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Everyday Ethnicity and Popular Responses to Nation-Building Projects in Moldova after 1989

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Wine as a “Cultural Product”? Ethnographic Notes on Work and Nationhood in the Republic of Moldova

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Abstract: The Republic of Moldova is one of the largest wine producers in Europe, and winemaking, both domestic and commercial, is deeply embedded in its society. State officials, wine marketing specialists, and subsistence winemakers in their discourses often tie wine and winemaking to a national framework, conceptualizing it as a “cultural product” that is typically Moldovan. The author makes use of ethnographic fieldwork to analyse how national identification becomes something salient among workers in the wine industry—if it does so at all—and what role nationhood plays in winemaking workers’ self-image. That wage work in wine-making means different things to manual workers and managers, and to subsistence winemakers. For the workers, their dependence on low remuneration and the division of the production process makes their work less a matter of national identification and “cultural production” than a purely instrumental activity.

Keywords: Moldova; winemaking; work; identity; nation

Introduction

When I visited T.M.’s small vineyard, he told me with some amusement that “a Moldovan without a vineyard is like a bird in the desert” (*Moldovanul fără vie e ca pasărea-n pustie*).¹ But then, looking more serious, he went on to say that careful winemaking was actually very important to him in his everyday life, and that

1 Interview with T.M., D.A., Văleni, 21 June 2017. The names of the village and of the winery have been changed, as well as the names of all interlocutors and some of their life details, in order to protect

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how the wine comes out (“tasty, balanced, and clean”) mirrors the “soul of the winemaker”. Another interlocutor, A.A., said too that “wine is the pride of the country, of the Moldovans. Everyone is proud of what is normal for them. [...] [Wine] is traditional, like [the Moldovan dish] *mămăliga*.”² Winemaking is indeed often celebrated in Moldova as a socio-economic activity, both in its domestic production for household consumption, and in its commercial production, which accounts for 3% of Moldovan GDP.³ More than that however, talking to people in the village of Văleni in southeastern Moldova where I carried out a year of ethnographic fieldwork, I often heard them describe wine in a self-essentializing manner, as having something about it of an essentially Moldovan “national character” (Herzfeld 2016, 34).

I carried out my ethnographic research in Moldova among subsistence and commercial winemakers alike; I learned that subsistence winemakers plant a vineyard, look after it, and then harvest the grapes themselves so that they can make their own wine; and they take great pride in the craftsmanship required to do so (Ana 2022a). I have shown elsewhere that homemade wine-making cultivates specific social relations that remain predominantly outside market relations, and that wine forges local and national identities (Ana 2022b). Here, I am looking at a different dimension of winemaking—wage work in commercial winemaking—even though taking place in one of the most iconic winemaking regions of Moldova, there is a clearer division of labour across the production process. How do wine workers incorporate wine into their self-image and when does nationhood become a salient category among them (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008, 540; Herzfeld 2016)?

My analysis follows anthropologist Robert Ulin’s study of cooperative wine workers in the southwest of France, and their narrative of their own identification with winemaking (Ulin 2002, 1996). Ulin redefined the notion of work as an act of differentiated cultural production and argued that the Marxist theorization of work would benefit from extension by adding analysis of the cultural significance of the production process. According to Ulin that would avoid reliance on economic determinism and excessive instrumentalism in understanding human work. In Ulin’s southwest French field site, both cooperative workers and *château*-based *vignerons* expressed their sense of identification with winemaking: “Even with the more mass-produced wines, cooperative growers claimed to recognize their labour

their anonymity. References to interviews and verbatim field notes have the following structure: pseudonym of interviewee initials, researcher initials, place, date.

2 Interview with A.A., D.A., Văleni, 9 November 2016.

3 “Raport Anual.” 2019. Oficiul National al Viei și Vinului (ONVV). Chișinău: ONVV. <https://wineofmoldova.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/RAPORT-ANUAL-2019.pdf> (accessed 20 November 2023).

as being embodied in a final product whose taste and quality bore witness to the distinction of the region and thus a source of identity” (Ulin 2002, 702). However, it is important to note that Ulin’s interlocutors were actually the vineyard owners who held much greater control over the production process (they worked the land and vinified the grapes themselves) than did the Moldovans I spoke to, who were wage workers employed by a commercial winery.

In the following sections I shall reflect on the place of wine in Moldovan society and its link to national identity, and discuss research on how wine can be absorbed in nationhood projects. I shall describe the experience of workers in various positions in a large commercial winery and explore how the division of their labour followed class divisions and how the degree of their identification with winemaking as a cultural activity was strongly influenced by everyday socio-economic concerns.

