer position, or families with dual incomes, are significantly better off than workers like Olga. This allows speculation about the increasing differences between mine workers and engineers as the emerging middle class (I will elaborate this more in the next chapter). Despite this, miners prefer leisure practices that aim to overcome these differences. Mushroom picking and preparing is available to everyone and makes women stand out in other ways than those based on the family's income. Drinking is done in humble places like the garage, to enable access to everyone. Sport, the battling ground of state ideologies and capitalist interests, that has changed its interest groups and meaning over the last decades, also has its own internal meaning for the community. Despite different ideologies, sportsmen are seen as moral persons and doing sport is respectable. Introducing a fee for the sports club raised discontent among miners who thought that sport should be free and available to all.

Alienated from the state, stripped of citizenship and with unstable class and professional identities, miners avoid overly explicit identities as consumers and maintain leisure practices that do not require a huge income. These leisure practices also help to overcome ethnic differences among Estonian and Russian speakers who otherwise tend to spend their free time separately. Some of these practices, like drinking, are common in the male-dominated mining communities, and exclude women. Some, like mushroom picking and preparing, divide leisure and labour unevenly between genders. But some, like skiing, bring together different generations, men and women, workers and engineers, Estonians and Russians. Although the sphere of social networks and doing things together has shrunk for the miners of North-East Estonia, like it has for the villagers of South Estonia (Annist 2011), the miners are trying to maintain solidarity and equality, at least among their colleagues.

It is hard to speculate about the reasons for these differences – as Annist (2011) points out, Estonians see themselves as more individualist compared to collectivist Russians.

Considering the deep nostalgia that the Russian speakers had for their old labour collective, compared to the Estonians who were quite happy just minding their own business, there might be some truth to this. Metcalfe (2006) guesses that due to the nature of miners' work, they choose leisure practices that promote a team spirit but also competitiveness and risk-taking. Other studies of mining show the importance of drinking and sport as places for male bonding (Diedrich 1999; Metcalfe 2006). In miners' work, the main principle is that whatever conflicts emerge, one has to remember that it is your workmate who brings you up from the shafts if an accident happens. This lessens social cleavages between the different worker groups and enforces male solidarity. The workplace continues to be the centre of miners' moral world, and seeing, competing or cheering for colleagues during sports competitions reminds miners of the ties that work underground creates between them, as well as of better times when money was more abundant and social events more frequent. Maybe the double uncertainty of the economic situation and the endurance of one's own body makes miners seek activities that maintain egalitarian communities, even if only for a few brief hours.

## **Chapter 6. Changing company, reshaping class and family**

### **6.1. Introduction**

Eesti Põlevkivi formally became part of the structure of Eesti Energia, the national power company, in 1999, but was independent in its management until 2008. In 2008, with the backing of the government, Eesti Energia started centralising the management of the group, got more involved in running the mining company, and centralised support services such as accounting, legal services, IT and public relations one by one. In 2009, a new image, brand and logo of the Eesti Energia Group were launched and the name of Eesti Põlevkivi was changed to Eesti Energia Kaevandused (Mines of Eesti Energia). Many significant changes in management practices and ideologies took place during my fieldwork, including introducing annual performance reviews, outsourcing labour, and changes in ideas about ethics and corporate team building.

By 2012, Eesti Põlevkivi was no socialist company. In the previous decade, principles of quality management, ISO standards, new accounting, audit and personnel management had been implemented. Old Soviet machinery had been replaced bit by bit with new technology from the West, and managers were taught to come to meetings in shirts and ties, rather than dirty overalls. Nevertheless, there were parallels with ethnographies of privatisation and takeover of Eastern European companies by Western businesses in the 1990s, such as those of Birgit Müller (2007) and Elizabeth Dunn (2004) which will be my main points of comparison for this chapter. These two ethnographies focus on the takeover of former socialist factories by Westerners, and the impact on new management practices that were aimed at changing the labour process and workers' values and habits. Elizabeth Dunn (2004) shows, based on a baby food factory in Poland, how Total Quality Management, employee trainings, reorganising labour discipline, and new ideals of performing oneself are targeted at unmaking the socialist qualities of the factory staff and making flexible selves. Müller studies several companies in East Germany where staff have to reorient themselves after the company is sold to West German owners. Similarly to the case in Poland, workers have to get used to new ways of working, managing, selling their products and internalising West German values.

It might be hard to see what is similar between a Western company privatising an Eastern European one in the 1990s and one part of a nationally owned company merging with another part of a nationally owned company in the late 2000s, yet some of the similarities are striking. Firstly, the ideas of flexible production and economising are not alien to nationally owned companies either. Eesti Energia, which had thus far been a monopoly electricity provider in the country, was losing the monopoly position due to EU regulations that required liberalisation of the energy market, which was supposed to lead to the better functioning of the energy market with lower prices, greater consumer choice, energy supply security and more cross-border trade (European Commission 2012:13).

Due to the general ideology of liberalisation of markets in the EU, the former monopoly also had to start competing in the market<sup>18</sup>. The company's top managers were constantly emphasising the need to be flexible and re-orient the company from electricity production to producing fuels out of oil shale. Mines, firmly fixed in the location where the natural resources are found, do not allow for the flexibility of the 'spatial fix' of moving capital elsewhere (Harvey 1999), but can still utilise other measures of flexible accumulation, like the technological fix of changing the labour process or the product fix of switching from electricity to fuel production (Silver 2003). Flexible accumulation requires flexible workers. David Harvey (1990) argues that a shift in capital accumulation took place in the 1970s and the Fordist regime in Europe and the US was replaced with a new regime of 'flexible accumulation', based on the casualisation of labour contracts. As Gavin Smith (2006) shows, neoliberal 'entrepreneurial workers' are not only made by companies but also by larger institutional mechanisms like the European Union and the state or regional governments wanting to attract capital. Trying to shape these new types of workers was on the agenda also for Eesti Energia.

Complying with the new EU rules raised angst and suspicion about the governance of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), due to their intimate connection with the state and poor fit with the ideology of free market economy. It resulted in requirements that SOEs adapt management practices similar to those of private companies. A recent study by the Baltic Institute of Corporate governance compared the management practices and transparency of

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<sup>18</sup> The European energy market opened in 2007. As the last country in the European Union, Estonia opened its energy market for industrial consumers who could choose their energy provider in 2009, and will open it for home users in 2013.

SOEs in the Baltic countries, allocating the second highest score to Eesti Energia. In the report, good governance was explained as follows:

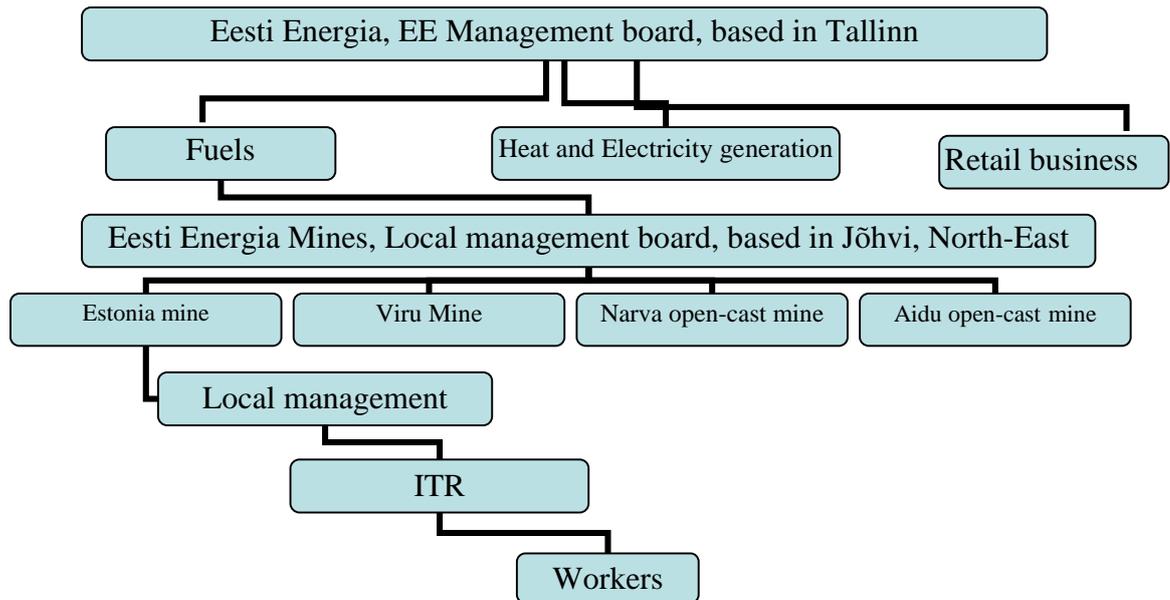
In practice this means defining desired outcomes, nominating the best most skilled and talented people to guide the SOE and monitor management and operations, incentivizing hard work and good performance, and ensuring accountability for results. Good governance also relies fundamentally on systems of reporting, audit and control that minimize risks, the potential for corruption, and conflicts of interest. Seen from the opposite perspective, politicized and uneconomic decision making, nepotism, opacity, corruption, and lack of controls and accountability are all antithetical to good governance (Baltic Institute of Corporate Governance 2012:5).

Characteristic to this report, and to the management of Eesti Energia, was a desire for a well-functioning auditing and incentives system, and fear of being associated with corruption and nepotism. The public expectations of the management of nationally owned companies were as high as the expectations of the newly privatised companies in Eastern Europe were in the 1990s. Management practices similar to those in the private sector are used, confirming similarities between state-owned and private companies<sup>19</sup>.

Before turning to my ethnography, I will explain the somewhat complex organisational structure of the company. I was dealing with four levels in the organisation, sometimes resulting in four different understandings. To help to clarify the levels, I have added an organisational chart (see Table 5). Eesti Energia, the national electricity company, is the top level of management. The company has three fields of activities, mining being in the field of fuels. Eesti Energia Mines, formerly known as Eesti Põlevkivi, is the local management level, based in Jõhvi in North-East Estonia. This is the level of mine managers who now administer four mines, including 'Estonia' where I did my fieldwork. In 'Estonia', we can also distinguish between the local management, engineer-technical workers (ITRs) and labourers. The Tallinn headquarters consisted of Estonian speakers who were educated in universities in Estonia or the West and were mostly from Tallinn. The local management in Jõhvi was mostly comprised of Estonian speakers (but also some Russians) who were originally from the North-East. The mine-level management was comprised of Russian speakers (apart from the director), as were most of the workers.

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<sup>19</sup> A difference between the ethnographies of private companies and Eesti Energia was that due to the near-monopoly of the latter, there was less focus on sales and marketing. But in preparation for the opening up of the market, Eesti Energia changed its logo and launched a huge marketing campaign targeting household electricity consumers in 2010. This, however, did not change the organisation of work in the mines. Rather, the changing name and logo struck miners on an emotional level, similarly to the abolition of Miners' Day, which I talk about in Chapter 4.



**Table 6. The organisational chart of the mining company**

## 6.2. The border of civilisations

Heidi, Ines and Eve were all young Estonian women who worked in the Public Relations Department of Eesti Energia in Tallinn. They had grown up in Tallinn, were educated in Tallinn and Tartu, and started their careers after university. My social background was very similar to theirs. The three were smart and ambitious. Had I chosen a different career, I could have ended up in the fresh-looking offices of Eesti Energia, writing a new communication plan together with them. Their responsibility was to make the mines in the east feel like part of the same company, to embrace the new brand and partake in the new events and parties that they organised.

Laura, the HR manager of the company, had 20 years of human resources work experience in other large companies in Estonia. She had no earlier experience with large Russian-speaking industrial companies and found it difficult to understand the different logic and values. Her aim was to implement a functioning HR, motivation and pay system that she believed in. The women never used derogatory terms about the employees in the east. Rather than saying ‘socialist’ or ‘inflexible’, they would say ‘conservative’. Rather than just blaming the people for being ‘conservative’, they admitted that they needed to improve

communication in the east, consider local cultural differences and needs, and understand the region better every year.

Nevertheless, the young women in office outfits in Tallinn and the moustached men in helmets seemed to have more than 200 kilometres between them. In fact, in the internal discourse of Eesti Energia, the civilisational border between Western Christians, Muslims and Orthodox peoples which Huntington (1996) saw running along the Narva river, on the border of Estonia and Russia, had been shifted slightly more west. The little river of Purtse near the border of Ida-Virumaa, west of the mining area, had become the cultural boundary for the managers of Eesti Energia in Tallinn, who talked about those who lived on the other side as having a different management ethic and worldview. This was not only related to ethnicity: Estonian-speaking managers of the mines were also seen as ‘miners’ living on the other side of the river. Tallinn managers seemed to think that beyond the Purtse river, people still lived in socialism and did not understand the rules of the market.

This leads me to the second similarity with ethnographies in which a Western capitalist company is taking over an Eastern or socialist one, namely the orientalisation of the staff of the company in the East. Andre Czeglédy (1996) describes how teaching managers in Eastern Europe often means sending Western managers “into the midst of what is often seen by Western managers as a boiling cauldron of inefficiency, corruption and incompetency” (p. 329). Heintz (2006) shows how in newly capitalist Romania the old notion of the socialist work ethic was replaced by the idea of the Protestant work ethic, which was built on comparisons between the positive capitalist work ethic and the negative Romanian work practices. In a Chinese special economic zone, Chinese workers from the countryside were seen to have a socialist habitus, were ‘red’ and lazy, while Hong Kong workers were “disciplined, productive, and profit minded, and [...] possessed rational economic sense rather than political consciousness” (Ngai 2005:80). In Birgit Müller’s (2004; 2007) ethnography in which a West German company takes over a company in East Germany, due to lower productivity in the East German firm, the stereotype of a ‘lazy Ossi’ prevails. Elizabeth Dunn (2004) shows how the American managers who took over a Polish baby food factory saw the old managers as not flexible enough and too immersed in the old socialist ways to become new types of managers.

This type of internal orientalisation, within the limits of one country and one company, was also happening in Eesti Energia during the takeover. The Estonian-speaking

management clearly saw themselves as Western and progressive, and saw the Russian-speaking managers in the east as Soviet and backward. This was not because the people in Tallinn were all evil, heartless and profit-greedy, but rather because they came from a very different background to that of their employees. I will now shift my focus from the Tallinn offices back to the north-east to show how the managerial innovations of Tallinn were carried out in the mine. In this chapter, I focus on four particular changes that took place – the annual performance review, outsourcing and restructuring labour, remaking parties, and the new code of ethics. My general aim is to critique the idea that new management practices can and should be implemented in the same way everywhere. Furthermore, I want to balance the discourse of making new types of Western persons or creating a new personhood, by showing that reality on the ground is more complex and the new, completed persons are nowhere in sight.

### **6.3. An attempt to make new engineers? The annual performance review**

The weekly meeting of the ‘Estonia’ mine took place every Wednesday, after the general meeting of the mine managers in the headquarters in Jõhvi every Tuesday. It involved hearing reports from most of the nearly 20 heads of departments, and a general discussion of production numbers, issues with staff, technology and spare parts. This time, in early May, when I had just joined Misharin’s department, the local mine director and HR manager Kabanova delivered some big news. There was going to be an annual performance review, and all white helmets (ITRs), from the mine director and the production manager to the underground foremen and head mechanics, were going to have to participate. Strictly speaking, it was not the first time when performance reviews were taking place. The management in Jõhvi had been doing it for two years already and the very top-level managers in the mines had been introduced to the system the previous year. But now, all of a sudden, it was required that everyone who was part of the engineer-technical workforce, the white helmets, meaning about 300 people, had to do it.

This meant filling in a form rating one’s own performance and setting goals for next year. After that, the employee would have a conversation with their direct manager, agree on and complete the form, and the employee’s performance would determine if there was going to be an annual bonus or not. Kabanova, the HR manager, a Russian-speaking woman from a mining dynasty who had been working in different positions in the mine since her graduation

as an economist, was very eager to explain to everyone what had to be done. She had connected her laptop to the projector, opened the internal website of Eesti Energia, and explained where to find the performance review form, explained the different parts of it, and how it had to be filled in. First, employees had to grade themselves, based on how they had accomplished their tasks, on a scale from A-E, where A meant excellent and D meant below expectations. Then the employees had to talk through the evaluation form with their managers and agree on the overall grade and future goals. Kabanova announced that if the employee's ratings were C or above, they would get an annual bonus. The managers, mostly middle-aged Russian-speaking men (the director of the mine and the head of the technology development and myself were the only Estonians in the room), seemed confused about the whole project.

Going through the meetings with their subordinates meant extra work for them. Furthermore, as most of the white helmets were not actually sitting in offices behind computers but were in the mine, the processing plant and the garages, they could not fill in the form online and paper copies had to be printed for them. It was also not clear for whom the internal web system had created an online version and for whom it had not. The managers present asked clarifying questions. They agreed that if it was *absolutely necessary* to do this, they would, but it really distracted them from their actual production work. Only Misharin seemed really happy all of a sudden. Having me in the department meant that he could ask me to be in charge of the performance review. He was boasting in front of the whole room of managers that I would fill in the form for the employees of his department. I expected some finger-wagging at this, but the other managers instead seemed envious that Misharin had someone to carry out what they saw as a pointless and burdensome task. At the meeting of the foremen of his department, Misharin delivered the news from the general meeting. He mentioned that annual appraisal would be taking place but that no one should worry about this as it would not use up any of their valuable labour time since I was going to do it for them.

Around the same time, the new issue of *Estonian Miner* had a short interview about the annual review with the chairman of the board and the local HR manager, Kabanova's boss, an Estonian-speaking woman called Evelin. The chairman of the board said in the interview that performance management should make people think more about the company's goals and see connections between different priorities and sub-goals. The review

should also improve the quality of dialogue between managers and implementers, and ease the general complaint about lack of information because employees could talk through issues in detail. The HR manager Evelin added that the manager and the employee had to agree on common goals and the employee had to feel that the appraisal was fair. In the internal newspaper of Eesti Energia, one of the top managers in Tallinn explained that the performance pay was based on how well the enterprise had done and how well the employee had fulfilled the set goals, and that it was important to give an objective appraisal to the employees' work and value-based behaviour.

So Misharin and I started the appraisal work. Filling in the form was a bit more of a challenge than he had thought. First, each employee had to write down goals that they were going to achieve and the activities they were going to do to achieve those goals. In Misharin's department, like in others, there was a lot of confusion and discontent. Most people said that their work was routine production work and it made no sense to set any goals, apart from doing their everyday work well. Together we first figured out the goals that Misharin had to set for himself, like fulfilling the planned tasks of the department, guaranteeing the health and safety of staff, managing, monitoring employees' fulfilment of their work duties, monitoring the repair works in the technical unit, and organising the delivery of limestone and rubble to clients. This was not so bad, I thought, but the next step was to quantify the goal – each of the goals had to be measured in some way so that next year, one could compare how the employee had improved their performance. We encountered other problems along the way when filling in the form. Employees had to assess, using the letters A-D, how well they had worked according to the values of Eesti Energia: *enterprising spirit*, *teamwork*, *expertise* and *responsibility*, and give examples of how they had used such qualities in their work.

