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Outclassed by Former Outcasts: Petty Trading in Varna

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outclassed by former outcasts: petty trading in Varna

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In this article we explore some of the strategies adopted by categories of Bulgarian citizens for coping with new opportunities introduced by profound changes in the political and economic order since 1989.¹ For ethnographic illustration we examine the practices of trader tourism—an economic system in which agents disguise themselves as tourists and travel from Bulgaria to Turkey to buy consumer goods at wholesale prices and then bring these goods back to Bulgaria and sell them at increased but still bargain prices at open-air markets. Although the phenomenon of trader tourism has expanded enormously throughout the areas previously controlled by the Soviet Union, this expansion has not been uniform for all segments of the population; this uneven distribution demonstrates that adaptability to new and fluid politico-economic circumstances corresponds to pre-established divisions of class, ethnicity, and gender. The roles and strategies that individuals adopt as they are challenged to adapt their resources and assets to new opportunities and risks reveal new articulations of basic identity alignments. Small-scale traders are compelled to pursue profitable possibilities through investments of money, time, and labor—all at the risk of considerable losses. Some individuals, particularly Roma participants, interpret this challenge to be one that offers opportunities to engage in rewarding presentations of self and fulfillment of ethnic legacies. To others this challenge entails exhausting efforts to risk profit in exchange for diminishing self-images. In short, trader tourism offers participants with diverse identities a contrasting picture of onerous efforts to gain desired aims.

the ordeal of transition

Since 1989 many East Europeans, especially people who live in those countries where the reform process has proceeded more slowly, have faced serious problems of economic survival.²

People caught in circumstances of social upheaval differ in the ways in which they adjust to instability and change. Occasionally individuals at less privileged socio-economic levels engage in socially devalued practices such as the small-scale trading enterprises that have been degraded ideologically during 45 years of communist rule in Bulgaria. In this article we explore the ways in which people adjust to change by examining ethnographically the practice of trader tourism in Bulgaria. We argue that such an examination supports a rethinking of the concept of boundaries, if boundaries are fluid sets of constraints that individuals negotiate when reacting to monumental stress. Specifically, we consider the reactions of population groups within Bulgaria to the post-1989 economic crisis. We also suggest that members of each group react in group-specific strategies of temporary inclusion, permanent inclusion, and exclusion. [economic anthropology, survival strategies, markets and trader tourism, capitalism con. communism, Roma/Indo-Roma/Gypsies, Eastern Europe/Balkan/Bulgaria, transition/boundaries]

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In 1978 Bulgarian government officials introduced campaigns promoting “a new economic mechanism” in which the state economic system would acquire free market features alongside its state socialist institutions, such as increased efficiency and incentives to entrepreneurs (see Gellner 1993; Nelson 1991:60). By 1996, however, officials had yet to implement proposed means to manage state property and collect taxes. Furthermore, the discourse of private entrepreneurship that appeared in official ideologies was couched in negative terms. In addition, because many “new businesspeople” were formerly members of the *nomenklatura*,³ the perception of widespread “mafia” activity and corruption pervaded public opinion. These confusions were compounded by efforts of the Bulgarian Socialist (ex-Communist) Party (BSP) to advocate simultaneously the socialist ethos and the capitalist ideal of *laissez-faire*.

As the novelty of these reforms has been replaced by confusion and skepticism, many individuals have come to view the reforms negatively. More specifically, the vast majority of people who occupy the lower socioeconomic levels have been hit with pronounced unemployment (national average of 20 percent in 1994 in Bulgaria), rising inflation (120 percent), the absence of trade union protection, and sharp increases in criminal activities against both life and property; for a stunning example, the meager salaries of state employees ranged between 3,000 and 6,000 levs (U.S.\$46–\$92 a month) before taxes and the 120 percent inflation level in 1994. Thus lower-level Bulgarian state employees find themselves caught in circumstances in which they must decide whether to aspire to better positions within a supposedly business-oriented state administration or to strike out on paths of individual entrepreneurship of a free-market nature. In our experience most Bulgarians fervently desired to attain more than merely a subsistence level of existence, and family members and friends discussed forms of entrepreneurial activities on a daily basis. Success stories came mainly from the domains of speculative trading—often on the verge of illegality—and engagement in such services as opening a small restaurant or café. Nevertheless, the initial capital necessary for such activities remained largely inaccessible because of credit interest rates between 80 and 120 percent, and many professionally trained workers had no practical training or experience. Moreover, in socialist discourse the marketplace (*bitak*) was depicted as the lowliest position, and the “Gypsies” who inhabited it were perceived as the diametrical opposites of the “New Man” and “New Woman” of the communist future. Individuals who pursued these activities thus found themselves acting in ways that were morally opposed to, and devalued by, practices institutionalized by 46 years of official ideology. For these individuals, deciding on a successful course of action that ensured a sense of well-being and emotional comfort was difficult. We argue that the ability of individuals to survive financially during the post-1989 transitional process is connected to their adaptability to drastic, new conditions.

unemployment, an excuse for petty trading

While the national average of unemployment was reaching 20 percent in 1994 (among a population of 8.5 million), the rate of unemployment among the various Bulgarian Roma groups amounted to more than 80 percent (see Stewart 1990). Similar circumstances existed in many Muslim (both Bulgarian and Turkish) villages in the Rhodope region. It is evident that Roma and Muslim groups have been hit harder by transitional reforms than has the Bulgarian majority. Although a small percentage of the latter gained—sometimes considerably—from the 1992 restitution of town property and the limited return of land that had been privately owned before collectivization (see Riedel 1994:390 ff.), there were no such benefits for Roma or Muslims. This precarious economic situation among minority groups has been further affected by a widespread loss of jobs resulting from the liquidation of cooperative farms, the uncertain situation of the tobacco industry, the breakdown of the workshop system in villages (Smollett 1993),⁴ and the closing of heavy industry and mining enterprises, leading to diminishing opportunities for daily or seasonal migration. Only construction work in large cities provides

new employment opportunities; this boom is connected with the transformation of undeclared savings into real estate and the development of a tourist industry.

