

# 3



## Moral Economy and Mutuality at Work

### *Labour Practices in Tobacco Shops*

LUCA SZÜCS

#### Introduction

Since its landslide victory in 2010, the populist right-wing government of Hungary's Fidesz-KDNP has promoted the idea of a 'work-based society' reliant on a national bourgeoisie and a strong, property-owning middle class. The political changes and policy decisions that have taken place since then have substantially reshaped the structure of the economy and the state, turning the post-2010 regime into what might be understood as an accumulative state (Scheiring 2020: 74). As a response to the period between 1990 and 2010, when economic policies favoured multinational companies, the accumulative state now propagates economic nationalism and economic interventions that positively discriminate in favour of Hungarian capitalists (ibid.). These policies have been further supported by a drastic cutback in welfare spending, the repression of labour unions and the deregulation and flexibilization of the labour market.

The nationalization of the tobacco retail trade in 2012 is a salient example of the economic nationalism propagated by Fidesz. As a result, government-franchised shops<sup>1</sup> – so-called National Tobacco Shops<sup>2</sup> – being given the exclusive right to sell tobacco products. Prior to this, almost all shops, including grocery stores, could sell tobacco, which contributed significantly to their earnings. The justification for this change had two prongs: to improve public health by reducing access to tobacco products for those under eighteen years of age, and to support the creation of small and medium-size businesses, including family businesses. After the tobacco law was implemented, small and specialized tobacco shops sprang up all over the coun-

try. Drawing on my ethnographic research in such shops, the overall aim of this chapter is to shed light on the moral economy at work by exploring the ways in which labour processes and labour relationships are underpinned by practices of mutuality and non-commodified exchanges. Before doing so, however, I will briefly discuss the historical and political importance of the notion of work in the Hungarian context.

Public and political debate in Hungary often revolves around the idea of work, since the government has propagated the idea of a ‘work-based society’ and introduced its rather controversial workfare scheme as a positive alternative to ‘declining Western welfare states’ (Szikra 2014: 492). By focusing on how workfare practices work on the local level, Chris Hann (2018) points out that these programmes were in fact widely endorsed throughout the countryside, as they touched upon the ‘moral dimension of economy’ and resonated well with the deep-rooted idea of ‘work as a value’ in rural Hungary. He shows that workfare schemes ‘draw upon both the pre-industrial ethics of the smallholding peasantry, when work was an end in itself, and the ethics of socialist industrialization, when work was enshrined in the ideology of the state’ (Hann 2018: 249). Accordingly, by exploring its historical significance, Hann argues that after 2010 populist politicians successfully restored the idea of ‘work as a value’ in public, moralizing discourses. This chapter examines the persistence of these values further by focusing on the meanings various actors give to the sphere of work in urban settings. Given the importance of ‘work as a value’ in Hungary, I evaluate various theoretical approaches to the understanding of the entanglement of social values and material interest in the areas of work and retail trade.

In his historical analysis of the changing relations of circulation in Western societies, James Carrier (1994) points out that throughout the nineteenth century retail trade became the primary means through which people obtained and comprehended objects. The result of this was the growing impersonalization of retail trade, entailing the dissolution of durable social relations that had earlier characterized transactions between customers and shopkeepers (*ibid.*: 359–61; 1995: 61–82). Although Carrier’s account is about how the circulation of objects became disembedded in retail trade, from which workers were also alienated, his intention was not to draw a sharp division between the non-alienated, personal commercial relationships of pre-capitalist times and the alienated, impersonal economic relations in capitalist trade. On the contrary, drawing on Marcel Mauss’s (1954 [1925]) concept of gift relations and Chris Gregory’s (1982) distinction between gifts and commodities, Carrier conceptualizes these changes in the forms of circulation as a continuum defined by two polar terms. One of these poles denoted inalienable objects – ‘possessions’, as Carrier put

it – that were embedded in the personal relationship between givers and receivers, whereas the other pole stood for commodities and alienable objects that were disembedded from social relations. By detecting fundamental transformations in retail trade that emerged in all its branches, Carrier argues that although there was a significant shift in the forms of circulation, most objects and transactions fall somewhere between the two opposing poles (1994: 361).

