MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY WORKING PAPERS

MAX-PLANCK-GESELLSCHAFT

Working Paper No. 86

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FRIENDSHIP GROUPS IN LEISURE TIME IN BULGARIA: EXAMPLES FROM THE SOCIALIST AND POSTSOCIALIST PERIOD

Friendship Groups in Leisure Time in Bulgaria: examples from the socialist and postsocialist period[1]

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Abstract

The main objective of the paper is the investigation of leisure time friendship groups in Bulgaria, mainly during the second half of the 20th century. The specific goals are first, to establish a typology and to analyse the functioning of these friendship groups in Sofia and amongst the educated strata, focused in the context, first, of hiking, and second, of making merry in a restaurant; second, to make a comparison between the two types of groups in view of the transformation of the social and interpersonal relations since the mid-20th century. The very activity of the mountaineering groups creates a context, which largely determines their functioning. In this case the context includes the wild natural environment, and this prompts specific requirements on the behaviour and activity of the hikers associated with their safety. Practical requirements of immediate solidarity on the mountain determine the development of friendship as an after-effect of the group's functioning. The predominant principle for structuring of the friendship groups of hikers is inclusion. The groups called 'groups for fun' here are presented not so much as an object of an independent investigation than as a possibility for comparing them to the mountaineering groups. The two specific groups for fun investigated here belong to different strata of Bulgarian society (one of them clearly belongs to the new emerging middle class and the other consists of rather poor pensioners). Both differ substantially from those of the mountaineering groups. This difference offers the opportunity of tracing how social, economic and status differences reflect on the structure and the functional and cultural expressions of the groups. Unlike the groups of hikers, pragmatic aspects are absent in the activities and interaction among members of the 'groups for fun'. Their members invest time and means not in the context, but in 'the pure relationship'. The emotional aspect of the friendship is much stronger than among the hikers. This logically finds expression in the more explicit group identity too, as demonstrated in the self-naming of the groups, established routine practices, as well as rituals and even special emblems. The different socio-class characteristics of the friendship groups presented here show that the informal units function at various levels of the social hierarchy in the country: both in (the almost) elitist environment and in differing segments of the non-elite strata. Though seemingly paradoxical, the friendship groups are at one and the same time both evidence of the development of individualism as a life strategy, but also a means of development of personal and collective social capital.

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Introduction

It is no secret that the routine actions and practices making up the fabric of everyday life are often more difficult to study than outstanding and memorable phenomena and events. The mechanisms by which people realise their daily interactions are far from obvious. The present work is a stage in my attempts to study social networks and interpersonal relations in Bulgaria in the socialist and postsocialist periods. The article is a follow-up of two preceding articles dealing with questions of friendship and the function of interpersonal relations (Benovska-Sabkova 2004: 109-129, Benovska-Sabkova forthcoming). The new element here is the more restricted scope of the study, which is confined to the functioning of two kinds of friendship groups situated within the context of leisure time in an urban environment.

The main objective of the article is the investigation of these leisure time friendship groups in Bulgaria, mainly during the second half of the 20th century. The specific goals are more restricted: 1) to establish a typology and to analyse the functioning of these friendship groups, focused in the context,[3] first, of hiking, and second, of making merry in a restaurant; 2) to make a comparison between the two types of groups in view of the transformation of the social and interpersonal relations since the mid-20th century.

Methods of Fieldwork

The article is based on fifty autobiographical interviews, taken in 2001-2005, primarily with representatives of the intelligentsia in Sofia (of middle-age or older). One should note, however, that friendship groups were, if at all, only mentioned spontaneously in the course of an interview since my interviewing strategy was one of minimal interference. The preliminary intention was to investigate the larger problem of socialist and postsocialist transformation of social relations in Bulgaria. The idea of investigating the relevance and social significance of friendship groups took shape later on. The data referring to friendship groups and leisure time activities can be found in nine of the interviews; in some cases the interviewed person was a member of more than one of these groups. A part of the data was also collected in participant observation (attending the gatherings of such groups).

It is hard to evaluate how common these informal groups are, especially with regards to the 'groups for fun', but indirect evidence shows that since the socialist period, the phenomenon of fixed groups of hikers was rather typical in character. According to a survey conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in 1970, 20.78% of the sample of 18,994 persons[4] declared to hike "systematically"; another 14.30% of the sample declared that they hike "non-systematically" (Congress 1972: 19). Although these statistics do not go into the number of those practicing in the informal groups I am interested in, it gives an approximate idea about the quantitative dimension of the phenomenon in question.

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[3] On the significance of context in the study of friendship see Adams and Allan 1998.
[4] The sample consisted of persons older than 12 years of age (Congress 1972: 19).

The Concepts of 'Group' and 'Friendship'

The terms, adequately characterising the social units under consideration, are 'group' and in one specific case 'coalition'. Without going into depth on theories of social groups, I have here accepted the concept of George C. Homans (1951: 4), who states that direct communication among members is characteristic of a 'group'. Although there is no clear-cut differentiation of *etic* and *emic* levels of discourse, it is not insignificant to note how the interviewees themselves define these groups. Both words, 'group' and 'friendly companies' [«*приятелски компании*»], were used as the interviews proceeded.

In agreement with Jeremy Boissevain, I argue that "the coalitions which people form in their drive to attain their goals are temporary alliances" (1974: 170; see also Adrian Mayer 1966: 97-122). Unlike the group, which is distinguished by greater inner cohesion, shared norms and even rituals, a coalition is characterised by instability, including possibly a shorter existence in time. Although I do not completely stick to it, I owe the analytical model of my work to authors like Homans (ibid: 64-149, 157-189) and Stephen R. Marks (1998: 43-70), as well as to the literature on network analysis (Mitchell 1969; Boissevain & Mitchell 1973; Scott 2000; Wasserman & Faust 1998).