Different segments of the Bulgarian population have reacted to these economic difficulties with different strategies. Bulgarian Muslims have responded primarily either by focusing on private farming and animal breeding or by migrating to Turkey and other areas of the Middle East to work. Roma, on the other hand, have overwhelmingly (perhaps to a level of more than 50 percent) responded by participating in entrepreneurial activities—small-scale trading, in particular—as have Bulgarians and “Russians” (a collective term for Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians).⁵ Trader-tourism seems to be the preferred economic option available to these individuals at the lower socioeconomic levels. To engage in this economic system a trader needs only a modest initial investment (a minimum of U.S.\$400), physical fitness, several suitcases, and the time to travel to wholesalers’ stores in another country and then to sell the goods at open-air markets at home. For the most part, however, Muslims have not been involved in trading activities: on one occasion in the summer of 1992, there were only two Bulgarian Muslim women selling rugs in the open-air market of Gotse Delchev at the center of one of the main Bulgarian-Muslim areas in the Rhodope Mountains (Lockwood 1992).

Although hundreds of thousands of people from former Soviet-bloc countries are currently engaged in this vernacular survival strategy, it has attracted disproportionately little attention in the anthropological literature (but see Hann and Hann 1992; Konstantinov 1993a, 1993b, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1994d; Kressel 1993, 1994; Thuen 1993, 1994; Zilberg and Kressel 1995).⁶ We suggest that the indifference of researchers may mirror the perspectives of the traders themselves—that this activity, widespread though it is, is considered unimportant and not a serious economic sphere. Because small-scale trading in Bulgaria is associated primarily with the Roma and with the connotations stemming from stereotypes applied to them, it is disparagingly dismissed as an “unserious, Gypsy affair” (*neseriozna, tsiganska rabota*).⁷ With its openness and accessibility, trader tourism arose as a relief program for individuals at the social levels where the pressures of the economic crisis are the greatest. To our knowledge, this is the only “program” that has worked out successfully—in sharp contrast, we believe, to the various relief programs initiated thus far by world organizations and Western states. For the most part such Western programs have resulted only in the offering of advice (“the consultant business”) in which the outcome of the intended transition from socialism to capitalism was a transfer of power from communist to supposedly reformed socialist hands—usually belonging to the same key individuals. Such programs thus reinforced the old *opportunist apparatchiks* and caused the widespread criminalization of society.

In this article we propose to contribute to the limited literature on trader tourism in Eastern Europe. We specifically consider several of the socioeconomic factors that various population groups in Bulgaria are negotiating. For ethnographic illustration we present case materials from the Sofia and Varna open-air markets and from a trader-tourist bus trip between Varna and Istanbul. From this ethnography we examine the ways in which actors manipulate boundaries of identity to cope with risk and ambiguity.

the bus to Istanbul

Trader tourism occurs in two parts: traders first travel by bus to a large regional market where they buy goods; they then return to Bulgaria and resell these goods at stalls or small kiosks at open-air markets. The regional destination for Bulgarian trader tourists is, as it was during the Ottoman Empire, Istanbul (in Bulgaria Istanbul is known as Tzarigrad, “the Sultan’s City”). Because Konstantinov has discussed the bus trip in a previous article (1996), we will provide only a brief description here and devote more attention to the resale process.

Bulgarian trader tourists make their trading trips by bus for several reasons. Trains and ferries accommodate more people than can be handpicked by a trip organizer—bus groups average

40 to 45 passengers—and private cars are not only luxuries for most people in Eastern Europe but are also disadvantageous because motorists usually receive harsher treatment from custom officials than do other border crossers.⁸ The bus journeys are organized by small travel agencies and each is led by the agency's owner, usually a woman (known as the "organizer") who was formerly a guide with the state tourist agency, Balkantourist. The travel agency supplies the transportation, reserves rooms in a cheap hotel in central Istanbul, and arranges for a collective visa for the passengers. The most important service provided by the agency, however, occurs on the return trip, when the passengers must take their goods back to Bulgaria without paying duty on them.

To do so, traders pose as tourists and present the goods they have acquired as within the limits for personal use (for details see Kunchev 1993; Kunchev et al. 1994; Ministry of Finance 1992a, 1992b). To make the Bulgarian customs officials accept this improbable rationale, the traders engage in two activities. First, they exchange merchandise among themselves until each individual achieves a semblance of noncommercial motivation: on one occasion the three of us each put on a lady's leather jacket to help a Romni (Roma woman) trader who possessed at least a dozen. Second, the organizer secretly presents a bribe (*souho* in Bulgarian slang)—publicly collected from the passengers—to the Customs officials.⁹ The mystique of the bus journey rests on the secrecy and ambiguity of this exchange. By contrast, on the Turkish side of the border bribes change hands openly.

