
No (Wo)Man's Land

The Postsocialist Purgatory of Czech Female Factory Workers

Socialism is a game with zero-sum gains (as forty years convincingly demonstrated). A market economy based on the principles of private ownership is a game with a positive outcome—wins and losses don't cancel each other out. It is about a cumulative process leading toward the victory of all of us.

—VÁCLAV KLAUS (1991d:1)

ACCORDING TO THE METANARRATIVE, the market's triumph was not merely for an elite few; to the contrary, it was a victory in which all Czechs would prevail. Czech female factory workers were, therefore, no exception. Infected with the fervor of the Velvet Revolution, Czech workers dared to imagine a "better world." Forty-five-year-old Lada, who both before and after 1989 worked on the production line in a Czech-owned factory that manufactures cosmetics and perfumes, recalled being filled with revolutionary zeal. Like so many Czechs who rattled their keys as a symbolic protest during the demonstrations against the communist regime in Wenceslas Square during November 1989, Lada shook her keys "like a crazy person." At that time she thought, "It's going to be fabulous. . . . Finally we're going to have it good, we're going to have more money, we're going to be able to travel. . . . Finally those of us at the bottom—because I am a worker—we're going to have it better. Really, I believed . . . that it is going to be more fair toward ordinary" people. The velvet vision of prosperity and more generally of freedom was publicly and personally imagined as a dream "for all." Lada's thirty-nine-year-old coworker, Dáša, described her "sweet" dreams about a postsocialist

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future, echoing those of Lada and those of most Czechs: “I imagined it like this: that they’ll increase my wages, that vacation won’t be such a problem for me, and that I won’t have to count every” crown.

Czech female factory workers did not have lofty expectations. They merely wanted to “earn enough to live decently,” “have a foundation,” and attain a better standard of living. The market metanarrative stipulated, however, that monetary gains would not be instantaneous or painless. As I discussed in chapter 3, penance in the manner of pain and sacrifice would be the price exacted to gain freedom from socialism’s shackles. To invoke yet another of Klaus’s admonitions to the Czech populace, in a March 1990 *Literární noviny* article he cautioned, “The transformation of our economy into an effectively functioning market system is not going to be painless; we’re going to have to change a lot of our habits” (1990e:1). The workers heard policymakers’ demands for “belt-tightening” and readily accepted the specified five- to seven-year delay in financial gratification (Drábek 1991). As Dáša declared, “I knew that it wasn’t going to be immediate.” Lada contended, “They said five years.” According to the market metastory, short-term pains would ultimately translate into long-term gains. For Czech female factory workers, this knowledge made the supposedly short-term financial squeeze palatable. Fifty-one-year-old Jirka recalled understanding from the beginning that it wasn’t “going to be easy.” Like her fellow Czechs, she believed policymakers’ promises of eventual betterment with the qualification that it was not “going to be like the West. We didn’t believe that, but we thought that it would improve so that we would have the capacity to earn at least enough that we could live decently.” Forty-two-year-old Eliška, similarly grappling with the publicly espoused connection between immediate but short-term hardship and eventual but enduring well-being, commented, “I thought that perhaps for a while, like what was said, we would tighten our belts. It would be for a while, but then the standard [of living] would begin to go up.”

After a decade of waiting, however, their convictions had largely collapsed. As Lada expressed with dismay, economic hardship is “still going on today.” Disillusionment set in as initially anticipated finite hardships became endless. As Dáša observed sadly, “I thought that after these ten years that we would truly be somewhere else,” later adding that she had “looked forward to [prosperity], and suddenly you discover that it isn’t in sight.” She described the situation using the Czech idiom *Mazání kolem pusy*, which literally refers to the spreading of

honey all over one's mouth and figuratively means a sweet but false promise.

In this chapter, I illuminate how forty-eight Czech female factory workers draw on the market metanarrative to make sense of their post-socialist plummet. Pushed to the margins in both economic and social terms, they seem to be the losers in the new economic game. Indeed, their postsocialist predicament is not easily reconciled with the forecasted rewards of marketization. However, the hegemony of the market metastory renders it not so easily discarded. As a result, these women engage in an act of interpretive adaptation to fit together their lived experiences and the market metanarrative. Accordingly, they ascribe their postsocialist tribulations to their socialist upbringing. Their future generations, exempted from the experiential burden of the socialist past, will thus reap the rewards of economic reform. Capitalism's promise of a "radiant future" consequently remains unbroken.

Suffering and Struggle

Most of the forty-eight Czech female factory workers I interviewed have spent much if not all of their working lives at the same factory. Obligated to work and granted job security by the socialist state, the majority of these women imagined that their work lives would end where they began, that they would hold the same jobs until their retirement. Now, however, the Czech state no longer guarantees its citizens jobs or ensures enterprise survival. As the market metanarrative asserts, the state's paternalistic rapport with citizens and businesses has come to an end. Since the outset of the economic transition, these workers have struggled to maintain a foothold on an unstable, transformed economic terrain. Despite the many windows of opportunity created in the transition from a command to market economy, Czech female factory workers largely lack the human capital prerequisites—especially education—needed to pass through the windows.

