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Belonging in / to the everyday.

Conflictuality and identity negotiation in a South-West German manufacturing company.

Pertenecer en / a lo cotidiano.

Conflictualidad y negociación de la identidad en una empresa manufacturera del suroeste de Alemania.

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1.1 Introduction

This research project seeks to explore how manufacturing workers experience conflict and how they respond to both vertical and horizontal conflictual settings. The shopfloor functions as a place of negotiation and struggle where people work to define their sense of belonging through daily interactions with others. Accordingly, the project examines how workers in a German manufacturing organization handle or redirect their conflicts within their formal organizational structure and unofficial communication networks.

Discussions of shopfloor conflict often focus on two dominant narratives: a top-down perspective, where management exerts control and discipline over workers, and a horizontal perspective, where conflict arises from personal disputes, competition or informal hierarchies. While these dimensions are still essential and a big part of this work, they do not fully capture the complex ways in which workers experience, manage and sometimes even reproduce conflictual environments. This study seeks to move beyond simplified views by examining how power and (working) culture intersect to shape conflictuality on the shop floor. A central focus is on how workers construct and contest identity within a context of cultural and structural hegemony. Identity, in this sense, is not static but actively negotiated through everyday practices which include storytelling, workplace rituals and even conflict engagement itself.

This thesis explores the following key questions:

- In what situations do manufacturing workers experience conflict on the shop floor?
- How do they navigate vertical conflicts with management and horizontal tensions with colleagues?
- How is belonging constructed and maintained within an environment shaped by structural hierarchies and informal work culture?

To address these questions, this study is based on ethnographic fieldwork: combining participant observation with informal interviews in a mid-sized manufacturing company in South-West Germany. By immersing myself into the daily routines of shop floor workers, my goal is to capture not only the more visible conflicts – such as disputes over wages, working conditions and managerial control – but also the more subtle dimensions of workplace tension, including unspoken internal power dynamics, informal rules, as well as language and workplace

design. Here, an important feed is asking how culture and belonging is managed while being confronted with the dynamic and stagnating duality of modern industrial labour.

This research is particularly relevant in the context of a male-dominated manufacturing environment, where traditional ideas of work and masculinity are challenged by socio-economic, cultural and technological transformations. It aims to explore how workers create stability amid conflict – how they reinforce belonging through these rituals, internal humour, gossip, inhabiting space, or even resistance to "elites" (whether managerial, political or cultural). Therefore, this research examines how issues like technological change and restructuring do not simply marginalize workers but create new forms of differentiation, struggles and contradictions.

The role of *Arbeit* (work/labour) in this specific *Mittelstandsbetrieb* (mid-sized company) provides special insights as it functions as a magnifying lens into broader societal patterns. *Arbeit* is not only an economic necessity but also an organisational pattern that inscribes itself into social life: shaping hierarchies, identities and social norms. But rather than attempting to explain the entire system through a single case study, this research seeks to analyse how seemingly mundane routines and implicit rules of the shopfloor are deeply connected to structural shifts, cultural anxieties and struggles over recognition.

Relevance of the following research can be found from different angles. First, the shopfloor remains a critical site for understanding broader societal transformations, particularly in the context of technological and cultural change, as well as shifting labour identities (or political loyalties). Second, the study provides insight into how workers respond to both economic pressures and cultural anxieties, including the tension between traditional labour identities and emerging workplace norms and language. Finally, by engaging with ethnographic methods, this research may contribute to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of shopfloor dynamics, moving beyond abstract theories to explore how workers experience and manage tensions and create relationships in their everyday lives. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to shed light on the hidden dimensions of shopfloor dynamics, revealing how workers navigate power, negotiate identity and construct belonging within the constraints and possibilities of industrial labour.

1.2 Theoretical framework

Workplaces appear as structured and orderly environments, yet conflict remains an inherent and constitutive feature of workplace – in this case shopfloor – dynamics. Traditional labour process theory, particularly the work of Michael Burawoy (1979), has demonstrated that conflict in industrial settings is not merely built on isolated dysfunctions but is an omnipresent structural element of capitalist production. This study builds on and extends Labour Process Theory (LPT) by incorporating insights from critical realism, political theory and spatial analysis to examine how conflict is structured, experienced and mediated within the shopfloor environment.

Burawoy's classic analysis in Manufacturing Consent explores how workers both participate in and resist managerial control – highlighting the dialectical tension between cooperation and coercion in capitalist labour relations. Drawing on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Burawoy shows how workplace regimes sustain societal dominance through a combination of consensus and coercion. This framework remains relevant and vital but requires refinement in light of contemporary transformations in industrial relations. This includes technological developments, digitalization, globalization and new forms of precarisation.

Building on this foundation, Paul Thompson and Chris Smith (2009, 2017) argue for a renewed LPT that accounts for shifting power dynamics within workplaces. Similarly, Gamst (1995) emphasizes the evolving meanings of work and their implications for shopfloor politics. These perspectives allow us to move beyond deterministic accounts of capitalist domination, highlighting the micro-political struggles and adaptive strategies of workers in response to shifting economic and technological conditions. More recently, Menz & Seeliger (2024) extend these discussions, incorporating sociological perspectives on contemporary labour relations reflecting on their own work and going into dialogue with Burawoy, Kern/Schumann, Nachtwey, Becker-Schmidt and others that paved the way for this project. Their historic work as well as their reflections on it provide insights into the evolving power relations within workplaces, emphasizing how structural transformations and worker agency interact in shaping modern shopfloors. These insights will guide this study's analysis of shifting class dynamics, workplace segmentation and the emergence of new identity conflicts.

Beyond structural constraints, this study examines “culture as a fieldworker’s point of critique” (Atkinson 2001), emphasizing how cultural practices and social relations formation intersect with economic and political structures. Culture is not merely an imposed ideology but is actively inscribed through daily interactions and contestations. By engaging with Didier Eribon (2009) and Oliver Nachtwey (2016), this research explores how class identity is reconfigured amidst the erosion of traditional working-class solidarities, often leading to new forms of resentment, nostalgia and political realignment.

By positioning workplace antagonisms within a broader political framework, the goal is to understand how workers engage in identity negotiation and power struggles, both vertically (with management) and horizontally (among colleagues). For this purpose, the terminology of “conflictuality” plays a key role in differentiating the analytical structural potential of conflict from its ontological emergence in active conflict. Therefore, conflictuality will be an analytical tool to discuss the introduced conflictual settings and is to be distinguished from the terms of “conflict” and “conflictivity”.

The spatial organization of the shop floor plays a critical role in structuring workplace relations and reinforcing power hierarchies. This study incorporates Lefèbvre’s (1991[1974]) analytical tool of a conceptual triad of spatial practice/perceived space, representations of space/conceived space, representational space/lived spaces that are built on his theory of everyday life (or everydayness under the conditions of capitalism). Everydayness here means the standardization of the lifestyles of individualization and particularization through societalization processes (cf. Lefèbvre 1995). Following Foucault (1977), space is not neutral but an arena of power, surveillance, and resistance – a dimension often overlooked in traditional LPT analyses. Understanding how space is structured, controlled and contested provides crucial insight into the intersections of material conditions, bodily presence, and power asymmetries.

Rather than viewing resistance only through structural or organized forms of collective action, this study draws on Michel de Certeau’s theory of everyday practices to investigate how workers subtly and tactically navigate imposed orders. In The Practice of Everyday Life (1984) de Certeau distinguishes between strategies, which belong to institutions and structures of power, and tactics, which are localized, ephemeral practices that operate within spaces the workers do not control. These tactical responses reflect what de Certeau calls the “antidiscipline” of daily life, where compliance is never total, and systems of order are continuously evaded or undermined through creative appropriation. Workers, in this sense,

are not resisting through organized confrontation, but through quiet reconfigurations of space, speech, and time. By theorizing the factory not only as a space of control but also as one of lived negotiation, this study incorporates de Certeau's emphasis on the "ways of operating" that define everyday resistance. Such practices help us grasp how agency is enacted below the radar of formalized opposition, complementing LPT's focus on structural antagonisms with an attentiveness to cultural and symbolic resistance.

This research aims to synthesize insights from Labour Process Theory, cultural critique, spatial theory and study of everydayness to provide a nuanced analysis of workplace conflictuality and belonging. By combining social, economic, political, and symbolic analysis with the ethnography, it highlights the ongoing struggles over control, recognition and culture in the industrial workplace. In doing so, this study moves beyond binary notions of domination and resistance, instead revealing the contradictions, negotiations and micro-politics that define contemporary shopfloor relations.

1.3 Methodological approach

This study is grounded in a qualitative research design informed by ethnographic fieldwork, with the aim of closely observing and interpreting everyday practices, conflicts and identity negotiations on the shop floor. Rather than seeking generalizable findings or causality in a positivist sense, qualitative inquiry enables the production of situated knowledge that captures the texture and contradiction of lived experience. The central premise here is that social reality is not merely discovered but co-constructed through meaning-making like material, linguistic and symbolic practices that unfold in specific spatial, temporal and institutional settings.

The research aligns with the tradition of industrial and workplace ethnographies, such as those by Michael Burawoy (1979, 1985), Frederick Gamst (1995), and more recently Paul Thompson and Chris Smith (2009, 2017), who place the shopfloor at the centre of inquiry. These authors demonstrate that workplaces are not simply sites of apolitical production of goods but arenas of negotiation, reproduction and resistance – marked by tensions between structure and agency, consensus and conflict. Through direct immersion in these spaces, it is

possible to access the affective and informal dimensions of work that often escape formal discourse or quantitative studies.

For this purpose, the research builds on the methodological sensibilities of interpretive sociology especially in its attentiveness to language, performance, gender and spatiality. Taking cues from Löw's (2008) relational understanding of space and Augé's definition of a "non-place" (1995), the shopfloor is read as a space which itself has an impact on the conflictual structure of the shopfloor. Additionally, it draws inspiration from the anthropology of labour and the body (Wacquant 2004; Scheper-Hughes 2002), as well as recent feminist and post-structural critiques that focus on gendered, racialized and classed power dynamics within organizations (Berdahl et al. 2018; Anteby & Bechky 2016).

In terms of method, the empirical material was generated through participant observation, informal conversations, and fieldnotes compiled over multiple phases of fieldwork. The approach is partly autoethnographic, given my previous employment in the setting, but aims to avoid overly introspective or anecdotal pitfalls by embedding observations within a broader socio-theoretical framework. The ethnographic lens thus provides both access and distance: access through familiarity and proximity, and distance through systematic reflection and critical contextualization (cf. Brannan et.al. 2007).

Its material was evaluated through an open yet theory-informed coding process, where empirical categories emerged inductively but were continually tested against theoretical constructs from the above-mentioned theoretical clues. It is important to note that the goal was not to apply a fixed framework onto the material, but to trace how categories such as "masculinity," "resistance," "belonging," or "conflictuality" take shape in practice – often in contradictory or fragmented ways.

To try to understand the multi-layered dynamics of conflictuality on the shop floor, I will structure them with the help of the mentioned analytical tools of a "vertical" and "horizontal" dimension. However, because those dimensions are not rigid but rather move in different directions depending on the intent of action or movement of conflictuality, their respective dependence and interaction between each other will be important to discuss. The goal is hereby to analyse those very points of interaction by centring on the researched ethnographic setting.

Finally, this methodological approach acknowledges the relational and affective dimensions of fieldwork. It understands knowledge as relationally produced and pays attention to positionality,

including issues of gender, age and class background, which shape both access to the field and the interpretation of social dynamics therein. Often, I didn't need to ask or look for the produced qualitative data: stories and anecdotes are being told, news and gossip are floating around the shop. By observing and inhabiting the space, taking part in the daily discourse and assuming a certain "in-between" role whereby I was near enough to take part, but also distant enough to not fear retaliation or leakage of information to other colleagues or management, these particles of the social organization provided me access to the story of difference and day-to-day work in this space.

After presenting the field of study and my access, I will introduce the workplace and the different people it is all about. Following this, I analyse the two main directions of shopfloor relations, not as static theoretical elements but as point of entries into the analysis. First the vertical dimension of workers and management, and specialised employees is discussed, before heading to the horizontal dimension of intra-shopfloor dynamics. As mentioned, a main focus lies on the "production of conflictuality", on how conflictual spaces are managed and identity negotiated inside of this spectre. Adding to this, I present the cultural setting of language as well as forms of solidarity and resistance to give a comprehensive picture. This requires different "lenses", or categories tested, which will be installed in form of subchapters. I will conclude each respective chapter by returning the ethnographic content and analysis to the primary questions asked.

Entering the Field: The Factory as a social Space

In Germany, the manufacturing industry still holds a position of central economic, political and societal importance. Although the tertiary, service industry has long overtaken the secondary, industrial sector, automation and tertiarization has not driven the relatively stable manufacturing industry out of importance, so that in 2022 5.51 million were employed in the secondary sector (Statista 2024). This goes especially for South-West Germany, where the automotive industry and mechanical engineering are seen with great pride by virtue of their international success and impact on collective and individual prosperity in the region. In Baden-Württemberg, over 1.5 million people were, as of 2022 employed in the manufacturing industry whose share of gross value added, that lies at 30.1 per cent, is significantly higher than the national average that is at 20.4 per cent (Volkswirtschaftliche Gesamtrechnungen der Länder 2024).

The company in question is located in a region in South-West Germany filled with “hidden champions” in their respective markets. Some of them are world renowned automotive manufacturers or screw dealing titans, but most are, what is called a Mittelständler – a middle-sized company that dominate global markets in very specific sectors of engineering and industrial innovation without being widely known to the public. While Mittelständler only seems like a description of the company’s size, the literal translation implies a certain way of doing business. Mittelstand translates to middle-class, with Stand being the feudal denomination of class. This is not only a remnant of long forgotten times or a word-compositional gimmick, but it describes its genesis being by the Mittelstand, for the Mittelstand. Historically, Mittelständler have maintained relatively close relationships with their workforce – with some embracing a paternalistic approach of the giving patron – providing long-term job security and apprenticeships. They tend to assume a role of modest and steady economic activity with a focus on giving the working-class safe jobs and opportunities to rise up in the ranks.

Especially in South-West Germany, they are deeply connected to regional identity, with a strong emphasis on "Arbeit" (work) as a core cultural value. Many of them are still family owned and do not necessarily play in the biggest markets, but for years they have dominated their international markets due to the acclaimed and demanded, but also struggling, quality label of “Made in Germany” (cf. Dück 2015). This also goes for the researched company. Since it was founded, it has low-key managed to gain worldwide relevance in its field. In the plant, and especially the department I worked in, the main focus lies on a specific product line which are produced in quantities ranging from one piece, to around 200 pieces per order. The quantities are usually not gigantic, as their slogan entails specified solutions for specific problems. One shift produces between 150 and 200 pieces a day with the capacity utilisation theoretically being 220. This cannot be achieved at the moment due to a big change in the assembly process with the introduction of a new line and new machines but is expected sooner than later according to management.

My access to this company and workshop is due to the fact that since I was 16, I spend many summers working at different companies in the region and since I was 18, I was working the shifts during lecture-free periods. I came to the company in question because my family told me it was a good place to start working and they accepted kids from 16 onwards to work in a “normal” shift. Nearly all my male relatives are working in the manufacturing industry after industrialization replaced classic agriculture in the region. During my *Abitur* and afterwards I

worked at two different companies producing automotive pieces to “earn the big bucks” as the general payment – especially for short-term employment – was way better, while the labour conditions were much tougher and the tone rougher. Therefore, I decided to come back to the first company during my studies. First, solely to do vacation work, and later now, for research purposes of this thesis after talking about the intricacies of the shopfloor with friends.

