

---

## BOOK REVIEW

**Kofti, Dimitra. 2023. *Broken Glass, Broken Class: Transformations of Work in Bulgaria*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.**

Roberta Koleva

“*Once we were unified; now we are like broken glass*”. This remark, spoken by workers in Mladost, a Bulgarian glass factory, captures the sense of sharp transformation, fragmentation, and disillusionment at the heart of Dimitra Kofti’s *Broken Glass, Broken Class: Transformations of Work in Bulgaria* (2023). Based on a decade-long field study, partly stemming from the author’s doctoral research at University College London, this insightful ethnography closely examines the post-socialist transformations of the everyday politics of labour in Bulgaria, set against the broader context of global post-Fordist shifts toward production flexibilisation and work precarisation. The Greek anthropologist brings readers directly to the microcosmos of Mladost’s shop floor and shares the intimate stories of workers navigating a world where the legacies of socialism, the demands of modern capitalism, and successive economic crises collide daily, shaping various understandings of what was “before” and what followed “after”. Through these nuanced narratives, Kofti not only delivers a critical analysis of the theory of post-socialism and widespread presumptions of linearity but also brings vibrant accounts into the anthropology of labour and global capitalism, revealing how abstract economic demands shape the daily lives, imaginations and bodies of Mladost’s glass workers in a diverse way – both on the conveyor’s belt and in the domestic spheres.

Starting with the research methodology, an impressive moment, given that factories are typically spaces with restricted access, is that, like other classical ethnographers of post-socialist labour (e.g., Dunn 2004), Kofti managed to get employed in Mladost as an unskilled worker. This allowed her to immerse herself in the rhythm of the conveyor belt and develop close relationships with the factory’s employees, extending her fieldwork into their everyday lives and homes. After her initial fieldwork in Sofia in 2007, she returned in 2013 during a follow-up study on deindustrialisation in Pernik, keeping in touch with the Mladost workers, many of whom had become her friends. Her observations continued until 2018, also drawing upon her 2003 research in Sofia’s working-class Druzhba district (24–25). A major strength

of the monograph lies in this extended engagement, which allowed her to analyse the complex layering of multiple temporalities embedded in the lived experiences of workers and managers, many of whom had spent their entire careers at Mladost, participating in and adapting to a series of managerial, production, and technological transformations. Moreover, Kofti's fieldwork overlapped with the international banking crisis of 2008, which, as it swept through Europe, prompted comparisons to past Bulgarian crises among Mladost workers.

The first chapter of the book provides a historical account of these complex temporal layers that coexist in Mladost. As we learn, Kofti chose this factory name-ly because of its long history, which dates back to 1931 when a wealthy Bulgarian family founded it as a glass workshop in Sofia (38). Along with all other small-scale glass workshops in Sofia, it was nationalised in the 1950s, and after facing severe economic hardship in the late 1980s, it was privatised again in 1997 during a wave of nation-wide factory closures and privatisations. In this context, Mladost became part of a large Greek company, which was followed by some fundamental changes, including the gradual closing down of previous production units, a focus on core production, outsourcing, subcontracting, and the introduction of new managerial discourses of flexibilisation of labour. While many workers remained employed at the factory, others lost their jobs during downsizing. Some of those who were laid off later returned under significantly worse conditions, often as outsourced workers on precarious casual contracts.

These successive transformations of socialism, post-socialism, and neoliberal restructuring have shaped not only the organisation of work but also the identities and daily experiences of employees and managers alike. Employees often navigated them through comparisons of "*edno vreme*" (in Bulgarian – "once in the past"), continuously drawing comparisons between the socialist times and the subsequent changes, using these references to interpret current experiences creating various categories of "before" and "after", "old" and "new" (55–65). Moreover, Kofti illustrates that these categories are not simply chronological but represent a dynamic interplay of status, identity, and power, creating an environment where, for instance, being an "old" worker can signify either pride in one's past skills or accusations of continuation of power from the previous period. Conversely, "new" could imply both insecurity in a shifting environment and newfound authority within the privatised structure (58).

