



The Veterans' Gala: Using tradition to struggle over industrial leadership in labour conflict

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Abstract

Since its privatization in 1995, Kazakhstan's largest steel mill has been in a restructuring process characterized by workforce reduction, augmented pressure on remaining jobs and labour conflict over wages, work conditions and corporate social responsibility. In 2013, in an attempt to re-establish harmonious relationships with workers, management invited the steel mill's former labour aristocracy to join a newly established veterans' council, a forum resembling traditional *aksakal* councils, to discuss the company's difficult situation. In the context of a banquet given in honour of the veterans, tradition became the contested terrain over which labour and capital struggled to endorse the own vision of industrial future. As corporate capitalist visions of efficiency and professionalism, ethno-national concerns for harmony and stability, and practices rooted in the Soviet labour legacy clash against each other, tradition is staged by actors as a practice which can either affirm or challenge industrial leadership in labour conflict.

Keywords

steel industry; Kazakhstan; traditionalization; labour conflict; veterans

Introduction

Good evening! Today, dear veterans, we have gathered you on a great occasion: Kurban-ait. (...) Different nations celebrate Kurban-ait differently, but the essence of this feast is everywhere the same: It is the great feast of monotheism, the first and greatest feast of humanism. On this day people invite friends and close ones. People who once were enemies become friends. People make peace, make plans for the future. It is a unifying holiday. And we are happy today to have you at this table.¹ (O. T. Kamzabaev, Director of labour relations, ArcelorMittal Temirtau, 17 October 2013).

In this opening speech, the Director of labour relations at Kazakhstan's largest, former Soviet steel works also known as Karagandinskiy Metallurgicheskiy Kombinat (colloquially referred to as Karmet), was addressing an audience of former workers, engineers and foreign managers

