

Work ethic or an ethic of human relations?

ESRC Workshop: 'Moral Economies in practice'
King's College, Cambridge
28th April

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Abstract

After 1989 in Romania, the concept of a 'work ethic' was one of the first to be discarded, 'compromised' by its association with the old regime. For most people the concept contained the socialist meaning they were used to, thus as they rejected socialist practices, they rejected the concept as well. As a result, there was a lack of conceptualisation of what one would normally call a 'work ethic' and a lack of framework for discussions of an appropriate work ethic, which affected the homogeneity and the control of attitudes towards work at every workplace. In order to fill this gap, opinion leaders began to propose an imported ideology of work corresponding to the Protestant work ethic – if such a unified set of moralities exists and if the information they had about it was accurate. The new rhetoric played on a comparison between the positive capitalist work ethic and negative Romanian work practices. This is why, in 1999-2001, most of the service sector employees I observed during my fieldwork concluded that they had no work ethic at all. Though denying the logical value of this inference, a careful analysis would indeed lead us to question the existence of a specific ethic that has work as its object. Values intrinsic to human relations, not work values, can be found behind work practices in Romania. Work values are socially embedded values, not impersonal values imposed by the economic organisation. As this situation is not acknowledged and even less accepted, it leads to a confusing mix of values and practices, which I will describe in this paper.