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# Consuming Ethnicity: Loss, Commodities, and Space in Macedonia

Rozita Dimova

The existing literature on ethnicity and nationalism in the Balkans has provided many responses to the political and economic changes in the region.<sup>1</sup> Re/definitions of ethnic and national identities and their alignment with different versions of history and memory analyzed by several anthropologists have been critical in shaping the contemporary character of the “new democracies” that have emerged since the end of the Yugoslav socialist federation.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, larger ideological contexts in which the west and the Balkans have been mutually entangled and constituted have inspired scholarly works on the “Balkans” by stressing the importance of representation and otherness and viewing it as a western construction and embodiment of the west’s negative Other.<sup>3</sup>

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1. The last fifteen years have given rise to an astonishing production of scholarly and popular literature on Yugoslavia: so-called Yugoslav (or post-Yugoslav) studies. A WorldCat expert search using “former Yugoslavia” and limited to books published in English from 1991 to 2008 yielded over 6,000 records. While some of these works only included former Yugoslavia in larger themes such as ethnic cleansing, the number limited specifically to former Yugoslavia is nonetheless still vast.

2. Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, 1996); Keith Brown, “Seeing Stars: Character and Identity in the Landscapes of Modern Macedonia,” *Antiquity* 68, no. 261 (1994): 784–96; Keith Brown, *The Past in Question: Modern Macedonia and the Uncertainties of Nation* (Princeton, 2004); Rogers Brubaker, “National Minorities, Nationalizing States and External National Homelands in the New Europe,” *Daedalus* 124 (Spring 1995): 107–32; Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, Eng., 1996); John Comaroff, “Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Politics of Difference in an Age of Revolution,” in Ed Wilmsen and Patrick MacAllister, eds., *Ethnicity, Identity and Nationalism in South Africa* (Chicago, 1994); Loring Danforth, *The Macedonian Conflict: Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World* (Princeton, 1995); and Jane K. Cowan, ed., *Macedonia: The Politics of Identity and Difference, Anthropology, Culture, and Society* (London, 2000).

3. A large body of literature by anthropologists, historians, and cultural theorists has also added an important dimension to both the primordial and instrumental approaches, namely the crucial role of representation and imagination in the mutually constitutive link between the west and the Balkans. This negative portrayal of the Balkans, which, according to Maria Todorova, emerged during the Middle Ages with the opposition between western Christendom and Ottoman Islam, was reinforced during the Cold War by an ideological and political geography that contrasted the democratic, capitalist west with the totalitarian, communist east. Either expanding on Edward Said’s concept of orientalism or arguing that Balkanism is not a subset of orientalism, scholars in this critical tradition have opened a space for reflecting on the relationship between the west and the Balkans, one that takes into account multiple factors and agents in the creation of ethnic tensions in the former Yugoslavia. See Milica Bakić-Hayden and Robert Hayden, “Orientalist Variations on the Theme ‘Balkans’: Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics,” *Slavic Review* 51, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 1–15.

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This article builds on this literature addressing issues of ethnicity, nationalism, and identity politics, which continues arguably to be the most prevalent analytical framework on the Balkans and the events following the post-1991 period. And yet, although ethnicity and ethnic difference serve as analytical lenses, the following study focuses on ethnicity and class in conjunction with each other rather than as separate categories of analysis with a special emphasis on how they are rearticulated in the postsocialist context. Instead of explaining ethnic differences, this article pays close attention to the class distinctions produced by a free market and neoliberal economy in Macedonia and explores how these economic changes have affected the interaction of ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians in Kumanovo, a small town in northern Macedonia.

By bringing class into the analysis, and by focusing on commodities and consumption practices, I also join in the conversation with the existing ethnographies that have identified consumption as central to the many contradictions of the post-Cold War realities in eastern Europe. Krisztina Fehervary's analysis of middle-class consumption practices, for instance, reveals that the idea of having "American kitchens and luxury bathrooms" actually informs the sense of "normalcy" among middle-class aspirants in Hungary who measure their own standards of living by contrasting them to "imagined western ones."<sup>4</sup> Rich Russians similarly indulge in building large villas equipped with fancy Jacuzzis, while at the same time they struggle "with the conditions of achieving meaning . . . and the intended wholeness and coherence of the objects themselves."<sup>5</sup>

I concur with those authors who argue that the concept of postsocialism offers valuable theoretical grounds for examining the logic of the post-1991 transition by generating productive discussion on the similarity between postcolonial and postsocialist studies or the on-going socialist legacy that shapes contemporary political realities.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, I also question teleological assumptions and evolutionary perspectives surrounding a particular trajectory of change, especially between the socialist and postsocialist systems.<sup>7</sup> As for the role of consumption during the socialist and postsocialist periods, one should question the view that "capitalist growth depends on consumption, in order to absorb the products it creates and generate profits upon which accumulation depends while during socialism a large proportion of the population was hindered from consuming Western goods."<sup>8</sup> Several studies have successfully argued that consumption and consumerism were also central during socialism. As Fehervary observes, not only was consumerism central to the "normal" na-

4. Krisztina Fehervary, "American Kitchens, Luxury Bathrooms, and the Search for a 'Normal' Life in Postsocialist Hungary," *Ethnos* 67, no. 3 (2002): 369–400.

5. Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism* (Ithaca, 2002), 177.

6. Katherine Verdery, "Whither Postsocialism," in C. M. Hann, ed., *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia* (London, 2002); Caroline Humphrey, "Does the Category 'Postsocialist' Still Make Sense?" in Hann, ed., *Postsocialism*.

7. Daphne Berdahl, "Introduction," in Daphne Berdahl, Matti Bunzl, and Martha Lampland, eds., *Altering States: Ethnographies of Transition in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor, 2005).

8. Verdery, "Whither Postsocialism," 19.

ture of postsocialist Hungarian life, but consumption opportunities were also critical to the restoration of the “normal” in post-1956 Hungary.<sup>9</sup> “Attempting to appease a hostile populace,” she writes, “the government prioritized improving standards of living by increasing production of consumer goods and housing in exchange for political acquiescence.”<sup>10</sup>

The importance of fashion and style in the former German Democratic Republic displayed through fashion shows, seasonal clearance sales, the textile and garment industries, and everyday consumer practices, reveal East Germany’s effort to create a communist consumer culture during the Cold War that attempted to compete with capitalism on the west’s terms and thus, unwittingly, produced consumers who ultimately tore down the Wall.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as Susan Reid and David Crowley argue, during the thaw (post-Stalin) period from the mid-1950s onwards, consumerism and moderate fashion consciousness began to be tolerated or even promoted with the intention to signify modern life during socialism.<sup>12</sup> Patrick Hyder Patterson has noted a similar occurrence in socialist Yugoslavia when Josip Broz Tito and the government, in addition to the performative dimension of “the Yugoslav socialism with a human face,” also encouraged consumerism as a way to smooth political (national) tensions in the country after 1965.<sup>13</sup> Still, as Chris Hann points out, although consumption was encouraged during the heyday of “market socialism,” “only cars, second homes or other luxury goods became permissible items of private ownership and were the objects of feverish accumulation in the decades of ‘mature socialism.’ However, the means of production, the land and most urban housing remained in collective ownership.”<sup>14</sup>

Yet none of these studies of consumption during socialism and post-socialism examines the conjunction between class and ethnicity. The novelty of my approach therefore is that I highlight the ethnic dimensions of changing patterns of consumption by the class mobility of one ethnic group, and thus combine class and consumption with notions of ethnicity.<sup>15</sup> As Daniel Miller has argued that consumption has been central in reexamining the theoretical and epistemological boundaries of anthro-

9. Fehervary, “American Kitchens,” 383.

10. Fehervary’s observations in Hungary rightly argue against drastic ruptures between the socialist and the postsocialist periods, while pointing out that during the socialist period, too, the construction of a socialist modern consumer equated western lifestyles and ways of living with “self-value and dignity” enabling “normal” family life and personhood otherwise impossible under the “abnormal” conditions of state socialism. This new standard of “middle-class fashioning” has remained central to the ongoing social, economic, and material transformation of the country. *Ibid.*, 384.