When working at this specific company, I usually spend it at the same department – sometimes I was transferred for an afternoon e.g. if the line wasn’t working or we were too many in the department – which led to me getting to know the people and process quite well. Therefore, it was essential to communicate my research intentions in an open way to the people I directly worked with, without making it a bigger deal than it is. They gave me their blessing based on the fact that, of course, all names are anonymized and the dates confounded. To avoid irritation on behalf of management I asked them, to not tell too many people inside the company.

My role in the company is that of a vacation jobber, short-term employed during the vacation fluctuation of workers. This would mostly be during the summer slumps when there are fewer orders than usual und the pace generally slows down a little. While the core group of workers are still the very same, I came to know a couple of years ago, the fluctuation of the people working “on the line” has been high. Many transferred to different departments, one has been let go and Viktor, the old hand from the testing station, has retired.

There are two shifts working in this department since the quantity has superseded the potential to produce all of it in one shift around 10 years ago. Usually, the personnel is fixed to one shift and only when needed, like in the vacation period, during flu waves, or if there is active conflict, it is adjusted. The first week of my stay, I worked on the line in the early shift from 05:30 a.m. till 02:00 p.m. with Timo “commissioning” (collecting and placing single parts in a box on the line), Adem and Lamin with me on the line and Oleg at the testing station. Most of them I knew from earlier periods of working, so the familiar faces made me feel quite welcome. Also, the smells of the grease and oil of the machinery, as well as the buzzing sounds of the shopfloor came back to me. However, the sounds coming from the new line and its positioning had changed drastically due to the introduction of the new assembly line. Before, the manufacturing process was rather similar always, with a couple of changes made to the machinery and the organization of the shift.

There are now three assembly stations, as well as the commissioning station in the beginning and the testing station as the last step before sending the sub-product to the associated

department where they add electronic heads to the instrument or directly sending the finished product to packaging. This assembly line itself is arranged in its classic 0 shape (cf. figure 1) whereby the stations are set in a C shape (cf. figure 2) with the three assembly stations on the backside (relative to the transport way), facing testing and commissioning, while the old line was in shape of an L with an open space where the assembly personnel (two workers most of the times) moved between the stations.

Figure 1 Production line: bottom left to the foto: Testing; top left: commissioning; on the right side: assembly stations

Figure 2 Assembly station 1. Line to the left. C-shape as in open to the back with machinery left and right

Figure 3 Assembly station 2 "Turntable": Insert parts, start, insert new parts from the box coming through the assembly line

From the second week onwards, I worked with the team I have usually worked with: Tobi, now formally made team leader (a role he has assumed anyways but now with better payment); Ralf, a middle aged, sort of "classic", Swabian man who has been working in the company for ages – commissioning; Luca, a middle aged German-Italian guy, rather new at the company and fresh on his long-term contract, on the line with Milan, a second generation German-Serb in his mid-twenties whose father, Dragan, with whom I've become acquainted with, works in the neighboring department – and finally Luan, who is in the company since a couple of years but I've never worked with, from Kosovo – at the testing station. Depending on the time of day or basic atmosphere, the inner-group exchange ranged from quiet working in tired early mornings to frantic jokes being thrown around late into the late shift when no one else was around.

These are not the only people with whom one is in contact. Every day there is, of course, interaction with the foreman Micha, a rather nice and helpful man with little assertiveness; sometimes the different departments come around to talk about a missing or non-functioning piece; parts get brought by the guy driving the "ant"; material is brought by the transport robot; service comes around if there are any issues with the system (so they tend to come a lot); quality assurance pops by to check the quality of the single parts as well as the product if there are changes in the data (e.g. thickness of the material) and many more "guest appearances", like the plant manager leading a group of Korean businessman through the plant giving them a snippet of the production process.

The product the company produces is of different sorts and sizes. Although I worked there for almost a year in total, I have yet to fully understand the scope of application and functionality of the produced items. I was there to work. A day's work was usually spent at the same station on the assembly line with some trips and excursions to other areas where single parts are prepared for the process or the housing is screwed on. The same station does not mean always the same process as different sorts and sizes of product also mean either a different mounting process or changing the set-up of the installations. This set-up process costs a lot of time which is why it was one of the main reasons to introduce the new assembly line that is said to save set-up time.

2 Vertical shopfloor relations: of Hierarchies and Production

Architecture of conflictuality

The ever-repeating capitalistic dualism of top and bottom inscribes itself in many ways in the daily life on the shopfloor – one of them the architecture of the production plant itself. The architecture hereby shapes space and tempo of daily life, creating the ways to walk, the spaces to be and the obstacles to face. But architecture doesn't simply exist, it is purposefully created. Or, as Lefèbvre opened on his work to spatial theory: "Social space is a social product" (1991:30).

Of course, there is the primary structural and logistical logic to the conception of a plant. The shopfloor hereby has to be on the ground floor with high ceilings due to overall productivity and safety of the facilities, while corporate offices and conference rooms can be stacked and constructed with lower ceilings. In the case of this specific plant, the production shop I worked in is closed with a line of windows behind the assembly lines and installations, whereas on the front end, there is a huge glass front. On the ground level, this transparent front separates this shop from the research & development facilities that are glassy from both sides so you can see through the R&D into the tree-lined entranceway partly seen in figure 11. On the second floor however, office facilities and a break room are in place from where you can look down into the production hall (cf. figure 4&5). Inevitably one comes to think the obvious. "They up there having their little coffee *klatsch*, looking down on us" is something I heard various times from different sides, and came to feel too.

Even if the main idea of it being an open shop with transparency and easy, partly natural lighting is an idea perfect for visits from clients and other guests, the obvious nudge of it being an architectural reproduction of already prevalent resentments, is too evident to not include into the decision-making. Lived spaces are here subordinated under the conceived space or "representations of space" (Lefèbvre 1991:38) of corporate planning. Maybe, drawing boards were yet to make sociological decisions, but while the design of the place might seem positive for productivity as it gives a wider perspective than in most other shops where the outlook is limited, errors like this one that induce the image – if not enforcing it by design – of a panopticon, certainly are not.

Figure 4 Glass front and offices, view from assembly station 3

Figure 5 View into the plant and "our" line from the office break room

Figure 6 View into the neighboring line from the office break room

According to Foucault, institutions such as factories are designed to exert control over individuals through surveillance and spatial arrangements (Foucault 1977). The panopticon metaphor can be adapted to this case, seeing the layout of this production plant and how the design (theoretically) allows for constant monitoring and ensures worker compliance through subtle disciplinary mechanisms. The people working in the office facilities are instructed not to have long breaks looking down on the shop by management according to one higher management person whom I asked about this plant design while smoking. He, an old friend of my parents, told me that he knows about the symbolic quality of it, stating that they wouldn't do it like that again, but also in a real managerial fashion, that everyone should focus on their own responsibilities which is their respective job.

In "The Production of Space" Henri Lefebvre argues that space is not neutral but socially produced and embedded with power dynamics which, in this case, allows for a strong top-bottom perception that re-enforces power structures and supports further alienation of shopfloor workers (Lefebvre 1991). I asked my co-worker Luan who I saw looking up one day early in the late shift, how he feels about this glassy front to which he replied: "I feel like a fish trapped in an aquarium sometimes". This goes to show that architectural design does have an impact on the workers that literally are put into the exhibition window for the sake of prioritizing a visually pleasing, transparent labour process over the very real perception of the day-to-day worker on the shopfloor.

One example for a mundane space that triggers conflict is the parking lot. While again this sounds very trivial, it is a place that is used every day where people park their more or less beloved cars. During the construction of a new production hall, the main lot is halved and outsourced to a gravelled car park next to it. But many workers didn't want to use the gravelled space, as it gets muddy after rains and is a bit further to the entry. So, there was an enquiry made towards management to bypass this issue by using the shift handover time to exchange the early shift's cars (and workers) with the late shift personnel (and cars). Apparently, this proposal didn't go far, but it shows that even temporary spaces like gravelled car parks can be a point of conflict where managerial pragmatism and worker's perceived infringement clash.

As space "takes place in perception" (Löw 2008: 25), the conflictuality regarding space itself varies strongly. A pragmatic shift for one, could be an insupportable breach for another. What is my space which I made livid? What is just another used space by someone? Active spaces of conversation and exchange are spaces put in place and/or made up and made lively by the

workers. Over time those spaces change with the development of new production halls, as well as the modernization and neutralization of all places considered to a clean – but rather empty and monotone – company based couleur. Old spaces where – as mundane, and as essential – communication happened on a day-to-day basis hereby erode to please the striving of management to manufacture the "lean" company visual appearance and culture.

Break spaces, as the main space of possible uninterrupted coming together, are chosen by the employees according to their priorities and needs during the two 15-minute breaks in the early shift, and 30-minute break in the late shift. The main break area of the factory hall my shift worked in, is a semi-open space with two sets of long lunch tables, a refrigerator, a little kitchen that contains a sink, microwave, coffee machine and water dispenser, is situated right next to the plants and working line. It is a space where safety trainings or updates on the corporate philosophy for the workers are held, as it is the place where in the morning at eight and in the beginning of the late shift the foremen, head of production, plant manager and others get together to discuss the tendencies and issues of the day on a modern screen that is in place there. The break space is used by most workers in this area of the plant to eat in silence being on their phone or talk about what is on the news, as well as sports or politics. Everyone seems to have their own place and routine that they follow while on break.

Meanwhile, the smoker's area is a classic social meeting point. There are two designated spaces for smokers to pursue their habit: outdoors between buildings where there are a couple of benches and a big ashtray in the middle as well as indoors where they put in a modern, half-open smoke box that sucks away the excess smoke (cf. figure 9). It is quite telling that there was no need to blur anything in this photography, since there was nothing to be blurred, nothing that could tell where this space was and what it would belong to. Even the orange colour which might have been put in place to "lighten up the room" seems more like a strategic, almost cynic move that is in vain because of the room's inherent emptiness.

Figure 7 Smoking cabin

This indoor space used to look a lot different, and it is made sort of inhabitable to de-incentivize sitting down while smoking on a short break. On the cabin that fits maybe four to five persons there is written a set of rules as to how to use this smoking space. Those are, and I quote:

Terms of use smoking cabins

Smoking is prohibited in the room in which the cabin is located.

Please only smoke inside the smoking cabin.

Please light your cigarette in the cabin and blow out the last puff in the cabin.

Please blow the smoke upwards or straight ahead and not onto the floor.

Please do not blow the smoke out of the cubicle into the room.

Please only smoke standing up. (cf. figure 10)

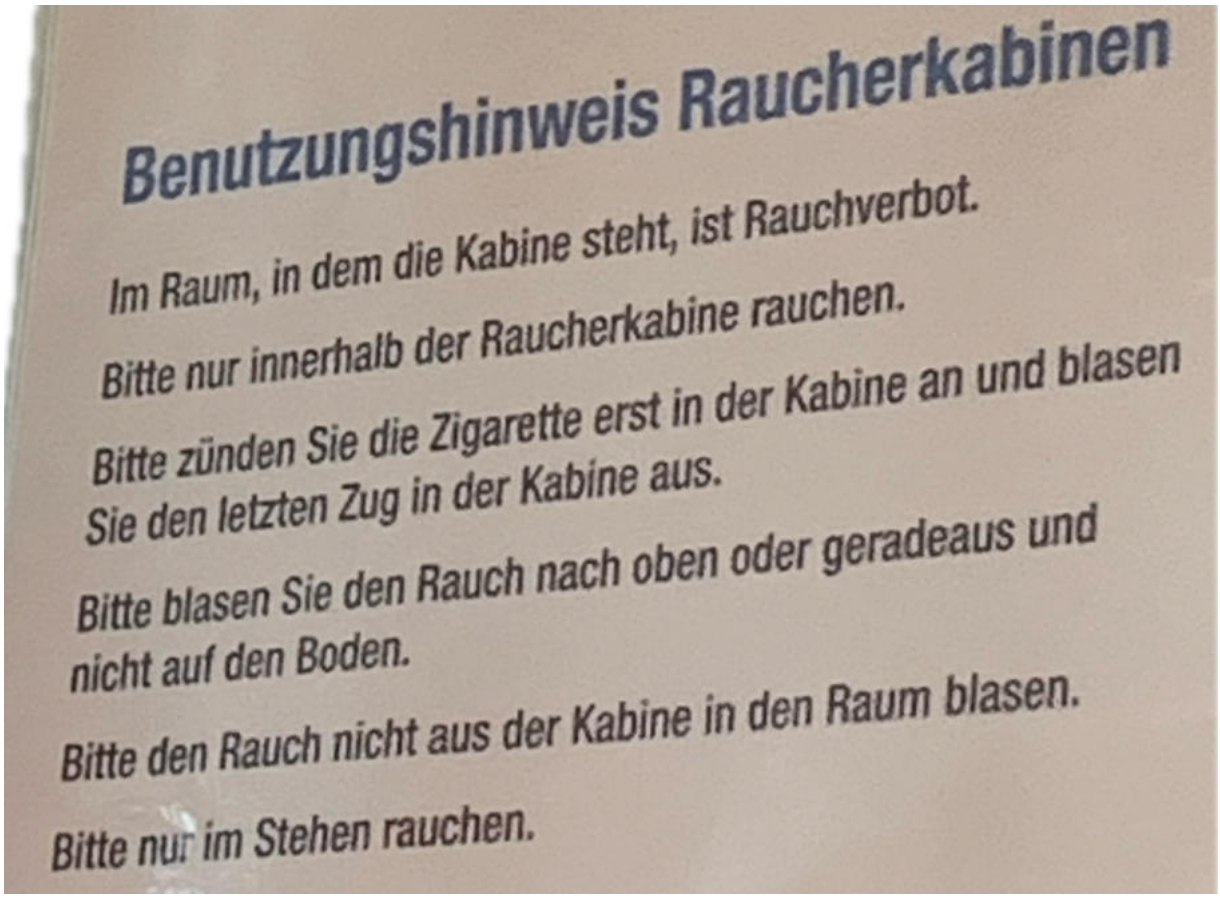

Figure 8 "Instructions of usage for smoking cabin"

As you might imagine this set of rules is ridiculed by the smokers for its rigour and paternalizing nature. This space is very much victim of capitalist structural constraints that tend to neutralize space in conjunction with state's policies. Lefèbvre's analysis of this process is quite fitting here: "Hence the space too is made up of "boxes for living in," of identical "plans" piled one on top of another or jammed next to one another in rows" (1991: 384). There used to be two raunchy sets of benches that faced each other where a lot of communication took place by the workers that made this space their own. It wasn't a very pretty room with the cigarette vending machine and the old smelly furniture but in my talks with the smokers it became clear that they liked it way more than the new, bland and unfriendly box with no possibility to sit comfortably. Again, "The user's space is lived – not represented (or conceived)" (Lefèbvre, 1991: 362).

As this new box is not very well received, most try to smoke outside if it's possible, even if– for whatever reason – there is no wider roof covering the outdoor space. It is clear that smoking is generally de-incentivized by using the architecture of the spaces to make it less comfortable, making the implication to get over with it and keep on working. Workers are not invited to "dwell". Rather, they are processed and managed. These spaces, therefore, are "[…] there to be used, not to be remembered" (Augé 1995: 79) and qualify strongly for Marc Augé's definition of a "non-place", a space of transit and function, with no sense of memory and identity. Of course, the smoking area is but one example of this phenomenon coined by Augé in his work "Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity" (1992 [1995]), as spaces all around are being uniformised and stripped of their memory.[1] But, it is important to note that with the action of remembering the old space and ridiculing the new one, this concept is challenged – at least for as long as there are people working and living these spaces that remember and share the stories. It is an action against the vertically imposed supermodern architecture of conflictuality.