Then the employee's manager had to also assess his subordinate's performance and they had to agree on the grade together. Having gone through Misharin's performance review questionnaire, my task was to go through the same process with the ITRs of Misharin's department. Going through the form with the head of loading, a friendly elderly Ukrainian, was rather complicated. Luckily, Misharin had already told me what his goals should be. "How can I assess my own work? This is really strange, the boss should do it," he said when we got to the part with letters from A to D. Here, I also had instructions – that Kabanova had implied at the meeting and Misharin had repeated – that everyone should just put C everywhere when assessing their work. Because if it was less than C, people would not get

the bonus, but evaluating one's work as A or B was also not appropriate. The part about values of Eesti Energia was especially hard. First, I had to show my victim the piece of paper with the values and what was meant by them (when you have tons of oil shale to load onto wagons on time, you do not always know what the brand people in Tallinn have come up with as the latest trendy words). And when people are not used to the way of writing about where and how they were showing their *enterprising spirit*, or talking about themselves in such a way, it is very difficult to get something out of them. The head of the loading unit also did not think he had anything to write under personal development needs. He had already been on a computer course. He had already figured out that no matter how many Estonian courses he took, he would not be able to speak it unless he had the opportunity to practise every day. He thought he did not need any new skills or training to do his everyday job.

As the days went on, people were getting more skilled in the new lingo of goals and characteristics. My host father and his father, both working in white helmet positions in the mine, were discussing over shots of vodka on a Friday night which grades they had given themselves (both saying that they had followed the suggestion of putting Cs everywhere). Misharin, after having managed to fill in his own form after many phone calls to HR, discovered that it was easier to invite his engineer-technical workers to the main office and make sure they filled it in under his watchful eye. This did not mean that people understood the goal of this exercise any better. Volodya, the first mechanic of the processing plant, was commenting when filling in the form that his one and only goal was that the plant would be running without problems and that the paper was rather pointless. People were also not satisfied with the form's translation into Russian, claiming that some expressions were not clear or proper Russian language. Nevertheless, the bonus money motivated them to fill the forms in anyway. As the company had good economic results and most of the white helmets' performance was a C or sometimes above, they received their annual bonus as promised.

In early autumn, I was interviewing Laura, the HR manager in Tallinn. I asked her how she thought the performance appraisal process had gone. She said that when looking at the organisation in general, there had definitely been progress.

We have more thought-through goals, we have articulated personal goals to people that are connected to the general strategy, we have measured these goals, we have had performance review meetings, agreed on the results, and paid performance pay based on that. The performance management system has been completely implemented in the retail part of the company and is working well.

She was not, however, so sure about the mines. The management had wanted to implement the system more slowly in the large production units in the east. Their plan was to go layer by layer annually, explaining it to local managers and incorporating another set of lower-down managers every year, once those higher up had understood the principles of performance management and the values of the company. Laura said that she had explicitly forbidden incorporating all engineers and specialists that year, and asked to take it step by step. She said that she had no idea why the local management showed the “eagerness of pioneers” and wanted to involve everyone all of a sudden, but suspected that it was to do with the local head of the management board whose contract was to end soon and who wanted to show what he was capable of before he left. She was not quite sure how to assess the success of the process, but thought they had taken the long way by making a large number of people participate without explaining the purpose of the process properly.

The local HR manager, Evelin, in charge of the four mines, the same person propagating the performance review in *Estonian Miner*, put the decision in a completely different light:

This was the first time when the specialists in Eesti Energia mines got performance pay. They are the people with know-how who maintain and develop the organisation. The worker does his hard work under the ground and gets his monthly pay for it. Managers have received bonuses since time immemorial, but specialists... for ten years, ‘specialist’ has been an offensive title. If you were an engineer or projector without the potential to become a manager, you had no chance of getting performance pay. And the year had been economically successful. That’s why I am especially glad, that even when breaking the rules, I pushed through involving all managers and all specialists so that they could get their performance pay.

Evelin considered the review process a great success, because although individual meetings between some managers and staff might not have been successful, the main thing was to incorporate everyone. This logic did not reach the level of the mine. The mine director who had to announce performance reviews to his staff in the general meeting later confessed to me that he found it slightly surprising that the review process for all was announced all of a sudden, at very short notice, when it had been expected to take place only the following year. Although he agreed that specialists should also get their bonuses, he said that the biggest problem was that it was not properly explained to the local staff who had to carry it out.

This was very true with Kabanova, HR manager of ‘Estonia’. She was a person who thought very highly of all innovations coming from above, without always being clear what was expected or what the logic or reasoning was behind a particular task. Her advice to the

managers had been rather haphazard. Regardless of that, she thought that the performance review was an excellent idea and went very well. She explained to me at length how wonderful it was that the review process gave the workers an opportunity to have a private, heart-to-heart conversation with their managers and the managers could learn more about their employees' views.



**Illustration 17. The headquarters of former Eesti Põlevkivi**

**The grandiose Stalinist building in Jõhvi has flags of Eesti Energia flying in front of it, but the management in Jõhvi often disagrees with new ideas and practices coming from Eesti Energia headquarters in Tallinn.**

In the ethnographies of Dunn (2004) and Müller (2007), as well as in other ethnographies of producing new flexible and docile bodies (Ngai 2005; Ong 1987), the main focus is on the act of production of new types of workers. The new order requires a new type of entrepreneurial and attractive citizen (Berdahl 2005) or the self as a mini-corporation. Dunn (2004) observes how the new management processes such as quality control, job evaluation, and training methods produce workers who are self-auditing, self-regulating actors. Müller describes how the West German owners wanted “to train members of their staff to actively strive towards the proposed model of the winner. While obedience to the objectives of the firm was the norm, it should be embraced by animating the individual competitive spirit” (p. 162). The active self-disciplining was the normalisation of discipline required in the company (Müller 2004).

This focus on person-making and personhood assumes that by the end of this production process, new workers – the flexible new products – are made and completed. For example, Müller claims that introducing the new process of auditing created self-activating

and self-regulating persons and empowered them to improve themselves according to the company norms. This way of looking at the process leaves the impression that introducing neoliberal management practices is something neat, well planned, final and new. The approach to research following the Foucaultian tradition can be criticised on the basis that the agent and any subjectivity of labour is removed from the analysis. “Too often the language of Foucauldian-influenced researchers is of the ‘good’ or docile worker who adjusts to the techniques propounded by those who would engineer our souls [...]. More often, the voice of labour is not accessed but constituted with the managerial discourse” (Smith and Thompson 1999). Smith and Thompson argue that such approaches do not distinguish between managerial intents and outcomes, and either make worker resistance futile or tend to see resistance in everything. This is also an issue with the ethnographies cited above that focus more on the managerial activities and the process of making new workers.

It could however be argued that the discourse of flexibility is not so new or capitalist. As scholars of the socialist labour process (Burawoy 1988; Burawoy and Lukács 1992; Czeglédy 1996; Müller 2007) have pointed out, in the situation of constant shortage of materials, socialist workers had to be flexible and autonomous on the shop floor to keep the process going. Kipnis (2008) shows how workers in China and the US undergo the same new employee management practices that anthropologists would call neoliberal and describe as neoliberal governmentality. Chinese workers, on the contrary, describe performance reviews as socialist.

The performance review, as it was rolled out on the ground (and underground), looked like something other than flexible subjects being made. In a company where there were at least four levels of management, each had their own motivations, visions and values that made the performance review acceptable for them. The Western-trained managers in Tallinn wanted to see the performance review creating a base for the company culture, uniting the goals of the company and individual worker, and rewarding only those who had performed well. Given that the energy market was going to open up, they needed to be sure that they were cultivating a motivated workforce whose members were given opportunities to advance if they had the ambition and would help to attain the goals of the company. In other parts of the company, with a younger workforce in customer service, the management had succeeded in producing the type of workforce that Dunn (2004) calls “flexible and self-regulating”, but, knowing the cultural differences and moral code of employees in the east,

they did not even want to go there and start producing these flexible workers, down to the level of an underground foreman who is responsible for smooth work process in his shift.

The middle level in Jõhvi were tired of being told how to do things by Tallinn. For many years, they had been their own bosses, the highest level of management, and now, all of a sudden, some people from the capital were telling them what to do. The staff at Jõhvi headquarters, regardless of ethnicity, felt that they knew the local life and values and how to go about things. They were offended because, for the past two years, miners had received smaller Christmas bonuses than workers in other parts of the company and thought that they were not treated equally. They also thought that it was necessary to reward specialists who had the key skills to keep the company going. Specialists were respected in the company but had been forgotten during the neoliberal cult of managers during the previous years. So, besides showing their rebellion (which in Tallinn was read as over-eagerness), they also asserted the local values, like respect for engineers.

The process of producing these new flexible persons is messier, with unpredictable consequences whereby subjects are not only being made but are also agents who attach their own meaning and morality to the processes. This should not necessarily be viewed as resistance, conscious or unconscious, but rather points to the messiness, multiple levels of management, and multiple motivations that exist in such processes. My ethnography points to processes of disorderliness and changing meanings and the fact that bodies are not only made and produced but react to this in their own way.

Performance review, however, was not an example of an innovation that was embraced with enthusiasm. The ITRs at the mine level mostly took it as something slightly confusing and annoying that needed to be done, another piece of paperwork to get the pay. Other ITRs did see it as an opportunity for a good conversation with their manager. As Ashwin (1999) points out, Soviet workers were tied to the enterprise and the management through individual, particularistic, discretionary paternalism. Soviet workers had to cultivate personal ties with managers in order to survive and get access to goods and services, and the manager had the last word.

When I was talking to the former mine directors, they always emphasised how important it was to listen to the workers, because this was sometimes all they needed in order to be happy. Even if the director could not help them with their problems in any way, at least

they had listened. Here, performance review was seen as the continuation of the tradition of going and speaking to someone higher up about problems to do with housing shortage, pay, or a difficult marriage. In the desire for a corruption- and nepotism-free transparent review system that would be equal and fair on everyone, the management of Eesti Energia had accidentally created a case of neo-paternalism in which engineers were using the framework that was familiar to them and that they had always used. The performance review created new forms of appealing to the father figure, the manager. The old forms of workplace paternalism were maintained under the new cover of meritocracy and ambition.

Looking at the activities on the ground, it was clear that the performance review process, aimed at aligning the goals of managers and the company, was no sophisticated process of remaking workers or producing a new type of person for the new situation of an open electricity market. Surely, Eesti Energia wanted to have the disciplinary technologies, for that would produce loyal and ambitious workers, but through four levels of management with different outlooks on the process, with information getting lost at each layer, this was not possible. Making an anthropologist, who is sneaking around the department anyway, do something useful and avoid the tedious paperwork, shows quite well how no new persons were created in this process. I certainly did not see any significant changes in people during the process, but it is also important to note that the process was interpreted in different ways, as additional bureaucracy, as institutionalised patriarchy, or as a way of recognising the role of specialists in the company.

#### **6.4. The annual performance review: creating the new class structure**

I am not arguing that the performance review process had no consequences whatsoever. Rather, I am arguing that instead of focussing on the creation of new types of persons as individuals, it is more useful to look at such processes as mechanisms that aid new class formation processes. Dunn (2004) points to the phenomenon of the influx of foreign investments which caused Polish managers to differentiate themselves as a class. This was expressed by signalling their Westernness through certain accessories. She explains,

To attract the attention of a Western manager, land a managerial job, and gain access to Western business knowledge, Polish managers had to demonstrate the right personality characteristics: attitude, beliefs, flexibility, receptivity, initiative. But how did they go about demonstrating these very personal, “inner” characteristics? Unlike their Western counterparts, Polish managers could not rely heavily on résumés listing

their past achievements.... Instead, they had to rely on the idea that the outer self signals changes in the inner self. They used changes in dress, personal possessions, and personal space to display their supposed transformation from a socialist being – a *kierownik* – to a capitalist being – a *menadzer*. (p. 71)

But rather than this idea of individuals crafting themselves according to the new requirements, which she calls ‘class’ in passing, I would suggest paying attention to new management practices as tools for creating actual class differences. Also Dunn notes that in her factory, the introduction of job evaluations differentiated managers and workers and made clear which type of job was more valued as well as cementing income differences, dividing workers into trainable managers and untrainable line workers, the latter being seen as too immersed in socialism. I argue that in the case of the mines in Estonia, the performance review was a tool that started to create class differences between ITRs and workers.

In the Soviet period, the relationship between workers and engineers was that of cooperation but also uneasy tension. Managers and workers were positioned on the same side against the governing elite. They cooperated in order to meet the plan – managers tolerated workers’ inefficient practices because they could meet the plan despite it and workers, in return, cooperated with managers to minimise disruptions in the labour process at times of labour shortages. Together they also fought against changing the production process. Both of them wanted to reject any reorganisation or innovation of the production process; managers were afraid of plan increases and deteriorating relations with workers, while workers wanted to avoid the intensification of the labour process and control over their autonomy on the shop floor. Managers tolerated bad work discipline in order to have any workers at all in the situation of labour shortage (Filtzer 1992). Workers’ special position in a workers’ state guaranteed them significant economic and symbolic capital. Yet, as Stenning (2005b) points out, forced proletarianisation in the Soviet space led the urban intelligentsia to see the new working class as “ignorant, backward and suspect, which challenged the official celebration of working-class spaces and cultures” (p. 987). The position of the mine engineers was similar to that of the urban intelligentsia. The engineers were paid and glorified less than the workers but built their group identity based on their expertise and knowledge, in opposition to the ‘uneducated’ and ‘greedy’ workers.

Older workers, both Estonian- and Russian-speaking, talked about engineers with great respect. They remembered times in the 1950s when the first postwar generation of

trained engineers started working in the mines. Although one might assume that old miners felt uneasy when some young men started to order them around, this was tolerated as long as the young engineers also recognised miners' experience and knowledge of the particular mine and machinery. These hierarchies and respect for engineers' superior knowledge remain even when engineers retire. For example, in the Kohtla mining museum where both engineers and workers were working as guides, engineers always stressed that they made better guides because of their knowledge of geology and technology. Workers thought they made better guides because of their knowledge of 'real work', but nevertheless felt uneasy about their lack of formal education (Kesküla forthcoming).

Currently, in the space of the mine, engineers continue to hold a higher position in the hierarchy of labour. Like in the Soviet period, miners actually earn a higher salary than the lower-rank white helmets. Sometimes the head mechanic and the deputy of the First Production Department looked at experienced miners with certain envy, explaining that miners earn more than they do and have a better job because they never have to worry about work after they have finished their shift. Workers agreed to respect and obey good managers as long as the managers kept the work process smooth. Miners were prepared to admit that engineers are more educated. But they were very disappointed to hear that underground foremen's salary was raised, and emphasised that underground foremen had never before received more than miners. Hard physical production work was miners' justification for getting a higher salary and the condition for obeying engineers, and this difference between workers and engineers was keenly watched by workers, making sure that the salary difference would not get too large.

The boundaries between white and yellow helmets, despite educational differences, were not firmly fixed. It was possible to move from being a worker to being a manager – it usually happened with young men who had recently attained their mining qualifications and needed to get some practical experience before starting to manage others. Others had started as workers but got their engineering degree through distance learning. It was also possible, but not very common, to start as a white helmet and then become a worker. This happened to Podolsky from the First Production Department, who used to be department head but lost this job due to some conflicts and then decided to become a worker. It was common that a father would work in the mine as a worker, and son as an engineer, or vice versa. Pavel, who was a white-helmet mechanic whose son worked as a miner, did not mind this at all, admitting that

the boy was young and needed more money to have a good time. Workers and engineers also lived in similar houses and spent their free time in similar ways, and sometimes together (see Chapter 5). Education legitimised engineers for workers, and hard work legitimised miners for engineers.

During my fieldwork, the boundaries between well-paid workers and lower-paid engineers were starting to shift, and workers felt alarmed. In ‘Estonia’, yellow-helmet workers did not undergo performance reviews. Workers considered it unfair when performance reviews and annual bonuses were introduced for all white-helmet employees of the mine. The fact that ITRs were to receive an annual bonus, while workers were not, upset workers. As they told me, some white-helmet workers had started boasting to their yellow-helmet colleagues that they got the bonus while workers did not. This brought about strong conflict in some cases, and a general discontent among workers. The line operators and switchboard managers from the processing plant, the most militant crowd among the workers, were extremely offended. They understood that the ITRs got the bonus because there had been profits made, while they were left with nothing, as if their work did not count towards the profit. This was especially upsetting for them because until the early 2000s they had received an annual bonus called the 13<sup>th</sup> salary, that had now been abolished. They drafted a complaint letter backed by the trade union, that read as follows:

We, the labour collective of ‘Estonia’ mine, are outraged about the decision of the management of Eesti Energia to pay annual bonuses based on the annual results only to the ITRs, which causes a split of the workers into two camps.

Because we scrupulously participated in the successful work of the mine and have the right for monetary rewards [...] We strongly ask to reconsider the question of annual bonus to all workers in order to reestablish social justice. We sustain the right to a picket or more radical measures.

Parallels about the shifting position of workers can be drawn also outside the postsocialist space. Sharryn Kashmir (1996) shows in her ethnography of a Basque cooperative that despite the official ideology that managers, engineers and labourers were all workers and owners of the co-op, workers’ experience was still different of that of management, and workers sensed the class difference. In the 1990s, however, even the argument of equality, ‘we are all workers,’ was abandoned by the managers of co-ops who started saying that the cooperative was never meant to create equality but something more flexible such as ‘equilibrium’ or ‘solidarity’. Managers started using the language of *efficiency*, *competition* and *crisis* to push for increased production and lower wages. Kashmir

notes that after this shift, managers could not fully control the ideology of equality that they had previously created. Workers, who had earlier been sceptical about being equal, started using the language of equality to demand fair treatment and to react to the new management practices. Similarly, mine workers in 'Estonia', touched by the same global wave of new management practices, tried to appeal to the language of equality and entitlement that they were used to while the management was distancing itself from it.

Processes of class formation take a long time (Kalb 1997) and class is not mechanically reproduced but is a flexible and 'fuzzy' category (Buchowski 2003:64-65). Nevertheless, it seems to me that the former model, in which workers and managers were aligned against the ruling elite and respected each other, was starting to break down. Big differentiations that came along with the new system hurt miners' egalitarian worldview as well as their sense of pride. The ritual of performance review drew a clear line between those who were expected to advance, improve, and be ambitious, and those who were cursed underground to dig the stone forever; those whose work counted when company profits were calculated and those who just relied on earning their monthly piece wage. Furthermore, this also deprived workers of the institutionalised access to a chat with a father figure, while allowing it to the managers. Although some managers were arrogant enough to point this out to the workers, the whole ideology of grading themselves as 'C' – doing well, but not wonderfully, and not necessarily better than others – shows that most managers shared this egalitarian worldview and did not necessarily subscribe to the ideology of meritocracy.

Workers saw the moment when underground foremen's salaries exceeded theirs as a sign of danger and the whole review process as potentially destroying the fairly egalitarian community among those who still held a job. It pointed to the symbolic reversal of roles, where miners' hard work was not worth as much as education, but also the potential material effects of differentiation of incomes that would no longer allow the leading of similar lifestyles. Currently, the type of clothes, cars and holidays depended more on personal preference and interests, but the performance review pointed to the beginning of the differentiation. Estonian society (and social scientists) had desperately looked for its middle class since the 1990s, while the overall low standard of living and high unemployment guaranteed that there was no middle class in sight. Furthermore, as Buchowski (2001) argues in the Polish context, the new middle class is a teleological concept, influenced by ideas of

transition to the West, that is employed in order to gather support for the liberal political and economic order.