11. Judd Stitzel, *Fashioning Socialism: Clothing, Politics and Consumer Culture in East Germany* (London, 2005).

12. Susan Reid and David Crowley, eds., *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2000).

13. Patrick Hyder Patterson, “The New Class: Consumer Culture under Socialism and Unmaking of the Yugoslav Dream 1945–1991” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2001).

14. Chris Hann, “Introduction: *Postsocialism* as a Topic of Anthropological Investigation (i) Farewell to the Socialist ‘Other,’” in Hann, ed., *Postsocialism*, 17.

15. Although I am aware of the multiple definitions of class, in this analysis the term is used to indicate the purchasing power of the people involved in this research.

pology as a discipline, I also insist that the rise of ethnic and national differences (and the ensuing tensions and conflicts) in the Balkans in general, and in Macedonia in particular, need to be analyzed by stressing the rearticulation of class, ethnicity, and, as I have argued elsewhere, gender.<sup>16</sup> The process of articulating ethnicity and class, I contend, is induced by the larger neoliberal context of the post–Cold War world in which the political economy of the “free” market and privatization inform local subjectivities. The domain of consumption, therefore, offers a place from which we can understand the complex interactions of multiple actors in Macedonia and observe the various economic, performative, and symbolic significance of consumption.

### A Context of Changing Fortunes

This article is based on sixteen months of fieldwork in a small town in northern Macedonia among ethnic Albanian and ethnic Macedonian families in 1999, 2000, and 2001. The narrative consciously acknowledges my own presence as a researcher in the field and the responses that I and my interlocutors had toward each other during the research. The constant tensions I encountered throughout my fieldwork constitute a significant element of this research. As an ethnic Macedonian conducting research during the period immediately following the 1999 bombardment of Slobodan Milošević’s Yugoslavia by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, my unease infused my research with a different intensity: my own ethnic belonging constrained but also enriched my research, especially in making contacts and meeting people.<sup>17</sup> My methodological strategy to

16. Daniel Miller, *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies* (London, 1995). Miller identified the domain of consumption as one that has transformed the “nature” of anthropology as a discipline. The acceptance of consumption as a significant object for anthropological analysis does indeed mark a fundamental coming to maturity of anthropology—a final expunging of latent primitivism. *Ibid.*

I draw on recent literature in anthropology on gender transformations after 1991. For more, see Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism: A Comparative-Historical Essay* (Princeton, 2000); and Francis Pine, “Retreat to the Household: Gendered Domains in Postsocialist Poland,” in Hann, ed., *Postsocialism*. I have observed that the experience of loss among Albanians, which has affected notions of masculinity, was, ironically, partially generated by an NGO-led social movement promoting the improved integration of the Albanian ethnic minority into the larger society of post-1991 Macedonia. This NGO-led movement sought to empower Albanians by opening up opportunities in the fields of education and politics, especially for women. As a result, however, the recent presence of young Albanian college-educated women has altered the cultural fabric of the traditional Albanian family and has generated dramatic conflicts between Albanians’ desire to maintain control over women and their sexuality, while at the same time, seeking to become “modern,” educated, and equal members of post-1991 Macedonia. To preserve or protect the supposed purity of Albanian ethnicity, control over female sexuality has become a widespread concern. For more, see Rozita Dimova, “‘Modern’ Masculinities: Ethnicity, Education, and Gender in Macedonia,” *Nationalities Papers* 34, no. 3 (2006): 305–20.

17. The fact that I was studying at an American university triggered negative reactions from many Macedonians and Serbs who were enraged by the American initiative to proceed with the bombardment; at the same time, though, it opened doors and facilitated my contact with many ethnic Albanians who believed that Americans had the correct perception of the “Albanian situation” in the Balkans.

focus on interior spaces and decorations and to take them as a point of entry into the discursive reality of post-1991 Macedonia, although this required more sensitivity and longer networking, proved crucial in opening a new dimension, namely the experience of loss that underlies the views of many Macedonians toward Albanians that would otherwise be perceived as nationalist and racist.

The experience of loss I encountered during my research stems from several features that mark the new context and the circumstances in which Macedonia has been embroiled since its independence in 1991. The first feature is the loss of class privileges. During the Yugoslav federation, ethnic Macedonians constituted a disproportionate majority in a privileged “working class” who enjoyed such class advantages as a comfortable, state-sponsored lifestyle. Since 1991, not only have many of these ethnic Macedonians lost their state privileges, they have also witnessed the enrichment of ethnic Albanians whose ties to relatives abroad have enabled them to open many small and medium-sized businesses. This new wealth enjoyed by some ethnic Albanians has transformed the social and physical space between these two ethnic groups in contemporary Macedonia, engendering strong ethnic tensions.<sup>18</sup>

The second feature is the presence of commodities imported from abroad and the ability of newly wealthy Albanians to buy them, even as they remain out of reach for many Macedonians. This shift in fortunes has erased what was once a visible boundary between the two ethnic groups. When Macedonia was part of Yugoslavia, ethnic Macedonians considered themselves more “modern” than ethnic Albanians, who were then considered “backward and poor.” The current blurring of the class boundaries has affected the ethnic and cultural delineation between Albanians and Macedonians and has thus caused a reconfiguration of the social relations between the two groups. According to Macedonians, Albanians are “getting too close,” “becoming too similar,” and are, therefore, not only threatening, but also responsible for Macedonians having lost their former class privileges. By bridging the cultural gap through economic upward mobility, Albanians have reformulated, even reversed, class differences in a neoliberal context leading to the Macedonians’ loss of cultural hegemony.

The third feature is the perception held by many Macedonians that Albanians can never be loyal to Macedonia. Although most ethnic Albanians in the country are citizens of Macedonia, they cannot easily identify with the civil meaning of Macedonian-ness. On the one hand, this signifier for Albanians (and also for Macedonians) will always have an ethnic connotation. On the other, the proximity of Albania and Kosovo creates

18. Class mobility proved an initiator of major political, economic, and cultural changes that threatened the ruling classes and elites in the Balkans during Ottoman times. The Orthodox Christian merchant class in the Ottoman empire, for instance, with its access to economic capital and power, became one of the main destabilizing factors that eventually led to the weakening and fall of the empire. For more, see Traian Stoianovic, *Balkan Worlds: The First and Last Europe* (Armonk, N.Y., 1994); Michael Hechter, “Group Formation and the Cultural Division of Labor,” *American Journal of Sociology* 84, no. 2 (September 1978): 293–318; Michael Hechter, *Principles of Group Solidarity* (Berkeley, 1987).

strong familial, political, and cultural networks between Albanians living in Macedonia and their co-ethnics who live outside the country's borders. Albanians living in Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo are united by the ideology of a common language and, in many but not all cases, religion.<sup>19</sup> As one Albanian informant from Kumanovo pointed out: "We are the same nation and the same people. No one should object to the fact that we don't feel as if we are Macedonians. I don't want to be called a Macedonian Albanian. That is an offense to my Albanian heritage." Since the 2001 military conflict, though, the close connection between ethnic Albanians from Kosovo, Albania, and western Macedonia has appeared threatening to the newly independent state of Macedonia, particularly from the point of view of ethnic Macedonians who have spent decades longing for independence and believe that they have finally achieved a fragile form of self-governance. Continued denial of the legitimacy of various aspects and symbols of Macedonian identity by Bulgaria (language), Greece (name), and Serbia (church) adds to Macedonian insecurities.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to providing a brief account of the experiences of several Albanian and Macedonian households during socialism and after 1991, I draw theoretically on a combination of political-economic and semi-otic (symbolic) approaches that not only treat symbols and signs as commodities caught up in the capitalist web of production, circulation, exchange, and consumption but also consider material objects as symbolic agents with the fetishistic capacity to create feelings of loss, inadequacy, fear, and hatred. By adding Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of consumption (in which distinctions between different class segments are drawn on the basis of the commodities that people choose and buy), I explore how the larger political-economic context in contemporary Macedonia is infused with different losses and how these experiences affect everyday life in Kumanovo.<sup>21</sup> In the course of my sixteen months of fieldwork, I worked closely with ten Macedonian and eight Albanian families. I also surveyed eighty Albanian and eighty Macedonian individuals of different sexes and ages. The survey asked questions about furniture and taste preferences, although I included several general questions, such as education and quality of life. For this article, I have selected several "case studies" that, in my view, reveal widely shared experiences among many Albanians

