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Patterns of Reinterpretation: Trader-Tourism in the Balkans (Bulgaria) as a Picaresque Metaphorical Enactment of Post-Totalitarianism

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# patterns of reinterpretation: trader-tourism in the Balkans (Bulgaria) as a picaresque metaphorical enactment of post-totalitarianism

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## introduction

**economic crisis and migration** After the events of 1989, like the majority of the former Soviet Bloc countries, Bulgaria faced an acute economic crisis against the backdrop of the collapse of a previous social order. At the height of trader-tourism (1992–93), the survival strategy on which I focus in this article, the average monthly income in the country equaled U.S.\$87.5 (Natsionalen statisticheski institut 1994:93);<sup>1</sup> annual inflation reached over 120 percent, unemployment toward 20 percent. In this situation 45.2 percent of the population found themselves below the subsistence level and 64.6 percent below the poverty line (cf. Offe 1993:682). A major outcome of this crisis was that great masses of people took to the road: in the period 1990–93, 458,000 Bulgarians left the country. Of these 330,000 emigrated to Turkey and the rest mainly to the United States, Canada, South Africa, and Western Europe (Germany and Austria) (Bank of Austria 1994:3). Apart from this massive emigration other groups began to travel between Bulgaria and regional trading centers as “trader-tourists”—travelers across borders who use guided coach tours to trade between countries. Such traders buy and sell goods usually at open-air markets, having individually carried their merchandise as personal belongings. This migratory movement is generally absent from economic assessments and reports on the situation in the country although its proportions are considerable and its expression of the reality of the transitional processes in the whole former Soviet Bloc deserves serious attention.

The most prominent characteristic feature of trader-tourism, the one on which its economic sense is based, is its ambivalent nature: the actors are traders who pass for tourists; their merchandise passes for personal belongings; and in this way they avoid paying the required duty. By the same token, the customs officers are in fact recipients of bribes who close their eyes to the realities of the situation. As other investigators of entrepreneurial activities in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have noticed, there is a theatrical quality to what is

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*Trader-tourism is a massive survival strategy practiced in East European countries, in this case Bulgaria. “Trader-tourists” import Turkish goods that are sold at Bulgarian open-air markets. Profit is made by circumventing customs control through the bribing of officials—a loophole facilitated by widespread corruption and engendered “from above” by the more powerful transitional actors. The picaresque role that former state employees have adopted as present-day trader-tourists accentuates a deficit of legitimacy and absence of normative institutional support. Trader-tourists attempt to overcome this deficit of authority through imaginative treatment (poetization) of entrepreneurial materials in order to attain a reinterpreted form of the previous stability, normativeness, and order. [economic anthropology, trader-tourism, Bulgaria, Balkans, transition]*

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happening on the economic scene—while it is supposed to be (pass for being) free-market-oriented, it is in fact heavily embedded in the social atmosphere and ethos of the previous social order (cf. Anderson on privatization in Russia, 1994:10–16).<sup>2</sup>

In this “theatre of trade” (Anderson 1994:14), small-scale trading can be seen as a type of mass-travelling, both as a physical movement and still more as a movement between states of mind, motivated by social changes and their economic consequences. As such it is the second great migration of very large groups of people in recent Bulgarian history.

The first was the migration from village to town after the industrialization and centralization policies of the previous, socialist state. Between the mid-1950s and the beginning of the 1980s Bulgaria virtually depopulated its villages by receiving approximately 80 percent of the previous village population in the apartment blocks of the rapidly expanding cities and towns. With the events of 1989 a large number of the inhabitants of the apartment blocks lost their previous jobs, while those who still remained in state-paid employment rapidly found themselves on the brink of poverty. In this situation the search for survival strategies became the order of the day, and many people became engaged in various entrepreneurial activities (“businesses”)—most of them in one way or another connected with trader-tourism.

The movement from “capitalism” to “socialism” has thus been spatially enacted by the travel or migration from village to town by great masses of people primarily from the lower strata of the previous social pyramid. The new movement—from socialism to capitalism—can be again connected with a form of traveling (emigration, small-scale cross-border trading) by great masses of people who had meanwhile traveled some distance up the social (and socialist) pyramid and to a considerable degree had ended up in the previous petty bureaucracy and technocracy. In this way the movement between ideologies is both physically and ideologically performed by “the masses”—from capitalism to socialism one travels from an “old (regressive) order” to a “new (progressive) one,” as the ideological labels of the day proclaimed. After the events of 1989 the movement has been from what was perceived as a settled socialist state existence to the uncertainties and risks of a nomadic entrepreneurial life (or direct economic emigration). The new traveling can thus be said to represent a purported ideological movement between heavily centralized socialist statism and capitalist free-marketeering, and between totalitarianism and free-market democracy, according to the new labeling. While totalitarianism (simply called by people “before”) perceptually exists in a well-defined form with memory quickly eroding the less pleasant edges, free market democracy (“now”) has, by contrast, a loose, chaotic, and undefined presence. In this way traveling occurs between a well-defined point of departure and an extremely ambiguous point of arrival and, in this sense, is not linear but circular and groping. The latter quality is compounded by the fact that the real protagonists of the journey—the so-called “enfranchised *nomenklatura*” (Bugaj and Kowalik 1992) or *entrepratchiks* (Verdery 1994)—are not oriented toward a unidirectional movement but toward a spiral one in which a new form is invested with a previous meaning, and a reassertion of power occurs on better terms for the principal agents. The compromise term *entrepratchik* nicely captures the ambivalence of the situation, its “as if” quality. Trader-tourists exist in consequence of the strategies employed by the higher and more powerful echelons of economic actors (the *entrepratchicks*), and their traveling provides the chance for observing in a very immediate way the workings of the act and the metaphor of transition: people travel, earn money, are tough and inventive, and, at the same time, try to rediscover the stability or normativeness of the only clearly existing orientational center—that of “before.”<sup>3</sup>

**the poetic function** Transitional phenomena in the former Soviet Bloc have awakened lively anthropological interest, and researchers have tried to see through the ambivalences and contradictions of the rapidly changing human landscape that the transition has produced. Closest to my analysis stand the findings of Creed (in press) on Bulgaria; Kideckel (1993),

Sampson (in press), and Verdery (1994) on Romania; and, notably, Hann (1992) and Hann and Hann (1992) on Hungary and on Russian trader-tourism in Turkey. Looking at transitional events from the vantage point of various specific developments (i.e., restitution of land, decollectivization, privatization, new ethnic politics, etc.), investigators generally recognize two features as predominant: the fluidity of the new landscape and the reinterpretative, if not reconstructive trend that events follow. The fluidity (elasticity, chaos, etc.) attributed to the transitional landscape is especially fascinating when it applies to supposedly stable, rigid entities such as land (Verdery 1994:1071–1110), and one notices the strong motivation for capturing the transpositional, metaphorizing movement of the process. This occurs on both a vernacular and an analytical level and seems to reflect an overall perception that all actors are performing not in a straightforwardly referential way vis-à-vis an elusive reality but mostly in a poetic mode (in the sense of Jakobson's [1960] taxonomy of language functions).<sup>4</sup>

There is thus a general agreement that the transitional movement is in fact a circular, reinterpretative one—capitalism realized as a socialist statist project (cf. Offe 1991:879) deeply embedded in new forms of previous usufruct and social networks (Anderson 1994:10ff; Humphrey 1991:8–13, on the former Soviet Union). Humphrey places special emphasis on protectionist measures practiced by ex-Soviet republics, districts, and even individual cooperative farms through systems of coupons, orders, and rations, and even the printing of money (Humphrey 1991). In an earlier article I have noted this emphasis on seeking the protection of the earlier “order” in connection with the protection of the Bulgarian lev—a mechanism facilitating and, in fact, motivating trader-tourism (Konstantinov 1994a:238). Focusing particularly on Bulgaria and Romania, researchers have pointed out the strong tendencies toward some new forms of essentially state-managed economies (Creed, in press; Offe 1991:880). The coming to power of revamped former communist parties in both countries and elsewhere supports the sense that the brief journey into the “capitalist jungle” brought for the masses a nostalgic hearkening back to the “stability and order” of the previous regimes. This reconstructive movement is believed to have taken place over the greater part of the former Soviet Bloc and is by now obvious to the point of triviality.