[1] While Augé's non-place is typically applied to overtly transitory environments such as airports (compare hereby for example the airports of Bogotá and Cartagena or Kathmandu), this insight shows that permanent spaces like the factory can and do also function as non-places in affective and political terms.

Production relations

At the base of conflictuality on the shopfloor are the vertical mechanisms of the "fabric regime" (Burawoy 1985). While I will not go too deep into the rabbit hole of the capitalistic labour process, its fundamental premise is important in explaining its inherent conflictual potential that can result in active, empirically locatable conflict. I agree with Thompson and Smith (2009) who see it as foundational that the capitalist structure of power and control functions as the main component in shaping labour relations. Hereby, a focus will be on "relations of production", that are the manifold exploitative tendencies of the production relationship, and especially, on the "relations in production", that are the social relations that manifest in production (cf. Burawoy 1979:5ff.). This mainly because worker-management conflicts are, more often than not, rooted on the very shopfloor practices which centre on the tension field between control and autonomy of process design.

Relations in production are moulded by the relations of production according to Burawoy: "Conflict and consent are neither latent nor underlying but refer to directly observable activities that must be grasped in terms of the organisation of the labour process under capitalism. Conflict and consent are not primordial conditions but products of the particular organisation of work" (Burawoy 1979: 11). Although Burawoy relates this to monopoly capitalism in the seventies, the core of his argument above still holds up: the vertical organization of the labour process directly affects horizontal human relations (not as in HR but as in general human relations), as it produces conflict as well as consent. He shows how worker consent is integral to the capitalist labour process, emphasizing that this consent is not coerced but rather produced through the structure of work itself. Burawoy's central thesis is that workers are engaged in a game-like competition on the shop floor. Workers are not passive victims of exploitation; instead, they actively participate in a system of production that transforms the labour process into a game. The incentive to "win the game" – whether through beating production quotas, beating the other shifts output, or securing personal satisfaction – leads workers to consent to their own exploitation. This game diverts attention from the unequal distribution of power in the workplace, as workers focus on individual goals and short-term gains rather than collective interests or long-term structural inequalities, therefore, the relations in production reproduce the relations of production.

This is of course heightened in monopoly capitalism as in Burawoy's ethnography or in automotive manufacturer in Germany, where performance of output is basically rivalized between the shifts and workers. My argument, however, is that especially in smaller companies, as in the researched, the mechanisms of Burawoy's thesis hold up in a much more subtle way which lends us a view, deep into the process of capitalist production and its social reproduction. Menz and Seeliger made the critique that the game-like competition is bound to his example of monopoly capitalism (cf. Menz/Seeliger 2024: 250). However, the abstraction can be made and adapted to different settings of industrial work for its core argument to still be valid but in a different form. Workers in middle sized companies also take part in games that consent to their relative exploitation. While the focus of this research lies on how the labour process plays a big role in the conflictuality of the shop floor, the "manufacturing of consent" (Burawoy: 1979) is important to understand the machinations of industrial work. The concept of "manufacturing consent" on the shop floor of manufacturing companies refers to how management fosters worker cooperation and compliance without relying solely on coercion.

Its game-like structure can be seen in the modern "gamification" of productivity such as language learning, sports apps or even online university courses, where progress is incentivized by using the principle of reward and competition. Here, the idea is to tie the user to the program by enhancing engagement through the mechanisms in place. Gamification promotes intrinsic motivation by satisfying basic needs of competence and autonomy that align with the self-determination theory. Making routine tasks engaging is essential for the shop floor as the process can be wearing and tearing.

By analysing the labour process itself as well as the measures taken to pass the time, the games can be seen for example in competition between the shifts. Output numbers, general quality of work and influence on the shop floor are compared here at times where superiority over the counter shift is sought after. This friendly competition can easily turn into an environment where resentment towards each other is created. In this game, usually, only the productivity wins, therefore management. The other shift's numbers are inspected first thing at the line to see how the line has been working and for comparative purposes of course.

Many times, I caught myself striving for a high number of pieces, wanting to beat my own time or the process of the assembly line. This little game came quite automatic to pass time playfully and compete against yourself or the colleagues on the line in a friendly contest. While you can beat your own times, if everything is working right, you cannot beat the assembly line. This

appears to be one of the main mechanisms that keeps the worker moving, as well as the gamer in a way, the always striving idea of beating the game.

Ralf, for example had a different idea of beating the game. He works in the firm as a commissioner (the one that lays the parts on the line for further assembly) since many years and tells the over-eager young workers off for working too quickly or "schnell und schlampig" ("quick und sloppy") as he puts it. His ways of "restricting output" (cf. Burawoy 1979.) I only understood thinking about it during this work. In the moment, I thought it was laziness and grumpiness that leads him to calling it a day early, refusing to lay more parts on the line for the whole assembly line to be out of work, while at the same time, this can be interpreted as his form of resisting against the seemingly inevitable running of the line and being an actor against predetermination. Many of the long-serving workers like him have an attitude towards work that is quite astounding. Pride of being a worker coincides with being fed up with the way the labour process (mis-)treats them and has been doing for years.

De-professionalization and technologization

Generally, humans are "creatures who work", we define ourselves and our environment by what we do and see others do on a day-to-day basis. The sentiment of feeling useful and being able to attribute self-worth to oneself commonly stems from spending time on providing or creating for oneself and one's family. This humanist approach, however, opposes modern production systems like Taylorism and Fordism, where "Berufsarbeit" (professional or vocational work) is detached from product standardization, the assembly line and division of labour (cf. Schumann 2013). The demands on labour have been changing globally on a macro- level but just as well on a more tangible micro-level. Technological progress like the single-purpose machine and intelligent plants directly impact the bodily relation towards work. This not only creates a steeper vertical slope inside the company but also a further polarization of work itself: top, bottom; professionalized, de-professionalized[2].

The technologization of workplaces does not inherently eliminate restrictive, repetitive labour but instead reshapes the division of work, reinforcing existing hierarchies and creating new forms of segmentation. While technical advancements have increased efficiency, they have

[2] Harry Braverman wrote on this phenomenon as early as 1974 in his influential work "Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century" where he discusses the degradation of work due to mechanised and routinised tasks, simplification and control.

also led to a clearer separation between direct (manual) and indirect (cognitive) labour, as seen in the growing distinction between assembly line work and quality assurance, maintenance, and service roles. This division expands the category of "those up there" in production – workers engaged in planning and oversight – while reducing multifunctionality among shop-floor workers, thereby limiting skill diversification. As a result, the professionalized system regulating work coexists with increasingly restrictive manual labour, leading to what Schumann & Kern (2013: 29) describe as the "danger of internal segmentation" within the workforce. Contrary to expectations that technological progress would either marginalize or definitively professionalize workers, it has instead created a hybrid reality in which automation neither eliminates low-skilled labour nor guarantees upskilling. However, Sauer and Wittke (1994: 47) suggest that this shift also necessitates the "reintroduction of production intelligence", meaning that even in technologically advanced environments, workers' knowledge and problem-solving abilities remain crucial. Thus, rather than replacing human expertise, automation restructures labour dynamics, reinforcing segmentation while selectively reintegrating skill-based contributions.

Technologization of other parts like the office leads to another form of top-bottom conflictuality. When working out of the home office which has been partly incentivized and normalized since COVID, sometimes important entities for the smooth-running of the line like QA (quality assurance) and Service (overseeing the functioning of everything technological), cannot be reached according to the shift leader: "They're sitting at home with their arses sore". They communicated their grievance to the works council leading to adjustments made that include only one day of home office except in special cases like having a sick child at home. While usually in a case like the one mentioned, the parent can request sick-leave for the child's sake and simply not work, the shop floor workers can't do home-office if their child is sick and have to seek out sick leave. Compromises have to be made in stalemate situation like these where both have valid arguments to their side, this however is also due to a de-professionalized labour force in a technologized working world.

The general relation between QA/Service – trained and "skilled" labourers not working in one department but overseeing the quality production and smooth-running of the lines – and my department is tense. While there does not seem to be many personal issues around the characters and likability, the ridge between both parties is located in a verticalized issue of professionalization and skill. This Taylorist division between "mental" and "manual" labour (cf. Braverman 1974) leads to class fragmentation and frustration over loss of autonomy and

control. Often times, their (QA/Service) work ethic and effectivity are denied in times of the line standing still and idle state. When a Service worker comes to look at the error patterns, he is received with a joking welcome: “Ahh, here he comes to save the day”. This sarcasm does not prevent both sides from working together to try and fix the problem using their respective experience and point of views, but later, once the Service-guy left, the undertone usually entails a certain mockery and a “what he can do, I could easily also do!”.

This brings me to the fact that, while potentially costly, upskilling would prevent this need for external help if the department was trained on further troubleshooting than the usual pushing of the blinking red button: “confirm error message” and pushing the green one for “start process”. Sure, personnel fluctuation and trainings of new workers are not advantageous for the idea of upskilling of the shopfloor, but to depend on other entities to fix their issue isn’t as well. Inside the group there are also different levels of skill and training. While the experienced workers have amounted a lot of information over the diverse issues and their problem solving, new workers have to continuously work and experience them first hand over time. Still, it is about *Stückzahl*, a high quantity of units, which leads to the primary role of making product and “commodification of the body” (cf. Scheper-Hughes 2002; Wacquant 2002). This is due to a structure that is implied in production labour where the workers, at least those on the line, are handled as a interchangeable commodity which, if used up, can be replaced.

In many other jobs, there is a “breaking-in” period where one is learned the technicalities and workings of once job, while on the shopfloor most of the knowledge has to be compiled at work, not learned. Therefore, there is not only a vertical skill gradient between professionalized workers like QA and Service, but also the mentioned internal segmentation between workers. Some have worked in the same department for years and not amounted a tremendously higher skill level partly due to the missing of personal initiative being stuck in the routine and because it is not incentivized by the structure of the labour process itself that is built on division of labour.

A couple of weeks before I started the job, the old line was replaced for the new one which has a longer assembly line and separate assembly stations instead of a shorter line where 2-3 workers had to communicate the process. By the fact that you had to be interworking to generate a continuous flow of parts, there was a much “freer” mobility, a higher potential to interact and also interchange between stations. This incentivized coordination between workers and created a process in unison, whereas the worker on the new line finds himself

literally more alienated and stuck to the same place and routine all the time. As interaction und coordination is reduced while the new line's struggling to work properly, diffuse and directed frustrations over the change and against those in charge arise. While in the near future it was expected to make 50% more pieces, in the short term, technological and procedural issues prevented the shifts from achieving that goal. Some days we were stuck waiting while the service team tried to solve malfunctions. One service guy, mockingly referred to as *Maulwurf* (mole) often came around trying to fix the manyfold systemic errors. Especially in these idling phases, the old line and its seamless workflow was conjured up and the "oh so clever" (Ralf) line engineers were internally teased for their new creation.

This process of renewal is as inherently economic as it is "violent" for the people running the machines. Of course, at some point, the machinery has to be exchanged to guarantee productivity and compatibility with new pieces. This change of everyday "spatial practice" (Lefèbvre 1991:38), like routines and routes, could be seen as "natural" for the bigger picture of management, but in a more micro-analytical level, as alienating for the worker that is reduced to the role of a mere operator that "makes product" (Darrah 1996:13). Spatial practice here reflects and reproduces the dominant order by regulating how bodies move and interact within space. There is a naive realism of viewing workplaces as "natural objects" that go their way according to the ebb and flow of the industry. Workers, however, build up a relationship with their perceived space – and the memories or embodied practices belonging to it – that they claim as their "representational space" (Lefèbvre 1991:38). How could you not – after living this space, working on the same line daily for many years, while having a certain pride connected to its longevity and maybe even implemented improvements made on your behalf.

More often than not, the new machines also further reduce professionalization to produce more output which has an alienating consequence for the workers as they have been trained on working various machines knowing their strengths and flaws. These changes relate to the "properties of specific machines, the patterns of feedback that characterize the production floor, and organizational expectations." (ibid.) Adding to the above mentioned altered patterns of feedback, both sensually and psychologically, the new line in place reduces movement between the machines because now the operator is most of the times tied to the assembly line, moving in small circles and placing the individual parts into the machine that assembles them before laying the now finished partial product onto the line to move on.

Issues and Outlets

Denis, with whom I worked in the first week and more often before, was one of the workers that had a lot of complaints about the lack of functionality of the new line and other issues. Some of those other issues were for example the taking away of the baker's trolley that used to come into the area shortly before the first break in the early shift. It was a short moment where the workers in the departments around queued and caught up while grabbing a bite for the breaks. Now to get some baked goods, you have to go to the cafeteria or wait until the sandwiches are put into the vending machine. This doesn't seem too big of a deal, but many told me that this change annoyed them because it took away the tradition of the trolley. I have to say, I also really enjoyed this bit in earlier vacation jobs when the baker rang the bell coming near his spot. Everyone quickly moved there, having a chat with the workers from the other departments. Again, the rationale of management is to rationalize its processes to reduce costs, and this does mean getting rid of seemingly extra operations at times. Also, as time is of the essence being on the clock, those 5-10 minutes (depending on the queue in the cafeteria) can hurt as you don't want to spend them during your break time but also usually can't just take them randomly while working. A "normal" rationalizing process can therefore become a source of vertical tension where the workers don't feel recognized for their wishes and needs.

This is one of the topics that has been communicated to the company's works council according to the shift leader but management states that it is allegedly due to the externally hired bakery, not them. For managing grievances like this one, the *Betriebsrat* (works council) is instated. It is a legally mandated entity created to ensure employee organisation from different areas of the firm to interact and voice their standpoints and interests. While unions negotiate broader industry agreements, the *Betriebsrat* ensures these agreements are implemented at the workplace level trying to foster dialogue over conflict. While German law protects *Betriebsrat* members from being fired, ensuring they can represent workers without fear of retaliation, the impact of the members is not necessarily palpable at all times with frustration over the legalistic approach, which slows decision-making and social dynamics, looming high. Dusko, a former member stopped his participation because he said that "if no one listens I might as well just quit it". While he didn't go into detail about what happened, he was very frustrated with the structure of the *Betriebsrat* and its performance. He stated that the measures taken were just symbolic and faded quickly like the letterbox, jokingly called "Kummerkasten" (worry box) where workers can anonymously insert their grievances. When

I asked Ralf if he ever participated in the *Betriebsrat* due to his long experience in the firm, he told me that it wouldn't change anything and that the benefits are tremendously outweighed by the time effort which he as a father cannot commit to as an extracurricular. It becomes clear that time, body and compensation are not aligned with a basis to participate in contestation of the status quo on the shopfloor.

As mentioned before, time and space are managed thoroughly in the factory. Relative to the shift and/or contract, your position as a worker is clear and it structures your day-to-day. This, of course, goes for many different jobs where time and place might also be managed over one's head but the lack of possibility to manage those situating elements is particularly little on the shop floor. While the shift seems to pass slowly, depending on internal things like the general flow of things or external situations like the functioning of your workplace, the weeks go by pretty quickly, giving time a fleeting and blurry stamp, at least for me as a single adult working for a limited time. Chats about the weather, future or past holidays or happenings on the weekend are of importance to structure time and place, is it is in many social spaces like the workspace. This might seem very much infra-ordinary as it seems so very ordinary, but it gives back a certain factor of location in time and space that is made redundant by the organized design of work on the shop floor.

