

THE BASEMENT OF SOCIALISM

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Abstract

The socialist everyday life already has multiple interpretations and emphases. This paper focuses on the time of cohabitation in socialist dorms (prefabricated blocks of flats). Occupants construct living worlds and relationships that are built upon sympathy, benefits, and seniority. While away from their jobs, occupants do not maintain contact with relatives, but rather with colleagues, thereby reasserting the values of Modernity. This study places special emphasis on the basement as a male space for the „leisure time“ with no restrictions or prohibitions, in which an active role is played by the Basement-Tavern and the Basement-Museum.

Keywords: *socialist material culture, everyday life, housing culture*

The studies on the socialist everyday life already contain a large number of topics (Колева 2007; Брунбауер 2010; Ivanova 2014). The present text focuses upon the time of cohabitation within one specific type of socialist accommodation dormitory – the prefabricated blocks of flats. It is based on observations in different towns in Bulgaria, as well as on a research¹, conducted in 2012 in Rousse, a town on the Danube River, a district centre in the Nord-East Bulgaria. A special focus of interest was the everyday life and housing culture in five residential blocks of flats, which bear the names of capitals of socialist states – “Moscow”, “Prague”, “Bratislava”, “Warsaw” and “Sofia”, constructed in the middle of the 1970s. Some of their residents have received them as “departmental” housings – property of the

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¹ The research was also implemented with the participation of 12 students of the University of Rousse, to which I was a scientific mentor. By using the method of the structured interview, a total number of 45 interviews were collected.

factory that has invested in the construction. Others have received them as being “in utter need”, and a small part of them was housed in the blocks as compensation for an expropriation of previous property. Upon their accommodation, the newcomers were at a similar age, which is a precondition for establishing friendships in time. Although at a distance from their workplaces, the ones living in blocks of flats maintained contacts mainly with colleagues, and not with relatives, thus affirming the values of Modernity.

The residents of the blocks with names of socialist capitals have several common characteristics, which are also confirmed by previous observations. The life of the separate entrances is gradually distinguished because of the continuing common cohabitation of its residents. This is also contributed by the institution of the “home councils” under the leadership of the “house manager”, who is engaged with looking after the address registration and to share it as an obligation with the organs of the “people’s militia”. The collective living requires from the residents taking part in seasonal and “jubilee” initiatives for hygiene (“Lenin’s Saturday”), and improvement – constructing small parks, alcoves and places for rest. The expenses for the elevator, for common parts of the block and repair works are occasions for growing tension, which always calms down in a profit of the common interest. Although being residents of an outlying neighborhood in Rousse, for the people living in the mentioned new blocks the concept for center and periphery is not relevant – many of them don’t know the town and don’t have any idea were the ethnically different people live – Armenians, Jews, Turks, Gypsies, or who are “the old citizens of Rousse”. It probably must admit that the social engineering of socialism has work properly, but it is quite possible a realization of the values of Modernity to be seen as well. The use of anonymity is typical for that time – as a counter to the knowledge for “the other” in the pre-Modern settlements, where every inhabitant is a relative or a neighbor. The leisure time is another certain value of this period, where excursions and vacations, picnics in nature, in front of or inside the block – are often found topoi in the narratives. Today, around 70% of the residents are the same since the building of the blocks of flats, they are pensioners and this gives them a distance in time, for which they are willing to talk about today. The change is also marked within the structure of the narratives – the end of socialism comes with the change of the housing for some of the residents, and this leads to falling apart of the companies, that led “party” life in the blocks of flats.

Modernity distinguished the working time from the leisure time, including through division regarding space – the place of the residence turned into an intimate world, where the inhabitants can share their individuality, to construct and defend their own or the family’s identity. In the time of socialism in Bulgaria was implemented a secondary modernization of society and forced urbanization, where – as a result of the leading ideology, was imposed an unification and standardization of the everyday life. In the period following the 1960s, the housing became “prefabricated blocks”, and the furniture – “sections”. This ultimate unification of the spaces of living does not allow individuality in unison with the political corrective of the

time. The only places in the residential spaces that allow difference are the marginal ones – attics, basements and balconies. Indisputably, the topic for the habitation of an “attic” is attractive with its large number of manifestations of “otherness”, but given the constructive absence of attics in the prefabricated blocks of flats, the basements are at the foreground. In the course of research, the “basement” was outlined as a specific place within the social-cultural space. It is a zone of typically man’s presence in the leisure time, without limitations and prohibitions.