During the early stages of transition, the demand for educational credentials—specifically, a university degree and a knowledge of English, German, and/or French—privileged some women, but not factory workers. Only one of the forty-eight workers in the sample attended university; the remaining forty-seven completed only elementary or most commonly secondary school. Many of these women work-

ers mastered their requisite job skills during on-the-job/on-site training; the remainder trained in secondary school. As part of the curriculum, these women pursued an *učební obor* (conceptually akin to vocational training or an apprenticeship) that involved specializing in a particular field, often over the course of several years. Employment in the same factory where one trained typically followed. Thirty-five-year-old Marie, who works for a pharmaceutical maker, described her four-year *učební obor*:

That first year, we had practice in the laboratory, where we actually learned all about chemistry with test tubes. And then, in the second and third year, we went into production. . . . We had six days of school and then four days of work. And actually, we went straight to production to assist. What was necessary we actually did so that we could go through the factory and the job to get an actual idea of what one does.

Forty-three-year-old Zuzana recalled her start as a sixteen-year-old at Polovodiče, a company that manufactured semiconductors:

I wanted to learn window dressing because I liked to design and to display. . . . Everything with window dressing I liked tremendously. So, my folks enrolled me in a window dressing program, but I didn't get in because they could have paved the street with them [i.e., applicants]. There were far too many. My dad wanted me to go into butchery. I really didn't want to, and so I went to my school-teacher and cried there that I don't want butchery and that I want something else. They again came from Polovodiče [to my school]. They were hiring people, training them for their company as lab technicians. It really appealed to me, so I took it, I trained there. . . . As a lab technician it was half and half—a little chemistry and a little electronics. But in the end, I became an electronics fitter [on the production line]. I was there for about three years, then I got married at eighteen or nineteen and in two years I went on maternity leave.

Marie's and Zuzana's trajectories were typical of many Czechs who, under state socialism, were routed into an *učební obor* during their sec-

ondary school years and then were employed by the same enterprise in which they had trained. However, this seemingly secure course under state socialism left many Czechs, especially women, in an insecure economic position post-1989. The unemployment rate and risk for individuals with a secondary or lower level of educational attainment has been significantly greater than for those with a postsecondary education.¹ Moreover, without postsecondary schooling, Czechs such as Marie and Zuzana never acquired English or other international business language skills; instead, they learned Russian. These women greatly lamented this language deficiency as a piece of the past ill suited to the present.

A lack of human capital unquestionably renders many opportunities unavailable to Czech female factory workers. Where opportunities have presented themselves, these women workers generally identified the potential risks as too great. Although a new job carries the possibility of success in the new market economy, these women found that the likelihood of failure poses too much risk. Their experienced economic and social marginality in the new market economy has fueled an acute sense of vulnerability.

The “Hunt for Money”: Poor People, Beggars, and Gypsies

In the move toward the market, Czech female factory workers' economic grip has weakened considerably. Their real earnings have shrunk relative to their pre-1989 real earnings. As Czech sociologist Jiří Večerník explains, only those in the top income strata have benefited from the opportunities created by “private business, foreign capital, new management requirements, and the financial market”; meanwhile, those in the middle income range “have in no way profited from the transformation” (1996:65). Most of the female factory workers I inter-

1. For example, in the fourth quarter of 1993, the unemployment rates of women by level of educational attainment were 7.8 percent primary, 5.4 percent trade school, 4.2 percent secondary (vocational), 3.8 percent secondary (general), and 1.3 percent university (Czech Statistical Office 1994). In the fourth quarter of 1998, they were 16.7 percent compulsory school (without further education), 9.7 percent secondary (vocational), 8.7 percent secondary (general), and 3.3 percent university (Czech Statistical Office 2000a).

viewed earned less than the Czech median wage in 2000. As table 4 reveals, a mere six earned more than the 2000 average gross monthly wage of 13,490 crowns.

Because inflation has outpaced their wage growth, these workers have struggled to stay financially afloat in the new market economy. In their recollections of the socialist past, the factory workers summoned up impressions of relative economic equality among the Czechoslovak citizenry. In Jirka's memory, "No one had it much better. . . . The differences were not so great. Rich people existed. They were called the top ten thousand, but these were people with whom one did not compare oneself. . . . They were a completely separate category of people." Daša contended, "Everyone got the same." The factory workers recalled few if any extras or luxuries for the average person under state socialism. Nonetheless, in their estimations, everyone had "enough" income. These claims of minimal income inequality in socialist Czechoslovakia are not false memories. In a 1991 World Bank report, Alan Gelb and Cheryl Gray cited the relatively equal income distribution as "perhaps the major accomplishment of the socialist systems of Central and Eastern Europe" (56). Socialist Czechoslovakia's Gini coefficient of 20.7 during the 1970s and 1980s was among the lowest of the socialist economies (e.g., Hungary = 24.4, Poland = 24.3) and was lower than the coefficients found in most "middle-income developing countries" (e.g., United States = 32.6) (Gelb and Gray 1991:53; see also Milanovic 1990).²

These women workers claimed that since 1989, however, they have barely subsisted from paycheck to paycheck. Jirka, like most of the other female factory workers, bemoaned her deteriorating financial circumstances:

I can't afford a vacation, which before I could afford. Before we could afford to buy a new car. Now it is absolutely, simply not possible any longer. . . . What I earn is enough for us, for the family's subsistence and for the necessary expenses [i.e., electric, gas, phone] . . . and it's enough so that the children can study, but in no way for anything else.