In conversations with colleagues, it becomes clear that precarity on the shopfloor is not solely about wages. Most workers earn enough to make a solid living, especially when combined with their partner's income – a shift that, on the surface, signals increasing emancipation due to possibility of women's participation on the labour market. However, this dual-income model often forces women into low-wage jobs to sustain the household, turning economic necessity into a constraint rather than a choice (cf. Nachtwey 2016:77). While wage structures remain exploitative and unequal – now for both, men and women – the destabilizing effects of precarity stem just as much from the pressures on workers' time and bodies, often in direct relation to financial concerns.

Many workers set material goals – e.g. a home, a vacation, a nice car – but future vocational training is rarely part of their plans. When speaking with Tobi – not only a long-time colleague but also a highly skilled worker – this became particularly evident. Despite his deep technical knowledge and experience, he has no ambition to turn his expertise into career advancement. I have asked him multiple times over the years why he does not pursue training to become a foreman or production technologist, especially given that he is still relatively young. His answer remains the same: he simply cannot afford it. Training would mean

temporarily earning less money and added time away from the family, which is not an option for a father of two who is also renovating his house on his own.

Tobi's case illustrates a broader shift in aspirations. Though he frequently complains about management and inefficiencies on the shop floor, he has no desire to further professionalise and specialise, maybe therefore even having a positive impact the production flow due to his experience on the line. What Oliver Nachtwey (2016: 9) describes as the "Sehnsuchtsobjekt und Handlungsnorm" (the object of desire and standard for action) of upward mobility through performance and training no longer holds to the extent of a true object of desire. Instead, in what he calls the "Abstiegsgesellschaft" (descent society), ambition is increasingly replaced by a pursuit of stability. The traditional promise of social ascent through work and education is losing its grip with many workers now focussing on avoiding downward mobility. This shift does not mean the absence of frustration – rather, it underscores a growing disillusionment with the idea that effort and skill necessarily translate into security or advancement. Stability, rather than ascent, has become the defining ambition for many working the shopfloor.

In the following subchapter I will discuss the political manifestation of this growing disillusionment inherent to not only, but especially, the shopfloor. Missing upward mobility – or even descent – were unthinkable for many years as the opportunities were large and the country's economy was steady. Cheap gas from the Russians; international trade with the Chinese; international security from the US and NATO. All these factors led Germany to exist in as safety bubble, but now that most of those nets are porous and unsteady, it has to work with its own situation, that of a society, horizontally possibly more equal and inclusive, but vertically with greater economic equalities (ibid.: 11). This comes with the question of guilt, of who is responsible for "our" social descent, precarity and polarization.

Precarious identities and *die Grenze des Sagbaren*

"Der Feind ist unsere eigene Frage als Gestalt" (Däubler: 1916)

"The enemy is our own question as a figure/form." (Transl. V.H.)

Historically, the depriving of workers of sense and meaning in form of de-professionalization or dislocation created distress that manifested in form of political views and resentment towards what represents the bad (cf. Schumann: 2013). While this "bad" is dynamic and changing over time, the side that represents the worker's "us" and opinions is changing with it. Easy solutions and scapegoats for socio-economic and cultural hardship are being made out and articulated politically, feeding into the prejudice.

Over the course of the prime years of economic prosperity, the working class has been classically represented by the politically left party spectre, whereas nowadays most have shifted their voting behaviour to the right. This can be seen in the voting behaviour of the 2025 elections where, according to the representative "infratest dimap" poll on voting shares by occupation, the governing social-democrats suffered a devastating loss of 14 per cent, while the far-right AFD gained a huge 17 per cent of the worker's (and unemployed) vote which is the biggest jump in any voting shares (cf. figures 1,2&3). In total, 38 per cent of the workers gave their vote to the far right and only 12 per cent to the SPD, considered representing the worker's voice – although historically disputable[3] – especially in the context of workers unions.

[3] Didier Eribon writes on this subject that the position in social structures and working world does not determine class interest: "How and why is it that the popular classes sometimes draw the conclusion from their circumstances that they necessarily belong to the left, and sometimes, of course, to the right? Various factors play a role here: the economic situation, the changes in the world of work and the social relations that result from labour, but also – and I am inclined to say above all – the way in which political discourses and discursive categories influence the constitution of the political subject" (2009: 145)

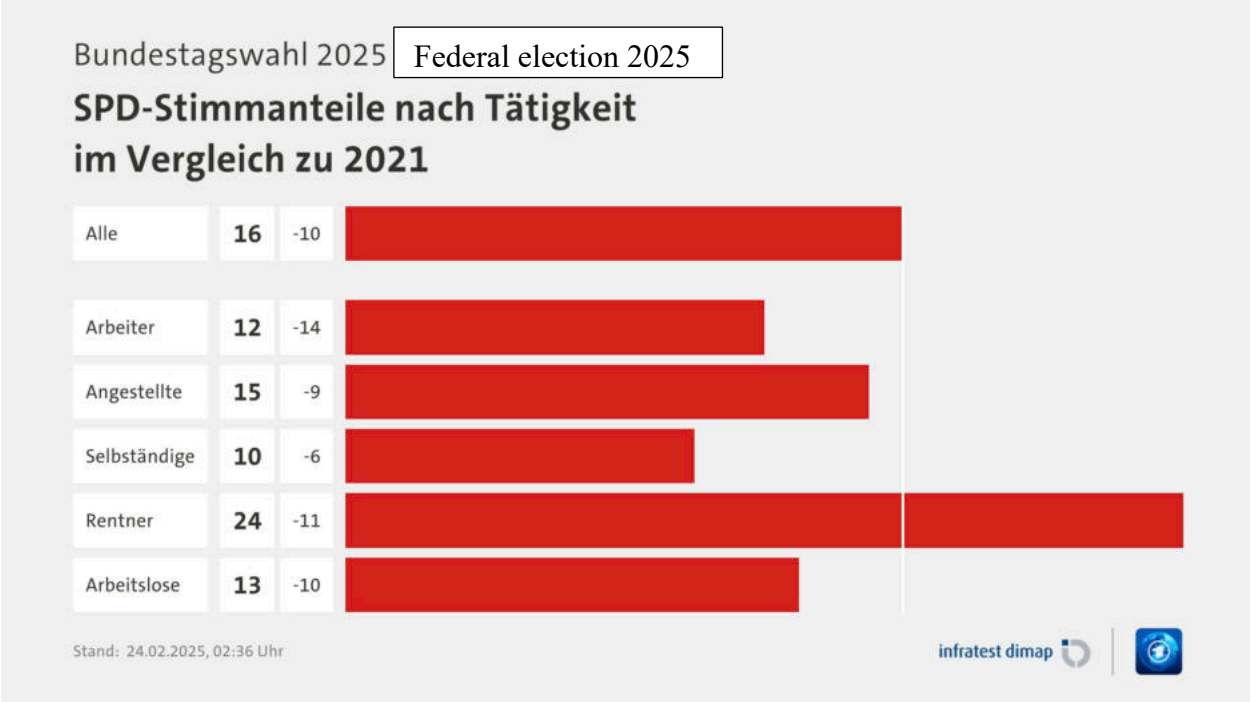

Figure 9: SPD vote shares by occupation (Arbeiter=worker)

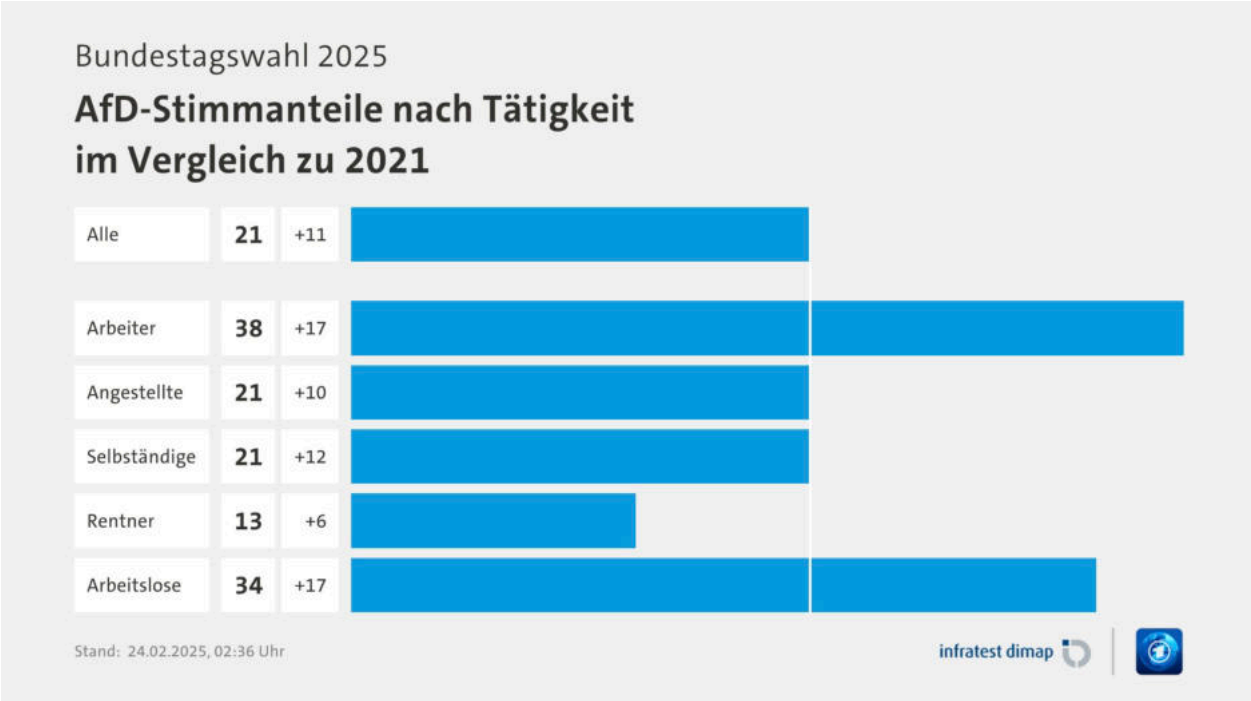

Figure 10: AFD vote shares by occupation (Arbeiter=worker)

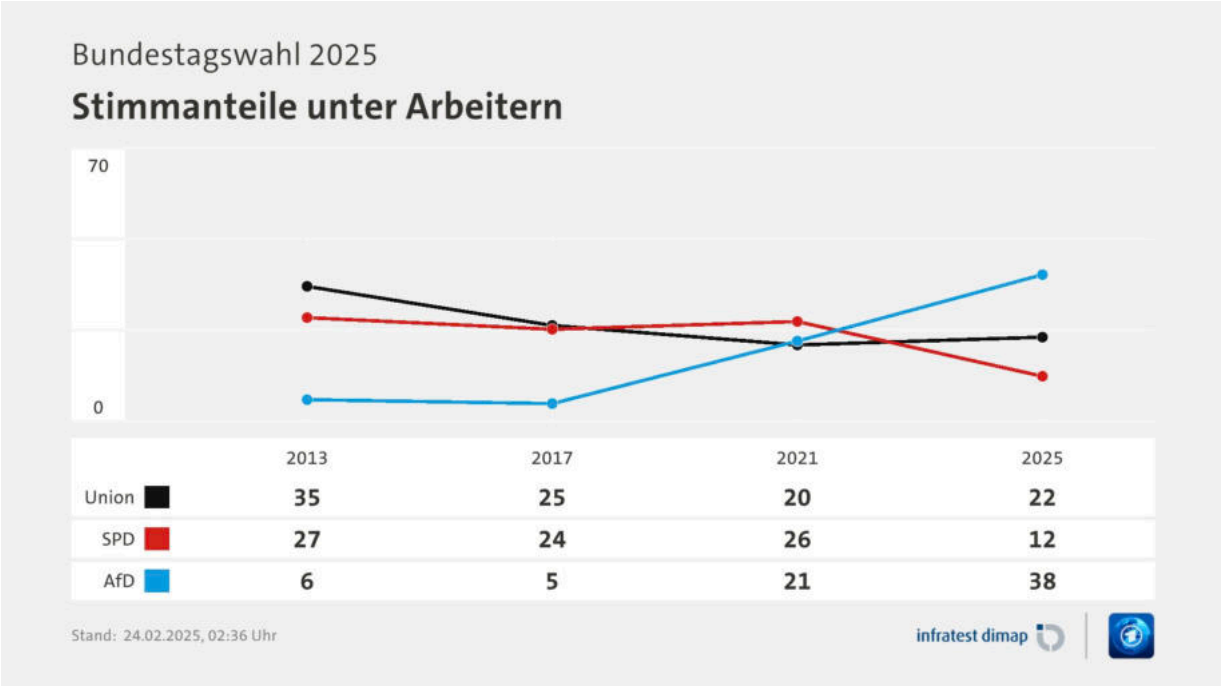

Figure 11: Voting shares among workers

The resurgence of social insecurities following the erosion of the post-war "class compromise" (cf. Wright 2000; 2012) has fuelled a sense of political exclusion, particularly among workers who feel increasingly disconnected from decision-making processes and the public discourse that determines which issues are deemed legitimate and important. While the compromise historically ensured a consumerist inclusion – granting workers access to goods, services and social insurance – it did not extend to genuine participation in capital accumulation and strategic economic planning. As the material foundations of this compromise have eroded under neoliberal restructuring and global competition, the protective buffers it once provided have weakened, leaving many exposed to precarity and downward mobility in times of economic or political shifts. In this context, emerging class conflicts are increasingly fought out not only over wages or employment, but through symbolic struggles – particularly around the legitimacy of ecological transformation, cultural identity and narratives of national belonging (cf. Schaupp 2021). These symbolic arenas often become stand-ins for deeper structural grievances, exacerbating the perception among many workers that their voices are not only unheard but actively excluded from the future being imagined.

The Green Party, for example, is often perceived as representing an elite detached from working-class realities, reinforcing a sentiment that is heard often: "Von denen hat doch nie einer richtig geschafft!" ("None of them have ever even really worked." They are made out as the foul that is responsible for many modern issues like the failed "Ampel-Koalition", the opted-out coalition under chancellor Scholtz, and the struggling engine of German

manufacturing. Their policies – targeting combustion engines, addressing western ways of consumption (e.g. meat, shopping, travel) – are framed as prohibitive, fuelling resentment. Statements like "In der Schule von meiner Tochter gibts kein Schweinefleisch mehr, des isch doch deutsches Kulturgut!" ("They no longer serve pork in my daughter's school, but that's part of German culture!") by Ralf reflect a perceived loss of cultural autonomy, where even small shifts are seen as attacks on tradition rather than policy changes introduced to reduce meat consumption and/or offer a more inclusive meat variant that does not discriminate against believers of different faiths.