In the time of cohabitation in the socialist dormitories – the prefabricated blocks of flats, their residents have constructed living worlds and relationships, built upon sympathies, benefits, hierarchies and origin. The basement is a man’s space of rivalries and unions, where the new season’s wine or rakiya is tasted, winter supplies are produced or stored – pickles, bottled fruits, and sauerkraut. The basement is a club and a workshop – cabinet for craft works – for creating woodcarvings, pyrographies, for repairing domestic electric tools. The basement is a storage – for the items of the leisure time of the man – for a fishery, instruments for repair works; bicycles, heating fuel containers, wooden vessels for wine and sauerkraut, demijohns, glass packaging, vegetable cans, wine, rakiya. Today, the packaging is used to a much smaller degree, but it still exists.

Since the middle of the 1970s, the basements in the prefabricated blocks of flats are constructed as “anti-nuclear shelters”. Actually, they are presented as such by the propaganda, and in reality they can be only bomb shelters. Some of the basements have armored plates and covers, but no filters, storages or any independent systems for electricity, water, air-tubes. Does that make a man feel more secured in the basement or does that turn it into a shelter from the reality outside?

In the first years after the changes in the early 1990s, some of the basements – with windows towards a pedestrian street, outside the complexes of prefabricated blocks of flats, were transformed into the so-called “crouch shops” – shops that replaced the missing kiosks. Others gave shelter to collections – to a functioning installation of train-toys and remote controlled compositions (P. B., born 1959); a collection of old radios, owned by a former manager of a local radio (D. L., born in 1954).

The residence contains intimacy, which explicates the items, typical for its residents. The decades of purposeful training (propaganda) in forms of urban lifestyle – through public reviews, furniture and interior exhibitions, books and magazines (Енов, Иванова 2014), formed a standard model, where the advantage in the sphere of the house’s furnishing belong to the woman. The man’s home spaces remained marginal – the men inhabited balconies, attics, basements, and sometimes even shared the stairs between the floors, where they were gathering for a cigarette or a mouthful of rakiya. This specific gender division of the space directs the investment of passions from the inhabitants into separate parts of it and leads to a fantasy projection of the interior inside them, mostly visible within the so-called “folk-style rooms”.

Every item, instrument of a toy (gadget) of the everyday life is connected to a narrative, and together they construct the “biography” of the owner of the space, where they are located. Of course, there also another very important man’s space –

the automobile. According to Baudrillard namely, the automobile establishes the preconditions for recasting the sociological division of the roles according to gender. The standard scheme presents a family universe, where man dominates outside the residence – in one filed, where the efficient mark is the car (Бодриар 2003: 74). Actually, the concentration into the space of the basements registers the direct functional dependence of their use by the owners of a vehicle. The basements of these drivers turn into storages – an addition to the garage. Car tires are held there – summer or winter ones, chains for snow, wheel rims, exterior luggage-carriers, charger for an accumulator battery. Very often repair works of the automobile are conducted inside the basement, including of the engine (B. V., born 1921). The reason for these actions is found both in the deficit of services during socialism, and in the lack of financial sources for visiting auto-service, but mainly in the opportunity for manifestation and self-affirmation of the man, who has managed to take care for the family property. Similar needs are also stimulated by the initiative “Do it yourself”, which supports self-expression and to some point fills out the vacuum of services. Of course, this “hobby” model is known and established at first in the Western world, but in Bulgaria, it has a specific ideological meaning since it is encouraged by the state policy, which presents the nation is a “technical” one.

Here I must make a specification that in all basements that I have been and I have described in the present text, I have been invited to see them – they are shared, but also demonstrated in front of me. Inside them I had the specific status of a guest, but not as a guest with whom the basement to be shared according to its functions – a tavern or an exhibition, but more as a guest-observer, who stays here as an expert, and from who a sanction is expected – acknowledgement for the obtained place of freedom.

Among the various examples are distinguished a row of common premises in the basements of the blocks of flats, turned by the inhabitants into a “tavern”. Decorated in a pseudo-ethnographical style, they became popular as a “folk-style room”. Prominent among them is the case of the “Haidouk Inn – “Zli Dol” Tavern”, which has been preserved as a basement of memories.

