

The Borsa: The Black Market for Rock Music in Late Socialist Bulgaria

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Throughout the 1980s a peculiar ritual could be observed in Sofia, Bulgaria's capital city: at around 6 p.m. on workdays a group of male teenagers would congregate around the Liudmila Zhivkova People's Palace of Culture trolley-bus stop. This spot was known as the *borsa*, a term whose literal English translation is "stock exchange" but which in reality meant the biggest black market for rock music in the country. Western rock was not officially banned by the authorities. It was ideologically condemned, however, and therefore unavailable in the government-run record stores. Hence, the only way to obtain it was through illicit purchases outside the official system for the distribution of goods. The borsa was the site where such transactions took place.

But it was also something more than that. The borsa was an urban site whose existence was the outcome of the cultural segmentation of city landscapes in late socialism—a visual manifestation of the emergence of novel forms of behavior under Soviet-type regimes. It was an interactive locale—the habitat of a community of rock fans who shared both the ability to sustain routine business transactions and the intensely felt aesthetic commitments that made possible moments of ecstatic exultation. The borsa was also a carefully demarcated terrain wherein aesthetic appropriations were facilitated by the mechanical reproduction of works of art. Finally, it was the stage on which a new dramaturgy of power became increasingly visible—the chosen place where creatively scripted disruptions challenged the regime's control over public space.

It is these dimensions of the borsa that I analyze in this article. Drawing on a series of interviews I conducted in 2008 and 2009, I tell the story of a fascinating unexplored place and thus expand currently limited knowledge of the patterns of public interactions and conspicuous cultural practices that emerged in 1980s Bulgaria.¹ But I am also contributing to the growing body

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1. The source base which I use in this article consists of twenty-four interviews conducted in Sofia in 2008 and 2009. The method I used was snowball sampling (also known as chain referral sampling), which means that the study sample is formed through "referrals made among people who possess some characteristics that are of research interest."

of literature on the impact of rock music on Soviet-type regimes during the communist era.² What were the main characteristics of the places where rock fans used to get together? What consequences did the circulation of tapes and records of western music generate? How did the emergence of countercultural places redraw political terrains in eastern Europe in the 1980s? An in-depth analysis of the borsa—both the daily exchanges that constituted it as an interactive site and its broader significance as an urban phenomenon—will shed light on such issues and thus enrich our understanding of the ways in which cultural dynamics and political changes unfolded in late socialism.

The Borsa as an Exclusive Urban Site

There are places I remember
All my life, though some have changed.

—The Beatles, “In My Life”

The exact location of the black market for rock music in Sofia was on Patriarch Evtimii Boulevard, between Vitosha Boulevard and Fridtjof Nansen Street, and why the borsa emerged where it did is a question without a clear answer. The important fact is that by the late 1970s (that is, a decade before the beginning of perestroika) this fragment of the city landscape had become a culturally notable site—a place which a group of city dwellers claimed as theirs.³

Patrick Biernacki and Dan Waldorf, “Snowball Sampling: Problems and Techniques of Chain Referral Sampling,” *Sociological Methods and Research* 10, no. 2 (November 1981): 141. While this method is not designed to generate propositions generalizable across populations, it is of central importance for the study of groups engaged in illicit behavior, such as buying and selling in violation of legal restrictions. See Alfred R. Lindesmith, *Addiction and Opiates* (Chicago, Ill., 1968).

2. See Artemy Troitsky, *Back in the USSR: The True Story of Rock in Russia* (London, 1987); Timothy W. Ryback, *Rock around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Oxford, 1990); Sabrina Petra Ramet, ed., *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia* (Boulder, Colo., 1994); Thomas Cushman, *Notes from the Underground: Rock Music and Counterculture in Russia* (Albany, 1995); Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, 2000); Anna Szemere, *Up from the Underground: The Culture of Rock Music in Postsocialist Hungary* (University Park, 2001); Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006); Sergei Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity, and Ideology in Soviet Dnepropetrovsk* (Washington, D.C., 2010); William Risch, *The Ukrainian West: Culture and the Fate of Empire in Soviet Lviv* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011); and Madigan Fichter, “Rock ‘n’ Roll Nation: Counterculture and Dissent in Romania, 1965–1975,” *Nationalities Papers* 39, no. 4 (July 2011): 567–85. On Bulgaria in particular, see Ryback, *Rock around the Bloc*, 193–98; Stephen Ashley, “The Bulgarian Rock Scene under Communism, 1962–1990,” in Ramet, ed., *Rocking the State*, 141–65; and Karin Taylor, *Let’s Twist Again: Youth and Leisure in Socialist Bulgaria* (Vienna, 2006). Taylor’s research focuses mostly on the 1960s and 1970s, not the 1980s, which is probably why she does not mention the borsa.

