

The Red Riviera

Next Wave: New Directions in Women's Studies

A SERIES EDITED BY INDERPAL GREWAL,

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Introduction

The sea breeze is salty and cooling. The operatic calls of the young men selling corn on the cob accompany the gruff hums of jet skis and the percussive gushing and smashing of the Black Sea. Topless Western European girls lounge beside portly Russian grandmothers. Wild gangs of preteen boys overrun the shoreline, dribbling soccer balls through the sand castles built by naked squealing toddlers. There are more than five thousand people enjoying the glorious day on the narrow band of beach in the resort of Albena.

The fine sands on the shore are similar to the soft, pale grains in Koh Samui or Antigua. But compared to the lush, tropical ambience of Thailand or the Caribbean, Bulgaria feels distinctly European. There are no palm trees, no thatched huts, and the local peddlers threading their way through the sun-worshipping tourists are paler-skinned and carefully covered with thick, white smears of waterproof sunscreen. Looking out toward the sea, you see the usual array of water-sport equipment found at any major beach resort—paragliders, water skis, and paddle boats. This could be Greece, Italy, or France, but a glance inland at the towering, cement hotels—monolithic pillars of totalitarian architecture—betrays the landscape's communist past.

Few people outside of Europe think of Bulgaria as a tourist destination, but German, British, French, and Scandinavian visitors have been descending on the country en masse since the mid-1960s. In addition to its pristine beaches, Bulgaria is blessed with four mountain ranges, including the Balkan Mountains after which the entire peninsula is named. The other three ranges are home to international ski resorts that attract winter holidaymakers from across the continent. Bulgaria is also well

known among spa enthusiasts—the plentitude and variety of its mineral waters draw international visitors for both medicinal and recreational tourism. But it is the resorts on the country’s eastern coastline that are the biggest lure, comparable to but cheaper than Spain or Turkey for the cognoscenti among European tourists on a budget. Of the five major resorts at the seaside, Albena is one of the most breathtaking. Its tree-covered hillsides and purplish cliffs slope sharply down to the blue-green waters of the Black Sea.

On the top floor of the tallest hotel in the center of Albena, Desislava is just finishing the lunch shift.¹ She wipes her hands on her apron before she taps a cigarette out of the pack and sits down by a window to smoke. Her dyed orange-reddish hair falls in curls to her shoulders. A stripe of chocolate-brown roots runs from her forehead toward the crown of her head. Her ever-so-slightly angled eyes are rimmed with fine wrinkles that fold up when she inhales. She holds the cigarette lightly between her index and middle fingers. Her fingernails are carefully manicured. From the Panorama Restaurant she can see the entire resort through the floor-to-ceiling windows. “So much has changed since 1989,” she starts. “And so much has stayed the same.”

Desislava, or Desi for short, is remarkably qualified to be a waitress. She has the equivalent of a master’s degree in English philology, and she speaks four languages in addition to her native Bulgarian. She has been working in Albena for over twenty years. When she first graduated from the university before the collapse of communism, there was nothing in the world she wanted more than to work in one of the international tourist resorts on the seaside. Her fortunate assignment to Albena made her the envy of her friends and classmates. For all her loyalty and perseverance over the years, she expected nothing less than to be one of the lucky few assigned to the Panorama Restaurant. She tells me that she has earned her position. Even today, more than ten years after the onset of so-called “free markets,” Desi is proud to work in tourism. There is no other job that she would rather do.

In the nearby city of Varna, a young woman named Svetla is the top student in her class at the German language secondary school. She has decided, against the advice of her parents, to sit for the university entrance exam in tourism. The exam requires the mastery of a minimum of

two foreign languages, and Svetla's mother is afraid that the program is too competitive. Her father wants her to sit for an easier exam like law or medicine. But Svetla is committed to tourism. She knows that the best way to get a job in the Golden Sands resort is to graduate with a tourism degree, and she is willing to study an extra four or five hours a day to perfect her French before the exam. Her dream is to be a receptionist and to someday become the manager of her own hotel.