The interesting part—suggested and, I hope, illustrated by the ethnographic material I present below—concerns the ways in which the reconstructive movement is performed through the recently introduced forms of “wild capitalism,” of which trader-tourism is the part offered for mass consumption. For example, how do actors attempt to regain a previous frame of reference, perceived as attractively stable, through unstable forms?

From such a vantage point I would argue that the actors poeticize (see Herzfeld 1985, 1987, 1994) on the presently available material and that what we observe is a spontaneous exercise of vernacular hermeneutics—an attempt at a rediscovery of the previous order through traveling amid present chaos. As others have pointed out,

the rapid flow of events not only broke out unexpectedly; it is also not guided by any premeditated sequence, nor by proven principles and interests about which the participants would be clear. Instead of concepts, strategies, collective actors and normative principles, there are acting persons and their discoveries of the moment with their deliberately opaque semantic content. [Offe 1991:867]

This point is connected with a host of ambiguities. Are trader-tourists, and the new entrepreneurs in general, not driven solely by economic circumstances and the desire to overcome them and become rich? Undoubtedly there is much to such assertions, but at the same time there is also a heightened sense of moral apperception vis-à-vis their “own passions and conduct,” in the sense of Gudeman's discussion of Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1976 [1759]:112; Gudeman 1992:282). These entrepreneurs have just emerged from an intensely antimarket, ideologically top-heavy universe, and the recent engagement with the market not only is perceived as opaque in terms of moral meaning but is still residually conceptualized in intensely “amoral” terms.

This leads people to treat economy as a medium for the artistic transposition of models that convey a greater sense of in-groupness or, more generally, convey greater social stability. Such a form of poeticization has been shown well in contexts both relatively close to my material—such as Gypsy horse-trading in Hungary (Stewart 1992:97–115)—and more distant and “exotic,” such as market behavior represented as hunting (Overing 1992:180–203).

From this vantage point the travels of the new small entrepreneurs invite discussion of the embedding of economic action in social relationships and the morality of a given economic course of action. The material that I am discussing suggests much moral substance and very little abstract form (in the sense of Polanyi 1977[1944]) in what the new entrepreneurs are doing, and I shall try to demonstrate this primarily by illustrating their emphatic search for the “norm” and the desire to get away, as soon as possible, from what are perceived to be the more glaringly low-prestige or amoral sides of the market (“Gypsy trading”). Like other investigators (Sampson, in press), I emphasize the search for moral support and the development of new self-elevating mythologies on the part of the new businesspersons (as “pillars of society,” “the real patriots,” etc.), or, in the case of the trader-tourists, “the more inventive, imaginative, brave, and resourceful,” in comparison to those who simply wait for the state to help them (the “suckers”).

Whatever specific transitional development attracts the attention of the investigator, we may predict that there will be a tendency to see it as a representation of the fluidity of the overall picture, its fuzziness, lack of order, turbulence, or elasticity. The specific development (i.e., privatization, restitution, decollectivization, trader-tourism, etc.) has both an objective and a symbolic life: it stands for the process itself. This is how the description and analysis of disorder works and what it represents develop. The present article is no exception. In terms of methodology, the next movement has already appeared: an anthropology of stability (i.e., “consolidology”; cf. Schmitter and Karl 1994). I offer some suggestions in this direction here too. It mainly concerns how actors fervently desire to leave behind the more obvious sides of illegality to acquire legitimacy.

Finally, to conclude these introductory remarks, Bulgaria as a country has been largely absent from the news (a “non-existent” country [Kuperberg 1994:74]) and has been little visited by anthropologists. This necessitates some description of the local economic, political, and moral background against which trader-tourism is taking place. For this reason the background description and the analytical issues suggested above will be developed somewhat further in the first half of the article, while the second half (“The Road”) will provide ethnographic illustrations from various travels of trader-tourists from Bulgaria to Istanbul, Turkey.

### **part one: the traveler—ambiguity, choice, and reversals**

Small-scale cross-border trading or trader-tourism has presently acquired massive dimensions but is not to be connected exclusively with post-1989 developments. Before that date trader-tourism existed as part of the overall informal economy but primarily in association with movement within the former Soviet Bloc. Thus tourists from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the German Democratic Republic (hereafter GDR) would come to the Bulgarian Black Sea or mountain resorts and engage in the clandestine buying and selling of goods, exploiting deficits and price asymmetries among the respective countries. Likewise, Bulgarian tourists would travel “on excursions” to the more prosperous Central European members of the Soviet Bloc and engage in informal economic activities there, but on a much more limited scale and in a less open way in comparison to the present period.

Today, trader-tourism has spilled through the previous Iron Curtain borders in huge proportions. The massiveness of scale has been made technically possible by more or less free access to the much-coveted foreign passport—that is, the document that affords the right to travel abroad. In a brief but very significant development trader-tourist travel in Bulgaria was preceded

by an “ethnic” migration. Bulgarian Turks were given permission to leave the country before other Bulgarian citizens and, frightened by previous assimilatory measures, fled to Turkey in massive numbers. In the space of two months (June–July 1989) more than 300,000 Turks left Bulgaria (cf. Poulton 1991:153–163). This mass exodus is seen by many to have contributed to the motivation behind the coup d’état that overthrew Todor Zhivkov’s regime in the country (November 1989) (see, for example, Nelson 1991:55–66) and thus illustrates from an “ethnic” angle the point that ideological shifts tend to be accompanied by massive migratory movements. In the sense in which the informal economy is seen as “dialectically produced by the market economy” (Gudeman 1992:287), trader-tourism (as an informal economy) was produced by socialism and its subsequent surge triggered by transition. The more interesting aspect of the situation, as pointed out above, seems to be that while a market economy is supposed to represent the final “safe haven” (the “return to Ithaca”), it is in fact perceived as the journey itself. Ithaca is therefore sought in the previous orientational frame; the future is in the past. This movement entails circular or at best spiral reinterpretation.

When it comes to how the actors themselves perceive their engagement in trader-tourism, predictably the explanations are connected exclusively with “push” factors and the rationality of economic sense: “I lost my job,” “I earn much more in this way,” “It is difficult, but it pays,” and so forth. While the present economic crisis affects the majority of the population, *not everyone* decides to use the opportunities that entrepreneurial activities offer (trader-tourism being the most accessible among them). Economic conditions being equal, a potential participant must come to terms with the demands that such activities pose. Irrespective of strictly economic explanations, these demands are first and foremost faced in ideological (or more generally moral) terms. To clarify this central point in the context of local conditions, I now propose a schematization (necessarily somewhat rough) of the local ideological map.

**competing moral paradigms** For the overwhelming majority of the present travelers moving to an elusive destination, that elusiveness seems to emerge mainly as an acute awareness of the deficit of legitimate authority. On an everyday level this is constantly reinforced by an entire array of heavily disturbing, if not traumatic, events and signs: employment is extremely precarious, property relentlessly threatened, and—in a disturbing number of cases—everyday life, familiar signs, and presences (street names and other toponyms, monuments, shops, state enterprises, and private companies) are changing with frightening speed. All this is happening in a basically provincial society, in the backwoods of the former Soviet Bloc, where a centralized state firmly held everything in parsimonious but stable uniformity and conformity.