Friendship is discussed here as interpersonal relations, resting at least on a personal and voluntary choice, particularism (in the sense of Parsons) and emotional contents or elements (Eisenstadt 1956: 90; Eisenstadt & Roniger 1984: 1-7; Paine 1969: 505-506). What is emphasised, moreover, is the intimacy, confidence and the endurance of the relationship, etc. (Guichard, Heady, Tadesse 2003: 7-9).[5] This rather descriptive definition of friendship is relevant for the present work: "Friendships so conceived turn on intimacy, the confident revelation of the self to a trusted other, the sharing of expressive and consummatory activities" (Silver 1989: 274). In describing the groups under consideration as 'friendship groups', one must keep in mind all the complexity and variety of different dyadic and polyadic relationships. I do not mean this term to be understood as 'exclusive' or 'close' friendship or as a prevailing relationship, but rather friendship in general as a means of building and maintaining social cohesion.

In order to follow these objectives the paper is organised in three parts. The first part is devoted to the hiking groups and coalitions; the second to the groups that I shall call for short 'groups for fun'; the third will be based on the inferences of the preceding two, tracing the transformation of social and interpersonal relations during the second half of the 20th century in Bulgaria. Further on I shall outline the typology, organisation and principle of structuring of these mountaineering groups.

Structure and Functioning of Friendship Groups among Hikers

In Bulgaria many kinds of groups exist in the different spheres of leisure time. Why are specifically the hikers the object of attention here instead of any of the other groups? A close analogy of the mountaineering groups are the groups of skiers (more often young people) and the hunting associations. Like the hikers, the skiers and hunters centre their activities in the open air in a natural environment. Of similar interest are the pensioners' clubs, which often also incorporate a function as neighbourhood party clubs. Significant in character are, on the other hand, the groups for amateur art (most often folklore) existing in all towns and in the majority of the Bulgarian villages.

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[5] For a review of the literature see Eisenstadt 1956; Guichard, Heady, Tadesse 2003: 7-17. See also Silver 1989: 274-297.

Distinct types of associations are the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which have appeared during the past fifteen years. Some of them have a structure similar to that of professional organisations. Other NGOs, which exist in the context of the leisure time, are self-help associations, like patients associations directed at victims of socially significant diseases[6] or single mothers associations[7]. The list can of course be extended considerably.

The choice has fallen on the hiker groups because of my interest in studying friendship in Bulgaria. The mountaineer groups are often based on friendship and rather informal in character (apart from formally being registered as 'tourist associations'[8]). This sets them apart from the hunter societies, for instance, which, besides having a formal status, have their activities institutionally regulated, like in other countries. Some of the individual members of the hiker groups are members in the Bulgarian Tourists Union (BHU), but whether they belong to this union or not is not at all a criterion for their participation in the groups. Besides informality, the latter are distinguished by spontaneity in their formation. The second reason for choosing them is the intensity of their social life. Some of them go to outings in the mountains every week and these are also the examples that I investigate here. In the third place, they belong to a widely accepted cultural model of the organisation of leisure time in the urban environment developed in the second half of the 20th century.

I shall discuss elsewhere the development of mountaineering in Bulgaria (which began in 1895), and for that reason shall not dwell on it here. The hiking in groups is common in many places in Bulgaria, but as a mass phenomenon it is more characteristic of Sofia, because of the direct proximity of Mount Vitosha to the city. It should likewise be noted that the mountaineering groups of established composition and regular functioning are far from being the only tourism and mountaineering form in Bulgaria. These activities are often practiced by families or by groups of friends as 'a day out'.

On a hiking trip or on an outing in the mountains you can also meet single tourists, but this rarely happens. Moving in a group is a safety requirement and for that matter, hiking has the characteristics of an integrative sport. As I have already mentioned, in nine out of a total of fifty interviews, friendship groups were mentioned as part of the sphere of leisure time. In six of the nine interviews, mountaineering groups are referred to, but there is a lack of correspondence between their number and the number of the interviews, because some of those interviewed participated in more than one such formation. The specification of the number of the latter raises some difficulties, because of the flexibility of the groups, which in their different compositions can sometimes be defined as functioning independently, and sometimes as an extended or contracted version of the same group.

Provided this is taken into consideration, it could be considered that in six interviews, nine separate hiking groups and/or coalitions are mentioned as demonstrated in the following list[9]:

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[6] See for instance http://www.generousheart.org or http://clubs.dir.bg/.
[7] See http://www.ngo-bg.org/en, http://www.ngo.bg.
[8] It is accepted in Bulgarian to use the word 'tourist' to designate 'a hiker'.
[9] All informants have been anonymised.

The Pavlov Family

D., born 1956, *P.*, born 1955
A group of families from a single neighbourhood (former or current colleagues; engineers). The configuration of the participants alters every week, but the outing on the mountain takes place every week as well. It has existed since the second half of the 1980s.

Lydia, born 1943
Participation (simultaneous) in three different formations:
- A coalition of about 30 men and women who combine trips to resorts in the mountains with the celebration of calendar or personal holidays several times a year. The core consists of colleagues, extending by marital partners, boy/girl friends and others.[10]
- Six of the women from 'the big' coalition hike every week in a 'small' group on Mount Vitosha (sometimes they undertake more difficult tours on other mountains). Lydia has been active in mountaineering since the early 1980s.
- Three or four families of 'the big' coalition engage in yachting on the Black Sea during their summer holidays since 2002.