The new HR policy, influenced by this liberal economic order, was employed as a tool for creating this desired middle class at the expense of workers. Eesti Energia's HR policy that aimed to create a bigger difference between white and yellow helmets aided the process through which engineers were expected to set goals, progress, and be paid more than miners. Engineers with their decent income, education and ambitions could form the basis of the future middle class, while miners, while financially well off, were symbolically barred from the company rituals, with no acknowledgement of their share in the company profit, stamped as those whose tasks and position never change. The next summer when I went back, the new collective agreement had been signed by the trade union and the 13<sup>th</sup> salary for the workers had been reinstated. This means that workers' sense of justice was taken into consideration in that particular aspect, and at least for a while peace and the illusion of no changes in class relations were maintained. Nevertheless, other processes of reorganisation in the company were initiating a different type of class differentiation, reflecting increased differentiation in the Estonian and European societies more generally (Bodnar 2000; Harvey 2005a; Kalb and Halmai 2011; Kasmir 1996; Kasmir and Carbonella 2008; Narotzky and Smith 2006; Stenning 2005a). Polanyi (1957) discusses the contradiction between 'habitation' and 'improvement' during the Industrial Revolution. He shows that capital tends to strip working people of the means of their own social reproduction (habitation) in pursuit of new sources, means and landscapes of accumulation (improvement). Kasmir and Carbonella (2008), however, emphasise that waves of dispossession do not touch whole communities evenly, but rather they are important moments in the production of difference and hierarchy. The new management practices that came along with neoliberal ideology illustrate this differentiation and creation of new hierarchies in the mine, and one of the most striking changes was outsourcing workers.

## **6.5. Outsourcing as creating difference**

The general striving for efficiency as the strategy of new management and the opening energy market collided with the economic crisis of 2008 that forced the company to look at where to cut costs. The obvious target for redundancies was the support staff. I am not sure which members of the management came up with the idea of laying off mine survey labourers, the men who drive cars underground, carry equipment, help mine surveyors

conduct measuring production, and set up new directions where the new shafts and conveyer belts will be. But in late 2009, with other layoffs of office and support staff, survey labourers were also under threat. The mine surveyors managed to convince the management that it was not possible to do their work without survey labourers – there were too few of them if anything. The next proposal for cutting costs was to create a company that would be providing survey labour service to the mine. The men would be made redundant and could do the same job in a new company. The mine surveyors were not very happy about this; after all, they were dependent on the help of the labourers, and had workers side by side with them for years. They suggested that the labourers could form their own company. After all, retired surveyors had their own companies and could help with setting one up. Somehow, however, the deal had already been made with someone else and there was no negotiation.

Next, the labourers tried to use their connections to find another job in the mine – the survey labourer job was not that well paid in the first place and they knew that the conditions were going to be worse. Siim had already talked to the director of another mine and Robert had been promised a job driving vehicles on the surface in ‘Estonia’. Somehow, both of these jobs fell through and the men suspected that someone from the management had told the mine directors not to take them, so that they would keep doing what they did in the new company. With few other jobs around, the men accepted. Siim had lost his previous jobs when first a tyre factory and then Kohtla mine (now a museum) were closed. Robert had previously worked in a chemical factory in his hometown Sillamäe, but found the job too dangerous for his health and preferred the one-hour commute to the mine instead.

After the transfer to the new company, the pay system changed and survey labourers started getting less money. Siim was particularly upset that when they were laid off, the unused annual leave was given to them in money and in the new company he had no annual leave to start with. He never made a secret about the fact that he was not particularly fond of his job, and having to do it the whole summer rather than travel or work in his garden made him miserable. The men also lost their union membership in the mine trade union. The last thing I heard from the survey labourers was that the company wanted to pay the labourers even less, wanting to only pay for six hours of work per day, which they thought the men were doing rather than eight, while the labourers would still have to spend eight hours at the mine before the buses back to their towns took off after their shift. At the same time, the men felt that they could not fight for better conditions because then they would be replaced by

someone else. They said that there were no other options in the region. Robert once mentioned that he would not mind going and working in the UK if there was a friend there already. His colleague from another mine had gone in that way a few years ago. But as long as his children were still young, he had to hold on to the job he had and try to make ends meet with his salary and his wife's part-time job as a shop assistant.

Restructuring did not always mean creating another company; it was possible to also shift people inside the company. A few months before I joined the First Production Department, restructuring had taken place among mechanics. To cut costs, three of the nine mechanics had to shift departments and become part of the all-mine mechanical services department. The head mechanic had to select three of his employees and send them to mechanical services. So Dima, Misha and Anton had to go. The salary of the mechanics had been about 17,000 Estonian kroons (slightly over 1,000 euros) and dropped to 12,000 when they changed departments. The men also said that they were given no choice or protection, nor told why exactly they were chosen. They were told that if they did not want to sign the agreement, they could leave altogether, and then the restructuring was done very quickly. They continued doing the same everyday jobs, repairing and maintaining mining machinery side by side with their former colleagues, but formally employed by another department. The only thing they could do was apply the strategy that Dima had chosen, to now do the bare minimum and nothing more. When earlier he would clean his workplace, organise tools or help others after he was done with his work, he would now play solitaire on the computer. This, naturally, caused conflicts among the mechanics. Dima also told me that he was convinced that God would punish the people responsible for that, and that gave him inner peace. This was one of the very few times I heard anyone talking about God during my fieldwork.



**Illustration 18. Restructured mechanics**

**Mechanics still have lunch together and do the same work as they used to, but some of them are now nominally part of another department, with a significantly smaller salary**

Before leaving the field, there was new talk of restructuring. All the mechanics would be gathered into a central service and would be providing services to all production departments. Miners would be performing their own simpler service and repair jobs to their machines. It was rumoured that the change would take place on 1 January, but in late October no one knew exactly if it was going to happen for sure, what it would mean in terms of salaries, and whether everyone would be able to keep their job. Sergey, who was in charge of the large wheeled loaders, Toros, and took great pride in his knowledge about the machines and skills, servicing and repairing them with great speed, was very worried. “Say you have taken a loan for a house reconstruction and you do not know how much you will be paid in a few months’ time?” The sewing factory where his wife was working had also had layoffs and there were more to come. And Sergey was indeed rebuilding his house, to make more space for his two young children. Sergey’s first big concern, however, was the machines. “But we know all the systems,” he was telling me while cleaning the inner parts of the huge wheel of a Toro, the loading machine.

The miners have never repaired the machines, they only sit in their machine and drive off. Our guys are only going to service the machines and change the oil. But who is going to repair the machines? It is simple now when there are mechanics in every department who look after the machines and the conveyer belts in the *zaboi*. But they will mess it all up; it seems to me that no one will win.

At the same time, they were reassuring themselves that the likelihood of restructuring would be small. Another mechanic said,

I do not think it will be feasible. Because if I work in this department, I am interested. If they call me in the evening, or at night, I will go. But what if I am in a company? No way in hell. I will come in the morning and that's it. Because we have a work cycle here. If one part of it does not work, everything falls apart. Because the drillers come, they drill. Then the roof securers. Then blasters come, they blast. Then loaders come and load. If a conveyer belt breaks, they cannot load. So there is no *zaboi* to prepare, people come but there is nothing to do, if there is a breakdown somewhere.

In the Soviet period, auxiliary workers were always lower-paid than production workers. Although conflicts emerged between them, miners could not do without their mechanics, just as mine surveyors could not work without their mine survey labourers due to the need for repairs to keep the whole production cycle going. Miners and mechanics had particular ideas about each other's hierarchy in the mine. One of the reasons the miners thought that mechanics should not be paid as much as them was that there was not as much dust, gas and danger of rock falling from the ceiling in the underground garage where mechanics worked. The mechanics responded in the same discourse, saying that on Monday mornings, after the mine and the ventilation had not been working over the weekend, the conditions in the underground garage were just as bad, and when explosions took place near the garage, they got their share of gas from blasting.

Nevertheless, the men saw each other as workers, as miners in the wider sense of the word, and besides everyday conflicts at work that emerged from the rush that piece-waged miners caused, they got along and had no issues. But the new constant danger of being restructured made mechanics anxious and scared. The threat of becoming the flexible worker, who is supposed to change his tasks, contract and salary, was always hanging in the air for them. The situation was changing from one in which both miners and mechanics were well-paid, respected and skilled workers of a nationally-owned company, to one in which auxiliary workers were joining the global precariat (Standing 2011), always worried about their jobs and security.

Again, when I went back the following year, the mechanics had not been restructured, largely because of their key role in the production cycle as demonstrated by the mechanic's quote above, but they did not know how long they would be secure. But survey labourers were still in their unsure position, unionless and on a poor salary. Pointing to class formation processes here might again need some speculation, but if cutting costs on the expense of

auxiliary workers continues, it will be reminiscent of the situation that Jonathan Parry (1999; 2009) and Andrew Sanchez describe in state-owned steel plants in India, where the well-paid and secured permanent labour force has been reduced due to neoliberal management practices (Sanchez 2009), the small well-paid, well-educated and established permanent workforce can be classified as a middle class, and the majority of contract workers only earn a fraction of the labour aristocracy's salary and lead a completely different lifestyle (Parry forthcoming). This example from distant India is relevant because of the shared history of both field sites being company towns with well looked-after labour aristocracy. In both Estonia and India, the current neoliberal drive for accumulation by dispossession is radically changing the experience of work and class, creating new inequalities. In Estonia, the desire to see an emerging middle class has been strong since 1991.

Despite the country's relative economic success, this middle class is still nowhere to be seen as most people just manage to feed their families on their income, and a significant percentage of children are still growing up below the poverty line. There are also a handful of very wealthy families but the dream of the majority of people of living on a comfortable income and forming a middle class in the sense of Western Europe has not materialised. As Estonia's economy is recovering from the crisis, neoliberal principles are still honoured and formerly protected markets like the energy sector are starting to open up; simultaneously, potential for new class formations is also emerging. During my fieldwork, two types of reorganisation pointed to two different processes of class formation. On the one hand, engineers were assuming a more middle-class position in relation to workers, and on the other hand auxiliary workers were becoming an underclass of precarious labour. Miners, although being less appreciated and having a smaller income than they used to, relative to other professions, still remained the aristocracy of labour locally, but were in a more uncertain and precarious position than they used to be, especially if they lost their health.

## **6.6. The company as a family or the company and the family?**

Concerning the reorganisation in the company that I witnessed during my fieldwork, I would like to further discuss another topic: that of the changing meaning of family. Elizabeth Dunn (2000; 2004) shows how during its takeover by an American company, the workers of the Polish baby food factory used the terms and language of kinship to make sense of all of the new and alien changes. The Polish company was seen as a poor but beautiful Polish bride who would marry a rich older American gentleman. The reception after the privatisation deal

was signed resembled a Polish wedding reception, and the factory workers assumed that now the 'groom' would have to take good care of them. When layoffs and uncertainties began, this was interpreted as a let-down by the groom. This kind of interpretation, relying heavily on metaphors, might have made sense in the early 1990s when workers had no previous experience with privatisation. In reality, companies can have some qualities of a patriarch but because of a profit-making motive they never quite behave like one.

Müller (2007:170-183) shows how in the case of an East German elevator company, the metaphor of family was not used in the socialist period, but was a discourse introduced by the new West German management. The metaphor was attractive because it emphasised solidarity, community and responsibility of all workers, engaging both hierarchical and egalitarian relationships. It was, however, also full of contradictions, as on the one hand, employees had to display independent business thinking, but on the other hand, 'learn to think in the ways' of the company. The idea of 'company as a family' coexisted with the philosophy of 'competition as the law of the market' and 'belief in success'. When the latter two meant that people were starting to be laid off, the idea of the company as a family fell apart.

Even in stable privately owned companies the metaphor of family is ridden with contradictions. Kondo (1990) shows how the company as family metaphor worked for the employees of a Tokyo factory in some situations when the owner was organising informal events like trips and parties for the workers, but was deemed completely lacking in credibility by employees in other situations, for example the experience of having surveillance cameras on the shop floor. The metaphor, far from straightforward, provided ground for irony, ambiguity and different ways of experiencing the family in different situations. Interestingly, some of Kondo's ethnographic subjects also felt that the company really was a family until the director hired a management consultant to reorganise it, and that shattered the illusion of kinship.

In the case of the Estonian mines, it seems to me that the family metaphor was never very actively used. The analysis of the moral economy of miners in Chapter 4 supports the claim that during socialism, the state assumed the role of the patriarch, provider and protector (Ashwin 2000; Verdery 1996), which led to a reconfiguration of gender roles. Partly because of this providing and nurturing role of the state and, through it, the company, miners felt

entitled to certain benefits. Nevertheless, I believe that interpreting the company only in the role of a nurturing and caring father is too reductionist.

Certainly, there was respect for patriarch-like managers. The company's previous director, who died in a car accident in 2006, was one such fatherly character who was interested in the workers' lives, and came and shook their hands, but was also a tough and authoritarian leader. During my fieldwork in 2010 miners still talked about him with great love. The new directors of the company and the mine were believed to be arrogant because they did not engage with workers. So rather than saying that this patronage relationship was not important in the company, I argue that the father-like managers were not the embodiment of the company. Workers liked father-like leaders, and as the example of the annual performance review shows, were happy to continue such practices as institutionalised patronage, but the company was much more than the leader or a father. The company did not constitute a family in a top-down management discourse but rather consisted of clusters of the miners' own families. Through the fact that their grandfathers and fathers had helped to build the mines and had done hard work, they claimed a moral ownership of the company, through ideas of dynasties in the mining profession and their region, and saw themselves as those who produce light and warmth.

Due to this feeling of ownership of the company, the name change from Eesti Põlevkivi to Eesti Energia Kaevandused came as a shock. Most of the people I talked to expressed their sadness and disappointment about the loss of the old name. This was mostly related to the historical traditions that people appreciated – they were immensely proud that oil shale had been mined in the region for 90 years already and that the particular company had been around long enough that their grandfathers, fathers and themselves had been able to work there for many years. It was also a symbol for the whole region rather than only employees of the mines. It was the biggest industry in the area and one of the few that managed to survive in the new capitalist system. Nearly everyone had a family member working in the company, the directors of the mines were the most respected men about whom the most legends and gossip were spread, and the parties organised by Eesti Põlevkivi, particularly Miners' Day, were the best parties in the neighbourhood.

People had somehow forgiven or forgotten the radical changes in the 1990s and early 2000s, including selling the company's summer cottages, the sanatorium and the children's camp, and the closing of several mines that left thousands without work. The retired miners

would show me their photo albums of the good times they had at work, the souvenirs and letters thanking them for hard work, all with the name and logo of Eesti Põlevkivi. The name meant a lot even to top managers who came to do their traineeship in the prestigious company when they were young. One of the mid-level managers, a distinguished gentleman in his late fifties, climbed on top of the flagpole in the mine yard to take home the last flags of Eesti Põlevkivi before the name and logo were changed. When the new logo was introduced as ‘green and sexy’ in the brand meeting, the local PR representative Veronika said that she had imagined a sexy girl in a green swimsuit. This idea of selling sexy young single people did not appeal to her and she was thinking, “Why can’t we be green with a family?”



**Illustration 19. Green and sexy replaces blue with family**

**When I left the field, the PR staff in Jõhvi gave me two sets of souvenirs. The fireplace lighter and a piece of oil shale with the old company logo related to oil shale and fire, and the mug, pen and memory stick were rather generic souvenirs with the new logo of Eesti Energia. Although the PR staff was supposed to be the promoter of the new corporate identity, it was hard for them to accept the loss of an important local symbol and name.**

I would agree with Dunn (2004) that the idea of family is intimately linked with the company, but rather than working as a straightforward metaphor, it is always ridden with contradictions as Müller (2007) and Kondo (1990) show, just as families themselves rarely resemble the ideal image. In the case of the mines, family and company were never separate for the workers. Besides family members who worked in the same company, wives and children were incorporated into the leisure activities organised by the company. The company had been built by the family; therefore family members who were engaged in other sectors of

work, and the families' children, the potential future employees, were also engaged in the capillary network formed around the company. I suggest that in the case of the mines the focus of the struggle between workers and management was not about the ideology of 'the company as a family' but about 'family in the company'. In the attempt to implement new corporate culture and in fear of promoting nepotism, this understanding of the intimate linkage of company and the family was about to change. I will explore this further in two examples: the Party of New Energy and the case of the new code of ethics.

It was a cold December morning, the sun rising and reflecting its red light on the piles of white snow on the edges of the road, on the fields and forests, when Veronika from the PR department and I drove to the biggest open-cast mine, the Narva quarry, to talk about the Christmas party. The management of the quarry was having their weekly meeting and Veronika thought it would be a great opportunity to encourage managers to come to the highly controversial Christmas party organised by Ines and her colleagues in Tallinn. As we drove through the fields and forests, seeing the chimneys of the power plants drawing closer and closer, Veronika explained that she was in a very difficult situation. The Party of New Energy that was going to take place in the beginning of January, and in which all employees of Eesti Energia were supposed to participate, was not popular among the miners. The new format that was introduced the previous year encountered resistance because of general dissatisfaction about the changes. The last straw was that miners did not receive a Christmas bonus that year because the mine did not generate enough profit, while the other employees of Eesti Energia, most notably the power plant workers, still received a good bonus. Miners had felt upset and let down – what was the point of going to the party and pretending that we are one company if we are not treated in an equal way? The miners had always received a Christmas bonus, even when times were really hard. This year, it was Veronika's job to make sure more people turned up at the party. As a local, she completely understood the miners and was not sure about the party herself, especially as a few days ago the local management had said that they did not support it. But as part of the centralised Public Relations department, Veronika had to do her job.

We arrived at the end of the meeting of department heads and managers, who were mostly moustached middle-aged Russian men in shirts and ties; the only woman besides ourselves was the local HR manager. Veronika gave a PowerPoint presentation introducing the concept of the party that was supposed to take place in five locations in Estonia, with

video-conferencing from different places for speeches and some performances. At the end of the presentation, Veronika asked the managers if they wanted to go to the party at all, because if they did, then the department heads would be the key people to encourage workers from their departments to join in. The general reception was positive; people agreed that of course a party was needed, and discussed the location, transport and catering for the party. Only then did Veronika clarify that the party would not include partners, that it would be only for the employees of Eesti Energia. This had been the major problem about the rearrangement of the party the previous year – miners had traditionally had their parties in a smaller group, usually just their own mine or quarry, and wives had always been present. Miners love to dance, and a party with a bunch of men and no one to dance with did not sound attractive to them. Miners' wives love to keep an eye on their husbands – not so much to stop them from drinking, but to make sure that they do not go off with other women.

The men at the meeting turned slightly grumpier but did not complain much. One of them joked that coming without wives was not really an issue for them: the problem was more how to explain to their wives that they had to stay at home. Then the men also picked up the issue of the Christmas bonus – it was 16 December and they had not been told yet whether they would receive one that year. The meeting ended without a real conclusion; the department heads promised to spread the message among their workers but it was clear that they were not so sure about it themselves.

A few days before the party, I found out that the one that was supposed to take place in Kohtla-Järve, in the mining area, had been cancelled. When I asked several people why that was, the PR people told me that it was because too few people had registered. Workers simply replied that it was not their party, and this was why no one went. The miners were still invited to join the power plant workers' party in Narva 50 kilometres away. Those miners who went were generally happy with the party, where, in addition to speeches and talking about the great achievements of the company, there was plenty of food, alcohol and dancing. The complaints did not concern so much the format of the party, but the location of the smoking area, quality of food and other practical issues.

But more people were alienated by the new way of partying. This was due to the unequal treatment of miners regarding Christmas bonuses (this year, miners received 400 Estonian kroons [25 euros] while power plant workers received 1,000 [60 euros]), and because of the sudden introduction of the idea that partners should not attend the party.

Family is one of the most central values in the region; miners and their families had all been very tied to the company. Not inviting partners was a big mistake by the organisers. Also the local management board members disapproved of the new policy, saying that it was sad if the wives and children did not know where their husbands were working. And although Ines, with the help of the local PR girls, had made a big effort to look for presenters, performers and music that would appeal to the Russian-speaking crowd, she still got some crucial aspects, like including the family, wrong. The local management of the mines, however, somehow still found some money to secretly support the New Year parties that the miners organised for themselves, at which their wives were present, everything was like it used to be, and they did not have to drink to the ‘Year of New Energy’.