This loss of stability is, tautologically, accompanied and compensated by a general relaxation of boundaries. Taken in their physical and moral representations—as national boundaries or ideological and moral constraints—this softening of boundaries (the “collapse of the Wall”) translates into a groping journey, its ambivalence and dynamism fed by ad hoc formulations of the appropriate course of action.

Such formulations are related to at least three competing paradigms: a “private entrepreneurial” one that glorifies the daring and imagination of the private businessperson; a socialist–statist one that hearkens back to pre-1989 memories of a “morally better” and more stable socialist state; and a restitutional one that is constructed in the process of the restitution of pre-Communist property and the rehabilitation of the past and is nostalgically connected with a pre-Communist, “morally better,” simpler, and more prosperous existence. Three main layers of socioeconomic actors can be defined according to this schematization: the new businesspersons of variable standing, the residual state employees (*slouzhashti*), and the rehabilitated precommunist, middle-class citizens or their heirs. Politically, the *slouzhashti* support the former Communist Party, now called the Socialist Party (BSP); the rehabilitated middle class supports the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS); and the entrepreneurs support new business parties like

the Bulgarian Business Bloc (BBB). Lines of division can be very blurred, however, and considerable overlapping can be observed in the still fermenting social and political mixture.

Among those nostalgic for an imagined past (or pasts), the only forward-looking group is that of the entrepreneurs from all economic strata and political hues. Present transitional processes tend to be influenced decisively by more powerful upper echelons—by those private businesspersons of today who, until the events of 1989 had been professionally engaged in trade, finance, or production, typically either as foreign trade representatives or as heads of state companies. The present president of a trading company or private bank and the former director of a state firm can be described as the protagonists of the entire journey or passage (“transition” as the cliché has it) from what once was to what has not yet come into existence. This figure is known by various names, all of them derogatory to a greater or lesser degree—a “mafioso,” member of the “enfranchised nomenklatura” (Bugaj and Kowalik 1992); “entrepratchik” (Verdery 1994), “nouveau riche” (“without culture”—Sampson, in press), and so on. A great deal of mythologization has occurred vis-à-vis what I prefer to call technically “high-echelon economic actors.” The tendency to mythologize is fueled by popular media descriptions of a sinister mafia world in which the more powerful actors operate and the mythological discourse, in its more extreme Russian case, reveals an apocalyptic nightmare. If mythologization is approached with the necessary reservation, it becomes known that the higher-echelon economic actors are difficult to get to know at a closer hand because they have become virtually unreachable (and untouchable) through sheer wealth and power. While this is so, the actors have—through their economic activities and the erosion of the state apparatus—made possible the florescence of trader-tourism. In their humbler way, the trader-tourists use loopholes that were originally created by the mightier entrepreneurs and were supported by political interests within the previous communist leadership (see Schöpflin 1993:25, in broad reference to Eastern Europe). The primary loophole here is the erosion of state-administration by the rampant corruption of state officials. In the ensuing battle for primary accumulation of capital, the trader-tourists can be seen as following in the steps of the powerful, scouring the field for whatever lesser loot can be extracted. They can be also compared to adventurers, *pícaros*, whose travels metaphorize the whole process of change in the more backward areas of Eastern Europe.

This picaresque metaphor attempts to capture an essence and features that become elusive in a longer description: an active, forward-oriented social layer (class?) driven by an ethos in which a passion for adventure and material gain is glorified by various romantic representations—borrowings from the West (“rugged individualism”); glorification of the nomadic love of adventure and the road, connected in the context with a stereotype of Gypsy culture; macho erotic perceptions of the strong and daring male; and memories of previous travels to foreign lands, bringing in unimaginable profit. All these representations possess as a unifying feature their relative dominance over abstract economic sense, and this relates them to the backward-looking paradigms with which they are in competition: both the socialist statist and the rehabilitated capitalists are dreamers above all, and they formulate courses of action primarily in moral terms. It is at this point that the three pieces click into place: whether present entrepreneurs, statist, or rehabilitated bourgeois, members of these broadly defined groups have served together in the Pioneer Organization, the Komsomol, a great number of “closed” Communist Party meetings as well as the “open” meetings where the constitutionally entrenched role of the Communist Party ensured that society worked for the realization of ideological dreams.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, all actors—irrespective of present divisions—have been orienting their various courses of action with respect to a clearly visible and dogmatically set and enforced ideological frame of reference. As an orienting social focus this last feature has repeated—reinterpreted—the collective sanction of peasant patriarchal society (see Schöpflin 1993:24–28).

An anthropology of transition requires methods for investigation and analysis that are capable of capturing the dialogue among actors whose ideas of the best course of social action are in a heightened state of indeterminacy and reinterpretation in the absence of an anchoring center. Accustomed to filtering reality in reference to an often ridiculed but clearly visible ideological dogma, many of these people have found that the present space has contracted to the point of emptiness. If there was a solitude in collectivism before the transition (Kideckel 1993), solitude without collectivism seems to be of a much greater order. The dogma of the collective order, it must be emphasized, was more often than not imaginatively adjusted to, exploited, and circumvented for individuals' own advantage; but the presence of such an ever-present and vulnerable orienting center in situations of moral choice should be regarded as the greatest "achievement" of the previous period. In order to continue such a socialized referential stability, actors react to a multiplicity of situations as if those situations contained a predetermined dogmatic focus and supra-individual authority. Actors attempt to guess the appropriate course of action in the belief that the "right" economic move or the "right" word holds the key to officially sanctioned survival. Until a new reference center has been established—when, in one possible but still not very probable scenario, marketization and privatization have produced well-crystallized class differences and a new ethos—actors would be driven by "other, much less tractable cleavages (ethnicity, locality, and personality)" (Schmitter and Karl 1994:180; cf. also Sampson 1991:58). Whether a new orientation is emerging or the old one is reemerging is precisely the point at issue.

The retrospective search for balance and for the disambiguation of complexities is most clearly evident in the overwhelming victory of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) in the recent parliamentary elections in Bulgaria (December 18, 1994). As part of a process sweeping through Eastern Europe, this rehabilitation of the erstwhile dictatorial authority can be interpreted as a wish for a simpler reality with firmer moral outlines and as less demanding of the need to grapple with complexity and less exacting in personal daring and imagination. Generally speaking, the BSP victory was won by the nonentrepreneurs—the less dynamic masses of villagers or first-generation urban dwellers and former state employees who together constitute the social class officially labeled as civil servants (*slouzhashti*) during the previous social order.

In the discussion of totalitarian and posttotalitarian societies alike a misunderstanding of the perceptions of this vast social layer constantly leads to surprises (e.g., *Economist* 1994). These surprises stem primarily from the simplistic perception that "Communist institutions were regarded as inauthentic, because they were the emanation of a system that was regarded as inauthentic and alien" (Schöpflin 1993:26). This may have been the consensus among various foreign analysts, but, for the actors on the ground, and certainly in the culturally less "Central European" regions, so-called communist institutions have served for decades as the best representation of authenticity for the majority of people. There is the subtlety of ambivalence to be added in the sense that what is considered authentic in the local context often receives public support but is subverted in private life. In this sense the term *authenticity* is to be invested with differing meanings according to a specific cultural context.

With such local adjustments in mind we can say that the travels of the trader-tourists are the travels of those who are most prepared to face a referentially "loose" landscape. Because they reflect on a lower economic level the travels of the decisive agents of reform (if such a premise is accepted), the manner in which trader-tourists grapple to address new complexities—without a guiding hand—is of great interest. So far, like their more powerful colleagues, they seem to be governed by a celebration of the erosion of boundaries as an opening to new resources.

**moral debates** While economic activities may broadly be said to be related to one of the three main types of orientations presented above (*slouzhashti*, *restitutes*, entrepreneurs), an individual shaping of a course of action would be the product of an increasingly concrete and

intimate debate among self, outside voices, and the influences of personal history, temperament, and chance. At all events we must visualize economic action as emotionally colored—an object of attraction, indifference, or repulsion.