19. In 1968 Albanian-speaking intellectuals in Yugoslavia voted to abandon the Geg-based (north Albanian) standard that had been in use since before World War II in favor of the Tosk-based (south Albanian) standard of Albanian developed there after that war. The official unification took place at the Orthographic Congress of 1972. Since that time, the slogan *një gjuhë, një komb* (one language, one nation) has been used repeatedly to emphasize transnational, ethnic Albanian unity. For more, see Victor A. Friedman, "Language Policy and Language Behavior in Macedonia: Background and Current Events," in Eran Frankel and Christina Kramer, eds., *Language Contact, Language Conflict* (New York, 1993).

20. Moreover, Macedonians have been prevented by political history from maintaining cross-border ties with co-ethnics in other states, especially Greece and, until recently, Albania.

21. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984).

and Macedonians living in Kumanovo. These case studies are widespread, although there are often exceptions: I have also encountered rich Macedonians for whom the privatization of large state factories has made it possible to accumulate enormous wealth.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, many Albanians have been affected by the hard economic situation in the country and struggle with day-to-day survival. Rich Macedonians and poor Albanians, however, appear to have been the types most often prevalent during socialism. In the new economic conditions that have prevailed since 1991, the previous division of power has been disrupted, triggering, for each group, different views of the other group's presence that I feel deserve to be analyzed and explained.

### Wealth Gone By: Macedonians Remember Yugoslavia

Tanja, an engineer and an ethnic Macedonian woman, became a close friend and important informant during my fieldwork, sharing many personal experiences from her youth and current life.<sup>23</sup> Unmarried and in her mid-thirties, she lives with her elderly parents who were state employees until they retired in 1993. Her father was an economist who held a position as an executive manager in one of the largest and most successful steel factories in Kumanovo; her mother worked at the city's largest trucking company. Soon after Tanja and her older brother were born, her parents purchased their first house, leaving the family home of Tanja's paternal grandparents where they had been living. This spacious new house had three bedrooms and was designed for young families with the two children that the socialist regime encouraged "modern" and "emancipated" families to have. In the 1960s and 1970s, the district where they lived was populated mainly with ethnic Macedonians and was emerging as a space for Macedonian representatives of the elite working class, while remaining segregated from the socialist apartment blocs occupied by the less privileged (industry or blue-collar workers and professionals).<sup>24</sup>

Albanians were concentrated in Orta Bunar ("Middle Well" [Turkish]), the oldest part of Kumanovo) and on the outskirts of town in an

22. For more on the nouveaux riche and the emergence of new elites in the Balkans, see Steven Sampson, "Beyond Transition: Rethinking Elite Configuration in the Balkans," in Hann, ed., *Postsocialism*; and Steven Sampson, "Weak States, Uncivil Societies and Thousands of NGOs: Western Democracy Export as Benevolent Colonialism in the Balkans," in Barbara Tornquist-Plewa and Sanimir Resic, eds., *The Balkans in Focus: Cultural Boundaries in Europe* (Lund, Sweden, 2003).

23. All names are pseudonyms.

24. In his remarkable analysis of communal apartments during socialism, Ivan Szelenyi argues that communal apartments in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, although initially intended for workers, became appropriated by blue-collar professionals and the educated layers of socialist society. My experience in Kumanovo while doing fieldwork research revealed that although class played an important role in structuring living practices in the communal apartments in Kumanovo, the central area was (and still is) mixed with people from different classes, and nowadays especially, ethnic backgrounds. For more, see Ivan Szelenyi, "Cities under Socialism and After," in Gregory Andrusz, Michael Harloe, and Ivan Szelenyi, eds., *Cities after Socialism: Urban and Regional Change and Conflict in Post-Socialist Societies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).

area that had been the first residential district when the town was built 250 years ago. Albanians also lived in the villages surrounding Kumanovo: Romanovce, Nikustak, Matejce, and others.<sup>25</sup> These residential divisions by class and ethnicity revealed the complex process of spatial reconfiguration resulting partly from the strategy adopted by the Yugoslav state to provide housing for “the working class.” The visible (and most likely unintended) consequence of this strategy was to sharply divide people along ethnic and class lines.<sup>26</sup>

As Tanja grew up, her father progressed in his career. After attaining a managerial position, he was appointed as an official representative of his company in Skopje and later in Belgrade. Although the family had an opportunity to accumulate enormous wealth, they did not do so. During the period of Yugoslav socialism, many people were aware of the discrepancy between the self-management ideology of a classless society and the reality of sharply pronounced class boundaries.<sup>27</sup> Tanja’s father handled his discomfort over this discrepancy by adopting a modest lifestyle. The family bought simple, 1960s furniture for their house: a couch and two small armchairs that they still have. Living simply was a matter of principle for her father: he felt he was supposed to be a model for everyone else. According to Tanja, “He carried the burden of the self-management ideology on his shoulders. He felt compelled not to contradict it, and he felt obliged to show its efficacy with his own actions.”

Nevertheless, Tanja’s family enjoyed many privileges during her childhood and youth, not only because of her father’s position, but also because her mother, although not formally high up in the transportation company, was powerful enough to have a strong influence in the firm. She told me that the Yugoslav times had been “great”; everyone had been equal and there were no differences based on ethnicity. For example, her company had employed several Albanians who were treated just like the Macedonian employees, although as she pointed out, they were not in management positions.

### Upward Mobility: A Contemporary Albanian Home

One of these Albanian employees was Ramo, the uncle of my closest Albanian informant. Ramo had worked as a mechanic for forty years in the

25. For more on the town of Kumanovo and its surroundings, see Petar Trajkovski, *Staro Kumanovo: Luge, Obicai, Nastani* (Kumanovo, 1997); Jovan Trifunoski, *Kumanovska oblast; seoska naselja i stanovništvo* (Skopje, 1974); Atanasie Urošević, *Kumanovo* (Skopje, 1949).

26. As Szelenyi has argued for Hungary and Poland, the official policy in former Yugoslavia allowed for sharp residential distinctions, not only between classes of Macedonians, but also between Macedonians and Albanians. Szelenyi, “Cities under Socialism and After.”

27. For more on class differences during Yugoslavia, see Dennison Rusinow, *The Yugoslav Experiment, 1948–1974* (Berkeley, 1977); Susan L. Woodward, *Socialist Unemployment: The Political Economy of Yugoslavia 1945–1990* (Princeton, 1995); Milovan Djilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (1957; reprint, Orlando, Fla., 1987); Patterson, “The New Class.”

same company as Tanja's mother. I visited Uncle Ramo's household in early November 2000. The district where his family lived reminded me of a labyrinth with narrow unpaved streets. The houses were hidden from the street by high walls; only their red terracotta roofs were visible behind iron gates painted green. Although it was eleven in the morning, the streets were dark—I felt as if I were in a tunnel. There were no numbers on the gates, so I asked one of the children playing in the street to show me Ramo's house. The boy pointed toward a house at the end of the street and told me that Ramo's house was the one next to the textile shop. When I knocked on the door, Elma, Ramo's daughter-in-law, opened it, smiling broadly. I was expected because my main informant and Ramo's nephew had arranged my visit the week before. The yard behind the green gate was not large, but it was obvious that someone took good care of it. Several plots were planted with roses and divided symmetrically by decorative rocks. The footpath in the yard was cement outlined with bricks.