2. The Gini coefficient is the most common measure of income inequality. Its value ranges between 0 (total equality) and 100 (all income appropriated by one recipient).

Several workers described their lives as having become a “*honba za peněžma*” (hunt for money). As Marie emphatically stated, “When a person looks back, when one earned two thousand [crowns], that was money! When I brought in twelve hundred, that was a lot of money. Now, we earn five times as much and it isn’t enough.” Meanwhile, five of forty-three-year-old Štepanka’s paper factory coworkers nodded in agreement as she remarked, “I think we’re always in the red, but we’re alive.” In a focus group in a factory that produces baked goods and pastries, thirty-six-year-old Agáta and fifty-three-year-old Lota debated the correlation between wages and inflation:

Agáta: The fact is, wages increased once over, but everything’s gotten twice as expensive.

Lota: Yeah, if only two times!

Agáta: Fine, I say two times, three times. So you really are, in fact, still in the same situation. Even when you have more, everything still costs more.

The factory workers see the influx of consumer goods as one of the few positive and tangible aspects of the economic transition. Indeed, both the availability and accessibility of goods have dramatically improved. They no longer wait in long lines in hopes of purchasing items. However, now they spend their shopping time going from store

TABLE 4. Gross Monthly Income in Czech Crowns, 2000 (in percentages)

Income Interval	Czech Female	
	Factory Workers ^a	Total Population
≤ 5,000 Kč	2.27 (1)	0.56
≤ 8,000 Kč	40.90 (17)	9.74
≤ 12,000 Kč	86.35 (20)	40.67
≤ 16,000 Kč	100.00 (6)	69.81
≤ 20,000 Kč		84.59
≤ 25,000 Kč		92.28

Source: Czech Statistical Office 2001.

Note: Calculations based on the wages of individuals employed seventeen hundred or more hours annually to eliminate the influence of part-time work and/or long-term illness on wage estimations. Gross wages do not constitute take-home pay, as a number of deductions are made from this total, including health insurance and social security. Net wages range between 70 and 80 percent of gross wages.

^a44 of 48 reported.

to store in an exhausting effort to make the most of their limited monetary resources. As thirty-six-year-old Máša asserted, “The stores are full of everything that we would like, but we can’t buy it.” Forty-five-year-old Marta added, “If you want to buy something, you have to scrimp and save.” The rising cost of goods without a concomitant rise in real wages further limits factory workers’ ability to purchase items. The plethora of new goods is a postsocialist phenomenon in which female factory workers share little.³ In the new market economy, Czech female factory workers remain primarily producers rather than consumers.

The “fall to the bottom” of the emerging socioeconomic hierarchy may be the most agonizing aspect of Czech female factory workers’ transition experiences. In the postsocialist Czech Republic, individuals no longer appear economically indistinguishable; instead, the differences have become increasingly apparent. Dáša characterized the country’s current economic reality as a dichotomy between the “positively rich” and the “downright poor,” with nothing in between. Jirka’s statement that “we’ve discovered that we are the poorest group . . . when we always thought we belonged to some middle group” epitomizes the shock of identity reconstruction for these women. As class difference replaces economic sameness, they are redefined as “the poor.”

The state has reinforced and continues to reinforce this identity in its efforts to eliminate universal social benefits, especially the child benefit, in favor of a means-tested system in accordance with its neoliberal agenda.⁴ In 1995, the Czech government legislatively abolished the universal distribution of the child benefit, formerly provided to all families with dependent children.⁵ Ironically, the income caps set in 1995 for the child benefit enabled 95 percent of Czech families to remain eligible. In 1997, subsequent modifications left 75 percent of Czech families eligible. As Leah Seppanen Anderson contends based on her extensive study of the devel-

3. For other examples of women’s celebrated consumer choice coupled with a realization of resource constraints on consumption in the postsocialist world, see Kennedy 2002; Petkova and Griffin 1998.

4. For an elaborate discussion of the encounter of the welfare state in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe with a neoliberal mandate (of global as well as local impetuses), see Haney 2002; for an abridged version, see Haney 1999.

5. In the Czech Republic, children are considered dependents until the age of eighteen, when they complete secondary schooling, unless they continue their education at the university level, in which case children may remain dependents until age twenty-six.

opment of the Czech welfare state, the 1997 revision “sounded a fundamentally different rhetoric concerning the state and its responsibilities to families and paved the way for future decreases in child allowance expenditures, especially as household income becomes more differentiated” (2002:8). Despite the great inclusivity of the child benefit, as of 1999–2000, not all eligible Czech families were receiving it. Indeed, several of the female managers I interviewed opted not to apply for it, deeming this benefit negligible to their family income. For factory workers, who earn far less, the child benefit is a valued contribution, however. Jirka, a divorced mother with one child and a gross monthly salary between 8,000 and 11,999 crowns, received a child benefit amounting to 600 crowns each month in 2000. Although Jirka deemed this amount “nothing much,” it equaled between 5 and 9 percent of her take-home pay.