Svetla, born 1951
A group of seven women, undertaking outings to Mount Vitosha every week. The group expands during the winter (through the mediation of one of the women, two men join it). During the summer it contracts (the two men are absent – they have other occupations during the summer; as have three of the women, who spend their summertime weekends and holidays in their family villas). Svetla joined the existing group in 1999; in the 1980s she had been on outings in the mountain together with her family (a husband and two children). Between the two periods there is an interruption of about 15 years.

Yoanna, born 1945
Since the end of the 1960s she has participated in three different hiking groups of friends (two female and one mixed) during different periods of her life. The last group, with which she is currently active, includes five or six women, graduates in philology. Yoanna joined it in 1999.

Voil, born 1940
Member of a youth group of speleologists and rock climbers in 1958-1960.

There are similarities among these groups, including the educational, and – largely – the social status of their members. They all have a university education and belong to different strata of the Bulgarian intelligentsia (scholars, physicians, teachers, linguists, representatives of the so-called 'technological intelligentsia', etc.)[11] Secondly, their members are all of a similar age: middle-aged

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[10] These 30 people were brought together both by their occupation with mountain hiking and their interest in music. These are families and couples of different ages, who have been connected by their employment in the institutes of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Lydia's husband is a scientist at one of the chemistry institutes of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The activities that brought them together were mountain hiking, including spending the night in a mountain chalet. Songs and dances are part of the programme of the outings. Furthermore, a carnival is organised, in most of the cases with the active involvement of Lydia, who tailors the suits for the masquerade. Besides, for the purpose of getting in close touch with nature, the friends also get together to celebrate calendar or personal holidays: New Year, anniversaries and birthday parties. Featuring on a photo taken during the common celebration of the advent of 2004, are also costumed personages: Santa Claus, the Old and the New Year and men with the caps of dwarfs on their heads. On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of a man in the group, Lydia tailored sailors' caps and shirts, a hint at the seafaring infatuations of the celebrant. Congratulatory addresses are read and the celebration is accompanied by dances, songs and guitar playing.
[11] The group of speleologists stands apart for at least two reasons. It is no longer in existence (unlike the others, which are functioning), and because during the time of its existence (1958-1960), these were young men between graduation from high school and enrolment in the university. All later graduated from the university. Some of them have passed away; others belong to the country's intellectual elite (scholars, interpreters and translators), among them several public personalities.

and a little above middle-aged (mostly between 50 and 60). Thirdly, their motivation for membership in such groups is also similar: the endeavour to keep physically fit, their commitment to the mountain and to the environment as a whole, their desire for a meaningful organisation of leisure time. It cannot be said that the idea of athletic achievement is absent but it is not leading.

It should be noted that the age of the group members and the educational characteristics of the groups are a result of the specificities of my fieldwork. University education and age around and above middle-age is largely part of the profile of those interviewed as a whole. In other words, the examples here are not necessarily representative of the actually existing age and social diversity of the overall amount of people practicing hiking in Bulgaria, but result from the focus of my original investigation.

The groups included here differ most of all in the character of their activities. This is best illustrated by the example of the groups in which Lydia takes part: one of them ('the small group' of women) practices mountaineering of the type most widespread among the citizens of Sofia; 'the big' coalition of about 30 combines hiking with the organised celebration of personal and family holidays, moreover in a very ostentatious and showy way. But this larger group is a coalition in that it comes together more rarely (several times a year) and can only to a much smaller degree establish routine practices. The other smaller yachting group is only mentioned here, because people of the same network of friends taking part in it and because the activity also involves sporting in the open air, in the natural environment. Here the difficulties in determining the limits of the units are most clearly visible (on this problem, see Wasserman and Faust 1998: 32-33).

The example focused around Lydia (but not this example alone) comes to show one of the most important specificities of the hiking groups: their flexibility and ability to restructure within a different context and under different circumstances. The ability to restructure is a key issue.

What is the leading principle in the formation of mountaineering groups? Does a certain group go out on the mountain because it is made up of friends, or do its members become friends because of their similar occupation, motivations and norms? Or, in other words, is friendship the principle of group structure, or the other way round – friendship develops as a result of the group's functioning?

Logically, both answers are possible. The interviews, however, reveal the domination of the second principle. This is not accidental, because the very activity of mountaineering groups creates a context, which largely determines their functioning (see Adams and Allan 1998). In this case the context includes the wild natural environment, which prompts at least three specific requirements on the behaviour and activity of the hikers associated with their safety. These are a certain level of physical training, good coordination in the activities of the group and solidarity based in the best case, on generalised reciprocity (Putnam 2000: 20-21), or at least on reciprocity within the scope of the group. The requirement for physical training means that one should not necessarily go into the mountain with one's best friend. This was explicitly confirmed in the interviews. Yoanna, the most passionate hiker among my informants, has never been into the mountain with her best friend, because the latter took no interest in mountaineering. This principle was also confirmed by other interviews. The observations of Norwegian ethnologist Liv Emma Thorsen are of a similar tone. In an investigation dedicated to the development of skiing as an element of female youth culture in Oslo in the 1930s, she notes the same criteria. Groups of female friends go skiing in the mountains, but 'the best' friend in the everyday context may not necessarily be among them, if her training does not correspond to that of the rest (Thorsen 1997: 59).

On the other hand, the common activity and interests and the frequent and regular communication, gradually build different forms of friendship among the groups, in which not all were initially equally familiar and close to one another. Three of the interviewed women (Lydia, Svetla and Yoanna) have varied and long hiking experience and have at least once joined already existing groups of mountaineers. This was based in all the three cases on a dyadic relationship (acquaintance) with just one member of the group. The point of inclusion into the group is presented in this way by Yoanna:

> "Yes. Me too, I secretly dreamed of getting into this group, because before that I had gone alone most of the time. First I became acquainted with one of them; we went out many times. Gradually the others began to include me, so that we went jointly on an outing. Now I go with them since five, six years and this does not preclude my inclusion in another group, my going out on my own, when the members of this group cannot go out. Often the group boils down to two persons and depends on when they can go out (…). We gather once a week, we outline together the routes we choose before setting out. For many of these routes I am the guide, because I can show them things they do not know and I have greater experience on the mountain."