When Elma and I entered the living room, I was greeted by Ferid (Elma's husband whom I had met earlier), his father Ramo, and his mother. Uncle Ramo shook my hand firmly. Looking around, the main items I noticed were the needlework decorations that dominated the room. Woolen handwoven covers (*jambolii*) and beautiful cross-stitched pillows adorned the L-shaped sofas, handmade lace tablecloths covered both the dining and the coffee tables, and two beautiful handmade lace curtains hung at the windows. The only decorations on the walls were two medium-size tapestries (*gobleni*) with flower motifs in richly carved gold-painted plaster frames. The flat-weave carpet on the floor had a design of pastel rectangular forms in tones of sand and peach.

We sat down around the coffee table. Elma immediately disappeared and came back shortly holding a bonbonniere with Austrian chocolates (*Mozart kugli*) and a tray with four glasses of water. "So, you analyze houses, ah?" Uncle Ramo asked me after I finished my chocolate and had a sip of water. "Well, ours is very modest. We have never had enough money to spend on decorations or expensive furniture. My wife is very skillful with needlework so she made all the nice decorations in the house. First we had a *minderlak* (bench), and then we bought a simple couch from the local furniture store, Treska.<sup>28</sup> What you see now was all bought by my son and his wife when they married. As soon as he got his job and the shop opened, they could afford to redecorate."

When I asked Uncle Ramo about his professional experience in the company, he stressed that he had not been mistreated by coworkers. "I had a very good professional life," he said. "I never had any problems with any of my colleagues. I always did my job and pulled my own weight. In forty years, however, I was never promoted. I started as a mechanic and I ended that way, unlike many Macedonians who were promoted."

When I inquired further about Uncle Ramo's experiences in the company, he told me:

28. *Minderlak* is a traditional Muslim low bench placed against the walls around a room and covered with pillows or cushions.

I really wanted my son to be employed by the company, but all they offered him was the job of conductor. Ferid didn't want to work as a bus conductor . . . and why should he, when he already had a college degree. They deliberately wanted to denigrate him, to undermine his college education. For me it was a matter of principle and pride. So I refused to allow him to be employed by my firm. It was very hard to survive with four kids. Ferid is the oldest and I am glad I was able to send him through school. But I couldn't afford that for the other sons. I have a very bad conscience. I had to send them abroad—to Vienna as migrant workers [*gastarbajteri*]. That was the only way they could help the family out. Actually, all four boys went to work there, but Ferid came back, finished college, and now looks after us.

Ferid now teaches in a high school. His three younger brothers live in Vienna where they have private businesses. They help out the family members who have remained in Kumanovo. During our conversation, it became evident that the family's financial status and the material quality of its lifestyle have improved significantly compared to the socialist period.

### The Old and the New: Narratives in Collision

Numerous interviews with ethnic Macedonians, in contrast, revealed that they considered their lifestyles during socialist times to have been much better. Moreover, since Macedonia's independence in 1991, many Macedonians have not only experienced the loss of their class privileges owing to the overall deterioration of the economy in the country and disappearance of state-sponsored, well-paying jobs, but they have also experienced downward mobility. For example, the mother of my Macedonian friend Tanja, who worked in the same firm as Ramo, retired in 1993 approximately a year after her husband, and they live poorly from one pension check to the next. They have joined the ranks of the *penzioneri*, impoverished people who have to survive on a meager monthly retirement income that averages \$300 (\$150 per person). Tanja's parents are able to survive on their pensions only by practicing stringent economic measures.<sup>29</sup> Nor is Tanja able to help her parents, as she can afford very little on the salary of \$150 a month that she receives. Tanja is not able to travel, buy books, or enjoy the freedom of living apart from her parents because she cannot afford to pay rent.

29. One of the ways to be economical was to prepare large quantities of *zimnica* or preserved food for the winter (*zima* in Macedonian means "winter"). Tanja told me that the preparation of food had always been a tradition in their family (as in many Macedonian households), though earlier had this not been related to economic problems. Her parents prepared *ajvar* (roasted and fried red peppers stored in jars), sour cabbage, eggplants, cauliflower, green tomatoes, and other vegetables. Tanja mentioned that her family, like many other households in Macedonia, has always been very supportive of natural, organic, and homemade food. Now, however, given the fear of starvation during the winter, preserving and canning food was turning into a real obsession. "We have to roast peppers, cut carrots, chop cauliflower for days. I am so sick and tired of this but it seems that for my parents this is so important. They see this as the only way to survive and eat well during the winter."

Many elderly people fear starvation and are apprehensive about the worsening economic situation in Macedonia. Without support from relatives (usually children) or some additional income, elderly people face a grim future. Confronted with additional stresses due to the country's unreliable health system, Tanja's parents—like most people in Macedonia who are in their seventies—fear for their lives.

Not only elderly people and pensioners but also those who have jobs experience financial difficulties and feel that their lifestyles have deteriorated significantly when compared to socialist times. Tanja, for instance, explained to me that her life has changed drastically over the last ten years.<sup>30</sup> The fact that she was not able to take summer vacations, or simply purchase things such as original Levi's jeans, Converse sneakers, books or music she likes makes her feel desperate and leaves her without hope for the future. These things were easily available during socialism, when she "was a girl who always wore the best brands." Her greatest wish was to "live the way young people live in the west—by themselves instead of staying with the parents even after marriage." But the possibility of moving out of her parent's house and living on her own was unrealistic given her difficult financial situation. Her desolate commentaries, full of underlying anxiety, were often interrupted by outbursts of anger and bitterness toward those she held responsible for the overall situation in Macedonia: the politicians, ethnic Albanians, and the west, which had supported Albanians in their nationalist hopes.

My conversations with Uncle Ramo, in contrast, revealed that he, unlike Tanja's parents, has few worries about basic subsistence. The pension he receives is, indeed, low and his wife has never worked, but the fact that Ferid and Elma are living with them and have a solid income from the textile shop has meant that the elderly couple will not be left alone to starve. Uncle Ramo and his wife expect that there will always be enough food to "get through the day." Furthermore, the elderly couple enjoy a feeling of security due to the fact that their sons in Austria have solid incomes and can be expected to help if need arises. The bonds between adult children and parents in Albanian households are both very strong and required by tradition. Family members who live abroad are supposed to take care of those who remain in Macedonia. Ramo's sons in Vienna have been sending him money, and they helped their brother Ferid and his wife Elma to open a shop on the ground floor of the family house. The shop sells textiles: bed covers, curtains, bed sheets, pillows, and so on. It has been doing well and Ferid used some of the profits to remodel

30. Tanja did not have any plans for the summer vacation of 2000. She did not have any savings, and her parents could not help her with expenses. She has not taken a summer vacation in years. Tanja retains precious memories of the summers she spent over ten years ago in Turkey and on the Adriatic coast in Croatia, how wonderful it had been to travel across the former Yugoslavia. But Tanja often interrupted these happy recollections of earlier travels by voicing her views on Albanians, whom she blamed for what she described as the mess that now exists in former Yugoslavia. According to her, things turned bad after the demonstrations in Kosovo in 1981—that was the real end of Yugoslavia. She blamed Albanians for the terrible economic situation—and for the "crisis" affecting young people—"because it is they [Albanians] who bring drugs and guns into the country."

the house and buy new furniture. He also planned to replace the family's old car.

### **Accounting for the Loss (or Why Macedonians Blame Albanians for Their Material Losses)**

Members of once-privileged households like Tanja's now struggle for survival, and this struggle fuels resentment and disappointment among many of the people I interviewed. The memories of the comfortable lifestyle and the social security provided by the strong Yugoslav state during socialist times are fresh and highlight people's inability to enjoy the same lifestyle now. During socialism, most state jobs were held by ethnic Macedonians, and these jobs provided the best benefits in terms of pay and social security (which included medical coverage, housing benefits, vacation, and pensions).

