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PRICE AND PREJUDICE.
BULGARIAN CASES OF CLOTHING AND IDENTITY

The massive use of second-hand clothes is one of the many innovations practiced by Bulgarian consumers over the last decade. The first shops for second-hand clothes, mostly of West European origin, appeared immediately after the fall of the socialist regime in 1989. At the beginning, they were located in back streets, backyards, modest spaces, and the information about them circulated among informal consumer networks. Slowly, the shops gained in profitability and respectability, and ten years later we find them in central streets, the heart of the towns, under neon shop-signs announcing their existence with a specific modest dignity or humor.

Buying and using second-hand clothes to such an extent is a relatively new phenomenon in Bulgaria and it has encountered specific obstacles, related to local tradition. For many Bulgarians, using clothes previously belonging to another implied either a close personal relationship to the prior owner or lower social standing, with a variety of shades between these positions. At least at the beginning, buying and wearing second-hand clothes was far from an anonymous, impersonal transaction. It involved intense work of symbolic appropriation and quite often, it led to reflection on the relationship between old and new owner. Almost inevitably, this led to analysis of the imagined West Europeans who used to don these clothes and the new Bulgarian owners, similarities and dissimilarities between them, and the symbolic links between Bulgarian customers and their imagined Western counterparts.

1. The Ambiguity of Second-Hand Clothes

Today, both poor and rich, young and old buy or receive as a gift second-hand clothes from friends, relatives or neighbors. Wearing second-hand clothes is not an entirely new practice for the country. Most traditional funeral ceremonies in Bulgaria include a ritual distribution of clothes belonging to

the deceased. They are given to close friends and relatives or the poor of the community. Here, the distribution of clothes has two different functions - for friends and relatives, the clothes serve as a reminder of the physical presence of the deceased, and may or may not be actually worn, and if so only on specific occasions. Of course, traditions are not what they used to be and sometimes such a gift may create awkwardness. “My aunt gave me a jacket which belonged to my deceased uncle. I do not know what to do with it. I can’t wear it at home - it would be somehow impolite to repair the car in it. I cannot wear it downtown, it is too old fashioned. I cannot throw it away, because, after all, it belonged to my uncle. So I just keep it and hope that it will get lost by itself one of these days.” The connection between the former owner and the article of clothing remains strong, and obviously presents specific problems to the modern-minded nephew.

Used clothes given to the poor is a classical act of charity with all the usual implications for the parties involved. This is still common in Sofia, especially among the elderly. Widows often exchange used clothes of a deceased husband for small services of a family friend in poverty. Close to this is the gift in used clothes made by a widow or a widower in exchange for services. In this transaction the recipient is constructed both as a friend of the family and as somebody poorer than the donor. Often the tradition again is not what it used to be, but still influences the behavior of the parties concerned, as we can observe in the following story told by a craftsman doing small repairs in his neighborhood: “Old women, especially widows, often do not have any money. That is why they do not call a real specialist, with all the tools, but me - I take ten times less. They also give me something to eat and give me old clothes, belonging to their dead husbands. ... I exchange them for potatoes in Vladaia (a village near Sofia), but I do not tell them anything. It would be inappropriate; I knew most of these men. It would be somehow indecent.”

Thus the gift of second-hand clothes could either imply close relations between the participants in the transaction, or be considered a charity, with a variety of subtle nuances between them. In both these cases discussed above, the connection between the former owner and the article of clothing remains present in the mind of the parties concerned and influences their behavior. The same old man who exchanged the second-hand clothes for potatoes, owns a suit, belonging to a famous leader of the Communist Party. As a staunch communist, he keeps the suit and has announced his intention to be buried in it, thereby declaring his loyalty to the ideals of communism. The used clothes are not only impregnated in the personality of the former owner, but can also act as a carrier of images, ideas and even ideologies.

The market is often said to alienate the manufactured article from all ties with its producers. In our case, we can note a similar process in patterns of consumption by severing the link between former owners and new users

of second hand-clothes. Those who purchase second-hand clothing do not know anything about the personality of the previous owners, and they buy them as they would buy any other good. However, used clothes are not as anonymous and impersonal as other products are. One reason for this is the consumer realization that these articles of clothing are gifts from someone in Western Europe or Canada, and that the end customers only pay for transportation and distribution costs. Originally, the clothing was a gift - and the articles they wear cannot completely avoid the implications of being a gift. Moreover, second-hand clothes from the West were imported to Bulgaria for the first time in the early 1990s as humanitarian aid: a gift of a different type. And a gift that cannot be returned is also called charity. The symbolic link with the former owner provokes specific tensions and, as a result, a variety of subtle strategies are employed for symbolic appropriation of such goods.