The “Haidouk Inn – “Zli Dol” Tavern” is opened in April 1976 in the second underground level of the basement of a prefabricated block of flats, close to the university in Rousse. Its establishment and nomination are full of meanings that gravitate to national and patriotic messages and relations to the past, topical at that time. The topic for the haidouks (rebels) in our country has always constructed mental bridges with the folklore concepts for heroism, among which indisputable place is occupied by the topos for the “Table” (Ненов 1999). The table in the haidouk song folklore is described as a ritual one, it appears to mark the change of the social status of the boys becoming men. In the popular culture, the “haidouk” table is considered a Bacchanalian share of food and wine, usually – with no limits. On its side, the nomination “Zli Dol” is a direct borrowing from the novel of Ivan Vazov “Under the Yoke”. It establishes a connection with the location of the basement (below), and in the same time focuses on the main character of this chapter of the novel – the Bori-

mechka. On the preserved images of the “tavern” there is visible not only a model of a wooden (cherry-trunk) canon, but also the heroic poses of the owner of this “inn”/“tavern”. On some of them he is posing with a stylized national costume, with a knife and revolver into the waist-belt, with a rifle in hand, with a bead-roll and a pipe – and with huge artificial moustaches, which establish a visual relation to one of the popular images of the haidouk leaders (Filip Totyu).

The creator and owner of the basement, whom I don’t know in person, has worked at the University of Rousse for many years, and he is described as a hearty man and the soul of the company, organizer of excursions for many years. Access to this space was granted to me by his daughter and his granddaughter Maria, which during her student’s practice in ethnology was provoked by the topic for studying the life under socialism in the prefabricated blocks of flats. She proposed to show me this specific space – in the past, part of the Bohemian of the day, and today to a large degree ritualized and turned into a museum.

In April 1976 the “Haidouk Inn – “Zli Dol” Tavern” was opened according to the official model for public ritual, affirmed at that moment – official guests (men in costumes, dancers or singers in folklore dresses), ritual bread, flag, and speeches. An Oath is prepared for the attendants. With its reading, the guests are equalized to haidouks, which confirms their presence inside the “tavern”. The month and the year of the opening are not accidental – they coincide with the national celebration, 100th anniversary since the beginning of the April Uprising, which is considered herald for the Liberation from Ottoman yoke.

A diary is recorded during visits inside the tavern. In the third visit appears the so-called “happy protocol”, which through the years appeared as the main source for entertainment – each company was reading its own and the previous protocols. At the moment of recording of the protocol empty spaces were left for definitions to the nouns, and after that, each of the attendants pronounces a random adjective. Unexpected combinations appear out of the improvisation, which provokes laughter. Here is an example from a “happy protocol” from November 1976 – “Today, on the 23 champion day of the *insolent* month of November all of us *swine* colleagues gathered at the *untied* tavern of the *rejuvenating* colleague...”. Later on, erotic topics appeared often, and sometimes there were uncensored words. The sharing of the hidden space of the basement predisposed the visitors towards revelations.

Foreign guests have appeared through the time – a group from Oltenita, a nearby Romanian town, someone Stewart Parker from the USA and Engineer Fatim Alkati from Yemen. Since 2009, a new genre appears in the diary – a “sober protocol”. The nomination “plays” with the opposition “drunk-sober”, but in nature, it does not differ from the “happy” protocol, recorded before.

An essential element in the tavern is its decoration that has focused a universe of exhibits. The items exhibited are described in the notebook-diary that plays the role of an inventory book. The last number in the row is 153 – “cheese jar (from grandmother)”. Most of the “materials” contain prices. The most expensive item is an “intercom” for 14 leva, and a “bell conductor 150 m” has cost 13.50 leva.