It is obvious that at the point of joining the group, polyadic friendship relations did not exist. Yoanna's case illustrates well her gradual integration into the group until the moment when she occupies a leading position in it.

In the course of time two of the women (Svetla and Lydia) developed polyadic friendship relations. As I mentioned above, the women of 'the small' group of hikers of which Lydia is a member also take part in the social life of 'the big coalition'. Obviously, what connects them is not just mountaineering as an immediate activity, but also a 'pure relationship' as defined by Anthony Giddens (1991: 87-89, 91-94; also Giddens 1992: 58); in other words, the attachment established within the group goes beyond the framework of interaction in the mountain and transfers to the realm of the everyday life in the city. This can be seen clearly in the group in which Svetla is a member. The relations among the women are continued regularly in town. Three of them who are in retirement and have more time get together every week in one of the most prestigious cafes in the centre of Sofia. In other words, this part of the group confirms their social relations twice a week. When the mandatory telephone calls made during the week to discuss the next outing are added, one can get an idea about the intensive character of these social relations. Furthermore, the women also back each other in activities outside the sphere and composition of the group, such as the support that all the women have successively rendered each other in the case of the illness and hospitalisation of the husband of one of the women in the past year and a half. All visited the sick man regularly and some even took care for him according to their possibilities. There is an obvious tendency that friendship and intimacy are extended to include people, who are outside the direct group of friends – 'friends of the friends'.

This picture, however, should not be idealised. The relations established are different in character and intensity. Some of them are only in the realm of the mountains and are not transferred into the city, i.e. people invest in their activities and in the context, rather than in "the pure relationship"[12]. In other words, a so-called 'true' friendship does not develop. Yoanna describes the typology of the different types of relations, established in connection with hiking:

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[12] This differentiation is made by Allan 1998: 75.

"These are the so-called mountaineering friendships, which I primarily separate from the other friendships. These mountaineering friendships are only for hiking, the outings, but we gradually became friends with some to an extent that we begin to meet during other days. It has happened that we go to see some film, or go to drink a cup of coffee; this is a story when we become friends in town, not only up there. And I have had friends, who are only for mountaineering friendships, which does not evolve in anything else. (…) Some people go with a permanent group; they are in contact all their lives. This has not happened with me; no such strong interrelations have developed."

The quotation shows evidence of the existence of both of dyadic and polyadic types of relations in the hiking groups.

No doubt, requirements of solidarity and reciprocity are among the basic characteristics of friendship and, within the context of hiking, they acquire greater importance. These two principles have different degrees of applicability in regard to social interactions in different social arenas: a) on the mountain, which is primary context; and b) in the city, which is an extension and an after-effect of the relations engendered in mountaineering. During an outing or a journey on the mountain the requirements are prompt and urgent solidarity and mutual assistance in the actions of the members of the group. This is an imperative of practical safety considerations. The refusal of such prompt and immediate solidarity and mutual assistance will rupture the relationship. One of the interviews illustrates precisely this point: during a heavy storm on the mountain, Yoanna felt ill, but was deserted by her two girlfriends. She received help from the mountain rescue service, but her relationship with this group of friends collapsed immediately. The case is an example for a deviation from the unwritten norms of solidarity within the mountaineering groups: the whole group has to adapt (and if necessary – also change) its route and to wait for those who do not feel well. The interviews clearly illustrate the application of these norms, including the case when the person experiencing difficulty is a newcomer (i.e. he/she has not been completely accepted) and is on his/her first outing with the group.

Obviously, in terms of reciprocity, the Bulgarian groups of hikers demonstrate certain aspects of the trend outlined in scholarly literature, by which the anticipations of solidarity and reciprocity among friends are projected over the medium range perspective (see, for instance, Allan 1998: 77). This specificity can be explained by the impact of "the external environment" on the group (Homans 1951: 173-176) – in this case the mountain and the conditions on it, which are often harsh. In addition, mountaineers perform a small ritual on Mount Vitosha (as testified to in the interviews), which aims to emphasise the difference between behaviour in the city and behaviour on the mountain. Although Bulgarians do not greet each other if they are not acquainted, when on the mountain, they often do the exact opposite; complete strangers greet on meeting. In this way the mountain is not only designated as a special realm exempt from the banalities of everyday life, the mountaineers also give expression to the idea of community. In other words, the greeting of strangers is a ritual expression of general mountaineering solidarity and reciprocity.[13]

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[13] On the difference between "specific" and "generalised" reciprocity, see Putman (2000: 20-21).

The groups of hikers establish a routine scenario, in compliance with which they organise their activity, which is not surprising, since the same has been noted in observations of other kinds of groups (Homans 1951: 110-117). A mountaineering Saturday or Sunday involves getting up early and travelling to the meeting place of the group. Usually the starting point is the same and does not change. The routes for the day are decided upon before setting out. The rucksacks contain a minimum quantity of food – a sandwich, possibly some fruit and vegetables – and water. The march on the mountain itself is divided into two parts, climbing up, in the course of about two hours, to one of the chalets on Mount Vitosha, a rest for about an hour and a lunch in the chalet, and climbing down for about two hours again. This uncomplicated schedule is prompted by the pragmatic requirements of a rational distribution of the time and physical strength needed for a one-day outing. The outings on the mountain that last for more than one day are organised in another way and the long, fortnightly excursions are based on a third type of organisation. The established routine is conducive to the better coordination and cohesion in the actions of the group.