The most common strategy has been to portray a visit to the second-hand shop as a kind of hunt. Characters of such stories present a combination of luck, knowledge and skill of which one should be proud. In these narratives, the item belongs to the new owner as a fish or a hare would belong to the happy hunter. It is neither a gift, nor charity any longer. Another strategy is to exchange second-hand clothing with a friend or relative. A modest gift from a humble donor cannot be refused, and the new owner should not be ashamed to wear it. The new owner can confirm their right over the used clothing by claiming that they have always been looking for such a shirt, cardigan, or coat; that they have spotted such clothing on the street, or TV, in a magazine, or even in an intellectual and prestigious scientific review. Last but not least, procedures for cleaning the newly acquired second-–hand clothes are by far more complicated than a standard laundry.

Second-hand clothes thus remain half-way between gift, charity and merchandize. This has created a specific uneasiness and motivated all the subtle strategies for symbolic appropriation. However, they have never been completely successful.

“I will never buy such a thing for my child. For me it is fine, I understand. He also understands, but the other children do not. They watch each other. They will make fun of him, and he is not guilty of anything. Well, neither am I, but I am already beyond these sentiments, I am not young”, explained a woman. Another woman told us how she used to go discreetly near the schoolyard to see how the children were dressed. People wearing second-hand clothes use sophisticated strategies to confirm their right over used clothes, but they do not offer this substitute to their children. In spite of recurrent efforts of symbolic appropriation, the ambiguity of the second-hand clothes remains.

2. Normality versus Reality

Despite their ambiguous status, people continue to purchase used clothes. Choice is motivated primarily by personal income, but not entirely - there are new clothes of Turkish or Chinese origin at a comparable price. They are of lower quality but they have the same or more fashionable design than the second-hand Western brands, and lack all the uneasiness and ambiguity of used clothes.

Simultaneously, a plethora of small shops were established all around the country, offering Western used clothes.– These shops are of two principal types. Some of them sell clothes per kilogram, while others fix prices for specific types of clothing, e.g. 5 Bulgarian levas for a pair of trousers. A typical customer might be a modest civil servant, doctor, teacher, low or middle-level white-collar employee at a private firm, teenagers or students. Most of my interviews were done amongst these people.

Most feel obliged to justify their choice of second-hand clothing because they perceived it as a compromise between need and income. Thus the first justification is financial - most argue they are not paid adequately. These complaints are probably common for people of different ages, gender and occupation in all societies. Customers of second-hand clothes shops share a specific common trait - they insist that their entire group is underpaid. They protest against the low salaries of all the doctors, teachers, or local staff at international institutions. At the same time, they paid less attention to individual complaints directed against their superiors or complaints of being personally underestimated at the workplace. They were firmly convinced of being underpaid as a group, and all their daily activities were dominated by the necessity to preserve their lifestyle with insufficient financial resources.

This was told and retold in endless stories about small personal campaigns, more or less successful, but always with significant human costs. They began with small personal sacrifice. The first thing to be sacrificed was "culture" - books, theatrical performances, art exhibitions. Those interviewed tended to explain why they pay less attention to "culture" and "self-development" with the fact that they cannot afford it, and interpreted this as a personal sacrifice. The next type of sacrifice was related to the small everyday items - at home, where men shave with cold water or women buy the cheapest dishwashing liquid, laundry by hand or cook after midnight when the electricity is cheaper, cut off central heating in most of the rooms, etc. A master notion emerged at this stage in the interviews - that of "normal life". All the sacrifices were understood as a deviation from "normal life", as if something that those interviewed were entitled to was taken away. Small acts of sacrifice were not a source of pride, as could be expected, but were mentioned as something humiliating, undermining self-respect and overwhelming individuals. Moreover, they remain a source of constant worry. "People are obsessed by these wor-

ries; everyday I think about what will happen tomorrow; and even the pettiest obstacle could bring disaster. Say, my salary is one week late (...) I start worrying one week earlier whether I will have my salary in time, and I start planning whom I shall ask for a short-term loan. I started to have headaches and have to take pills for my heart." Besides creating health problems, the deviation from normality was quoted as a constant cause of family quarrels.