In this context, the author critically engages with ongoing contemporary discussions in the anthropology of post-socialism considering whether it is still a useful framework<sup>1</sup> after three decades of transformations (13–19). Echoing Caroline Humphrey's perspective that the concept of "post-socialism" would lose relevance only when "actually existing socialism" fades into history (2001: 15), she shows how the (post-)socialist "past" continues to hold vernacular significance in Mladost. Moreover, by illustrating the coexistence of numerous versions of the "past" within

---

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Hann 2006, Dunn and Verdery 2011, Thelen 2011, Chelcea and Druta 2016, Kojanić 2020, Tocheva 2020.

the “present” her analysis offers a critically complicated view of the teleological assumptions of the “transition” as a linear process from a rigid point of departure to a predefined point of arrival (Pine and Bridger 1998: 5), challenging simplistic divisions between the socialist past and the capitalist present (14).

From the epistemic realm, Chapter 2 jumps back to the lived experience, diving deeper into how Mladost’s transformation under global capitalism in the face of the casual contracts and the multiple levels of outsourcing in the factory, produced stark inequalities in close proximity. Following the path of the glass bottle along the never-stopping conveyor belt, Kofti highlights how regular employees with stable pay and benefits now work alongside outsourced labourers who lack job security and protections, despite performing identical tasks (70). Many of these outsourced workers, supplied by the subcontractor Litex, were once regular employees of Mladost; their skills and experience are still utilised, but now they work under reduced pay and with minimal benefits. Gender and ethnic distinctions further compound these inequalities: the more stable, higher-paid roles at the Hot End are held predominantly by male workers, considered “skilled”, while the Cold End is staffed mainly by “unskilled” female and Roma workers, who endure lower wages and greater insecurity (86–115).

While existing literature in the anthropology of global economy and labour often describes the post-Fordist transformations as involving spatial dispersion and deterritorialisation (e.g. Sassen 1991, Low 1996, Ong 2006), Dimitra Kofti’s *Broken Glass, Broken Class* contributes to these discussions with the alternative term “local dislocation”. Rather than dispersing production across smaller, distant sites as is typical in flexible capital movements, Mladost, itself a large-scale industry, was integrated into a foreign company that outsourced labour within its original Bulgarian setting. In this and other post-socialist contexts, formerly nationally run industries have become subsidiaries of foreign corporations, reorienting their operations to global markets while maintaining local infrastructure (9). As the author puts it, “*Mladost was still at the same place, yet in a state of dislocation*” (10). Production sites, machinery, and expertise remain intact, operating on a Fordist-style conveyor belt, yet global post-Fordist pressures have altered the social fabric of the workplace. As a result, workers, once united by shared employment and benefits, now find themselves in conflict with one another. However, while critical of these labour practices, they rarely blame factory owners or the economic system. Instead, vertical conflicts are displaced into worker disputes (117–118), where Mladost’s workers see themselves as a “broken” working class, divided yet united by a shared sense of powerlessness (93).

In addition to the dissection of capitalist mechanisms and discourses, Kofti brings a nuanced view of personal lives entangled with these shifting economic conditions. In Chapter 3 her ethnography extends from the factory floor to workers’ homes, exploring how gender, household roles, and even familial relations on the conveyor belt might unexpectedly shift under the domestic sphere. As we learn, for many female workers who often emerge as primary breadwinners within their

families, factory labour offers not just income but also a break from rural, patriarchal family structures, allowing them some autonomy and influence over household decisions, and a space for social interaction beyond their rural villages (121–123). This “freedom”, as one of Kofti’s interlocutors, Gergana, put it, offers a sense of empowerment and motivation to work in Mladost, despite the feelings of exploitation, low wages and difficult working conditions.