While the child benefit is not insubstantial for Czech female factory workers, procuring it from the state is no easy feat in the postsocialist era. Workers recalled the simplicity under state socialism of filling out one form that enabled them to “automatically” receive the monthly child benefit. Minimal direct contact between citizens and state welfare workers occurred. Since 1995, however, citizens typically must reapply for the benefit at a welfare office every three months.⁶ There, state welfare workers determine eligibility and allocation based on family income. Thus, these female factory workers must repeatedly and directly confront state welfare workers with the need for state assistance. While Klausian rhetoric attempts to instill a sense of oneness between Czechs and the state with public statements such as “We made the Velvet Revolution and the state became our state” (1994a:107), these female workers struggle to move beyond the state/society opposition of the socialist past, continuing to construe this antagonistic rapport with the state as still extant in some ways. Their visits to the welfare office serve as a constant, uncomfortable reminder of who they are in the new market economy—“poor,” “beggars,” “like gypsies.” Dáša described feeling like “an idiot,” “a beggar,” and “a swine running around the [welfare] offices.” Intrinsicly at stake here is not what these women workers can get from the state but rather how they must go about obtaining it. Going to the welfare office means going to “beg,” said forty-seven-year-old Běta.

6. If the applicant's income does not fluctuate, reapplication may only be required once a year.

These workers manifest a marked sense of shame that is likely rooted in their socialist past. As a recent volume on postsocialist poverty and inequality explains, “Poverty [under state socialism] was largely regarded as a result of individual failing or deviance, since the state provided guaranteed employment for the able-bodied and assistance to those who were otherwise unable to work” (World Bank 2002:3). However, the market metanarrative’s explicit condemnation of dependence very likely also encourages this sensibility. These women workers are well aware of the market metanarrative’s exhortations of personal responsibility, and they do not reject the notion. To the contrary, most of the women I interviewed readily accept this idea in theory, although the practicalities of economic transition override its achievability. As fifty-year-old Berta elucidated, “If I earned a decent wage, what would I need from the state? If I was capable of taking care of myself and my family, then the state wouldn’t have to give me a single crown.” One of her coworkers chimed in, “I have the exact same opinion.” The implication in their comments is that if they earned enough to “live decently,” then they would no longer require support from the state. Thirty-three-year-old *Líza*, divorced with two daughters, declared, “It would be easier if a person didn’t have to go [to the welfare office] and would be able to manage normally from earnings, but that doesn’t happen. It doesn’t happen because when a person pays everything to bills—it’s seven to eight thousand just in bills, and what remains isn’t enough to live on.” Indeed, *Líza*’s monthly take-home earnings total between 6,400 and 9,599 crowns, a sum on which it is virtually impossible to make ends meet.

The Disquiet of Insecurity

Although economically and socially marginalized in the new market economy, the majority of these forty-eight women workers held the same jobs in the same factories from before 1990 through 2000. The fact that many of transition’s greatest dramas have played out in the effort to overhaul manufacturing’s outdated, inefficient, and uncompetitive infrastructure makes this employment continuity more remarkable. Processes of expansion and contraction in manufacturing remain ongoing. New foreign and local companies stake their turf, while others—

predominantly local enterprises—collapse in entirety or fracture into smaller corporate bits. The companies employing these forty-eight women are no exception to these processes. In one company, restructuring resulted in the layoff of more than 50 percent of the workforce. In another, workers recalled “talk” of the company’s production operations moving to Hungary, where the labor was cheaper, and of their factory’s conversion to a more profitable warehouse. In yet another factory, workers recollected anxious periods during the previous decade when the company had no orders for its goods. However, contraction, fracturing, and collapse have to date occurred far more in the heavy industries (e.g., steel) rather than in the light manufacturing sector (e.g., food, textiles). Such crises are consequently more dire for male than female workers as a result of male/female segregation along a heavy-light axis in manufacturing. This segregation may explain some of the continuity in the postsocialist employment history of the workers I interviewed.

Despite having little experience with unemployment, these women fretted tremendously about its possibility. Indeed, they talked most about their loss of *socialní jistota* (security). During the socialist era, *socialní jistota* represented a range of assurances from the state, including job security, free dental/health care, housing for all, free education, child care, and so on; it now refers mainly to job security. For these workers, the insecurity of the market breeds psychological stress. In forty-year-old Lenka’s estimation, she and her colleagues were “calmer” in the past—unafraid. Fifty-four-year-old Elsa and several other workers used the word “afraid” to describe their contemporary sensibility. The reason for this fear, she explains, is that “every moment you hear, you read . . . they are laying people off here, they are laying people off there, there it went bankrupt.” According to forty-four-year-old Milada, financial fears have supplanted political ones and exert “far greater pressure.” Despite individual good fortune, these women have a strong sense that fortune is fickle. In the new market economy, enterprise survival is now dictated by the demands of global and local markets rather than by the Communist Party, a situation the workers find far less predictable. In these uncontrolled circumstances, what is good can suddenly become quite bad.

Although most of the women interviewed have avoided unemployment, many of their husbands have not. For example, Dáša’s husband

was laid off twice after 1989 when his employers went bankrupt. The firm where Eliška's husband worked also went bankrupt. He was not paid for his final month of work, and he was unemployed for two more months before he found another job. Eliška found her stint as the family's sole wage earner "awful," a time she "wouldn't wish on anyone." Her mother and grandmother helped to pay her family's bills, and Eliška does not know how else she would have managed. For many of these women workers, unemployment is not necessarily an individual experience but rather a familial one.