This presents a real treat for right-wing media and clout-chasing politicians – that function hand-in-hand – because they can re-articulate this perceived prohibitive policy culture as an attack on freedom and identity again and again, reenforcing resentment and hate. Often times, the discursive conception of the dichotomy, or contrast, between what is "German culture" and what is not, is triggered by the political-media sphere and then reproduced in the factory (cf. Eribon 2009: 137). An example is the celebration of Markus Söder's (the Bavarian chief minister belonging to the CSU, the "Christian-Social Union") online appearance where he is raging against "Die Grünen" who want to destroy tradition and filming himself eating meat loaf. This works perfectly with the reproduction of lurid tabloids (often the one with the four red capitalised letters) during break times. Here, something perceived as outrageous and violent in regard to "Germanness", is cried out, or the alleged criminality of foreigners as well as their inability to adapt is formulated. First by the sensationalist media, then by the workers. A perceived "Verbotskultur" (culture of prohibition) is denounced, in which the "white German man" assumes the role of the victim who has his liberties stripped away, while other groups (e.g. LGBTQ+, asylum-seekers, women) strive and receive all the benefits. This can be regarding cultural exposure, financial benefits or better opportunities that are assumed for other social groups.

In industrial settings, individual car ownership and the combustion engine remain central to workers' identities, not just as material assets but as symbols of independence, technical knowledge and continuity. The push for environmental policies – such as phasing out combustion engines – can thus feel like an attack on both economic security and personal values, intensifying status anxieties. These conflicts are exacerbated by competition for social recognition, where groups experiencing a downward mobility – or rather, no upward mobility – direct their frustrations at those viewed as cultural or political elites rather than at structural inequalities (cf. Castel 2005: 67-73).

The backlash towards the above-mentioned manifests in the popular discourse around the limit of what can be said: “die Grenze des Sagbaren”. "Man kann ja gar nichts mehr sagen!" (“You cannot say anything anymore!” But also: “you are not allowed to say anything anymore”) is something that is often brought up, just as the defensive and cynic “das darf man ja wohl noch sagen!” (“certainly, you can still say that!”). It is often connected to media headlines or general language while especially the latter phrase is sometimes attached to the wildest and most vulgare statements. Just to name a few: Green Party politician Ricarda Lang is called a “fat pig that can’t tell me anything” and the “N-word” is freely used (When I asked Marco if he could bring me something he responded with: “Ich bin doch ned dein N****“ as in “I am not your n****”), as well as the “Z-word” (slur word for the cultural group of Sinti and Roma), whereas censorship to their right to free speech is claimed. But expressions of worker resentment (e.g., “You can’t say anything anymore!”) are not just about free speech – they reflect deeper anxieties over identity and social change. This corresponds with the above-mentioned poll on election day, where 53 per cent of voters indicated that they “worry greatly, that you will be socially marginalised if you speak your mind on certain topics” (cf. figure 4).

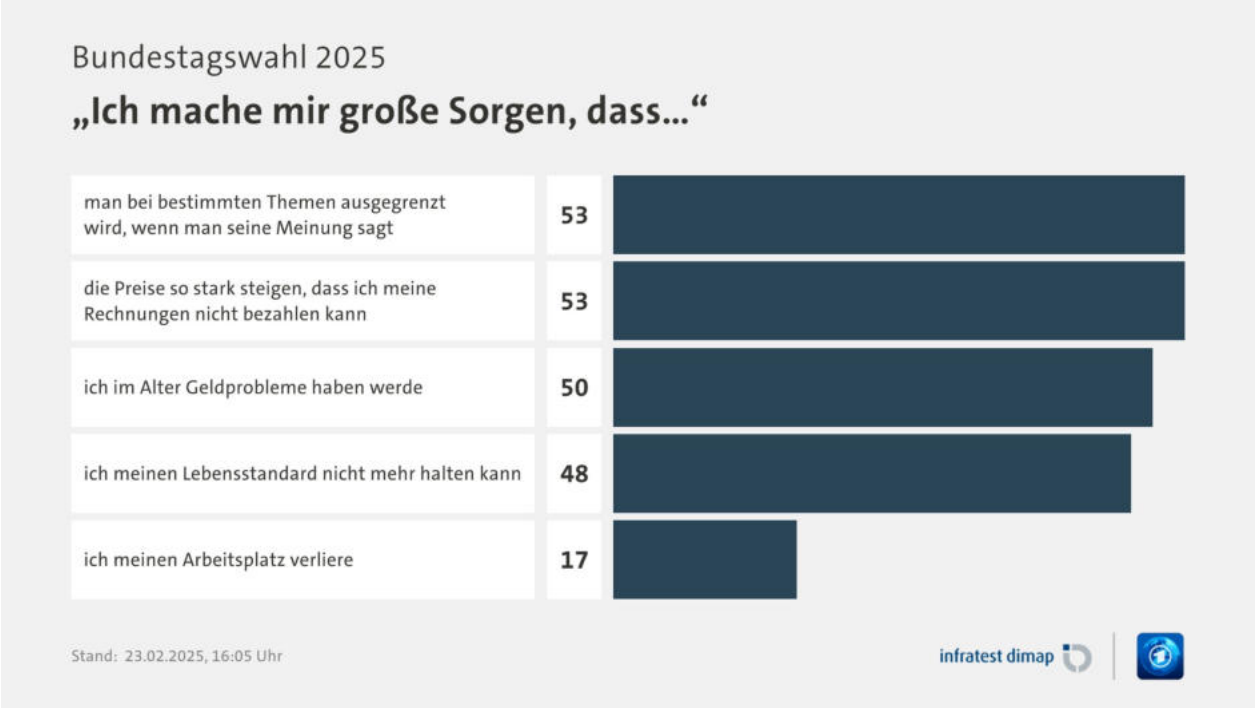

Figure 12: “I worry greatly, that…”

The term “Sesselfurzer” (literally “chair farter”), mocking white-collar employees primarily working in a seated fashion, illustrates this above-mentioned resentment: remote work is framed not as labour but as privilege, deepening the divide between those who are physically present in factories and those who are seen as detached – making decisions from afar. Due to this missing bodily connection to work, home-office or generally office work is often not seen as

"real work". In this landscape, resentment and cultural fight replace traditional class struggle, shaping a new politics of precarity, exclusion and contested identity. Workers in the plant feel left behind as the company goes in the direction of "new work" and "industry 4.0"[4] where modernization of workspaces and technologization change the day-to-day work, often for the better and the frequently quoted "work-life balance", while for most on the shopfloor not much is changing except for – essential, but isolated – innovations such as the paternity leave.

Corporate identity and working culture

"New work" also includes "lean" program measures implemented top-down to generate a consistent corporate image and, above all, a standardised way of working. This is perceived as essential for companies of this size nowadays that want a clear profile to appeal to international customers by streamlining production as well as marketing. The company's corporate identity is built, like many in the region, on the back of the founding father of the "family business" who takes the symbolic role of the creative entrepreneurial force that built the company from scratch. This truth of his success during the prospering times of the West-German "economic wonder" is utilised as a unifying and inspiring presence which is reproduced in the company's self-definition. His name is commemorated in festivities, pictures of him are placed in the foyers and online appearance. While much of this reprocessing still holds up in its symbolic form and keeps being important in this sense, many of the basic ideas and values of a medium-sized business have been lost in the chaos of having to stay alive in a changing economic field of manufacturing.

Corporate identity (i.e., the productive, thankful worker in the good company) promoted by management hereby clash with the workers' own culture as well as sense of autonomy. Management efforts to foster a team identity (e.g., the often invoked "we're all in this together" during the shop floor meetings) mask the underlying power imbalances in place. Corporate identity from a marketing standpoint is essential in representing the above-mentioned sales argument of medium-sized businesses and is – outside of the workplace – generally met with pride and a sense of belonging to something good. While this external

[4] Compare Pfeiffer, S. (2017); for more readings in the area of Industry 4.0.

representation is well received, the alienation (Entfremdung) between production workers and corporate self-image is tangible in internal lean-program measures.

The company's internal push for a unified production mode is branded under the term "synchro", short for synchronization. Officially, the program aims to streamline operations across factories, creating a standardized and efficient production system. To prepare for an upcoming "synchro"-audit, we attended a training session that outlined the company's three overarching goals: financial independence, technology and quality, and cultural change (to live and experience [company name]). This kind of corporate messaging, however, meets a wall of scepticism on the shop floor. Since the change of the CEO, six so-called "breakthrough goals" have been set under the slogans of trust, openness, responsibility, and investment in people. The reaction from workers? Thinly veiled sarcasm. Comments like: "Wow, this time they have really outdone themselves" or "What do we see of this shit" circulate among the production lines. The slogans feel detached from their reality and represents a glossy management vision imposed from above, disconnected from the actual conditions "on the ground". It goes to show that the streamlined concept is quite distant from production reality.

Every day, workers attend "shopfloor meetings" (a direct borrowing from English business jargon), where key performance metrics are presented on a sleek, modern touchscreen next to the plant on the transport route – sometimes interrupted by the automated robot commissioned with the material flow after which everyone moves away to let it roam on its lines of travel. These meetings cover weekly statistics – output quotas, error rates, and the *Kundenservicegrad* (customer service level). In theory, the goal is to connect workers to the broader production process: to show them what they are producing, for whom, and how their work fits into long-term company developments.

In practice, this attempt at integration seems to mostly fail. Rather than fostering a sense of engagement, these presentations often feel like yet another layer of corporate abstraction. Workers stand there – arms crossed, eyes glazing over, Ralf sitting on his desk chair he requested for this item of the day – alienated from the very data meant to connect them to their work. The figures on the touchscreen might as well be stock market reports for all they feel relevant to the daily grind on the line. Still, there's an implicit expectation that workers should care. The foreman presents the numbers with a slight undertone of pressure, especially

when output isn't where it's supposed to be. The line isn't running optimally – so who's as fault here? The response from the shop floor is telling. Tobi shrugs off the subtle reprimand:

„Dann soll er halt mal in die Linie kommen und auch mal mitschaffen."

("Then he should just come to the line and also work with us for once.")

It's a small comment, almost offhand. But in that one sentence, the entire disconnect between management and production becomes clear. The numbers on the screen, the lofty company values, the vision of synchronization – all of it remains abstract. What seems to matter for most of the workers is the physical reality of labour and working together. This solidarity is often invoked by the group – just as its very death is mourned. Especially Ralf, who experienced a different time inside the company – when there was still a beer-vending-machine on the shopfloor – is missing a time of togetherness and solidarity. This includes communal activities like company events, but also basic social feeds like going for a beer after work or eating a Currywurst after work together. In his perception this has diminished strongly as corporate identity destabilised working culture and – again in his opinion – demographic changes took away a worker's solidarity.

One hot late-shift Friday, the company held their yearly summer event on their main "campus" a couple of miles away from the plant I worked in. Public transport buses were rented to carry everyone from the parking lot to the campus and it is said that everyone had the opportunity to only work half a shift to go to the party. I, of course, stayed at work as did only a fraction of the other workers and no supervisors. The sun was out, and we could watch the buses arrive, carrying personnel like management, the other shift's members and the ones that cut their shift short to the promised land. It was an interesting scenery and ambiance, because as some grumbled about the timing of the event and that not everyone can just cut their shift short, I felt a quiet around the plant that was unknown and a certain solidarity with all worker's that "stayed behind". We worked unhurried while listening to music and talking about this and that, finishing our shift timely to go out and drink a beer with all the workers left in the plant at the benches on the entranceway (cf. figure 11).

Figure 13 Friday after late shift

This, however, is an atypical excerpt of working life, usually everyone goes their own way after a hard day's work which can be attributed to the *Entfremdung* of corporate culture from working culture. These little, uncomfortable benches we sat on were enough for this specific event, but not merely enough to incentivise spending time together within the framework of work itself on a regular basis.

Vertical levers for disunity

Rather than enforcing strict punitive measures for workplace conflict, the company in question relies on structural interventions – social sanctions, strategic transfers and managerial reshuffling – to maintain cohesion. Dismissals are rare – some of them will come up below – and when conflicts escalate beyond acceptable levels, they are quietly managed through worker relocation or internal social exclusion.

A striking example is a former colleague who was transferred to another department after a long period of gossiping and badmouthing her team. The workers had already long communicated their issue and imposed informal social sanctions – excluding her from conversations and workplace interactions – before management intervened. As Tobi put it:

"Nach ner Weile war's einfach genug. Ich bin so froh, dass sie weg ist, ist schon so oder so genug los hier."
("After a while, it was just enough. I'm so glad she's gone, it's chaotic enough anyways.")

Instead of addressing the underlying group tensions, the foreman simply relocated her, treating the problem as a matter of placement. Reshuffling is not only performed due to active conflict but – more often than not – based on conflictivity regarding group membership and what is perceived as potentially creating unrest, disengagement or historically in discord. Some of those mechanisms are to keep the workers from the Balkans away from each other; the known right-wing workers away from the People of Colour; to not only have Russians in one shift because they would apparently disengage from the rest and only speak Russian. This strategy of reshuffling based on group belongings, I heard from a couple of people, inside this company and in another one from the region as well, as the foremen and management are inclined to manufacture a harmonious condition on the shopfloor.

Another case illustrates how conflict with authority is handled through displacement rather than direct punishment. Stani, a former worker from the warehouse who was openly dissatisfied with power hierarchies, frequently resorted to dark humour as resistant tactic. In one of his last wage discussions – knowing he wouldn't get a raise – he apparently lit a candle in front inside the foreman's office and said: "If I'm getting fucked, at least I want to make it romantic." This, of course, secured his reputation as the factory's resident troublemaker but

also ensured his removal from this plant. Following this incident, management transferred him to a different plant near his home village without further sanctions.

The company's approach to conflict is thus one of quiet containment rather than confrontation. Workers who challenge authority too overtly or disrupt the social order are not disciplined–they are displaced. The firm, compared to stricter workplaces, manages potential conflict by pre-emptively structuring shifts and teams to minimize tensions. This means that foremen strategically position workers, considering not just skill levels but also actual and possible interpersonal friction. While this flexibility satisfies some, others resent the lack of differentiation between diligent workers and those who put in minimal effort. Tobi and Ralf both told me that often times they wished for a tougher hand to regulate working life and conflict regarding processes or habits.

For example, informal smoke breaks are, after years of people having a smoke break during their shift, disallowed and workers have to swipe off for the time being on the digital login station to the plant located right next to the smoking areas. This was enforced after other workers complained by reasoning that those informal smoke breaks are unfair as the others are paid the same but having more breaks and using smoking to their advantage of procrastination. Therefore, rather than also taking little breaks to go to the toilet or get a snack from the vending machine, they demanded a change. Of course, this came in handy for management as the sense of fairness and/or competitive behaviour regarding the rule bending resemble their objective of productivity.

Vertical conflictuality is built from tensions inherent to the production process and performed between workers, and management or "skilled" workers. These potential conflicts often revolve around expectations, comparison, communication gaps and perceived injustice in workload or recognition. Vertical tensions are often absorbed through informal mechanism such as slowdowns, toilet breaks or deliberate procrastination – forms of what Burawoy termed "restriction of output." These acts are not always overtly political but serve as quiet methods of reclaiming time and resisting over-instrumentalization, sometimes out of sheer spite. At times, such strategies even border on sabotage of the process, yet they are rarely discussed openly, only whispered about and almost never organized collectively.

The recent reorganization of the factory – spatial rearrangements, new machinery and automation – has not only affected workflows but reshaped social geographies. New distances make interactions harder, old routines are disrupted, informal as well as regular meeting points are lost or diluted. Referring to Lefèbvre (1974), this spatial transformation or "colonization of space and time" is never neutral but a specific capitalist mode of appropriating and organizing social life. The redesign of the factory subtly fragments existing solidarities while homogenizing work rhythms, contributing to a more impersonal and isolating experience of labour which leads in turn to the creeping reinforcement of the prevalent socio-political working-class sentiment of being left behind in an age of continuous transformation.