In addition, the procedure of identifying concrete transitional behavior (trader-tourism) must take into account the specific conditions of the moral discourse in which the debate is couched. Because it is different from the publicity that the new rich attract, no access to formal public discourse is generally available here: the actor is not interviewed by journalists and rates low on the social prestige scale. This low prestige rating is indeed problematic for a prospective participant. Additionally, fears of traveling “with the Gypsies” abound—of being robbed, even killed, in the highly accentuated crime-infested atmosphere of the present day.

Related to pre-1989 decades of ideological rule, the debate here seems to be underlined by an enforced perception of private entrepreneurship as an essentially immoral activity—a condemnation of marketing and commerce articulated through the ideology of the day (see Dilley 1992:3 ff.). Although informal transactions permeated the pre-1989 economy of scarcity (as well as the resort-related trader-tourism), the surface dialogue constantly negativizes informal dealings. Apart from harsher measures such as fines and imprisonment, a constant discursive feature was the caricaturing of repulsively rich private “dealers” (i.e., car mechanics, meatsellers, bartenders, waiters, etc.) who allegedly abuse their right to live in a socialist society. Still more despised was the most resistant “old person,” the stereotyped, slandered figure of the “Gypsy tinker, traveler, and thief,” who stood in contrast to the men and women of the new socialist order.

The evaluative terms of the debate may appear in all sorts of increasingly idiosyncratic ways, but they still reflect central oppositions between such concepts as love and justice and their opposites. The competing moral paradigms are thus juxtaposed directionally: a retrospective one that attempts to retreat into settled stability and harmony, a simpler and quieter, if poorer, existence; and a prospective one in which people are attracted by the exhilaration of movement and visions of wealth. The latter can be illustrated by the travels of the trader-tourists.

## part two: the road—a multiplicity of styles

**the group** Trader-tourists do not travel alone as a rule. They tend to form permanent groups, clustering around the central figure of the travel agent (who is also usually the guide on the trip). Bus trips start from some prearranged spot in town (the National Stadium in Sofia, the Archeological Museum in Varna, the House of Humour in Gabrovo), and, as the group assembles for yet one more trip a spirit of camaraderie in adventure envelops all: the sight of familiar faces works to obliterate doubts and fears. From here to the Turkish border some six hours away the mood in the bus is one of exhilaration: the compulsory mix of rap and Gypsy, Greek, and Serbian songs blares from the intercom; jokes are cracked; songs are sung; and there is Gypsy belly dancing in the aisle, accompanied by lewd comments.

Two-thirds of the group normally are women, the women being dominant in the hierarchy of the bus (see below; also Konstantinov et al. 1994; Nedeva 1996:59–60). The women impose a carefree, sensual atmosphere on this first and most attractive part of the journey. It strikes the observer as a celebration of the picaresque spirit, the daring mood of the small entrepreneur whose fortune is uncertain but who derives pleasure from adventure and risk.

A prospective traveler who is a non-Roma (*Gadzhe*) does not usually suspect the presence of this side of Gypsy trading, and its discovery awakens a host of memories of a near or remote past. “It is like when we used to go to Dresden in the old days,” remarked the Bulgarian woman sitting next to me on one trip. She was an ex-employee (accountant) from the Computer Center in Varna, an institution that in pre-1989 days had lively connections with a similar center in the GDR. The Germans came to the Black Sea Coast and the Bulgarians went to the GDR, where

they saw the sights and bought many goods that in those days one would not find in Bulgaria. The spirit in the bus on the outbound journey also invokes memories of holiday-traveling organized by the respective state enterprises in earlier times and of going to state-sponsored holidays at rest homes (*pochivka*). These annual pilgrimages that take people away from humdrum daily realities are the topic of nostalgic storytelling, and comparisons are made between today's "tense" if financially more profitable times and the "calmer" days of "before."

More distant memories are also collectively circulated. People remember stories of forefathers traveling for gain across the boundary-free Ottoman Empire and—most emphatically—of pilgrimages (*hadzhiluk*) to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The journey reawakens memories of previous links within political and cultural universes: the Socialist community, the road to Budapest and Vienna in the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the still earlier Ottoman roads to Istanbul, Damascus, Jerusalem, and Alexandria.

The attraction of the journey derives much from a historically rooted sense that the crossing of a border presupposes an advantage and from the expectation that travelers should be rewarded for their adventurousness, daring, and endurance of the hardships of the road. Many of the jokes mock those who stay at home and wait for the state to feed them. "A private business—merry home" (*chasprom—vesel dom*): this rhyme is often heard as an explanation of why a particular traveler is not interested in the security of a state job any more. Travelers see themselves in positive terms that reinterpret the state-employee/entrepreneur opposition as that between settled person and nomad, in which the nomad is the braver, sexier, and generally more clever and attractive person. This is perceived (by *Gadzhe* and Roma alike) as an entirely Gypsy perspective on ethnic values, reinforcing a classic stereotype. A nontraveler is perceived as foolish (see Sutherland 1975:247), an idea expressed in texts in which "they" are depicted as naive and frightened innocents, afraid to cross the boundary and go to Turkey: "They think they will be robbed; that the food is not for eating and the water not for drinking."

By contrast "we" confront boundaries connected with expectations that there is something "on the other side" to be bought "very cheaply": there is a fantastic bargain (*dalavera*) to be made. Travelers constantly circulate stories about new lands of unbelievable opportunities. "Now it is a super deal to go to China," one traveler said: others joined in with stories about opportunities in the United Arab Emirates (Dubai), in Singapore, and in Thailand (on Dubai, see Egbert 1996). Such contexts inspire memories of early travelers' tales of the Moluccas, of the gold and pearls of the New World, or, further back into European fairy tales, of the rewards of bravery when the bridge is crossed and the monster faced—in other words, when one leaves the security of a tree or a cave to cross to the other side of the woods or the mountain.

There are also memories and fears that may repulse the prospective *Gadzhe* former state-employee from embarking on the trader-tourist trail. The Roma are uniformly perceived as the ethnic owners of this form of trading. The variety of attitudes to trading and possibilities to engage in it within the Roma population are usually ignored, and Bulgarians see trader-tourism as a uniformly "Gypsy business" (*tsiganska turgoviya*). Although economic statistics indicate that Bulgarians tend to dominate the markets, or are at least equal in number with the Roma, the Roma are still perceived as the marked members (Ivanova et al. 1996:32–36; Konstantinov 1993, 1996; Krusteva 1996; Mileva 1996; Ovcharova 1996), despite the fact that not all Roma are trader-tourists (cf. Kolev 1994). Moreover, trader-tourism is today practiced noticeably by Russians, Ukrainians, and Chinese, as it formerly was by Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks. Nevertheless, trader-tourism is still branded as "Gypsy trading," that is, as an unprestigious, despised, lowly occupation that belongs to the overall mythmaking that accompanies transition (cf. Hann 1992:247–249).

There are also negative aspects to risky entrepreneurship: collective negative sanction, humiliation, and the unknown. "I do not care if former colleagues see me at the market with the Gypsies," remarked a former researcher from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (Institute

of Inorganic Chemistry) while traveling to Istanbul. "I cared a lot at first, was simply ashamed to stand behind the stall—what if my professor saw me there? But now I do not care any more—it is work and it pays, unlike the work at the Institute. The most decisive step is the first, though—you have to close your eyes and jump into it." This was in the fall of 1992. By 1994 the same person owned a boutique in town and was proud that she had made it "beyond the stall and the Gypsies." This brings up the point that the Gadzhe would ideally, from their own point of view be only temporary visitors to the low-level entrepreneurial scene (the Gypsy trading). From that stage they usually attempt to ascend to the higher echelons of economic activity (see also Konstantinov et al. n.d.). In this way the Roma are perceived as a frame of reference that is otherwise invisible but is highly necessary both in the drama of initial apprehensions and as a subsequent point of departure. Of the missing collective opinion only its classical scapegoat has remained—a curious facet of post-1989 developments whereby metonymic processes fuel nationalism, also known as "chauvino-communism," when used in reference to the countries and peoples of the former Yugoslavia (Schöpflin 1993:32). For the Russians and the Ukrainians the Roma role may be occupied by Chechens, Armenians, or Georgians, who represent a classically alien and frightening embodiment of existence beyond the pale.