These women seem to find little reassurance in either their own or their husbands' reemployment following a job loss. Instead, the consciousness of their insecurity seems intensified, with frequent references to coping and survival strategies. For example, the trauma of a 1990 job loss exacted a personal toll from Milada: "Now when I'm working somewhere, I can no longer establish any relationships because it stays in a person's consciousness that [a firm] can go bankrupt at any time." Zuzana strived for flawlessness in her work performance "so that they don't let me go, I work more and better . . . so that they think about me, that I don't make mistakes. I have to prove myself and I have to concentrate more. I can't chat with friends."

Faced with the volatility of capitalism, these women workers repeatedly voiced a wistful nostalgia for the calming predictability of their socialist past. Alison Stenning cites a "productivist ideology" in socialist states into which workers were "inculcated" via "the material relations of workplaces, communities and states . . . the education system, the media, and slogans on buildings and banners" (2005a:240). This ideology encouraged workers "to believe not only in the centrality of work, but their centrality within these regimes" (240). For workers under state socialism, work heavily defined not only their daily lives but also their identities. In her work on the emergence of nostalgia (termed *ostalgie*) in eastern Germany, Daphne Berdahl writes, "In a society where productive labor was a key aspect of state ideology and where the workplace was a central site for social life, the high incidence of unemployment throughout eastern Germany has profoundly undermined people's sense of self and identity" (1999:199). For Czech female factory workers, similar connections between work and identity prevailed under state socialism. This entanglement is embedded in Máša's remark that without jobs, "we aren't going to have anything." In Máša's interpretation, to lose a job is to lose everything.

Too Young, Too Old: The Economic Impasse of the Working Mother

All Czechs feel the loss of *socialní jistota*. However, women's gender role as mothers in some ways renders this loss more acute for women than for men as motherhood has become grounds for their exclusion. In the transition from socialism to capitalism, the underlying cultural logic remains unchanged. Accordingly, a woman's "natural" role as a mother limits her capacities as a worker. Czechs construe womanhood and motherhood as inexorably linked, as biologically given (Čermáková et al. 2000). Employment merely qualifies this identity (i.e., as working mothers). While motherhood is a constraint for female workers, male workers are culturally unmarked by fatherhood. Men are workers; women are working mothers. The workers interviewed locate the origins of this classificatory schema in the First Republic (1918–38), when the gendered division of public and private realms was both an ideological and practical reality. Czechoslovakia's post-World War II labor shortage disrupted this gendered divide, compelling much of the female populace to enter the labor force (Scott 1978).

Although the Czechoslovak Communist Party, which came to power shortly after World War II, professed an ideology of gender equality, it never challenged inequities in parenting between men and women. Instead, the party sought only to help women reconcile their productive and reproductive demands through a multitude of social policies (e.g., maternity leave, early retirement). Disproportionately burdened with reproductive responsibilities, women's workplace contributions under socialism were inferior to the productive inputs or outputs of male workers. Such factors undoubtedly contributed to occupational segregation and stratification as well as to wage differentials along gender lines. However, under socialism, *socialní jistota* enabled women to join the workforce, albeit with limited occupational access and ascent. In the new market economy, this gendered facilitation of access to employment is gone.

Although few of the women interviewed had personal experience with losing a job, they perceived that women who lost jobs had more of a challenge finding new employment than did men. The factory workers regard women as caught in an absurd impasse in which they are labeled by employers as either too young or too old and therefore undesirable. This topic arose in every focus group, often provoking impas-

sioned discussion and ultimate consensus about the toll of mothering. In one focus group, several workers proclaimed virtually in chorus,

Marta: [Employers] look at whether you have small children. . . .

Léna: That happened to me.

Lada: [Mothers] are completely written off.

Máša: If there are small children, no one wants to hire them [i.e., mothers] for a job. We're always going to be home with them sick, with the children. They [i.e., employers] don't want it. We all know it.

Members of the same group later added,

Máša: After fifty, they also no longer want you. You're going to be sick lots and you'll do little.

Marta: It's difficult. The don't want young ones to marry, to have children. . . .

Lada: It's the same for older women in turn.

According to these workers, employers see women age thirty-five or younger as mothers or potential mothers whose childbearing and child-rearing demands make them productively weaker than older and/or male workers. In addition, employers construe women forty-five or older as soon-to-be retirees (since women are eligible to retire earlier than men) whose potential productivity is outstripped by that of younger and/or male workers. While the Czech government is in the process of raising the ages of eligibility for retirement from mid-fifties to late fifties and early sixties, women will still be able to retire younger than men.⁷ The workers in this study made little mention of these changes, however, and their comments suggest that these modifications matter little. As forty-eight-year-old Františka noted, "No one here wants a woman at this age—around fifty." To a woman even nearing fifty, every employer's response, in Olivie's words, is, "You, no." Lota

7. Prior to 1996, women with children were eligible for retirement at age fifty-six if they had one child; fifty-five if they had two children; fifty-four if they had three or four children; and fifty-three if they had five or more children. Men were eligible to retire at age sixty-one. Since 1996, these ages of eligibility have been increased annually by four months for women and two months for men. The ages will stabilize in 2007 at between fifty-seven and sixty-one for women and sixty-two for men.

claimed that employers will not even talk to women over forty-five. Her coworker, forty-six-year-old Růžena, views herself as “unwanted” by employers despite the fact that she is not eligible for retirement for eight years.