The success of the bus journey depends on cooperative interaction among participants at several key moments. The process of loading the bus in Istanbul is a strenuous operation requiring the help of all. As we have already mentioned, the passengers must help each other at the border by redistributing their merchandise. More important, there exists an implicit cooperation among bus passengers and the border officials: although bribes are cloaked in secrecy as a result of socialist ideologies condemning informal and unofficial activities, the practice is known to all. In our experience, organizers collected the bribe money by making announcements over the bus intercom. Finally, because published texts of legal regulations (Ministry of Finance 1992a, 1992b) are largely unavailable to the general public, traders get their information from vernacular sources.¹⁰ These consist of stories and rumors, primarily misfortunes, that the traders tell each other during trips. In this discursive process, the less experienced traders rely on the more experienced organizers and traders; frequently the more experienced people are Romni and individuals who have family contacts in Turkey.

ethnography of trader tourism: the stall

Upon returning to Bulgaria, trader tourists resell their goods at open-air markets. To study this phenomenon of the stall, we engaged in direct participant-observation: we hired stalls at two principal markets and sold merchandise such as old clothes and shoes, trinkets, and bathing suits.¹¹ We conducted our fieldwork in the large market of Malashevtsi, known as the Bitak (from *bitpazar*, secondhand market), in Sofia, and in the market in Varna known locally as Kooperativen (cooperative) or by the nickname Kolhoz, from *Kolhozen Pazar* (agricultural products market).¹² Although this nickname is anachronistic now, it reflects a past when cooperative farmers sold their produce there from specially allocated small kiosks (now called "boutiques"). The Bitak is more diverse ethnically than the Kolhoz; the vendors at the Bitak regularly include Chinese, Syrians, Afghans, Mongolians, Vietnamese, and Armenians (from the Republic of Armenia), in addition to the primary groups of Bulgarians and Russians.

The Bitak is open only on Saturdays and Sundays, and we visited it as sellers on eight occasions between December 1992 and June 1993. The Kolhoz market is open every day, and we operated a stall there daily between August 6 and September 20, 1993, and returned as observers in the summer of 1994. We argue that this form of research is beneficial because it

provides a perspective of the market “from the other side”—that is, focused on the composition of the buyers’ population, their tastes and preferences, the manners in which they treat the marketplace, and the peak and slack hours, days, and seasons. Because the details of this picture have been described elsewhere (Ivanova et al. 1993; Mileva and Konstantinov 1992), we will report only the main points here.

On one occasion at the Bitak an Armenian couple asked to share our stall—and the daily fee—and they did as much research on us as we did on them by asking us about the “right price,” “what [we] should ask” for the various items of merchandise, how to guard against thieves, and other essential points of market lore. In general such questions constitute the main part of conversations at the market and freely circulate among the sellers. We discerned no withholding of knowledge, an observation that is in keeping with other research on the circulation of esoteric knowledge in service communities (e.g., Orr 1990).

We established initial relationships with our neighbors easily; sellers need each other’s help in many ways. In Bitak our neighbors were Evangelical Turkish Gypsies (see Zubchev 1992) from Pazardzhik, and in Kolhoz, Bulgarians and Turkish Gypsies. In both markets, these individuals frequently asked us to keep watch over their merchandise so that they could use the toilet, and we learned to “protect [our] neighbors” when strangers came in the mornings and asked if the stalls were available for renting. During the winter neighbors borrowed our clipboard to scrape snow off the roofs of their stalls. As colleagues, we were privy to descriptions of “new roads,” prices, misfortunes, and good luck stories about those first two legendary people “who started [like us] with two holdalls on the road to Tsarigrad.”

Stalls may be held by the same people or families for several years and are treated as monopolies. Since Roma traders operated the first bitaks in Bulgaria even before the changes of 1989, they usually command the best stalls in the first rows near the entrance. They keep these stalls by maintaining well-oiled relations with the administration and market police.

The market has noticeable gender and age aspects. The marketplace is primarily oriented to the needs of women and children: in the main areas vendors offer such goods as household utensils, clothing and footwear, toys, school articles, cassettes, and so on. The “male” section is restricted to stalls offering tools, mechanical workshop implements, spare parts, antiques, and other old or secondhand goods.¹³ In addition, women seem comparatively more inclined than men to buy clothing from the markets rather than from shops in town. Moreover, most of the sellers are women; men provide protection against thieves, carry goods, procure advantageous stall positions by waiting on fee-paying days in long queues to pay bribes to key persons, and perform other male-specific tasks.

Attitudes as to whether the market is an “own” or an “alien” place, and whether individuals should be *forroske save* (“boys of the market”; see Stewart 1992:97) or simply buyers, are revealed both by the frequency with which people move around between stalls and by the ways in which family members collectively treat their stalls. Among Roma families, the children, parents, grandparents, and other relatives occasionally gather at a stall to help or simply to chat. Clusters of stalls resemble the *mahala* (ghetto-like quarters): children play and collect empty bottles, loud music—usually pop-folk arrangements of Gypsy, Greek, and Serbian songs—blares out, smoke and smells of *kebabcheta* (meatballs) rise from grills, and Roma children and young women weave their way through the throng and loudly call out that they have plastic bags, sunflower seeds, and soft drinks for sale. During the summer we frequently saw people lying full-length on the stalls or simply on the ground, dozing during the sluggish siesta hours.

Opinions about the value and prestige of trader tourism vary by group. Vendors who sell from stalls must carry their merchandise back and forth between the market and their homes and are exposed to the heat of summer and the cold of winter; they are frequently depicted as being equivalent to “Gypsies”—a derogatory label. Many vendors desire to attain positions in boutiques, both to avoid the negative appellation and to work in pleasant surroundings.