Chapter 4 returns to the horizontal tensions among workers, illustrating how management discourses around “flexibility” exacerbate the fragmentation of previous solidarities. Managers, instead of addressing the impacts of neoliberal practices, often blame Mladost’s struggles on Bulgaria’s “communist past” and its “problematic” practices. These are contrasted with contemporary ideals of “individual responsibility”, “hard work”, “competitiveness”, and “productivity”, all promoted under the guise of flexibility. However, Kofti compellingly demonstrates the discursive elasticity of “flexibilisation”, which simultaneously emphasises “individuality” while instrumentalising pre-existing demands for collective production (154). Moreover, rather than fostering adaptability, Kofti illustrates, these managerial strategies, such as diverse pay structures intended to incentivise competition, instead increase rigidity, disrupt coordinated efforts, and erode solidarity, ultimately limiting the potential for collective resistance among Mladost’s fractured workforce (158–163).

This clash and coexistence of discourses, practises and symbols from different temporalities crystallise in spatial forms in Chapter 5. Here, Kofti focuses on the “dead chimneys” of the older dilapidating buildings in Mladost, which remained empty amid deindustrialisation, and were officially labelled as “not in use” (169). However, she then goes on to demonstrate that rather than being merely “abandoned”, these spaces provide the material means for unexpected forms of resistance. Workers repurpose them as personal and informal spaces, offering moments of respite from the rigorous demands of the production line and the panoptic oversight of management. In doing so, this allows them to maintain a sense of their “old” identities and agency<sup>2</sup> and provides an alternative subtle way to resist the neoliberal structures (181–191). Moreover, Kofti shows that management passively permits the use of these spaces, as it itself utilises them to host a range of services once funded by the company but now provided through alternative economic practices. It is in these “seemingly empty” buildings that some casual contract workers are placed, enabling what Kofti terms “local dislocation”, where outsourced labour fragmentation takes place within the same physical space (177–181).

The last chapter presents a sort of culminating final dissection of the book’s central “paradox”: Mladost as a site, embodying both change and continuity. In this haunted space of layered temporalities, workers use “seemingly contradictory” expressions like “everything has changed” and “everything is the same” to encaps-

---

<sup>2</sup> For example, Nadia, a former tailoress, now working as a cleaner, repurposed an empty room in the factory to informally continue her tailoring work, repairing clothes for both workers and managers and earning additional income by mending uniforms at piece rates (61, 182).

sulate the sense of transformation within succession (197). Kofti contextualises her analysis against the backdrop of the 2008 – 2009 global economic crisis, deeming it an “ethnographic moment”, that triggered memories of past uncertainties and once again provoked discussion over whether things have truly transformed or essentially stayed the same (195). On the one side, “everything has changed” came as a comparison with “*edno vreme*”, emerging amid the workforce segmentation, intensified time pressures, and inequalities brought by the post-Fordist profound restructurings. On the other side, workers perceive the structures of authority and exploitation as eerily familiar. Although operating in the neoliberal realm, these power dynamics are perceived as continuing from the “past” and are often labelled by the workers through familiar idioms linked to the designation “communist” (212).

In this sense, Kofti’s analysis offers an insightful perspective on the anti-communist discourse, demonstrating how it is not only used by elites as a discursive tool to demonise social policies and foster neoliberal practises (e.g. Chelcea and Druța 2016), but is also invoked in divergent ways by workers themselves, reflecting broader critiques of power. While managers in Mladost often use anti-communist rhetoric to dismiss past “unproductive” practices, shop floor employees link past inequalities to current ones, using “communism” to critique workplace hierarchies. This bottom-up discourse paradoxically casts new elites as “communist” due to their perceived unfair affiliations, employing anti-communism as a retrospective tool to elucidate present power structures. However, rather than seeing this framing as contradictory, Kofti prefers to analyse it as a critique of both past and present conditions, revealing workers’ ongoing frustrations with the succeeding teleologies of both socialist and capitalist ideologies that shaped their experiences at Mladost (192, 217).