Frank Adloff follows a very similar line of thought when he argues for the reconceptualization of action theory on the basis of Mauss's theory of the gift. Accordingly,

in Mauss an approach can be found that hints at actions that are simultaneously self-interested and disinterested, voluntary and obligatory. The mistake of modern sociology as well as philosophy was to suppose that every action is either utilitarian or normatively-oriented. However, even in modern society actions cannot be reduced to one of these approaches but either explicitly follow a logic of gift-giving and reciprocity or are accompanied by such logic. (Adloff 2006: 409)

By broadening the scope of actions based on the principle of gift-giving and exchange, Adloff goes further and argues that reciprocity and gift-giving prevails in all spheres of life, shaping all social interaction, including labour relations:

labour relations cannot be understood just by assuming an economic exchange of labour for remuneration. The economic principle may be dominant in this field, but labour contracts are always incomplete: the performance the employer expects cannot be regulated and fixed in detail . . . thus labour relations rely on patterns of reciprocity to ensure that both sides profit from the contract and economic exchange. (Ibid.: 420)

Prior to Adloff, Jonathan Parry made a very similar point when he pointed out that 'the whole ideology of the gift, and conversely the whole idea of "economic self-interest," are *our* invention . . .' (1986: 458, original emphasis). Tackling related conceptual questions, Stephen Gudeman argues that the two realms of economy, namely mutuality and the market (or community and impersonal trade), are dialectically connected, so that economies are always both embedded and disembedded (2009: 18–19). More recently, by shedding light on exchange and forms of sociality in the practice of work, the notion of 'flexible capitalism' has been re-conceptualized in a similar manner by Jens Kjaerulff and the authors of his edited volume (2015). Drawing on the rich anthropological literature on the gift, the contributors argue that prevailing work regimes hinge on the cultivation of sociality and social exchanges in situations of flexible capitalism (see Kjaerulff 2015: 1–41).

Developing the analysis further, Carrier (2018) suggests reformulating the concept of moral economy in line with the principle of the ‘mutual obligations’ that define almost every relationship, including both commodified and non-commodified transactions. Instead of focusing on individuals and their values, he argues that moral economy emerges in those relationships in which participants become ‘obliged to each other’ in the course of time (ibid.: 25). In this sense, he concludes that ‘whether or not economic activity or an economic realm is moral is a matter of degree rather than kind’ (ibid.: 31).

In line with the thinking of these authors, I utilize the term ‘moral economy’ in its relational form in showing how the notions of both mutuality and obligation underlie all economic practices. Accordingly, the aim of the chapter is twofold. First I seek to understand the often conflictual links between material interest and social values in the realm of work. Here I look at economic transactions as relationships that are structured by the entangled practices of self-interest and mutuality or, following Carrier, mutual obligation. My second aim is to unfold the contradictory nature and experience of service work in retail tobacconists in Hungary. Given the locations of these shops, their assistants mainly work with regular customers, meaning that economic transactions often take place within durable social relations and are accompanied by genuine sociality. By working alone in these shops, moreover, employees acquire autonomy and a degree of control over them. This becomes a source of well-being and self-fulfilment for the employees, and it also helps them to internalize their employer’s material interests and contributes to their increased work performance.

### **Division of Labour and Changes in Tobacco Shops: Flexibility and Solidarity in the Making**

The three tobacco shops I worked with are located in different areas of Szeged.<sup>3</sup> The largest or so-called ‘central shop’ is situated in one of the oldest working-class suburbs of the city, which today is mainly populated by pensioners, the unemployed and working-class residents. Like many houses in this neighbourhood, the building containing the tobacco shop is an old, single-floor detached house with a backyard. The second tobacco shop, which is significantly smaller, is situated on the ground floor of a socialist-type housing complex located in a different neighbourhood and consisting largely of working-class residents. Both shops have mostly regular customers from the immediate neighbourhood.

The third shop is situated on a busy road, nearer to the downtown area. This part of the city is more heterogeneous in terms of social classes. Be-

cause of its location, the third shop is a so-called ‘half-transit shop’, meaning that it has a smaller number of regular customers. Ultimately, however, all three shops maintain close relationships with their own neighbourhoods, within which all the employees and employers themselves live.

The appearance of the tobacco shops – and therefore the employees’ work environment – is defined not only by the owner but also by the state and its legislation. Prohibiting the display of tobacco products to those who are underage, Hungary’s tobacco law requires owners to apply uniform dark foil covers on shop windows. This considerably affects the employees’ working conditions, since the dark foil prevents sunlight from coming into the shop through the window. Also, by disconnecting shop assistants from the outside world, the dark windows make them vulnerable, leaving them defenceless in cases of robbery, physical abuse or other criminal acts.

The business of running these particular shops is truly and legally a family concern, since a father and his son András are the joint owners of all three shops, though as the executive director András is regarded as the real boss of all three. One member of the extended family was employed full-time as a shop assistant, while another worked part-time.