Bulgarians and Bulgarian Turks who have turned to this Gypsy world view trader tourism simply as a transitional occupation on the way to better positions, the most fervently desired of which is a boutique in town. Former bureaucrats present themselves as “new businesspeople” with access to BMWs and nightclubs. A Bulgarian family in the stall next to ours in Kolhoz often complained about the heat, the noise, and the general “Gypsiness” (*tsiganiya*) of the market. They told us that they planned to move to rented boutique premises as soon as possible; indeed, toward the end of the summer they disappeared. By contrast, Roma traders appear prepared to stay for extended periods, as the permanent renting of stalls by the same people suggests. In the stall next to ours at Bitak, a Turkish Roma family from Pazardzhik sold blue jeans from Istanbul. They had recently embraced Evangelicalism and the mother frequently said, “God has provided for us with this trading and we pray that it lasts.”¹⁴ Bulgarian Muslims, on the other hand, make their opinions known through their complete absence from trade activities.

theoretical discussion of boundaries and group-specific strategies

These field data suggest that the adaptability and creative self-management of personal affairs by individuals in Bulgaria is closely linked to their abilities to negotiate cultural and ethnic boundaries, thus increasing the elasticity of the moral order (Barth 1969; see also Thuen 1993, 1994). By defining boundaries as fluid sets of constraints that individuals negotiate when reacting to monumental stress, we propose to explore how groups of actors confront past and future objectives in the context of a transitional reality. The survival strategies that actors invoke to accommodate this stress reflect culturally appropriate understandings of the boundaries. Thus there exists a dialectical relationship between boundaries and survival strategies: each shapes the other, so that newly designed boundaries influence possible strategies, while the performance of these strategies reinforces these boundaries. In terms of small-scale trading, the boundaries have changed from those within barter transactions in deficit economies and a marginalized existence on the fringes of town markets to more global survival strategies in the course of the last several years. Within social relations in the overall “groupscape” (to paraphrase Appadurai’s notion of the “ethnoscape” [1991]), such boundaries may range from the overwhelming inclusion of others to the complete exclusion of others and may occasionally coincide with demarcations of gender, ethnicity, and nationality. In addition, our ethnographic data show that rapidly changing social facts may be successively reinterpreted as new, rigid boundaries. Through a critical examination of the practices of trader tourism we will discuss some of the boundaries that are shaped, invoked, negotiated, and re-created as individuals employ strategies for survival. Although the practices of small-scale trading that we describe may vanish in the future, the boundary processes that they influence will, we argue, remain relatively constant. Thus we consider evidence not for static reifications of precommunist culture but for the constancy of changing social facts.

For Bulgarian Muslims beneficial boundary material must be opaque: individuals prefer that their culturally specific features should not be clearly distinguishable so that they will be relatively safe from attack by more powerful identity groups. Thus we argue that the Bulgarian Muslims preserve the boundaries around their group identity by limiting their engagement in small-scale trading. On the contrary, Roma traders have successfully preserved their separateness by maintaining a visible profile (see also Okeley 1979:45). Yet the boundaries around trader tourism remain flexible: at the same time that Roma perceive trader tourism as their own method of preserving separateness from *gadzhe* (non-Roma), they acknowledge that cooperation with non-Roma may increase their social standing.

differing attitudes to trader tourism among Bulgarians, Roma, Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks), and Turks

Ideologically, Bulgarians were brought up to believe that Communism would eliminate all hunger, but in order to survive economically, they had to disregard Communist teachings. The gap between praxis and belief grew wider. As a result of long-term political indoctrination, individuals understood loyalty to a socioeconomic and political order as an honorable moral choice inherent in *Homo socialisticus*. Individuals saw themselves as morally superior and on the side of progress and humanitarian values if they followed the moral code of socialism. Migration to the West, if not condoned for base economic reasons, was considered by many Bulgarians a treacherous act against the socialist fatherland. Despite this common indoctrination, however, groups of individuals have responded to economic stress in different ways. In our research, we have discovered that those individuals who join the process of transition are able to shed the customs of communism easily. In particular, those who profess to have resisted complete indoctrination into Marxism appear more successful in private entrepreneurship. On the other hand, individuals whose family heritage included trading and property are more inclined to look for connections with the precommunist past. Thus it is against this polarization of opinions about entrepreneurship that individuals must enact survival strategies. Such conflicts, sometimes distributed over generations within a family, often arise in situations in which parents proclaim strong procommunist views while the children operate as “new businesspeople.”

Trader tourism is an economic activity heavily embedded in social and ethnic relationships in the sense of Polanyi’s concept of impersonality in commerce—the differences distinguishing two or more sets of communities are supposed to justify the division of labor, which augments the impersonality of exchange (1977; Polanyi et al. 1957). As traders move up the hierarchy of economic relations, their interactions become more global and removed from particular cultural identities; as they move down by contrast, the diversity of the ethnoscape increases. Thus we must consider the phenomena of ethnic boundaries and strategies at these different levels of interaction.¹⁵

attitudes toward urban migration

The survival strategies employed by members of minority groups have differed with respect to larger national trends. For example, the introduction of a centralized state economy and land collectivization during the first decades after the communist takeover in 1944 prompted large numbers of the Bulgarian majority to migrate from village to town; city populations doubled and, in some cases, trebled, catching up with the industrial societies of the West. Meanwhile, members of the Islamic minorities (Bulgarian Muslims and Turks) either remained in their home villages or, if they chose to resettle, migrated to compact rural areas that became Islamic enclaves (see Konstantinov 1992a; Konstantinov et al. 1991:28–29). As a result, today more than 80 percent of the Turkish population live in two compact Turkish-populated areas in the northeast and southeast of the country, respectively, while more than 90 percent of the Bulgarian Muslims live in a single geographic area, the Rhodope Mountains. After being forcibly settled in the 1950s, Roma have either occupied ghettolike quarters (mahalas) in the big cities or have moved into the villages. Although the rich diversity among Roma groups (Fraser 1992:293) makes it problematic to describe a distinctive Roma identity, we argue that it is possible to describe similarities among the ways in which all Roma negotiate their marginal status (see Silverman 1988; Stewart 1990). Under the impact of centralized planning and land collectivization, individuals have redrawn the boundaries of their groups by choosing to live with other members of their groups.