**Illustration 20. Children’s Christmas party**

**It is important for miners that families are incorporated into the company, for instance through children’s Christmas parties. The parties have to be locally organised to consider regional circumstances. In this party, we can see Russian-speaking Father Frost and Estonian-speaking Father Christmas entertaining children together, so that no one feels left out.**

The renaming of the company and the change in party traditions did not affect everyday work relations, pay or jobs. The changes did, however, carry very strong symbolic value that was important to the miners, the engineers, the local management and local community alike. On the other hand, the event organisers in Tallinn were sad that people did not want to take part. Ines confessed to me that she had become ‘much more tolerant’ towards Russian ways of having parties and she really had organised a programme in Narva

that the Russian-speaking audience appreciated. There was still a huge communication gap between Tallinn and the east, both sides not quite listening to what the other had to say. The new tradition of having parties without wives present was justified by the argument that it was still a work event (between dances, company production numbers were shown, for example), and because of the economic crisis it was necessary to cut costs and having fewer people made it cheaper. Thus, from one angle, it was about rational economic calculation, and from the other, about new values of individualism. Just as engineers had to fill in their individual performance review questionnaires, they had to come to the party as individuals, not as a family. A third way to look at it is simply that the young and arrogant management in Tallinn did not know or care about local values and tried to implement what they thought was best, hoping that the ignorant miners would see that the new way was better and would go along with it. Among the Eesti Energia management in Tallinn, there was a definite fear of families and how to manage effectively in a situation in which the unit of management seemed to be the family rather than the individual. This claim can further be illustrated by the case of the introduction of the new code of ethics.

One day when I was sitting in the office of the First Production Department, someone from the HR department came with a piece of paper that she attached to the notice board. "Eesti Energia's new code of ethics," she explained to the head of department. "Make sure you and your department read it and they sign off that they have read and understood it." The same piece of paper, declaring general ethical values, was travelling to all departments. It contained points that employees should not work for a competing organisation, not consume alcohol at the workplace, and not accept expensive gifts. One of the points was "We will not work under the direct management of our relatives, family members or friends because this kind of relationship can lead to a situation of conflict of interests. As managers, we avoid such situations and shall not recruit our relatives or friends to our department."

But mining is a family trade, mainly because there is often little else to do in the mining regions. Even more so is mine surveying, and mine surveyors have their own very strong professional identity. Often the mine surveyors working at 'Estonia' were from families whose parents were already mine surveyors somewhere in Russia or Ukraine. This was the case with Sergei and Katja who both decided to pursue their parents' passion and started their studies in the St Petersburg Institute of Mining. They became coursemates, fell in love, got married and were both appointed to work in Soviet Estonia, Katja in 'Estonia' and

Sergei in another mine nearby. When the other mine was closed ten years ago and the head of the Surveying Department in 'Estonia' retired, Sergei was invited to become the new head. He and Katja had been working side by side for ten years, each responsible for their own job and And Sergey could not influence Katja's salary or other benefits in any way.

Suddenly, after the declaration of the new code of ethics, the head mine surveyor from the local central office in Jõhvi announced that Katja and Sergei were not allowed to work together anymore. It was difficult to track down the source of the very passionate implementation, but it was certainly not the head mine surveyor herself whose husband, another mine surveyor, had to give up his job in another mine due to the same rule. The mine surveyors had proposed discussing the matter with the management (as they had earlier tried to defend their labourers) to come up with a solution, but they were not heard and within a week Katja was transferred to another mine, which was to be closed in two years. Sergei was extremely upset when he told me about this. He felt that he was not respected and trusted, that his family routine of travelling to work together had been broken. Moreover, he had lost one of the best specialists in the department, Katja, who was always very responsible, precise, demanding and knew her parts of the mine very well. When it all happened, Katja and Sergei's daughter Daria had been home for a break from university. Daria was a third year student at the St Petersburg Institute of Mining; she was studying to be a mine surveyor like her parents. (Sergei had thought that Daria was more of a humanities type and warned her that it was an extremely tough job for women, but Daria had insisted.) When she heard about what had happened, she gave up the idea of coming back and working in the mines in Estonia. She could not work in the same department where either her mother or father was a manager, and she would not even want to, if her parents were treated with such inflexibility.

Other anxieties about families working together were also signalled from Tallinn. Although Eesti Energia was a company that was officially supporting family values, their discourse and understanding of these were different from the east's. As Eesti Energia advertises to their potential future employees, they claim to endorse family values and free time with family. As the website of Eesti Energia states,

We believe the work and personal lives of our employees should be in balance.  
We give additional holidays and days off to our employees for family events.  
We pay a bonus when our employees have a child and when the child first goes to school.  
We host a joint Christmas party for the children of our employees, with Christmas presents for the children (Eesti Energia 2012).

From this vision, it is clear that the family-friendly policy of Eesti Energia was different from what miners understood as a family-friendly policy and practice. The management stated that it was ready to support people who had families and even give them extra free time to spend with their families, but this was supposed to take place outside the framework of the workplace; work and personal lives became two distinct and completely separate categories. I would not want to speculate about the meanings of the policy here but it is worth pointing out that while children were acceptable, partners or grown-up children who might join the company seemed to pose a problem. Moreover, what was understood as the pride of mining dynasties and professionalism, including possibilities for husbands and wives, fathers and sons to work together in the east, was understood as nepotism that had to be uprooted immediately in the west. The young Estonian women of Tallinn, single or not in such close and possessive relationships as their colleagues in the east, could not understand the importance of having partners present at the workplace events or in the workplace itself. Office workers with jobs that were not dangerous did not understand the need of showing wives the dangerous work environment and underground colleagues to confirm the masculine nature of their job. Hence, despite the discourse of family friendliness, the new management practices were breaking up the family as a unit intimately tied to the workplace, as it had been understood in the east.

Recent anthropological work on codes and standards has shown that rather than being simply technical tools to regulate labour regimes, they create new social regimes of power and inequality (De Neve 2009; Dunn 2005; Rajak 2009). De Neve shows convincingly how the ethical standards imposed on Indian producers by Western companies do not improve the conditions of workers on the shop floor, but instead, what he calls the politics of compliance gives the stronger party another tool to expand its control over others.

Ethical compliance allows for a powerful politics of inequality to unfold precisely because it is wrought in the nebulous languages of CSR, philanthropy and partnership, and because it presents the market as benevolent and the actors involved as caring and compassionate. As a result, the politics of compliance contributes to the consolidation of the power of standard-setting actors by facilitating the devolution of risk, uncertainty and responsibility to the weaker “partners” in the chain. The ultimate paradox is that while CSR claims to protect the weakest and poorest from the ills of the market, it in fact allows the market to govern in its most unchecked fashion. Through the politics of CSR powerful corporate regimes of control and governance are unleashed that construct new hierarchies of value and morality. (De Neve 2009: 71)

Elizabeth Dunn (2005) notes the same about applying EU standards in Poland. She shows how implementing standards is not only about improving product quality but also making firms more like they are in the West, and making postsocialist farmers, workers and managers more similar, though not necessarily equal, to those in the West. The aim is to create homogeneity across the world, but this homogeneity is always related to global hierarchies. “The hierarchy of value that standards lay out quickly transmutes difference into impurity. Standards thus act as more than technologies for organizing and regulating markets, and express fundamental social relations between groups” (p. 181). In this article, Dunn acknowledges that standardisation does not lead to new types of persons being made and completed. Instead of homogenising persons, she believes, standards create inequalities between persons, as Eastern Europe with its different institutional legacy is seen as inferior.

Eesti Energia’s new code of ethics, like other codes and standards that try to enforce the same rules everywhere, did not consider the legacy of mining as a family trade. By applying the idea of a company ethic, the management was able to override the local family ethics and represent these as somehow dirty, suspicious, inferior and corrupt. At the same time, Eesti Energia’s own codes and family policy showed them as ethical and caring. Particular ideas of corruption and transparency, as measured in the report of the Baltic Institute of Corporate Governance (2012) quoted at the beginning of this chapter, not only orientated any other values than those represented by Eesti Energia management, but also confirmed the hierarchy of power whereby local management could no longer argue against those 200 kilometres west, and local workers and their families had no other options than to comply with the new vision of individuals whose family is external to the company.

Ethnographies of family firms and outworkers in Southern Europe show how due to a particular local form of capitalism, workers need to commodify their family relations and use the labour of kin. In family firms, the material and non-material interests and struggles for ownership and control are intertwined; family members struggle to participate in owning and managing the firm, but also for inheritance and succession of the firm and the family (Yanagisako 2002). Workers recruited through family and kin networks that provided the best ways of accessing cheap and flexible labour (Goddard 1996). “This is because familial ideologies generate a set of differentiated rights, so that some have rights over the labour of others, while at the same time they foster ideals of communality and reciprocity, where demands for better wages and improved working conditions appear to be inappropriate. Not

only is kin-based labour cheaper, but it also predisposes workers to accept requests to work late or to work harder” (Goddard 1996: 127).

In these Southern European cases, the flexible neoliberal economy makes people use their family labour even if they would prefer not to, mixing kin and business relations. As Narotzky and Smith (2006) have shown, in the case of outworkers in Spain, the EU regulations and the need to attract capital in an uncertain economic situation make the region advertise itself as flexible. Social science concepts such as *social embeddedness* and *social capital* have been taken over by the local government and businesses to be sold as advantages of the region and to promote the type of outwork tied to family labour. In other words, the flexibilisation of labour promotes working together with families. In the case of Estonia, flexibility is expressed in increasing outsourcing and breaking up units where families worked together. In Estonia, the ‘audit culture’ (Shore and Wright 1999) is the side of neoliberalism that separates the family and direct economic relationships. Once again, my ethnography confirms the argument that neoliberalism plays out differently in different contexts, depending on local circumstances and histories (cf. Goldstein 2012; Kipnis 2008).

## 6.7. Conclusion

In *Magnetic Mountain* (1997), Kotkin shows how the Soviet worker was made in the 1930s. This was more than the project of switching agricultural time to industrial time: it was also a political project. Workers had to understand the political significance of their work. The main construction of the new worker was going to take place on the shop floor, and technologies of making workers more efficient and educating them politically included shock work. Shock work was about rationalisation and better organisation of workers rather than introducing new technology. Other technologies in the productivity campaigns included socialist competition, Stakhanovism, introducing individual piece wage and individual norms, the fulfilling of which was rewarded with bonuses. Workers were also shaped by meetings with political agitators and the presence of secret police on the shop floor.

Studying a much more recent period, Dunn (2004) looks at new methods like Total Quality Management, employee trainings, reorganising labour discipline, and new ideals of performing oneself, that are targeted at unmaking what was Soviet or socialist about the worker, and making flexible selves. The new political and economic conditions shape the view of an appropriate type of person for the new era. But rather than focussing on the

process of engineering a particular person that ends in a finished result – a new neoliberal man or woman, I suggest looking at the contradictions, unpredictabilities, reversals and conflicts that emerge during the process and that do not necessarily end with a new person being made. The subject of engineering has his or her own understandings, desires and motivations, by which he or she also influences the process. Furthermore, the changes in political and economic conditions do not result in the shaping only of persons, but also of larger social units such as families and social classes.

The changes that Eesti Energia introduced in the mines, such as performance review, labour restructuring and outsourcing, are indicators of new stratifications in the class system which separates engineers, miners and auxiliary workers. New types of parties and the code of ethics helped to separate the family from the company and started to create a new system in which the two were meant to keep separate, rather than being overlapping. These processes can be read as a part of more general trends of individualisation, casualisation of labour and increased stratification, but it is important to note that they do not happen neatly according to the plan of the top management or the elite. Rather than being explicitly and only neoliberal, these processes are a mix of political and economic conditions and local values and understandings. Besides the individual resistance that workers displayed to reject the changes, the trade union is still present in the mine and has had to reform itself in the face of recent changes, as well as to maintain some of the old functions to which miners were accustomed. My final chapter focusses on the union and labour politics.

## **Chapter 7. A different kind of union: EPTAL in the mine and at the negotiation table**

### **7.1. Introduction**

The 1970s and 1980s saw significant changes in labour and capital relations, signified by flexibilisation of production, increasing transnationalism and hypermobility of capital. In the West, this led to the decline in power of trade unions, but also encouraged new ways of organising unions. The erosion of the strength of unions occurred in parallel with the decline of heavy industry. The process has been explained by the ‘race to the bottom’ thesis, which sees capital tapping into a global un-unionised labour reserve, and by the introduction of a new organisation of production that fragments the workforce in the context of the decreasing power of nation states and especially the retraction of the welfare state (Silver 2003). The period since the 1990s has been described as the decline of worker politics, also in Eastern Europe. The research of the last 20 years shows declining numbers of union members, low bargaining power, and the mysterious passivity of workers in Eastern Europe as the former workers’ states have abandoned their workers. Following labour politics in Estonian mines, I want to give an alternative account. I will do so by describing a union that workers find useless but nevertheless use; that is not involved in strike threats but strikes nevertheless take place; that works together with the management but nevertheless wins benefits for workers. Trying to fit unions into a European model that is outdated and changing, leads to descriptions of unions as weak and a particular imagination of what a union should be. Looking at non-Western examples, and activities on the ground, allows us to have a more context-specific view of unions and workers’ union consciousness.

### **7.2. Globally changing industrial relations**

This chapter is organised as follows. First, I shall review the literature on unions in Eastern Europe and offer my approach on how to analyse it based on characteristics other than deficiency and lack. Then, I will give a brief overview of trade unions in Estonia and the Oil Shale Producers’ Union, EPTAL. I will go on to explore how workers talked about the union in the mine and then introduce several ethnographic examples to show how miners, despite the talk, actually used the union in various ways and how trade union consciousness emerged among miners and union officials, within and outside the official EPTAL framework. These examples demonstrate the need to look at global and local context and

historical background to explain the emergence of particular union consciousness and organisation and its dynamics.

The collapse of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union meant that the Party-sponsored trade unions lost their position of monopoly. New independent unions emerged, bringing about competition for power in politics and for membership between the old and the new unions and questions about the roles that they should fulfil. Analysis of Eastern Europe shows that unions took different roles during the collapse of the previous regimes, for example unions in Russia and Ukraine (Siegelbaum 2004) demanding transition to the market system in 1989 while the militant miners of the Romanian Jiu valley were actively supporting neo-communists (Keil and Keil 2002; Kideckel 2000; Vasi 2004) and the Estonian unions of Soviet factory workers were demanding the continuation of the Soviet Union (Open Society Archives 1989). After the initial confusion, however, the role of the unions decreased everywhere in Eastern Europe, as it had decreased globally.

Political scientists and industrial relations scholars analysing trade unions in Eastern Europe have often asked about the puzzling quiescence of workers after socialism, resulting in a literature that can be titled *why did the dogs not bark*, or why were workers not militant after the fall of the workers' states? Analysing Russia, various authors have noted the structural constraints that caused the powerlessness of trade unions. It is concluded that unions' current weakness is shaped by their socialist heritage (Ashwin 1999; Kubicek 2002), and that privatisation, new systems of governance and economics have not really changed the industrial relations in the country. The different reasons include poverty-related ones, for example the alternative incomes of people who survive on other economic activities and therefore are not starving but are not interested in the unions. A related factor is how to strike when there is no work? Workers' position in the labour market is weak and those who have been laid off already would no longer be able to strike for workers' rights. Crowley (2006) highlights privatisation as one of the factors – most of the strikes have taken place in the state sector and the small number of strikes in the private sector suggests that the state has succeeded in no longer being perceived by workers as directly responsible for their well-being; or perhaps workers in the 'privatised sector' simply are not sure against whom to strike (Crowley 2006). Unions are highly dependent on management, who in turn depend on local politicians (Ashwin 2004; Clarke 2005). However, Robertson (2007) points out that the question of lack of protests is not justified at all – although the workers in what he calls

'hybrid regimes' like Russia are not organised in unions, protests do occur outside the union framework and in some regions more than others and at some times more than others. His analysis points out the need to look at alternative forms of organisation and alternative ways of expressing grievance.

The overall framework is that of trying to explain variations in the militancy of workers in different Central and Eastern European countries (cf. Avdagic 2003). Besides Russia, Romania with its militant miners, a relative anomaly in the region of quiescent workers, has also attracted attention. Why did the dogs, who did not bark elsewhere, bark in Romania? How can we explain the very militant action of the Jiu Valley miners? For, example, Vasi (2004) believes that the miners were easy to mobilise because of the dense social networks of the mono-industrial homogeneously populated Jiu valley region. He explains that miners were also helped by the availability of union resources, the presence of a favourable political opportunity, and unique mobilising potential that had already been created during socialism. Kideckel (2011), however, rightly argues that the miner militancy has to be viewed in the wider context of global processes that are linked to the national political economy. Increasing inequalities, labour migration, and changing conditions of labour all "contribute to the decline of violence and the emptiness of politics" (p. 125).

The literature on *why did the dogs not bark* assumes that workers' political action has to be expressed in the trade union framework and that the action has to be a strike. Unions and worker organisation in Eastern Europe have been defined in terms of lack and weakness. This means focussing on an ideal model of what unions should be, and what they should do, rather than what they actually are and why their actions are meaningful in a particular situation. Sheila Cohen (2006) gives a similar critique of Anglo-Saxon union literature: that often it has focussed on what 'the unions' ought to do rather than looking at what they actually do. Besides prescribing an action programme for the unions, she believes, this also homogenises different types of unions and their bureaucrats and rank and file members. In Eastern Europe, the literature is not even programmatic, prescribing what unions should do, but saying *what they are not able to do*, comparing them to an imagined, Western ideal which might not exist in reality even in the West. A parallel can be drawn with the 1990s literature on building civil society in Eastern Europe, where researchers applied the Western understanding of civil society and asked why this did not work in Eastern Europe, and often used 'socialist mentality' or 'path dependency' as explanations for this. Analyses of civil

society in terms of lack have been strongly criticised by anthropologists (Buchowski 1996; Hann and Dunn 1996; Kalb 2002; Lagerspetz 2000; Lagerspetz, Ruutsoo and Rikmann 2001; Mandel 2002; Sampson 1996). For trade unions in Eastern Europe, framing the question in terms of lack of militancy means neglecting other activities that unions are engaged with, like collective agreement negotiations. It also neglects the local context where unions are understood in a particular way and used according to local understandings of what a union should do, and defines alternative uses of unions in terms of lack and deficiency. It contrasts sharply with anthropological literature on unions (mostly in the global South) and alternative organisational practices that I will discuss below.

Such literature implicitly also assigns a particular role in world history to the working class, who are expected to be political and class conscious, and to overthrow the existing system. Accusations that workers only have trade union consciousness, rather than revolutionary class consciousness, can be traced back to Lenin, who discussed the revolutionary potential of workers (Lenin 1963). Lenin noted that workers' struggles were nothing more than trade union struggles, and that the working class, without the help of the intelligentsia, is only able to develop trade union consciousness, meaning that they believe that it is necessary to fight for workers' rights by negotiation with the employer and the state. In contrast, social-democratic consciousness is the recognition that workers' interests oppose the whole modern political and social system, the need to overthrow the capitalist system. Following on from Lenin, Eric Hobsbawm explains that "[E]ach class has two levels of aspiration [...]: the immediate, day-by-day specific demands and the more general demand for the kind of society which suits it" (Hobsbawm 1984: 26). According to Hobsbawm, in order to achieve the fulfilment of its own interests, the working class has to organise collectively, to create a formal organisation which is the carrier of class ideology. The lower level organisation, then, is often a trade union. Trade union consciousness thus refers to the workers' awareness of the necessity to organise collectively, to become a class not only in themselves but also for themselves. The term 'labour union consciousness' is also used by anthropologist Paul Durrenberger (2002) who defines union consciousness as union members' awareness of their position in the union and wider political system, vis-à-vis trade union leaders and management. Huw Beynon (1975: 108) talks about factory class consciousness as workers' understanding of class conflict through the everyday confrontation of workers and bosses in the politics of the factory. Although Beynon admits that trade union consciousness based on workplace relations reflects relationships in the wider society, he sees

the union essentially as a tool for economic bargaining and not for changing society. Similarly, Cohen (2006) blames British unions and union members for indulging in 'reformism' instead of trying thoroughly to analyse capital-labour relations and overthrow the capitalist system.