3 Horizontal dimension: of Segmentation, Gossip and Masculinity

Developments of fragmentation and conflictuality also show themselves in the horizontal dimension of work on the line. For this purpose, horizontal conflictuality will be defined as the potential of conflictual characteristics inherent to the social relationships on the shopfloor itself. Here, the horizontal dimension of workplace dynamics refers to the tensions and fault lines that emerge not between hierarchies, but within the supposed level field of the shopfloor. While all production workers technically occupy similar roles in the organizational structure, in practice, distinctions abound – between long-term employees and temporary workers, between apprentices and "holiday jobbers", between skilled and unskilled labourers, and along social axes such as ethnicity, gender and age (cf. Schumann 2013; Anteby & Bechky 2016). These differences may reflect management categories, but they are also actively lived, negotiated and reproduced by the workers themselves.

Although management and the organization of the shopfloor certainly lay the foundation stone to the fragmentation of the workforce – through contracts, spatial separation or selective scheduling – much of the segmentation and tension is self-managed among the workers. Everyday challenges in the labour process, especially those exacerbated by the discontinuity of alternating shifts, often go unresolved. Seemingly mundane issues – variations in working speed, order handling, tidiness, or attention to detail – accumulate into broader patterns of

frustration, finger-pointing and reduced solidarity. What begins as a minor annoyance can turn into a hardened social divide, manifesting in gossip, exclusion or silent competition. These horizontal dynamics are not only key to understanding the lived experience of the workplace, but also speak to deeper cultural scripts of masculinity, pride and group belonging that structure life on the shopfloor.

The problem is not just technical but profoundly social: the lack of direct interaction between shifts means that workers are often more confronted with the traces of each other's work than with each other. When a mistake or perceived shortcoming arises, it is rarely addressed directly. Instead, it is absorbed into a circular economy of gossip and resignation, where indirectness becomes a mode of managing tension. Even when the issue is escalated to a supervisor, the intervention tends to be symbolic rather than transformative – limited by a widespread reluctance to engage in conflict or challenge the fragile equilibrium of group cohesion.

A telling example is Lamin's reaction when a colleague called out his inconsistent tagging of parts. Rather than acknowledging the critique, he snapped back:

"Du bist nicht mein Chef, du kannst mir gar nichts sagen"
("You're not my boss, you can't tell me what to do.")

The situation was quickly handed over to the foreman, who responded with a generic reminder to "pay more attention next time." But no real confrontation took place, no deeper discussion of standards or responsibility emerged. Instead, the issue dissolved – absorbed by the group's tendency to displace responsibility either horizontally (onto one another) or vertically (onto management), while everyone tries to avoid the discomfort of direct address. This points to a broader structure of conflict avoidance, in which even the foreman distances himself from vertical escalation, reluctant to "pass problems upwards."

Rather than being confronted and worked through, tensions are thus redirected, internalized, or dissolved into quiet frustration. Problems remain, but their ownership becomes diffuse. Workers manage them not through resolution but through displacement – onto colleagues, management, or the structural logic of the shift system itself. Horizontal conflict, then, is less about open confrontation and more about silent segmentation, emotional withdrawal and a low-intensity struggle over recognition and respect.

Sick of chit-chat

The horizontal dynamics that have an impact on shopfloor atmosphere are manifold. One of them are (alleged) cumulative sick notes. According to the DAK (German Employee Health Insurance Fund), sick leave was at an all-time high for the second year in a row in 2023 and keeps being this way in 2024 (cf. DAK-Gesundheit). This leads to the fact, that there is a whole political discourse surrounding the big number of sick leaves, with the CEO of Allianz even suggesting stopping payment for the first day of sick leave (cf. dpa-AFX). This is just the last advance of big management figures in this direction after Tesla and Mercedes made themselves advances that strike as patronizing educational measures with ideas of sick visits and part-time payment.

Management is stressed out by this fact but also workers that are not much on sick leave– triggering a defensive mechanism of work ethic and pride related to their work-ethic and consistency, comparable in form to the issue regarding smoke breaks. A colleague from the other shift, Adem, with whom I worked with a lot in the past and in the first week, was seen by Dragan from the neighbouring section, on the construction site while on sick leave. His contract was terminated after Dragan told on him and he is now in court due to a formal error committed in his dismissal. Interestingly enough, he keeps on working in the "counter shift" and he will most likely continue to work there.

This is not the only case in this rubric of workers telling on their colleagues for skipping work. Long-term worker, Senad, was dismissed after also being seen by the very same Dragan while in the arcades playing the slot machine during working hours. Dragan told me: "Yes, I ratted him out! He had already messed it up with us, he just wasn't korrekt [proper or nice]. You also have to be grateful for what the company gives you and not complain all the time". Senad, with whom I worked a lot after school and in between semesters now works as a full-time taxi driver (as he did on the weekends while working at the firm). I met him with my torn Achilles on the marketplace in the city after a visit to the doctor with no one to drive me home. As it plays out sometimes, he spotted me lingering there, offering to drive me home (free of charge of course, he was even offended when I asked him how much I owed him). During the short drive, we talked about his situation and state of mind after being fired. He told me that he was much happier now:

“The work was always good there, but the people… I'm telling you… they were always talking behind the back. There was always something to chit-chat but never to your face. The foremen never did anything because the shop was running smoothly. I’m much happier now, I can arrange my time as I wish, I can work other places with no problems, and I’ve even got more money coming in.”

Also, he has a lot more energy now, he says, and that’s the way he looked as well: much more colour in his face, not yellowed by routine and the white, fluorescent lights of the shopfloor. We talked about the industrial logic of day-to-day hard work with the same routines: “People get fucked by this system, it exploits them and spits them out on the other side. It’s the same logic everywhere (as in industry companies).” Nevertheless, he didn’t seem to bitter about the way it ended, he said he was still thankful for the job and the time at the firm. It goes to show that straight forward analysis of work on the shop floor is not possible. Contradictions as well as layers have to be put into account. One can be thankful for some things and be harshly criticizing a different part of the job – or even the same thing one might be thankful for.

There are many stories, anecdotes and industry myths floating around while working the shifts. Not all of them are harming, much of it is an organic part of building belonging by relating the firm’s story in its context of the region to one’s own story. Those anecdotes are basically time and/or place separator regarding other firms or “the old days” that are fun to hear and tell stories of other, mostly better, but also harder times when the community on the shop floor was much stronger and united, as well as other places, where work is harsher, and the culture is much worse. Much is talked about lived experiences of oneself or of acquaintances at other places. Harry, a colleague who I always met during breaks in the smoking area, talked about his time working the alternating triple shift which left him confused and unhappy due to its inherent unsteady rhythm, and Timo talks about being taken advantage of and bullied at the car repair shop. Some anecdotes can be highly entertaining just as some can get quite dark. (One famous “industry myth” tells the story of a big automotive supplier nightshift where a worker was offered money to blow air pressure in his behind which ended with him tearing his sphincter and dying.) This phenomenon, of course, is not specific to the shop floor as similar dynamics are to be seen in most work environments. Nevertheless, it is intrinsic to the shop due to its close(d)ness and daily routinized exchange.

The other inside

Within this environment, belonging and exclusion manifest in multiple ways – whether through the division between "the workers" and "them up there" (management), generational differences, heteronormativity or cultural background. For example, to be accepted or respected, one must actively demonstrate adherence to the shop floor's work ethic. As a former colleague once told me, in a mix of jest and sincerity: "You're not lazy – unlike the rest of your generation." These informal boundaries structure daily interactions and define who is seen as "one of us" and who remains an outsider.

The threshold between harmless shop-floor banter, general roughness in speech, and outright discriminatory behaviour is fluid. Gossip, while serving as a common form of informal workplace communication, can also function as a mechanism for reinforcing power structures and social hierarchies. The "cultural other" within the firm – whether women, people of colour, or younger workers – experience gossip, stereotyping, and exclusion disproportionately. The shopfloor becomes a space where difference is marked and maintained, shaping how individuals are treated and what is expected of them.[5]

Lamin, a young man who fled Gambia alone as a child, is an example of this ambivalent positioning of the "other." On the one hand, he is praised as an exception:

"Der isch ned so wie die Anderen, der ischn richtiger Schaffer"
("He is not like the others; he is a really hard worker.")

Yet, this very praise reinforces his otherness. Lamin is not simply accepted as a worker – instead, he is positioned as an exceptional representative of his cultural group. This is a widespread issue whereby immigrants are expected to be here to work, that their existence here is defined by work. Due to the internalized racism within the workplace, he must work even harder to gain the full respect of his peers – his worth is defined by his disposition to work hard.

[5] The Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS) has published the Mobbing Report: "Mobbing in the World of Work: Significance, Prevalence and Prevention" together with the research report "Representative Study on Mobbing in the World of Work in the Federal Republic of Germany" by the University of Leipzig. It not only shows that bullying is a phenomenon of social relationships in the workplace with negative consequences for those affected, employees involved and companies, but also that those affected by bullying were younger; people with a migration background; with a lower income compared to the net equivalent income of the people or with a low socio-economic status. (cf. BMAS 2025)

On the other hand, Lamin experiences point-blank racism behind his back. Maria – a worker from a partnering department – confronted Oleg about sloppy errors in their shift. Oleg refused to take responsibility, responding defensively. Lamin, loyal to his shift mate, sided with Oleg and snapped at Maria, telling her to mind her own business. While Lamin's response was inappropriate, what followed was even more telling:
Maria and Tobi again decided they would no longer communicate issues directly with the counter shift but escalate problems to the foreman instead. Behind Lamin's back, they made a racist remark:

"Man sollte ihn direkt wieder zurückschicken."
("One should send him straight back.")

There are two horizontal issues at interplay here: One of them is the continuous shift from horizontal problem-solving to vertical escalation. Instead of resolving issues among themselves, the workers rely on management to intervene – reducing their own agency in workplace dynamics. And secondly, the racialized reaction. Instead of treating Lamin's actions as something to be worked on, he is marked as an outsider entirely while even resorting to hateful statements behind his back.

Another instance of workplace division revolves around the perception of unfair treatment. Luca suspected that Lamin received preferential treatment when he was granted a permanent position before him as he said he was there before him. Luca framed this as an unjust advantage for people of colour, claiming that "nowadays, they get all the benefits." When I asked Luca whether he had raised the issue with the foreman, or whether Lamin's contract might have been expedited due to his asylum-seeking status, he simply replied: "It wouldn't change anything anyways." Though Luca never formally contested the decision, his resentment remained – directed both at Micha, the foreman and at Lamin himself. His perception of Micha as a gutless follower of orders and Lamin as an undeserving beneficiary of workplace policies fuelled a lingering frustration and his grumbling attitude.

Ralf once said

"Man sucht immer das andere als Gegenspieler"

("You always look for the other as an opponent/antagonist")

when I asked him about all those different dynamics at work there. You have the other shift, the vertical other, the other firms that produce low quality and the other ethnicity that all play a part in this social negotiation of outside and inside.[6]

As alluded to, ethnicity and nationality are still very present and topics of discussion. Of course, one has to keep in mind that many other social spaces are much more homogenous than the shop floor, e.g.: the office or most of the sport teams, which are usually dominated by white German people and are therefore not place of such exchanges. Much of the conversations on the shopfloor that regard the cultural backgrounds are very much friendly and built on banter towards the colleague. With the neighbouring unit, for instance, they call each other in a cheeky way by their nationality (or city) at times: “hey Armenier“, “hey Saloniki“, or “hey Albaner”. This is a friendly marker of belonging that is heard sometimes through the whole production shop.

Generally, there is an interest in each other’s cultural background to be seen and people compare upbringings or time stamps. This happens especially in the smoker’s area during late shifts where the ambience is much less distorted by noise or rush. I experienced a lot of exchange regarding heritage and lived experiences in the smoker’s area where you could sit down and really talk for a minute without the imminent sense of urgency to get back, as in the later stages of the late shift everything quiets down, and no bosses are around so people become more comfortable. In these moments the topics of conversation seem to shift to much more “deeper” things compared to the more Smalltalk based topics mid-day. People share their ways of life and experiences made regarding processes of migration and what it’s like to go back to those places with the beauty and corruption of it; experiences with war or struggles like health issues and separation etc. It suddenly becomes a safe space where questions and stories of all kinds are welcome due to the closeness that this space induces.

National belongings often come up during talks about politics where the respective loyalties and consumed media becomes clear. Just to name a few: There is Ralf and his microaggressive “My grandad used to kill their ancestors, now I work with them”; the conversation about the so called “Graue Wölfe” (the *Grey Wolves*, a Turkish nationalist movement) and the player Merih Demiral who showed their symbol after scoring a goal during the Euros, which enraged the Armenian colleague Ivan from the neighbouring department. After there was a brawl of Turkish

[6] For more readings regarding sociology of migration and labour in Germany see: Mihajlovic: 1987; Pries: 2010; Fauser: 2023.

and Serbian people next to the sports betting place he was telling me that he believed that "they (the Turkish guys) are always like that, always cause trouble, when they are five people they have big balls, otherwise there is nothing"; Milan's way of supporting Serbia and Russia by saying "It's Zelenskyy's fault that there is still a war", possibly due to the closeness of Serbian national media to Russia which led to us strongly debating this topic; or Luca claiming that "Ukrainians are just exploiting the asylum system". These are just some examples of nationalised talk on the shopfloor where a clear "otherization" of the historic (and present) antagonist is observable. It becomes a realm where belonging is negotiated through connecting oneself to a national or ethnic group.

Man, oh man

As conflict is an inherent part of social organization, gender on the shop floor is no exception. In a male-dominated workplace where labour is demonstratively physical and technical, masculinity is both a performance and an expectation. Being a man, being hetero, being a worker – these identities are deeply intertwined, shaping social interactions and the boundaries of belonging. Gendered dynamics surface in both explicit and implicit ways. The mentioned infamous German newspaper "BILD" that Ralf reads during breaks becomes a vehicle for venting frustrations about a changing world, as his rants against a female Algerian boxer or generally trans athletes reveal not just personal bias but an underlying anxiety over shifting gender norms. As Anteby and Bechky put it: "Central to the definition of what it means to 'be a man' is 'to not be a woman'" (2016: 426). These remarks, while directed outward, also reflect a fragility of masculine identity within a space that was of immense male dominance, increasingly challenged by social transformation. Topics like gender and sexuality arise far more frequently than expected, revealing how the binary division between "man" and "woman" that dominates workplace discourse no longer relates to the realities outside the factory gates.

On the shop floor, masculinity is reinforced through everyday interactions – banter, jokes or competitive displays of strength. The notion of "work as a masculinity contest" (Berdahl et al. 2018: 422) remains relevant, visible in the physical realm through endurance, workload, and risk-taking, and in social spheres where discussions about cars, sports, and politics reaffirm traditional masculine ideals. A strong leader's crackdown on crime or immigration is praised, mirroring values of toughness and dominance embedded in industrial work. Gender, like class and race, thereby functions as a system of stratification and exclusion (cf. Acker 1990; Berdahl

2007). The expectation to embody a physically capable, self-sufficient worker persists – and those who fail to meet these norms risk ridicule. In a previous vacation job at an automotive supplier, struggling to loosen a bolt earned me mocking comments about my generation's supposed weakness and even questioning my mother's cooking: "Kochd deine Mutter nix gscheids?" ("Doesn't your mother cook something proper?"). While the firm where I conducted my research had a more tempered tone, the underlying structures remained similar.