The high demand for and prestige of tourism employment in Bulgaria may seem at odds with common perceptions about the undesirability of work in the sector in advanced industrialized economies. But Desi, Svetla, and many other Bulgarians like them are responding to the particular history of Bulgarian tourism, which sets it apart from tourism sectors across the globe. This small Southeastern European country was one of the only places in the world to develop tourism under the direction of central planners during a communist era. Totalitarian tourism in Bulgaria was organized with reference to capitalist models, but independent of the dictates of supply and demand and liberated from the profit constraints of free-market competition. The peculiarities of its socialist development made employment in the sector exceptionally prestigious, and the internal dynamics of communist gender politics meant that it was Bulgarian women who worked the lion's share of these exclusive jobs.

Bulgaria's sudden insertion into global capitalism after 1989 drastically reshaped the Bulgarian economy. As the country's once vibrant industrial sector began to collapse, tourism emerged as one of the key powerhouses of the postsocialist economy. Representing at least 10 percent of Bulgaria's gross domestic product, tourism became the nation's largest generator of foreign exchange. Most importantly, tourism was one of the few sectors that continued to expand despite the onset of privatization and marketization. Tourism was labor-intensive—at a time when jobs in the formal economy were disappearing, employment in the sector grew. Yet despite high unemployment rates for men, fierce competition for jobs, and a general erosion in women's formal employment prospects after the onset of capitalism, Bulgarian women continued to dominate the sector even at the highest levels of management.

This is the story of the development and transformation of the Bulgarian tourism sector during both the communist and postcommunist



eras, and how this unique trajectory impacted the lives of the many women who worked in the sector as they struggled through the chaos of economic and political transition. This is a tale that starts with a revolutionary idea, an idea that promised social and economic justice for all workers and total equality for women. The story ends with the reality of economic collapse, government corruption, organized crime, widespread poverty, and reemerging social inequalities not only between men and women, but also between the ascending handful of the super-rich and the slowly sinking majority. Through it all, the women employed in Bulgaria's tourism sector negotiated their way through the rapidly changing institutional imperatives of emergent free markets by using the education and experience gained under the old system.

The success of these women was in many ways an unexpected outcome. Many scholars, international aid institutions, and nongovernmental organizations have suggested that all women in Bulgaria were negatively affected by the economic transition.² But there were some populations of women in Bulgaria that did relatively well after 1989. In general, the women who were better off after the collapse of communism had higher levels of general education, work experience with Westerners, and foreign-language training. My case study focuses on tourism because it was the sector of the communist economy that employed the highest

concentration of women who had almost daily access to Western tourists. This access gave women employed in tourism a chance to practice and perfect their foreign-language skills, to interact with and understand capitalist culture, and to receive tips in hard currency. The long off-season also allowed women extended opportunities to pursue continuing education and training throughout their careers. Thus, women working in tourism under communism had a high concentration of the education and skills necessary to benefit from the economic transition. By 2002, about 20 percent of currently employed women and approximately 18 percent of the total female labor force were directly or indirectly employed in tourism.³ Many of these women were able to use their education and experience to succeed in the postsocialist context. This is a significant enough number of women to challenge common perceptions that Bulgarian women in general were more negatively affected by the economic transition than men.

These higher levels of the right type of education and experience that were attained under communism have translated into new class privileges under capitalism. This has created significant economic disparities between different groups of women within Bulgarian society. While a small group of women experiences an increase in their standard of living, the majority of Bulgarian women slide into poverty. This is a process that mirrors the emerging economic inequalities in Bulgarian society as a whole, but few have yet to study these emerging class differences between women.

Since generalizations about women as a distinct and separate group miss these emerging social inequalities, it is necessary to dig beneath the gender-disaggregated national statistics. My arguments emerge not from distant observation or quantitative analysis, but from the experiences of Bulgarian women working in the tourism sector and how the process of economic transformation in 1989 irreversibly altered their trajectories.⁴ Only the personal accounts of real women who survived the collapse of communism can provide the detail and insight necessary to understand how larger historical shifts in political and economic systems shape individual lives. Narrowing in on personal stories also allows me to examine the particular processes through which some women were able to adjust

to capitalism using interpersonal, educational, and material resources designed for survival under communism—a radically different social, political, and economic system.