Wine and “National Character”

Nationalism can be defined as the project of making the state congruent with the nation, or the cultural unit, which can be done by working top-down but also through the daily reproduction “of ordinary people engaging in routine activities” (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008, 536-7) which results in the forging of so-called national identities or a “national character”. Michael Herzfeld examines how a national character is created and maintained through various mechanisms, including education, media, folklore, and state-sponsored rituals (Herzfeld 2016, 21). It is a way of defining a nation and differentiating it from others, and in many cases involves the creation of stereotypes and other generalizations about the people belonging to one particular nation, associating them with specific metaphors or symbolic routines. The realm of food is an accessible avenue for such symbolic routines and the interweaving of food and national identity has been a prominent area of research for decades (Bourdieu 1984; Bray 2014; Porciani 2020; Sayadabdi and Howland 2021). At its best, food can convey a feeling of community (Mintz and Du Bois 2002), but when used by xenophobic and exclusionary nationalism food can appear as a marker not just of distinction but of exclusion too (Porciani 2020).

More specifically, winemaking and wine consumption have been shown to contribute to an existing sense of identity and national belonging (Ulin 1996; Demossier 2010) or even to restore national identity (Monterescu and Handel 2019; McGonigle 2019). One of the most iconic such example is the identification of champagne with France (Guy 2003). Black and Ulin (2013, 69) discuss how academic and professional literature on wine tends to anthropomorphize “grape plants and wine by associating certain terrains and their wines with such noteworthy historical themes as French blood, soil, nationalism, and the cultural identity of

the nation-state". The terroir, a term implying a particularly close relationship between the winemaker and the farmed environment, can be infused with religiosity as well as nationalism (Monterescu 2017) while communal drinking has the potential to construct national identities (Douglas 1987; Kasmir 2005).

In the Republic of Moldova, wine and winemaking have enjoyed a special status across most of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, despite repeated crises in the industry that have added to the country's socio-economic hardship. However, those crises also confirmed once more that winemaking in Moldova has been able to show considerable resilience, both economically and in the strength of its symbolism. A good example of one such earlier industry crisis came in 1985. The Moldavian Republic was then under Soviet control, and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's so-called "dry law" of that year decreed that up of 75,000 ha of vineyards should simply be grubbed up—more than a third of the area under vines at the time.⁴ The main explanation for the planned elimination was to combat an increase in alcohol consumption across the Soviet Union, and along with Georgia, Moldova was one of the two largest producers of wine and spirits among the Soviet republics. The episode led to resentment among Moldova winegrowers, who wanted to resist the order to cut their vines, and prompted over-zealousness among party cadres who sometimes forced farmers to uproot even more grapevines than strictly necessary.⁵ One of my interlocutors, a marketing specialist in his late fifties and himself a subsistence winemaker who was familiar with the wine industry, explained to me that this decision to stigmatize and diminish wine production in Moldova had a challenging effect on society's shared values:

We have the very bitter Soviet experience, which tried to destroy our [Moldovan] unanimity about wine being something good, even more so in '85 when they told us to remove the vines because they destroy us. We might not have ripped all of them up, but we did rip from our hearts the belief that wine is a good thing.⁶

However, the imagined unity of the Moldovan nation around wine survived: the decree of 1985 was lifted in 1988, and before long after that the Soviet Union collapsed (Nemtsov 1998). The early 1990s then saw a period of disarray in the Moldovan wine industry, with many wineries working only intermittently or closing down entirely. A tendency to reanimate the industry came up especially after the National Programme "Land" was implemented in 1998, through which

⁴ "Visuri franceze in vile Moldovei si vinurile Moldave in piata mondiala. Probleme din economia viticola din Moldova," *Vocea Poporului*, 13 March 1990, 6.

⁵ Interview with G.O., D.A., Văleni, 23 July 2017.

⁶ Interview with I.S., D.A., Chişinău, 29 July 2017.

arable land was decollectivized. Many wineries were privatized in the early 2000s (Ana 2022a).

Around the same time the Moldovan post-Soviet governments decided to revive the importance of wine in their nation-building strategies. For example, when the post-Soviet Party of Communists (*Partidul Comuniștilor din Republica Moldova*, PCRM) was in power from 2001 to 2009, wine was evoked in support of the national identity in public rituals and performances through the revival of the ritual of *cinstirea vinului* (“honouring the wine”) (Buzilă 2006; Bîrlădeanu 2013, 37). A “National Wine Day” was introduced, aiming to “increase the culture of wine-making, to consolidate national traditions in the most important parts of the national economy, to maintain the prestige of the wines, as well as to attract foreign tourists to Moldova with interesting cultural programs” (Bîrlădeanu 2013, 48). Apart from a break during the pandemic years the ritual has been celebrated in Moldova in October every year since 2003 as a festival during which, as I could observe more than once, virtually all wineries in Moldova present their wines to the wider public in the Great National Assembly Square in Chișinău.