While gender-based discrimination is illegal in the Czech Republic, employers deploy falsehoods such as “The position is filled” or “We don’t need you” to avoid hiring women younger than thirty-five or older than forty-five. Under socialism, the state guaranteed employment for its citizenry, and all able citizens were obliged to work. Although employers could still limit women’s entry, this form of *socialní jistota* to some extent weakened employers’ capacity to control women’s labor force activity. With these mandates no longer in place, employers have considerably more power to dictate who is in and who is out. Consequently, many of these Czech women workers see themselves as hanging onto jobs acquired before 1989, fearful that if they lose or relinquish them, they will be unable to find other employment.

Exploitation and (Little) Protection

In many instances, these women workers have accepted manipulative and/or exploitative employer actions because of the real as well as perceived precariousness of their position as workers and as women workers. These actions include mandatory overtime, forced leave with docking of wages, forbidden unionization, and wage discrimination. Except for wage discrimination, all of these practices have arisen since 1989. Although not contractually required to work overtime at the behest of their employers, many of these women fear that refusal will result in the loss of their jobs. According to Eliška, who works in a factory manufacturing pharmaceutical drugs, “The way it looks with the job, you can’t say that you’re not going to do it. It can’t be done because they’ll say to you ‘So, good-bye.’” Brewery worker Františka complained,

The foreman come to us with dread to say “Ladies, you stay here with me tonight” or “Get ready, tomorrow you’re going to stay longer” because people [i.e., workers] have had enough already. But again, they are afraid for their jobs. He [i.e., the foreman] could say, “Run to complain and you can take your identity card and go if you don’t like it.”

Mandatory overtime poses a gender-specific set of complications for mothers with children waiting at home. In another factory, workers detailed how, during a production slowdown, the company forced them to take a leave and docked their wages by 40 percent. In mid-2000, these workers were anticipating another forced leave with wage docking. For these women, already in an economically precarious position, these intermittent pay cuts constitute a source of anxiety and anger that is largely directed at an employer, whom they view as insensitive to their survival. In addition to the economic costs to workers, these acts exact other tolls. If a worker has available vacation days, for example, then these mandatory leave days replace vacation time.

Workers from two other factories described being either discouraged or explicitly forbidden from unionizing. According to Jirka, who works in a factory that makes telecommunications products, management is “strongly against unions. It is the bogeyman to them, and they will not allow it in their firm. . . . It is our [i.e., workers’] choice, but our choice rests on whether I want to work at this firm.” In Marie’s factory, all of the workers were unionized prior to 1989; since then, however, the firm has been privatized, and she contends that the new owner “pressures” workers not to join the union, suggesting that membership will jeopardize their jobs.

Unlike mandatory overtime, forced leave with wage docking, or forbidden unionization, wage discrimination is a remnant of the socialist past carried over to the capitalist present. It is, furthermore, inherently gendered in its origins and enactment. In the postsocialist period, international actors such as the International Labour Organization, the United Nations, and the European Union have openly and actively criticized this wage discrimination. Nevertheless, the Czech Republic retains a 30 percent average wage differential between working men and women. Czech female factory workers subsequently retrieve and reiterate this discourse’s “social fact.” According to Máša, “Women here are always discriminated against. . . . If you take a male lawyer and a female lawyer, the man probably has a salary of about 30 percent more. They do the same work, have the same university education, and she probably had better grades, and he earns more. This is everywhere here.” Yet Czech female factory workers tolerate wage discrimination because they see no individual or institutional recourse to it or to the other maltreatments meted out by employers. In their inability to envision any resort, the market metanarrative’s explicit declaration of no alternative to the

market resounds. To resist individually would virtually ensure the loss of one's job; to resist collectively does not enter into the realm of imagined viabilities because transition substantially destabilized labor's traditional advocate: unions.

The workers interviewed retain vivid memories of the *Revoluční odborové hnutí* (ROH), the only labor union that existed under socialism. In both focus groups and interviews, workers recalled the ROH's diverse offerings, including food supplements, recreational/travel discounts, holiday gifts for women and children, factory libraries, and monetary subsidies for children's summer camp attendance. After 1989, the ROH fractured into separate unions by trade, and many of these functions disappeared. Membership is no longer mandatory, and many workers have abandoned the unions. The continued provision of summer camp subsidies for children motivates only a few to stay.