Different groups in contemporary Bulgarian society conceive of their everyday life as a deviation from what they call a "normal" way of living. This was analyzed under a different lens by several Bulgarian social scientists. In 1999, a team led by Dr. Petya Kabakchieva working on the World Bank project "Voices of the Poor" indicated that the concept of normality - a normal revenue, a normal level of consumption, a normal lifestyle - plays a key role in interpretations of poor Bulgarians. One task of our team was to understand how the perception of 'a good life' was created. A 'good life', or 'well-being', is a classical category in anthropological writings. As our work progressed, we saw that the notion of 'a good life' was constantly in conflict with the notion, of 'a normal life'. At times, both notions appeared side by side, and at other times 'normal life' displaced 'good life'. Although the two concepts share some similarities, they also differ substantially. The notion of 'a good life' is related to everyday or long-term strategies of individuals or families, to plans and hopes, which may or may not come true. By contrast, 'a normal life' was a much stronger and more aggressive concept, which touched the core of the individual and related to items, whose absence would lead to profound change. In the years immediate after 1989, the anti-communist opposition promised to turn Bulgaria into a normal country, and the appeal to "normal life" brought people to the streets. At the time, political conflicts were more intense. Today, Bulgarian politicians talk about 'a good life' and hope to win over voters during elections. Respondents talked about 'a normal life' when sharing with us their decision whether to emigrate, or change work. The concept of 'a normal life' has an intensity and violence entirely missing from the gentle notion of 'well-being'.

In her recent article 'Reconstructing the Normal: Identity and Consumption of Western Goods in Estonia', Sigrid Rausing argues that the consumption of Western products constitutes a form of appropriation of Westernness, whereby the whole community she studied is moving from East to West, from socialism to democracy, from non-normal Soviet past to the normal European future. The introduction of new Western goods marks phases of this process. Researching the genealogy of the concept of 'normal', Rausing states that it echoes the Soviet culture of normativity.

In their study of 2000, four Bulgarian sociologists, Andrei Raichev, Andrei Bundzhulov, Kolio Kolev and Lilia Dimova, argue that the concept of 'a normal life' is constructed chiefly on the basis of memories about socialist times.

The team assumes that the difference between 'normal' and actual life forms part of the impoverishment of the socialist middle class – that extremely large group of people, which constituted 80% of the socialist society and identified itself as 'middle class'. The four sociologists argue that the new structures of Bulgarian society are being created in a process of destruction and downgrading of the older middle class. Large groups of people who once belonged to the middle class have now become poorer, lost their profession and, along with it, their social status and prestige. The team also sees a connection between the notion of 'normal' and patterns of consumption, although this problem is not central to their study. Its members say again that the perception of normal consumption resides in the memories of the socialist period. While Sigfrid Rausing discusses primarily the consumption of concrete Western goods, the Bulgarian team pays attention most of all to the structure of consumption, namely, expenses for education, healthcare, clothing, food and transportation. According to them, it is exactly this structure of consumption, which shapes the perception of the 'normal'.

These interpretations take into account the harsh realities of large social groups subject to social displacement and denied consumption and their perceptions of these changes. However, there are some nuances in the field data on the perceptions of normal consumption that the previous interpretations could not explain. While discussing what a normal pattern of consumption should be, those interviewed quoted items and practices that are now standard but rather uncommon fifteen years ago. For example, one of the small everyday sacrifices, mentioned by those interviewed as a deviation from the normal life, was replacing a visit to a restaurant with a home-made bag lunch. The humiliation was even greater, because it was public. However, the small street food shops and small restaurants are a new phenomenon for post-socialist Bulgarian society. Another quoted problem was the inability to afford normal, good quality shower gels, shampoos, washing powder or soap – "normal" being a product from Proctor and Gamble or Johnson & Johnson.

Some components of that "normal" pattern of consumption can be interpreted as a product of memory, while others come from a different source. When asked to describe how a "normal" life should be, those interviewed gladly discussed the life of their counterparts in Western Europe or North America, the normal societies where doctors, teachers and engineers have a normal lifestyle. The normal pattern of consumption was conceived rather after the model of what the interviewed considered to be the standard way of life for their counterparts in the West European societies.