Despite the fact that trade union consciousness is politically seen as a weak type of consciousness for challenging capitalism, it is an analytically useful tool. It helps us to look at how workers perceive their position in the capital-labour relations in everyday shop floor situations as well as in wider society, and to explain the particular actions they undertake as workers. While many labour researchers like Cohen (2006) put all their trust and expectations in the rank-and-file members of unions, in the Estonian case it is useful also to explore the trade union consciousness of trade union representatives and how this is changed by the reconfigurations of capital. I use trade union consciousness in a place-specific and processual way, to explore workers' recognition for their need to organise or, in other words, how workers relate to the union considering particular historical circumstances, and political and economic constraints on the ground. Trade union consciousness of workers can be expressed in a more or less utilitarian way, within the framework of the official union as well as outside it, depending on the particular history and situation on the ground. A particular consciousness leads to a particular type of action. One way that people learn about the nature of their oppression and to articulate their values is through class organisations like trade unions (Fantasia, Levine and McNall 1991; Mills 1999). As Turner (1999) shows in her ethnography of Japanese workers, there is a strong dialectical relationship between consciousness and action.

Rather than describing Eastern European unions in terms of an imagined ideal of a union, I suggest looking outside the global North to see the diversity of union forms and tactics. Ethnographies of trade unions in the global South often focus on building alternative new membership bases and alliances to strengthen unions against global capital. As Silver (2003) points out, the decline of labour movements in the West and the relocation of capital to the newly industrialised countries has created new organisations of labour there. Nash's (1979) classic ethnography of miners in Bolivia shows strong class consciousness and union struggle based on an indigenous worldview and identity in addition to worker identity and miners' awareness of their position in the global marketplace. Mills (1999) shows how Bangkok unions and labour solidarity groups draw upon both 'modern' urban commercial

forms as well as 'traditional' ritual practices to promote class-based unity within a predominantly youthful migrant labour force from rural Thailand. Through enactments of solidarity these youth rework the dominant symbols and practices and contest the hegemonic authority. Members who are commonly believed to have little potential for collective action develop a class-based identity through common activities (Mills 1999). Olivia Swift's (2010) dissertation on a Philippine seafarers' union shows how the union is more present in the paternalistic housing projects on land dealing with seafarers' wives than on the 'shop floor' of the ship.

With the decline of state sovereignty, labour internationalism is considered necessary to fight the transnational organisations with real power. Ethnographies show cases where labour internationalism has proved useful for labour unions; for example, Gill (2007) shows how the trade unionists in the Colombian Coca-Cola company were faced with locally accepted ways of fighting unions, including the use of threats and murders by paramilitaries. In response, the trade union formed alliances with non-union and international groups of human rights NGOs, and student and trade unions in other countries. Union strategies and the extent to which they use strategies of transnational cooperation vary according to the structural factors and union ideologies. Anner (2003) looks at how unions in Brazil respond to global economic integration and the industrial integration it includes. He concludes that unions' strategies depend on industrial structure, domestic structure, labour ideologies and union politics. While left-oriented labour unions were more inclined to participate in transnational labour activism, conservative labour unions preferred to rely on close relations with the state and the private sector to pursue their demands. Anthropological studies have highlighted how unions operate differently in different contexts, drawing on resources, members and ideologies that make sense in a particular political, economic and cultural context.

### **7.3. Background of trade unions in Estonia and EPTAL**

To understand the role of unions in contemporary Estonia, it is important to understand the particular history of unions in the Soviet Union and former socialist bloc. Trade unions in the Soviet Union did not have a strong role and were the lowest-ranking members of the troika consisting of the Communist Party, the enterprise management and the union leader. This meant that the company management, the union and the Party were on the same side, managing the production process, workers and provision of goods and services.

The role of the unions was threefold: firstly, they were to maintain order and discipline at workplaces and ensure the fulfilment of the plan. Their second role was to be an ally of management, working with the management in distributing social benefits like holidays, daycare and accommodation, and lobbying ministries together with the managers to get more resources for their company. The third, and the least important, role of the unions was to defend workers against unjust actions by managers (who were also union members), for example dismissals of workers or ignoring safety issues. The unions, allied with the management and subordinated to the Party, seldom did this and were not in a position to encourage autonomous worker mobilisation (Kubicek 2002: 108). When worker uprisings occurred outside the framework of the union, as they did in Novocherkassk in 1962, they were violently suppressed and covered up by the state (Baron 2001).

After Estonian independence in 1991, trade unions were not part of the vision of neoliberal Estonia dreamt up by the young liberal market-worshipping ministers. The whole third sector was seen by many parliamentarians as a way of outsourcing state services, rather than as a partner in governing the state (Lagerspetz, Ruutsoo and Rikmann 2001). The closing of heavy industry further helped to reduce the strength of unions. Since 1991, trade union membership has dropped from 100% to 5.8% nationally. In a recent survey ordered by the Estonian Trade Union Confederation (Faktum & Ariko 2009), only 14% of the respondents said that they belonged to any kind of civil society organisation, and 4% of the sample of respondents belonged to trade unions. Common reasons for not joining were that respondents did not see any benefit in union membership, they had not thought about it, there was no union in their workplace or that they worked for a small company that functioned as a team.

Estonian economists Eamets and Kallaste (n. d. ) reach the conclusion that Estonian trade unions do not have enough power to extract any surplus from employers and that trade union density is too low to provide sufficient power. Unions' bargaining is fragmented and there are substantial alternative labour segments, which can substitute for existing labour. Comparing Estonia and Slovenia, Feldmann (2006) shows how there are strong variations within the former socialist Eastern Europe's industrial relations, whereby Estonia with its small membership and collective agreement coverage represents the liberal model, while Slovenia, where membership and bargaining power of unions are still relatively significant, represents what he calls a consensual and coordinated approach to industrial relations. The

liberal model was further consolidated in 2008 when a new Employment Contracts Act was introduced which, among other measures that the Ministry of Social Affairs called 'flexicurity' (from 'flexible' and 'security'), made it easier to lay off employees, and decreased redundancy payments. Since the government did not consider most of the proposals by the Estonian Trade Union Confederation EAKL during the talks on the Employment Contracts Act, EAKL decided to strike. The strikes that took place were brief and did not attract more than 1000 participants. In Estonia, trade unions are officially not linked to particular political parties. They are mostly endorsed by the Social Democrats, who usually receive about 10% of the vote in the parliamentary elections. Social Democrats however do not have a strong foothold among the Russian speakers. Trade unions are the strongest and have the largest membership, mostly in Russian-speaking enterprises like mines and power plants, which were historically manned with Russian-speaking labour.

In the 1990s, the Estonian Oil Shale Producers' Union Confederation EPTAL, representing the workforce of the nationally-owned mines (Eesti Põlevkivi), was in a different position from the majority of Estonian companies, since it managed to maintain a functioning union, despite the slow drop in membership from 100% to around 50% from 1990 to 2009. It remained the only union in the company, and maintained a close relationship with the management. Under the new arrangements, EPTAL was financed from membership fees, which constituted 1% of members' income. EPTAL reduced the number of staff but kept a legal adviser, Rein, a secretary/sports coordinator (Siiri who we met in the previous chapter), and an accountant on their pay. The rest of the staff was made redundant while EPTAL gave up many of its health and safety and social security functions.

Throughout the 1990s, EPTAL worked closely with the management to get more financial support from the government. Like similar companies in Russia and Ukraine (Ashwin 2003; Ashwin 2004; Ashwin 1998; Clarke 2005; Kubicek 2002), EPTAL could not be considered to be completely independent from the company. The system of the troika of union, Party and the company had been replaced with the bilateral system based on the cooperation of the company and the union on the company level, while on the state level the tripartite system in reality meant that the state pushed through the policies that corresponded to its neoliberal ideology<sup>20</sup>. Gradually, the function of the union shifted from distribution of

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<sup>20</sup>As a new model of trade union involvement, Estonia, like other Central and Eastern European countries, followed the tripartite model of involving the state and representatives of unions and employers in negotiations. But instead of stabilising the conflicting interests of labour and capital, the effect of this model in Western

goods to negotiation of the *collective employment agreement* for the workers, standing for their wages, pensions and annual leave, as well as helping them to deal with everyday misunderstandings with the employer and representing them in court to claim compensation for workplace accidents<sup>21</sup>. Some of the redistributive functions, like distributing subsidised passes to the sanatorium, organising children's camp for the employees' children and distributing cash when workers needed support due to illness, death of a relative or other financial difficulties, were maintained. During the mine closures and layoffs of the 2000s, EPTAL was involved in developing retraining, benefits and other measures to soften the landing of the hundreds laid off from the mines. The union worked together with the management against the privatisation of the mines. In 2000, it organised public gatherings and a human chain from Jõhvi to Narva (50 km) to protest against buying cheap electricity from Lithuania and to show dissatisfaction with the state's inactivity in resolving unemployment and social problems in the region.

During my fieldwork in 2009-2010, EPTAL consisted of five different member organisations, all part of the former Eesti Põlevkivi, each with their own union representatives. These five were the trade unions of the Estonia and Viru underground mines, two open-cast mines, and the joint union of the local administration and the Oil Shale Railway. EPTAL had an elected chairman of the board, and five board members, one from each organisation. The chairman of the board, Jürgen, and the three employees of the union were all Estonian speakers. The representatives of three mines and the railway were Russian speakers, while Ratassepp from the Viru mine was Estonian. Galina and Valeria, women in their late 40s, had arrived from Ukraine and Russia as young specialists. They had not been active in the trade union during the Soviet period, and had both been doing union work for about three years. As their organisations had less than 500 members, they continued their ordinary work but had a couple of hours free every week for union work. Misha from the 'Estonia' mine had been leading the trade union for longer than anyone could remember. Ratassepp had been the chief engineer of his mine before he retired and decided to take up

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Europe, this has been little more than a façade to legitimise the neoliberal agenda of the elites in Eastern Europe and to further marginalise the workers Ost, David. 2000. "Illusory Corporatism in Eastern Europe: Neoliberal Tripartism and Postcommunist Class Identities." *Politics & Society* 28(4):503-30..

<sup>21</sup> The Estonian government has for years postponed the discussion and implementation of compulsory health insurance that would cover workplace accidents and work-related illnesses, and currently a worker who has suffered a workplace trauma has to go to court to claim compensation from the employer, a costly and complicated process that would be even more difficult without the help of trade unions.

trade union work. Boris had been active in the Communist Party during the Soviet period but had taken up trade union work only recently.

Jürgen, the Estonian-speaking chairman of the board of the union, was a former blaster. A simple miner who enjoyed fishing and Estonian folk dance, he had no great desire to become a trade union leader. But his career had started at the end of the 1980s when the mine director had asked him to become the head of the union because he knew both the Estonian and Russian languages. The director promised to teach him everything else he needed. During the end of the Soviet period and the 1990s, Jürgen's work included distributing canned meat, solving arguments between husbands and wives and taking care of drunks, as well as helping to solve an occasional labour debate. The union and the management of the mine worked closely together. After his mine closed and he was transferred to another one, he continued as a blaster.

When the old chairman of EPTAL retired, Jürgen saw his chance to leave his underground job behind. After all, he was already in his late fifties. He was elected to the position and started his new job at the same time that I started my fieldwork. My first impressions of the round, grey-haired man were his appearances at public events in the community, shaking everyone's hand and parading around with his new camera, taking photos of the events. At first, he came across as a confident man who seemed to be scheming something all the time and was very secretive about it. I found it very hard to make him talk about trade union issues, and often the talk slipped into questions of fishing instead. For a long time, I was not sure if the friendly man who seemed to know everything about mining was very secretive about union questions for some reason, or simply had no idea what was going on. Towards the end of my fieldwork I was rather convinced of the latter. I will return to Jürgen and EPTAL towards the end of this chapter, and will now introduce the trade union organisation of 'Estonia' where I did most of my fieldwork.

#### **7.4. How 'Estonia' workers talk about their union**

In all the mines, workers represented by the union EPTAL comprised around 50% (see Table 1). The table shows that in 'Estonia' about half of the workers were union members and their numbers were slowly declining as the number of staff was reduced. The number of women was low because the workforce was generally male. The number of youth

was low because of the high average age of workers in the mine, as well as the youths' reluctance to join the union, which will be discussed in more detail later.

	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>
<b>Staff</b>	1212	1177	1092	1074
<b>Trade Union members</b>	669	679	636	562
<b>Women in trade union</b>	167	104	90	81
<b>Youth (aged up to 35) in trade union</b>	165	159	142	131
<b>Shop stewards</b>	11	16	16	14

**Table 7. Union membership in 'Estonia'**

Since the union had always existed in 'Estonia', and Estonian independence meant no radical changes, many people kept on paying membership fees to the union just as they always had. Others, who had been transferred from mines which had been closed, decided not to re-join the union in the new mine, seeing that the union was incapable of stopping mine closures and layoffs. Still others kept working at the same job as they had before, but were formally transferred to another company to cut costs, or to the payroll of another mine run by the same company. These people often did not even know that they had lost their union membership. They had not made a conscious decision to leave the union; simply no one had told them that they were not members anymore.

Both workers and engineers, up to the top management, were members of the trade union in the Soviet period. Similar to workers, older engineers who worked in the same mine for decades remained members of the union. For example, Misharin, the head of the First Production Department, firmly believed in unions and regretted that unions in Estonia were weaker than those in France or Germany. He was unhappy that so few of the miners in his department were still members of the union. "I have told them so many times that they should join, but it is impossible to convince them," he complained. This seems like an unusual situation, in which a manager is a member of the union and has to convince workers to join. The piece workers earning a high salary were rather reluctant to join, and the miners of the First Production Department especially so, because of conflicts with the shop steward Misha. Therefore, trade union consciousness was not strictly based on the working class versus the managers. Rather, it reflected the Soviet legacy whereby managers were also considered

wage workers, like miners, and the more complex internal hierarchy within the workforce of the mine, whereby miners proper earned more than managers.

Young people were mostly unaware of the meaning and role of the union and did not see any reason for joining. A young miner, Karl, who had previously worked in England and was well informed about how unions worked there, nevertheless stated that this was not for him and he would rather do his own thing by himself. The younger managers were oblivious to the possibilities of the union. Interviewing Kolya, a young Russian-speaking specialist who had joined the mine a few years earlier, I asked whether he was a member of the union. He told me firmly that the union was for workers and the ITRs should not join. I first thought that he was expressing a strong belief about what was appropriate for workers and managers. However, it turned out that he had been told that when hired, and he was very surprised to hear from me that other ITRs, like Misharin, were actually members. He then admitted that if his managers told him to join, he would, but up to this point the possibility had not even occurred to him. When young people did join the union, it was for practical reasons. The wheeled loader driver, also called Kolya, said for instance:

Of course there is a point in being a trade union member. I can go to Toila [to the sanatorium] once a year. It costs 2000 for a trade union member but without the subsidy, 7000. So there is 5000 difference and I only pay 1400 in my membership fees a year. Plus presents for children. But many do not use their benefits. Those who do not go to the swimming pool and do not do sports. But I do. Especially because there is a sauna in the swimming pool. I am that kind of guy.

In conversations, workers often expressed their dissatisfaction with the unions. The complaints fell roughly into two categories. Firstly, that the trade union gave nothing to workers, materially, politically and in terms of information; secondly, the inability to act within the union because of the precarious situation that workers were in after the 2008 economic crisis.

The main complaint that I heard was that the union did not give workers anything. People said that they saw no benefit in being in the union. The benefits like subsidised sanatorium and swimming pool passes and Christmas parties for children did not seem like a good enough reason to stay in the union. Workers hardly ever knew about other work that the union leaders did, for example negotiating the collective employment agreement with the employer. We were sitting at the table of the underground garage of the First Production Department and discussing trade unions with Pavel and Valeri. Like many other mine workers, they agreed that there was no activity visible from the trade union other than

providing sweets for children and money for members who were facing unexpected difficulties. “In the last five or ten years it has been only sweets and financial assistance, nothing else,” Pavel complained.

There were other workers who agreed with Pavel and Valeri. The women who worked in the processing plant also said that the trade union was weak and it meant that workers had no voice, or no right to speak. They referred to the mystical ‘abroad’ where trade union membership is 90%, instead of 9% in Estonia. “The trade union does not work here, this is why we all left,” a group of Russian-speaking women in their fifties, in their working clothes and headscarves protecting their hair from the dust, explained to me. “So you all decided together to leave?” I checked. “Of course, together, why would we spend that money if we do not get anything?” they chorused simultaneously, their voices raised. “100-200 kroons is also money. For this money I can buy sweets for my grandchildren.” Following the workers’ discourse about the union, it seemed that the difference of belonging and not belonging to the trade union for the workers was about who buys the sweets, and when. Both men and women workers were doubtful about the union’s ability to improve their lives and represent them because they said that their union was not independent. Many workers pointed out that the trade union representative could not be independent if the management paid his salary, because he could not take on activities that the employer was not happy with. Workers called EPTAL a ‘bought off’ and ‘internal’ union, referring to its intimate relationship with the mine management.



**Illustration 21. The head of the Estonian Trade Union Confederation comes to visit 'Estonia'**

**During his visit, Harri Taliga learned about the functioning of the mine, met the management and union leaders like Jürgen and Misha, and observed work underground, but did not have a chance to talk to any workers, who did not even know about his visit.**

Workers also talked about the lack of information. As Pavel complained, eating his sandwich in the underground garage, “We do not know anything that is going on in the union, it is unclear how the representative is elected, where the candidates come from; no one knows anything, although we are trade union members.” “The members of the union should elect the candidate,” I replied. Pavel responded,

But I am a member of the union. But I still do not know. It is all shrouded in darkness. Who, when, why to vote? For how many years I have been working; for that many years I do not know anything. How can we be more active in the union if we do not know anything? If there are no meetings, no announcements, nothing? It would be good to have just a newsstand about how the collective employment agreement negotiations are going, some kind of news; there is nothing. Besides sweets for New Year. I think people would then become members, because the membership fee of 200 kroons from the salary of 20,000 is nothing really.

Some Estonian-speaking workers thought they were better informed about the trade union activities, but that resulted in even stronger dissatisfaction. Only, rather than vocal and passionate complaining, this was expressed in short and ironic remarks in their case. For example, Peeter from the First Production Department was quick to point out that the negotiations of the collective employment agreement were held in Estonian but that their shop steward Misha did not speak Estonian. He had also heard from somewhere that Jürgen, the head of the Oil Shale Producers' Union, tended to lose concentration and fall asleep during meetings. Neither of these rumours, for Peeter, encouraged confidence that this kind of union could represent him politically. Unfortunately, both rumours were true. The account so far closely resembles David Kideckel's (2008) study of Romanian miners' unions that had lost their militancy and the workers' trust, and were considered useless and corrupt. Kideckel describes a nominal union meeting where workers have no say, and nostalgia for earlier solidarity has been replaced by apathy and disunity. This might be the complete story in Romania, but might also be Kideckel's excessive reliance on what miners say, rather than how the union actually functioned at the workplace on a day-to-day basis. Furthermore, as I have indicated in Chapter 4, when Kideckel interprets miners' complaining as a sign of powerlessness, I read it more as caring for certain issues; for example, describing the union as useless and comparing it to the past and the West painted an image about what the workers

wanted their union to be. The particular use of the union, however, was embedded in the particular history, political economy of Estonia and the 2008 economic crisis.