Even when technology provides alternatives, masculinity and said contest continues to shape workplace behaviour. On my line, workers often carried heavy instruments by hand rather than using the crane installed to reduce strain and injury. Despite its practicality, physical labour remained a badge of honour, reinforcing traditional gender norms. I even caught myself doing the same – whether out of habit, pride, or subconscious conformity. Of course, this isn't universal: one colleague dismissed the need to "prove" anything, saying that it would be "stupid," and preferred saving his back after finally getting the crane a couple of years ago. This marks a subtle form of resistance, diverging from hegemonic masculinity by embracing care for one's body over brute performance. While the crane was designed to assist workers, it disrupts established gendered expectations, altering how labour is embodied and perceived – thus reshaping "how technology-led employers reshape how employees perceive their own bodies and their sensual relation to work" (Anteby & Bechky 2016: 504).

Still, this shift can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, using such technology may reflect a counter-hegemonic stance. On the other, refusing to use it might signal resistance to management or to changing norms, thereby reinforcing traditional ideals of masculine strength and self-sufficiency. Depending on the lens, even if inherently toxic or self-destructive, macho contests can become a form of symbolic resistance – especially when confronting imposed norms that challenge the masculine values embedded in organizational culture (cf. ibid: 433).

The smoker space, again, breaks these boundaries of masculine talk and bravado. In conversations with groups of three to four, I experienced moments where taboo topics such as testicular cancer screening, intimate shaving, women's gynaecological visits, and even sex came up. These exchanges were more open and vulnerable than the often crude or performative discussions on the line where sex comes up as well but in the latter form. This suggests that while the broader workplace reinforces heteronormativity, some liminal micro-spaces allow for its partial suspension – though always within certain limits, especially regarding time and space.

Yet while men navigate these implicit pressures, women on the shop floor confront what Regina Becker-Schmidt (2010) terms a "doppelte Vergesellschaftung" – a "doubled societalisation" that reflects the structural demands placed upon them both in the workplace and in the private sphere. Their presence in manufacturing remains marginal and usually limited to non-shopfloor jobs in offices. When they are employed, they are often assigned to tasks marked by repetitiveness due to huge amounts of small parts, low physical strain (in the sense of strength, there is certainly a different physical and psychological strain inherent to the job) and lower social status inside the firm. These jobs are often filled by older, long-term female employees or workers with disabilities through the firm's inclusion program. Other workers joke about these departments, reinforcing a hierarchy of labour that places "real work" in the domain of male bodies. This reflects a gendered logic of capitalist production; wherein feminized labour is rendered invisible or devalued (cf. Goldin 1995; Dinkelman & Ngai 2022).

Moreover, the societal expectation that women simultaneously fulfil roles as caretakers and workers deepens their structural disadvantage. While men's identity at work is bolstered by performance and status, women's labour is framed as supplemental and rarely tied to the same ideals of pride or recognition. The interaction between these groups is minimal, with exceptions like Maria who was the only woman on the shopfloor not working these lines, emphasizing not only gendered segmentation but the broader devaluation of feminized labour within capitalist production. With changes in what we see and interpret as "work" and who is equipped to perform this work, positions and status are being rearranged, further destabilizing said prototypical male manufacturing man.

Horizontal tensions are negotiated within the small-scale social networks that emerge through shared breaks, basic similarities in routine or cultural proximity. The smoker's corner emerges here as a crucial space – not just for gossip, but for vulnerability and community. Intimate conversations about health, relationships and struggles in this seemingly liminal space reveal a different mode of communication, removed from the productivity-driven or crude language of the line. A stark contrast is provided by the break room, where small talk about football, the news, or silence dominate. These micro-environments shape different registers of speech and belonging on the shopfloor.

As we have seen, the horizontal dimension of shopfloor dynamics is imprinted with missing spaces for exchange, and possibilities for the pending conflictuality turning into "true", as in

productive, conflict. Many times, workers escalate their conflicts to their superiors as they are missing the tools to find internal solutions. Horizontal conflicts manifest in misunderstandings, diverging practices between shifts, or perceived lack of effort by peers. These are not merely personal disputes but structural features of shift work, lack of shared space and absence of institutionalized handover routines. The resulting issue of this design however is not only technical but profoundly social. Workers from different shifts are often confronted more with the results of each other's labour than with each other directly. Thus, dissatisfaction festers silently and internally, feeding into gossip, resentment or apathy rather than being productively addressed. A notable example of horizontal deflection is the case of Lamin, whose sloppy tagging was questioned. His defensive reaction – "You're not my boss" – not only reveals a breakdown in peer-to-peer accountability but also reflects the absence of legitimate channels for feedback and mediation.

The group's passive solution, to defer to the foreman, only underlines the lack of a functioning conflict-resolution framework. Yet the foreman's habitual avoidance of confrontation points to a systemic incapacity – or perhaps unwillingness – to deal with conflict as a productive force of truth and potential betterment. Chantal Mouffe's (2005) insight of what she coined "agonism" is helpful here: rather than eliminating conflict or "producing harmony", she argues that democratic and pluralistic settings require that conflict be channelled through constructive contestation. In contrast, the factory structure, though steeped in hierarchy, routine and performance metrics, does not offer space for such contestation to occur, and conflict is often managed by avoidance, gossip and vertical escalation which undermine the group's potential for autonomy and solidarity.

4 Worker's Culture, Language and Resistance

In this chapter I will discuss the cultural context that creates this working space and the way people communicate. The plant is interesting to analyze from this participatory perspective because it allows for the analysis of many different factors of belonging and lived experience that shape unique settings of work, interaction and language creation. These settings, that can only be conceived from within, become more than "just" work, dialect or form of talking, they are used for essential purposes of self-positioning, differentiation, belonging and resistance.

I work therefore I am

Work (Arbeit) is not merely a means of economic survival but carries an inherent subjective *Sinnanspruch* (claim to meaning) that is deeply embedded in cultural narratives and social identity (cf. Menz, Seeliger 2024). As Beckmann and Spohr (2022: 16f) argue, "Humans don't just have to work, but generally they should and want to". This dual nature of labour – both necessary and desired – is particularly evident in the South-West German manufacturing context, where Protestant work ethic, historical labour traditions and corporate structures shape the ways workers relate to their work(place).

Frederick Gamst (1995) offers a useful framework to understand this dynamic by distinguishing between the coercive and voluntary aspects of work. Coercion refers to labour as a structural necessity, dictated by economic and organizational imperatives, whereas voluntarism relates to work as a source of personal fulfilment, identity and social meaning. This distinction is crucial in analysing the German *Schaffermentalität* (the mentality of the hard worker) which oscillates between these two poles: work is both an external obligation and a self-imposed expectation to achieve and create. The well-known Swabian phrase "schaffe, schaffe, Häusle baue" (work, work, build a house) encapsulates this deeply ingrained ethos, reflecting the historical connection between labour, material security and social standing. Again, being a hard worker, as well as being perceived as one is a great source of being able to belong as mentioned before in the examples of Lamin, and young people in general. Symbolical representation of labour and work, its subjective representation in the consciousness of the workers

He, Lamin, once told me “Weißt du Vale, ich will einfach nur schaffen” (“You know, Vale, I just want to work and that’s it”). I saw this as an instance whereby after all the struggles and migration, having a secure job, working and being able to afford a solid living, might just be enough (for the moment at least). Something similar goes for Dragan, who’s young adulthood has been nothing but tumultuous with him slipping into criminality and paying the price. He also is content with his basic working situation which lends a steady socio-economic situation. Therefore, the primary condition in which you land at a place, definitely has an impact on how you relate to your work(place), whether you “doomsay” due to labour conditions and corporate structures or coming from a darker place, appreciate the situation around you more than some of your colleagues.

Gamst’s concept of work as a site of identity formation (cf. 1995: 32) further highlights how employees derive a sense of self-worth from their labour which is echoed by Menz and Seeliger (2024: 11), who emphasize that “self-realization at work and the identity that employees derive from their work is reflected in concepts such as producer pride, but also in the positive identification of employees with their company.” This highlights the ways in which labour, far from being a neutral or merely technical, inevitable process, is both shaped by and generative of complex social relations and self-identification.

However, this identification is increasingly challenged as traditional work as well as workplace attachments erode under globalized corporate restructuring. Where once workers felt a strong sense of belonging to their firm, modern branding strategies, corporate architecture and managerial discourses fail to resonate with employees' lived experiences. Ralf, for example, often times mentioned that “damals” (“back then”) there were more communal activities, e.g. yearly parties, less strict codes of work and generally more interaction between the different entities that created a much more familial environment. This speaks to the ways in which vertical restructuring reprograms horizontal communal efforts and historic affiliation with the employer.

Many factors are at play that shift this perception of the identification with the family-owned Mittelständler. Most are part of the general practical shift in how businesses are led and how they have to function (or perceived to have to function) in modern times. However, many of those factors are of subjective nature – which doesn’t mean they are non-existent, just not as measurable. For example, there is an interaction between the objective and subjective elements of language shifts on the shopfloor. As globalized corporate language manifests in “shop floor meetings” and audits, objectively the language changes, while subjectively the

workers feel as they aren't included anymore, alienated by the corporate, technical language of organization. Therefore, instead of assimilating, identification shifts towards internal workplace culture itself – rituals, habits, and language – rather than the prescribed outwards-moving "corporate identity".

"I speak therefore I am"

Language is a key element in this identity formation and negotiation. It serves as both, a tool and a marker, of workplace culture, facilitating social bonding and group differentiation. The shopfloor is characterized by a distinct "micro dialect" that consist of unique words, technical wordings, and linguistic adaptations. This form of communication has different layers and might seem like an obscure and random dialect at first, but is actually built on different language "blocks":

Primary language of communication is German, of course, in its specific regional variant, which contains what is left of the local dialect (Mundart) that is itself strongly influenced by Swabian and Franconian dialects. Nowadays, the dialect has changed significantly as it experienced the same fate as many others. Historically, it was under pressure to adapt to the Swabian language, as a large proportion of the dignitaries (pastors, teachers, civil servants) came from the Swabian region. Furthermore, since the 1950's, many medium-sized companies were established, that attracted students, as well as German and migrant workers (Gastarbeiter) which led to a continuing shift of the original *Mundart*. Finally, in modern times, the globalized youth and refugees trying to make a living in the region, have all but little connection to the old version of the dialect, often decried as a farmer's language. The now used linguistic base – depending on the exact location inside the region and demographic factors – would be a mix of dialect and standardized Hochdeutsch.

This regional dialect, particularly in contexts of work, is known as a "Schaffersprache", which translates to the language (Sprache) of the hard worker (Schaffer), reinforcing its cultural values of diligence. The word *schaffen* is a typical word strongly connected to the cultural group of the Swabians. In my experience, this word and the above-mentioned phrase does depict the mentality in the region quite well in a way, because of the strong inherent connection to wage labour with the end goal to build a homestead for the family. The region in question is mainly protestant in belief and mentality. It depicts very distinctly Weber's pronounced "protestant work-ethic": Hereby, the dedication to secular labour in the form of

one's *Beruf* (i.e. profession but also calling or mission) represents a life's work before God. The emphasis on hard work, discipline, and efficiency persists, even without explicit religious motivations. Initially religious implications as in the example of work-ethic and also *sparen*, which translates to saving money but also to living frugally, moulded the mentality and language. This frugal mentality is present in daily life and reputation of Swabians around Germany. Also, swearing and grumbling or complaining (bruddln and meckern) is very present in a day's work. Some workers, like Luca, take it to the extreme so much so that the rather non-confrontative shift leader Tobi went at him for always complaining. This habit of swearing or grumbling is a widespread cliché of Swabians, especially the men, who are notoriously grumpy.

Evidently, there is a strong link between working, the dialect and prevalent mentality in this region. Certainly, this doesn't come up too much in an explicit way. Mentality is informed by language in a subtle way coming from many years of working culture transported into the familial and individual identities. While the general mentality, coming from a protestant working ethos, impacts the language, it seems that the language influences the mentality in a reciprocal or circular fashion. The day-to-day work is at the centre of one's social life. For some workers that were not socialized in this region, it is estranging. In a talk with Luan, I asked him whether he wanted to stay here forever or go back to Kosovo where a big part of his family still is. He responded that he would like to return at some point. After asking him why he would like that, he told me that for him, here is only work, that there is nothing to live or do, just to work and to die.

We speak therefore we are

Gamst's argument that work is socially constructed (1995: 44) is particularly evident in the linguistic environment of the shopfloor. Language functions as a key mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, shaping workplace hierarchies and reinforcing collective identity. This aligns with Brennan et al.'s (cf. 2007: 398) argument that the "lived-experience" of life at work is essentially socially constructed, which manifests itself in specific workplace jargon, rituals and "code talk".

Language on the shop floor is more than just a dialect: it is an active site of identity negotiation. Certain words and expressions function as informal markers of belonging – some

exclusive to specific teams or departments – others shared across the shopfloor or even across the company, like jokes about the quality of their main competitor. Due to decades of labour migration, the spoken language has incorporated lexical elements from Turkish, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, among others. These borrowed words, such as “moruk”, “jebote”, “bljad”, “kuraz” or „çabuk çabuk“, stemming from the multiple cultural backgrounds and upbringings – as well as the tendency to exchange words and swear on the shopfloor – create a shopfloor-specific ethnolect. For outsiders, these rather obscure references, inside jokes or grumbling terms might be difficult to penetrate, while for insiders this is the normal exchange, the very language itself marking their inside-belonging. This echoes Gamst’s (1995: 67) observation that workplace language evolves both as a functional necessity and as an expression of worker identity. He argues that this dynamic language use reflects broader social structures while also shaping group cohesion, hierarchy and resistance.

This form of language that is built through including idiosyncratic wordings that either can’t be translated in a consistent fashion, or – as most of the times – contain a certain informal cultural value, making it contextual wordings that entail much more information than just the translation. The “ethnolect”, entails borrowed words and banter from current workers, but also from past colleagues that left their mark on the shopfloor exchange. The in the beginning mentioned Viktor, a Russian “Haudegen” for example, was notorious for his rants towards the machines or management while using a multitude of the word “bljad” to emphasize his anger. He might be pensioned now but the word and also, an implicit way of remembering him through this word, stays.

“Speak so that I can see you,” Socrates is said to have claimed – a fitting phrase for the layered linguistic dynamics of the shopfloor. Language here is not merely a neutral tool of communication but a vehicle for social positioning, belonging and distinction. Different language blocks interact with each other and are vertically and horizontally distributed across the field: on the one hand, there is the superimposed technical jargon, corporate terminology like “Kundenservicegrad”, Anglicisms like “shop floor meeting”, and the sanitized Hochdeutsch spoken by parts of management or HR; on the other, the dialectal speech of the “Schaffer”, the locally rooted workforce, combines with increasingly hybridized ethnolects, shaped by migration, youth culture and everyday banter.

These forms of speech do not exist in isolation – they are in constant contact, clashing and blending depending on the situation and the speakers’ position in the hierarchy. Gamst (1995) suggests that workplace language both reflects and shapes power relations – a claim that

certainly holds in many ways, but perhaps also oversimplifies the ways language operates on the shopfloor. Rather than being a direct instrument of domination or control, the interaction of language blocks often unfolds through subtler, more ambivalent dynamics. For instance, the use of dialect or ethnolect is not only about resistance or solidarity, but also about emotional labour, humour, or tactical positioning in moments of ambiguity. At times, dialect serves as a marker of pride and local rootedness, while at other times, it can be merely a performance of class identity. Similarly, while *Hochdeutsch* may index authority, it can also produce distance, artificiality or mistrust when used in informal shopfloor interactions.