The three shops have ten permanent employees, nine women and one man, each working eight-hour shifts. Gender plays a significant role in the selection of employees. Women, according to András, are the most suitable employees for this job due to their ability to be more flexible and more reliable and to keep the shops tidy and clean. Each shop has three employees including a shop manager, who works shifts like the other two employees but enjoys a bit more autonomy. One additional office employee takes care of the accounts for all three shops. András mainly takes care of business relationships with his suppliers and the marketing representatives of the wholesalers, and he also oversees the management of the shops. His father deals with the takings and collects them on a daily basis.

The shops are open six days a week from 6:00 AM to 10:00 PM. The morning shift is from 5:15 AM to 2:00 PM and the afternoon shift from 1:15 PM to 10:00 PM. On Sundays, the opening hours are between 7:00 AM and 5:00 PM, there being only one shift. Since monthly wages are calculated according to the number of hours worked, it is always difficult for the shop managers to arrange the monthly shifts so that they satisfy all the employees and so that everyone has enough work hours for a reasonable monthly wage, as well as sufficient days off (two days a week according to the labour law). Drawing up a monthly assignment, therefore, usually demands creativity and good negotiating skills on the part of the shop managers. András did not usually want to be involved in these matters, checking work schedules only before the start of the month.

If an employee could not work their shift due to personal, medical or family issues, usually it did not cause any serious difficulties: employees were able to change shifts with each other easily and not just within but between the shops as well. By keeping track of these little favours and helping each other, employees developed a well-functioning horizontal system based on reciprocity and mutuality. Usually, the boss did not have any objections to the practice of changing shifts, as long as the employees kept within the limits of the law in doing so<sup>4</sup> and kept him informed. Nonetheless, this well-functioning system was seriously challenged whenever the number of employees dropped from three to two, as when Erika had to give up her job.

Erika was in her late twenties and the manager of the central tobacco shop. She was born and had grown up in the very same neighbourhood. After completing vocational school in commerce and catering, she worked as a bar tender in various pubs in Szeged and later worked evenings at a petrol station for several years. Given her educational background, experience and skills, as well as her extensive knowledge of the neighbourhood, András had immediately offered her a job after the interview. Erika was never disappointed in her work and was reliable and hardworking, becoming shop manager in a short period of time. However, Erika's career, her life and the organization of the shop she managed changed drastically when she was diagnosed with a serious medical condition. Even though she saw several doctors in both state and private hospitals and spent a significant amount of money on these consultations, she did not receive the appropriate medical treatment that would have stopped her attacks and let her do her work properly. Since she did not want to leave her job, and since András did not want to lose one of his best employees, he decided to wait and kept her position open until she got better. This decision required the workforce in all the shops to reorganize, which demanded a great deal of flexibility.

According to the doctors, Erika had to wait and see which medical treatment would work best for her. She was also advised to find another job where she would have the support of a team – something that she did not want to do. The biggest challenge, therefore, for both herself and András, was to find a solution to this problem. First, they agreed that Erika would only work the morning shifts and then persuaded her colleague Edit, the office clerk, to change her shift and start work earlier at 7:00 AM so Erika would not be alone. However, this did not work out for two reasons: even if Edit came into work at 7:00 AM, Erika was still left working alone for an hour and 45 minutes, which could be dangerous for her due to the potential for an attack. From time to time, Edit volunteered to start work even earlier so as to be with Erika, although she could not do this regularly. Secondly, the fact that Erika was doing only morning shifts was not sustainable in the

long run, given the fact that the other employees in the same shop found it difficult to maintain their personal and family lives if they mostly had to do the afternoon shifts. Erika's health problems unfortunately continued, and the side effects of her medication did not allow her to work properly on a regular basis. As a result, she was forced to stop working, though András still did not want to hire anyone else and preferred to wait until she had found a suitable medical treatment that worked for her.

Although András's decision was dictated by solidarity with and sympathy for Erika, his choice not to hire anyone else for her position while she stayed away from work for an indefinite period of time required other employees to work harder, be flexible and make sacrifices for the business. Obviously, hiring a new employee was a financial risk for András that he did not want to take. To do so, he would have to pay for the certificates the new employee would require to be able to sell lottery tickets, and the new person would also be expected to leave if Erika were to return. In this regard, András's decision was driven not only by a sense of solidarity and moral obligation towards Erika but also self-interest. As Erika was one his best employees, someone who had been working for his company for years, he also felt obliged to reciprocate her valued labour by keeping her position open for her.

However, for the other two shop assistants, it was a very difficult period because of the overtime they often had to do. When this became too difficult or stressful for them, András replaced them for some shifts with other employees from the two other shops or sometimes did the shifts himself. András himself was very flexible when it came to business and work, and therefore he required the same, full flexibility from all his employees: they had to be ready to substitute for each other whenever it was needed, even when they had days off.