**facing authority** For trader-tourists the most dramatic moment of the journey comes when they face the customs authorities on the return from Turkey (or another country) to Bulgaria. Bulgarian trader-tourists are mainly importers; they rarely export goods. If they are bringing in quantities "for commercial purposes," they are supposed to pay duty at the Bulgarian customs. The economic *raison d'être* of trader-tourism, however, rests on the assumption that the traders attempt to pass for tourists. To motivate customs officials to accept this fiction, trader-tourists resort to the simple expedient of the bribe.

Dramatic tension arises when customs officials are difficult, do not accept the bribe, and make a busload of trader-tourists pay full duty. When duty is avoided, the trader-tourists make a profit of about 40 percent on the money invested in the goods and the trip (including the bribe); but if they pay duty they may end up with no profit at all, or even lose as much as 10 percent of the total investment. Therefore, economic sense dictates that a person should operate as a trader-tourist only if there is sufficient reason to believe that the negotiation of the customs-barrier on the homebound journey will be unproblematic. How can one be sure of this?

**the guide** A key person who holds the answer to the question is the mediator between the trading party and the customs officials—the guide or excursion organizer. This person is usually the owner of a small travel agency.<sup>9</sup> The guide or travel agent is usually a woman between 25 and 45 years old, Bulgarian, and, typically, a former Balkantourist employee.<sup>10</sup> In Varna alone the 1992 city guidebook officially listed 27 such companies. In 1993 their number increased to 40, and it continues to grow.

The travel agency supplies a hired bus, ensures that the travelers have rooms for one or two nights in a cheap hotel in the shopping center in Istanbul (near the Covered Bazaar), and arranges for the collective visa for all the passengers. This is important because from this point forward the group will be treated as a collective by the customs and passport authorities. All the passports will be collected for various inspections on numerous occasions, passengers will receive individual numbers that identify them as part of the group, and some form of group discipline will be imposed. In general, the group is led by the women, primarily the Roma women, a feature that constitutes an important reversal of normative ethnic and gender roles in the mixed group. The group shares a common purpose, the risks and dangers of the enterprise, and formalities such as the collective visa.

The crucial service rendered by the travel agency is to make arrangements so that duty does not have to be paid on the return: it is the guide who passes the collective bribe to the customs officials. To build a reputation of being able to solve duty problems successfully every time, the guide employs personal contacts with one or more customs officials. These contacts may have been built up in the course of recent successive travels or may go back to pre-1989 Balkan tourist-organized travels abroad. In addition, the guide is often called upon to employ her hunches, persuasive skills, energy, and even “womanly charms” to solve difficult and exhausting situations. The success of the operation is very much in her hands.

**the bribe** On the road back from Istanbul, the bribe is collected only from those travelers who say that they “have nothing to declare.” There might also be rare tourists who are indeed genuinely interested only in the sights of Istanbul, and bribe money is not required of them. The travelers are generally amused by the presence of such innocents but also find uses for them—for example, as “mules” on the return trip, meaning that they are asked to include the travelers’ merchandise in their declaration forms (see Nedeva 1996:62).

The collection of the bribe is performed either by the guide or by someone from her intimate circle (Nedeva 1996:63). The going rate is announced over the bus intercom, and is usually U.S.\$1–2 per item of luggage. Once everyone agrees on this price, the guide or one of her female assistants goes down the aisle and collects it.

Because each of the approximately 40 passengers has on average five items of merchandise in bulky holdall cases, the total sum gathered is usually around U.S.\$200–400 per bus. The total weight is estimated at four to six tons of luggage (and possibly more), and the total price of the merchandise ranges from U.S.\$10,000 to \$40,000. The merchandise is composed mainly of textile goods; consequently, the bulk is such that the whole bus—luggage compartments, racks, under-the-seat spaces, aisles, and the last four rows of seats—are solidly packed with holdalls and smaller pieces of luggage, food for the road, plastic bottles with water, cans of Coke, and big bunches of plastic flowers sold to the passengers at the very last moment by Turkish street vendors who cluster around the bus at the time of loading. Moving in and out of the bus becomes very difficult with all this luggage, but unloading and reloading are the worst tribulations for the entire group. Compulsory unloading and loading, however, is one of the major means by which the controllers (Bulgarian or Turkish customs officials) assert their power and authority. If they decide to use it the controllers issue an order that the luggage must be taken out of the bus and the travelers must line up behind their respective piles. This usually happens late at night because the travel logistics require that the days should be used for buying and loading the merchandise. Our team has participated in such midnight ordeals on several occasions, and I remember in particular one such occasion on a bitterly cold night in March 1993. One of the women passengers fainted, and her two immediate neighbors supported her in an upright position until the customs officials finally appeared. The message here is very clear: travelers can be punished in a variety of ways under the guise of officially necessary procedures because they are culprits by definition—Romani or Bulgarian traders, Romanians, Russians, Albanians, Macedonians, or Serbs, who make fake customs declarations are treated as rogues or picaros. The controllers will be tempted—seduced—to become accomplices, but, invested with official authority, they remain the more powerful actors. The controllers’ power partly stems from the normative instruments at the controller’s disposal but predominantly from the large margin allowed for the case-by-case arbitrariness of judgment as to who may pass for a tourist and who is to be treated as a trader (see Konstantinov et al. n.d.).

**the border zone** The trader-tourist drama is finally performed in the physical space of the border zone. For the Bulgarians, especially for those who formerly occupied bureaucratic positions, the original choice has been the hardest; consequently the tension at the border is

the greatest for them. In one telling incident during an August 1993 journey, a middle-aged male Bulgarian who turned out to be a former factory director broke into a Romani song with the rest of the Romani (Roma women), some of whom had formerly been employed as cleaners at his factory. Apparent in this song was a great feeling of liberation: an elated sense of freedom from the convulsions of coming to terms with the novel and somewhat frightening position of being trader-tourists. Many of the Bulgarian trader-tourists had nothing to do with trading until three or four years ago, but now they are on the other side of a line that differentiates them from those people who have remained in poorly paid state jobs or with no employment at all. In the jargon of the bus passengers, those people are “suckers” (*balamournitsi, douhachi*); there is great pride in having taken the plunge to arrive at one’s present state, which requires tough resourcefulness. Still, it is not easy for these individuals to come to terms with being treated as petty criminals at borders and having to fret over the uncertainties and caprices of the customs officers every time.

If the trade has existed on such a massive scale for the last five years, why is there such an obvious lack of streamlining and regulation of the whole process? The process is indeed massive: the unofficial figures look something like this—100,000 trader-tourist trips by Bulgarian citizens annually; approximately 5,000 tons of merchandise imported annually at a total regional value of U.S.\$100 million per year (approximately 0.9% of the country’s GNP) (OECD 1994:102). The bribes given to customs officers on the land routes to Turkey may be roughly estimated at U.S.\$500,000 per year. (Konstantinov et al. n.d.). The application of these figures to the whole terrain of operations from Eastern Europe to the Russian Far East suggests a total of millions of trader-tourist trips and the corresponding figures for the value of merchandise, tonnage, and bribes given.