Throughout this book, I weave my arguments around the small histories of Bulgarians employed in the tourism sector, gathered during the fourteen months that I lived in Bulgaria in 1999 and 2000. In the chapters that follow, I momentarily slip into the shoes of women like Desi, the waitress in Albena. Her story provides the details that anchor much of my theoretical framework into the real lives of Bulgarian women. The story of Dora, a forty-two-year-old head chef in the seaside resort of Golden Sands, helps me to explore what life was like for Bulgarian women working in tourism under communism. While sharing meals and telling jokes with her and her family, I see the tale of Bulgaria's transition to capitalism through their eyes, and examine the effect of the collapse of communism on men and women across the nation.

Then there is Gergana, a young chambermaid working in the winter resort of Borovetz. By following her through a typical day of changing sheets and scrubbing toilets, I look at the particular economic context of tourism employment in Bulgaria after 1989 and how, despite high rates of postsocialist unemployment for men, the tourism sector has remained dominated by women. In this endeavor, I am also helped by Hristo, the bartender; Katina, the travel agent; Pencho, the ski instructor; and Petar, an unemployed miner. Their experiences allow me to explore the relatively high wages and high levels of job satisfaction found in the tourism sector.

I also travel back in time with Sonia, a receptionist who has been working in Bulgarian tourism for almost four decades. Sonia's memories and observations of the historical development of tourism in Bulgaria provide the foundation for my look at the unique political economy of the sector under communism and the peculiarities of command economics and secret police surveillance on the beaches of the Black Sea coast. Through her I also demonstrate how the isolation and control of the Bulgarian people and their inability to travel outside of the Eastern Bloc made work in tourism so exceptional. The daily contact with Western tourists and the constant access to otherwise unobtainable foreign currencies gave women like Sonia invaluable social and economic assets

under communism. These would later prove invaluable to her ability to survive the economic transition.

Prolet was a reservations manager in Golden Sands before 1989, but took advantage of the new opportunities provided by the liberalization of the Bulgarian economy to start her own small business as a tour operator. The details of her personal trajectory provide the backdrop for my investigation of the privatization and marketization of tourism after 1989 and how these changes strengthened the position of Bulgarian women in the sector. I also look at the new, postsocialist forces that shaped the character of tourism employment after 1989—the emergence of a new democratic state, the small but increasing interest of foreign investors and transnational corporations, the suddenly ubiquitous presence of the Bulgarian Mafia, and the proliferation of nongovernmental organizations representing Bulgaria’s new “civil society.”

Finally, I take a step back from the tourism sector and consider the broader implications of my case study through the eyes of the director of one of Bulgaria’s prominent women’s NGOs. I discuss what women’s NGOs in Bulgaria are doing to improve the lives of women and how their efforts ignore the successes of people like Desi, Dora, Gergana, Sonia, and Prolet. In fact, the work of women’s NGOs may be contributing to the creation of ideologies that will make it more difficult for future generations of women to thrive in a free-market economy.

In addition to the more in-depth stories of these women, there are glimpses of many other Bulgarian men and women whose experiences give names and faces to the larger social, political, and economic processes that shaped and reshaped the development of Bulgaria’s tourism sector over the last fifty years. It was through these extended conversations with maids, waitresses, cooks, receptionists, and the many others who work in Bulgarian tourism that my own observations and analysis came to life. In the details of their day-to-day routines were the experiences and outcomes that eventually fleshed out the bare bones of the abstract theories of economic transition. It was only through my understanding of the history of someone like Desi that I could begin to untangle the theoretical complexities of how some individual Bulgarians overcame the economic chaos that followed the collapse of communism while others did not.

DEISLAVA

Desi is thirty-eight years old. She was born in a village outside of the city of Varna to parents who were both farmers and committed communists. At eighteen, Desi passed the exams to study English at Varna University and became the first person in her family to receive a university education. Desi had a talent for foreign languages; she also studied German and excelled at the required Russian language courses. Upon graduation, she officially joined the Communist Party. This helped to place her in a three-year position as a waitress in a restaurant in Albena serving primarily English tourists.

Each day, Desi worked in a paradise of luxury compared to her small village. In an era when travel outside of the Eastern bloc was severely curtailed and contact between Westerners and ordinary Bulgarians was strictly forbidden, Desislava met and talked with British, German, and Scandinavian tourists on a daily basis. At a time when access to Western currencies was denied to all but the most privileged members of the communist elite, Desislava regularly took home pockets full of pounds, marks, and krone, which she could then exchange for Bulgarian leva on the black market for several times the official rate. She also had access to the special dollar stores where her hard currency could buy her Western cigarettes, alcohol, and denim jeans.