My own experience illustrates how this linguistic terrain invites constant negotiation. Returning to the factory as both researcher and temporary worker, I found myself adapting quickly, reactivating vocabulary from past jobs and intuitively picking up new idioms – an adjustment not just out of practical need but out of a desire to be read as someone who knows the ropes: as someone who belongs. By performing "acts of identity" we can deliberately try to influence the perception of our identity through our speech (cf. Gardt 2015: 105 ff.). This adaptation or "code-switching" therefore is not merely passive assimilation. It is also a process of navigating inclusion and exclusion, of using my "linguistic capital" (Bourdieu 1991) as a form of currency navigating this dual role. In that sense it is tangible that language plays a constitutive role in workplace dynamics with its function often being improvisational, ambiguous and relational. Shopfloor identity connected to language here always includes alterity, the other with our own. In the shopfloor microcosm, speech becomes action, and dialect, ethnolect, wordings and idiom are social signals, laden with embodied histories and a certain spatial memory of language and experience of differentiation.

"Tactics"

Workplace language is a site of negotiation, control, and, at times, subtle resistance. On the shopfloor, communication unfolds not just through orders and metrics but through jokes, silence, sarcasm, and tone. These linguistic registers reveal much about the relational dynamics between workers, management, and the shifting boundaries of authority. While bodily routines are heavily disciplined and schedules tightly managed, speech can become one of the few remaining areas where ambiguity and improvisation can flourish. Sarcasm, in particular, emerges as a tactic of everyday resistance, a linguistic gesture that destabilizes imposed authority without openly confronting it. This section explores how such practices can

be read as acts of symbolic struggle – not as organized resistance, but as micro-political gestures embedded in daily life.

Michel de Certeau's concept of "tactics" is instructive here:

> "I call a "tactic," […] a calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. **The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance**. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. **The "proper" is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time – it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing."** Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities." The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them." (De Certeau 1984: xix)

While strategies are the domain of institutions and structures, tactics are the improvised "moves" of those who lack power but still find ways to inhabit and manipulate systems from within. Workers on the shopfloor, largely excluded from meaningful decision-making, use sarcasm, mimicry and informal commentary to cope with their position creating rhetoric or narrative tactics. Several of these communicative efforts or even micropolitical acts we've already discussed, most of them operate under the radar of institutional control or are of rudimentary calculus, but they are far from passive. They are "moves" in a field of power that reassert agency and subtly reconfigure relationships of domination.

The previously mentioned "candle-gate" can be brought up in this context of tactics. For a tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of what De Certeau calls a "proper (propre)" place – Stani turned the tables and reconfigured – not as subtly in this case – the relationship of power through his action in a situation he theoretically had no control over, or not even a say in. This tactic born out of frustration and spite insinuated itself into the place belonging to the foreman while the "win" of dominating a fragment of time had no opportunity of being kept. On the contrary, this was his last act in this space from which he went out with a bang, at least securing a certain admiration from his peers. While this is rather active resistance, other subversive tactics are much more subtle.

Take, for example, the daily “shop floor meeting,” where management communicates updates and instructions to the shift. At the close of each meeting, the foreman Micha always ends with what he perceives as a playful phrase:

"Hopp hopp, an die Arbeit"
(roughly: "Chop-chop, back to work")

On the surface, it might sound innocuous or even encouraging, perhaps aiming to energize the group. Yet in practice, it often lands as patronizing or performative. The phrase is rarely acknowledged sincerely by workers, instead, it has become an object of ironic mimicry. When used among colleagues later, it is typically repeated in a sarcastic tone – a reflexive echo of turning authority into joke. This transformation – from instruction to inside joke – captures a central dynamic on the shopfloor: language as a tactic to manage power asymmetry.

Sarcasm, in this context, becomes a means of regaining agency in an environment of control. The repetitive and monitored nature of the work lends itself to a particular kind of cynicism. When workers refer to management decisions with phrases like

“Na, da haben sie sich aber wieder selbst übertroffen”
(“Well, there they have really outdone themselves again”),

they are not just being humorous. These comments are small, coded refusals to fully internalize the logic of top-down planning, even while complying with it. Such talk marks a subtle boundary of doing the work but not without a cheeky or snotty commentary, even though in private. These practices of ironic detachment constitute a form of linguistic resistance. Not in the sense of organized protest, but in the small, cumulative acts of symbolic distancing from imposed authority. In a setting where few opportunities exist for open critique or meaningful participation in decision-making, these moments of sarcasm and inside humour preserve a margin of autonomy – however thin.

Resistance and Solidarity

Work slowdowns like those mentioned can be interpreted as subtle resistances to assert autonomy over tasks or simple acts of procrastination to get some time off the line. These forms of subtle resistance might include working more slowly, taking extensive toilet breaks, or quietly resisting management’s demands without openly challenging the system in place.

There are different ways to resist the structural and cultural notion (*schaffen*) to work hard. Many of these ways are "restrictions of output" (Burawoy 1979), which are e.g. finishing the late shift early and procrastinate; ignoring bad parts of the counter shift because "nothing is changing and the foreman doesn't intervene" (Tobi); as well as to not see something as personal responsibility to manage or repair.

While minor resistances exist, solidarity rarely scales into collective action. Rules are quietly circumvented or mocked, but not publicly opposed. When changes occur – like a reorganization of work areas, or a shift in break policy – discontent is widespread but diffused. Responsibility for change is rarely assumed as a group. This is, in part, the effect of a fractured organizational structure. Beyond the shopfloor, interaction with office workers is minimal. Shared spaces are lacking; routines do not overlap; conversations beyond the necessary are rare. The only formal channel connecting the two spheres is the mentioned flawed Betriebsrat which itself functions more as a mediator than as a site for fostering cross-departmental solidarity. Without reciprocal encounters, no shared vocabulary of struggle can form. As a result, even in moments of shared frustration, responses remain isolated or performative.

But, focusing on the shopfloor itself, solidary or resistant actions are rather dispersed. While there certainly are a lot of such situations – some of them already mentioned – collective action is avoided or responsibility individualized. One solidaric example, however, stuck in my mind:

In the time I was there, a measure was taken to prohibit open drinks like coffee mugs which have to be exchanged for closeable drinking units. A week later I forgot about this measure and bought a coffee from the machine. While going away from my workplace to get something from the warehouse, a group of management and foremen happened to pass by the line for an inspection. Of course, they saw the coffee standing right next to the machinery and the foreman snapped a photo of it. When asked who that mug belonged to, Luan replied that he didn't work at this machine but also that he wouldn't know who it belonged to. Impressed by this act of solidarity – he could have just told on the vocation worker; most likely nothing would have happened, and the group would have been protected from possible drama – I went to the foreman to clarify that it was mine to avoid any trouble for the group by taking responsibility. These little acts of reciprocal support, based on a petty, paternalistic rule apparently put into effect and framed "to keep the workers safe", stabilised our relationship on the line. My colleagues teased me the next days, saying that I would be printed in the

company newspaper for my screw up and that they would fire me on the spot next time. Besides the joke of it, it serves as a subtle reminder of the surveillance structure that governs behaviour on the shopfloor and the constant renegotiation of control (and therefore also resistance) in the labour process (cf. Thompson & Smith 2017).

This brings me to the point that belonging on the shopfloor is both conditional and performed. It emerges not automatically through contracts or uniforms but is established through shared experiences, recognition and embeddedness in everyday routines. Belonging in this factory is not only constructed around doing one's job well, but also around symbolic acts – knowing the language games of the shopfloor, having the right attitude toward *schaffen* or sharing in the frustrations over management.

The lived experiences of the people on the shopfloor are not marginal details but central to how individuals understand themselves and each other. Lamin's sole childhood process of migration and him arriving in a foreign place listening to 2Pac on loop; Dragan's time in prison and his, as precarious as colourful, life story of, for example, working as a callboy; Luan's mother's earring that was violently torn from her ear by the Serbian police during war times with him watching as a youth; Senad's growing up in the besieged Sarajevo selling cigarettes and later having a crazy migratory story of working as security on a poppy field in Afghanistan before going back to Europe, always on the run. These life stories are exchanged in moments of informal conversation, often in liminal spaces, "safe spaces" like the beloved smoking area, or idle times during work, suggesting that identity formation at work extends far beyond labour tasks. Cultural exchange is happening on the spot and not conjured by an "open-minded" part of society but lived through experience. Workers are telling stories of heritage and migration, travels and failures. People that, outside of the company's realms, would have never been at the same place, are bound together through the factory. This is one of the huge differences to office jobs, where you see a much more homogenous group of people working together. The action of *schaffen* here in a way creates meaning, as a uniting and quasi-levelling process despite or rather due to the facts of working under this capitalist production model.

Streamlined organization and production measures take away some of the opportunity to really get to know each other, listen to one's stories, question existing prejudices – whether of "horizontal" or "vertical" nature – and form solidaric bonds. It is a subtle, maybe even secondary outcome of the pursuit of total uniformity of processes that is inherent to the capitalistic production method. While the internal exchanges on the shopfloor are not always

harmonious and cultural difference can be a source of tension as much as connection, the very missing of time and space to thoroughly interact is itself at the core of alienating and conflictual processes.

However, the act of labouring side by side itself, under similar constraints and pressures, creates an ambiguous but tangible sense of "being in this together." Instances of care and solidarity cut through fragmentations. One example is a Russian-speaking worker translating for a recently arrived Ukrainian cleaning lady. The act was brief and largely unnoticed, but it encapsulated an unspoken ethic of solidarity, extending beyond job descriptions or ethnic boundaries. These micro-acts suggest that even in a setting of fragmented temporalities and competing expectations, workers do not merely reproduce the hegemonic culture – they also remake it in subtle ways. Power asymmetries are stabilized and challenged through everyday practices. It shows that individual action, whether of conscious or unconscious nature, is inherently dual because it can be reproducing hegemonic structure or challenging it (cf. Giddens 1984).

The dual dynamics – of unity through shared working conditions and division through stratification, as well as daily forms of resistance and compliance – are key contradictions of the industrial work environment. It echoes Schmidt's view of Arbeit as both "individual satisfaction and fulfilment, as well as liberating collective experience, but also threat, danger and servitude." (2010: 144 [transl. V.H.]). But it is important to note that workers do not relate to their jobs in a singular fashion, there is no blueprint. For some it is a career, for others a waystation, for some a safe haven after years of struggle, for others and for many still a dead end. In this discussion around the instrumentalism of work, Knapp's (1981) critique of this widely spread myth of what she calls *arbeitsinhaltliche Gleichgültigkeit* – the assumed neutrality toward the content of work – resonates strongly: work means very different things to different people. Specific cultural norms and settings, as well as the lived experience, make the diversity of work experiences immense (cf. Thompson & Smith: 2017).

5 Conclusion

This thesis revolves around but a fragment of the people's realities working on the shopfloor, not only in general but also in this specific case. Different perspectives allow for different stories and other realities shown. Spending more time in other divisions or just in the counter shift would have resulted in a paper, maybe not completely different in tone, but certainly comprised by different stories and therefore with special attention to other topics relevant to the people and me.

Identity in the factory is less a static category than a constantly negotiated positioning. What it means to be a good worker varies by group, shift or even moment. While some adopt management ideals as a point of pride – internalizing productivity metrics and viewing high output as personal achievement; others – or the same people in different moments – resist this framing, engaging in different tactics of coping. Whether those are tactics that refer to time and productivity such as slowdowns, toilet/cigarette breaks or other forms of "restriction of output"; spatial ones of inhabiting and reclaiming space like the smoker's area; or narrative tactics of using language and storytelling to reclaim agency and community. Of course, to reclaim something implies that it was once lost, which speaks to the uniformist, "lean" environment of a capitalist society where these fields of community and space are in contestation. These tactics are fleeting, situational and embodied forms of agency that challenge power – mostly not even by open confrontation – but through the quiet poaching of meaning, space and time.

Workers therefore have to actively work against their working place becoming a "non-place" of identity – a space where workers are operationalized, where conflict is managed spatially and where agency must be enacted through those tactical, informal means. In contrast to top-down managerial strategies that seek to standardize space, time and labour, the workers' everyday speech and navigations of the shopfloor are much more arbitrary. Therefore, the multiplicity of orientations on the shopfloor cannot be captured by a simple dichotomy of compliance versus resistance. Instead, it speaks to the layered, relational and unfinished nature of identity and conflict in the factory.

While workers may not necessarily live in extreme precarity (all of them are still working hard to make a living with rising prices of rent, groceries and fuel disproportionate to their wage-structure), their sense of agency and social mobility has eroded. Instead of climbing up, they are holding on. Instead of feeling part of something bigger, they are fragmented while navigating an uncertain future with many conjuring a better time gone by. The historic idea of the giving *Mittelständler* in South-West Germany which embodies this specific form of industrial organization, regional pride and socio-political identity, deeply tied to the everyday lives of its workers is struggling with the erosion of the working-class' sense of standing and mobility.

All these factors tie into a conflictual setting where vertically created structures of production clearly effect horizontal relationships and solidarity. Issues of gender, race and culture are woven into this fabric of conflictuality, while vertical escalation and avoidance of internal issues – added to the loss of space for contestation – remain at the center of the continuing loss of autonomy and community.

A question I asked myself early on in the process: Does expectation create reality?

Ethnographic writing is not a transparent window into a culture, but a constructed narrative influenced by my choices, perspective and position. Referring back to De Certeau, I also followed a "strategy", namely conducting fieldwork and writing this thesis. Due to my familiarity with the context and having to estrange the people and space to a certain extent for academic purposes, this gave me a strange form of insider-outsider positioning. Lindsay Hamilton manages to describe this situation in her ethnographic work "Muck and Magic" (2007:488):

> "I had to work at becoming a 'stranger', learning to become a virtual outsider by visualizing the everyday discourses of working life as 'data'. As an inside outside observer, my own identities oscillated continuously as I focused and re-focused my gaze from within the multiple sites of habitus that I occupied."

Here, in a way, the language choice gave me both, an upside and a downside. The latter due to the fact that it is unlikely that this work will be accessible for people like the one's I worked with and wrote of; as well as the challenge of translating a very specific, German context, not only in the literal, linguistic sense but also in a more symbolic, cultural sense.

It also presented me with an upside that came surprising to me, which was the estranging effect that the technical process of translation gives to a work. This might seem odd, but it gave me this well needed distance from a social context very much familiar to me.

Finally, at the core of this work lies the habitual or “infraordinary”; moments and routines that are easily taken for granted or overlooked in its inherent everydayness but make out the scaffolding of social life. Instead of placing workers as resistant heroes or passive victims, this study tried to stay with ambiguity: to acknowledge how identity, power and conflict are constantly made and remade, not through grand narratives but through everyday navigation.

Whether or not expectation creates reality, I’ve come to learn that the stories we tell – and choose to listen to – shape how that reality is lived, doesn’t matter the expectation beforehand. I remain deeply grateful for the trust I was given by the workers and my mentors Prof. Ordóñez and Prof. Schmidt to follow this idea into the factory – and for those stories and realities that are there to listen to.

6 Annex

Figures:

Figures 1-8 & 13: V.H.

Figures 9-12: https://www.tagesschau.de/wahl/archiv/2025-02-23-BT-DE/umfrage-aktuellethemen.shtml

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V. Heiß