3. While it is true that this site was in proximity to two urban landmarks, by all accounts they had virtually nothing to do with the borsa’s attractiveness. One was the aforementioned Liudmila Zhivkova People’s Palace of Culture, after which the trolleybus stop



Figure 1. The site of the borsa, with the Palace of Culture in the background. Photo by Marty Ganev. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 2. The borsa was located on Patriarch Evtimii Boulevard, between Vito-sha Boulevard and Fridtjof Nansen Street. Photo by Marty Ganev. Reproduced with permission.

These urbanites shared several characteristics. Virtually all were male; many, but not all, were enrolled in elite Sofia high schools (such as the English Language School, Seventh High School, the French Language School, First High School, and the German Language School). Most were born and raised in the city, but a sizable minority was not. In fact, one of the intriguing facts about the borsa is that it was a site where a deep cultural cleavage that had divided Bulgarian society since at least the 1880s—the cleavage between Sofia and “the provinces”—was bridged.⁴ If and when non-Sofians were mentioned during the interviews, they were depicted as fellow collectors, connoisseurs, and entrepreneurs.⁵ Therefore, to the extent that the borsa was a distinct place, its distinctiveness was grounded not so much in the ascriptive identities of those who visited it (their given, or “unchosen,” characteristics) but in their passion for rock music.

My interviews fully confirm Bulgarian musicologist Claire Levy’s observation that Bulgarian audiences were influenced primarily by British, not American, musicians.⁶ In the memories of the borsa regulars, the Beatles, Deep Purple, and Queen feature as the bands whose recordings were most frequently traded and discussed. Also popular were “harder” bands like Led Zeppelin, Judas Priest, and AC/DC, as well as progressive rock bands like Yes, Genesis, Pink Floyd, and Jethro Tull.⁷ The only American performers whose music was in demand seem to have been Jimi Hendrix, Boston, and Kansas.⁸

Another hypothesis to which the empirical evidence I gathered lends support is Sabrina Petra Ramet’s contention that rock fans in eastern Europe hardly paid attention to the words being sung by rock stars.⁹ My respondents

was named. (Liudmila Zhivkova was communist dictator Todor Zhivkov’s daughter, whose meteoric political career ended when she died in 1981. See the most recent biography, by Krum Blagov, *Zagadkata Liudmila Zhivkova* [Sofia, 2012].) Separated from the borsa by a large park and situated more than a kilometer away, the Palace was not connected to the black market in any meaningful way (see figure 1). Vitoshka Street was also nearby, but the kinds of things one could purchase in the shops that lined this commercial thoroughfare—household appliances, medicines, linen and other fabrics, furniture—could hardly spark adolescent imaginations. Thus, there is no evidence to suggest that the trolleybus stop on Patriarch Evtimii Boulevard was somehow intrinsically more special than any other nook in the chaotic conglomeration of urban sites (see figure 2).

4. No one has analyzed this social divide better than Ivan Hadzhiiski, *Bit i dushevnost na nashiia narod*, 3 vols. (Sofia, 1940–2002). Subsequent analyses have added very little to Hadzhiiski’s fundamental insights.

5. The following is a sample of typical statements from my interviews. Assen Djingov: “Tony was this guy from Pernik who was a true entrepreneur: he only had a mono cassette player at the beginning, and after two years became the biggest supplier of rock music in his city.” Khristo Namev: “Krassi was from Kiustendil; he knew a lot about Deep Purple.” Miroljub Petrinski: “One of the greatest collections of records I’ve seen was owned by a borsa regular from Vladaia; this guy really understood rock music and knew more about it than I did at the time.” Pernik and Kiustendil are cities in southwestern Bulgaria; Vladaia is a village near Sofia.