What has been presented so far makes it possible to draw some preliminary conclusions. The mountaineering friendship groups reaffirm the so-called 'homophylic hypothesis', according to which there exists a positive dependency between repeated joint actions and interactions and the feelings of rapprochement and liking that result.[14] The frequency and regularity of the interactions, the common interests and shared norms create closeness and friendship (though not generally valid and unconditional) among the mountaineers. This, generally speaking, logical conclusion can also be supplemented by the observation that the predominating principle for the structuring of the friendship groups discussed is inclusion. Paraphrasing the definition of "inclusive intimacy", formulated with respect to one specific group of women (Marks 1998: 43-71), we could claim here that the mountaineering groups are structured according to the principle of inclusive solidarity. Regardless of the fact that there are also digressions, the implicitly adopted norms are precisely along this line, which is also expressed in the capability of the groups to expand and be restructured, though not to infinity. It should be taken into consideration that the expansion and inclusion are witnessed within the frameworks of the same social environment, i.e. the interaction takes place among people of a similar social and educational status.

These principles of the functioning of the groups are, in turn, connected with another characteristic principle: the 'bridging' of the different spheres of activities and social life. Three out of the nine mountaineering groups being discussed are the result of precisely such links between the spheres of labour and leisure time. Friendship relations established at the place of work are also transferred onto the mountain during leisure time. The antithesis of friendship as a phenomenon of the private sphere versus the impersonal character of public spheres (see Silver 1989: 293; Oliker 1998: 21, 23-24; Allan 1998: 84) is marginal in the results of my fieldwork. Most of the interviews demonstrated the existence of intensive friendship relations and dense networks at the place of work under socialism and postsocialism (Benovska-Sabkova 2004: 109-128), which facilitates 'the bridging' that, in turn, extends the access to resources. I shall note that the combining of these 'bridges' with the strategy of inclusion is a positive factor in building social capital.

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[14] Homans 1951: 40-43, 110-117; see a commentary in Scott 2000: 22-26; Lin 2001: 29-40.

The Groups for Fun: action, interaction and identity

The groups, which I somewhat provisionally call 'groups for fun', are presented here not so much as the object of an independent investigation, but rather as a comparison to the mountaineering groups. Their investigation is also an incidental result of my fieldwork. The social and class characteristics of the two specific 'groups for fun' investigated here differ substantially from these of the mountaineering groups. This difference, however, offers the opportunity to trace how social, economic and status differences reflect on the structure and the functional and cultural expressions of the groups. As in the case of the mountaineers, the two groups for fun will be briefly presented before they are analysed.

'Klyafki'
This is a group of women in a composition ranging from about ten members during the winter to about twenty-five during the summer, who get together once a month on a preset date in a restaurant in Sofia. They are around and a little above middle-age between about 45 and their mid-60s. Well-to-do women, they can be defined without any hesitation as representatives of the middle class (on the rudiments of the middle class in Bulgaria, see Dainov et al. 2005). In practice this means that they have a profitable business or profession separate from and independent of the professional occupations of their husbands. The *'klyafki'* include a cosmetic surgeon, owners of a chain of shops, a construction entrepreneur, an artist, attorneys and others. The availability of more than one car and more than one dwelling in the family are elements of the outlined social profile. *'Klyafki'* is a quasi-neologism, an ironic self-description, which is associated with a distorted clumsy gait in slippers. With this appellation 'an invented tradition' has been forged. A silver and mother-of-pearl brooch, whose design was specially made on order by the women, is the group's emblem. Notwithstanding its abstract appearance, in the view of the women, the jewel is reminiscent of a hybrid shape with a female face and a snake's body. The members of the group have and wear identical pieces of the jewel-emblem. The group's primary activity is a monthly gathering in a restaurant with the objective of getting away from the routine of everyday life, having fun during their leisure time and supporting one another where they can. A fundamental ritual is the celebration of birthdays of each of the *'klyafki'*. The present given to the celebrant is invariably a gold bracelet, but the design is different every time.

'Sredari'
This is a group of nine retired men and women aged from 68 to 82 at the time of the interview. It has been in existence since 1966 and formed initially at the place of work of some of its members. The name of the group derives from *sryada* (*сряда*, the Bulgarian for Wednesday) – the day on which the group gets together every week in a small, cheap restaurant, almost always in the suburbs of Sofia. They perform popular songs accompanied by guitars and an accordion, backed up by the drinking of alcohol and eating. The apparent minimum requirement for membership is musical skill. It is not the only one, however; of no lesser importance are the personal qualities of the members such as a cheerful character, a skill to be able to ignore the hardships of daily life and maintaining the high spirits of the group. Their own ritual takes place every year in April and includes the performance of the favourite songs of all the deceased members by the side of the tomb of the founder of the group. Three of the '*sredari*' attend gatherings of another group of

singing pensioners, on another day of the week; four women of the *'sredari'* get together at home for 'a ladies' matinee', which, however, involves no drinking of alcohol.[15]

Between the *'klyafki'* and the *'sredari'* there are both similarities and differences. Both groups are informal. An obvious similarity is the place of action – the restaurant, which makes it possible to combine the social event with consumption. The latter obviously has much in common with the ritual character and indubitable integrative meaning of taking a meal together. Of greater importance, however, is the character of the friendship that integrates each of the two groups. Their members invest time and means not in the context, but in 'the pure relationship'. In other words, unlike the groups of hikers, the pragmatic aspect is absent here. The friendship and merriment are integrating elements. The emotional aspect of the friendship (especially among the *'sredari'*, who have been in touch for about three decades) is very much stronger than among the hikers. This logically finds expression in the more explicit group identity too, as exemplified in the self-naming of the groups. For the *'klyafki'* it is also emphasised in the existence of the emblem of the group in the form of a jewel. In both cases the groups have established routine practices of their own as well as rituals. The members of the two groups isolate their marital partners from their gatherings and explicitly state that in this way they avoid the supervision that their spouses would have tried to exercise on them.