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2
3 invited to a lavish dinner arranged by the company on the occasion of the Muslim feast of
4
5 Kurban-ait. The setting was the sumptuous dinner hall of the company-owned Steel Hotel, the
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7 most distinguished and expensive venue in rust-belt town Temirtau, in Kazakhstan's Karaganda
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9 region. Renowned for its Indian cuisine, the hotel is frequented mostly by foreign staff on short-
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11 term business trips to the steel plant, or used for corporate events such as the aforementioned
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13 gathering. Invited were some forty men from all over the steel plant's various shop floors. They
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15 were sitting at lavishly loaded banquet tables, the dark suits of many of the elderly adorned with
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17 Soviet medals and badges, a reminder that the plant, which nowadays is Indian owned, had been
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19 Soviet until some years ago.
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24 The celebration took the ritualized form of a *toi* (Kaz. for feast or celebration), with food
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26 and spectacle, musical accompaniment, and final blessings by religious dignitaries. Alongside
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28 the ritualized division into 'guests' (veterans) and 'hosts' (company managers), carefully
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30 moderated speeches were alternately performed by veterans and company managers, followed by
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32 toasts and heavy alcoholic drinking. Most veterans were appreciative of this belated recognition
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34 in the form of a dinner invitation and for the chance to meet again with former colleagues not
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36 seen since long. Also present, from the management's side, were the Indian General Director, Mr
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38 V.M., accompanied by his personal translator, the Polish human resources (HR) Director, Mr
39
40 A.W., and Mr I. Kh., the Czech chief engineer responsible for the production process. They were
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42 the company's most important executives and public personalities in Temirtau. Also on the 'host
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44 side' were three young women from the company headquarters, secretaries to some senior
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46 manager, who sat at a separate table and came to hand over bags of presents to the veterans and
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48 to be available for a dance over the musical intermezzos between speeches. A few journalists, the
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3 cameraman of the company-owned local TV channel, and a musical ensemble performing
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5 Kazakh and Russian hits and classics completed the picture.
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8 The veterans' gala was a unique event generated by unique circumstances. Convening
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10 Soviet veterans, some of whom had worked up to fifty years in the steel plant and were declared
11
12 atheists, on the occasion of the religious celebration of Kurban-ait, was unprecedented in
13
14 Temirtau. Even more exceptional was the reason behind the invitation, namely, to establish a
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16 new institution, a veterans' council. Conceived for the task of advising and assisting
17
18 management in difficult choices ahead, it was inspired on the model of the Kazakh traditional
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20 council or '*aksakal* council' of elders, which used to be influential in pre-Soviet Central Asian
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22 societies (Krader 1963; Bacon 1966; Martin 2001; Beyer 2006). Mr Kamzabaev² was the
23
24 dinner's mastermind, initiator and toastmaster (Rus./Georgian *tamadá*, cf. Mühlfried 2006).
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26 Himself of veteran's age, he was the only local, only Kazakh, and the only one not knowing
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28 English among the more powerful foreign management directors attending the event. The
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30 veterans' gala and the unconventional idea of establishing a veterans' *aksakal* council were
31
32 Kamzabaev's personal initiative: a deliberate invention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger
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34 1983), presented, as we shall see, as a measure to overcome an impasse in labour-management
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36 relations.
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42 By discussing the veterans' gala, in this paper I reflect on the uses of tradition in
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44 industrial labour conflict in contemporary Kazakhstan. As connoted by Soviet attitudes and
45
46 practices, the worlds of heavy industry and tradition are diametrically opposed and, at first
47
48 glance, unlikely bedfellows. While heavy industry was in many ways seen as representing the
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50 pinnacle of Soviet modernity in 'backward' Central Asia, Soviet prejudice against local cultures
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52 and forms of religiosity framed tradition as 'traditionalism', the threatening opposite of socialist
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3 modernity (Poliakov 1992). Whilst actively suppressing local forms of traditionalism, Soviet
4 policymakers themselves early on adopted top-down traditionalisms by putting to use tailored
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8 ‘traditions’ in the interest of the state (Grant 1996; Igmen 2012). In the post-Soviet climate of
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10 national and cultural re-effervescence such Soviet-devised traditionalization ‘from above’ has
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12 continued, now in the interest of vigorously nationalising independent states. At the same time,
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14 following a global re-assessment of tradition (‘multiple modernities’, ‘indigenization of
15
16 modernity’), a new interest for local traditions’ liveliness, adaptability and multiplicity has
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18 triggered new debates about the nature of ‘truth’ and authenticity.³ Essentializing approaches
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20 gained salience all over post-Soviet Central Asia, as newly independent states used cultural
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22 authenticity and tradition to legitimize post-communist rule and even turning it, as in the case of
23
24 the Uzbek mahalla, into a practical tool of governance (Rasanayagam 2011; Massicard and
25
26 Trevisani 2003). At the same time, scholars were detecting and deconstructing newly emerging
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28 traditions ‘from below’, by focusing on people’s inventiveness and industriousness in their
29
30 dealings with custom (Beyer 2016), on tradition’s ‘protean nature’ and its capacity to resurrect in
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32 new cultural practices (Levin 1999: 258, 307), on its inclusive and participatory character that
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34 defies authoritarian leadership models (Dubuisson 2014: 73).
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40 Following this interest in tradition’s inner workings, I will here focus on how tradition is
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42 put to work in labour conflicts among Kazakhstani steel workers. Tradition surfaces in this
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44 context as a way of claiming authority, as a challenge (or assertion) of the industrial status quo in
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46 the steel plant, and as an act of ambition put forward by cultural entrepreneurs. As we shall see,
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48 the veterans’ gala is permeated with efforts in ‘creative’ traditionalization: versatile attempts at
49
50 making, staging and performing references to tradition in order to achieve strategic goals. While
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52 such traditionalization efforts differ in their source of authority, the use intended and the power
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3 of performing actors, the veteran's gala shows how tradition can bring some levelling in the
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5 uneven field of labour struggle.
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8 Through the analysis of how different agents of traditionalization – managers and
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10 veterans – stage their participation in a ritual performance, this article aims at contributing to
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12 regional debates on political performativity (Reeves, Rasanayagam, and Beyer 2014) and notions
13
14 of virtuous leadership (Liu 2012), and to relate these to post-socialist debates on the morality and
15
16 authority of management in industrial relations (Ashwin 1999; Rogers 2006; Trevisani 2018).
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18 Thereby, I rely on concepts taken from debates on global labour precarity (Hann and Parry 2018;
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20 Munck 2013; Neilson and Rossiter 2008) and postsocialist decline and temporality (Burawoy
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22 2002; Collier 2011; Ringel 2018) to show how pre-Soviet, Soviet and neoliberal heritage is
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24 deployed in times of crisis and uncertainty.
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29 While focusing on strategic and antagonistic usages of traditions, I show that the ability to
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31 deploy them persuasively must refer to visions and values inscribed in shared cultural and moral
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33 registers that raise them beyond the merely instrumental. Persuasive traditionalizations are,
34
35 essentially, embedded visions of societal renewal (Liu 2012) that resonate with peoples' lived
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37 heritage. Compelling traditionalizations rely on 'pervasive essentialisms' (Herzfeld 1997) – the
38
39 strategic invoking of notions of past harmony for social actors' specific interests in the present.
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41 In order to be effective, such traditionalizations must be able to 'traverse history' (Sahlins 1999:
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43 409) and to reach out to meanings, associations and values that are shared, believed and felt
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45 collectively. Therefore, an attentive look at the practice of staging and performing tradition must
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47 depart from a narrow 'Hobsbawmian' reading of traditionalization, understood as a mere
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49 strategic and instrumental manipulation of tradition. When deployed to achieve legitimacy and
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3 social consensus in a labour conflict, invoked tradition always conveys underlying concepts of
4 the good and the rightful in industrial relations.
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8 The traditionalization efforts that I observe over the veterans' gala raise fundamental
9 questions about the nature of the capitalist project: what should the company be accountable for?
10 Should the steel plant be run as a social enterprise or as economic business? We shall see how
11 such questions emerge from the tensions and frictions underlying the different visions and
12 understandings that motivate the actors of traditionalization. The social responsibility of the
13 society-producing factory; the corporate logic of capitalist profit; the dominant, state-mandated
14 attempt to accommodate industrial identity to newly defined ethnocultural ('nationality-')
15 demands: surfacing all over the dinner's heated conversations, such issues mark the divided
16 heritages and visions of the industrial future in steel-town Temirtau. They represent the
17 background against which the traditionalization practices observed over the veteran's gala must
18 be analysed and interpreted.
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33 This paper is part of an ethnographic project based on fieldwork carried out in the
34 Temirtau steel plant. At the intersection of global capital, Soviet industrial legacies and
35 Kazakhstani nation-building, it is concerned with changing labour relations, emerging forms of
36 inequality and distinctive patterns of precarity among multi-ethnic steel workers (Trevisani 2015;
37 2016; 2018). While the overall project's focus is on shop floor interactions among workers, here
38 I am concerned with the way in which tradition becomes a tool in labour conflict. It is based on
39 the analysis of the veterans' gala, during which, besides those of the four executive directors who
40 were present at the event, I have recorded 14 veterans' speeches over the three hour-long dinner.
41 By analysing the ritual performance and content of the speeches, the article investigates the
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3 different ways in which local and foreign actors, veterans and management of the steel plant
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5 come to understand and try to impact their industrial present and future by performing tradition.
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11 **Protracted stagnation**