The interviews with individuals who occupy relatively modest positions at the local offices of Western institutions (e.g. the German Embassy, the British Council, the European Commission) were more nuanced. Most of these people are highly qualified and very competent - often better qualified and

more competent than their Western superiors. They often contrast the life of real Westerners who receive a "normal" income in Bulgaria to what they consider to be the normal in consumption. The discrepancy between normal consumption imagined to exist in the West and real examples of their Western superiors was explained in different ways - these are East Germans, and not real, i.e. Western Germans, the British Oversees Ministry sends less qualified personnel to Bulgaria, the spoiled children of the French elite come here instead of doing military service, etc.

Ideas about the "normal" West European society were not based on real experience. Those interviewed were able to even discard the real experience due to the contacts with real West Europeans, qualifying them as inauthentic. Ideas about the "normal" West were constructed from different sources - probably memories from previous experience from the socialist past, literature, films, etc. It seems that one of the main sources of data about the imagined normality are TV ads, which providing the "standard" and "normal" background of a standard and normal family.

3. Longing for Normality

Ideas of a normal lifestyle are by no means individual constructions. Notwithstanding undeniable individual differences, on a whole they are shared by most of the interviewed people. They play a significant role in everyday communication between those interviewed and their colleagues and friends. One result is that outside their home the individuals have to make a constant effort to maintain a level of consumption close to that common normality; otherwise they risk to lose the respect of their colleagues and friends and to be excluded from their respective networks.

Usually, this means that when deciding what not to purchase, people restrict items or practices consumed in the private confines of the home. A book yields to a glass of alcohol consumed among friends, small house repairs are traded in for small talk over a daily cup of coffee with friends, colleagues, neighbors, etc. The everyday "sacrifices" at home are painful, but to be sacrificed before consumption practices with friends or colleagues. The interviewed had to make a constant effort to maintain their respective place in their networks, and it was usually related to significant expenses, especially amongst friends. "I have not met my colleagues from University for several years. It is difficult to talk with them now, you know - we used to meet in restaurants, and it is difficult to discuss with somebody who spends the whole evening with a glass of *rakiya*... I remain hungry, because one cannot order a dinner while the others stay with one *rakiya*, it is awkward...", explained a man. So his former friends were not able to keep him in their network. Or the story of an old widow who used to belong to the elite of socialist Bulgaria: "We meet

with my old friends once per week, every Thursday. I always order a coffee and pastry. (...) I calculated that if I order just coffee, I would be able to buy one chicken every week, but I can't."

Communication with colleagues over a cup of coffee was less expensive. Of course, after retirement one automatically loses this network, and data indicate that colleagues do not help as much as the network of friends, when you need a new job. Everyday communication with neighbors is even less expensive - a bottle of beer or a cup of coffee now and then, while time spent with parents and relatives costs virtually nothing.

A certain correlation exists in costs to maintaining facets of a social network - the less formal the type of relations are, the more expensive they become. One cannot chose one's parents, they are for life; regular communication with one's relatives and neighbors is discretionary, but relations with them are clearly structured and often beyond individual choice - a brother always is a brother, and a next-door neighbor always lives next door, so the type of relation is largely predetermined, at least in the Bulgarian context. Friendship is a voluntary arrangement that one desires to cultivate even at significant cost, investing time and money.

This correlation echoes the results of a recent study on networks in Bulgarian society, commissioned by Open Society Foundation in Sofia in 2002 as part of the "State of Society" project. During the research, an interesting relation emerged. All networks have proved to be dominated by a common tendency, namely, the transition from vertical to horizontal networks. Numerous authors define networks involving hierarchical relationships as a distinctive feature of socialist society. Figures of authority ("big men") and "little people," patrons and clients are interlinked within those networks and exchange services, loyalty and assistance. Those at the top and the others at the bottom are constantly involved in real or symbolic transactions, and that is why such networks were defined as "vertical."

Inclusion in these networks was a matter of survival, and during socialism it was a terrible curse to say to someone: "may your contacts die." It seems that this is precisely what has been happening during the last decades with ever greater tempo. The findings of the "State of Society" show a dominance of horizontal social networks made up of people with similar social status, incomes, age and education. Hierarchical relationships, i.e., patron and client, were seldom mentioned. Stable vertical networks can hardly be seen anymore.