This reinterpretation of group boundaries is also evident in the ways in which individuals respond to economic crises, both in practice and in discourse. Roma, for example, participated in small-scale trading activities throughout the socialist period and into the present era; moreover, as we have noted, trading enterprises are frequently stereotyped by non-Roma as distinctively Roma activities. Bulgarian and Turkish Muslims, on the other hand, have developed an “Islamic” peasant-worker economy (see Bates 1980; Lockwood 1992; Nelson 1991:58–59; Petkov 1990:229 ff.). Trader-tourist activities threaten Islamic ingroup cohesion and stability by requiring sellers to move out of villages and into the territory of “town swindlers” and “confidence tricksters” who, as Konstantinov notes, “would cheat us [Bulgarian Muslims], rob us, kill us, spoil our girls for we are simple people, not used to city-life” (see Konstantinov 1992b, 1992c, 1992d). The only exceptions are for men who are seasonal laborers abroad. Roma informants expressed their cohesion-building practices by remarking that “for the Roma the road is life,” and, specifically in connection with traveling, that they were “tougher and cleverer than some.” By contrast, Bulgarian Muslims told us, “We are simple people; we had better stick to our villages.” Meanwhile, at the same time that former members of the communist nomenklatura worry about how they will be affected by the transformation of public property to privatized concerns, rank-and-file Bulgarians are confronted by doubts and worries about identity. Our informants expressed it in these ways: “Can we be like the Gypsies?” “Is petty trading an honorable, proper means of making a living?” “Should one be involved with profiteering?” (Hamer 1994:188). The presence of a great number of Roma in petty trading tarnishes this avenue of livelihood for others.

Success as trader tourists is linked with an individual’s ability to overcome social and ethnic inhibitions. For members of the Bulgarian majority, engaging in trader tourism requires that individuals deal with Turkish traders in Istanbul by crossing, both ideologically and physically, into the territory of their former oppressors—the definitive Other. Bulgarian trader tourists must also reconcile themselves to the fact that they must interact with Roma groups, particularly on bus trips. Although this causes tension, Bulgarians acknowledge that it is in their best interests to accept Roma experience and leadership in trading matters. Thus there occurs a role reversal whereby members of the dominant majority find themselves subordinated to individuals perceived as belonging to the lowest social status (the term *Gypsy* also indicates the lowest level of social prestige [*tsiganin*, pl. *tsigani*]).¹⁷ At the same time, Roma find it problematic that they must cooperate with non-Roma, whom they call *gadzhe*, a term that not only parallels the derogatory connotations of the word *tsigani* but also carries the connotation of “fools” in the sense of persons who lack cunning. Roma acknowledge, however, that interactions with *gadzhe* provide access to increased social resources. Sutherland has commented that “*gaje* exist outside the social boundaries, and relations with them are intrinsically different from relations with one’s own people, in some ways diametrically opposed” (Sutherland 1975). Roma who perceive small-scale trading activities as aspects of their cultural legacy are obliged to put up with *gadzhe* during the tense moments of negotiating—and violating—customs regulations, a situation requiring a degree of accommodation that conflicts with traditional cultural norms. Close cooperation between white-collar *gadzhe* and low-status *tsigani* necessitates adaptability and accommodation on both sides.

We understand these minority representations of self (after Goffman 1959) to reflect the correspondence of actors’ attitudes and dilemmas with the meanings related to their respective group-specific strategies of boundary preservation. We further suggest that the understanding among actors of the overarching importance of cohesiveness (adherence to their group and its moral standards) and stability increases according to the fear perceived by each group—fear due to its powerlessness and the inefficacy of its defense mechanisms. The practices of Bulgarian Muslims and Roma illustrate an underlying ethnic cohesion that is the direct result of their perceived powerlessness when they individually confront the other groups and the state organs.

In response to Hamer's concern with predicting which "among several alternative meanings and forms would likely be chosen for reinterpretation" (Hamer 1994:189), we propose that Bulgarian Muslims and Roma react to powerlessness by reinterpreting constant boundary (identity) meanings through the forms offered by quickly changing events. In more general terms, these reactions may range from exclusion of others from the new "mode" (such as small-scale trading) to complete inclusion within it.

gender

Yet another boundary constraint emerges through gendered interactions. In Bulgaria the participation of women in trader tourism, both in the markets and on bus journeys, is substantially greater than that of men. On bus journeys women dominate in number: usually two-thirds of the bus population is female. Our informants described these circumstances as "traveling with the Gypsy women to Tsarigrad." Women also exert significant influence over the trips' programs. To begin with, the organizer is usually a Bulgarian woman (see also Nedeva and Konstantinov 1993). In addition, women are the primary decision makers on the buses: they speak in loud voices, in sharp contrast to the silent men, and move around as commanders of the whole affair. When decisions are to be made, four or five leading women gather around the organizer in her seat at the front. This leading group also distributes the seats on the bus. On one occasion, when a man protested at being moved to a less attractive seat, we heard one of the women respond, "You do as I tell you and don't ask any questions!" The man obeyed. Women also expressed their preference for working with other women: not only were there fewer conflicts among women than between men and women, but women were usually more successful than their male compatriots in bribing border officials—all of whom were men.