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14 Temirtau has been originally a peasant settlement named Samarkandsky and was made part of
15 the Karaganda Gulag Camp later on (see Barnes 2011; Dulatbekov 2012). It became a mono-
16 industrial town thanks to the construction of its giant steel works in the post-war period.
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19 Moulded by Soviet industrial work and development, the mono-industrial town developed a
20 strong community around the Soviet symbiosis of society and factory (on this see for instance:
21 Buttino 2015). During the Soviet Union, Karmet was a symbol of socialist modernity.⁴ The
22 Soviet plant was technologically up-to-date and an elite training centre for scientific and political
23 cadres. Many party officials, some of them renowned and politically active today, had their
24 background in this plant and today the steel mill is still associated with the President of
25 Kazakhstan, who began his career as a blast furnace operator at Karmet.
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38 With the collapse of the Soviet Union the steel plant had fallen into a severe crisis.
39 Production nearly stopped and Temirtau's population was rapidly declining when the British-
40 based Indian billionaire Lakshmi Mittal took over the plant in 1995 from state ownership. Under
41 Mittal's foreign managers arrears were repaid and production gradually recovered with a
42 modicum of investment into the (by then decrepit) machinery. Decline was reversed, and
43 Temirtauians hailed Mittal as a saviour, everyone being aware that: 'if the *kombinat* doesn't
44 work, the city will stop existing' (Y.F., veteran).
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54 You came to us when it had been very hard for us, when our government was in trouble.
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3 Thanks to you the city still exists, the city blossoms. As we say, by God, your enterprise
4 – our enterprise. The factory works, we also live very well. (E.T., Veteran)
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8 The speech was by a veteran who had worked in the blast furnaces together with President
9 Nazarbayev back in the early days of the *kombinat*, and therefore he was often seen on formal
10 corporate meetings and public occasions to perform the role of the President's friend. Addressed
11 to the imaginary presence of Mittal himself, the speech had a reverential undertone. It was
12 politely centred around conveying gratitude and optimism that serves the company and the
13 government, a message often amplified in official discourses, in which, however, the
14 complexities and more contradictory feelings that circulate in Temirtau around Mittal's
15 ownership of the Soviet-built plant remained concealed.
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27 Temirtauians often credited Mittal for mastering the challenge of averting Karmet's
28 foreclosure. By enduring and overcoming difficulties Mittal successfully managed to adapt
29 management to local constraints and conditions. Tax holidays and regulatory exemptions that
30 were part of the undisclosed privatization deal helped keep the plant afloat and eventually, also
31 thanks to the bullish steel conjuncture of the late 1990s and early 2000s, to run it profitably.
32 After the initial honeymoon period, voices critical of the foreign ownership intensified. Over the
33 years of economic recovery Temirtauians became resentful towards the 'Indians' for siphoning
34 away the profits from the factory formerly owned by the people without 'giving back' adequately
35 to the city. Accusations were directed against the company's radical job cuts, worsening labour
36 conditions, neglect of environmental issues and non-transparent finances. Since Mittal's arrival,
37 workers have lamented a lack of investment and (what many see as exaggerated, 'furious') cost-
38 saving job cuts in the steel plant's many departments and shop floors. Foreign management
39 presented them as inevitable restructuring, deemed necessary to enhance profitability and to
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3 ensure an economically viable future for the steel works. Workers held diametrically opposed
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5 views, fearing that restructuring was undermining the very viability of the steel plant's future.
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8 Such worries were echoed in the veterans' speeches:
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11 Of course, the number of workers had to be reduced, but only to a sustainable degree. In
12
13 the city, there are many who need to work somewhere, and in the steel plant they do not
14
15 hire. The Institute [Temirtau's higher education institute for education and training in
16
17 metallurgical professions] ... we celebrated its 50th's anniversary. The lecture halls were
18
19 empty. No registrations, even when scholarships are available! If registration numbers
20
21 fall, this is because students getting their degrees from that Institute end up working in the
22
23 bazaar. (Y.F., Veteran)
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27 Worries about the loss of inter-generational knowledge transmission were expressed, and
28
29 demands for jobs to be transferred across generations were put forward, since these chains of
30
31 knowledge and skills passed on through families nowadays were being interrupted, because of
32
33 company jobs no longer being available in the plant. The same veteran who speaks above drew
34
35 attention to the double drama of job scarcity in the city and worker scarcity on the shop floor. To
36
37 him, it would be 'better to pay a smaller salary, but employ more people', a philosophy strongly
38
39 opposed by the current management.
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45 By the time of my fieldwork, the steel plant was again navigating troubled waters.
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47 Problems in production, procurement, supply and marketing had augmented. With market
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49 competition growing and prices falling, labour-management relations had gradually become
50
51 more confrontational. After the end of the Soviet Union Temirtau had become more socially
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53 divided as a consequence of privatization, restructuring and nation-building. The Soviet
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55 stratification has been thoroughly shaken in the post-Soviet period as result of political-economic
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3 transformations and migratory flows. Social divides have opened up between regular and
4 precarious workers, between ‘townspeople’ and ‘factory people’,⁵ and between groups of
5 different ethnicities, such as culturally ‘Russian’ (Slavic or Russianized non-Slavic) long-term
6 residents, who still constitute the majority in Temirtau, and newly arrived Kazakhs, the growing
7 minority. By and large everyday relations are unproblematic and peaceful, as proclaimed in the
8 post-Soviet Kazakhstani ideology of multi-ethnic harmony, which stands for ethnic tolerance and
9 pluralism in a multi-ethnic state. However, as elsewhere in Kazakhstan (cf. Moscaritolo 2012),
10 resentments linger. Predominantly Russian steel workers are often skeptical of an independence
11 which they see prioritizing Kazakh interests over theirs. Speaking publicly about these problems
12 is taboo, yet many better-skilled Russian workers have found employment elsewhere and left the
13 country. Despite growing differences, the ‘Indians’ had the merit of unifying an increasingly
14 divided town around a joint criticism against foreign ownership and management.
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31 We see that Temirtau’s working people reside in a context of crisis and restructuring
32 similar to that known from industrial settings affected by postsocialist decline and shrinking
33 (Ringel 2018; Burawoy 2002; Mrozowicki 2011), with the difference that, rather than steep
34 decline and deindustrialization, Temirtau’s industrial trajectory faces more gradual decay and
35 protracted stagnation. Elsewhere, I have termed this oblique, downward trajectory, neither
36 captured by postindustrial shrinkage nor by post-postsocialist recovery, a ‘partial intensification’
37 of the industrial regime (Trevisani 2018: 105). In this context, capital is reluctant at investing
38 into radical restructuring (arguably fearing government interference), thus maintaining labour
39 employed under deteriorating shop floor conditions. The government accepts this compromise
40 because it limits the erosion of jobs and industrial welfare, while labour abides under worsening
41 health and safety conditions and is made to come up for the production shortcomings caused by
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3 ageing machines and lack of investment (Kesküla 2018).
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6 In Temirtau's post-privatization trajectory, workers and the city feel trapped into the
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8 'presentism' (Guyer 2007; Ringel 2018) of the precarious balance that keeps the factory running,
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10 at the same time remaining skeptical of management's and the government's respective promises
11
12 of a radiant future. Workers, as elsewhere under flexible labour regimes, are facing a devaluation
13
14 and precarization of their labour and experience a crisis in the meaning and in the ethos of their
15
16 work (cf. Rajković 2017). Still, under the particular constellation of capital, labour and the
17
18 encompassing Kazakhstani state, workers in Temirtau are not giving up on their visions and
19
20 values and hard work, thanks to which the plant (and the city) continues to cope and survive.
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22 Steel has lost its former Soviet glory, but it continues to define the city's core identity and
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24 economy.
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30 The authoritarian state takes an ambiguous stance between capital and labour, by
31
32 preempting both real criticism and a thorough reform of the employment regime. It thus
33
34 contributes to shaping a form of balanced stagnation, in which company managers' and workers'
35
36 expectations and understandings of each other's entitlements and roles never meet. 'Russian'
37
38 workers idealize the Soviet past and develop, in workers' parlance, a '*chemodannoe nastroienie*'
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40 (lit. 'mood for packing suitcases', i.e. a desire for leaving the country whenever a suitable
41
42 opportunity presents itself), while Kazakh workers look more hopefully at the national future,
43
44 even as their prospects for social mobility promise to be post-industrial ones. At the same time,
45
46 corporate foreigners are frustrated by their inability to implement thoroughly 'efficient' (read:
47
48 neoliberal) labour restructuring. In such a context, low-intensity labour conflict has become the
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50 new normal, also because trade unionism and effective collective action is tolerated only up to a
51
52 certain point by the government.⁶ While Soviet workers enjoyed the system's promise of a
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3 ‘normal life’ (Yurchak 2006: 118-9), entailing a dignified work, social welfare and an inclusive
4 workplace sociality, dissatisfied post-Soviet workers complain about the company, voice anger
5 at work and work recalcitrantly, but are skeptical about their possibilities of articulating more
6 effective resistance against the new corporate labour regime.
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16 **Tools in labour conflict**