Interestingly, winemaking in Moldova was as present for other ethnic groups as it was for ethnic Moldovans, but on occasion it had different meanings for them. The Gagauzes for example, a Turkic-speaking minority most of whom live in the south of Moldova, are noted for their occasional rejection of certain symbols seen as Moldovan. Demirdirek observed that in a reversal of the ritualized, nation-building aspect of wine consumption, the Gagauzes pointedly refused to drink wine on occasions emblematic for them, such as the Turkish Language Olympiads (Demirdirek 2006). Such events were organized to emphasize “Turkishness,” and the Gagauzes drank no wine while their Turkish sponsors were present, although it was normal for them to drink it within their community—indeed a number of well-regarded Moldovan wineries operate in that region. These were in fact attempts to create a “Gagauz supranational unit and a Gagauz imagination” by highlighting the “Gagauz imagery mainly through language and its products” (Demirdirek 2006, 45).

The most recent crises in the wine industry have been related to tension with Russia, which for many years was Moldova’s main trading partner and the main export market for its wine. Russia banned Moldovan wine from its markets for brief periods in both 2008 and 2010, but in 2006 and again in 2013 excluded it for longer and with much more drastic economic effect on a trade that was so export-dependent. The Russian action shattered not only the relative economic stability deriving from the Moldovan wine export trade but also badly tarnished the wine’s image among buyers and shook the confidence of winemakers and wine workers. However, one effect of the loss of stable trade relations with Russia was the reform it triggered in the production and marketing of Moldovan wines, as wine companies

re-oriented themselves westwards, looking now to countries some of which had different tastes and standards in wine from those of the Russian market (Ana 2022a). A national branding narrative to market Moldovan wine was composed during that time, and another wave of consciously reinforced “Moldovanness” followed. The country brand “Wine of Moldova—A Legend Alive”, established in 2013–2014, presents Moldova as a “wine country” and contributes to the “recognition and promotion of quality Moldovan wine abroad,” emphasizing its continuous centuries-old tradition of winemaking.⁷

The Site

These industry-wide efforts to diversify markets and publicise Moldovan wine more widely outside the former Soviet space have been successful. In the early 2000s up to 90 % of wine exports went to Russia, but in 2019 Moldova was exporting wine to 71 countries all over the world.⁸ Many wineries recorded increased sales of wine to central European markets and gained more and more recognition in international wine contests, winning various medals and other distinctions. One of the wineries that implemented the reforms most successfully is Văleni (located in the eponymous village), where I carried out ethnographic fieldwork between August 2016 and August 2017. Văleni lies in a district where historically the population has been dominated by Moldovans, but there are also Ukrainian, Russian, Gagauz and Bulgarian minorities living there. After the 2006 export ban, the Văleni winery made the decision to rely as little as possible on exporting to Russia, instead concentrating its efforts on gaining more market share in European Union countries such as Romania, Slovakia, Czechia and Poland.

The present analysis is based on data gathered through participant observation in the winery and the village, on 51 in-depth interviews with workers and former sovkhos employees, as well as on archival research on Soviet-era agricultural periodicals. I looked at the winery as a complex social artefact in continual transformation—a “heterogeneous and temporary assemblage of people, practices, devices, resources and perceptions” (Mollona 2009, 21), now responding to a shift in markets that triggered a shift in everyday practices. Also, on the shop floor and in the vineyard I noted that different workers were doing different work and saw the role the division of labour played in how the employees understood work and identification.

⁷ For more, see the website of Moldova’s National Office of Vine and Wine, <https://wineofmoldova.com/en/> (accessed 20 November 2023).

⁸ “Raport Annual”, 5.

The Văleni winery has been producing wine for centuries (Ana 2022a). Archives from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mention the region as producing some of the most remarkable wines—especially reds—in the whole of Bessarabia, which historically was the region between the rivers Prut and Dniester up to the Black Sea in what is now Ukraine. Văleni has enjoyed high prestige in the region and recognition in international contests, where its wines frequently win gold and silver medals. Until the interwar years the Văleni winery was administered by Germans who immigrated to Bessarabia and developed and expanded Văleni along with other wineries in the region, in order to supply the large market of the Russian empire. As in many places in Europe, the production at Văleni experienced a severe crisis after the discovery of the phylloxera on Moldovan territory in 1883 (Bittner 2015).

After Bessarabia became part of Romania in 1918, winemaking was not encouraged to a comparable extent (Gusti et al. 1940) and then when Bessarabia was occupied by Soviet troops in 1944, the Văleni winery was taken under state ownership and functioned as a state factory until 1970. The lands of the kolkhoz were added to create an association of sovkhoz factories, and after Moldova’s independence in 1991 the winery remained in state ownership and produced wine intermittently until 2003, when it was privatized and a tourist complex built around it. By 2016–2017 production capacity was 2 million bottles per year, from 260 ha of vineyard. Production and administrative staff numbered approximately 50, and the vineyards themselves required 100–130 permanent workers all year round, a number doubled by seasonal workers during harvest. All the workers introduced in this study were familiar with the complete experience of winemaking either as domestic winemakers or as professional oenologists. Those involved in winemaking at the Văleni winery worked in the vineyard and in the winery and as manual labourers; then there were the technicians, who were specialists responsible for a high level of control over the wine production process.