Even in critical and physically demanding situations such as the loading of the bus before the return journey, women make significant contributions. At the end of an exhausting journey to Istanbul we watched Romni women lugging heavy suitcases to taxis; the men, in contrast, had fetched the taxis and were watching complacently as the women unloaded the bus. According to Roma cultural rules, men work either in traditionally male activities such as money changing, livestock trading, and professional entertaining or in more prestigious enterprises such as acquiring and protecting front-position stalls, investing proceeds in additional activities (such as opening coffee and snack stalls in the market), and negotiating inexpensive procurement strategies (see Egbert 1994).

foreign: a stall in a wholesale Bazaar in Istanbul

Diversity within the larger population expands beyond gender and ethnicity to more global categories of nationality, thereby enlarging the realm of boundaries that actors must negotiate. The trader tourists whom we met included citizens from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS—formerly the USSR), Romania, Macedonia, Albania, the Kosovo region of Yugoslavia, and other Balkan communities. There is also a trading population that consists of individuals who were students from the Middle East, Afghanistan, China, and Vietnam and who are now residents of Bulgaria.¹⁶ Although the Bulgarian government has substantially restricted the influx of people from its northern neighbors, especially in light of CIS-associated racketeering activities ("mafias"), citizens from the CIS, known collectively in Bulgaria as "Russian traders," continue to provide rich supplies of household goods, tools, workshop instruments, spare parts for cars, and toys—all of which are products of Soviet industry. The activities of the Albanian, Macedonian, Romanian, and Serbian trader tourists are primarily connected with UN-embargo violations across the western Bulgarian border and contribute to the ongoing civil wars in the former Yugoslavia. As is the case in Bulgaria, Roma groups comprise the leading contingents of traders from Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo.

The Vietnamese population comprises a considerable presence.¹⁸ Vietnamese guest workers who arrived in Bulgaria during the late 1960s established an entire informal economy of their own that was centered on the production of ready-made denim clothing, the export trade of medicine to Vietnam, prostitution, and illegal all-night sales of alcohol and cigarettes. Over time, in the Sofia Roma quarter of Fakulteto, Vietnamese traders became the main rivals of the Roma *Erli* (settled Gypsies, i.e., urbanized) in the informal economic sphere. Shootouts among Roma, Vietnamese, and police officers led to the expulsion of most Vietnamese in 1990. At present the activities of Vietnamese who remained or have recently immigrated are centered around the Varna-Haiphong shipping link. Other local links with countries such as Mongolia, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian Republics of the former USSR are visible at the markets, and there is a growing presence of Chinese traders of sandwashed silk garments.

In numerical terms, although each of these new trading communities is relatively small, the combined international element comprises a substantial, and formidable, part of Bulgaria's trading community.¹⁹ This increased diversity has had several significant effects. First, as Bulgarian traders become more involved in this more global network, they lose their ethnic distinctiveness. Second, "ex-revolutionary" students provide perspectives on the transition that differ substantially from those of local Bulgarians. Many small shopkeepers and traders who were formerly ideological revolutionaries have seemingly forgotten socialism's imperative against primitive capitalism: for instance, Kurds from Turkey and Palestinians from Israel are routinely associated with semilegal and illegal trading activities in the Balkans.²⁰ Such activities have been reported in the press as including drug trafficking, arms dealing, car theft, and, increasingly, the smuggling of immigrants across Bulgaria's southern border with Greece and northward into western Europe. Third, the persistence of this motley crowd of traders demonstrates that although government officials are eager to usher in capitalism they are unable to keep it under control.

The prevalence of these illegal trading activities and the absence of an infrastructure for negotiating participants' interests have further led to violent conflicts among members of the various trading minorities. Such incidents as street shootings in broad daylight have contributed to the creation of an ethnically marked, as well as frightening, image of informal economic activities. Despite previous ideological slogans proclaiming "international solidarity," ethnic prejudice against foreigners, particularly students, was well marked in Bulgarian society; public performances of ethnically marked boundaries have only compounded these problems. Thus trader tourism has acquired a negative image among large sectors of the Bulgarian public because of the strongly marked ethnicity of its participants—in particular, the ex-revolutionary traders from the Middle East and the Russian traders and their mafia-type activities.

This diversification of the larger groupscape is especially noticeable because Bulgaria is on the intersection of trading routes that connect Russia, the Middle East, Africa, western Europe, and India. The Middle Eastern connection, which until recently represented the image of "revolutionary" zeal, is now regaining its stereotypical association with trading. Russians, Chinese, and Vietnamese illustrate dramatically the quick metamorphosis of communist ideals into capitalist practices. Finally, Bulgarian-Turkish border crossings at Kapitan Andreevo and Maldo Turnovore present postmodern examples of diverging worldviews: boundaries demarcate different universes in which actors live or from which they shy away; the erstwhile constancy of the division between Bulgaria and Turkey that represented both constant economic possibilities and otherness now represents permeability, letting otherness infiltrate, merge, and thus effect the nature of the national entity.

conclusions: old and new boundaries

One of the most striking features of transitional realities is the ambiguity of boundaries at multiple levels. In light of the Bulgarian case we have described, we suggest that this ambiguity

corresponds to what Durkheim theorized as anomie (Durkheim 1993). And, as we have tried to illustrate in this article, adaptation to these ambiguities provides a significant successful survival strategy. It begins with the simple technique of crossing boundaries under false pretenses (as “tourists”) and through loopholes (bribes), and expands to larger social negotiations of boundaries. Moreover, because the cultural constraints that shape the system of trader tourism are influenced by the very circumstances that produce them, social interactions are both unique to the slow reform transition and dialectically engaged with these circumstances. Thus the system appears changing, fluid, and even unpredictable. This resulting perception of chaos is further enhanced by the flaunting of sybaritic lifestyles by the newly rich (see also Sampson 1994), gang wars in the streets, and rising criminality. This situation makes it difficult for actors to respect existing moral and legal boundaries and to engage in practices that create new boundaries.