In Albena, the Western tourist season lasted only through July and August. For another four months, there were tourists and youth groups from the brother socialist countries. During the six months of the off-season, Desi was sent to different universities around the country to further her language training. In the five years that she worked in Albena during the communist era, she took language courses in German, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, and French.

In 1986, Desi married a man from her village who worked as a technician in the Golden Sands resort. He was also a member of the Communist Party. In 1988, she gave birth to a son, Kiril. Through their connections with the party, she and her husband were able to get their own apartment in a block in Varna. She moved out of her parents' house in the village and into the big city. She continued to work in Albena, but now used the off-season to do home studies and to spend time with her

infant son. During the tourist season, Desi sent Kiril to her parents' village where her mother looked after him.

Everything suddenly changed in November 1989 when Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria's communist leader for over three decades, unexpectedly resigned. Desi first felt the effects of the changes when the severe shortages of basic goods left the store shelves bare. But the economic disorder would be eclipsed in Desi's life by the death of her mother in 1991. As an only child, Desislava allowed her father to move into her apartment in Varna. At the same time, the number of tourists to Bulgaria increased, and Desi was working more days and longer hours.

Desi had considered leaving her job in Albena in the early 1990s to stay home for a few years and spend more time with her father and her son. She decided to keep working because the increase in tourists after the changes meant that there were many new people coming to Bulgaria for the first time, and she was curious to meet them. The departure of some of her colleagues also allowed for her promotion to a nicer restaurant in the center of the resort and a pay increase. Like Desi, her colleagues were used to leaving and returning to the labor force at will due to the possibility of extended maternity leaves under communism. The ones who left Albena in the early nineties never thought that they would have trouble coming back to their jobs at a later point.

As the nineties progressed, the economic situation worsened. Desi's father's pension was reduced. Her husband lost his job in the resort. Since he spoke no foreign languages and had only a technical engineering background, there was little he could do once the resorts were restructured and the Mafia began moving in. Desi's father sold the house in the village. Now, only Desi's tips and wages from the restaurant keep her family from going without good food, medicine, or heating in the winter when so many Bulgarians are forced to choose one over the others.

Each day Desi rides the employee microbus from Varna to Albena for about thirty minutes. She does not mind the commute; the narrow road winds its way up the picturesque coast. Through the trees and the breaks in the cliffs, Desi catches spectacular glimpses of the sea going in both directions. The smell of the fresh, salty air greets her in the morning, and the sight of the tourists and their children strolling through the resort—relaxed and content—calms her anxieties about the future of her own

family. Every week new busloads of foreigners are dropped off in the resort, and every day a handful of them find their way up to the Panorama Restaurant. Each morning as the microbus sways its way to Albena, Desi muses about whom she might meet. A Dutch architect? A German bus driver? A Russian poet? Or perhaps even a young American woman studying Bulgarian tourism . . .

CULTURAL CAPITAL AND CAPITALISM

Desi's story provides valuable detail for understanding how and why the education and experience women gained while working in the tourism sector under communism was the key to their postsocialist success. By using Desi's experiences, we can begin to explore the mechanisms that allowed women like her to survive the economic transition relatively better off than many of her compatriots. To do this, however, I must use several theories that explain the complex relationship between education and social mobility in different economic contexts.

In their book, *Making Capitalism without Capitalists*, Gil Eyal, Ivan Szelenyi, and Ellen Townsley investigate the ways in which individual men and women in Central Europe successfully made the transition from life under communism to life under capitalism, and argue that those with higher levels of education have done better than those with money or political connections.⁵ At the center of their analysis is trajectory adjustment theory, a compelling model that demonstrates why some portions of the population were thriving under the new capitalist system while others were not. Before the explanatory clarity of trajectory adjustment theory, however, there were two competing theories of how capitalism would be built after the collapse of communism: the theory of "capitalism-by-design" and the theory of "path dependence."⁶

The idea of capitalism-by-design was very simple. Proponents of this theory believed that 1989 was a complete break with the past, and that all of the former socialist countries were blank slates on which a new capitalist economy and democratic polity could be built by imported technologies, expertise, and institutions from the advanced capitalist countries.⁷ The idea of capitalism-by-design informed all of the "shock therapy" policies whereby markets were liberalized almost overnight.