But the privilege of holding a state job during socialism became a major disadvantage after 1991. Many of these "public" corporations, which under the self-management ideology were officially owned by the workers, became privatized, and their new owners have adopted a different treatment of workers. Small and irregular salaries, a lack of good medical insurance or retirement benefits, and the absence of any assistance from unions in purchasing goods on credit (*odloženo plaćanje*) have become a common feature of the employment policies of once large and powerful state companies.

The political, but especially the economic, instability in the decade following the independence of Macedonia created intense distrust of the state and disappointment among most of the people belonging to the different ethnicities I interviewed. Many ethnic Albanians, however, have proved more successful than ethnic Macedonians in embracing the market economy and starting businesses on their own. Although, on the one hand, some ethnic Macedonians have prospered, and on the other, a large number of Albanians have also experienced severe poverty and struggle for basic subsistence, poor Albanians have been a common and acceptable part of the social landscape in Macedonia for a long time. The recent emergence of very visible nouveaux riches Albanians who possess expensive commodities has been the disruptive feature since 1991.<sup>31</sup> Rich Albanians are viewed as having stolen what Macedonians once used to own. The resentment created among downwardly mobile or economically stagnant Macedonians by upwardly mobile Albanians has been exacerbated by the spatial proximity of the two ethnic groups.

The interviews and survey I conducted in the fall of 2000 and winter of 2001 reveal that 75 percent of the eighty ethnic Macedonian households I polled claimed they had a far better life during the Yugoslav federation,

31. A survey conducted in 2001 by the Institute for Sociological and Political-Legal Issues in Skopje (Institut za Sociolosko i Politicko-pravni Raboti) disclosed that ethnic Albanians in western and northern Macedonia own private businesses and earn more than the employees in the public (state) or nongovernmental sector. This only corroborated the results of my own survey conducted during fieldwork research in Kumanovo.

especially during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Those years were hard for ethnic Albanians, however. Most of the people I interviewed explained that they had to send family members abroad because that was the only way for large families to support themselves.<sup>32</sup> But the financial resources that emigrant Albanians accumulated during those years changed the lifestyles not only of those living abroad, but also of family members who remained in Macedonia and received financial help from emigrant relatives. Since 1991, small- and medium-sized private businesses have been sprouting up all around Kumanovo and in western Macedonia, where Albanians are concentrated. The financial and practical aid provided by relatives living in the west has allowed ethnic Albanians in Macedonia to establish such businesses.<sup>33</sup> It has also allowed some Albanians to become rich and to display their wealth through purchasing commodities such as clothes, cars, and, notably, decorations for the interiors and exteriors of their houses.

Uncle Ramo's house illustrates these changes. Along with the traditional handmade decorations made by his wife, the house now has brand-new furniture and electronics. Ramo's family never received (or applied for) an apartment in one of the many socialist-bloc buildings that were the only accommodations open to mechanics. He had four children and the apartments offered by his firm had only one bedroom. "I couldn't get a house through the firm," he told me, "only maybe a tiny apartment, but what would I have done with it when there were so many of us?" So the family built a house in the Orta Bunar district, near the town's only surviving mosque. When first built, the house had only two spacious bedrooms on the top floor, but Uncle Ramo's son Ferid has since converted this floor into a three-bedroom apartment. Ferid and his wife Elma have also refurnished the downstairs.

The living room where we had our conversation now has a *košnik* (an L-shaped sofa with seating for eight), a nice *komoda* (a decorative, carved wooden chest placed along a wall in the center of the living room) with

32. Elsewhere I analyze the role of migration within Yugoslavia, which is central to understanding contemporary class transformation among Albanians and Macedonians. The Yugoslav government encouraged economic migrations in several different waves. The first wave, until the mid-1960s, involved primarily skilled workers from Croatia and Serbia. In the period from 1965 until the early 1970s, the government staged an elaborate economic plan to assist the less-developed areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia, thus including large Albanian populations from rural areas. Rozita Dimova, "Yugoslav Illusions: Migrations, Class and Ethnic Conflict in Macedonia," *Max Planck Working Paper Series*, no. 94 (2007): 1–14.

33. Similar processes took place in postwar Europe when impoverished people from southern European countries such as Greece, Portugal, and southern Italy migrated to northern Europe. The remittances of the migrants affected the living standards of the relatives who remained at home. For more on this, see Alessandra Venturini, *Postwar Migration Patterns in Southern Europe, 1950–2000: An Economic Analysis* (Cambridge, Eng., 2004). At present, similar trends are taking place among migrants in the United States and western Europe who send remittances to the Caribbean, Africa, or Central and South America. For more, see Paul Stoller, *Money Has No Smell: The Africanization of New York City* (Chicago, 2002); Nina Glick-Schiller and Georges Eugene Fouron, *Georges Woke Up Laughing: Long Distance Nationalism and the Search for Home* (Durham, 2001).

a TV and VCR on it, and a wooden cabinet with a hi-fi stereo. The upper floor, where Ramo's son, his wife, and their children live, was decorated in accordance with the daughter-in-law's taste. Elma told me that ever since she was "brought into the household," they had had a TV, a VCR, and a hi-fi in the room, so that she and her husband could enjoy privacy and be alone. Several years ago, Ferid's brothers who live in Vienna brought a Nintendo computer game and a laptop for Ferid and Elma's children, which they proudly showed me.

The material items owned by some Albanians accentuate the feeling of loss experienced by many Macedonians who are not able to redecorate their homes or to purchase new electronic items. Many of them made their last big purchases in the years immediately preceding the dissolution of the Yugoslav federation, when the option of buying on credit still existed. This reversal of shopping capacity has been a major factor leading many Macedonians to blame Albanians for their loss of class privileges.

The symbolic power of the commodities owned by some Albanians became even more visible owing to spatial reconfigurations in the town of Kumanovo. In recent years, many Albanians have moved into areas previously populated only by Macedonians or Serbs. These districts, consisting primarily of apartment blocs, were built during socialism for the numerous workers in the well-developed industries of Kumanovo. As Uncle Ramo explained, not many Albanians were able to live in these apartments given their large families. But Albanian families have been changing, due to the fact that many educated young women no longer want to move into and become part of their husband's extended families, preferring instead to seek a separate apartment. As a result, many young Albanian families have been seeking housing in areas many Macedonians previously considered as theirs. These changes have brought Albanians and Macedonians closer together in the sense that they now share residential spaces instead of sharing only such public spaces as the workplace, the market, or the town's central shopping district. Recently, as many Macedonians and Albanians have become next-door neighbors, both have also gained new insights into each other's living and consumption practices.

### **Semiotics of Space: "Too Close, Too Dangerous"**

I met Lela, an ethnic Macedonian woman, through Tanja. They have been close friends for fifteen years. A medical doctor who works in the local hospital, Lela is also a single mother of three. Her home is a small, one-bedroom apartment in one of the oldest socialist buildings in Kumanovo, on the main square. Lela obtained her apartment through her ex-husband who was working for the military. When I asked if she would be willing to show me the apartment, she was excited. "I love my place," she said. "It is tiny, packed, and messy, but I adore it."

I went to visit Lela on a Friday afternoon in mid-August 2000. When entering her building, I experienced a strong sense of oppression in the smelly main entrance hall, with its stained walls and dirty cement floor.