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19 In 2013, the causes of the factory’s crisis had become the object of heated debate between
20 the management and the trade union. Workers lamented the harsh working conditions and the
21 decay of an ageing factory. For the management, the company was losing market shares because
22 of the high costs and poor quality of production. The trade union was accusing the company of
23 taking advantage of crisis talks to justify unnecessary austerity measures. While only a part of
24 the company workers backed the trade union in their criticism (the other arguing that it didn’t go
25 far enough) all agreed that the factory’s difficult moment necessitated action and lamented the
26 poor working climate.
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38 The directors of human relations (HR) and labour relations, Mr A.W. and Mr Kamzabaev,
39 took active part in the negotiation with the trade union, but over time they found themselves in
40 growing disagreement, the one pushing for more job cuts, the other vehemently opposing them.
41 Kamzabaev’s sympathies were, he said, for the ‘people’ and for the ‘factory’, not for the trade
42 unions. Equally critical of the ‘Indians’ and the local shop floor managers, he saw in
43 management both the factory’s problem and the key to reform. His plea for management renewal
44 was informed by his philosophy of the three Ps (*Professionalizm, Patriotizm, Poriyadochnost’*
45 (decency)). ‘Flow’, by Chicago organisational psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1990), was his
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3 favourite reference. Hanging on his office wall, the pictures of quality control expert W.
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5 Edwards Deming, British naval historian Cyril Northcote Parkinson and Soviet telepathist Wolf
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7 Messing were points of departure for many a digression on his ideas about good management
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9 during our conversations.
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13 With negotiations for the collective labour agreement having reached a deadlock and
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15 under the urgency of the plant's economic difficulties, Mr Kamzabaev came up with an attempt
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17 at 'inventing' a tradition, by calling for a meeting of the steel plant's veterans. In a broader sense,
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19 the event was an experiment aimed at winning the favour of what, in the eyes of management,
20
21 was the influential group of the former labour aristocracy (elite workers, shop floor managers).⁷
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25 In Temirtau, steel veterans represent a reputable influence group. Although they are not
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27 organized in an association, many are well connected and follow the vicissitudes of the steel
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29 plant as they feel concerned also after having retired because of their family linkages or other
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31 interest in their former place of employment. No census exists, but invited veterans themselves
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33 estimated their number in the hundreds or even around one thousand. By approaching a limited
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35 number of particularly reputable individuals, Mr Kamzabaev wanted to involve this group of
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37 stakeholders in his efforts at mitigating public suspicion against Mittal, by hoping to convince
38
39 veterans to give their public support in a difficult moment for the company. Although veterans
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41 do not exert direct influence over the trade union, the symbolic significance of their potential
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43 consent is considerable and was deemed worth pursuing by Mr Kamzabaev.
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49 Mr Kamzabaev prepared the event carefully over several weeks, compiling lists of
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51 veterans and holding informal talks. After public talks over the renewal of labour agreements
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53 between trade union and management had ended in open quarrel and bad press, inviting veterans
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55 and honouring Kurban-ait seemed to promise better headlines for the company, as it appeared to
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3 be a welcome initiative both for the Kazakhs, who saw Kurban-ait as one of their national
4 celebrations so far disregarded in the company's PR, and for the 'Russian' workers, who knew
5 about Soviet celebrations for labour veterans, later discontinued after privatization.
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10 Mr Kamzabaev himself was a newcomer to the steel department. Trained as a retail
11 manager, he had worked during Soviet years in various state-owned companies and in the coal
12 mining department in Karaganda before privatization to ArcelorMittal. There he stayed until the
13 company recently moved its headquarters to Temirtau. The son of a renowned family of
14 academics, he grew up outside the world of industry. Equally close (or distant) to the working
15 people of Temirtau, the company management he criticised and cherished, and the Kazakh state,
16 whose closest representative he was in the foreign-dominated top management, Kamzabaev's
17 role in the plant came closest to that of a company intellectual. Such characters are no strangers
18 to large corporate enterprises, who rely on local intellectual and cultural resources when it comes
19 to justifying and vernacularizing neoliberal restructuring policies into local idioms of inequality
20 (Sanchez 2012). But Kamzabaev's case goes in the opposite direction – banking on Soviet and
21 Kazakh heritage he challenges corporate conduct from inside, by engaging tradition and its
22 implicit values to rein in a dispute with labour. Over various initiatives that he had organized to
23 promote 'labour harmony' between workers and management, he became critical of
24 management, especially of the HR director, whom he likened to a 'bad gardener' (*plokhoi*
25 *sadovnik*) for his indiscriminate cuts and spending reviews. The difference in views gradually
26 turned into antagonism, as the two directors found themselves holding diametrically opposed
27 views about the future of the plant and the way to implement restructuring. Whereas the foreign
28 HR manager's job was to implement cuts, the local manager was vehemently opposed to them
29 and accused the former of undermining the plant's future prospects by not appropriately valuing
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3 its staff. Despite the diplomatic tone of their speeches, the acrimony between the two was hardly
4
5 concealed during the gala. Although the union talks were not explicitly mentioned (not inviting
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7 trade unions and state representatives were part of Kamzabaev's effort at keeping the tone of the
8
9 talks within the harmonious framework of a feast and at avoiding embarrassing quarrels being on
10
11 public display), those attending the dinner were all aware of the latent tensions setting 'town' in
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13 opposition to 'Indians', and locals against foreigners.
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18 Mr Kamzabaev was hoping that the veterans' dinner would help win the support of the
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20 Indian general director, in order to overcome the HR director's 'blockade' of the talks with the
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22 trade unions. While his general aim was to establish labour harmony in the interest of the
23
24 company, his personal interest was for demonstrating managerial skills and a career promotion.
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28 These aren't just people sitting here, but experienced professionals, people who have
29
30 seen life, who have passed on their knowledge to their children... As we used to say in
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32 the past, we have labour dynasties (*trudovye dinastii*), and members of our dynasties are
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34 here with us today, their children work with us, now they are managers in our company.
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37 (Kamzabaev)
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40 Kamzabaev's pledge not to waste their experience went down well with the veterans, who felt
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42 emboldened and thankful for this recognition. Kamzabaev's speech, and the gala in general, was
43
44 well received by the veterans, because it was so different from the conventional corporate PR
45
46 they were used to. Although the dinner's ceremonial form followed the corporate style that
47
48 mixes Soviet, Kazakh and Indian elements and conveys them into a single form, in other respects
49
50 the event was also very different from conventional corporate events, particularly in the mode of
51
52 invoking tradition and using it as a tool in labour negotiations. By referencing Kazakh
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54 'aksakaldar' (elders) and 'Soviet veterans', tradition was put to work with the intention of
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3 legitimizing a new institution that promised to be able to embody positive aspects of both the
4 Soviet and Kazakh past. However, unlike the socially palliative and politically correct corporate
5 PR, the veterans' gala was envisioned as a new tradition with the capacity to challenge the social
6 and political status quo.
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16 **Corporate traditionalization**