The transition from vertical to horizontal networks involves a series of processes. First, the field study indicates a clear distinction between the networks of rich and poor. The more affluent have more intensive contacts and rely on friends of more recent date for assistance. The wealthy have less contact with relatives and hardly ever with older friends or other individuals of former

networks. Often, former schoolmates, neighbors or peers are at the core of the new network, but these former schoolmates have followed similar trajectories of success or failure, and are equals. The successful person does not feel obliged to keep in contact with or help his/her less successful former schoolmates or peers. On the contrary, the poorer interviewees often complain that their former friends, schoolmates or colleagues have broken off contact and even stopped greeting them in the streets. According to the successful interviewees, keeping up contacts with their less successful former friends/colleagues/schoolmates is of benefit mainly to the latter, and they themselves are more inclined to break off contact.

Networks of the prosperous are comparatively more complex and include numerous different and useful new friends, whereas those of the poor are comparatively limited. In the worst cases, e.g. long-term unemployed in a large city, they are reduced to a hard nucleus of the closest kin. From the losers' perspective, this means that the most resourceful members of their former networks may potentially refuse to assist them. In principle, this is an important nuance of horizontal networks – it is easier to reject members who have stopped being equal. Perhaps we are witnessing an extremely interesting moment in the development of networks in Bulgaria, in which hierarchical networks are falling apart whereas horizontal ones are establishing themselves feverishly, expelling unequal members.

With progressive impoverishment, loss of status or long-term unemployment, we can make almost mathematical determinations about the dropout of individual segments from these networks: the more informal and non-institutionalized contacts are, the easier it is to lose them. People normally first lose new friends, followed by "old" friends with whom they have had less intensive contact; next come schoolmates and neighbors, ultimately leaving only a nucleus of relatives. The less formalized the contacts are, the easier it is to break them off in a crisis. Under these circumstances, long-term unemployed have a limited number of options: they might try to keep their previous network – and be refused; they might admit their new status, intensify their contacts with other long-term unemployed and thus perpetuate their status; or, finally, they might remain in an in-between state, rejected by their previous equals and refusing to identify themselves with their new brethren.

As a rule, they choose the last option and isolate themselves. This is the predominant case, and the poorer they become, the more isolated they are. In rare cases, they might choose the humiliating first option, gravitate to the periphery of their previous networks and complain that their former friends no longer recognize them. Yet those are extreme cases. Usually individuals struggle to avoid dropping out of their networks. I would like to discuss in more detail some of their strategies, because they will bring us back to the notion of the 'normal life'.

Since the new horizontal networks tend to expel unequal members comparatively easily, their maintenance requires certain effort and investment. There is a direct relationship between the intensity of socializing and the sustainability of a particular network. For example, people threatened by mass downsizing and unemployment radically intensify their contacts with fellow workers. This intense sociability is motivated by the fear that you might drop out of a respective group. In a crisis (e.g. job loss), the individual has very little time to mobilize his/her entire network to help cope before being rejected by or excluded from the latter. The recently unemployed who are actively looking for a new job cannot afford to stay at home; they must promptly contact old and new friends, colleagues from different worksites, neighbors and relatives.

This situation could be presented as a scale, with the practically indestructible core of the individual and his/her antecessors for whom even minimal investments in time and socializing costs are sufficient, on one end, and with the potentially temporary colleagues or friends, who require investing a considerable part of time and money if you want to keep them, on the other.

Yet precisely the latter are the most necessary. Hence, if one wants to keep them, one is obliged to invest. We encountered several possible strategies. The first was connected to the distribution of income within households. Shrinking incomes compelled the majority of the respondents to take permanent decisions about what they could afford to drop. As a rule, they would be more willing to renounce expenses related to furniture, reconstruction, and refurbishing, and less willing to drop the expenses related to socializing. For example, saving for a new refrigerator was dropped in favor of a regular glass of beer with friends. The money for revamping the apartment was easily spent on the everyday cup of coffee with colleagues, and repairs on the stove lagged behind visits to coffee houses. Sometimes, those decisions are hard and the respondents often referred to them as a 'sacrifice', but as we said, investment in networks is a question of survival.