During the same period, an employee from one of the other shops was also going through a hard time, causing further problems for both her colleagues and András. Angéla, a single mother, was in her late thirties with a teenage son and a one-year-old daughter. She was raising her children entirely alone, without her family's financial support. Hence, it was necessary for her to keep her job, despite having to struggle to synchronize her shifts with her child-raising responsibilities. She asked András to allow her to work only part-time and do only morning shifts, which was more suited to her children's needs. András was very sympathetic to her problems and required the same from her colleagues too, even if her situation meant an extra burden for them. As András told me, being a father of two young children himself, he would never have been able to kick out a single mother, and the others had to understand that and accept the situation as it was. However, the sacrifices of the other employees ultimately resulted

in tensions developing among them. They told me that, having families or being mothers as well, they felt that their boss was showing favouritism to Angéla.

Accounts like this illustrate the tension between material interests and moral obligations that is an inherent part of practices of mutuality. Going beyond self-interest and profit-maximization, András felt he had obligations to the two employees who were experiencing personal difficulties and therefore chose to keep their positions open for them, but in morally obliging them he challenged relations of mutuality between himself and his other employees because he did want to lighten their burden by hiring new, temporary employees or take into consideration their familial obligations as well.

By broadening the analytical scope of practices of mutuality between employers and employees, in the next section I look at how remuneration in the form of wages and other financial incentives worked and how these were accompanied by vertical gift exchanges.

## Remuneration, Incentives and Gift Exchanges

There were three levels of wages in András's tobacco shops. At the first level were the shop assistants, who earned a monthly minimum wage of 85,000 HUF (approximately 275 EUR),<sup>5</sup> with an extra 30% for working after 6:00 PM, time and a half on Sundays and certain financial incentives, meaning an employee could earn up to 100,000 HUF (324 EUR). Shop managers received a slightly higher wage, earning an additional 10,000 HUF (approximately 32 EUR) a month.

Financial incentives included those attached to selling scratch cards. If employees could sell 576 a week, they received 2000 HUF (approximately 7 EUR) per week or 8000 HUF (approximately 26 EUR) per month. Although it was possible to achieve this figure, if they had not sold the required number of scratch cards before the end of the week, they made sure of receiving the extra money by purchasing cards themselves to make up the number.

At the second level of earnings was the office clerk, who took care of the accounts. Her net salary was considerably higher than those of the shop assistants, at 140,000 HUF (454 EUR) net. Edit, the clerk, had been with the company since the very beginning, working for András's father, and was therefore regarded as one of their most reliable and trustworthy workers. Although she was not entitled to the same material incentives as the shop assistants, she admitted that she always received extra money twice a year on top of her salary when she took a longer holiday to visit her partner, who lived and worked abroad as a truck driver.



At the third level is the owner, who took a dividend four times per year. He also took a monthly salary, as he worked on Sundays before the shopping ban was revoked.<sup>6</sup> There were no differences in terms of salary between family and non-family employees. Only the owner's younger brother received a different wage, since he was a temporary employee, jumping in only when his university studies allowed him to work.

In order to thank employees for their labour, András held a party for them every year in the backyard of the central shop. This half-day event was the main ritual and cement of the work community, feeding everyone with stories and anecdotes, which were frequently repeated. It was an occasion that everyone looked forward to, not just because it was an enjoyable social event full of games, but also because it was an occasion for distributing bonuses and gifts to the employees. The party was always meticulously planned by András a few months in advance. In the year of my fieldwork, the party took place on a hot summer Sunday afternoon. The employees had received detailed instructions from András beforehand to meet at a different location for team-building games.

Before the games started, András had handed out bonuses to his employees, with everyone receiving different amounts along with an appraisal. Kati, a recipient of one of the highest bonuses, told me that the amount they received had increased each year. Besides this occasion, bonuses were also given to employees just before Christmas, although the amounts were minimal compared to the summer bonuses, and they often came in the form of grocery store vouchers, which the employees tended to dislike.

The team-building games continued back in the courtyard of the shop, and there was a quiz as well; András ran five games in total during the afternoon, which all aimed to learn and experience how team members can cooperate, work and understand each other. The games were occasionally interrupted by drinking and smoking breaks, where everyone chatted with each other in an easy manner. The hierarchical relationship between employer and employees disappeared for a while, thus allowing creative play in a relaxed atmosphere. After the games, prizes were awarded. First prize took the form of vouchers for two persons for two nights at a three-star thermal-wellness hotel near Pécs, Hungary's fifth largest city, situated in the south-west of the country. Those who won second prize were given vouchers worth 10,000 HUF (32 EUR) that could be used in a widespread perfumery chain. Those in third place still received tickets for two persons for the local beach and aqua park.