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18 As elsewhere in Central Asia, Soviet ceremonial practice and public celebrations have been
19 redefined in Kazakhstan since independence (Adams 2010; Roy 1997; Laruelle 2007). The
20 independent state has valorized ethnic nationhood, but maintained a high degree of continuity
21 with Soviet practice when it comes to cultural forms, rites and styles of celebration. Within
22 Karmet, Soviet rites, symbolic hierarchies such as the 'wall of honour' (*pochetnaya doska*) for
23 the best workers of the month, prizes and rewards for the best brigade etc.), feasting and
24 celebrations that were an integral part of work and life in the Soviet Union have survived
25 privatization in a modified form. This continuity is reinforced by the fact that, in order to
26 forestall local criticism, only a very limited number of foreign top managers were sent to
27 Temirtau since privatization, the bulk of staff still consisting of the local workforce and labour
28 dynasties that were 'raised' in the Soviet plant. Although celebrations with veterans were
29 common in the past, after privatization, Soviet labour celebrations were downsized under the
30 post-privatization corporate spending review or were replaced by new public celebrations with
31 different symbolic connotations, while those for Karmet's veterans were discontinued altogether.
32
33 Outside the steel plant, the company organizes public events and participates in the calendar of
34 public celebrations, for instance, by setting up corporate yurts and sponsoring concerts for the
35 Nauryz holiday, the Central Asian New Year celebrated in March, as the government and the
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3 city expects it to do. On the first of May, which is no longer a workers' holiday but now the
4 (multi-)national 'Day of Unity of Kazakhstan people', the company organizes marches and
5 concerts, as it does for International Women's Day, New Year's Day and other national holidays.
6
7 During public concerts and marches, such as the traditional Steelworkers' Day in July, pictures
8 of Mittal and the President shaking hands are displayed in tabloids, while Indian songs and
9 dances are now included in the multi-national folklore and musical entertainment programme put
10 on stage at festive occasions. The new corporate ceremonial culture thus adopts Soviet cultural
11 forms that make it recognizable and appreciated, since they resonate with local experience and
12 expectations. Although they are at odds with modern corporate management culture, the
13 company deemed it to be important to maintain rites and celebrations and preserved them in a
14 modified form, with an eye for keeping costs and benefits in a balance. Celebrations like that for
15 Women's day or the Nauryz concert are now smaller but more elegant and glamorous, performed
16 in a way better suited to be shown on television. Workers criticize that in the past these were
17 larger, more inclusive events.
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36 In the eyes of many workers, corporate spending on these kinds of public celebrations and
37 philanthropy appear to be 'hollow' and 'insincere', since the foreign company has come 'for the
38 profit, not for the good of the people' (M. Yu., steel worker). The Soviet plant was an all-
39 enveloping provider of housing, heating, food, education, health, recreation and other services to
40 its employees and to the city (cf. Collier 2011). The privatized steel plant has not followed up on
41 the Soviet plant's all-encompassing care but it does engage in some philanthropic activity in the
42 framework of its corporate social responsibility policy: it sponsors scholarships in local high
43 schools, maintains sports facilities for its employees, subsidizes public transport, and runs a
44 clinic for its employees. Nonetheless, many dissatisfied workers accuse the company of greed
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3 and stinginess. They resent foreign ownership of the steel plant and dismiss corporate
4 philanthropy as a waste of money that would be better spent on hiring more workers.
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8 Corporate philanthropy backfires, paradoxically ending up only reinforcing workers'
9 hostility and prejudice, despite the company's efforts to draw from the accepted repertoire of
10 Soviet and national cultural forms and ritual legacies for its public relations (PR) and corporate
11 social responsibility campaigns. The company is aware of this, which might also be a reason for
12 why it prioritizes investment into the media and public visibility rather than ceremonial
13 expenditures, deeming the first to be rational, since it is promising to increase acceptance and
14 quiescence among dissatisfied and often hostile workers, the second only a necessary burden,
15 rooted in expectations shaped by the Soviet legacy that never will or can be met sufficiently.
16 Thus, an elaborate PR and corporate social spending policy helps contain criticism, with
17 corporate-owned local media propagating a positive public image of the privatized plant. All the
18 same, these attempts at claiming local traditions for corporate PR are locally met with suspicion.
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34 The conventional corporate PR pattern conflating corporate culture with local traditions
35 repeated itself in the General Director's and HR's performances at the veterans' gala.
36 Kamzabaev's speech was followed by that of the General Director:
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42 Good evening, veterans. I would like to wish you all in Arabic: 'Ait mubarak'. Which is
43 Kurban-ait. Basically, what we know, this is to honour people who sacrifice. I'm
44 personally standing here thanks to your hard work. I also thank you for training your
45 children, your grandchildren, who are all working here. Today, the current team is full of
46 challenges because of the market. The interior team is focused on bringing the plant back
47 to its original glory. You will also personally see that from your relatives working in the
48 plant, how focused we all are on this. And from this year on, we would like to meet all of
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3 you once every six months. And I also would like to receive your feedback on how we
4 can do better. Be free to give your suggestions so that we can change because you have
5 seen good and bad back in the past. *Spasibo*. (General Director V.M.)
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10 The Indian General Directors' speech addressed the two reasons for the ceremony, the Muslim
11 feast and the veterans' gathering. Furthermore, the speech gave performative fiat to the veteran's
12 council, by stating that the institution will from now on come together regularly. In his speech,
13 the general director claimed religious competence, by trying to make use of religious repertoire
14 (his good wish in Arabic and his reference to sacrifice as the central meaning of Kurban-ait), and
15 acknowledged the veterans' 'sacrifice', their merits, Karmet's Soviet 'glory'. He blamed 'the
16 market' for the current challenges, and praised the workers' 'focus'. By greeting every single
17 veteran with a handshake, thus making the round of all tables, he expressed humility, but also
18 leadership and presence. However, the invitation to speak out, on the guarantee that their advice
19 would be taken seriously, was contradicted by the fact that he and the HR Director, the factory's
20 Nr. 2, left the meeting immediately after having greeted all veterans, citing 'other business' as a
21 reason. In doing so, they again created distance and hierarchy between themselves and the
22 veterans.
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41 At the gala, the General Director, the only one wearing the blue company work uniform at
42 the dinner, performed his closeness to the 'factory people' in order to overcome their distance
43 and diffidence. But he also performed power and hierarchy, in affirming his leadership over the
44 plant and over Kamzabaev's potentially insubordinate initiative. Unlike Kamzabaev's, his
45 performance was an attempt at a traditionalization practice cementing the status quo of power
46 relations, made by staging rituals that hinted at local cultural forms but that also performatively
47 enacted power discrepancies, leadership and hierarchy. Veterans noticed the contrast between
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3 management's 'nice words' and deeds, essentially finding their prejudice and diffidence against
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5 the foreigners reconfirmed by the course of events.
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9 Whereas Mr Kamzabaev and the General Director centred their rhetorical efforts on the
10 acknowledgement of the veterans, in his speech the HR Director focused on the Polish-Kazakh
11 history and on the importance of paying respect towards the elders. In a short speech that was
12 received coolly by the veterans, the HR Director, at the centre of criticism for being in charge of
13 implementing job cuts, focused on the past and present of Polish-Kazakh friendship, in the style
14 of the Soviet trope of *druzhiba narodov* (Friendship of Peoples), but omitting the underlying
15 problems and feeling to have to justify his foreignness: 'Kazakhstani steel workers are being
16 hired by ArcelorMittal in Poland,' he mentioned, '[so] do not mind if one Polish manager is
17 working in Kazakhstan' was his admonition to the veterans. By avoiding mention of job cuts and
18 the purpose of the gala, he disenfranchised the initiative of his competitor Kamzabaev. The
19 reference to eldership was ambiguous: it could be read as meaning: 'don't waste time in politics,
20 stay with your families'; but also as 'respect the management, your 'elder brother''. If you
21 criticize, you will not go far – subtly evoking memories of the Zhanaozen 2011 event, a labour
22 protest cracked down upon by the government, and which was well known to everyone in the
23 factory. Shortly after his speech, he, just like the General Director, left prematurely, citing
24 another meeting he had to attend. The veterans would spend the rest of the dinner giving
25 speeches to the absent General Director and HR Director, the factory's two top managers. The
26 Czech chief engineer, whose only short talk focused on reporting the state of progress in the
27 modernization of the plant by rattling off the millions in investment projects executed or
28 planned, and Mr Kamzabaev, would be the only two directors listening to the veterans over the
29 whole night's celebration.
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The veterans