The differences between them are essential. They concern most of all the economic status and social and class characteristics of the members of the two groups and, hence, also the nature of the practices, consumption, style and taste. The differences are also in the age characteristics, educational status (the *'sredari'* mostly have a secondary education, while the *'klyafki'* have university diplomas), and even in the gender characteristics. Indicative is also the choice of a restaurant. Both groups choose a small restaurant, but for the *'klyafki'* it is in the centre of Sofia and has higher prices and higher quality of food and services. The *'sredari'* get together in cheap

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[15] The *'sredari'* group and the sub-groups that stem from it need a more detailed description. At the core of the *'sredari'* group is the former amateur choir of the State Insurance Institute in Sofia (1966). Some participants of the former choir, 14 in all, started getting together to sing and play informally in addition to the formal rehearsals of the choir. The friendship group continued to get together to play and sing even after the choir of the State Insurance Institute ceased to exist. These gatherings usually take place in small cheap restaurants, where the *'sredari'* [members of the group] are known and expected by the staff. *'Sredari'* bring their own food and drinks to the restaurant from home. The members of the group are of both genders, without being family couples. Now about nine in all have remained from the initial group of 14; the rest have passed away. The 'company', as they call it, is held together by friendly feelings. At present only three members are former state employees of the State Insurance Institute, while other people have joined – 'friends of friends'. The *'sredari'* have their own 'rite of passage', and it is not easy to join the group, although it is open to new members: *"Friends of friends and the good ones remain, naturally, while the others drop out(…) Oh, no, no to those who are complaining, they are good for nothing. We do not accept such people in our company. Once or twice, they do not pass the test and they are gone. On the second or third gathering they do not know where we are. Even if they ask, we are nowhere to be found."*

Besides their own 'rite of passage', the *'sredari'* have invented also their own ritual of commemoration. In commemoration of all the members of the 'company' that had passed away, the ones still alive pay a visit to the cemetery on the first Wednesday of April. The founder of the *'sredari group'* died in that month. They get together next to his tomb; they bring along cheese pies and brandy and perform in succession all the favourite songs of their friends, who have passed away. What is obvious here is the 'contamination' of a 'traditional' with an 'invented' ritual, because singing and playing instruments in the cemetery is quite an unusual practice in Bulgaria.

Three of the *'sredari'* have joined (since 1999) the gatherings of fans and former players of the former Benkovski Football Club, founded in 1914. The gatherings of Benkovski fans take place on every other Thursday of the month and also feature music playing and feasting. The culmination of the manifestation of the football club fans is a visit on May 25 to a site near the town of Teteven, where there is a celebration commemorating the death of Georgi Benkovksi, the national hero and patron of the club.

'The ladies' matinee', which takes place less regularly on Mondays, also involves singing. It is also associated with the *'sredari'* and initially included eight women. Four of them are still alive. The gatherings take place in the house of one member of the group, who bakes cookies and cakes, while the guests bring coffee and soft drinks. There is no alcohol served.

restaurants with a more modest choice on the menu and in the service standards. They are nevertheless liked and expected by the staff, who like their musical performances.

The solidarity and reciprocity, the interactions and transactions understandably acquire different forms in the two groups. The economic and social status of the *'klyafki'* is considerably higher and exchange among them has a greater economic value and shows a definite attention to the style of communication and consumption. The poor pensioners of the *'sredari'* can afford exchanges on a fairly low level; exchanges in the course of their everyday activities (home-cooked food, which is eaten together during the gatherings on Wednesday, or is taken home, when a member of the group is ill); the exchange of services also has lower economical value. On the other hand, from the point of view of the extremely low incomes of pensioners in Bulgaria, these exchanges and services have probably a more substantial meaning and a higher moral value.

I shall deal with the *'klyafki'* in greater detail. From the point of view of network analysis, in some groups 'the event' is a factor in the investigation of the social networks (Wasserman & Faust 1998: 30). I shall analyse here an event in the social life of the *'klyafki'*. I attended a gathering in October 2004 (although I did not know any of the women beforehand) and documented the event with their knowledge and consent. This gave me an opportunity to observe the specific interactions within the group. One of its essential characteristics is the integrative strategy of communication. It finds expression, first, in getting around a common table, second, in the choice of a common menu and the placing of the food in such a way that all could take from it, and, third, in the way of conducting conversations. The latter deserves greater attention.

The participation in the gathering (eleven women attended) makes it possible to formulate the following observations. The keeping up of the conversation is accomplished through the alternation of periods of fragmented conversations in couples and triplets with periods, when the attention is focused on a common topic and conversation is followed by all. The communicative strategy of the group is to combine coordination with sufficient opportunities of flexibility and variability in the actors' behaviour. In this way cohesion is achieved without restriction of the freedom and possibility for improvisation, which are so important in informal communication.

Spontaneity of communication notwithstanding, the topics of conversation are painstakingly controlled and directed in such a way as to keep up both the integrity of the group and the egalitarian ethos of friendship. The leading goal is integration. Unifying topics for conversation are sought. Topics from the professional sphere are avoided as a whole, so that all could have equal access to the conversation and be not excluded from it. The latter could have easily happened in view of the diversity of the women's professions. On the other hand, this strategy likewise enables the isolation of discussions of problems like professional success or failure. In this way the poles of self-praise or, conversely, of denigration and self-pity are avoided. Both are antithetic to the friendship and the search for entertainment. The sphere of labour is present only peripherally, as a context for relating comic happenings, presented with self-irony, such as the breakdown of the car in congestion on the way to an important meeting with business partners.