Western institutions such as stock markets and entire legal codes were imported and implemented in hopes that the right conditions would create capitalism, literally, by design.

The new institutional arrangements in society, like the advent of private ownership of industry, the possibility of starting small, private businesses, and the creation of national labor markets (by no longer guaranteeing full employment) were also supposed to reshape individual behavior. Those individuals whose entrepreneurial instincts had long been suppressed would suddenly spring forth and become the drivers of the new economy. Rising unemployment would lead to greater competition for jobs. This would lead to higher levels of productivity and lower wages, and Bulgarian entrepreneurs would be more competitive in international markets. The newly legal possibility for individuals to accumulate disproportionate amounts of wealth and to dispose of that wealth as they saw fit would create incentives for others in society to work hard and be creative in building the new capitalist reality. Capitalism and communism were seen as mutually exclusive systems, and individuals who had thrived under communism (bureaucrats and apparatchiks) would not be able to survive under a new system that rewarded ability and initiative.⁸

To use the example of Desi's experience under the paradigm of capitalism-by-design, 1989 represented a distinct break with the past as the communist government fell apart. Because full-time employment was no longer an obligation, many women in Albena decided to leave their jobs, while Desi used the opportunity to get promoted to a better position within the resort. From the institutional design point of view, this was a desirable outcome related to the emergence of new institutions (labor markets) in society. The women who left Albena probably did so because they viewed working as an obligation and therefore had little motivation and presumably low productivity. These are exactly the people that Albena as a private resort with a profit motive would want to get rid of. On the other hand, Desi enjoyed her work very much and was delighted with the new possibilities of more responsibility and higher pay in a better establishment—Desi is exactly the type of employee that Albena would want to keep. Thus, simply by changing the institutional arrangements and incentives, individual human behavior can be shaped so that those who are the most able will succeed in the new economic system. In other

words, individual people make rational decisions in response to new economic conditions that ultimately benefit society as a whole.

The problem with the capitalism-by-design paradigm is that it does not take into account that the women working in Albena had entire lives' worth of experience under the old communist system that did not merely disappear because there was now unemployment. Even if Desi absolutely loved her job and was an excellent waitress, she might have still left Albena because it was the first time in her life that she had the choice as to whether or not she wanted to work. Furthermore, many of the women left the workforce assuming that their jobs would be there when they wanted them back. They were operating under the assumptions of the old institutions, rather than being directly influenced by the advent of the new ones.

Path dependence—the second theory of understanding the creation of capitalism in the former socialist countries—reintroduced the idea that there are structural constraints that limit an individual's ability to make rational decisions in response to the new system of incentives.⁹ The idea behind path dependence was simply that capitalism would be different for each country depending on the status and type of communist state that existed before 1989. The sociologist David Stark recognized that different states had different approaches to privatization depending on how heavily indebted they were to the multinational lending institutions immediately before the collapse.¹⁰ The process of privatization was very important in shaping the new institutions of private property and entrepreneurship, and in each country that process was path dependent on the previous economic situation. Stark rejects the capitalism-by-design thesis as far too simplistic in assuming that decades of understanding and expertise under one economic system could simply be washed away by the advent of another. Once again, to use Desi as an example, her life did not suddenly start all over again in 1989. Things began changing around her, but her ability to deal with those changes was determined by aspects of her life that developed under communism, the things that limited her range of choices: her job in the resort, her education, her husband, her son, etc.

Trajectory adjustment theory tries to combine both the capitalism-by-design and path dependence ideas into one mechanism for explaining

how individuals made the transition from communism to capitalism. While capitalism-by-design placed too much of an emphasis on the new institutions that emerged after 1989 and the rationality of individuals if and when they chose to respond to them, path dependence implied that people could never fully escape their communist pasts when in fact there were many examples of individuals reinventing themselves under the new economic system. Trajectory adjustment theory mitigates these contradictions and relies heavily on Pierre Bourdieu's notions of the *habitus* and *champ* and on his ideas about social and cultural capital.¹¹