Because such huge quantities of merchandise are carried across national borders as individual items of luggage, one wonders why the travelers do not utilize more efficient means of cargo transportation such as rail, boat, or truck. Although rail transport is used in some limited ways, the emphasis generally is on the bus and the bag, which is why this activity is known as “suitcase trading.” Trader-tourism makes economic sense only if the traders manage to pass for tourists, that is, as people who carry merchandise as though it consisted only of personal belongings. As I have already noted, this also means that the controllers at the borders are effectively the recipients of bribes, that the guide is in practice primarily the person who administers the bribe, and, in general, that the whole system works only as long as its fictions can be maintained. Moving up the hierarchy of economic actors, we may say that the higher echelons (the “new businessmen”) in fact remain extensions of state enterprises (*entrepratchiks*), and that the whole period of transition reinterprets the previous formula of ambiguity—a previous state of affairs that passed for socialism and a present one that passes for a transition to a market economy.

The picaros operate in these murky waters of long-standing ambiguities. Their meetings with the authorities at the borders reveal a double play in which, behind the façades presented by both sides, the real dialogue is effected surreptitiously with the help of the mediator (the guide).

Open transactions do not seem to be possible. This is especially striking when we note that, by comparison, the transactions on the Turkish side of the border are fully transparent: the Turkish official enters the bus, accepts bribe in full view of everyone, and, with a happy smile, disappears, accompanied by friendly banter from the front seats. On the Bulgarian side transactions between trader-tourists and customs officials are deeply secretive. In a telling incident during our last (August 1994) journey, the guide of the Bulgarian bus and the customs official disappeared into the night behind several dark buses where, in a split second, a wad of money changed hands before they returned to the group (Kunchev 1996:70). The obvious conclusion is that an ethos of institutionalized bribing is not accepted as normal and that an appearance of moral pedantry is very much required. Most important, that cover furnishes a normative frame of reference on which social actors then perform their poetics. A straightfor-

ward referentiality (as in the language of economic action) is not possible; discourse remains intensely and ostentatiously poetic. This is simply another way of saying that this economic activity shows every sign of being submerged deeply in social relationships that are, first and foremost, relationships between the self and an intensely sought, imagined, and resurrected collective opinion, authority, and sanction that condemn entrepreneurship, duty evasion, and bribing as immoral.

**the homebound journey** Trader-tourist parties spend usually one or two full days in Istanbul and then return, the logistics being governed by two primary considerations. On one hand the guide must allow enough time for purchases to be made and the bus loaded (a stupendous task easily taking several hours), while on the other hand she must adjust the schedule in such a way as to be at the border when “her” brigade of customs officials is on duty. These brigades consist of two officers who take a six-hour shift together. Therefore, the bus must be at the border when a guide’s established contacts are on duty.

After spending tense and exhausting days in Istanbul and accomplishing the Herculean task of getting everything inside the bus—allowing some room for the 40 passengers as well—a second phase of exhilaration supervenes. The travelers exchange stories about the quantities of luggage that were loaded onto buses on previous journeys: “This here is nothing in comparison with what we had taken a month ago—when the door was opened for the customs official the luggage fell on him and buried him!” Another popular topic revolves around traders’ success (or lack of it) in making their purchases. Traders arrange an improvised exhibition of items to display their purchases and to announce the prices they have paid. Travelers take great pride in being able to say that a certain item has been bought for a very low price: “This lady’s suit for only two marks!” Prices are quoted almost exclusively in German marks or U.S. dollars as the Turkish lira fluctuates widely and is generally considered unreliable by sellers and buyers alike. This part of the journey is therefore seen as a summing up or reporting phase, important for circulating information, teaching the novices the actual value of their goods, and sustaining the oral literature and memory of the community.

Much as Orr describes for photocopier repair technicians, these stories also serve to celebrate the identity of the traders (Orr 1990:186–187). The material presented in Orr’s study, and in that of Myerhoff (1986), suggest that this part of the journey greatly resembles hunters’ conversations around the campfire. The texture of this part of the journey appears to be based in a desire to “make sense out of a fundamentally ambiguous set of facts” (Orr 1990:186) and create a sense of collective authority and sanction through the narrative process and the whole setting.

A comparison with Orr’s observations also suggests that these stories are not only about success but perhaps even to a greater degree concern failures and hardships: “You bought that for two marks—so they have cheated me again. I paid four marks as I have been paying all along!” The crucial point here is that the traders are what they are as a result of what they are capable of doing—achieving, losing, celebrating, and suffering. The narrative texts describing their fortunes and misfortunes create a collective forum, and the traders’ identities rest reflexively on the poeticization of their economic activities in such terms. Economic activity, if formalized and limited to itself, will not create the atmosphere described here: if economic rationality were the sole motivation the respective actors would not join in a collective conversation, distribution of knowledge, and celebration of identity, but would instead remain reserved and silent in their seats.

The preparation for the culmination of the whole journey—when the travelers have to face their controller in the sober guise of the Bulgarian customs officer—approaches inexorably after the bus passes Edirne (about 50 kilometers before the Bulgarian border). After the initial hours of exhilaration a sobering process sets in and tension gradually begins to rise. Each traveler

considers the possibility that all this trouble, exhaustion, expense, and anxiety might have been for naught. On the other hand there remains the wild hope that the guide will perform her miracle yet again and that the group will pass through the border “like diplomats”—that is, handing in their customs declarations while the guide passes the bribe to the controller, who gestures to the bus to continue out of the border zone.

The travelers are troubled by fears of failure (for example, if the bribe is not accepted, or if the controller chooses to display “honor” by being strict, the luggage is taken out and examined, and if everyone is lined up outside and taken to the “Hall”—the “Canal”).<sup>11</sup> They must meanwhile perform the intricate task of filling out the declaration forms, a procedure that requires close attention.

**customs regulations** Customs regulations constitute an esoteric body of knowledge, an opaque code of behavior. The relationship between the participants in this form of dialogue has the speaker in the role of a distant and mysterious authority while the listener’s role is mainly to be baffled and to feel guilty for being a picaro. The codified utterances of the speaker (the controller writ large) are thus performative and magical: they assign the hearer (traveler) to the role of the uncomprehending culprit, maximally divested of any claims to innocence, personal integrity, or honor. This part of the State–Individual dialogue thus illustrates the substance of present transitional realities: a general reinterpretation of preceding totalitarian discourse that is itself a reinterpretation of so-called Oriental despotic modes. Not surprisingly for such a context the second participant in the performative dialogue—the traveler—must also resort to magical utterances.

The process that shapes and formulates this state magic has as its central feature the fact that regulations are constantly changed, reshaped, or amended in a progressively downward direction throughout the state administrative hierarchy. The broad outlines of a regulation are drawn up in Parliament, the Council of Ministers interprets a Parliamentary decision, a specific ministry adds its own requirements, and a committee adds its own. The result is a legal maze that can only be unraveled by a professional jurist—that is, by a priest of this lore. How this is shaped for the traveler may be gleaned from the very titles of the manuals: “Regulations for Customs Control of Goods Carried across the State Boundary of the Republic of Bulgaria, Approved by Decree No. 59 of the Council of Ministers (5 April 1991), announced in the *State Gazette* (No. 30 of 16 April 1991), amended No. 87 of 1991, changed (Nos. 5, 20, 43, and 81 of 1992), changed No. 44 of 1994” (*Zakon za mitnitsite* 1994:37).

The hermetic character of this literature prompts the travelers to engage in vernacular hermeneutic exercises of which the results are passed around in the form of tales about identity (see Orr 1990) in a more sober continuation of the campfire conversations described above. At this stage, in which the customs official is inexorably approaching, the stories tend to be mainly about failures, massive losses, and other tribulations.