## **7.5. How ‘Estonia’ workers use the union**

Misha, the shop steward, was a Russian-speaking man in his early sixties, educated in mine engineering at St Petersburg Mining Institute. He never used his education, though, and started working as a simple miner instead of as an engineer, so he could earn more and feed his family. Before long, he managed to develop his career in the trade union, and had been the chief shop steward in the Soviet period and throughout the twenty years of the Estonian Republic. Although the trade union representative has to be elected, there was never very serious competition for the position. As Misha had been in the position for as long as anyone could remember, workers associated the whole institution of the trade union with him.

I will now explore an ordinary day in the trade union office where Misha worked, to show how people used the union on a day-to-day basis, despite complaining that the union was useless. Misha’s office was a large room that also served as the mine library. In the Soviet period, Misha had had his own large trade union library, of which he was very proud. But as trade unions were reorganised, and there was no longer space or staff for maintaining a library, he donated most of the books to the city libraries. He still had some books, that were now merged with the technical library of the mine. Misha showed me some old books that he was really proud of, and encouraged me to read a biography of Margaret Thatcher, one of the few newer Estonian-language books that he had. Like other miners, Misha was not familiar with Thatcher’s ideology or her battles with British miners. He was encouraging me to read the book because it was new and in Estonian, and because a biography of a British politician might be interesting for me as I was studying in London. Occasionally, people came to his office to borrow or return books, so this function of the trade union was still around and important for some people.

There was less work with taking care of the property than there had been in the Soviet period. “I had 15 summer houses, a stadium, a pioneer camp, the sanatorium in Toila [nearby on the seaside],” he told me. But there was no more money to run the houses, the camp and the stadium, and gradually they were all sold.

Most of the time, Misha’s office was empty and he could listen to the radio or do the work that he needed to do, preparing for the collective employment agreement negotiations,

doing budgets and the like. Before the start and at the end of shifts, there was more movement, as well as at lunchtime, when people working on the surface were able to sneak out of their workplace and leave their duties for ten minutes. One part of the job was distributing financial assistance. There was a special union fund for people who had financial difficulties. This could be because of illness that meant not being able to work for a while, or when a family member lost their job, or when a relative died and money was needed for the funeral. Each member was entitled to financial assistance once a year, and Misha had a big black-covered notebook where he marked down to whom he had given the aid. The people then had to give their signatures; Misha covered previous recipients' names with a sheet of paper, so that the person signing could not see who else had received assistance. Misha, having worked in the mine for years, knew the domestic situation of workers very well. He knew that for some of them it was very hard to make ends meet.

One of the women who stepped in while I was in the trade union office on an ordinary workday was Olga. The bubbly 40-year-old was working in the cart-loading department for a very low wage and had six children, of whom the oldest was just starting university and the youngest was six. Covering the everyday food and rent, as well as clothes, footwear and school outings and activities for children was not easy for her. Her husband, who spent most of his time drinking, kept the money he earned from casual work for his own entertainment while Olga was supposed to care for the family. Olga did not have to say much to Misha, who already knew her story. He just shook his head, saying that she had already received her material assistance for this year, but nevertheless handed her a 500-kroon note. Olga did not show extra gratitude, kept chatting casually to me while Misha was making his notes, then looked at her watch, said that she had to run back to her workplace before the manager noticed that she was gone, and was out the door.

There was also the distribution of sanatoria and swimming pool passes. The sanatorium-*profylactorium*, as it was called earlier, or Toila Spa, as it was called now, was a spa about 15 km from the mining town, at the seaside. The sanatorium had been built in the late eighties with money received from the Ministry of Coal in Moscow. It was planned to be owned and run by EPTAL, to provide treatment and rest for miners at a low cost. It was taken over and run by the mining company in 1991. In the early 2000s, it was sold, but the mining company and trade union kept an agreement by which the company would give a certain sum of money to the union for distributing subsidised sanatoria passes. An opportunity to spend a

week in Toila was available for both current and retired employees of the company. Therefore, an important part of Misha's work was distributing the passes. People who used this opportunity were happy about the passes and this was a popular benefit among both workers and ITRs. The last type of benefit that Misha distributed was fish. This was not strictly a trade union activity. Misha, like most men in the region, simply loved fishing and caught too many to consume himself. It was not uncommon for some of the women that he was friendly with to come and fetch bags of fresh fish from Lake Peipus from the refrigerator in the trade union office. This was miles away from distributing canned meat in the 1990s but it seems that even after shortage economy had ended, the trade unions in Eastern Estonia placed a lot of emphasis on food and sweets.

Often people, especially women, came in, and the shop steward's role was simply to listen, to understand and show compassion. Although he was a very fiery man who could explode in an instant, spit out millions of swear words and shout loud enough that the bookshelves would shake, he could give emotional support by just listening to people who needed it. A very important point to make is that it was not only trade union members who came to Misha with their problems. For example, the women in the processing plant who had all left the union and saved the membership fee, still kept going to Misha with their problems. "Does Misha not mind that you still go to him when you are not members?" I asked the women. "He doesn't mind, both members and non-members go to him, but it is of no use for either, there is no result." "So it is just an opportunity to go and talk?" "Yes, to say out loud what we feel, it still makes it a bit easier," the women laughed. Non-members also received financial aid, because Misha knew their background and needs, and as the people had worked in the organisation for a long time, Misha felt that he could not refuse.

Misha, as well as other shop stewards of the other three mines and railway of the company, pointed out that people come to them with everyday problems like not getting their annual leave when they wished for it, or that a chair at their workplace broke. Galina also said that since the new Employment Contract Act, people come with legal questions about work time and pay, for example pay for working on the weekend. It was easy for union representatives to talk about these questions with the employer, but questions concerning issues like pay rises are already decided on a higher level and it does not depend on the manager.

The range of questions that Misha might receive can be illustrated by the following example. I was standing by the little building of the loading department with Belaz truck drivers and cart loaders. There had been rumours that the engineers would get an annual bonus while workers would not, which had upset workers very much, and Misha was going around all the departments explaining the issue. He explained how the trade union had been fighting against such an arrangement for months already, and how he had handed over the petition with workers' signatures against unfair treatment. He then invited everyone to ask questions. He answered the first question that a Belaz driver asked, about the uncomfortable work schedule with a lot of weekend work. "But when will we get a pay rise?" one woman asked. Misha had to explain that workers should be happy that their pay was not being reduced during the economic crisis like it was elsewhere, and that they should not talk about a pay rise in this situation of high unemployment. Militant Dasha then shouted at Misha, "You need to stand by the workers!"

Misha got excited and shouted back, "But then tell me how – we are all workers!" No one had any good suggestions, until Anna asked,

"But tell us, Misha, why are people leaving the union?"

"I cannot do everything alone," Misha replied, "You come to me and tell me, 'uncle, do it,' but you are going to stand aside and watch."

The workers disagreed. Misha continued,

"But it is about 'uncle, you do it'. I collected signatures against raising the pension age, why did no one leave their telephone number? Were you afraid? Signatures do not count without telephone numbers!"

"Why did we not get a Christmas bonus?" the workers complained.

"Well, the power plant workers had Christmas bonuses in their collective agreement, and we did not. When you only received chocolate for Christmas, you said that they should have given at least 100 kroons, but now that you got 500, you are complaining. Well, you call the management. I have done everything I could. And they wanted to decrease the number of buses from Sillamäe to the mine again, I fought against that..."

A day in Misha's office as well as this small conversation in the mine yard show the type of action that characterises the type of union consciousness that workers have. A lot of Misha's work is distributing benefits similar to those that workers got in the Soviet period. At the same time, workers face new insecurities, like less sickness compensation, or they struggle to understand the new labour act that has removed many benefits. Despite the

discourse that the union does not give anything, people actively used the benefits and help that unions still gave. The brief conversation again expresses the Soviet services, show insecurities as the management is trying to reinforce differentiation between workers and managers. Dasha and Anna associate the union with workers and worry whether the ill fate of the union also affected them as workers. The overarching dynamic of this conversation however illustrates the way workers do not think of themselves as the union but identify the union only with Misha, the good uncle who is supposed to solve all problems. The union consciousness expressed in the need of the union both as a workers' organisation and a welfare provider is also acted out in the everyday. The role of the union as an aid to welfare and reproduction of the family is expressed particularly strongly. Besides material welfare, Misha becomes the good uncle who provides emotional support, like an older and wiser relative. The aspect of worker organisation is less strongly expressed in the everyday; nevertheless, workers' complaints to Misha express a particular vision of what a union should be. On the other hand, in the face of the economic crisis, workers are scared about their jobs and when they participate in union activities, they do it only partially, like signing a petition but not giving their telephone numbers.

## **7.6. The almost-wildcat strike**

Earlier in the chapter, I argued that rather than trying to talk about the weakness of unions compared to an imagined Western ideal, we should look at how trade union consciousness and action emerges in the local context. As I show, worker activity and union consciousness do not have to be expressed only in the framework of the official trade union. Even in contexts in which unions are labelled weak, as in Romania, workers try alternative ways of getting their demands across, for example hunger strikes (Kideckel 2008: 122-123). I will now leave the official trade union aside and explore a wildcat strike that took place outside the framework of the union. It can be argued that activities outside the formal union can also shed light on worker consciousness and mobilisation.

In September 2007, the loaders of the First Production Department were ready to begin a strike. They started their shift as usual and heard about the reduction of their piece rates due to a new technology that was supposed to make their work more efficient. They were already upset about several other issues in the mine, including not being able to take annual leave during the summer due to high demand for oil shale. On top of everything, as was explained to me later, the underground foreman had told them about the reduction in a

rude and arrogant way. I have tried to reconstruct the event from what the strike organisers, other miners, Misha and the mine managers told me, and what I read in the newspapers of that time.

The loaders went and did their shift, but they were too angry to let go of the grave injustice. After their shift, the miners were trying to get other men involved in their discussions about the possibility of organising a strike if the conditions were not improved. About twenty miners stayed in the yard for two hours, shouting, discussing and quarrelling about the demands. The miners asked the brigade manager, Zhuravlyov, and another miner, Podolsky, the unofficial 'kings' of the First Production Department, to lead the action. They agreed.

Over the next few days, the men gathered support from other departments and discussed how to go forward. Letters were posted on the mine notice board to involve more people. But mostly only miners working on loading machines joined. During this time, the loaders did not stop working, but did the minimum they were required to do to receive their basic pay. The miners did not inform the trade union leader about their activities. Peeter, an Estonian-speaking miner from the department, was trying to calm them down. He said that they should go to the trade union with their demands so that Misha could collect signatures and talk to the employer. Peeter also warned that they could get fired for an unsanctioned strike. Nevertheless, the leaders preferred not to inform Misha.

The action culminated that Friday when, once again, about thirty loaders had gathered in the mine yard to discuss the exact demands that they would give to the management of the mine. This time, they were supposed to meet also with the trade union representative. Zhuravlyov had invited a local journalist and an MP from the region to witness the situation. Zhuravlyov told the journalist that they would have a one-hour warning strike that day, and if their demands were not met, they would completely halt their work. When making phone calls, the shop steward Misha thought he heard a little noise as if his phone had been bugged. The same day, someone told Zhuravlyov and Podolsky that their phones were being bugged as well.

**Kaevurid nõuavad hüppelist palgatõusu**  
**Kuupäev:** Pühapäev, 30. september. 2007 kell 21:00:00  
**Teema:** Majandus

Eile esitasid Estonia kaevanduse kaevurid Eesti Põlevkivi juhtkonnale nõudmise tõsta oluliselt palkasid; ametiühing on enda väitel analoogse nõudmise juba varem esitanud.



Eile Estonia kaevanduse territooriumil kogunenud kaevandustöölised nõudsid arvestatavat palgatõusu ning ei välistanud, et kui nende nõudmisi ei täideta, võib asi streigiga lõppeda.

Eile kohtusid umbes 30 Estonia kaevurit kaevanduse direktori Aleksandr Borovkoviga, kellele esitati kolm põhilist nõudmist: tõsta palka umbes 20 protsendi võrra, arvestada tööaja sisse see aeg, mis kulub maa pealt maa alla jõudmiseks, ning säilitada sooduspension kaevuritele, kes pensioniikka jõudes maa all edasi töötavad.

Hommikul kaevanduse territooriumil kogunenud tööliselid olid otsustavust täis ning kinnitasid, et kui nende nõudmisi ei täideta, võib asi ka streigini minna. Oma nõudmised andsid nad üle direktor Borovkovile.

**Palgatõusu pooldavad nii direktor kui ametiühing**

**Illustration 22. Miners' strike threat in the local newspaper, *Põhjarannik*.**

The title of the article shown in Illustration 22 is “Miners demand a significant pay rise”. In the photo, a local journalist is talking to the miners in the yard of the ‘Estonia’ mine. The text under the photo states that the mine workers said that if their demands were not met, they were prepared to strike.

The next Monday, the representatives of the discontented miners, the head of EPTAL and the mine director met with the chairman of the board of the company and discussed the demands. Many of their demands were met. The chairman of the board gave his comments to the media: “The miners have had to do a lot of overtime in the summer and have not been able to use their annual leave. I understand that this causes stress among people. The pay rise of miners was already being discussed in any case. Nevertheless, they could have handed over their demands through the trade union.” The same day, someone from the Estonian internal intelligence institution KAPO contacted Misha and asked what was going on in the mine. KAPO also called Podolsky and Zhuravlyov and invited them for a chat.

Two years later, the men were happy to tell me what happened, but both swore that they would never again lead anything like this. Zhuravlyov told me: “It is the last time I will raise my head. I have learned that it is better to work peacefully. Everyone was ready to tell on us. And then I also had some workplace accidents in my brigade and the mine director told me that it is because God sees everything [it was God’s revenge for the uprising]. That’s why I now keep my head low.” Podolsky said that he is not afraid of anything because he is

already of retirement age, but he would not organise anything because no one is grateful and there are repressive organs in Estonia that he would rather avoid in the future.

The shop steward Misha showed me how he has to remove the battery from his mobile phone to make sure that the police do not listen to his phone calls. He also complained that whenever he collects signatures or agitates for people to participate in a trade union activity, the First Production Department refuses to participate. He thought it was because KAPO has given them a good “teaching of democracy”.

Especially in a time of economic crisis when families are dependent on one salary, no one can afford to risk their job to challenge the employer. Kinship obligations vary from supporting children, parents and siblings who have lost their jobs to putting children or grandchildren through their university education. Even Zhuravlyov and Podolsky, who were actually of retirement age (which is 53 for miners), preferred not to retire yet because the pension was small and their children’s families needed extra help. The fear also touches trade union representatives. For example Valeria, a trade union representative from a smaller mine, said she was very much afraid of losing her job, despite laws that protect shop stewards, because her own and her daughter’s lives depend on her having a stable income.

The consequences of losing a job are currently much more serious than they were in the Soviet era. There have been significant changes from the situation of full employment in the Soviet era to the desperate clinging onto the few jobs in the region and being dependent, and therefore compliant with the employer. The employer can raise salaries when economic conditions are good, and lay off people when they are not. The constant striving for increased efficiency was marked by periodic layoffs, increased insecurity and the feeling that the first ones to go would be trouble-makers and activists. The mortgages and loans taken in the economic boom years were making the workers even more dependent on the employer in the time of economic crisis. I was discussing the case with two maintenance men and asking about the possibility of future strikes. One of them said, “But why would we strike? If they fire us, what will we do? People here have only 9 or 10 grades of education and do not know the [Estonian] language. They are 50, they have dug that oil shale all their lives. Where will they go? Nowhere. Because we do not know how to do anything else.”

Besides employment legislation, the police seem to be one of the most direct experiences of the state for both miners and the trade unions. Jürgen from EPTAL told me

that the security police regularly visited him. All trade union leaders claimed to have some kind of permanent contact with the organisation. This was not a part of my fieldwork that I could easily observe, but I managed to get a comment from an acquaintance who worked for KAPO. "Of course they go and chat with them sometimes; it is a way of finding out what the mood of workers is like, if everything is under control. Routine checks, nothing else," he said. I did not feel comfortable asking him about the phones. It would be illegal in Estonia to bug peoples' phones, and the first time I heard the shop steward complaining about it, I thought the man had gone mad and had a strong case of paranoia. While this might or might not be the case, it is significant that there is more than one person who thinks the state is keeping them under surveillance. Rather than being alone with this fear, they talk about it with their workmates who start to believe and fear it too. So the workers, with or without the trade union, feel that they are monitored, kept in check, and if need be, may be punished by the state and the employer if they are seen as standing up for their rights too much.

This ethnographic example demonstrates that workers' urge to organise and fight for their rights can also emerge outside the trade union framework. Despite not being supported by many workers, the loaders managed to involve the media, the local politicians and the employer. More importantly, their demands were fulfilled, and their political action was effective. Zhuravlyov's and Podolsky's comments about not organising anything anymore are an expression of the worsening economic climate (the strike took place in 2007, before the global economic crisis) and fear of the state organs, external factors that also affect trade union consciousness. Other workers' reluctance to join could partially be explained by the legacy of the Soviet system in which the individualisation of incentives and the labour process prevented the emergence of workers' solidarity (Filtzer 1992), which is still prevalent in the contemporary labour process. There is also a lack of sympathy and solidarity between different groups of workers, which often runs along gender lines. Also, as Yarrow (1991) has noted looking at Appalachian coal miners, the gendered class consciousness of the miners makes looking for new allies like women unimaginable for most male miners. In the context of 'Estonia', women working on the surface were distant from the problems of high-earning miners, and when women from the processing plant were threatening to strike due to the managers' bonuses during my fieldwork, the situation was again solved by talking to the manager of the board rather than getting support from male miners.

Nevertheless, this example shows that successful worker action can take place also outside the union framework and with limited worker solidarity. The consciousness was shaped by particular ideas of entitlements of workers and how to achieve them, and was constrained by a particular political economy. To argue my point further, I will give an example of a different emergence of union consciousness in a construction firm.

## **7.7. An alternative use of the union**

Igor and his wife Diana were working in a building material factory in Tallinn. As the 2008 economic crisis started, the work conditions in the factory worsened, for example water and heating on the shop floor were turned off, the quality of the raw material for the produce worsened and it was harder for workers to turn out quality products. Igor tried talking to the managers several times, but to no avail. He had to call the national health and safety inspectors several times to report the situation before the managers agreed to negotiate conditions. Igor himself was a qualified specialist and could therefore afford to negotiate without fear of losing his job. Soon he contacted the Trade Union Confederation and asked for advice about how to form a trade union.

Six months later when I met him at a trade union training session, 50% of the workers of the factory had joined the union and better relations had been established with the management. The management tried to meet workers' needs, and workers believed that now that they were being heard, they had more ownership of the company and they put more effort into avoiding making faulty products. Igor and Diana, both Russian speakers in their early 40s, became very interested in the trade union movement and also in keeping informed about what was going on at the national level. They took advantage of the trainings financed by the EU that were conducted in both Estonian and Russian. They invited five of their young Russian-speaking workers to join the youth training. Due to the different history of their company, and different structure, the trade union consciousness of their members was focussed more on workers' rights and conditions on the shop floor. Since there had been no union in the company before, workers in their union did not see the union as a welfare provider or aid to reproducing the family.