The photos of children, grandchildren, friends, household pets, from summer holidays and travel abroad that make the round of the table are testimony of the strategy of sharing and disclosure. The thematic highlights in the conversations are the household pets: neutral, unifying and belonging completely to the private world. One of the *'klyafki'* was absent from the gathering because of the critical state of her household pet. This was a recurring subject of the conversation and the occasion for a telephone call, a sign of sympathy with her. One of the personal narratives, heard and

commented by the whole group, contained quite a few intimate elements. Its presentation in front of all demonstrated the trust and the tendency to disclosure.

The speech behaviour was indicative of the identity of the successful, educated and economically independent women of the middle class. The merriment and the intimate atmosphere were combined with emphatic moderation; no shrieking, tact and respect for each one of the interlocutresses. The exemption from the concerns of daily survival and the availability of financial resources also predetermine the desire of self-expression by way of agreeable communication (see Harrison 1998: 92-116; Oliker 1998: 18-42).

The birthdays are part of 'the schedule' of the *'klyafki'*, their October gathering included. The 50th birthday of one of them was celebrated at it. The ritual is simple, but the *'klyafki'* manage to set it apart from the rest of the time. It is 'framed' via the explicit reminiscences of its beginning, and with a short greeting speech, which one of the *'klyafki'* delivers on behalf of all of them. The presentation of the brooch – 'a tradition' of the group – is associated with animation, individual greetings and toasts, a lavish new order. The consumption is also marked by the arrival of a gigantic birthday cake, a magnified copy of the jewel – the emblem of the group, and an inscription '*Klyafki Club*'. The drinking of champagne and the group performance of *"Happy Birthday to You"* are recorded photographically. All the lavish consumption during the evening is paid for by the celebrant. Apparently, the celebrant has invested more than she has received in the exchange of 'a present for a treat for everybody'. The demonstration of generosity, however, is part of the style of the group, emphasising commitment to it and, finally, it is a means of establishing and keeping up the personal prestige.

What is taking place stimulates the relation of memories about earlier outstanding celebrations. The stories are told in the merry and quasi-ironical style preferred by the group. The common experiences have also created the common narrative of the group. Both the unique birthday cake and the stories of past birthday celebrations show the dual strategy: on the one hand of keeping up the group's own 'tradition', on the other of looking for a unique and personalised image of every birthday. The aim is to emphasise the individuality of the birthday celebrant. In other words, the group ethos is combined with consideration for the individuality of each one of the participating women.

Several communicative actions testify to the principle of expansion of the social relations outside the time and place of action of the group. The first is the invitation extended by the *'klyafki'* to me to join them (an invitation I also received from the mountaineers). No doubt, this is a sign of the openness of the group.[16] The second is the unanimous decision to attend the debut opera concert of the daughter of one of them. "*Klyafki* – rallied. We are going as one!" The subsequent preliminary arrangements regarding the purchasing of a basket of flowers for the singer indicate that style is the main concern of the *'klyafki'*. It is likewise an expression of their identity (on the care taken by middle class women in style, including that of consumption, see Harrison 1998: 93). The third action was when two of the women informed the others about the start of joint business, moreover sealed by a contract in writing. The group has provided the initial connection – before starting to attend, they did not know each other. The group friendship has also produced dyadic relations, and hence to the transformation of private relations into business ones. The three examples clearly show the inclusive strategy, as well as the functioning of the group on the principle of bridging.

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[16] The only group, from which I not only did not receive an invitation, but a categorical refusal to my request to attend a gathering of the group, was the *'sredari'*.

Friendship Groups and the Transformation of Social Relations under Socialism and Postsocialism

Without any claims to exhaustiveness of the observations, the facts presented so far show how social and class characteristics leave an imprint on the functioning of friendship groups[17]. This study cannot reflect the entire spectrum of socio-class differences in the Bulgarian society, e.g. under postsocialism, but it gives at least a partial idea about these differences. At the two poles are the '*sredari*'*,* with the lowest economic status, and the *'klyafki'*, with the highest; in-between are the groups of hikers. The economic status determines at least the possibilities of the groups to invest resources needed for their activity. The economic and the social status again dictate the nature of the consumption practices of the groups. The latter are determined by the identity of the group, but also contribute to that identity. The differences are most outspoken in the comparison between the two extremes – between the *'sredari'* and the *'klyafki'*. Obviously, the middle class women need not bring food and drinks from home to the restaurant, as is the practice of the pensioner *'sredari'*. On the other hand, the differences in the economic and social status of the presented groups make it possible to see that the formation of friendship groups in Bulgaria is possible in different social environments – from the poor pensioners to the representatives of the middle class. The different statuses concern only the form and style of the group activities, but do not essentially restrict the formation of the friendship groups.

The comparison between the two types of friendship groups testifies to the nature of the shift in the social relations in Bulgaria between the socialist and the postsocialist periods. The analysis shows evidence not only of the enhanced and significant role of friendship during the second half of the 20th century, but also of the changes taking place in the spheres of the family, kinship relations and gender. Out of the eleven groups (nine mountaineers and two 'fun groups') considered five are 'mixed' and consist of men and women; the remaining six are female groups. Only one of the groups, 'mixed' in terms of gender, features married couples. The absence of male friendship groups in the examples presented here does not mean that such groups do not exist. The participation of women, particularly when it is regular, shows that women have attained significant autonomy, at least in the making of decisions regarding the organisation of leisure time. One of the six female groups is made up exclusively of unmarried women who, at least theoretically, have more leisure time and are not restricted by family obligations.

