

Thursday Sociological Seminars

2/5/2024
14:00

room 207
Jilská 1, Praha 1

BARBORA STEHLÍKOVÁ

“This is not a sin”: Moral and ethical entanglements in e-waste management

Electronics manufacturers do not hesitate to discard products that never reached the market. This solution is more acceptable than underselling these products. Workers at the e-waste (electrical and electronic waste) processing company then must deal with the new and never-used products that should have had their lives taken away. Often, they steal them, although it is forbidden. The decision emerges from a reluctance to destroy something functional that required the work and energy of other people to be produced. In the environment of the e-waste processing company, things are salvaged, and a space for social interaction is created. Through the actions of workers, these objects find appreciation. In the practices of gift-giving, sharing, and collective use, the things are given back their social purpose. Furthermore, social ties benefit from the value of objects, and vice versa; the value of objects comes from social ties. Workers do not tolerate the destruction of value and use the objects to strengthen the value of the object and the social value of their relations. Their actions represent one kind of response towards the moral absurdity of wasting. Drawing upon ethnographic research at an e-waste processing company, I explore the extension of value transformation and the moral and ethical negotiations that accompany it. The stealing of the company's property highlights the irresponsibility of capitalist market logic. Stealing thus proves to be a moral action in this context.

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