In contrast to Misha, Igor made information about the union available to all workers (admittedly, it was easier in a small factory than in a large mine that works in three shifts) and encouraged the youth to join immediately. The youth, through the events of the Estonian

Trade Union Confederation, were becoming more aware of the role of unions and their own role, and developed a sense of the ownership of their union. In the youth training seminars that took place in a converted farmhouse in the middle of the Estonian forest, Estonian- and Russian-speaking youth from different unions gathered together to listen to talks by the staff of the Trade Union Confederation in Estonia as well as by union activists and members of the European Trade Union Confederation youth branch from Finland, Greece, Slovakia and the Baltic States. Synchronised translation was provided to all participants, from English to both Estonian and Russian. The presentations were about recruitment practices in different countries, the structure and role of unions in Europe, the role of youth in unions, the current economic situation during the economic crisis, and how unions can react to that. Besides the formal discussions during the seminar, the youths had meals together, and enjoyed having a sauna, dancing and drinking together in the farm yard in the evening. Igor and Diana's boys and girls were quite shy initially and kept mostly to themselves, but as the seminar progressed, they became more active, and after Igor's encouragement one of them even decided to run for the Youth Board of the Estonian Trade Union Confederation.

EPTAL had paid for ten places at the same seminar. However only two people went: a young specialist from the local administration, and myself. None of the trade union representatives had found any young and active miners to send<sup>22</sup>. The young specialist, Estonian-speaking Mart, was interested in gaining new knowledge, comparing the event to engineer training summer school that he had attended before. He remained, however, very cynical about the importance of trade unions, and did not engage with conversations about increasing membership or other strategies of strengthening the union position. At the end of the three-day camp, he admitted that it had been interesting but it was not really for him; he would not join the union or become active when he went back to work. This confirms on one hand that, compared to older workers like Misharin, the current young engineers and specialists do not become members of the union. It also highlights the different demographic of the mine, where the average age of staff is 45, and Igor and Diana's factory, where many youth were employed.

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<sup>22</sup>This is partly due to the very pragmatic attitudes the youth has towards unions, partly because Misha and other union leaders are scared of informing and involving youth because they do not want to lose their position, and partly because of the elitist tradition in the mines that all trade union representatives have an engineering degree and are not simple miners. The current trade union reps, especially Misha, had a very elitist attitude towards workers, claiming that they could not even read and write properly, let alone work in the union.

These differences result in two totally different trade union consciousnesses among the Russian-speaking workers of two companies in Estonia. Both seem to acknowledge the usefulness of unions and workers' need to organise. The workers of the mine, however, see the union as both the provider of welfare and defender of workers' rights, with Misha linking the past and present visions of the union as the benevolent uncle. The young workers of Igor's factory learn to see the union as a tool for defending workers' rights in the workplace. In the international youth seminars, they might also start to see the international political dimension that the unions have. This would also result in two different answers to the question of who is the union – for miners, the union is embodied in Misha; Misha is the union. Despite stressing to workers that he cannot do everything by himself, Misha supported that view to a certain extent, by making sure that no one got too interested in the union, and therefore no one would challenge his position. In contrast, the message of the youth seminars that was constantly repeated was that workers themselves are the union, that members' activism determines the success of the union. Rather than labelling the two consciousnesses as the 'Soviet' and the 'European', it is more helpful to look at which functions are needed in a particular situation. In a place with massive poverty and high unemployment, the role of maintaining and supporting the family is crucial for workers like Olga and her children. In a smaller private company in the capital, workers need to stick together to be a serious negotiation partner for the employer. However, a small union, formed by the workers on the shop floor, would never become a welfare institution.

Parry's (2009) study of unions in India shows that public sector unions tend to be an instrument for state hegemony while private company unions function as tools for private capital, and the different factions of workers in the private and public sector experience the state and the market in different ways. Furthermore, even in the Western context, unions differ from each other significantly and new forms are emerging. The 1990s saw a new revival of the labour movement in the USA after the introduction of community unionism that is not only based on class but on religious, gender, race, disability, or sexual affiliation (Fine 2005). The new unions are based on ethnic or geographic ties rather than specific workplaces and mostly provide support to communities of low-wage workers. These unions do not focus solely on labour market questions but also pursue a wider agenda including housing, health care and education, immigration issues, advocacy and lobbying for changes to policy. Due to the illegal status of many immigrants working in the USA, some of the unions focus as much on immigration policy change as they do on labour market issues. The

model of community unionism was also imported to the UK as a response to the Conservative government's Thatcherite policies and their continuation under New Labour. The new directions of community unionism in the UK envisioned unions not only mobilising wider communities but also being a service and education provider. However, in reality, the models of business unionism, based on traditional workplace activism, and community unionism, based on grassroots movements, are never clear-cut but rather mixed and interwoven in everyday life, as Mollona (2009) shows in his factory and union ethnography of Sheffield.

Also in the Estonian case, we can see that due to different history and circumstances, different union models are adapted. In the Estonian context, the unions of the big Russian-speaking enterprises in the East that still engage in family reproduction and welfare, and cooperate closely with the company, are seen as old-fashioned. At the same time, they have strong parallels with community unions in the US and UK. There are similarities in incorporating groups outside the shop floor, like incorporating the company pensioners and family members, providing welfare and, in discourse about partnership with the company, not different from the approach adapted by the British TUC in relation to the employer and human resources policies in the 1990s (Cohen 2006). What is considered old-fashioned and Soviet in Estonia seems to be the vanguard of the labour movement in many other contexts. New unions on the other hand, like that of Diana and Igor, seem to follow the more strictly pragmatic shop-floor-based business unionism seen as a more traditional form of unionism in the West. Neither of these forms can be in any way linked to revolutionary consciousness or workers' desire to overthrow capitalism, but nevertheless manifest a recognition of the necessity of trade unionism as it makes sense in a particular context. This consciousness and form of organisation are also by no way static but rather are reshaped in response to the reconfigurations of capital.

## **7.8. The collective employment agreement – the setting and dynamics of the meetings**

In the last example of this chapter, I move back to the level of EPTAL management and its leader Jürgen. Rather than discrediting the leadership of unions as bureaucratic and corrupt, as some union researchers do (cf. Beynon 1975; Cohen 2006), I believe that in the Estonian case the bureaucratic side of union organisation is worth examining. The formal, bureaucratic aspect of EPTAL was visible when the union leaders participated in the

collective employment agreement negotiations with the employer. I suggest that also examining the union officials in shirts and ties sitting at a negotiation table can lead to insights about the shifting trade union consciousness. It can be argued that the merger of Eesti Põlevkivi with Eesti Energia strengthened the trade union consciousness of trade union leaders representing Eesti Energia, made them more aware of their position as labour in opposition to capital, and strengthened their union organisation.

In Estonian companies that have a trade union, the employer and the trade union as the representative of the employees usually make a collective employment agreement that sets the same basic equal rights and guarantees for all employees (whether or not they are members of the union). This was the case also in the mining company. The collective agreement that was signed in 2005 between the management of the mining company, then called Eesti Põlevkivi, and the trade union, contained benefits like longer annual leave for people working on jobs that are damaging to health, paying a higher wage for night shifts than that demanded by law, giving a sum of money to the trade union for subsidising sanatoria passes every year, guaranteeing transport to the work site and back, and the like. There were also some aspects that were not fixed in the contract, like paying Christmas bonuses whenever the company made any profit, that were nevertheless kept. The contract was extended every year after that, since neither the union nor the employer had particular problems with it. Smaller issues could be negotiated privately between the union leader and the chairman of the board, and they usually managed to come to an agreement. In other words, the union and the management kept working side by side like they had in the Soviet period. The employer was in a stronger position when it came to raising wages but when there were possibilities for doing so, the trade union was listened to. For example, before the economic crisis started, miners' salaries were raised by 18%. Despite this close relationship where the union was clearly a subordinate, it was in a stronger position than unions in other Eastern European ethnographies, where unions had no say in issues of privatisation, were victims of managers' cunning schemes to cheat workers out of their shares and jobs, and had no say in new management practices like grading different types of jobs (Dunn 2004; Müller 2007).

The friendly relationship between the management and the union began to break down when the company was taken over by the national electricity company Eesti Energia in 2008. This meant that another layer of management was added and the trade union leaders

were not able to walk into the office of their chairman of the board and solve problems in a friendly and unofficial way. The management in Jõhvi had to coordinate all its decisions with the top management in Tallinn (see Chapter 6). The new collective agreement negotiations started from a whole new premise. The mines, two power plants, customer services for the electricity users, and several central heating plants that Eesti Energia owned were now all part of the same organisation. This meant that the six different collective agreements that had existed until now, were expected to be made into one single one, covering all employees. I observed the negotiations from December 2009 to September 2010. Contrary to the usual logic in Western companies when, after a merger, the employer is still interested in keeping different labour conditions in collective agreements to fragment the labour force, Eesti Energia management seemed to believe in simplification, standardisation and transparency in managing all companies. The desire for a standardised contract was further reinforced by plans to sell part of the company's shares to finance investment and power plant renewals, and a joint agreement would have signified organised and unified relations with the employees. During the negotiations they understood that inviting all parts of the company to one negotiation table had been a mistake, and the negotiations ended with four different contracts, of which the one with the mines was the last one, signed over a year and a half after the initially planned end date of negotiations.

The merger and negotiations brought together trade unions with different backgrounds and benefit packages, of which the miners' package was one of the more modest ones. Trade union representatives Alekseev and Ponyatovski from the Narva power plants had very good conditions in the agreements for their workers. The two large grey-haired Russian men were not shop stewards elected by the power plant workers, but professional trade union representatives hired by the union. They were very militant, very loud and aggressive and constantly played the 'good cop/bad cop' game, in which one of them would take a more radical and aggressive position and present it with a raised voice, while the other would then present the more softly spoken version of the same proposal. Estonian-speaking Kaur from the Energy Workers' Union Association was a young, pragmatic, well-educated man in his early 40s who had built his career from a rank-and-file union member, and had experience and international connections. EPTAL had so far had friendly relations with their local employer and did not have to use very aggressive tactics in negotiations. In the new situation, now that they were not negotiating with their colleagues across the hallway in the Jõhvi local management building, but with higher-up managers in Tallinn, they were not quite sure how

to go about the situation. The merger brought unions together and made them compare their conditions to each other's, discuss strategies, and, in some cases, even think about merging the different unions, too.



**Illustration 23. Trade union representatives getting ready for a meeting**

To understand the shifting dynamic of labour-capital relations after the merger, it is necessary to look at the different worldviews and assumptions of the two sides. The prevailing assumption of Tallinn management was that trade unions were something very old-fashioned, in the sense of belonging to the Soviet Union as well as belonging to the last century, and thus not suited to 21<sup>st</sup> century neoliberal Estonia. The worlds of Estonian-speaking younger people from the management and mostly Russian-speaking older men from unions clashed, similar to the conflicts over different values described in the previous chapter. Several members of the management had come from companies with no unions, as many new companies established after 1991 never formed a union. Suddenly these managers found themselves in a frustrating situation, whereby this organisation that called itself a social partner, whose partnership they had never asked for, was hindering all the innovative and progressive management ideas that they had planned. Here is a quote from an interview with Laura, the HR manager from Tallinn, the architect behind the performance review project described in the previous chapter, and one of the key participants in the negotiations. Laura felt her hands were tied in implementing new motivation systems.

The trade union has taken such a strong position in the East [of Estonia], because the managers are not there for people. What does it mean to manage people? That you commit time to them, that you give meaning to their work, that you hold performance reviews, train them, give more money to the best and less to the worse workers. But

in the east there is socialism-communism. Equal pay for everyone, the trade union rules and so on.

Laura saw herself as an enlightened leader who wanted to bring some new management practices to the backwards East. She blamed trade unions for having the ‘wrong kind of thinking’ because unions, in her mind, wanted the same kind of benefits for everyone. She thought the idea of equality for everyone characterised unions and she was ideologically against it.

One of the large underlying questions was how to allocate the company’s profit. The trade unionists had an egalitarian attitude towards distributing the profit: as workers had worked hard and put their labour into creating profit for the company, the profit should be shared with all of them, regardless of performance review results. A 25-fold difference between a female auxiliary worker and the company’s chairman of the board was unacceptable. Any profit that was made by transactions in the international energy market, rather than earned with hard work, was considered somehow immoral. As Jürgen put it,

I understand that the shareholders want their dividends [there were actually no shareholders; the company was 100% state-owned] and the state wants its profit. But they should not forget that miners have created it all, so you should give something to the miner, too. But they say that their profit came from buying cheap and selling expensive electricity. This seems to be the tendency among the Eesti Energia boys, why should they produce if they can just make profit by buying and selling. But there will not be endless opportunities for cheating...

Benefits for employees meant additional costs for the employer. The chairman of the board crudely put it in one of the first negotiation meetings: “When we talk about extended leave, we actually talk about money. Annual leave costs the employer so we are really talking about money, all benefits are actually money from the employer.” For trade union representatives, benefits that they were negotiating over were connected to the general moral economy of miners, described in Chapter 4, concerning the ideas that hard work and sacrificing one’s health deserve money and respect. One of the most important aspects was the extended annual leave for miners and other workers who worked in hard underground conditions. Trade union leaders talked about the poor health and low life expectancy of miners, and how the only way to relieve this was through early retirement and extended leave, while the employer talked about cutting financial costs. These differences in values highlighted for the unionists that rather than working together with the employer, they now had to stand up for their views.

The main question that the unions and the employer were trying to define during the months of negotiations was what the relationship between them was in the new situation, who they were to each other, and what the new identity of trade union representatives was. One of the points that was discussed during the negotiations illustrates the negotiation of new roles especially well. The parties were discussing a point that the employer had suggested, that stated that “the trade union is obliged to guarantee peace at work and not organise strikes when the employer is fulfilling the agreement, and also not organise or participate in protests that are directed against the employer”. I will present an excerpt of the discussion as it appears in my fieldnotes.

Kaur (Trade Unionist): But what if the employer decides to lay off 1,000 people?

Jürgen (TU): A strike can happen also without trade unions.

Kaur: Jürgen, let’s leave strikes out of it.

Laura (employer, Tallinn): It is possible to manage without protests.

Kaur: What should I do then, write letters? We might have to break the agreement if this point is not resolved, because we want the opportunity to organise protests.

Pille (employer, Tallinn): But we assume there is good faith from both sides.

Kaur: Let’s get rid of this point then. It is the obligation of the union to come and protest in such situations, otherwise we will be voted down.

Pille: But the union has to be reasonable. We are not malevolent, but if we have to lay off people because it is not possible otherwise...

Kaur: We cannot rule out all protests.

Evelin (employer, Jõhvi): But we have had good cooperation for a long time, we are not like that.

Kaur: But we would like to protest if we should need to.

Then Alekseev from the Narva power plants trade union gave a long example of a bad decision that the employer had made, how they should have consulted with the union, and how the protest was then justified. The conversation continued.

Pille: How is all this related to what we are discussing here? We only have 50 minutes left and our progress depends on whether we see each other as partners or on different sides of the front line.

Alekseev: Of course we are partners.

Kaur: But what will happen to this point?

Pille: Go home and think about when the employer has ever treated you in a way to give you a reason for protesting. This point determines whether we are partners or enemies.

Kaur: It is not so black and white. We are social partners but it does not mean that we should accept everything that the employer tells us.

Often the employer wanted to emphasise that they were reasonable and well meaning and there was no need for the trade union to be so suspicious. It is fixed in Estonian law that

while both sides fulfil the conditions of the collective agreement, strikes are illegal. When Jürgen was saying that strikes can also take place without the involvement of the union, he was referring to wildcat strikes like the one discussed above. He was trying to show the strength of the workers and effectively threaten the employer that if they did not agree to this point, there were still ways of organising strikes and protests. Kaur, representing a different educational and strategic background, did not think that threats were a useful tactic, and appealed to the right to organise protests, not strikes, should they be needed. The employers' side tried to appeal to the fact that the employer is reasonable, but the reason for this claim was different among the different levels of management.

There was a clear distinction between the local representatives of the employer in Jõhvi and the new staff from Tallinn who had little prior experience with unions. We met Evelin from Jõhvi in the previous chapter, when she pushed through the idea of performance reviews for engineers who in her opinion had not been appreciated enough. She believed that the relations between the Jõhvi management and the union had so far been good and peaceful. When she said that there was no reason to protest, she was referring to her earlier experience.

At another meeting, discussing the point about informing and consulting, Jürgen from EPTAL said that the employer informed EPTAL only once decisions had been approved by the management, and they had only recently found out about particular decisions. Evelin got really upset, saying that this was total demagoguery and she had sent all the documents to Jürgen and Jüri months before the decision. This was probably true and the documents simply got lost in Jürgen's mailbox, which the former blaster had trouble keeping under control. Evelin's very strong reaction, after which she rushed out of the meeting room, red in the face, showed how strongly she believed that on the local level the relations were very good. She took it as a personal insult that *her* union did not believe in her goodwill and that this was expressed publicly and in an unfriendly manner that was not characteristic of their previous relations.

Pille, who was a young lawyer and relatively new in the company, referred to the assumption that the employer is reasonable, and that the trade union is their partner, as a basic one. Her youth, legal training and lack of Russian language skills made her very hostile towards the completely different world of values represented by the middle-aged Russian-speaking men. Understanding only the logic of the company, there was no question for her about the reasonableness of the company, while the logic of the unions seemed alien and unreasonable. Discussing this point, the employer was trying to remove unions' right to

protest altogether while trying to camouflage it in a relationship in which the employer and unions work together and never have any disagreements. The unions, on the other hand, were already aware that this point would constrain their independence and what they could do to represent the interests of labour against capital<sup>23</sup>. Such confrontations strengthened the trade union consciousness and solidarity as well as highlighting differences in their strategies and skills.

Jürgen did not prove to be a successful leader, lacking in expertise, leadership skills, willingness to work and self-confidence. As the representatives of the mines grew increasingly disappointed in him, they started thinking of a way out. As the Russian-speaking mine trade union representatives had spent an increasing amount of time at meetings with Ponyatovski, at some point a plan was formed that the mine unions would leave EPTAL and form a new Miners' and Power Plant Workers' Independent Union. Ratssepp, the head of Viru mine's trade union and the only Estonian-speaking mine trade union representative of the five, was not invited to share in the plan, as the others thought that the old Estonian would not join them. Siiri and Jüri, the paid staff of EPTAL, saw this as a 'Russian putsch' and were initially very shocked about the takeover. But it was Jüri who helped the new union with legal matters about how to correctly proceed in forming a new union and electing a leader.

This concluded the shift in the relations from the model of unions and the employer as allies to the model in which they represented the different interests of labour and capital. As the previous ten years had marked the introduction of managers who were not mine engineers, this change resulted in a power plant worker, rather than a miner, leading the miners' union. This was a step away from the Soviet model of the enterprise director and union leader working together. It was a step away from the old 'one company, one company union' model that had functioned in the mine, but possibly a step towards having one single union within the new energy company in the future. Although the miners' and power plant workers' collective agreements were still separate and had different levels of benefits, there was hope for more equal conditions in the future. It made the trade union representatives recognise that they shared common interests against the employer, and developed their shared

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<sup>23</sup>At this meeting, as in many of the subsequent ones, this point was not agreed on, and remained highlighted in the master version of the agreement that the negotiating partners projected onto the wall while working. The employer had to give up on this point, and the final version of the contract expresses the point in the same wording as it had had in the 2005 agreement, stating that the trade union is forbidden to organise strikes or other protests against the employer with the aim of changing the conditions of the collective agreement while the collective agreement is valid.

trade union consciousness. Interestingly, it also restored the peace and partnership between the mine management and the union on the local level.