The oppressive feeling turned into real panic when I entered the elevator, which had not been maintained for a long time. I experienced claustrophobic terror as the elevator made loud creaking noises and shook horribly. I felt that my journey to visit Lela took me through different worlds, from the busy, crowded square full of light and people, through the dark, smelly, and frightening entrance hallway into the noisy shaking elevator, until, finally, I arrived at Lela's apartment that still smelled of fresh paint. The apartment was small, but I immediately noticed how she had indicated her attachment to it through the furniture and the decorative details. There were only a few pieces of furniture: a futon with a metal frame, a coffee table, one armchair, and two *komodi* similar to those popular in socialist Russia and described by Svetlana Boym.<sup>34</sup> I was surprised to see them in black, though. Although I saw the same komoda in many of the households I visited, only at Lela's place did I see them in black.<sup>35</sup> Atop one of the komoda was a mirror in a metal frame, and on it were several Indian copper pitchers, figurines of Buddha, elephants, and so on. On the other komoda were several tiny icons of orthodox saints, along with three miniature frames displaying pictures of her children.

In our lengthy conversation, Lela reiterated that she truly adored her apartment. Here, for the first time, she felt really free. After her traumatic divorce, she found peace in her 45 square meters. Even though it was small, she was happy there. She explained that once her children were on their own, it would be a perfect place for her. As a result, she had little to say in answer to my questions concerning the kind of place she would like to have or how she would decorate it. She liked her apartment the way it was, and she did not seem to mind that she had no money for redecoration. "That simply is not a big deal for me," she said. "I paint the place every summer, though. It doesn't cost me much, I can do it myself, and afterwards I feel as if I accomplished a major redecoration."

As the two of us were chatting and sipping strong Turkish coffee, there was a sudden noise and the sound of footsteps from the floor above. The noise was so loud that it was hard to maintain a conversation. Lela explained that the sounds were made by her new neighbors—an Albanian couple with four small children who had moved into the building a year ago. Lela became agitated when she started to describe how loud the children were, how cramped their place was, and how they used their balcony to make pita dough and filo pastries and then washed the baking trays on the balcony in buckets. According to Lela, Albanians did not mind living in such crowded conditions. Lela assured me that she did not hate Albanians but was instead afraid for the future. Because of their fast rate of reproduction, she said, soon there would be more Albanians than "us."

34. Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994).

35. As in Russia, the komoda symbolizes an urban (bourgeois) commodity in Macedonia. The fact that in Lela's apartment they were made not from dark but from black wood symbolized modernity, a way to part from the classical style marked by dark-brown, wooden items. For more discussion on the symbolic role of the komoda and other furniture in the Soviet Union, see *ibid.*, and Victor Buchli, *An Archeology of Socialism* (Oxford, 1999).

With fear in her eyes, Lela described her concern that she would lose her apartment, her town, and her country.

Our subsequent conversation was dominated by Lela's description of the large number of Albanians who had moved into the building over the last ten years. In the mid-1980s, when Lela first moved into the building, only one Albanian family was living on the second floor. Now there were almost as many Albanian families in the building as Macedonian ones. From all my interviews, it was obvious that Kumanovo was experiencing extensive movement by its residents, especially into the socialist apartment buildings in the central area of Kumanovo that had attracted many younger people from different ethnicities. Before 1991, most Albanians had lived in houses in the central district hidden behind the socialist blocs, but "now they are all over the place." Lela pointed out that quite a few of the families were young with "emancipated" working mothers who took their children to kindergarten in the morning. She described these families as "normal—just like us."

Many Macedonians that I encountered criticized their Albanian neighbors' hygienic practices. I often heard ethnic Macedonians talk about Albanians' "inability" to live in a shared space with other people or to comply with habitation rules in an apartment building because of "their backwardness and the influence of Islam that imprisons people behind high walls." Lela's views of her Albanian neighbors differed somewhat from these stereotypes. She described her young Albanian neighbors as "emancipated and civilized" people who could not be distinguished from Macedonians. But she also perceived the presence of Albanians in the building as threatening. Although she loved her apartment when I first visited her in 2000, by 2004 she was talking about moving away from the building, Kumanovo, and Macedonia altogether. Lela obtained a collection of prospects and printouts about the possibilities for migration to New Zealand, South Africa, and Iceland. During my last visit in the summer of 2004, she asked me to help her fill out an application form for migrating to Manitoba, Canada. Although she was concerned about the living conditions in Manitoba, she constantly repeated that "anything is better than here—there is no life with them, Albanians." I observed that Lela was upset not only by having so many Albanian neighbors in her building but also by the fact that the availability of imported commodities has meant that both ethnicities are able to consume similar items, erasing what was once a visible difference between Albanians and Macedonians. Ethnic Macedonians who once experienced their superiority to Albanians through the possession of "better" material items are suffering from a deep sense of loss and inadequacy. Their loss is both visibly real and materially actualized. Due to growing wealth, some ethnic Albanians are now able to purchase and own commodities and material objects coveted by ethnic Macedonians who have lost both class advantages and purchasing power.<sup>36</sup>

36. Lela's Albanian neighbors, for example, had luxurious cars; her next-door Albanian neighbor drove a BMW and her upstairs neighbor drove an Opel Astra. Indeed, one

### **Commodities Exposed**

In the course of my fieldwork, I observed the power of commodities to change people's social perceptions. Previously accepted views of Albanians as impoverished and less "civilized" than Macedonians, due to their lack of a sense of style and fashion, were fading away as Albanians were coming to be seen as wealthy and able to purchase commodities unavailable to impoverished Macedonians. Some Albanians now act more like some Macedonians, thus diminishing the social distance between "them" and "us." And as Albanians themselves begin to think about how the commodities they buy make them more like some Macedonians—they also confront the fear this engenders in ethnic Macedonians.

Luan is a wealthy Albanian who owns three shops that sell tractor parts. His brother, who was living in Belgium, helped him start his business by giving him a loan and by introducing him to several producers from western Europe. Later, relatives from Turkey helped Luan to expand his import business. In time, he started importing goods from Greece, Bulgaria, Russia, and Ukraine as well. Within seven years, his business had grown to become one of the leading tractor businesses, not only in Kumanovo, but in the entire country. The stores were patronized by ethnic Macedonians, Roma, Turks, and Serbs, as well as Albanians, precisely because they offered the best range of choices of quality goods. The rural areas surrounding Kumanovo are heavily agricultural. As a result, Luan's business was flourishing. With two stores in Kumanovo, as well as one in Skopje, his family was a leading representative of the *nouveaux riches* in town.

When I interviewed him, Luan was very busy with the preparations for his daughter Mersiha's wedding. Our entire conversation focused on the upcoming event. I immediately sensed his investment in the prepa-

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of the main things Lela missed and craved was a car. After she had to sell her old Peugeot 205 a few years ago because she needed money to support her family, she could not afford a new car. Her salary from the hospital where she was a medical doctor was 18,000 Denari (\$250) per month. Her ex-husband's monthly alimony was \$50. She received some financial help from her mother who would buy and cook food for the children while Lela was at work, but nothing more. Lela, like Tanja, told me wonderful stories of the summer vacations she and Tanja had taken in the 1980s. She remembered the joy of having had a car at 20, the pleasure of shopping for new clothes in Greece or Belgrade, and the excitement of going skiing in Slovenia or Bulgaria. The commodities owned by her neighbors made Lela feel like an imperfect mother and a failure in her life. Sharing the building with Albanians who seemed richer and appeared to own more expensive commodities triggered feelings of loss, envy, and inadequacy, while at the same time giving her a reason to feel superior to her neighbors. Despite their economic wealth, she felt, these Albanians were and would remain backward and on a "lower level of civilization" than she (for more on this see Sampson, "Beyond Transition"). The tension between economic and symbolic capital became evident among Macedonians like Lela who had lost their earlier lifestyle. Lela drew on her memories of the past, which were framed in terms of a cosmopolitan lifestyle, travel, education, openness, and freedom. She viewed her rich Albanian neighbors as less civilized and as spiritually poor because "money cannot buy spirit." Yet the fact that Albanians such as these have been able to consume and display expensive commodities like clothes, cars, mobile phones, jewelry, and so on has become a disturbing feature for many Macedonians, as indicated by Lela's frequent comments and her detailed descriptions of the items belonging to her Albanian neighbors.

rations, especially his pride in providing a rich dowry for his daughter. He had purchased furniture for her bedroom from the most fashionable furniture store in Kumanovo, where most of the pieces were imported from Turkey or Saudi Arabia and reflected a trendy neo-baroque style. This type of furniture is usually copied from the Biedermeier or Louis XVI styles. The most popular living room set is called *Barok* (just like the factory) and consists of a love seat, armchairs, and the inevitable *košnik*. This style of furniture is large, with richly colored wood (dark-brown, white, or gold) and vibrant textiles (pink, green, or red brocade or velvet with flower designs). Most owners of the fancy furniture stores are ethnic Albanians who started their businesses with help from relatives who live abroad. Eleven out of the thirteen Albanian furniture retailers whom I interviewed started their businesses that way.