While Kofti’s work is substantial, several areas could benefit from further elaboration. The “local dislocation” concept, which provides an insightful lens for viewing Mladost’s experience within global capitalism, could be emphasised more. Although introduced early in the text, it appears only briefly, missing an opportunity to serve as a more central analytical framework. Kofti brings important thinkers like Saskia Sassen and Setha Low into the conversation, but a deeper integration of theoretical discussions on scales and multiscalearity could add further depth to her argument, highlighting the intricate connections between local and global dynamics. Furthermore, the author’s use of “socialism” and “communism” sometimes lacks distinction, potentially causing ambiguity in an otherwise meticulously analysed study. A more consistent definition of these terms would enhance the book’s conceptual clarity.

All in all, Dimitra Kofti’s *Broken Glass, Broken Class* stands as a compelling contribution to contemporary discussions in the anthropology of labour, post-socialism, and global economic studies. This beautifully crafted ethnography is not only a careful and detailed exploration of labour transformations in post-socialist Bulgaria but also offers a nuanced lens on how global inequalities interact with local conditions, fragmenting workers and reshaping social identities that were once

united but are now fractured, “like broken glass”. In these layered realities, where post-Fordist practices intersect with the enduring legacies of socialism, the transformation is far from linear and the “past” is far from a relic; it is a coexisting force that defines the present and continues to shape the future. Kofti’s work, therefore, is an important contribution that illustrates that while teleological epistemologies persist on the top, on the ground people navigate in various ways that cannot fit into these rigid categories. These vernacular experiences are precisely what anthropologists of post-socialism must continue to explore and understand.

### References

- Chelcea, L. and Druță, O. 2016. ‘Zombie socialism and the rise of neoliberalism in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe’, *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57(4–5), pp. 521–44. doi:10.1080/15387216.2016.1266273.
- Dunn, E. 2004. *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Dunn, E. and Verdery, K. 2011. ‘Dead ends in the critique of (post)socialist anthropology: Reply to Thelen’, *Critique of Anthropology*, 31(3), pp. 251–55. doi:10.1177/0308275X11409734.
- Hann, C. 2006. *‘Not the Horse We Wanted!’: Postsocialism, Neoliberalism, and Eurasia*. Münster: LIT.
- Humphrey, C. 2001. ‘Does the category “postsocialist” still make sense?’. In: Hann, C. (ed.). *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Local Practices in Eurasia*. London: Routledge, pp. 12–15.
- Kojanić, O. 2020. ‘Theory from the peripheries: What can the anthropology of postsocialism offer to European anthropology?’, *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, 29(2), pp. 49–66. doi: 10.3167/ajec.2020.290204.
- Low, S. 1996. ‘The Anthropology of cities: Imagining and theorizing the city’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 25, pp. 383–409. doi: 10.1146/annurev.anthro.25.1.383.
- Ong, A. 1987. *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Pine, F. and Bridger, S. 1998. ‘Introduction: Transitions to postsocialism and cultures of survival’. In: Pine, F. and Bridger, S. (eds.). *Surviving Post-Socialism: Local Strategies and Regional Responses in Eastern Europe*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–15.
- Sassen, S. 1991. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton, NJ, Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Tocheva, D. 2020. ‘Vernacular entanglements: Islam and communism in a Bulgarian village’, *Balkanologie*, 15(2), pp. 1–22. doi: 10.4000/balkanologie.2627.

Thelen, T. 2011. 'Shortage, fuzzy property and other dead ends in the anthropological analysis of (post)socialism', *Critique of Anthropology*, 31(1), pp. 43–61. doi: 10.1177/0308275X10393436.

Roberta Koleva

Central European University Alumna, Independent Researcher

e-mail: [bettykoleva1@gmail.com](mailto:bettykoleva1@gmail.com)