The games and the prize-giving were followed by dinner. Food was ordered from a nearby restaurant and consisted of breaded meat and filled meat with fries and rice. While eating, András raised his favourite toast 'to the holy trinity', as he put it – 'family, friends, homeland'. As the atmo-

sphere became more and more relaxed, employees felt more comfortable approaching András with their work-related problems, revealing their frustrations and tensions. At the heart of their complaints was the excessive overtime they had had to do at that time. This was followed by private conversations in which András only made realistic promises and expressed his gratitude to each employee and his satisfaction with their performance at work. Some of these conversations became very emotional; for instance, Lilla, a single woman in her thirties, ended her conversation with András with tears in her eyes. She told me that András had noticed the positive developments in her work performance and had praised her hard-working character in a way that no one had ever done before. András told me that his employees should thank only themselves for the party because this year the business had done really well, and he owed it to them. This was why he spent 80,000 HUF (257 EUR) on the party alone, had handed out prizes and also announced that everyone would be getting a pay raise of 7600 HUF, or 24 EUR a month. He was also going to be making a slight change to the rules that would allow the employees to arrive at work not 45 minutes before their shifts start but only 30 minutes. However, most importantly, a bit later, at the end of the summer of 2016, he hired two new employees, which definitely eased the tensions among his existing employees.

As shown above, by taking the form and function of a ceremonial exchange, the company's annual party played a crucial role in the complex web of mutual obligations and reciprocal exchanges that dictated and shaped labour relations in the three shops. Giving out gifts and bonuses in this context was not only a symbolic way of acknowledging their labour and redistributing some of the profits; it also helped reproduce labour relations, thus obliging his employees to reciprocate by providing their labour on a continuous basis. As a result, the party can be seen as a ceremony that annually re-establishes the labour contract between the two sides. However, such vertical gift-exchange between employer and employee always implies hierarchy and inequality (Yan 2012: 276), and the party, in this case, was also a means for András to re-enact his status and power in his relations with his employees. In the following section, I show how András exercised control over the shops and ensured that his employees fulfilled their obligations to his business.

## **Disciplining and Controlling Employees in the Shops**

András required highly disciplined work from all his employees. In order to achieve this, he regularly visited the shops in person to check on his employees and also installed surveillance cameras. He was keen on following

closely the performance of his employees and also the daily cash flow in his shops, which he required all his shop assistants to inform him about at the end of the day.

Lateness or delays in opening the shops were taken seriously, being sanctioned by salary reductions, as Andrea explained in her narrative:

Last year, I was supposed to do a morning shift and open the shop, but unfortunately I overslept. This occurred to me only once, so I opened the shop 45 minutes later, at 6:45. I immediately called András to admit it. It was better to tell him because he could see it through the camera anyway, so I decided to be honest about it. András's voice was very cold on the phone, and he only said that I would have to face the consequences when he was back from holiday. However, when András came back from his holiday, mine was just starting, and I travelled to Greece for a week, so we could not meet or talk. I had no clue what the consequences could be and why he did not want to talk about it over the phone. I was nervous about this phone call and about its possible consequences; for an entire week, I could not relax at all. I was chatting on Facebook with Erika all the time, asking her whether she had heard anything about it. When I returned, he invited me into his office and told me that he could not just let me go with a warning but had to deduct 10,000 HUF (33 EUR) from my salary. By that time I was so anxious and afraid of being sacked that I actually felt relieved when I heard this. But then later I realized that 10,000 HUF is quite a lot of money for 45 minutes when I saw that he could not have made such turnover between 6 and 6:45.

These individual financial punishments were very efficient, and delays in opening occurred very seldom. The reason behind it was simple: such a sum was a big chunk of the employee's salary.

Besides the disciplinary measures for lateness and monitoring employees through surveillance systems, the work of serving customers allowed András to use 'secret shoppers' to monitor the extent to which his employees were abiding by the law, a technique also used by the tax authorities. The Hungarian law on curbing 'underage smoking' severely punished those tobacco shops and their owners who sold tobacco products, alcohol or lottery tickets to underage customers. The law not only prohibited shops from selling these products to those underage; it also stipulated that under-eighteens had to stay out of such shops, which the authorities monitored regularly by using undercover customers. In cases of infringement, shops were not allowed to sell tobacco products for thirty days and had to pay a fine, followed by harsher penalties for repeat offences. In order to avoid all these penalties, employees were obliged to ask every customer their age and check their identity cards if necessary.

