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Material and Moral Capital in Serbian Paremiological Forms

Gmotni in moralni kapital v srbskih paremijah

The paper is based on a corpus of Serbian folk proverbs and sayings, which are viewed as short folklore forms that prescribe desirable patterns of behaviour and at the same time interpret everyday life. We aim to examine how these forms shape collective representations of material and moral values, especially in the context of work, scarcity, survival, and economic relations.

Proverbs and sayings reinforce work as a fundamental value and existential necessity, while laziness and unlawful profit are presented as morally problematic forms of behaviour. Poverty and scarcity are often thematised as everyday experiences, but are not necessarily associated with moral decline, indicating a complex relationship between an individual's socioeconomic status and ethical values. In this sense, material wealth is not always perceived as a positive value, especially when associated with unfair trade, usury, or robbery, while honour and honesty are posited as superior forms of symbolic and moral capital.

Proverbs function as diachronic commentaries on reality, but also as a means of social control – they set the boundaries of acceptable economic pragmatics and act as a moral corrective to the behaviour of individuals in a community. Through stereotyped representations of the rich and the poor, a collective economic ethos is articulated, in which material gain is valued solely if it is aligned with moral norms and social values prescribed by the community.