The tavern is arranged with a low table and tripod chairs, the vessels for eating and drinking are of pottery. There is a large number of shelves where weapons are arranged – firing and cool ones, bottles of wine with autograph of some of the attendants, ethnographic items. Apparently added later on, among the collection of exotic objects is distinguished the member card from the Bulgarian Communist Party. In a basement like this one are formed collections of purely man's (macho's) items for drinking wine and rakiya – wine vessels, small kegs, barrels, pitchers, small pitchers, jugs, strange and old bottles. Among the “strange” bottles there are often collections of miniature bottles of various alcohol trademarks, known today from the airplanes and the hotel mini-bars, and at that time – mysterious and exotic like the entire “western” world. The exotic, the ethnographic, the old items rarely possess their initial functionality, but they contain significance that responds to the order desired by another man – evidence, memory, nostalgia, escape (Бодриар 2003: 77). Namely a memory for the prestigious “haidouk” past is built by the use of the “Zli Dol” tavern, where there is an element of escape from reality, but also a specific nostalgia for the lost “natural” way of life outside the urbanized space, which the inhabitants of the basement have probably never had.

The appearance of the basement-tavern is described in the period of socialism as a “folk-style room”. In the 1970s a stylized ethnographic style was developed in architecture and the decoration of public buildings, a connection was sought with the National Revival period and the affirmation of the National Revival house (and a “National Revival” town), as a Bulgarian national type (Маринов 2010). According to the cultural studies of socialism, since then the ethnographic items will turn into the “interior of the Communist middle class under the shape of a folk-style room, arranged mainly in a basement, for drinking with comrades – one private restoration of the lost rural idyll in a specialized premise, turned into a small ethnic world” (Дичев 2005: 171). I think that this very same interior, which marks the style as ethnic, does not visualize the nostalgia for the village, which in the period of socialism is not prestigious, but the nostalgia for the national. In the 1970s and the 1980s, there is a strong state campaign for affirming a version of its own for a “socialist nationalism”, whose peak was the “1300 Years Bulgaria” Movement². In this context, the appearance of an interior that contains an ethnic marker is associated with the liberation of from the tradition, with the opportunity for expanding the living environment from the time of Modernity, which allows the construction of individual identity. According to Ivaylo Dichev, socialism is an era of prosperity for the national kitsch, produced by the art crafts that gathered strength, sold at the shops of the Union of the Bulgarian Artists, and popularized by taverns and hotels.

²A strange peculiarity of it is that nationalism here has an anti-Turkish direction, but it is not expansive. It is build in the spirit of the verse of Georgi Dzhagarov – “a land like one man's palm, but I don't need you any larger”, which gives birth to the myth of “the little Bulgaria”. Within it the Bulgarian socialist nation manages to unite within the frames of a territory like “a man's palm”, and there, despite the fact that it uses forms of nationalism, it is not seeking contacts with all possible close or distant Diasporas.

“This kitsch turns into some kind of a “higher” culture: the height is from the fact that it is ours, it excludes the foreign kitsch” (Дичев 2005: 171–172). According to the researcher for less than a century the folk-style from a natural living environment has turned into an interior – a stage, over which the modern identity projects itself. I would support such statements only with the condition that the turning in an “interior” takes place in the Interwar period when the “Bulgarian Modern” style is affirmed (Ненов, Цветкова: 2000). Namely on its base were later on implemented other official forms of presentation of the ethnically marked “Bulgarian”, among which the most visible is the stylistics of “Balkanturist”. The stratification of this model³ leads to the establishment of domestic spaces, which resemble the “high” art and the modern urban topoi for attractions and entertainment, where the Basement receives features of a prestigious and hedonistic (not public) space.

The present-day inhabitants present the life that has passed, they describe it, they illustrate it, and to a large degree, they seek resemblance to it. In the search for continuity, the uniqueness of the experience is achieved. Probably, for this reason, the “Zli Dol Tavern” is still a secret for many, together with the fact that it is also considered storage for valuables, like a museum.

The change of the generations that inhabit the prefabricated blocks of flats turns the previous “clubs of interests” into spaces for exhibiting the former active life. There is implemented a co-modification of a type of culture, which has been active only for a certain period. The spaces of the basement today are no longer prestigious, they are considered as high-risk because of possible robberies and therefore remain in the realm of a memory. A memory, where socialism with its negatives has left, but its “party” spirit has remained, where the anthropological category of “youth” is visible and is recognized in the interviews. The respondents always associate this space is by with positive emotions, which also transfer on the spaces, inhabited by them. Thus, the basements of the prefabricated blocks of flats are rarely used today but are full of memories.

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³ In the urbanist practices of socialism, an element of the „Balkanturist“ system is usually located in the central square in most of the towns, which indisputably forms prestige.

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