

Since the appearance of wage labour, individuals employed by other individuals to expend their time, bodily energy, and mental energy in exchange for money, goods, or services have been attempting to claim, guard, or reclaim the resources they perceive or deem to be rightfully theirs. Most of the histories written about workers in late twentieth-century Europe have focussed on the collective, overt, and obvious methods they used to defend and promote their material interests, such as establishing or participating in interest-oriented organisations like trade unions. These histories have typically focussed on singular countries and the activities of interest-oriented organisations at the national level. The result is that the individualised, covert, intentionally less obvious methods that workers used to defend and promote their material interests and the activities and experiences of workers at the workplace, local, or global level have received negligible scholarly attention.

The project seeks to compare and make visible the informal practices that coal miners creatively and gainfully leveraged in Poland, Spain, and Great Britain between 1960 and 1975 to tell a transnational history of 'cheating' in the hard coal mining industry. It investigates instances of occupational crime, workplace sabotage, and workplace fiddling to determine how workers at six hard coal mines attempted to advantageously get around, bend, or break workplace rules. These informal practices included intentionally lowering performance; purposely breaking work tools and equipment; altering progress markers at the coalface; filling coal wagons with materials other than coal; failing to arrive or arriving late to work; leaving work early without justification; neglecting to work overtime hours; simulating illness to obtain sick notes from workplace medics; self-inflicting injuries and presenting them as the result of workplace accidents; appropriating workplace materials; and drinking, reading, or sleeping on the job.

In addition to surveying these informal practices, the project asks why miners used them. It questions whether they used them predominantly to acquire material and social benefit, to demarcate a space of their own within the workplace, to enact opposition to their employer, to preserve their bodily or mental resources, or to avoid being punished by their employer. In doing so, it tests the suitability of various anthropological and sociological theories which attempt to account for the motivations that underpin workplace cheating. The project is innovative insofar as it is the first to address the informal work practices of miners in Poland, Spain, or Great Britain and the first to produce a comparative, transnational labour history of these countries.

The project employs an historical methodology and consults different types of historical sources from local-level and workplace-level archives that have not yet been researched. These sources include legal files containing laws passed relating to the hard coal mining industry, disciplinary files on the infractions of miners according to their employers, and interviews already conducted with former miners. Triangulating this data on specific mines in the non-democratic communist regime of Poland, the non-democratic Francoist regime of Spain, and the liberal capitalist parliamentary democracy of Great Britain, the project seeks to reflect on how political, economic, cultural, religious, national, local, and sectoral contexts have historically shaped and constituted workplace cheating.

The project focuses on the coal mining industry first, because coal was an important domestic and export commodity in all three countries during the period studied, and second, because the complex and multistep process required for the extraction and transportation of coal provided miners with numerous opportunities to cheat. The project looks specifically at the period between 1960 and 1975 because, during this time, miners in all three countries were confronting significant structural changes such as automation, mechanisation, and the introduction of a formalised occupational health and safety agenda, which hugely impacted how they conducted their work and how they cheated at work. In contrast to other histories written about mining, this project does not draw attention only to active, able-bodied, male workers, as it takes the term 'miner' to signify any individual that works or has worked at a mine, whether below ground or above ground, so as to include female and ancillary workers and dismissed, unworking, or retired male workers.