Sometimes, households were not able to cope with these expenses and decided to invest in one family member only. Hence, all family members from every generation 'sacrificed' for others, normally youth. Patterns of consumption of youth thus constitute the field where the most serious investment was accumulated and where the strongest competition took place. The maintenance of one teenager or student in his/her network cost several times more than that of an elder person. The prestigious junk food of the type of McDonalds, Snickers and chips consumed by the youngster costs significantly more than food for parents at local restaurants.

Older people also can choose cheaper forms of socializing. For example, retired people regardless of gender sometimes choose cheaper forms of socializing, hitherto associated predominantly with women. Until a few years ago,

tasting newly prepared (home-made) preserves in the afternoon was a reason behind female get-togethers, whereas today it is a reason for family visits. The traditional form of family meetings is dinner, yet it requires a bigger expenditure.

4. Back to Second-hand Clothes

Whatever choice they made, all the interviewed had a similar problem - they had clear ideas on what a normal life should be, largely based on a supposedly normal level of consumption. None of them was able to consume normally or afford a life normal in all respects. Besides the painful choices each faces, the situation provoked interesting questions related to individuals' self-understanding, and to their own self-positioning regarding normality. In these circumstances, knowing what is normal becomes important because it enables the individuals to claim that their compromises with the harsh reality are temporary deviations from their normal lifestyle and normal self. This knowledge is directly translated in patterns of consumption. There was a common understanding one could not afford normal consumption - that is why it is equally important to be able to demonstrate that one knows what "normal" should be.

Second-hand clothes often demonstrate that clothes, which are of the right type, origin and quality, are normal clothes. They are contrasted to the clothes used by the brand new Western clothes of the nouveau riches, which, according to those interviewed, were selected with a deplorable lack of taste or not worn on the appropriate occasions.

Decent second hand clothes of Western origin are opposed also to those used by the less prestigious social groups, with more vivid colors and more provoking design, of poorer quality and dubious origin, such as Turkish clothes. "Every street in Sofia has become somehow dark now. One can immediately recognize the Turkish clothes - they are in dark colors, usually black, but it is a cheap sort of dark, and it fades out immediately."

5. Normal Individuals in a Balkan Society

Choosing to wear second-hand European clothes, the interviewed do not want to imitate the lifestyle of the rich and glamorous in Bulgarian society. Their comments on the presumed life-style of the wealthy involve a mix of irony, contempt, or outright disapproval, depending on the person. Their choice is neither a symbolic protest against the lifestyle of the Bulgarian elite, nor is it an effort to imitate the consumption practices of those who they considered to be of lower class, less cultivated and preferring cheap Turkish or Chinese goods. The group, whose being and life-style they tried

to imitate, was that of their imaginary counterparts in the Western society - the middle-class professionals. Of course, the aim was beyond their reach, so they had to compromise with second-hand clothes. The ambiguous status of the second-hand clothes - both gift and merchandise, both belonging to and not totally belonging to the new owner - presents interesting parallels with the ambiguous relations of their owners with the imagined normality, their ambiguous belonging to the larger group of what they consider to be their counterparts in the West.

The decision to adopt as a norm the imagined lifestyle of the middle-class professionals from the West has an enormous impact in several fields. For example, the interviewed were not able to indicate any social group in Bulgaria which they would consider having a "normal" way of living. Their friends, their colleagues, the people with whom they communicated everyday and who belonged to their network, also were considered as maintaining an "abnormal" lifestyle. The group of reference was outside Bulgarian society. In this context, everyone was to preserve as much normality as possible in everyday life. It was a strictly individual effort, of an isolated individual, who should decide everyday when she or he should be normal. The specificity of these choices and the following consumption patterns is that they do not create much cohesion in the social group adopting them, because it considers its own lifestyle "abnormal".

Another interesting consequence was the proliferation of rationalizations, which seek to explain deviations from "normality". Most interpretations treat Bulgarian society as a whole. Those interviewed argued that something wrong happened to the entire society at a certain point - with the Ottoman invasion, with the socialist revolution, with the Perestroika or in 1989. The concept of the Balkans has played an important part in these interpretations, when it was necessary to explain why those interviewed should live abnormally. "We are on the Balkans, after all", was a constant refrain, justifying the deviations from normality. They spoke of themselves as normal individuals in a Balkan society and their efforts to remain normal were interpreted as heroic individual actions against all odds.