András told me he had never had such a penalty, and he implied consequences that were not entirely clear cut but nevertheless ominous for an employee who did not follow the rules. Employees were certainly scared of

not following the rules, as one of the shop managers, Anita, expressed in her account of an official check:

I think I became older by ten years during that check, particularly when the controllers revealed themselves. They sent a ‘secret shopper’ – a young man – into the shop. He looked young, but not that young. He could have been more than 18. Anyway, I asked him whether he was underage and he said yes, then left the shop and two controllers came in to make an official report. At that moment, I realized that this one second could have changed my entire life. If I had not asked this customer his age, I would have been indebted to András for many, many years.

In effect, by not being entirely clear about the consequences, András had created an effective tool with which to discipline his employees. He himself also used secret customers to exercise control over his employees, as the following account will show.

Linda was not satisfied with her colleague Anita (introduced above) as a shop manager. She felt strongly that Anita was not the right person for this position and was not capable of fulfilling the duties of a shop manager. In fact, Anita was something of an exception in András’s workforce. For a start, she was the only one who had a university degree, and in Linda’s eyes taking this job represented a fall in status for her; unlike the others, she could not imagine Anita ‘retiring from this job’. Linda said that ‘she carried out her duties to the letter, but she was never keen on doing any extra tasks for the company’. Linda, self-confident about her own abilities and competence, decided to talk to András about her reservations regarding Anita and to recommend herself instead for the position of shop manager. András listened to her carefully, but a few days after their meeting informed Linda that she had sold a cigarette to an underage customer who he himself had sent into the shop and that she should therefore not expect any changes regarding the shop manager position. Also, for questioning her boss’s competence in selecting employees for certain positions, as well as for failing in the internal check, Linda received a warning, and 40% of her salary was deducted.

Despite all these disciplinary techniques, all the employees agreed that András was a good boss. All the employees had been declared officially, and they pointed out that he always paid salaries and made other payments accurately and on time. They felt that this sort of ‘paying morality’ was very rare compared to their previous job experiences, where delays in payments (or even no payments at all) were frequent. András was fully aware of these rogue practices, and therefore, when he was doing job interviews, he always emphasized to applicants that though he could not offer a good salary but assured applicants that they would all be declared and that their salaries would be paid on time. Also based on their previous work experience, em-

ployees highlighted his 'gentlemanly character', meaning that they were not exposed to any harassment or abuse. They described András as a strict but friendly boss who always managed his employees with civility and dignity.

In the last section, I unfold the characteristics of this type of service work and employees' work experiences. I also examine how being given autonomy and a degree of control over the shops they worked in was at once a source of freedom and self-fulfilment for employees but also made them work harder.

## **Controlling the Shops via Employees**

Employees experienced work in the tobacco shops as a very solitary but also a very social job at the same time. It was solitary because they had to work alone, yet social because they had to deal with customers. Sociality is an inherent feature of service work, as Robin Leidner pointed out: 'service workers and their customers or clients must negotiate interactions in which elements of manipulation, ritual and genuine social exchange are subtly mixed' (1993: 2). As I show below, the shops' size and location added a further layer to this inherent characteristic and helped employees to create durable social relationships with their customers.

When I started working in one of the tobacco shops as part of my field-work, one of the first things I realized was that selling and giving out the tobacco products the customers asked for was much harder than I expected. Other shop assistants had come to learn off by heart what regular customers consumed and had a huge mental database of not just their customers' preferred brands but their spouses or family members too. They would remember when a customer switched brands, how long a tobacco product would last for a customer, and what brand to recommend if the shop had run out of a customer's usual tobacco product. Ultimately, shop assistants were very proud of their broad knowledge of their customers' consumption habits and patterns. Extensive information-sharing and various informal economic arrangements and exchanges also took place in the tobacco shops, shaping employees' work experiences and nurturing their social relationships with their customers.

Nevertheless, before falling into the trap of giving an over-romantic picture of the sociality of these tobacco shops, their location and its effect on the working environment of the employees must inform any account of working there. As is often the case in economically deprived areas, populated mainly by unemployed, low-wage workers or impoverished pensioners, the tobacco shops often dealt with customers with an addiction, sometimes a heavy addiction. Customers were not allowed to drink inside

the shops, but they could bet on sports and played various lottery games that were often rather demanding for the employees, particularly when customers blamed them for losing a game and when they were exposed to their anger or surly speech.