Today imported goods dominate Bulgaria’s consumer scene, and available supplies to meet this demand have become public concerns. During the “deficit economy” years in which most families earned livings from state jobs, wages, pricing systems, and adherence to Engel’s Law,²¹ consumption patterns could be predicted and accommodated. The surreptitious means by which some people obtained extra revenues or acquired foreign goods were not discussed in public: this was an infringement of the socialist moral code. Other practices of the informal economy, performed in the domains of the office or the factory and consisting primarily in the abuse of position to obtain limited goods or services through embezzlement and bribery (see Sik 1992), also contradicted the socialist code. Now, by contrast, the informal economy of the previous Socialist state has come out of the closet: former bureaucrats sell alongside the Roma women.

With the shift of emphasis in the national economy from production to trade and services, members of the “reenfranchised erstwhile nomenklatura” have amassed considerable fortunes of public property—frequently from profiteering and other practices on the edge of legality.²² Much public attention has focused on the formation of this new group of “reenfranchised erstwhile nomenklatura.” The newly rich in Bulgaria come primarily from the middle-ranking nomenklatura, and particularly from among those who were employed in the foreign trade sector (see Sampson 1994 for Hungary and Romania). Here the gender distribution overwhelmingly favors men; the occasional “new businesswoman” appears as an exotic presence. Whereas men are involved in the higher levels of trading and business, women predominate in practices such as choosing and transporting goods. It is generally understood that the exploitation of supposedly less dignified sources of living is appropriate for women;²³ these less dignified activities are, furthermore, attributed first to Romni and then to gadzhe women. Even today, when earlier moral values have been largely abandoned, it is still difficult for men to engage openly in small-scale trading; women are the leaders behind massive survival strategies like trader tourism. Furthermore, women are limited in their participation in corruption and scandal. The Bulgarian “mafia” is depicted in terms similar to those of the Sicilian model; racketeering and gangster activities are exclusively male activities.²⁴ Attainment of the upper economic levels is thus viewed as a masculine achievement, whereas further down the social pyramid the less glamorous modes of economic activity are labeled as feminine.²⁵

This value hierarchy is also applied to ethnic divisions. The most problematic accommodation strategy that we have noted was that taken by gadzhe who had participated in previous power negotiations but later resorted to Roma options that conflicted with the cultural ideas appropriate to their socioeconomic position. By contrast, individuals low on the social ladder and far from the gadzhe power world—the Roma and, in particular, the Romni—find uninhibited possibilities in the new transitional arena. From the perspective of participants in trader tourism the moral code reproduces the Roma stereotype: “We are cleverer and tougher,” and “The road is life.” This discourse represents another form of heroism with roots in a long-standing, revitalized cultural tradition. Rating occupations on a scale from “dignified” to “undignified” thus becomes

rather problematic in postmodern Bulgaria, where tensions between “degrading” and “liberating” activities remain unsolved (see also Shreeves 1992).

These individual and group cultural values also inhibit actors. In particular, unemployed persons expressed their exclusion from petty trading in terms of an inability to adapt to Roma ways: “We cannot participate in such Gypsydom [*tsiganiya*].” Roma activities are considered threats to group boundaries, as in the Bulgarian Muslim case. When necessity so dictates, individuals may participate for a limited time and achieve a temporary compromise between a perceived sense of social worth and relative position and a present low-status occupation.

Those trade participants who completely break free of such inhibitions are the ex-revolutionary student traders, who have no commitments to the local scene and present their own interpretative patterns of boundary formation. They also offer new orientations and specific solutions to the highly dynamic and ambivalent transitional moral framework.

We anticipate that from now on trading activities in Bulgaria will increasingly acquire illegal features as the economic crisis deepens and the perception of moral ambiguity becomes more pervasive. We already see instances of drug trafficking, immigrant smuggling, trade in children for adoption, trade in organs for transplants, trade in radioactive materials, and so on. Prostitution and the sex market in general comprise another informal direction (see Attwood 1994). We suggest that ethnographic investigations of these related phenomena will provide further insights into the driving forces and cultural predispositions in societies that are experiencing profound and painful transitions.

notes

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1. We suggest that the current circumstances of change and instability in Bulgaria provide ethnographic examples of Durkheim’s notion of anomie (Durkheim 1933). The Greek word *anomos* means “lawless” and describes a state of society that emerges in times of economic crises and in which normative standards of conduct and belief have weakened or disappeared.

2. On political and economic reform in Bulgaria, see Creed 1991. According to our research this interpretation is appropriate to all countries of the former Soviet bloc, except those few countries in which the transition to an approximately western European type of economy has proceeded relatively quickly (i.e., the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, and Eastern Germany; see Gellner 1993). Bulgaria falls into the slower category of reform and exhibits regional similarities of development with Romania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Albania.

3. The term *nomenklatura* at first meant the top posts of the ruling stratum of Soviet society. In later years it meant a group of official positions that could be filled only by decisions handed down by party organizations. It here denotes middle- to high-ranking former state officials. In our article we focus specifically on the socioeconomic privileges of the *nomenklatura*.

4. Before 1989 opportunities for village employment consisted of workshop activities; these workshops were extensions of centrally situated, large industrial sites, especially those of the textile and armament industries, which were run by the Russians.

5. It is difficult to estimate the percentage of Roma involved in trader tourism, but we offer a tentative figure of at least 50 percent, on the basis of our field data and published figures (e.g., National Institute of Statistics 1994; OECD 1992, 1994; Radev 1994:4).

6. Field research on open-air markets and trader tourism was begun in the autumn of 1992 and organized by the Bulgarian Society for Regional Cultural Studies. Researchers studied town markets in Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Rousse, Vidin, Pazardzhik, Dimitrovgrad, Elena, Zlataritsa, Devin, Dospat, Gotse Delchev, Madan, and the village of Boutan, among other places (see Egbert 1994; Kressel and Ben David 1995, 1996).