Eyal, Szelenyi, and Townsley argue that individuals are able to adjust their personal and professional “trajectories” in response to exogenously imposed alterations in the economic system by changing their habitus to respond to new “rules of the game.” Each individual has a “portfolio” of stocks in economic capital, cultural capital, and social/political capital that determines their habitus and thus, their place in the *champ*. Economic capital is material goods or money that can be used for productive purposes. Social or political capital is an individual's knowledge of and ability to utilize social networks and spheres of influence. Cultural capital is also sometimes called “human capital,” which is an individual's education, skills, and experience. Cultural capital also includes the acquisition of “good taste”—a culturally appropriate knowledge of what constitutes good food, good art, good music, good manners, and so forth—which marks an individual as belonging or deserving to belong to a higher social position. This kind of cultural capital is also referred to as symbolic capital, because an individual's public “performance” of these discerning tastes symbolizes personal “success” to others in her social milieu. Much of Bourdieu's work focuses on how differential access to formal educational institutions and the learning of proper behaviors and tastes legitimate the unequal distributions of resources in advanced capitalist societies.¹²

To use Desi as an illustration, she had all three types of capital at her disposal in 1989 when the transition began. She had economic capital in the form of hard currency, the British pounds and German marks that she saved from her tips. She also had social/political capital in her membership in the Communist Party and her network of friends and colleagues at Albena. Finally, Desi had impressive amounts of cultural capi-

tal; she had a degree from a prestigious university, extensive training in several different languages, and many years of work experience with foreigners. According to the trajectory adjustment theory, these different forms of capital made up Desi's portfolio of stocks.

As the transition began, Desi rationally responded to the changing institutions in society by trading in or dumping less useful forms of capital in favor of those that had become more valuable under the new system. Under communism her old connections within the Communist Party were a very useful form of social capital that helped her get a job and apartment and move up within the established hierarchy. After the changes in 1989, however, this social capital was devalued considerably, and her cultural capital in the form of education, training, and language expertise became much more valuable. Furthermore, her economic capital in the form of hard currency, which was merely a bonus under communism, became important in the postsocialist period, when the Bulgarian currency was drastically devalued due to hyperinflation and the general economic instability that accompanied the transition. Having money in hard currency preserved the value of her savings, and allowed her to buy most of the things she needed even as prices rose. Desi slowly came to rely more on her economic and cultural capital as the transition proceeded, with her social capital becoming less and less significant.

As in the theory of capitalism-by-design, the relative value of Desi's different forms of capital was transformed due to external changes in the political and economic institutions in Bulgaria, and she rationally chose to rely on different forms of capital in response to those changes. But Desi's capital in 1989 was path dependent. The education and social networks she had in her portfolio were legacies of her social position during communism. Not everyone in Bulgaria, and certainly not every woman in Bulgaria, entered the postsocialist period with the same portfolio. Desi's husband, for instance, had excess stocks of social capital (his membership in the local Communist Party) that eventually proved useless in finding him a job after the changes. In the case of Central Europe, Eyal, Szelenyi, and Townsley demonstrate that the people who emerged as leaders after communism were the ones who had cultural capital, rather than those who had social or economic capital. This was also true in Bulgaria, particularly in the tourism sector, where those like

Desi who had excess stocks of cultural capital were able to survive and thrive after 1989.

For a wide variety of reasons, the most valuable forms of cultural capital after the collapse of communism were those of general education, work experience with foreigners (preferably Westerners), and fluency in foreign languages (again preferably Western ones). In chapters 1 and 2, I examine the particular historical circumstances surrounding the development of tourism in Bulgaria under communism that allowed women working in that sector to acquire disproportionate amounts of these forms of cultural capital—the state policies aimed at achieving full employment for all Bulgarian men and women and the unofficial gender regime that funneled women into the “service” sector. Women in tourism before 1989 were uniquely poised to do very well as the communist institutions were swept away and replaced by free-market competition in one of the most dynamic sectors of the Bulgarian economy. Desi the waitress, Dora the chef, Sonia the receptionist, and Prolet the reservations manager had all gained their cultural capital under the old system, but it became valuable only after the liberalization of the Bulgarian economy. In chapter 3, I examine this phenomenon in detail and propose that cultural capital is valuable only under capitalist regimes of accumulation where education and training are commodified in society and thereby made scarce. In other words, education becomes valuable only when it is difficult for people to get.