For these women workers, unions appear to have lost much of their meaning since 1989. Marie contended that unions do not fulfill their functions but was vague in explaining what these functions are other than to say that the union should help workers with "problems." Thirty-four-year-old Alexandra characterized unions as being "for nothing." Lota, like many other women, chose to leave her union because "nothing happens there." Lenka exasperatedly asked her coworkers, "What are these unions for? Tell me! What have they possibly done for you beyond you paying monthly dues?" Milada and Marcela answered that unions do help, citing the union's response to massive layoffs five years earlier, when the organization helped laid-off workers find other employment. Františka questioned whether her coworkers thought that the union would still do so, to which Marcela replied, "I don't know." Františka then reminded her coworkers of layoffs two years earlier: "I didn't hear that the union would stand behind a single person." In an effort to code the union's inaction not as failure but rather as sacrifice, Lenka drew on one of the market metanarrative's behavioral imperatives—self-reliance: "I don't believe in it, that someone will stand behind me. I believe in myself, that that which a person doesn't arrange, doesn't do, he won't have. . . . You have to rely on yourself." In Milada's view, unions are weak players in an economic game in which the power is grossly skewed in employers' favor:

People don't join . . . because everyone is afraid. . . . Take, for example, an employee having problems with his supervisor, and it per-

haps didn't involve just the supervisor but involved something bigger. So he'd go to the union and say, "Look, there's this and that problem." The union would have then to deal with the supervisor. Then the supervisor would find the employee, and he'd fire him. If an employee is going to complain, some loophole will then be found so that they can let him go.

In the postsocialist world, much like these workers, postsocialist unions occupy a purgatorial place, neither here nor there. Emptied of most socialist objectives, unions throughout the region are struggling to resituate in a new economic climate. Anna Pollert identifies an array of organizational complicating factors particular to the postsocialist region, including inexperience in "dealing with the capitalist employment relationship and its increasingly sophisticated management techniques"; "a communist workplace tradition of atomization and individualism"; and "an enterprise bargaining system in which unions and managers were partners." Unions' equally formidable ideological challenges involve the "relegitimation of trade unions as organs of genuine worker-interest representation rather than Communist Party conveyor belts" as well as "carving a space between opposing the old system and ambiguously both supporting and opposing the restored market economy" (2001:14). Indeed, as David Ost points out, until very recently, local union activists in the postsocialist nations believed that the primary role of unions was to "promote marketization," which would "help 'the working class as a whole'" (2002:37). An additional complication particular to the Czech case is workers' history of gains "largely delivered by the enlightened self-interest of governments" rather than by union action against capital (Pollert 2001:17).

A Postsocialist Purgatory

The future definitely has to be better.

—JIRKA

In Czech female factory workers' original reading of the market meta-narrative, they were among its protagonists. Its all-inclusive framing meant that they, like all Czechs, would share in the spoils of the market's victory. They understood that gratification would not be instantaneous.

However, in the decade since this metanarrative's original articulation, these women have abandoned their anticipations. Economic vulnerability, dependence, discrimination, and exploitation mark their day-to-day experiences in the postsocialist era. Their problems are not easily reconciled with the forecasted rewards of marketization. However, the fortitude of the market metanarrative and perhaps even more importantly the lack of an alternative render it not easily discarded. As a result, the workers adjust the market metanarrative to reconcile the happenings of their lives with it, an act that enables them to find comfort in circumstances over which they have little control.

In their postsocialist plunge down an expanding socioeconomic ladder, the workers I interviewed have become acutely conscious of their identity as "women workers" and verbally rail against the state and employers. Socioeconomically, they are the new poor, a sensibility reinforced by their rapport with the state. Although the feminization of light manufacturing may have moderated their risk of job loss as the sector underwent restructuring, the advantages accrued by women workers in the transition end here. Their gender—and more specifically, their gender role as mothers—is not a new liability, but it has become greater in the new market economy. Under socialism, employment was mandatory for all citizens, irrespective of gender. Now, under capitalism, employment is no longer obligatory or guaranteed and therefore holds the prospect of the exclusion of some, with women among the likely candidates. Motherhood intensifies an already precarious postsocialist class position as workers, yielding a double jeopardy.

In the early years of marketization, Czech women workers construed economic transition's hardships as delimited within their lifetimes. In other words, they would receive capitalism's rewards in the long term, but still in the course of their lives. As Lota readily acknowledged, policymakers "told us" and "we believed it": Czechoslovakia's "ordinary people" would live a "better life." By 2000, after a decadelong wait and a two-year recession from which the country was just beginning to recover, these women had given up their expectations of recompense for their sacrifices. However, although much of their suffering and struggle began with the introduction of the market, these forty-eight women workers did not and arguably could not hold capitalism accountable for their predicament. In its potent metanarrative construction, Czechs bear the burden of adjusting to capitalism, not vice versa. Moreover, the rejection of capitalism's communist alternative

after a forty-year trial, coupled with the unremitting incantation of a “market without adjectives,” inhibits Czech female factory workers’ ability to envision any other societal order (Mann 1973). As Jirka put it, the capitalist “course is going to go unstoppably forward.” Thus, according to the women interviewed, their disenfranchisement did not discredit the market metanarrative. The overarching trope of the market metanarrative—from captivity/poverty into freedom/prosperity—remains intact. However, the workers have modified its plot to resolve the disparity between their personal experiences and the metanarrative’s ideological claims.

These women perceive injustice as enacted by the state as well as their employers but direct ultimate blame for their postsocialist deprivation internally (i.e., toward themselves) rather than toward external mechanisms (i.e., the capitalist system). In keeping with the market metanarrative’s foundational script, they see themselves as flawed—passive, dependent, and irresponsible. However, according to the metanarrative’s original rendering, they are inherently adaptable and thus should be able to overcome their deficiencies. They therefore change this element of the story to alleviate the tension created. In their revision, this is not a trait shared by all; rather, it is generationally bound.