At the moment of filling in the forms all collective knowledge is urgently mobilized. This is perhaps the moment when the group is maximally united. A general feeling of helplessness pervades the bus while the travelers try to fill in the tiny pieces of flimsy paper: under the dim overhead lights that flicker here and there the travelers write on their knees with the kind of ballpoint pen used by people not in the habit of writing, and futilely tilt solar-cell pocket calculators at all angles. During this frenzy in the jolting and lurching bus, the travelers ask one another about the current state of the regulations. Above all the travelers must “prove” that the goods they are carrying are “for personal use” and not “for commercial purposes.” “For personal use” means that the total value of goods does not exceed U.S.\$300, and this is straightforward enough. The second and decisive point, however, concerns how many identical items one may innocently carry for personal use. Since May 10, 1993, no limit is set by official instructions (from the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Finance, etc.), and the implication is that this

determination is left to the discretion of the customs official. As a result travelers circulate among themselves versions of the current state of affairs in this area. The popular view is that one could carry identical items of a single type (for example, men's pants) in no more than three sets of that type (a set consisting of all sizes). Thus in this reading, if a type of pants has been bought in four sizes (small, medium, large, and extra-large), "for personal use" means that one carries 12 pairs of trousers (of different sizes) for personal use and that, in addition, one may carry 12 jackets, 12 shirts, and so on, provided that the total declared value does not exceed U.S.\$300.

This allows many loopholes, and the travelers, using their own style of magical discourse to match that of the state, quickly find them. First, travelers give an unrealistically low price for each item bought—for example, two collections of men's sandwashed silk jackets (eight items altogether) might be given a total price of U.S.\$25 (roughly U.S.\$3 for a silk jacket). Second, travelers circulate types of items in the bus so that, if trader A has an excess of six sets of a type, trader A gives traders B and C three apiece. In return, A does the same for the other traders until each trader has only the requisite number with a total value below the U.S.\$300 personal use limit.

In practice, the traders deviate from this norm—but modestly: not exactly three sets would be declared per type, but perhaps four or five; or they would declare number of single items in approximate terms (e.g., as "20 to 30"). During one of the 1993 journeys a Romani next to me in the bus wrote out the following declaration:

2 sets of jackets—40 DM—8 items altogether; 3—of sandals—20 DM—18 items; 2—of ladies' blouses—30 DM—20–30 items; 2—of men's trousers—50 DM—5 items; 2—of ladies' blouses [again!]  
—30 DM—20–30 items; 2—of ladies' trousers—40 DM—8 items; 7 items of ladies' suits—35 DM; 1 set of jackets—25 DM—5 items; 2 carpets—40 DM; Total 310 DM (U.S.\$194).

"Ask no questions, I will tell you no lies": what my neighbor was carrying in her own luggage was more by at least one-third, excluding those items on my declaration form that I had "taken" from her: 2 items men's leather jackets—40 DM; 2 carpets—40 DM; 1 set of men's trousers—25 DM—3 items; 3 sets of children's sandals—20 DM—30 items (I was also carrying goods for other passengers).

**the moment of truth** After passing through Turkish passport and customs control and Bulgarian passport control (the later is usually unproblematic) the trader-tourists finally face the Bulgarian customs officials. At this point, usually at midnight or later, everyone on the bus is silent. The guide collects the declarations and disappears into the night with the bribe. No one utters a word; some pray quietly. After what seems to be an unbearably long period of suspense, the guide reappears. What the guide says now will make or break the whole trip. Drawing on my field notes from various trips in 1992–94, I offer a typical scenario. In this sequence the guide returns and says:

"Everyone down with their luggage! He doesn't want to take it [i.e., the bribe]."

There is a collective groan from the whole bus. Getting down with the luggage means taking down some four to six tons of luggage that is tightly packed in the passenger spaces and the holds. There is someone behind me with TV aerials and repair parts for TV sets. He also has "nothing to declare" and now holds his head in both hands in mute despair. Finally we are all out in the night with piles of cabin luggage in front of us. The luggage compartments have not been emptied; only their lids are invitingly propped up for inspection.

At this moment a frightening thought crosses my mind—I have left my wallet and passport in the net-rack of the seat in front of mine. I dash back into the bus (this is forbidden at this point, but I take the risk) and in the darkness I see an elderly Romani sprinkling salt on a seat, under which I discern the bulging forms of a holdall. For the sprinkling the old woman is using a plastic saltcellar of the type that one sees in cheap restaurants.

"What is this for, Grandmother?" I ask in a whisper.

"It is against the customs officer, son," she whispers back.

This act of chasing away the evil powers with salt, like the use of other ritual practices such as amulets and the lighting of candles in church for successful passage, constitutes the

performative magic of utterances in the background dialogue between controllers and travelers when the dialogue is not in its conspiratorial stage (i.e., when the guide passes the bribe to the official). Between these two settings—the anonymous magical communion between controllers and travelers and the face-to-face interaction between controller and guide—there is a documentary and textual interaction between the traveler's declaration form and the controller's stamp. The stamp is the expression of ultimate power, as the travelers may leave the Control Zone only after the declaration form has been stamped and thereby validated. If the declaration is found to be fake it will not be stamped; a document for the payment of duty will instead be written. With the stamp in hand, the controller finally appears about 50 meters from the bus and uses hand gestures to motion that the luggage should be taken out of the bottom luggage compartments as well. The guide also appears, and it is whispered down the line that the guide has said that the controller still refuses to accept the bribe. It is also rumored that a bus has been taken to the inspection hall and that a Romanian bus has been taken to the "Canal." Indeed, the travelers see the second bus on the canal with the Romanians lined up next to it in defeated silence. Now the controller finally comes up to us, symbolically examines the piles of luggage (by prodding them here and there), and says that he will let this bus go on the following condition: "three of you shall voluntarily declare their goods. Your behavior has been outrageous!" (i.e., because the luggage looks far too much for what has been reported in the declarations forms). At this point the guide proves that we rogues are not entirely powerless. In a spectacular loss of temper the guide suddenly begins to shout at the controller that her knowledge of how much each controller had accepted in bribes could put the entire brigade of controllers into prison. The controller says something that we cannot hear, but the guide's voice keeps ringing out in the night. Finally the controller goes away, and the guide returns to us with all but one of the declaration forms, all duly stamped: the compromise solution is that the man with the aerials serves as the scapegoat—he will have to pay duty. Amid great joy the bus leaves the customs zone, the aerials man receives a collective tribute as a compensation for his losses and general scapegoating, and the bus stops at the first roadside restaurant. I look at my watch; it is four in the morning. A celebration begins with salads and plum brandy to mark the fact that the picaros have made the passage (their form of transition) yet again.

### **conclusions: regaining a new balance**

Trader-tourists owe the chance to use their particular forms of survival strategy to the fact that the primary agents of reform, the new businessmen, have been assisted from above to use the administrative, economic, and political changes necessary for the initial accumulation of economic power before the beginning of privatization. Two major factors are of crucial relevance for the trader-tourists: first, the need for corruption and hence of the possibility of bribing state officials; and second, the need to destroy the existing state economy and thus emphasize trading with imported goods rather than home production. The result is the reformulation of a previous order by using deviance from a newly emerged fragile standard (democracy) as the inner "deviant norm" of the enfranchised nomenklatura. A highly ambiguous and tense situation arises as this pattern is translated downward across the reformulated social pyramid, which itself is in a very fluid state.

The search for legitimate authority (in the more concrete, operational sense of the term) is becoming more imperative because of an important and spectacular aspect of the situation that is related to the issues raised in this paper: the increase of aggression and violence on every level, including the interethnic one, as exhibited by civil wars in the former Soviet Bloc. This topic can not be pursued further here but, by way of a final remark, I would argue that it is in this arena that the poetics of reformulation of previously managed systems is at its most intense and dramatic. From such a point of view it can be said that a model for investigation that draws

on methodological premises under a general title of semiotic ethnography (Herzfeld 1983), or in a “vernacular hermeneutics” in the sense in which I have used the term, seems to be the most adequate for an anthropological examination of recent transitional processes in Eastern Europe. The abundant empirical material challenges us to examine the powerfulness of a method that is capable of dealing with enactments of indeterminacy in the modeling of vernacular survival strategies.