The dilemma of Svetla, the young secondary school student in Varna who aspires to study tourism, exemplifies the changes that the onset of capitalism in Bulgaria has brought to both young men and women. Under communism, higher education for all young Bulgarians was paid for by the state. Of course, there was fierce competition for places at the best universities and colleges in the country, but anyone who wanted to continue his or her education was virtually guaranteed a space in at least one institution to study something. Before 1989, pursuing a general or technical education was not a function of one’s economic position, but, at least theoretically, purely a function of one’s own desire and ability. Furthermore, higher education was not necessary to secure employment—that was guaranteed for life by the communist state. Therefore, women like Desi, Dora, Sonia, and Prolet who studied tourism at the

university level did so because they were both capable and motivated. Unfortunately for Svetla, capability and motivation will no longer be enough.

The collapse of communism brought with it dramatic changes to everything, including Bulgaria's educational system. At precisely the historical moment that employment was no longer guaranteed by the state and knowledge and skills became more important than being a member of the Communist Party, higher education began to slip out of the reach of Bulgaria's recently impoverished majority. Whereas once access to higher education was a question of passing the right exams, since 1989 young people like Svetla have increasingly had to worry about how to pay the costs.

By 2004, most public universities offered full scholarships to only the top percentage of candidates who passed the entrance exam; those with lower scores were expected to pay if they wanted to attend. Additionally, Bulgaria has seen a steady increase in the presence of private universities, many of which will accept any student who can afford to pay. But the tuition demanded by these private schools far exceeds the annual earnings of the average Bulgarian family, and the quality of the education received at these new institutions is dubious. And even if a student is lucky enough to earn a full scholarship to a prestigious public university, rumors abound that good marks can be earned only through gifts and bribes to poorly paid and overworked faculty members.

For Svetla to attend university, she must earn a score that puts her in the top 20 percent of all students who pass the tourism exam. Without a full scholarship, Svetla's parents cannot afford to pay for her to study, and she will have to start looking for a job instead. The competition is stiff for the tourism exam, which is why her father is pressuring her to sit for the law and medicine exams as well. Furthermore, even though Svetla is very bright and works very hard, many of the young people that she is competing against have been studying with private tutors. Her parents cannot afford the tutors, so Svetla studies alone with secondhand language textbooks from the 1980s. The most fortunate of her classmates have been sent away for a month to England, France, or Germany to practice their language skills; Svetla practices on a computer in an Internet cafe near her secondary school. She still has a fair shot at scoring in the top 20 percent,

but since 1989, higher education has increasingly become a luxury for wealthier Bulgarians. Despite these disadvantages, Svetla is dedicated to pursuing her dream. She has one more month to study.

Svetla does have one advantage: that there are women like Desi in charge of making hiring decisions in the tourism sector. Desi is suspicious of the degrees granted by the new private universities, and knows that many talented young people are having to forego higher education due to increasing costs and the pressure that many feel to work so they can help support their parents. Desi is well aware of how fortunate she was to grow up under communism, even though she was happy to see the system collapse. Desi likes to joke that she traded her freedom for an education. Svetla tells me that she would gladly give up her ability to travel abroad for a top place at Varna Economics University and the promise of a career in tourism.

Svetla and Desi are just two of the over three million Bulgarian women who have lived through the transition from communism to capitalism. Although their experiences cannot be overgeneralized, the different paths and opportunities available to them are in some ways representative of the emerging disparities between women in Bulgaria. A minority of women are poised to do well in a competitive labor market. This group includes an older generation of women (like Desi) with valuable cultural capital in the form of skills and experience inherited from communism and a younger generation of women (like Svetla's wealthy classmates) with enough economic capital to purchase the requisite cultural capital under the new free-market system. In both cases, it is the possession of cultural capital that increases economic privilege relative to the other group of women. Education and experience (rather than political affiliation) are now the keys to finding a job. The majority of Bulgarian women, like Svetla, have neither valuable skills acquired in the communist era nor the economic capital to invest in their own or their children's education. They are the ones who are the most likely to have been harmed by the economic transition.