Six months after the ‘putsch’, when I visited the field site, the management of the mines, trade union leaders like Misha, and even the Estonian-speaking Jüri and Siiri, were satisfied with the situation. A new collective agreement had been signed, in which the union had won a pay rise and an annual bonus for all workers, while having to give up subsidies like the sanatoria passes were not considered as important by the trade union representatives. The removal of sanatoria passes, however, upset the company’s pensioners, who thought it was the company’s duty to look after their health after they had worked hard underground all their lives. Cutting welfare functions and relations with groups outside the shop floor can be interpreted as a further step from the ‘Soviet’-style community unionism to business unionism negotiating employment conditions only. Trade unions were shifting from being institutions distributing welfare to their workers, together with the aid of management, to a negotiation partner negotiating the employment conditions, benefits and salaries while conscious of the conflicting goals of capital and labour.

## **7.9. Conclusion**

Estonia’s labour movement cannot be viewed separately from global trends in the labour movement. In the Soviet system, unions had the role of welfare provider, working together with the Party and the company management. In Estonia, where economic liberalism has been the sole creed after independence, many such unions disappeared as all-Soviet enterprises and industries were closed. The mines and the power plants, however, crucial for Estonian energy self-sufficiency, stayed and their unions stayed with them. The Communist Party as one member of the troika was abolished and new parties did not forge strong links with unions, being too right-wing, too weak or too nationalist. New unions did not emerge in the new neoliberal capitalism and it seemed that Estonian unions joined the Western ones only when the party was already over and unions weakened everywhere.

But as anthropological literature on unions suggests, new forms of union organisation are emerging. In this context, it is not useful to talk about Eastern European unions in terms of lack and difference from a Western model that has stopped being effective even in the West. No one can deny the low membership numbers and low quantified wage-bargaining power. Nevertheless, it is more important to look at what unions actually do in these contexts

and which socially significant roles they fulfil. The global economic crisis, as well as the historical tradition of the union as a welfare provider, situated EPTAL in a role in which it was playing the everyday role of the good rich uncle while the worker mobilisation took place outside the framework of the union. A different geographic location, history and demography generated a different kind of union for Igor and Diana during the same economic crisis. As Anner (2003) has pointed out, structural trends like global capitalism are never enough to predict worker mobilisation; shifting political opportunities and shared cultural frames are equally important. Unions have a particular history; for example in Brazil, even though government market liberalisation policies hurt labour, certain unions formed under the ideology of state corporatism continue to turn to the state to resolve their demands if their historic partisan allies are in power (Anner 2003). While workers in Poland miss the times of strong Solidarity movement (Dunn 2004) and Romanian miners are nostalgic about the miners' marches of the 1990s, Estonian miners have a vague imagination of what unions do in the West, and regret that their union does not do the same. In this sense, they do what many analysts of Eastern European trade unions do, the only difference being that at the same time they go on using the union in their own way.

Jüri, who had worked in EPTAL for a long time and was disappointed about the lack of ownership that workers felt towards the current union, insisted that for a new 'European-style' union to emerge in the mines, the old union would have to fade away and the youth would then form something new once they found that it was more effective than negotiating with the employer individually. This might well be true, and has happened in the case of Igor and Diana, but for now, the older workers are around and use EPTAL and relate to Misha in their own particular way, which might not fit with the Western vision of what a trade union should be, but tells us something about the local lived reality.

The reconfiguration of capital already changed the consciousness of the workers. EPTAL was leaving behind the old model of close and friendly cooperation with the company and had to establish new relations with a new type of employer. The position and interests of the two sides were redefined in terms of class interests with the two parties representing different sides, rather than working together within the framework of the company. The merger, besides shaping the consciousness of trade union representatives, also initiated changes in the trade union structure that strengthened the position of the union.

## Conclusion

After nearly seventy years of making and shaping the Soviet working class (cf. Kotkin 1997), and fifty years of trying to incorporate Estonians into this project, the Soviet working class is no longer there. This has led social scientists working in postsocialist contexts to deny the existence of the working class altogether (Eyal, Szelenyi and Townsley 2001) or, worryingly, ask “where is the postsocialist working class?” (Stenning 2005b). The collapse of the Soviet Union, deindustrialisation and the restructuring of the Estonian economy have decreased the number of those who can still call themselves members of the industrial working class. If they are called Soviet, it is only a pejorative addition to the term ‘working class’, since being from the working class is no longer honourable as it was in the Soviet period (Buchowski 2006; Kalb 2009). Together with rural inhabitants, the poor, and Russian speakers, the workers are pushed out of the mainstream image of Estonia. Politicians, EU officials and the business elite (Feldman 2005a; Feldman 2005b), even social scientists depicted Russian speakers as a dangerous ‘Other’ (cf. Heidmets 1998; Vetik 2002). The Estonia that cultivates an image of being small, flexible, innovative with its flat tax, lean government and innovative IT solutions, does not pay much attention to the working class. Ida-Virumaa is often imagined as dirty, polluting, foreign, and troubled with HIV and drugs, with no awareness that every time the successful young Estonian-speaking man in Tallinn (the imagined Estonian prototype) turns on the light, the electricity he uses comes from the labour of miners underground and power plant workers near the border with Russia.

In his essay ‘Fieldwork in Philosophy’ (1990), Pierre Bourdieu says: “I am starting to wonder more and more whether today’s social structures aren’t yesterday’s symbolic structures and whether for instance class as it is observed is not to some extent the product of the theoretical effects of Marx’s work” (p. 18). Bourdieu does not claim that symbolic structures create social structures, but that the fact that the social structures exist as a potential, makes what he calls the ‘theory effect’ even stronger. The symbolic structures, he claims, have an extraordinary power of constitution and are to a large extent defined by the particular historical conditions of their genesis. It seems to me that while the historical conditions have encouraged the analysis of class and hence aided the formation of classes in Western Europe, in Eastern Europe there has been a reverse effect in the last twenty years. The society and the social scientists have forgotten classes and contributed to the situation

whereby the workers start to doubt their own existence. For this reason, my research has been a political project of bringing the working class back.

Despite the unfavourable economies and research ideologies, the working class exists. One day, when the others had returned to their machines and only the mechanic Jura and I were sitting at the dirty table in the underground garage finishing our lunch, I asked Jura whether he thought that there is such a thing as the working class. “Of course the working class exists, although no one talks about it now. If we are working, it means that we must exist,” he said. Although I have used class as a theoretical concept, it is important to take into consideration what the informants say about their identity and experience of being a worker, especially at the present time when more powerful groups seem to be doing everything to deny the existence of classes.

The concept of class allows looking at the changing of power relationships for people who are affected by dynamic processes of capitalist change in similar ways, and seeing how this changes their relationship with institutions like the nation state, the employer or the trade unions. It also allows looking at the dynamics of everyday strategies and relationships on the shop floor and in the neighbourhood and seeing how capitalism, the nation state and historical developments like the collapse of the Soviet Union change the position of a particular social group. It allows us to believe that people want to make the best of their worlds but have to negotiate it based on other forces in the field and employ their culturally familiar strategies to do this (Kalb 1997). Furthermore, it emphasises that people’s experience of a particular relation of production and their identity as a worker holds a value in telling something about the capitalist situation, without falling into the trap of expecting classes everywhere to reach some kind of maturity or endpoint that would lead to revolution.

My thesis has been an exploration of what happens to the working class in the context of postsocialism, neoliberalisation and deindustrialisation. In this thesis, I have argued that Russian-speaking miners in Estonia have experienced a significant decline of status as Russian speakers and as the members of the working class. This has produced a particular set of practices, moralities and politics signifying what being working-class means in Estonia at the end of the first decade of the second millennium. These practices, moralities and politics are not only a result of Soviet past and nostalgia, but are deeply embedded in the global economy after the 2008 economic crisis, the EU and national economic, security and ethnic policies.

In the context of celebrating neoliberal economic entrepreneurialism and individualism, ethnicity and class become overlapping categories whereby being Russian also means being a worker. Russian-speaking miners have been made the internal Other, a racialised underclass, and feel it in the social structure of the mine, where Russian speakers work underground and top management only consists of Estonian speakers. The working class, stripped of its glorified status, nevertheless tries to express its own autonomy, dignity and worldview. I have shown how, despite stricter control of miners' time and speeding up of the labour process, workers exercise control over the rhythm of work. The experience of industrial labour as a miner creates a simultaneous atomisation of workers, due to the piece rate system, and a shared experience of being a miner.

Workers' attempts to control the labour process, their constant complaining about things that they really care about that reveals their moral economy, and their unorthodox but nevertheless effective use of the union reveal what it means to be working-class in postsocialist neoliberal Estonia. These Estonian miners articulate their identity as workers against the elite with whom they do not share material means nor worldview. They believe, like Jura above, that they are still around, because they are working. The position in the productive relations that Estonian miners are currently experiencing determines that their interests are different from the Estonian-speaking elite, and they are doing the best that they can, in the situation of high unemployment, insecurity and fear, to articulate these interests.

They share the experience of labour, of solidarity of being a miner, and of the new economic and political forces that make them compete with each other, atomise them even more, but also bring them closer together in shared circumstances. The ideas of what it means to be a miner and the ideals of a good society create a particular moral economy of the miner, whereby miners demand money and respect in return for sacrificing their health and doing what they consider hard work. This moral economy, with its strong hierarchies of gender, is a product of remembering a better life in socialist times as well as the result of the 2008 economic crisis and high unemployment in the region.

The formerly socially homogeneous community where miners and engineers earned a similar salary is now experiencing increasing social inequalities. This is signified by differentiating consumption patterns. Nevertheless, some egalitarian practices such as drinking and sport still have an important levelling function in the community. Social inequality and new class formation processes are however further reinforced by new

management practices such as outsourcing and restructuring labour, and performance reviews that place workers in a precarious position and increase differentiation between workers and engineers in a previously homogeneous community. Furthermore, new management practices and ethos aim to break up one of the key characteristics of the mining trade: working together with families and involvement of spouses in workplace events. Despite these new trends, management's neat plans are often played out in a different manner in everyday situations in which actors with different worldviews and ambitions meet. Similarly, worker politics, as shown in my ethnography, does not correspond to a neat Western ideal model of what a union should be. A trade union can take different forms depending on the history of the company and particular economic needs. Trade union consciousness is shaped by the shifting social relations whereby the relationship of the company and the union changes from a patronage relationship to that of antagonistic labour and capital.

My research points to processes that can be called postsocialist in the sense that they are rooted in the institutions, social relations and ways of thinking characteristic to socialism in general and Soviet socialism in particular. At the same time, postsocialism also indicates the processes of liberalisation of the economy, connecting with the global flows of capital, and in the case of Central and Eastern Europe and Estonia, adopting EU policies and regulations. Multiple temporalities are present in the life of these miners. Besides the monumental, historical and linear time marked by the changing systems of political economy, there is the time of the mine, punctuated by new technology, changing mine directors, and introduction of new management practices. The mine, with its seams of brown oil shale and white limestone, can similarly be seen as different and coexisting layers of time. The socialist and the capitalist exist side by side in work organisation, one more visible in some aspects than in others, coexisting and intertwining with the cyclical time of the production process, breaking down the idea of a linear time from socialism to postsocialism. But besides my analysis highlighting something very specific about a moment in which different temporalities intersect, it also says something rather timeless about miners.

Mining communities often tend to be different from other types of occupational communities. Bulmer (1975:85–88), cited in Knapp (1997:25), suggested that mining communities may exhibit the following characteristics:

1. physical isolation, and a dispersed settlement system;
2. economic predominance of mining;
3. exacting, dangerous and periodic work;

4. occupational homogeneity and isolation;
5. communal leisure activities (religious, sporting, drinking) where work remains the chief interest and topic of conversation;
6. sharply segregated family and gender roles;
7. economic and political conflict between miners and managers;
8. multiple and complex communal social relationships: solidarity, shared histories of work and living, inward focus.

On this list, there are several themes that I have discussed that are significant among the miners of Estonia. These miners are lucky not to be isolated from civilisation, but they are nevertheless living in an area called 'Estonian Siberia', the area imagined as being far away from the rest of the country, behind Huntington's civilisational border. At the end of the Soviet period, 40% of the community was involved in mining and oil shale processing; many others providing health, education and welfare services to miners and their families. Despite the recent changes after which layoffs excluded many from the community of employed miners, people in the region tell the story of Kohtla-Järve, mining, Heroes of Socialist Labour, mine directors and the heaviest-partying miners, thereby sharing a strong collective memory. Despite the increasing income differentiation, sport and drinking, the archetypical miner pastimes, are still important in the community, and despite the long history of employment of women, gender roles remain strict. Solidarity remains key in the difficult and dangerous work, despite shrinking social networks and workplace events in postsocialism. But the representation of a miner, as a hero and a villain, does not only exist simultaneously as Metcalfe (1990) has shown, but is also continuously shifting between the two poles, leaning towards the image of the villain rather than a hero in contemporary Estonia.

I am not trying to argue here that mining is similar everywhere or that miners in Kohtla-Järve fit into an archetypical mould of miners. Nevertheless, mining has been a specific part of the industrial revolution, industrialisation, and more recently deindustrialisation. It is hard to apply Harvey's (2001) 'spatial fix' to mining in a national context – while the Estonian textile industry was transferred from Narva to China, the mines are still solidly fixed in the soil of North-East Estonia and will be exploited as long as the current policy on energy security in Estonia and the EU continues. In the wider, global context, however, mining capital seems to be as fluid as any other, while most of the contemporary mining ethnographies turn to the developing countries and 'resource wars' between capital, nation states and local communities (Ballard and Banks 2003). Deindustrialisation has become increasingly relevant in Eastern Europe, with the decline of worker numbers and militancy. Even the once militant Romanian miners, the misfits in the

overall narrative of worker quiescence, had by 2011 become depoliticised due to migration, EU and international management and economic practices, and the consolidation of the new underclass. Jiu Valley, closely connected to the global economic system, has become a “normalised and pacified international backwater” (Kideckel 2011:136).

A longer-term, archaeological and anthropological look at mining, however, shows that the mining profession as a job for life and a strong centre for community and morality is only a relatively recent phenomenon. As Knapp and Pigott (1997) indicate, people have been engaged in part-time mining for a much longer period. Godoy (1985) shows that for example in highland Bolivia, peasants take up periodic and part-time mining to complement their other economic activities. Flexible, short-term and precarious labour on the rise globally is increasing also in Estonia, as my own ethnographic data demonstrated. Considering these developments, it might also be time to start reassessing the idea of homogeneous mining communities with strong solidarity, traditions and genderroles, and start thinking about mining as another part-time or periodical activity.

In this context, it becomes harder to talk about the working class as we are accustomed to. The decline of industrial professions and power of trade unions since the 1970s has been witnessed everywhere in the West. In this situation, we cannot keep imagining the class models that we inherited from earlier periods, but try to capture the new, often contradictory processes of class formation. This is especially true in the socialist bloc that was supposed to consist of workers’ states, where the trajectories of class formation have been different. At the same time, the contemporary Estonian miners, deprived of their employment security, are undergoing the process of becoming precarious and flexible, which characterises 21<sup>st</sup> century workers elsewhere.

## **Contribution of this thesis to anthropological literature**

Most generally, my thesis is an ethnographic contribution to the literature on postsocialist working-class lives. Most English-language ethnographies of socialism concentrated on rural life, and rural decollectivisation has continued to be a popular topic in postsocialism. Other studies considered the new emerging questions such as property, civil society and consumption, while the topic of labour and the working class has received relatively little attention. The studies of workers were mostly conducted in the 1990s. Some of them paint a picture of chaos, confusion and disillusionment as a result of economic

restructuring and privatisation, like Birgit Müller's (2007), Elizabeth Dunn's (2004) and Frances Pine's (2002b) work. Miners in David Kideckel's (2008) and Sarah Ashwin's (1999) studies are feeling the economic consequences even more strongly, as miners are made redundant or keep working while their wages remain unpaid for months.

While in the 1990s, postsocialism across Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union was marked by radical changes, confusion, and a drop in living standards, in the 2000s, the different paths of different countries have significantly diverged. I believe that my most significant contribution is my ethnographic material that shows the working class spatially and temporally placed between something we could call 'advanced postsocialism' and Europe after the 2008 crisis. Ethnographically, I hope I have added new insights to the actual underground world of work, and captured the experience of Russian speakers, their moral worlds and reactions to changes in the company. Theoretically, I have tried to advance discussions about the labour process, ethnic relations in postsocialism, class processes, the meaning of family and company, and the meaning and role of unions.

### **Avenues for future research: two geographical imaginations, one theoretical concept**

While writing up my thesis, new directions for future research have emerged. These are related to two geographical imaginations that I touch upon in my thesis, Europe and post-Soviet, and one key concept, which is class. At the moment Europe remains a somewhat elusive category for anthropologists, but it is widely acknowledged that studying Europe as a particular area with certain unity makes sense due to the increasing political and economic integration in Europe. At the same time, anthropologists and geographers also note the uneven development in Europe whereby Western Europe dictates what being successful or developed means, via institutions such as the EU, and Eastern Europe becomes the internal colony of lower labour and production costs, defined in terms of lack. The 2008 economic crisis and its aftermath are however pointing to new configurations and new imagined geographies and movements of capital in Europe. Trends such as increasing unemployment, precarity and neonationalism among the European working class are experienced in both Western and Eastern Europe. Additionally, Western Europe has witnessed increased immigration from Eastern Europe. As Kaneff and Pine (2011:25) note, migration from Eastern Europe to the West is flexible and cyclical rather than unidirectional and permanent migration, and kinship links are transformed but maintained. In the context of the economic

crisis that is mostly threatening the life chances of young people in Europe, and in the context of postsocialism in which the older generations who lost their jobs, we can talk about a 'lost generation' (Pine forthcoming). What these new developments in Europe mean for the concept of Europe and the European Union, as well as individual countries and the position of workers in those countries, will require further fieldwork and theorisation.

The second geographical imagination, for lack of a more elegant term, could be called post-Soviet. In my thesis, I have argued that postsocialism is still a useful concept, but have paid less attention to the meanings of post-Soviet. In my future research, I plan to examine ideas of Soviet, post-Soviet and neoliberal more closely. I have been a participant in an international research group called 'The Soviet in Everyday Life' in which historians, philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists from various countries of the former Soviet Union have discussed questions such as what is particularly Soviet about certain practices, material and popular culture, and institutions, and how this fits into the wider framework of the global political economy. Participation in this group has aroused my interest in theoretically pushing and empirically testing the ideas of Soviet and post-Soviet. I aim to study the usefulness of post-Soviet as a meaningful explanatory category, and besides studying Estonia as part of Europe, I want to explore it as part of the post-Soviet space in the light of fast-moving capital flows and uneven geographical development.

The concept that I want to take further is that of class. A comparative study will allow me to think through different experiences, manifestations and politics of class in different geographical contexts which are becoming connected to the global economy more than ever. As the traditional working class is waning and dissatisfied people are talking about the 99% versus the 1% in the current economic and political situation, inequalities and reconfigurations of power relationships need further exploration and cross-cultural comparison.

To bring the ideas of Europe, post-Soviet and class together, I have chosen to compare workers in geographically and culturally distant Estonia and Kazakhstan, to explore the impacts of the Soviet past and neoliberalism in two postsocialist settings where the working class is still present, despite everything. I will conduct fieldwork on the everyday life, work and intergenerational relations among miners of Kohtla-Järve, Estonia, and the Karagandy area of Kazakhstan. In an era that is in many parts of the world considered post-industrial, mining fuels such as coal and oil shale nevertheless remains crucial for energy

production. Mining with its particular work conditions, technology, industrial relations, gendered professional identities and shifting meanings in a changing political economy will remain an important area of enquiry in social science. The miner, seen as an industrial hero, backward underclass, strong and sturdy, dirty and immoral remains a key actor in the economy and social structure of many countries and regions. He might simply not correspond to our imagination about what a miner should be like.

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