The central issue when examining emergent entrepreneurship on all levels concerns the embedding of economic action in considerations that stem from perceptions of an authoritative frame of reference. This frame of reference can be perceived in a great variety of ways by numerous social groups engaged in the painful emergence of new social differentiations. Irrespective of political bias or forms of directionality (both retrospective and prospective), the various groups share one common trait: the search for a tangible collective center. The most dynamic individuals, the small entrepreneurs as trader-tourists, reflect this best in their tense dialogues with the authorities; there is an insistence on both sides that a degree of propriety or normativity be observed. For all parties involved, there must first be a norm, and then, in a manner so typical of the previous period, a deviation from this norm. Through these deviations, trader-tourists and officials alike reinterpret the previous models of the delicate and tense ecology of collective norm and individual deviance.

Present transitional realities pose high demands for an ability to operate freely and imaginatively in the absence of clearly visible and imposed norms. The tension that arose from economic difficulties and from a sense of crumbling social order has resulted in an overwhelming collective desire for a return to socialist statism. Another, even more clearly perceptible orienting center is based on the drawing of ethnic and religious boundaries, and, from such an angle, the dramatic resurgence of ethnic and religious conflicts in the region becomes relatively understandable. We must keep in mind, however, that both socialist statism and its grimmer version, “chauvino-communism,” are in discursive terms no more than the semiotic constructions necessary for deviation in the ways in which trader-tourists fill out their customs declarations and in which customs officials accept them. This makes the travels of social actors framed by these novel orientations especially intriguing. Given the mass of accumulated experience and its socialization, it is difficult to see that the necessity for a collectivist paradigm may disappear in the territories examined in this article.

Because the search for less formalist economic practices has intensified in the world of successful market economies, the vibrant convulsions of present transitional processes in Eastern Europe may be offering prospective rather than retrospective experience. Contrary to current clichés, the transition here is not toward a market economy but toward another reinterpretation of nonmarket models of society. At present this reinterpretation is cast mainly in a picaresque mode, as presented by the less nostalgic and more active economic actors; but a more settled, mature version can be expected to follow.

## notes

*Acknowledgments.* This article derives much of its inspiration and substance from joint fieldwork carried out with Gideon Kressel (University of Beer-sheva, Israel) and Trond Thuen (University of Tromsø, Norway) that resulted in a joint paper on the same topic (Konstantinov et al. n.d.). I am also grateful to William Lockwood for his stimulating suggestion, during a short field study in Bulgaria in the summer of 1992, that attention be turned to ethnic interaction in the town markets. My gratitude goes to all my former students from the University of Sofia who have endured the hardships of the marketplace and the road to Istanbul. The investigations of the markets could not have taken place without the moral and financial support of the Open Society Foundation in Sofia, the University of Tromsø, the Interdisciplinary Center for Comparative Research in the Social Sciences (Vienna), and the Austrian Ministry of Science and Research. My deepest gratitude goes to Angela Sellner from ICCR-Vienna who helped coordinate and enlist support for this research through a number of difficult years.

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1. Many titles cited in this article will not be easy for the reader to find as the works still exist only as manuscripts, have been published in a variety of journals, read at conferences, or are in press. The author's wish has been to acquaint the reader with work that is being done in this field in Bulgaria. All titles marked "BSRCS" can be received from the Bulgarian Society for Regional Cultural Studies, Sofia 1233, P.O. Box 59, Bulgaria.

2. The phenomenon of trader-tourism was first described, to the best my knowledge, by Chris and Ildiko Hann (1992:3–6), who coined the term. A description of Polish trader-tourism in Hungary and of traders from the withdrawing Russian army is made in Hann 1992:248 and Romanian trader-tourists are mentioned in Sampson, in press. Much of the material presented in this article has been discussed from a slightly different perspective in Konstantinov et al. n.d. Cf. Egbert 1994, in press, Konstantinov 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1994d.

3. On the link between village to town migration and informal economic activities, compare Keith Hart's work on developments in Ghana. Of particular relevance to my topic is the benevolent attitude of the higher echelons of actors: "The informal economy offered itself as a form of self-organized unemployment relief and it was grasped eagerly by politicians and intellectual bureaucrats as a solution to their dilemma" (Hart 1992:218).

4. A graphemic expression of the poetic approach can be seen in the fact that it is very difficult not to put most words representing transitional concepts in quotation marks.

5. Before 1989 workplace collectives would hold "open Party meetings" at which the whole collective was present, and "closed" at which only Party members would be admitted. Members of the collective would likewise gather at the more infrequent Trade Union (*profsoyuz*) meetings or at the meetings of the Fatherland Front (OF) at their place of residence. For a time following the events of November 1989, the spirit of collective gatherings was sustained by demonstrations, marches, collective strikes, and the "tent city" of June–July 1990. At present, however, these events have waned considerably as the power of collective sanction weakens.

6. Social differentiation before 1989 officially recognized the existence of the following classes: workers, peasants, civil servants (*slouzhashiti*), and members of labor industrial cooperatives (TPK).

7. The sensitive matter of the use of ethnonyms—such as Roma (versus Gypsies) has necessitated different types of notation throughout the paper. Thus, when used as a neutral classificatory term an ethnonym appears in Roman type (Roma); when I try to capture its vernacular use in nonacademic discourse, I have italicized the ethnonym (*Gadzhe, Gypsy*).

8. The data are based on a series of field trips, organized by the Bulgarian Society for Regional Cultural Studies, to secondhand markets in Bulgaria and the regional market of Istanbul. The town markets of Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Rousse, Vidin, Pazardzhik, Dimitrovgrad, Elena, Zlataritsa, Devin, Dospat, Gotse Delchev, Madan, the village of Boutan, and others were studied. During 1992–93 the researchers engaged in participant observation as sellers in the Malashevtsi market of Sofia and, in the summer of 1993, at the Kolhoz Market in Varna. During 1992–93 the teams that travelled with trader-tourists to Istanbul were composed of Yulian Konstantinov (October 1992–February 1993) Milena Nedeva and Yulian Konstantinov (March 1993), and Gideon Kressel, Trond Thuen, and Yulian Konstantinov (August 1993). The 1994 travels to Istanbul were carried out by Dinko Kunchev, Nina Varpe, and Einar Rebni (August). Additional information was gathered by Henrik Egbert, who traveled to Trabzon and Dubai in 1993, and by Radostina Ivanova and Mihail Mihalev. Mihalev started as a trader-tourist in 1990 and continually traveled to Russia and Ukraine during the last five years. Two forums for researchers interested in the topic were organized by the BSRCS in 1993 and 1994 as International Seminars on Ethnic Interaction in Balkan Town Markets.

9. Every town has at least ten travel agencies, and the bigger towns often boast up to 50 or more.

10. Before the changes of 1989, Balkantourist was the state agency with an exclusive monopoly on cross-border tourism—similar to its gigantic Soviet counterpart, Intourist. Balkantourist officials, guides in particular, used to have rare access to resources that stemmed from unproblematic passage across the Iron Curtain. With this expertise in hand, they easily became the leaders of trader-tourists in the era post-1989.

11. The degrees of punishment are (a) get off and wait with cabin-luggage only; (b) get off and line up with all the luggage; (c) take all the luggage to the inspection room ("The Hall") where it can be examined item by item—a procedure lasting up to eight hours or more; and (d) take all the luggage to "The Hall" while the bus is examined at the "Canal" (i.e., the bus is placed over a ditch so that it can be examined from underneath for hidden drugs—a procedure that can be extremely long).

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