In both interviews and focus groups, these women workers mocked themselves as generationally “rotten,” “stupid,” and “idiotic.” Their fundamental problem is their “socialist” disease, not its “capitalist” cure. They are “infected” by socialism, unable to escape its contamination. Olivie stated that my selection of her “age group” for research was a “bad” choice because their encounter with marketization was the “worst.” In her assessment, the systemic change toward capitalism is “good,” but as a generation born and raised under socialism, her cohort is “bad.” According to Lota, “We didn’t have to be [responsible for ourselves], someone else was always responsible for us, and that, unfortunately, is still in us. . . . We were puppets. Someone gave us an order and along we went.” Her generation is “tainted.” Růžena espoused the difficulties in changing the cognitive and behavioral correlates of a socialist upbringing that had been “pounded into” them. Milada recounted how the Czech transition experience has been metaphorically compared to having “landed in the jungle” after having spent forty years in a “zoo.” Having grown up within the confines of the socialist zoo, the women are accustomed to the comforts of a secure and pre-

dictable albeit restricted existence. Now they find themselves beyond its walls in a capitalist jungle that is uncomfortably insecure and unpredictable, though free.

In their metanarrative adaptation, atoning for socialist sins will now completely subsume these women's postsocialist lives—a lifelong sacrifice. Although Czech women workers have forsaken their imagined future of a "better life" for themselves, they have not relinquished their conviction in a capitalist course. Victory is beyond their grasp but not that of future generations.⁸ Here, the workers retrieve "sacrifice"—for the well-being of their families—from the socialist past. As Máša implied in her invocation of the familiar Czech idiom *Bez práce nejsou koláče* (Without work, there is no cake), success does not come easily, but it will come. Even the most cynical of workers, such as Běta, who caustically announced during a focus group session that the revolution had not improved her life and had in fact made it worse, still admitted that the changes begun in 1989 "will help the young people." The women in this study differed in their opinions as to when exactly victory will be achieved, giving answers ranging from one to four generations. Most agreed, however, that a better life is within future generations' reach. As forty-two-year-old Hermína voiced, "There is definitely going to be something better." For these women workers, the question is not whether but when. Jirka stopped "believing" in the prospect of betterment in her own lifetime but affirmed that "improvement will one day happen here. . . . It's a question of two generations." In Máša's view, "It's all in the time." Lota elaborated, "It's going to take a long time. It's probably going to take two or three generations, but it is going to be good. We have to believe it; otherwise it won't happen. But I believe it."

The women insist that time will bring about the necessary cognitive and behavioral changes. Playing on the Czech idiom *Proutek se má ohýbat, dokud je mladý* (A twig should be bent while it is still young), forty-three-year-old Štepanka mockingly remarked "*Se starej strom ohýbá*" (An old tree bends). Her coworkers laughed but understood the contrary figurative intimation in Štepanka's wordplay—they are old dogs

8. Some might argue that such a belief was common in state socialist countries (i.e., that socialism would ultimately benefit either the people or future generations). However, in the Czech case, I believe that the August 1968 Soviet-led invasion largely eradicated any such shared conviction.

who cannot learn new tricks. In Lota's estimation, the cognitive and behavioral remnants of socialism "will remain for two generations": "it can't be so rapid. . . . It simply won't work. This is development, and development takes time." According to Běta, "With time, people will start to live differently, to think differently." Similarly, Marie stated that the thinking must "completely" change. In Czech female factory workers' revision of the market metanarrative, the social order—along generational lines—ruptured along with the economy's disruption. They now expect only a future restoration.

By their own interpretation, Czech female factory workers are in purgatory, a "no (wo)man's land." They have rejected their socialist past but are unable to lay claim to a capitalist present or future as its victors. Economic transformation has become, in Marie's words, "more complicated" than originally expected. Nonetheless, these workers believe that they have passed the point of no return. When asked whether she wanted to go back to socialism, Marie answered vehemently, "No, no, no, no!" The other women interviewed shared this sentiment. The socialist past is not their desired destination. However, they must travel a convoluted course to deliver their children (and children's children and so forth) to its capitalist conclusion.

Conclusion

For these forty-eight female factory workers, making sense of their lives now rests on a singular logic in which a neoliberal capitalism bodes only good fortune, with prosperity as the reward for sacrifice. They see no such recompense in sight; capitalism's promise remains unfulfilled. However, because the metanarrative naturalizes the free market and lacks a credible alternative, these women cannot easily resist it. Consequently, they transform it, providing "new inflections . . . without contradicting the main points of the metanarrative spine" (Steinmetz 1992:503). They interpret their postsocialist tribulations as resulting from the shortcomings of their socialist upbringing. They claim to construe their suffering under capitalism as a prerequisite for future generations' profit. In this way, they suppress the apparent contradiction between their lived experience and capitalism's pledge. In her book on nostalgia in postcommunist cities, Svetlana Boym aptly characterizes

economic transition as a “lost revolutionary teleology . . . found again, only this time it was not Marxist-Leninist but capitalist” (2001:64). Ironically, while having escaped the perversions of Marxist-Leninist communism, these women workers have become, in an inverting sequencing of the Marxian tale, the prey of capitalism’s ideological prowess.