On one occasion, some customers had already arrived by the shop's opening time of 6:00 AM to play the cheapest scratch cards (that is, 200 HUF or 0.65 EUR). On another occasion, a customer came in for the same reason around fifteen minutes before the shop closed, buying one scratch card after another. I watched him compulsively scratch fifteen or sixteen cards in a row before losing count. The only thing that stopped him buying another one was the closing time. When I asked Andrea how she felt about watching people scratch so desperately, she said she felt nothing; she was absolutely indifferent to it – it was none of her business how people spent their money. In this regard, dealing with addicted gamblers required emotional distancing, a sort of emotional labour (Hochschild 2003 [1983]) on the part of the shop employees. Emotional distancing was also made easier by the fact that scratch-card sales provided the employees with a direct material reward. As already noted, they received 2000 HUF (7 EUR) extra salary if they sold 576 scratch-card tickets every week, therefore they had a common interest with their boss in selling as many as possible.

Beyond the attraction of such material incentives, employees were also motivated to increase their work performance for 'intrinsic rewards' that were strongly related to acquiring autonomy and therefore freedom in the shop. Here I follow Pierre Bourdieu, who drew a distinction between intrinsic and external profit and pointed out that by allowing workers a degree of control over their work and thus permitting them to pursue a symbolic 'intrinsic' profit, managers deflected them from wage demands ('external profit'). As he writes: 'It is on this principle that modern management theory, while taking care to keep control of the instruments of profit, leaves workers the freedom to organize their own work, this helping to increase their well-being but also displace their interest from the external profit of labour (the wage) to the intrinsic profit' (Bourdieu 2000 [1997]: 204–5). Michael Burawoy (1979) made a very similar point when he wrote about work as a game in his early ethnographic research on an industrial plant in south Chicago. He argued that the piece-rate system at the plant created the illusion of labour as a game, with workers competing with each other or 'making out' to surpass their expected output, resulting in job satisfaction and symbolic rewards that made him and his colleagues work so hard.

In the same vein, I postulate that acquiring authority and a degree of control over the shops not only contributed to the employees' well-being and helped them feel proud of their work; it also made them work harder by having them internalize their boss's economic interests. For instance, when

Kati had taken a day off one Sunday, she had said she could not stop fretting about a purchase order that needed to be placed with the central supplier on the Monday morning. The colleague whose job this was had taken the Sunday off sick, so András was substituting for her, but Kati did not trust him to put the order together correctly due to his lack of knowledge of the customers' consumption patterns and the computer system. Thus, instead of enjoying her day off, she cut a planned family event short and went to the shop in the evening to make sure that the purchase order for the following week had been properly prepared. Kati felt that the business depended on her performance to make a profit and remain sustainable. She felt that her job was at stake, even though that was not the case. One could say that Kati had obvious material reasons for working hard – she wanted to keep her job in the long run to avoid economic uncertainty. However, what motivated her on a daily basis were the symbolic rewards or job satisfaction; in other words, the 'intrinsic' profit, in Bourdieu's sense, including enjoying a sense of freedom and sociality by having a degree of control over the shops.

## Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to show how labour relations have been organized, experienced and reproduced in specialized tobacco shops since their emergence in 2013 and how the mutuality of the relationships that emerges in this context informs the moral dimension of work. The nationalization of the tobacco retail trade and the spread of specialized tobacco shops as a result is a hallmark of Fidesz's economic nationalism and its class project to create a national bourgeoisie. By looking at this specific sector and the functioning of these retail shops, I showed the range of challenges, social dilemmas and social conflicts that are inherent in Hungary's neoliberal accumulative state. Going beyond static notions such as 'embeddedness' and 'alienation,' I aimed to grasp the nature of work in the tobacco shops as a set of labour relations and economic transactions between customers, the employer and employees governed by the practices of mutual obligation. Following Carrier (2018), these practices of mutual obligation in the realm of work might be understood as moral obligations or moral economy. The ethnography presented here has shown that work schedules were always a result of negotiations among and between the employer and employees, characterized by a complex web of mutual obligations and reciprocal exchanges.

By exploring the conflictual and contradictory nature of work experiences in the tobacco shops, I argue that the work of serving in these shops was accompanied by sociality and non-commodified exchanges that

largely shaped employees' work experiences and nurtured their social relationships with their customers. Having these work experiences and being able to work alone enabled employees to acquire autonomy and a degree of control over the shops. While this became a source of self-fulfilment, well-being and joy for them, or 'intrinsic profit' in the sense of Bourdieu, these aspects of work also helped them to internalize their boss's material interests and to intensify their own work performance.

**Luca Szücs** is a doctoral student at the Martin Luther University and Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, both in Halle/Saale, Germany. Szücs's project within the Research Group 'Realising Eurasia' focuses on the entanglement of historically formed moral concepts, values and entrepreneurial motivations in small-sized (family) enterprises. For her doctoral project, she carried out twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork in the city of Szeged (Hungary) with an empirical focus on small businesses. Her focus on the daily practices and experiences of both employers and employees in these businesses provides a fresh analytical angle on labour and class relations and ultimately on how the capitalist order is maintained and reproduced in the post-financial crisis era.