Professional Winemakers and Identification

B.V. was 33 years old and had been head of production at the winery since early 2015.⁹ He was born in southern Moldova, in another village where winemaking was popular, and had decided in his late teens to acquire a university degree in wine technology. During his studies he became even more convinced that “everything

⁹ Some of the ethnographic data used in this section are present in previously published work (Ana 2022a, 105–30). Nevertheless, the purpose of the analysis here is different. In the previous publication I looked at the link between work rhythms and the globalization of the wine trade.

related to wineries was good business”, as throughout those years Moldovan wine was being sold in enormous quantities to the Russian market. He started work in a winery immediately after graduating in 2005 and experienced the euphoria that overtook the wine business until March 2006, when Russia set the first of its wine embargoes, mentioned above. That first embargo hit the winery B.V. was working in comparatively mildly because the manufacturer managed to diversify its markets quickly. B.V. continued to work there for another ten years until 2015, when he began working at Văleni. There, he organized the entire workforce and coordinated the whole production process, apart from the laboratory, which was led by the chief oenologist. Nevertheless, the oenologist formed the habit of involving B.V. in some of her tasks, since she appreciated his already-impressive experience as a specialist winemaker, despite his relative youth. As an employee with overarching technical and management responsibilities therefore, B.V. was very closely involved in the wine production process.

B.V. used to live on-site five days a week, spending weekends in Chişinău or in his home village with his family. It was a demanding schedule but, as he put it, the rewards for supervising the production of “the most appreciated wine in Moldova” motivated him and gave him the will to strive to perfect his activity. B.V. coordinated the making of acknowledged wines, and talked about making a good wine as being “like taking care of a baby”, and that in your work you cannot “just guide yourself after the laws of physics; there has to be something beyond that and you need to have a vision for what you are doing”. He also explained that it was characteristic of almost all Moldovans, not only those who were professional winemakers, to have a very close relationship with wine in general:

Maybe in other parts of the world it is similar, but here not only do winemakers say this [that Moldovans are very close to wine, E.-D.A.] [...] we say that we are tied to something that cannot be seen with the naked eye, a sentimental thing. Many insist that this is not merely the love of drinking, it is actually something that comes to you ever since you were sucking your mother’s milk; this is when you got bonded with wine. And this is somewhat true, look at our son. It is normal [for my wife] to have a weekend dinner and a glass of wine, even if she is breastfeeding. My parents and hers did exactly the same thing. It’s something historical, from olden times. Some say they’ve found isotopes confirming that the Dacians¹⁰ were drinking wine; maybe then—maybe even earlier. And this is something everyone says—“when my parents were drinking wine, it was going into the milk.”¹¹

He thought for a moment, then continued: “but bringing a five- or six-year-old boy from Costa Rica [to Moldova], he’d definitely learn the taste for wine. It’s not correct to talk [only] about the milk, it is a metaphor, [wine] is socially learned.” Going

10 The Dacians in antiquity inhabited most of today’s territory of Romania and Moldova.

11 Interview with D.C., D.A., Văleni, 12 October 2016.

back to Herzfeld’s concept of “national character” as a way of defining and differentiating nations (2016, 21), recognizing national character often involves the creation of essentializing stereotypes and generalizations about the people belonging to a particular nation. Specifically in food consumption, a mixture might be created of unconscious reproduction of banal discourses and practices, as well as hyperconscious reflexive modes of generating identity constructs (Sayadabdi and Howland 2021, 4). For B.V., kinship and wine create the Moldovan bodies that are connected to wine in an almost transcendental manner and thus, collective connection and “knowledge of the wine” are created. Being part of the Moldovan nation means for B.V. that one becomes deeply acquainted with wine, and in Moldova drinking wine reinforces the bottom-up construction of national identity (Foster 1999; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008; Herzfeld 2016).

D.C., director of the winery’s bottling section, had worked in the trade longer than B.V. but with a similar motivation in pursuing winemaking. D.C. had graduated from the National College of Viticulture and Winemaking in Chişinău in 1979. He was assigned by the state to work in a sparkling wine factory in Chişinău, where he held positions ranging from supervising blending to foreman of the bottling section. In 2013, D.C. saw an announcement in a newspaper that the Văleni company was looking for a director of its bottling section; he was selected for the position and has been heading the company’s bottling section ever since.