To those studying the situation of women in Bulgaria, however, it is too easy to lump these two groups of women together and ignore the very important class divisions that are polarizing them. Of course, these new socioeconomic fissures between women mirror the class stratification

of the entire Bulgarian society since 1989: a small minority ascends to middle- and upper-middle-class status while the majority slips into increasing poverty (not including the lucky few Bulgarian athletes, celebrities, businesspeople, politicians, and organized criminals who join the ranks of the international super-rich). Thus, while it is true that the majority of Bulgarian women are worse off after 1989, it is equally true that the majority of Bulgarian men have been negatively affected by the economic changes. Homogenizing Bulgarian women into one category fails to take account of the cultural capital that some of them (such as those employed in tourism) do have, and how this has helped them increase their economic position relative both to other women and to men.

In an interesting irony, the vast array of nongovernmental organizations for Bulgarian women make exactly this mistake. Since the end of communism, hundreds of millions of dollars in international aid have poured into the country to create “civil society,” and women’s organizations are ubiquitous. While the main concern of most Bulgarian women is access to education and/or employment opportunities, these organizations are busy advocating for women’s rights by focusing on non-economic gender issues such as sexual harassment or domestic violence. In the conclusion of this book, I broaden the implications of my case study of tourism and examine the politics of professionally advocating for women’s rights in the postsocialist context.

Thus, although my primary subject is tourism and the many Bulgarian women who work in the sector, tourism cannot be studied in a vacuum no matter how separated the resorts are from the rest of the country. It is the social, political, and economic context of Bulgarian tourism, particularly its communist origins and the changes that capitalism has wrought since 1989, that have created the fascinating circumstances that allowed some Bulgarian women to succeed despite the many challenges. On the other hand, tourism in 2004 accounted for over 12 percent of Bulgaria’s gross domestic product, and all of the indicators point to higher future growth in the sector. Because it makes up such a large part of the Bulgarian economy, what goes on in the tourism sector also influences the rest of the country. In many ways, Bulgaria’s entire macroeconomic stability relies on tourism, and the women who, for the

most part, run the sector have the future of Bulgaria in their hands. The individual stories of these few relatively successful women may help us understand the spirit and tenacity of those Bulgarians who were not crushed by the maelstrom of transition, and how their example can help us to find strategies for the resuscitation of the many Bulgarians who were.

Back in Albena, Desi pulls her hair back into a ponytail and secures it with a thin black elastic. There are a few stray strands of hair that frame her face; she slides them behind her ears. Her high cheekbones are now more prominent, and she applies a fresh coat of red lipstick. We are both still sitting in the Panorama Restaurant where we have been talking for almost two hours. She gazes out of the large window.

Through the glass, I can see almost the entire beach swarming with thousands of tiny, nearly naked human bodies in the late afternoon sun. There are heads bobbing up and down in the water near the shore; a little further in, a motorboat pulls seven or eight people astride a long, bright, yellow, plastic banana. As the motorboat accelerates, the banana swoops up into the air and then splashes back down, cutting a wide arc out to the two-kilometer buoy that bobs near the horizon. The brightly colored sun umbrellas on the beach are lined up with military precision. Standing tall, they lead from the thin boardwalk down to the shoreline. I imagine that if somebody gave the right command, the umbrellas could march off and invade the sea.

Desi looks at her watch. She will need to get ready for the dinner shift soon.

I turn my attention back to my notebook. She watches me for a few minutes as I write. I have taken almost twenty pages of notes from our interview, and she seems impressed at the volume as I flip back through the notes to check if I have any last-minute questions.

“I didn’t think my life was so interesting,” she says.

I stop flipping and look up at her. “Think of everything that has happened in your country over the last decade. Don’t you think it’s amazing how things have changed in your life since 1989?”

She extends her hand and inspects a small chip in her nail polish. “Not really,” she says.

I laugh. “Well, it is interesting to me.”

She shrugs. I thank her for her time, and we agree to meet again in a few days.

As she walks toward the kitchen, I look back at my notebook. It amazes me still how the details of the life of one waitress can seem inconsequential, and yet provide a window into an entire world of women living, working, and surviving on the other side of the globe. It is the stories of these women that can make sense of the often-senseless process of political and economic change, and that will help tell the captivating tale of women, tourism, and transition in this small but intriguing nation on the most southeasterly edge of Europe.