Dear Metallurgists, it is a great feast for us today. Each of us worked in this plant for no less than 40 years. We've spent our youth, our life in this place. We honestly worked hard and deservedly went to rest. (E.T., veteran)

To the veterans, the meeting was as much an occasion for addressing their concerns to company representatives as it was for commemoration, for celebrating their common history, and to remember those who had passed away. Although gathered on the pretext of establishing an advisory body, re-evoking an emotionally loaded past in the factory was also important and resounded with veterans' experiences, with their expectations of moral commitment and status shaped over the Soviet period (Edele 2008). While the veterans' foremost reason for joining the gala lay in their concern for the future of the steel plant, the evening was also a welcome occasion to perform their 'veteran-ness', i.e. staging their role as veterans and speaking publicly about their experience in the Soviet plant.

I'm saying 'our' [factory], because we came out of it. Also, right now, someone [we have trained] is working there. For this reason, the factory is, essentially, ours. (Y.F., veteran)

In their speeches, the veterans acknowledged their strong attachment to the steel plant; a recurring phrase was *rodnoi kombinat* ('native plant'). Therewith, Karmet was likened to a homeland, because 'we came out of it', 'we worked there', 'we built it', and 'those trained by us still work there'. In Soviet years, nearly every adult in Temirtau was directly or indirectly on its payroll. The Soviet steel works was the city's central employer and a provider of welfare, housing, education, employment and sociality. Over the Soviet period, steel workers' families tended to be employed in the steel plant over several generations, parents preparing their children

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3 for work in the steel plant and priding themselves of transmitting knowledge and status to their
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5 offspring (see also Kesküla 2018). The factory was part of their enculturation and socialization,
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7 growing up in Temirtau entailed much of what it took to become an accomplished steel worker
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9 later on (cf. Willis 1977). To a lesser degree this applies until today and therefore,
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11 unsurprisingly, at the dinner the veterans were expressing deep attachment to a workplace that
12
13 had shaped their lives and had produced not only steel, but also valuable cadres, skilled people
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15 with strong characters, industrial elites such as those who now rule their country, their region,
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17 and their city. In their speeches, pride and emotional involvement were palpable:
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21 The plant is a unique industry. In the Soviet Union, we have built it with help from all
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23 over the Union republics. It is working now. I think there is a bright future for this plant.