D.C. recounted to me that his passion for wine came from his childhood, as he grew up in a wine-growing region in southwest Moldova. During the Soviet years every village in his region had its vineyards, and on average every fourth village had its own winery too. Since he was around ten years old, D.C. had worked in the school brigade, helping with weeding and harvesting in the vineyards. That had been the origin of his liking for what he called “the wine culture” as during his schooldays he came to like the fields even more through teachers whom he found very inspiring and who he felt treated the students very fairly. In time student internships at wine companies convinced him to specialize in winemaking, to be part of something he felt was socially important: “The grapevine is a fundamental companion to human civilization.”

Although he specialized in making white wines, he came to concentrate on just one segment of its production—bottling. He was responsible for drawing up the bottling section’s monthly plan and preparing the entire technological process of bottling, labelling, and delivering the wine. He was required to order auxiliary materials, and organize each shift’s schedules. He also had to make sure the constantly large number of orders were completed on time for delivery to dozens of countries worldwide. D.C. had to be at the factory from around 6 a.m. sometimes staying until after midnight, when he would supervise the night shift, although not continuously. His office was on the floor above the bottling section, and was

where the workers went every morning to be given the daily plan; D.C. would go down to the bottling line from time to time, to see how the workers were doing. Regardless of how hard his work, and how fragmented, he felt could hold fast to the final product for which he felt responsible, and through which he felt connected to a history of the place: “The grapevine is most important for mankind. Making a good wine is a huge thing; a good wine is made by taking the trouble. I learned winemaking and I went on with supervising bottling because this is how I started it all. And I did not change the section because I strived to do well where I had started.”¹²

D.C.’s view was therefore comparable to B.V.’s: the long history of winemaking in the region and the prestige of the Văleni winery gave him an identity as a worker, who in spite of its repetitive nature understood his work as more than purely instrumental, again despite the small fraction of his control over the final product. Both had a cumulative view of something bigger than individual artisanship, something mediated by its local sociohistorical context, which echoed the position of the Dordogne cooperative workers in France: “The culturally formative activity which is entailed in wine-growing work and identity unfolds in a social arena which positions winegrowers both literally and figuratively in fields of power and which should be seen as both historically and socially mediated” (Ulin 2002, 694). Both B.V. and D.C. acknowledged similar positions in relation to wine: they had become close to it through a process of exposure and social learning ever since childhood, that process supported by the natural endowments of the regions where they grew up and later worked.

It is a commonplace in the anthropology of work to observe that division of labour alienates workers (Spittler 2008; cf. Braverman 1998). However, it is worth considering and discussing its implications in winemaking as something relevant to the “cultural” dimension of work. In Văleni, production is carried out in different sub-departments of the winery, so that production is split into different sections and carried out by different workers, who in the course of a year repeat the same operations endlessly.¹³ Segmentation of the labour process is a central aspect of capitalist production and is known as “detailed division of labour”. It is employed in industrial factories to subdivide work into distinct operations and is responsible for “breakdown of occupations and industrial processes”. It is different from “social division of labour” which is more often tied to gender roles and does not entail the division of tasks within a craft and was present in pre-capitalist times (Braverman 1998, 49-52).

¹² Interview with D.C. D.A., Văleni, 7 June 2017.

¹³ The processing section, open only during harvest, and the vineyards are exceptions to this, because here a sequence of different operations is carried out during one year.

It was usually the older employees who delivered a more complex and deferential narrative about their work in the winery, while the younger ones saw themselves as overwhelmed by economic constraints. But class and skill, mediated by closeness to the technological process of production (Mollona 2009), could shift the narrative among winery employees. The examples of B.V. and D.C. shed light on how work is understood from a management position. Their expertise and supervision were crucial to both the making and trading of the final product, but they were involved only partially, albeit crucially, in the entire process of wine-making from the vineyard to the bottle.

Manual Workers and the Division of Labour

On an autumn day in 2016 M.K., who had worked at the factory for more than thirty years, asked me to go with her to a different winery building to take some additives there. We hurried around for quite some time, too busy to say much. When we arrived back at the tanks where the additives had been needed, she suddenly just stared into space and mused aloud: “This is how God left work, we are on this earth and we have to work; some are richer, some are poorer, but we have to continue doing this work.” She continued by saying that in moments when she found herself in a difficult situation—such as when a piece of equipment was not working—she was usually able to sort it out, but she could also start swearing, to her own surprise, “because at home I never swear, but here, I work like a man so I swear like a man!” Afterwards she began to talk about the new winery, since privatization in 2003. She expressed contentment because what had once been a bare meadow was now planted with vines, so it had created jobs and was providing wages for the community. During years of unemployment in the 1990s she had sold homemade dairy produce, fruit and vegetables at the market in Odesa, Ukraine. “This entire hill [a small part of the hill where the Văleni vineyard extended to] was a meadow and we all kept two cows. Two cows! What do you get from two cows? Goats, pigs... this is a small income. I am grateful they came with this winery,” she said referring to the privatization of the former sovkhos.¹⁴ Despite her work not being easy nor

¹⁴ Many villagers saw the proximity of the Odesa market in a more positive light (see Ana 2022a, 90-1), as having provided enough income to build houses and to buy food for entire households in Văleni over decades. The reliance on this petty trade was, however, strenuous, as it implied leaving very early from Purcari, travelling 80 kilometers one way to Odesa, and spending long hours in a semi-open air market to try to sell produce much of which was perishable.