7. Roma constitute the second largest minority in Bulgaria, after Turks (Iglia et al. 1991); at present there are approximately 400,000 Roma in Bulgaria (see Gjuzelev 1994). The term *Roma* stands in contrast to the popular ethnonym *Gypsy* (*tsigani*), which is usually rejected in official discourse by Bulgarians and Roma alike (see Barany 1994:381, n. 4; Gilliat-Smith 1915); academic terminology is not uniform, however (see, for example, Maroushiakova and Popov 1993). In this article we are concerned primarily with the activities of “Turkish Gypsies” and use the more general term *Roma* to designate this group. The term *Rom* denotes a Roma man; *Romni* is used to refer to both a Roma woman and Roma women. *Romani* is the language; it means the Gypsy parol.

8. We have calculated that between 1992 and 1994 approximately 100,000 trader tourists made the trip annually from Sofia to Istanbul. On average, each trader-tourist purchases approximately U.S.\$1,000 of merchandise from Istanbul suppliers per trip, so that the overall importation of goods is approximately U.S.\$100 million per year—roughly 9 percent of Bulgaria’s GNP (OECD 1994:102). In terms of weight alone, the goods reach the 100,000-ton mark annually. For more information and estimates about the influx of petty traders to Turkey during 1992–94, see Aktar and Ögelman 1994.

9. The average bribe ranges from U.S.\$250 to U.S.\$400 (U.S.\$2-5 per suitcase); we estimate that customs officers stationed at the road crosspoints receive U.S.\$500,000 or more per year.

10. According to a statement issued by the Bulgarian Trade and Industrial Chamber (BTTP), Bulgarian import and export regulations have changed approximately 75 times during the last few years (24 *Chasa* 1994; see also Kunchev 1993).

11. The Malashevtsi market was studied (1992–93) by Y. Konstantinov, A. Kolev, T. Mileva, M. Nedeva, Henrik Egbert, and M. Burzashka. The Varna Kolhoz market was studied (summer 1993) by Y. Konstantinov, G.M. Kressel, T. Thuen, D. Kunchev, R. Ivanova, N. Kaikova, Henrik Egbert, and G. Vakrilo; and (summer 1994) by Y. Konstantinov, G.M. Kressel, T. Thuen, A. Sellner, N. Varpe, E. Rebni, A. Kolev, P. Munkova, and D. Kunchev. Researchers who participated in trading trips included Y. Konstantinov, M. Nedeva, G.M. Kressel, T. Thuen, D. Kunchev, N. Varpe, E. Rebni, and H. Egbert.

12. *Kolhoz* is a common abbreviation for the Russian Kollektivnoe Khozyaystvo, meaning collective farming. It was one of the two basic units of Soviet socialist agriculture, the other being the Sovkhoz (state farm).

13. This relegation of secondhand goods to the male sections of the market is particularly interesting linguistically: although the word *bitak* is derived from the word for secondhand (*bitpazar*), the larger market sells almost exclusively firsthand goods.

14. The Evangelical Church offers the Roma an alternative to the Orthodox Church and Islam (Zubchev 1992).

15. Bulgarians, Roma, Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks), and Turks comprise the principal population groups in the country. The most recent census (December 1992) recorded a total population of 8.5 million people, broken down as follows (in round numbers): Bulgarian Turks (600,000), Roma (400,000), Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks) (220,000) (National Institute of Statistics 1994).

16. Sociometric tests regarding the ethnic constituents of Bulgarian society are largely absent, as the country does not constitutionally recognize the presence of ethnic minorities. Present research suggests, however, that the main sociometric distribution (in the sense of Allport 1954; Moreno 1960; for ethnic stereotypes see Hagendoorn and Kleinpenning 1991; Kleinpenning and Hagendoorn 1993) would, from top to bottom, be as follows: Bulgarians, Turks, Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks), and then Roma (see Kolev 1994; Kolev et al. 1994; Shopov and Konstantinov 1994). According to Barany, “One of the few remaining similitudes in these increasingly dissimilar (East European) societies is contempt towards the Roma” (1994:329).

17. These students were originally participants in a Soviet-inspired program “for the support of revolutionary movements in developing countries.” With the reforms of 1989, the *raison d’être* of the program disappeared and these students lost the financial support that the Bulgarian government had provided. Most of these “ex-revolutionary” students preferred to remain in Bulgaria and engage in trading activities. Most of those who did not remain were from Latin and Central America, Africa, and Asia.

18. The Vietnamese population consisted of persons who managed to evade the wholesale expulsion of some 30,000 Vietnamese guest workers in 1990.

19. The last census lists 5,438 Arabs, 1,969 Vietnamese, and 2,000 Chinese as resident in Bulgaria (National Institute of Statistics 1994:194–231).

20. See Apostolov 1994a for further information about Palestinian involvement in illegal arms dealing with Bulgaria. Reports about Kurd traders suspected of terrorist activities were published regularly in 24 *Chasa*, the daily Bulgarian newspaper (see especially Apostolov 1994b).

21. According to Engel’s Law, the lower a family’s cash income, the greater the percentage of the family’s income that is spent on food (Sloan and Zurcher 1970).

22. We have borrowed the term “enfranchised erstwhile nomenklatura” from Polish discussions of these transitional processes (see Bugaj and Kowalik 1992:140–157).

23. A striking example of these allegedly less dignified activities is the frequency with which middle-class professional women, particularly those from the CIS and the Middle East, resort to prostitution (see Kon and Riordan 1993).

24. For comparison to patterns of corruption in provincial Russia see Humphrey 1991.

25. This association of certain activities with masculinity appears throughout the popular press, but most openly in glossy magazines of the *Playboy* type (e.g., *Kloub M* [The Male Club]).

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