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25 Like a living organism, it had peaks and troughs, in 1988 we produced more than five
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27 million tons of steel. (...) All of us here today had their part in the development of the
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29 plant. I wish you all health, happiness, happiness with your grandchildren. (E.T., veteran)

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32 In another speech by a former worker who spent his life at the blast furnace (*domna*
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34 *pech*) the factory was also equated to a living organism. In workers' parlance, each of the four
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36 furnaces had a name. This one referred to the furnace's head of workers, a man named Ivanov.
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38 The furnace was thus personalized into 'Donna Ivanovna', portrayed as a complex machine with
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40 a history, moods, and a character. 'Donna Ivanovna' was a capricious woman with a soul, that
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42 also demanded one's soul and love and dedication if it was to work properly.
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47 Muehlebach (2017) encounters similar organicist tropes and workers' expressions of
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49 'love for machines' and analyses them as traces of a materially grounded community, in which
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51 machines produce 'thick social relations' (120), solidarities and values, so strong that they can
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53 outlive the factories. In similar vein veterans can claim for themselves and for the workers a
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3 ‘thick’ moral ownership over their workplace, a source of authority that the real, more powerful,
4 owners lack. This moral authority grounds veterans’ vision of industrial renewal. It structures
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6 their claimed entitlement to express criticism and care for the factory.
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10 By highlighting workers’ decisive role in the survival of the factory, veterans stress the
11 role of local expertise and its intergenerational transmission to counter the effects that
12 transnationalization has for the value of local skills. Veterans are not only defending a specific
13 claim to the factory’s past, but narrate the past to counter the transnationalization of expertise
14 and its devaluative effects on local labour . Unlike the merely folklorizing use of tradition
15 perpetrated by the company, veterans invoke an idea of heritage that is vital and essential to the
16 factory’s survival, that is part of the factory’s ‘living tradition’ (Sahlins 1999).
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26 Veterans’ visions of good management drew upon different repertoires, but all were
27 rooted in local traditions and labour legacies, and were articulated in polemics against foreign
28 management. They expressed anguish at the existential threats to their factory, to workers and
29 their families, and did not step back from criticizing management for their shortcomings and
30 responsibilities.
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37 Let's drink, as our General Director said, to dreams. May they become true, may the steel
38 plant thrive again! May it be as before, with no economic, so to speak, crises around.
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40 They shall not affect our work! They should not influence it at all, if you are being good
41 managers... We, for our part, we'll spill the metal, this, and all the rest, no worries. But
42 you look, look for those holes [in the budget], stop them, stuff them all! Sell! You are the
43 businessmen! (N.N., veteran)
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51 Peculiar class theories were put forward by another veteran, who stated that after the
52 *razval* (the post-socialist breakdown) three classes had emerged: the high, the middle and the
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3 working class. The plant's present problems are rooted in the lack of consensus, agreement
4 (*soglasie*) among them. To him, the company's priority task was to re-establish harmony across
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6 classes. In this constellation, the *nachal'niki*, heads of shop floor, were portrayed as those who
7
8 solve problems at the production level, a 'middle class', who, together with workers, liaise
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10 against 'those up', the foreign managers. Heckling by other veterans dismissed such class-talk as
11
12 backward-looking and confused, but the focus of criticism on foreign management again
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14 suspended divisions and projected unity.

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19 Veterans' criticism and their proposed remedies to Karmet's problems centred on their
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21 vision of good management, a vision alternative to that of foreign management and surprisingly
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23 coherent across different speeches. It centred around the model of a just and benevolent master
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25 or *khoziain*, the paternalistic director of the Soviet era, who was looking at the workplace as a
26
27 household, and at the workers as his family (Trevisani and Kesküla 2016; Ashwin 1999; Rogers
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29 2006).
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33 Let the shop floor manager be the master in his own shop. Here are sitting people who
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35 bore the role of shop floor manager on their shoulders. And they know: labour discipline,
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37 production, economy - everything was on them. The shop floor manager (*nachal'nik*)
38
39 mastered all these things. He was the boss in the shop, the master (*khoziain*) of the shop.
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42 Let him be the master in his shop and you will be rewarded! (Kh.U., Veteran)

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44 Among the veterans, the idea of the shop floor manager as a patriarchal provider and fatherly
45
46 authority who knows everything about production seemed deeply internalized, and was
47
48 positioned as the solution to the company's present problems. He was seen as a moral and
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50 professional authority (the shop floor's master, or even 'draft horse', in one of the veterans'
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52 speeches), whose absence had left a void in the post-Soviet shop floor.
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3 The veterans' plea was to reinstall this local model of authority. 'I. please!,' stated a veteran
4 heartily addressing the Czech chief engineer by first name: 'Let the *nachal'nik* be the real master
5 of the shop-floor and you will be rewarded. Do not obstruct their work, be supportive, don't
6 change them too frequently.'⁸ 'Revitalize the Soviet way of working, empower the *nachal'niki*.'

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12 The veterans' diagnosis and proposed remedy to the ills of their steel plant was in direct
13 contradiction to the plans of the foreign management to downsize the role of the once all-
14 powerful shop-floor *nachal'niki* and to reorganize the workings of the shop floors bypassing
15 them. They were refusing to acknowledge management's concealed, but implicit argument that
16 the reasons for the factory's poor economic performance today, and for the factory's bad shape
17 prior to privatization, was imputable to the persistence of the Soviet *khoziain* model, or, in other
18 words, to *them*. What the former saw as the solution, the latter saw as Karmet's problem.

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Local and corporate paternalisms differ in that they draw from different sources of
authority and use tradition in different ways and for different ends. Veterans counter the
corporate paternalism staged in the CEO and HR directors' performance of hierarchy and
leadership with local visions grounded in traditions they can reclaim by virtue of their long work
in the plant. Veterans reverse the corporate hierarchy by speaking about Soviet legacies
(*khoziain*; *nachal'nik*) to which they feel entitled by their sense of moral hold over the factory,
thereby staging a counter-paternalism 'from below'.

<<Picture 1 about here>>

<<Caption: The veteran's dinner at ArcelorMittal Temirtau, 17 October 2013. Photograph taken
by the author>>

The uses of tradition and its limit

Dear comrades, I ask the Almighty to hear what was said by the representatives of the previous generation of metallurgists. Might the Almighty assist our leaders, first of all the leaders of ArcelorMittal Temirtau. So that ArcelorMittal Temirtau might prosper, thanks to the veterans, and to the workers. I wish you all health and happiness! If we are with Allah, if we carry him always in our souls, we will be healthy and happy. Might ArcelorMittal, our city and our homeland be blessed and prosper. Allah Akbar! (A.A., veteran)

The veterans' corporate Kurban-ait gala ended with a prayer by a 'veteran-*aksakal*', first uttered in Kazakh, then translated into Russian. The majority of the veterans joined him in raising their hands for the ritual gesture 'Amin' performed at the end of the prayer. A photo session, the distribution of gifts, handshakes and farewell chats prolonged the dinner a little further before everyone dispersed.