Figure 1: Dry pruning in March 2017. Courtesy: © Elena-Daniela Ana.

always rewarding, she reflected on a feeling of pride in what she could do and that Văleni wine was famous, and recognized not just throughout Moldova but abroad too.

Manual workers in the other departments expressed similarly ambivalent views of their work in the winery: it was their main—and permanent—source of income. But it was insufficient and brought no sense of security nor fulfilment comparable to those described by B.V. or D.C.. Moreover, to make ends meet almost every one of the manual workers' households included in my research relied on additional reproduction work such as subsistence agriculture, care work and remittances (Ana 2022a, 83-104).

The workers expressed the need for a double-layered recognition for their work: besides higher wages they needed more social recognition for their efforts. Eloquent witness to that came one winter day in 2017, when discussion in the winery's bottling section took a more intense turn because a work inspector was present. The inspector had been sent by management from Chişinău to report on the work in the winery; usually he appeared two or three times a year, stayed for a day or two and wrote a report about the activity, speed and performance of the workers. For their part the workers rather resented him for being young, "straight

out of school”, and yet being sent to evaluate and report on their work, while—they were convinced—“he’s never touched a bottle or a hose!” In the same context, one worker who had been on the bottling team for six years talked about their previous head of production who, in his first weeks working there, in 2013, had come and tried to do the same work they were doing. He put on a pair of gloves, filled a couple of containers with bottles—and found the work rather a strain. He acknowledged the team’s work was harder than it looked. They were paid 8 MDL an hour (around 40 Eurocents in 2013) which later went up to 10 MDL. “Until you get hands-on, you don’t understand,” said one of the workers in the bottling section.

A colleague of hers added bitterly that job options in the Moldovan countryside could be categorized as follows: “the one where you haul rocks”, meaning hard physical work; “the one where you sit on your arse,” referring to office jobs; and “the one where you are on the run”, by which he meant the factory work he was currently doing. He considered that wages should be higher and adjusted to the amount of effort done, which was not happening “because here in Moldova the people are not valued”.¹⁵

Similar views were expressed by I.B. and D.M., who had been working in the factory for 10 and 20 years, respectively. One day, which saw the release of a new company advertising video in which the workers were praised for their work, I asked I.B. if she felt proud of working in the winery. “You what? No, we’re only here for the money. The technical staff are respected; they get the New Year [paid days off for the New Year, E.-D. A.] we’re here just like that [...] Workers aren’t respected anywhere,” she said as she was hurrying to set the water pump to clean a cistern. D.M. added that her job was claiming a lot of her time as she had been working 12 hours a day during the harvest between September and November. The rest of the year her shifts were mostly of eight to ten hours; and during the harvest, her salary was not significantly higher. She felt she had to be there all the time and had no time for herself, such as for going away on holiday or simply spending time to enjoy a barbecue on the bank of the Dniester with her friends. She was a graduate of a winemaking college and a trained laboratory technician and in the early 1980s had completed her college internship working in the laboratory at Văleni during the harvest. She had met and married her husband—a Văleni man—and moved to the village; however she was soon removed from the laboratory because, apparently, it was not easy to keep such a job as a newcomer to the community. She then worked in a number of different departments in the winery until she settled into the blending section. I asked her if she had liked it better in the laboratory, given that the work there had been better paid and of higher status than manual work. She replied: “It was good, but I like physical work more because I’m a working person,

15 Fieldnotes T.V., D.A., Văleni, 20 February 2017.

not a lazybones.” There was a sense of dignity in doing physically demanding work and in being in the company of other manual workers. She said that work, regardless of the field, was necessary and there was nothing special about the wine sector: “No great pride in working at the winery. In the past, at least there were prizes [referring to bonuses and paid trips to other Soviet Republics].” But still, she said that winemaking was Văleni’s destiny: “I’m afraid that this is the only thing from which we can make money,” however little that was. For other women too, the job at the winery was hard but gave them a better negotiating position at home. J.A., who had been working in the industrial cellar at Văleni for four years, found her work very uplifting because of the independence it had given her in her marriage. Although the tendency to self-essentialize in relation to wine is present among manual workers too, it is more instrumental than in the case of middle-class professional winemakers or the subsistence “artisan” winemakers.