During the course of my fieldwork, Luan's daughter Mersiha and her fiancé became some of my closest Albanian acquaintances. In the days preceding the wedding, I witnessed Mersiha's extremely rich dowry, which was just as her father had described.<sup>37</sup> Mersiha's fiancé, Adnan, was from a much poorer family, one that could not afford to redecorate the house for the new couple. But Adnan did manage to find alternative ways to buy new furniture at large discounts. With assistance from his future father-in-law, Adnan bought two huge *košnici* that could each seat 16–18 people for the living room (*salon*) and the family room. He also bought a new wooden dining table and chairs for the living room, new carpets, new *komodi*, a new stove for the kitchen, and other items. In my conversations with Adnan, he often mentioned that he wished he could afford to redecorate his house without financial assistance from Mersiha's father.

Adnan's mother also told me that so many changes had taken place that she could not recognize her own house; it was as if it were another house. Despite her concern that Mersiha's father paid for much of the redecoration, she approved of the young couple's intention to change the living conditions in the entire house. "It is okay though," she told me, "if Mersiha and Adnan redecorate, then they want to feel at home and remain here."<sup>38</sup>

37. Mersiha was bringing many new items into her future husband's house, such as a new washing machine, a new dishwasher, a new vacuum cleaner, hundreds of pieces of needlework (tablecloths, pillowcases, bed sheets, blankets, duvet covers), porcelain pots for the kitchen, several sets of crystal glasses in different shapes, tapestries, and a ceramic wall clock with Quranic scripture on it. (The personal wardrobe her father bought for her included 22 pairs of shoes in different colors with matching handbags, several dozen new dresses, and more.)

38. Because domestically manufactured furniture is significantly cheaper and therefore more affordable than furniture manufactured abroad, people are able to use the origin of a family's furniture as a basis for assessing their economic position. Mersiha's father, for example, told me several times that he could have bought the same type of furniture for one-third the price if it had been domestically manufactured. But since his daughter's furniture was from places like Saudi Arabia and Italy, it cost \$8,000. He was doubly proud of the fact that he bought the furniture from a store in Kumanovo rather than from one in Skopje. Now everyone in town would know that he had bought the furniture that had been displayed in the window of the store for a long time—furniture that had figured in the dreams of many young couples. Local knowledge of who bought what enhanced the value

Adnan's mother had had a less than positive experience with the marriage of Adnan's older brother, whose wife had refused to remain in the extended family household. She was thus understandably pleased that her new daughter-in-law wanted to dominate space, not only in the couple's private room, but also in the other common areas of the house, with objects and commodities from her dowry. The older woman took the younger woman's actions as a positive sign of the bride's intention to be part of the family. Nonetheless, Adnan and his mother were concerned about how the bride's wealthier background would play out in the household hierarchy and whether the bride would behave in an inappropriately superior manner.

During my visit with Mersiha, she pointed out that one of her father's colleagues, a Macedonian lawyer in charge of the legal aspects of her father's business, had chosen the same bedroom furniture for his daughter's dowry. Mersiha's father has many ethnic Macedonian friends and she pointed out to me several times that although she, herself, prefers styles with Arabic and Muslim motifs, her family often buys things that are similar to those bought by their Macedonian friends. "What is beautiful is beautiful for Macedonians and Albanians. It is a matter of taste, not a matter of one's ethnicity. There are Albanians now who have sophisticated tastes just like Macedonians. There isn't much difference any more. The Albanians are not what they used to be—without any taste."

Adnan and Mersiha's wedding banquet was held in the recently renovated hall of one of Kumanovo's elite restaurants. The restaurant was popular among rich Albanians because the recently appointed manager was an ethnic Albanian. On the evening of the banquet I was approached by several of Adnan and Mersiha's relatives and friends who asked me how I liked the wedding. They wanted to know if it was very different from a Macedonian one. This was the first time that I had ever attended an Albanian wedding. It is true that the wedding banquet was similar to most of the Macedonian ones I have attended; there was loud music and a similar dancing style. In fact, several times during the dinner, one of the waiters, who was an ethnic Macedonian, rolled his eyes at me as if to express compassion and understanding. Toward the end of the evening, while serving dessert, he whispered in my ear: "Nice wedding, isn't it? Albanians are not what they used to be. Now their weddings are just like ours." The

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of buying furniture from Kumanovo. Since Kumanovo is a relatively small town, gossip, rumors, and news circulate with amazing speed. Mersiha told me that, by the time the truck with the furniture arrived in front of Adnan's house, several of their friends had already arrived to see whether it was true that Mersiha had received the expensive furniture as her dowry. Most of the furniture from Mersiha's dowry was purchased in Kumanovo. Although Kumanovo's proximity to Skopje (20 miles) has inspired many Kumanovans to purchase big-ticket items in Skopje where they find a greater selection, the town of Kumanovo has emerged as a major center for furniture stores. At the time of my fieldwork, there were more than fifteen furniture stores. Before 1991 there were only a few state stores (*državni prodavnici*), none of which offered the possibility of purchasing imported furniture. The styles were also limited. Since 1991, however, the stores have displayed an impressive variety of furniture. Owing to imports from Italy, Austria, Slovenia, Serbia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other places, people have many choices when selecting furniture.

waiter's remark, I realized, was both a perception and evidence of social separation. In fact, Albanian and Macedonian weddings have been remarkably similar for centuries—part of a common heritage of shared cultural space. The view that Macedonians and Albanians are so different from each other is a perception constructed and disseminated during the socialist period due to a lack of contact between these ethnicities and the social isolation of ethnic Albanians.

A few months after the wedding, a friend from Skopje, my hometown, came to visit me in Kumanovo. I invited Adnan and Mersiha and her cousin to join us in the local café, one of the most popular places in Kumanovo for ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians to go out together. My friend, an ethnic Macedonian and an architect, spent most of the evening in deep conversation with Orhan, Mersiha's cousin, despite the unbearably loud music. Later that evening as we were walking back to the apartment where I was staying in Kumanovo, she told me: "These Albanians are really nice. Mersiha and Adnan are a very nice couple—very modern. But Orhan impressed me so much—he is so knowledgeable about philosophy and literature. We were talking about death and the afterlife. Wow, he is so well read. And he dresses so well. You could not tell that he is an Albanian at all." But then, as she was taking off her make-up with a cotton ball in front of the mirror in the bathroom, she shouted to me while I was unfolding the living room sofa. "But don't get fooled, my dear. Albanians like these are the most dangerous ones—you cannot recognize them. They are so similar and therefore so much sneakier. These are the ones we should fear and not be impressed by."