This gala had been a unique event brought about by extraordinary circumstances, which must be seen in light of different factors: the labour-management conflict at Temirtau's steel plant, internecine management struggles between local and foreign managers within the company, the particular framework of ArcelorMittal's PR that has appropriated and blended Soviet social policies with Kazakhstani national cultural forms and incorporated them into corporate practices. While foreign management wanted to appease veterans and downsize the labour force, the local management and the veterans wanted to maintain labour and change foreign management policy. The veterans' claim came out of a sense of moral ownership that veterans and workers held by virtue of their long years of work in the plant (Trevisani 2018).

Reflecting on the different references, uses, and creative engagements with tradition, the

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3 gala shows that despite mutual invocations of harmony, veterans' and management's different
4 understandings of industrial legacies and tradition did not harmonize. Although, on the surface,
5 they claimed to aim at mutual harmony, in substance they talked at cross-purposes. The lived
6 experience underlying the veterans' sense of tradition, and their pledge for how to revitalize it,
7 was at odds with the company's essentializing attempts to win local support by staging 'Kazakh'
8 and 'Soviet' rituals of recognition that sounded hollow in workers' ears. The company
9 executives were nominally committed to a politically correct doctrine of multi-ethnic harmony,
10 but felt having to justify their 'foreignness' vis-à-vis resentful locals. By turning veterans into
11 *aksakals*, they tapped into a cultural model that resonated with specifically Kazakh forms of
12 tradition and led to the folklorization of a PR-event that could be broadcast on TV. But veterans
13 did not feel taken seriously by the management, despite solemn declarations by the General
14 Director, who left prematurely. After the meeting, managers and veterans were reconfirmed in
15 their irreconcilable differences of views, priorities and values.
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33 In the months after the veterans' gala, Mr Kamzabaev stepped up to criticism against
34 management but did not attempt to revive the *aksakal* council. Eventually, he left the company
35 with no farewell ceremonies and in disagreement with management. A regular *aksakal* council
36 was not established in the company and the veteran's gala remained a unique gathering whereas
37 other feasts and the sponsoring of social and cultural activities continue to be used by
38 management as a palliative to persisting problems and conflicts. Soon, a new cohort of foreign
39 managers, sent from the corporate headquarters, would succeed the generation who took part in
40 the veterans' gala: they will continue to deal with local 'tradition' according to the principles of
41 their corporate PR, no longer having to worry about Mr Kamzabaev's creative attempts to
42 employ it in novel ways and arenas.⁹
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Traditionalization recurred in this context as a strategic practice aimed at renegotiating power relations by referring to the authority of tradition. Corporate traditionalization can be seen as an instrument to legitimize and strengthen the corporate grip over an industrial community by stepping into the footprint of local, top-down legacies of 'tradition'. The veteran's gala shows that such an approach can backfire when it fails to persuade those for whom it is intended. For those who lack power but 'have' tradition, tradition can become a 'weapon of the weak' (Scott 1985) in labour conflict, when it is grounded in legacies and values that resonate with peoples' lived experience. In such cases, traditionalization can be a form of ersatz collective action 'from below', effective in countering corporate encroachments while expressing a voice that cannot be simply ignored by powerful foreign managers.

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Following Hobsbawm and Ranger's analysis of how tradition is produced, we can distinguish between a reinvention of tradition from 'above' (i.e. the company, the state policy of public ceremonials), and from 'below' (the veterans' Kurban-ait), which is the case when social actors take up rites and wrap them up in the vestiges of tradition to state their (political) identity in the present (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), as the local manager did. In both cases, traditionalization surfaces as a tool in the struggle for meaning and values underlying industrial labour conflict in Temirtau. But even when traditionalization is effectively validated by reference to shared values and traditions, its efficacy in labour conflict is no forgone conclusion. Actors realize that their contemporary concerns and struggles cannot but only partially be captured by the realm of tradition when they are, in effect, about labour and power.

51 52 53 **Acknowledgements**

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41 ¹ All quotes are translated from Russian by the author. If not indicated otherwise, all words in italics are given
42 in Russian.

43 ² Mr Kamzabaev wished his name to be published without anonymization in this paper. All other names of informants
44 are given with their acronym.

45 ³ Cf. Brumann's review of anthropological debates on tradition (2011).

46 ⁴ Due to its massive size and output (the largest steel mill in Central Asia, with 40,000 employees, and 6
47 million tons of annual steel production in the Soviet heydays), Karmet alone accounted for a large part of Kazakhstan's
48 Gross Domestic Product (Encyclopedia of Karaganda Oblast: Karaganda, Karagandiskaya Oblast' Enciklopediya,
49 1986) and was the most important outlet for raw materials produced in the coal and iron mining region of Karaganda.

50 ⁵ That is, those related and those unrelated to the factory were divided over their jobs and over the evaluation
51 of the environmental costs for society attached to these jobs (Prilutskaya 2016).

52 ⁶ For similar trends in Russia see Ashwin and Clarke (2003).

53 ⁷ In the world of Soviet industry, veterans enjoyed public recognition and privileges, especially when they had been
54 better qualified elite workers, and even more so when they had come from families with labour dynasties. The status
55 of a labour veteran could be achieved by any worker after many years spent working in the steel plant and it was
56 usually reached when near to retirement. Labour dynasties were those with members of several generations who
57 worked or had worked in the plant (see also Lane 1981: 115; Ashwin 1999; Kesküla 2018).
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⁸ Shop floor management turnover had dramatically increased, while in the Soviet plant managers kept their positions for long periods, ideally transmitting them along the lines of labour dynasties.

⁹ In August 2018 a corporate Kurban-ait was held at the city mosque under the aegis of a newly established department for 'ethnocultural affairs' at ArcelorMittal Temirtau. Reporting in the company journal makes no mention of any speeches touching upon labour issues. Photographs of the event show mostly Kazakhs in a sober, religious meeting, without the presence of either Soviet veterans or the management (Tikhonov 2018).

For Peer Review Only



The veteran's dinner at ArcelorMittal Temirtau, 17 October 2013. Photograph taken by the author.

502x294mm (300 x 300 DPI)