The division of labour in the winery distances workers from the final product, and not everyone can follow all aspects of the chemistry of wine. For example, one day in the industrial cellar I was helping fill barrels. When a worker and I mixed in certain of the required additives, I asked my colleague what they were for, but the worker did not know, because “everything is done as the laboratory decides”. Such



Figure 2: Transportation of the harvest, October 2016. Courtesy: © Elena-Daniela Ana.

distance from the full process is one key to understanding the meaning of work in the factory, as was revealed from discussions about homemade wine. If at home, “you know what you are doing, and you are doing it for yourself”; at the winery each worker is responsible for only one narrow segment, which greatly influences how work is conceptualized.

Nevertheless, distance from the production process was present during the Soviet period as well—alienation is ubiquitous in industrial work. In the USSR, work on a collective farm or in a factory was not always organized on egalitarian lines, for strong hierarchies were in place there too, and competitiveness was encouraged albeit in different ways—perhaps with privileges for those supervising and reporting back to the party; road trips within the Soviet Union for those who were performing best in their jobs; and top-down organization of the labour force. In fact, division of labour in industrial production in capitalist economies does not differ substantially from what it was in the communist Soviet economy, and is an element of continuity between socialist and capitalist societies. An important difference is that workers’ remuneration and security have been reduced in recent neoliberal times, while for many, working hours have increased.

From her research on the Languedoc winemakers of France, Winnie Lem argued that class is fundamental to understanding wine production, although she also noted an effervescence of cultural identity politics among wine workers (Lem 2002). Lem analysed social groups by looking at their positions in relation to the means of production, and described the resilience of class as being related to the fact that the socioeconomic system is “based on the production of goods by one class and the appropriation of surplus by another” (Lem 2002, 289). She agrees with Marx in that understanding of class, but departs from him by acknowledging the existence of new subjectivities woven from postindustrial tensions. According to Lem, “although class remains salient in contemporary identities, it has become inseparable from other forms of cultural consciousness that have emerged” (Lem 2002, 289). In the previous section, in which I introduced the two specialist employees, this argument was even more salient, as for B.V. and D.C. winemaking seemed to be first of all a marker of personal and national identity and only afterwards a means for them to earn a wage.

A Mirror-View from the Southern Hemisphere

In discussing the meaning of individuals’ work in winemaking, it is further enlightening to learn how Moldovan winery employees saw themselves in comparison with wine workers in other countries. B.V., introduced above, and his wife S.V., a laboratory technician in the same winery, had worked in the wine sector in

New Zealand, and their experience there during the harvest season convinced them even more strongly that winemaking should be a collective endeavour. B.V. had twice worked in New Zealand, in 2014 and in 2015, each time for three months; S.V. accompanied him only in 2015, their stays in New Zealand arranged by the two of them alone. Both took leave of absence from the Moldovan winery for three months because the reversed seasons in the two hemispheres allowed them to be absent during non-critical phases—the harvest in the southern hemisphere takes place during springtime in the northern hemisphere, when the grapevine plants there are only just coming into bud. Their purpose was to gain experience and to earn more money than they could in Moldova. On both his stays in New Zealand B.V. worked as a cellar hand, assisting in the daily operations of the winemaker throughout the winery. For S.V., the initial plan also to work as a cellar hand quickly changed, as in the second week of their stay she discovered she was pregnant with their son; the management decided to move her to the laboratory, despite S.V.'s hesitancy—she feared her English was not good enough to work in the laboratory; but she found she was able to manage very well.

For both B.V. and S.V. their time in New Zealand was enough to reveal differences in work relations, which pointed to something they both thought had been somewhat lost sight of in Moldova after the fall of the Soviet Union: solidarity between workers and owners, and security at work, the absence of which had become the norm everywhere in the country. Although the so-called “New World” winemakers¹⁶ are usually seen as aggressive marketers and as representative of neoliberal competitiveness (Itçaina, Roger and Smith 2016), B.V. and S.V. experienced more cooperation and solidarity than competition. B.V. recalled that when visiting wineries in the area while looking for a good Pinot Noir, it happened more than once that the vintner said that while B.V. could buy a decent one from him, if he wanted a really perfect Pinot Noir he should go to a neighbouring winery where he could find a better vintage that year. B.V. found himself wondering: “Why are they not trying to outdo each other? After all, in the end they’re competitors?”¹⁷ Indeed, collective branding has been the strength “of

¹⁶ The main so-called “New World” winemaking countries are the United States, Chile, Argentina, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. The “Old World” of wine refers mainly to European and partially to Asian winemaking countries, in which wines are associated with long histories of production (see more in Banks and Overton 2010; Ana 2022a, 132-4).