Throughout my fieldwork I heard numerous statements concerning the fear Albanians evoke in many Macedonians.<sup>39</sup> Some of these statements were general without any reference to concrete people or situations; these were usually connected to fear of an "Albanian conquest" and "losing the country." Those who live in ethnically mixed districts would often use negative attributes to describe Albanians in general, whereas the concrete neighbors with whom they had frequent contacts were viewed as "exceptions": "They are not like most of the Albanians . . . they are different." Such contradictions were also apparent in Lela's view: she described her neighbors as "normal"—just like us," whereas her view of Albanians in general was informed by a vague fear rooted in detached perceptions of Albanians *en masse*.<sup>40</sup>

I situated my friend's comment in a similar explanatory framework,

39. "There is no way that Albanians can learn to share the country and live in a civilized manner. Their mentality has been oppressed for too long," Ana, 27 years, Kumanovo. "We will never become a member of the EU with the Albanians. They are so primitive and Europe knows that they don't change," Kiril, 49 years, Kumanovo. "You give them a finger, and they want to take the whole arm, with a piece of your back too. There is no way that we can live peacefully with them [Albanians]. They might have changed the way they look and appear modern, but what is in their heads will never change," Svetlana, 53 years, Skopje. "Their looks are so misleading—one could assume that they [Albanians] are part of a modern world. But there is no way they would ever change," Riste, 31 years, Kumanovo.

40. I designate this fear as "phantasmatic" in a Lacanian sense—as nonrealistic and yet constitutive of reality.

although my initial reaction to her comment was impulsive: I was angry at what I interpreted as a racist comment directed at people I had grown to like and respect during my research. However, as I mentioned, in time I realized that her comment was a genuine reaction that reflected the attitude of many ethnic Macedonians whose moral integrity I would not question. Yet, I could not comprehend the irrational fear or rage that many Macedonians had when talking about Albanians. The fact that a large number of Albanians are “modernized and dressed better than us so you cannot recognize that they are Albanians” reveals the dimension of “otherness” that Macedonians draw on to explain the existence of Albanians who are visually similar and hard to distinguish from “us.” Such Albanians neither hide their Albanian identity nor deny their religious affiliation. During socialism, in contrast, “successful” (socially visible) Albanians were most often party members, which inevitably meant that, like Macedonian party members, they had to be officially atheists. It also meant that they looked up to Macedonian citizens as the models for what a “successful” (and modern) member of society should be. Nowadays, however, Mersiha and her family are financially more successful than many Macedonians who once enjoyed financial privileges during socialism. On the one hand, Mersiha is proud that she can own the same commodities as rich Macedonians, such as her father’s attorney. On the other hand, however, she constantly reminded me that she is Albanian. She is proud of the fact that her grandfather was a *hodja* (a Muslim cleric) and that her entire family is religious.

If we are to understand the social changes in post-1991 Macedonia, we need to examine the changes in wealth acquisition, for the link between consumption and ethnicity provides a central element in this shift. The profound feelings of loss of class and ethnic privileges experienced by some ethnic Macedonians in relation to ethnic Albanians provides a context for the seemingly nationalist and racist views that many Macedonians have toward Albanians. Although these prejudices existed before, they have now acquired a new dimension as the Albanians have improved their socioeconomic status relative to the Macedonians.

In addition to the importance of commodities in the construction of ethnic identity, class, ethnicity, and altered perceptions are also linked by spatial reconfigurations. Bourdieu argues that social space shapes how different groups interact with one another and that access to capital is the most important feature determining which group dictates the rules of the game. The interplay between symbolic and economic capital creates the space where different classes and, as is the case in Kumanovo, ethnic groups, conceptualize each other’s presence. The urban space of the town of Kumanovo has indeed contested and reconstructed ethnic and class identities. The Marxist philosopher of space, Henri Lefebvre analyzed urban space as a social system produced through the primacy of economic relations.<sup>41</sup> For Lefebvre, the inhabitants of a city have a right to

41. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991).

contest this tendency, a “right to the city” itself.<sup>42</sup> Michel de Certeau also emphasized the “user” of space, describing people’s everyday practices (including cultural productions) that appropriate spaces to ends other than those for which they were intended.<sup>43</sup> Keith Brown proposes that urban spaces affect the ways anthropologists (and other social scientists) do their fieldwork and research and argues that urban studies could thus push the “disciplinary boundaries for inspiration and dialogue.”<sup>44</sup>

My analysis of spaces in the town of Kumanovo, as well as in the Republic of Macedonia, which has a bounded and fixed territory with a name (although still disputed by Greece) and a particular historical narrative of origin, has corroborated these arguments: since 1991, Kumanovo’s and Macedonia’s inhabitants have been radically contesting different spaces. During socialism the urban space of the town seemed more stable and fixed, although, as one can see from Gregory Andrusz and Victor Buchli’s analyses of the USSR and Mark Pittaway’s account of Hungary, socialist high-rises and private houses alike were sites of individual agency for the people inhabiting these dwellings.<sup>45</sup>

What my ethnographic examples demonstrate is that some ethnic Albanians have more access to both economic and symbolic capital than some ethnic Macedonians. Members of once-privileged Macedonian households, such as those of Tanja and Lela, now struggle for survival and often blame Albanians for their economic impoverishment. At the same time, some ethnic Albanians articulate their social mobility in terms of “being modern” and “having good taste” “just like our Macedonian colleagues,” underscoring the “social mimicry” of their performance.<sup>46</sup>

To explain how Macedonians and Albanians make sense of their increasing visual similarities and diminishing differences, the notion of social proximity is useful.<sup>47</sup> Distinguishing a Macedonian from an Albanian was, relatively, easy during socialism. According to one Macedonian interviewed during my research, “then Albanians could be easily recognized from far away—their clothes, lack of style, their skin color, their body postures were so different from ours.” Although these stereotypes were not valid even then, many of my Macedonian informants believe that only in

42. Ibid.

43. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1974; Berkeley, 1984).

44. Keith Brown, “The Knowable City: Interpretation, Social Science, Activism,” *Ethnologia Balkanica* 9 (2005): 36.

45. Gregory Andrusz, *Housing and Urban Development in the USSR* (London, 1984); Victor Buchli, *An Archaeology of Socialism* (Oxford, 2000); Mark Pittaway, “The Reproduction of Hierarchy: Skill, Working-Class Culture and the State in Early Socialist Hungary,” *Journal of Modern History* 74, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 737–69.

46. Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London, 1990). To describe how ruling groups in former colonies “imitate” their colonizers, Bhabha used the concept of “social mimicry” to explain relationships among different segments of the colonized in colonial contexts. This concept can also help us understand the practices and rhetoric adopted by upwardly mobile ethnic Albanians in Macedonia who mimic the “civilized” and “modern” qualifications formerly exclusively the characteristic of ethnic Macedonians.

47. For more extensive theoretical discussion on social proximity, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago, 2002); Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do* (London, 1991).

recent times have these differences been disappearing, making it harder to recognize who is who. My friend's reaction to the appearance of Adnan and Mersiha, who could not be recognized as Albanians, reveals how the disappearance of the differences that distinguish "them" from "us" creates fear, as evidenced by her comment: "Albanians like these are the most dangerous ones—you cannot recognize them. They are so similar and therefore so much sneakier. These are the ones we should fear and not be impressed by." Her fear is palpable, although she herself could not articulate what one should be afraid of.

These new shifts in wealth and social status, along with the new political situation after 1991, when Macedonia became independent, have disrupted the balance of power between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians in Kumanovo. The loss of class privileges experienced by many ethnic Macedonians has become visible through the growing proximity and similarity of lifestyles between the two ethnic groups, resulting in pronounced nationalistic (anti-Albanian) views.

Changes in the political economy of Macedonia have influenced the symbolic space that grounds and gives meaning to ethnic identities which, since 1991, have been redivided by class. The presence of the vast array of commodities has fueled this realignment of class and ethnicity. And the presence of Albanians who are "just like us" has created fear among ethnic Macedonians, for this shift has threatened the privileged position that Macedonians were accustomed to enjoying vis-à-vis Albanians. As a result, one of the main ways in which ethnic Macedonians make sense of the changes is to explain the loss of their economic privileges and the decline in their previously comfortable lifestyles by resenting and blaming Albanians. Evidently, for some ethnic Macedonians, the most effective way to rationalize their loss is through criticizing the Albanian's gain.