It seems that such struggles are not entirely new for Bulgaria. The notion of 'normal' has been used for a long time to conceptualize social transformations. This concept goes hand in hand with the development of Bulgarian society. At the beginning of the 19th century, when the first attempts to modernize Bulgarian society took place, ideologues of the Bulgarian nation argued that Bulgarians were a modern European nation, which unfortunately was subjected to dual Asian domination – by the Byzantine Greek clergy and the Ottoman empire. The rejection of this these powers, the creation of the Bulgarian state, and the modernization of Bulgarian society have been interpreted as a return to the normal, eternal essence of the Bulgarian nation, to

its most authentic identity, which was temporarily lost or forgotten under the influence of the Byzantine clergy and the Ottomans.

During this period, a didactic pedagogical literature appeared explaining that contemporary manners, everyday behavior, the organization of the Bulgarian family, household, economy, and society did not reflect their true identity. Efforts had to be made to restore a lost identity, to modernize, come closer to the West, and become Europeans again. It is not surprising, then that during this period – the beginning of the 19th century – the concept of 'normal' was distanced from what everybody did on a regular basis. On the contrary, what occurred on a regular basis was not normal. Normality was connected to an identity, which had been lost, which one was longing for and had to restore. The notion of 'normal' is thus connected to the specific modernization experience of Bulgarian society. I would say that it reemerges at the time of each consecutive modernization effort. Anthropology allows us to document the repercussions of these grand modernization discourses in the self-understanding of individuals and their personal strategies.

6. How is it Possible to Live on the Balkans?

The use of second-hand clothes might be a good and affordable solution when the individual needs to demonstrate her or his knowledge of what should be consumed. However, this strategy is not viable with respect to food consumption or socializing practices. It is not enough to be among familiar people; one must show that one knows what and how to consume. One must demonstrate that one is a normal person who deserves his/her place among normal people.

Here we come back to the notion of 'normal life' and to another important practice of the Bulgarian society, which is complaining. Constant complaining, criticizing and protesting accompanies everyday consumption, especially that of food. Having a cup of coffee or having lunch with colleagues goes together with endless comments on the quality of food, its price, taste, the quantity of salt, the restaurants' hygiene, the lack or the presence of ash-trays, etc. Alongside these comments, there are others stating what things would have looked like if we had been in Europe, if this were a normal restaurant, with normal clients and owners. As a rule, all members of the network participate in this ritual complaining. There exist special jokes about people who refuse to join in. Complaining represents an intrinsic part of consumption and I will argue that consumption and complaining should be regarded as one and the same process.

Constant complaining in Eastern European societies attracted anthropologists' attention a long time ago. In her wonderful book *Russian Talk* Nancy Ries states that through complaining, Russians reproduce the discourse of

their eternal suffering as a people, which makes them even more vulnerable. In his communication to a meeting of the Association of South-Eastern European Anthropology held February 2002 in Graz, Stephen Sampson calls this process 'self-Balkanization'. By that he means that local people endlessly and persistently reproduce the negative images of the Balkans. Debating with M. Todorova and L. Wolff, Sampson emphasized that they had failed to pay sufficient attention to the processes of self-Balkanization. They too hastily accused the West and only the West of having produced and spread such images.

I will try to propose a more optimistic interpretation of the practice of complaining, conceiving it as an intrinsic part of the process of consumption. It seems that complaining serves two goals. First, the consumer distances him/herself from his/her own consumption. He/she consumes cheap food in a dirty restaurant, but through the act of complaining disassociates him/herself from his/her current actions. In other words, the complaining person says 'I am not doing what I am doing at the moment.' Second, the consumer shows that he/she knows what and how should be consumed, and that is the whole point, as Bourdieu would have it. Two parallel lines of consumption are being established – the material one – the person who eats cheap food in a dirty restaurant, and a verbal one – of the normal person who knows what normal food and restaurant mean.

Against all odds, consumers solve an otherwise unsolvable problem. On the one hand, we have people of low income, who cannot consume normally. On the other, we have desire for normal consumption patterns to maintain network and self-esteem. Complaining helps them to achieve the impossible and they continue to be normal individuals in abnormal circumstances, like islands of normality on the troubled Balkan seas.

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