## Notes

The ethnographic research for this chapter was conducted as part of the 'Realising Eurasia' (REALEURASIA) Grant Project. I am grateful to Chris Hann and Lale Yalçın-Heckmann for their continuous support and to my colleagues at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology for their comments and theoretical insights on this chapter. Lastly, I am thankful to all my informants in Szeged.

1. One can only open a National Tobacco Shop with a concession granted by the state through a public tender. There was a political scandal when it became public that decisive market players had mobilized their political influence and connections to involve themselves in the law-making process for the tobacco market from its very beginning and that a significant number of licenses had been awarded to known government supporters, their families or associated companies (Laki 2014: 23).
2. The official label 'tobacco shop' does not cover the wide range of products and services provided by these shops, such as newspapers, soft and alcoholic drinks and lottery tickets.
3. My doctoral research took place in the city of Szeged, Hungary's third largest city, with a population of about 160,000. Its location in the south of the country close to the borders with Serbia and Romania on the banks of the river Tisza have helped turn Szeged into an international cultural hub. The majority of its residents belong to the Roman Catholic Church, but there is a significant Protestant minority community, both Calvinist and Lutheran. Small businesses are particularly relevant



for Szeged, where a high number of micro- and small-sized enterprises contribute substantially to the viability of the local economy. The empirical data I gathered consisted of participant observation in various workplaces, qualitative interviews and a questionnaire administered to about forty business owners in various sectors.

4. When someone had a night shift, he or she was not allowed to do a morning shift the next day as the labour law stipulated that everyone had to have eight hours rest between shifts.
5. Before I left the field, the owner increased the monthly net salaries by 7600 HUF (approx. 25 EUR).
6. Between 15 March 2015 and 23 April 2016 there was a ban on Sunday opening in retail sector. The Law (Act CII of 2014) stipulated that shopping malls and stores bigger than 200 square metres had to be closed on Sundays. In this way, tobacco shops were exempted from this regulation although they were only open until 12 AM and it was only allowed for the owner(s) and the family members of the owner to open the shop.

## References

- Adloff, Frank. 2006. 'Beyond Interests and Norms: Toward a Theory of Gift-Giving and Reciprocity in Modern Societies.' *Constellations* 13(3): 407–27.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2000 [1997]. *Pascalian Meditations*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Burawoy, Michael. 1979. *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labour Process under Monopoly Capitalism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Carrier, James G. 1994. 'Alienating Objects: The Emergence of Alienation in Retail Trade.' *Man* 29(2): 358–80.
- . 1995. *Gifts and Commodities: Exchange and Western Capitalism since 1700*. London: Routledge.
- . 2018. 'Moral Economy: What's in a Name?' *Anthropological Theory* 18(1):18–35.
- Gregory, Chris. 1982. *Gifts and Commodities*. London: Academic Press.
- Gudeman, Stephen. 2009. 'Necessity or Contingency: Mutuality and Market', in Chris Hann and Keith Hart (eds), *Market and Society*. New York: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 17–38.
- Hann, Chris. 2018. 'Moral(ity and) Economy: Work, Workfare, and Fairness in Provincial Hungary.' *European Journal of Sociology* 59(2): 225–54.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2003 [1983]. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kjaerulf, Jens. 2015. 'Introduction', in Jens Kjaerulf (ed.), *Flexible Capitalism: Exchange and Ambiguity at Work*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 1–43.
- Laki, Mihály. 2014. 'A trafikpiac átalakulása és átalakítása, esettanulmány.' *Szociológiai Szemle* 25(3): 23–51.
- Leidner, Robin. 1993. *Fast Food, Fast Talk: Service Work and the Routinization of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1954 [1925]. *The Gift*, trans. Ian Cunnison. London: Cohen and West.
- Parry, Jonathan. 1986. 'The Gift, the Indian Gift and the "Indian Gift".' *Man* 21(3): 453–73.

- Scheiring, Gábor. 2020. *The Retreat of Liberal Democracy: Authoritarian Capitalism and the Accumulative State in Hungary*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan e-Book.
- Szikra, Dorottya. 2014. 'Democracy and Welfare in Hard Times: The Social Policy of the Orbán Government in Hungary between 2010 and 2014.' *Journal of European Social Policy* 24: 486–500.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2012. 'The Gift and Gift Economy', in James G. Carrier (ed.), *A Handbook of Economic Anthropology*. Cheltenham-Massachusetts: Edward Edgar Publishing Limited, pp. 275–90.