¹⁷ Marion Demossier compares winemakers from Burgundy to those in New Zealand and echoes B. V.'s and S.V.'s experience from an anthropological perspective. She notes that the New Zealanders “are very happy to talk openly about what they are doing among themselves and with the anthropologist” (Demossier 2018, 135), contrasting this with Burgundian secrecy.

marketing campaigns of the New World” (Itçaina, Roger and Smith 2016), so perhaps the explanation was some combination of economically and socially instrumental solidarity.

B.V. mentioned too the lack of hierarchy in daily life at the winery, which was also a contrast with Moldova: “The chief winemaker at the winery where I was working made no big thing of the difference between a high-up boss and a worker; they would all sit together and have a coffee, or a glass of wine.”¹⁸ That was indeed different from the organization of labour at the Văleni winery, where distinctions between workers and management were clearly perceptible, and spatial segregation was the rule too: The managers ate at a separate table in the kitchen and often had different food, while the workers ate in the cafeteria. Mixing between management and workers was very rare and had to do with celebrations, such as at the end of the harvest. While in his own work environment, he used to play by Moldovan rules, B.V. said he was trying to popularize these new ideas and visions, to “agitate” among students who came to Văleni for internships, to get them to be more cooperative with one another. But he believed that in Moldova it was very difficult to cultivate solidarity and passion for work because of the level of poverty. In more affluent winemaking countries around the world, even the working class could choose a job they might enjoy, and receive a decent salary for it. In Moldova, B.V. said, the working class were in such need that their only consideration was that a job must pay enough to support a household.

The contrast B.V. and S.V. saw in their experience in New Zealand presents Moldovan workers as atomized, competitive, and bitter. Although that bitter image of the Moldovan working class is not fully supported by my ethnographic data, in that people do manage to find meaning and reward in their daily activity despite obvious hardship, after the end of communism, social and economic responsibilities were indeed transferred from the state to the individual (Negură 2021; Dorondel, Şerban and Tudor 2021, 91) and competition became more salient. In Moldova, trust between people is low and readiness to cooperate remains low, too (Bolokan 2021, 16). All across Central and Eastern Europe, industries have been dismantled and workers have suffered a decline in their social recognition both financially and symbolically (Kideckel 2002; Kofti 2016). In Moldova, the high unemployment rate and the ineffectiveness of labour unions has sharpened competition and exacerbated individualism at the expense of solidary structures. Options such as organizing into collective structures such as trade unions, or cultivating cohesion and solidarity on the shop floor, are less visible than the

18 Interview with B. V., D.A., Văleni, 12 October 2016.

widespread mistrust of institutions and in society at large. As a result, exclusion became systemic and workers resorted to out-migration, or they developed coping strategies through unpaid subsistence reproductive work.

Conclusion

National identity in the Republic of Moldova has survived under different political regimes. Relying on participant observation and in-depth interviews with a number of the employees in a successful winery, this article has explored the meaning of work and the salience of national identification and notions of “national character” in Moldova in relation to winemaking. I have shown that not only can the consumption of food and wine be tied to a nation, but the act of its production and the relations concerned in its production can also be tied to a national framework. Moreover, the “nation” thus becomes salient in Moldovan winemaking at the level of everyday solidarity among workers, which I found was helping my interlocutors to make sense of hardship and competitiveness in the industry. While the “nation” is relevant in winemaking and shapes both the trade itself and the self-image of the workers in it, national identity ideology has only limited influence on wine industry workers.

Manual workers have a more instrumental view of what they do, experiencing both lower remuneration and more alienation through the segmentation of the labour process. In this article therefore, I have extended the classical Marxist notion of work as an instrumental act of transforming and appropriating nature, to include an act of differentiated “cultural production” (Ulin 2002). Discussions about the amount of effort and payment were quite common among my interlocutors; in fact, before bringing up any detail related to their attachment (or not) to winemaking itself, or the estranging effects of the division of labour, the manual workers mentioned the recognition of their work effort as the central aspect of a fulfilling working life. They talked about recognition in terms of remuneration, but also in terms of praise from the management and from colleagues in other departments. They described their work as a necessity, as toiling *without* sufficient recognition, and yet some expressed their attachment to the product itself.

The “extension” of the Marxist approach, proposed by Richard Ulin, proves to be an apt tool for use in forming a better understanding of the meaning of work in winemaking, as from a cultural point of view wine is a richly endowed commodity. In the wine-producing country of Moldova, workers tend to have more instrumental views of their occupations, given the country’s historical and economic context. Under pressure to devise day-to-day economic coping strategies, their low incomes and a generally difficult economic situation prompt manual wine workers not to

identify themselves through their work and they tend not to see it as any kind of “cultural production”, certainly not to the same extent as the professionally qualified workers do.

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Bionote

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