The rest of the women have families, children and some of them grandchildren. In other words, in the organisation of leisure time, the choice is between the friendship group and spending of time in the family. This, however, does not mean a division of the social life of the spouses. The interviews show that the female members of the friendship groups maintain common social contacts jointly with their marital partners as well, i.e. meetings with family friends or with relatives of the two spouses.

By comparison, a study of groups of friends of middle class women in Great Britain shows that the relationships among women are structured by way of (the successful) overcoming of the resistance of their spouses (Harrison 1998: 96-100). A similar motif – a conflict between the female hiker and her husband, who does not hike – appears in only one of my interviews; moreover the

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[17] On class affiliation as a factor shaping the character of friendship relations, see Allan 1998: 71-91; Harrison 1998: 92-116.

conflict cropped up at the very beginning of the mountaineering activity and continued for more than twenty years. The other women are not confronted with the conflicting choice between family obligations and the investment of part of their leisure time with a friendship group (or even friendship groups). But this observation only holds true in a specific social environment and its importance should not be overestimated.

This testifies to at least two things. First, it is indicative of a considerable autonomy in the actions of the women of high educational status in an urban environment and with guaranteed economic independence. Insofar as I have no data regarding male friendship groups, I would refrain from any conclusions regarding the possible specificity of friendships among women, unlike authors like Oliker, Marks, Allan and Harrison.[18]

Secondly, conclusions can be formulated regarding the correlations between activities connected with the family and the kinship circle, and those of friendship relations as a sphere of social life. With the exception of the *'klyafki'*, most of the social actors presented here set aside one day of the week to the friendship groups. This means that no small part of the time, assigned for social contacts, is invested in the friendship groups, provided that what is discussed is the social environment of a big city and the rather educated strata of society.

Without an exception, all fifty interviews on which the present study was based, explicitly mention family and/or kinship ties. Only one of the fifty informants cannot point out friends at all. One should explore this data within the larger context of societal transformations in Bulgaria since the middle of the 20th century. The enhanced geographical and social mobility during the time of socialism and postsocialism, migration to the city, the detachment of great flows of people from the village and, most of all, the shift from agriculture as a main livelihood is changing the character of social relations. Kinship relations preserve their importance and are a substantial social and economic resource, i.e. social capital. What is also observed, however, is 'the dwindling' of their social territory with the decreasing economic function of the family and lesser need for interaction with relatives in the course of farming activities (Benovska-Sabkova 2001: 7-23).

The interviews with people born in the interwar period indicate the simultaneous operation with kinship and friendship groups and an approximate balance between them. One of these interviews presents an eloquent biographical illustration of that. Born in 1936 into the family of a half-professional musician, one woman has childhood memories of weekly gatherings of relatives in her parents' home spent in the playing of music and the singing of songs. She herself, with a musical education, is today a member of the group of the *'sredari'* and takes part in their weekly musical marathon, but she does this with friends rather than with relatives. This does not interfere with her being, in the rest of her time, the soul of a large group of family and relatives, with looking after her grandchildren and, today, with providing the daily lunch not only for her family, but also for her widowed brother-in-law. In the biographies of those born after the 1950s, the correlation between kinship and friendship is specific. This implies an enhancement of the significance of friendship relations, which under conditions of a greater mobility and in an urban environment sometimes prove to be the main source of solidarity.

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[18] These four articles are published in Adams and Allan 1998.

Conclusion

What has been stated so far is evidence of a modernisation of social relations in Bulgaria[19]. For its part, it is accompanied by the development of individualism and a life strategy called by Giddens "the reflexive project of the self" (Giddens 1991: 11-12). The clear differentiation of personal space as in the case of the 'groups for fun', or the emphatic concern for the health and physical fitness among the hikers are manifestations of this 'project'. The paradox is only all too apparent. The development of individualism is accompanied by a higher degree of inclusion in friendship groups, because it is precisely in this way that personal space is sought and the goal of relative emancipation from the bonding power of the family and the kinship circle is expressed. The analysis is evidence not only of the enhanced and significant role of friendship during the second half of the 20th century, but also of the changes taking place in the sphere of the family, kinship relations and gender. The membership and functioning of groups testify to the transformation of gender relations and to a considerable autonomy in the actions of the women of high educational status in an urban environment.

The different socio-class characteristics of the friendship groups presented here show that the informal associations function at various levels within social hierarchies in Bulgaria, both in (the almost) elitist environment and in differing segments of the non-elite strata. Though seemingly paradoxical, the friendship groups are at one and the same time both evidence of the development of individualism as a life strategy, and a means of development of personal and collective social capital. Besides their flexibility and ability to restructure, these groups (except one) are also characterised by the openness and inclusive strategy of their structuring. The only exception (the group of *'sredari'* pensioners) demonstrates that the greater emotional adherence, strong positive identity and in-group solidarity bonds could be maintained by trends of bonding and closure. The analysis here shows that due to the functioning of the friendship groups, the sphere of labour bridges the sphere of leisure time and vice versa. The interactions at the place of work became a basis for the emergence of the mountaineering group or, conversely, the contacts in 'the group for fun' give an impetus to the establishment of business relations. The structuring, following the principle of 'bridging', is one of the most important features for the building of social capital, though with the essential provision that this conclusion holds true for a social environment of specific educational and social characteristics. If we assume that civil society has to be sought in "social organisations occupying the space between the household and the state that enable people to co-ordinate their management of resources and activities" (Layton 2004: 3, 6), then the groups like those investigated here, are a step forward along these lines. This justifies optimistic expectations in future development.

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[19] Regarding the conception of the modernisation of friendship, but implemented almost a century earlier, see Oliker 1998: 18-42.

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