6. Claire Levy, “The Influence of British Rock in Bulgaria,” *Popular Music* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 209–12.

7. On progressive rock, see Edward Macan, *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (Oxford, 1997).

8. Djingov, Petrinski, and Sava Beninski, interviews.

9. Sabrina Petra Ramet, “Rock: The Music of Revolution (and of Political Conformity),” in Ramet, ed., *Rocking the State*, 4.

openly admitted that they did not know the lyrics of a single song by heart. To be sure, certain catchy phrases from admired megahits were in wide circulation—future PhDs in physics seemed persuaded by Pink Floyd that “we don’t need no education,” aspiring architects would mischievously chant “We will rock you” with Queen, and, most appropriately, would-be lawyers seemed to wholeheartedly agree with Judas Priest that the most meaningful form of behavior is “breaking the law.” But overall, English was not used—the bursa is remembered as a place devoted exclusively to the music’s instrumentals.

There are two additional dimensions of this exclusivity that are particularly interesting. The first is better grasped when the bursa is juxtaposed to other black market locales in the city. The black market was an agglomeration of spaces where an array of scarce commodities could be bought—an unsanctioned infrastructural ingredient woven into the fabric of the socialist metropolis. Compared to these other urban corners, the bursa exhibited an intriguing characteristic. At other black markets—even those that exhibited a degree of specialization—customers had access to a multiplicity of goods.¹⁰ In contrast, all transactions at the bursa revolved exclusively around only one type of products: those related to rock music—records, cassettes, and music magazines (such as the German magazine *Bravo*, which was particularly popular). Those who went there were interested in a variety of western commodities, but everything else they coveted was obtained elsewhere: “I’ve never purchased anything [there] other than records and cassettes.”¹¹ “When I was at the bursa I did not even think about things like jeans or dollars.”¹² “For other stuff, there was the Magura Café and the flea markets; for music, there was the bursa.”¹³ What made this urban site special, therefore, was the attempt to assert its uniqueness not only vis-à-vis the official “publicness” of the socialist city but also in relation to other locales at which illegal activities thrived.

The second dimension of the bursa’s exclusivity was that there the triad “sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll” was compartmentalized so that the regulars could concentrate solely on rock ’n’ roll. Put more extravagantly, had Axl Rose, of Guns N’ Roses, landed in Sofia in the 1980s and asked to be taken to a place “where the grass is green and the girls are pretty,” he would not have been directed to the bursa, because very few female rock fans went there and drugs were almost never consumed.¹⁴ The place was visibly gendered—at any given point in time, female presence there was minimal. This was not unique to Bulgaria: Artemy Troitsky reports that there were no *chuvikhi* (girls)

10. By far the most popular black market was the *bitak* (flea market), where all kinds of commodities were bought and sold. If Sofians needed to “rent” a truck (in other words, to pay a bribe to a driver who would bring the state-owned vehicle out of the state-owned garage where it was supposed to be parked unless used for official business), they would go to Macedonia Square, where they could also buy cement and radiators; or, if they needed hard currency, they would go to the Magura Café, on Vitosha Boulevard, where jeans and Kent cigarettes were also available.

11. Aleksandar Ganchev, interview.

12. Petrinski, interview.

13. Georgi Pipkov, interview.

14. Drugs were culturally irrelevant in Bulgaria—it was alcohol that was used by those who wished to turn on, tune in, and drop out.

among the *stiliagi* (“style hunters”) who strolled up and down Gor’kii Street in Moscow in the late 1950s, and Uta G. Poiger points out that in East Germany cultural practices that fall under the rubric of “hobbies,” such as record collecting, were perceived as a domain of exclusively male fantasies and ambitions.¹⁵ Interestingly, almost all of my male respondents pointed out that they regularly made tapes for their female friends and classmates and that the discovery that a shared interest in a particular band might serve as an exciting conversation topic was a huge relief for those about to subject themselves to the first, gut-wrenching rites of dating.¹⁶ Still, it is a fact that young women who loved rock music did not visit the borsa, either because they felt uncomfortable being out late or because they feared police brutality (an issue to which I return below).¹⁷

In addition to a female presence, also missing at the borsa was alcohol. Drinking in the company of mates was considered normal but was not done there: “I used to drink a lot, but I never drank before or during my visits there.” “During all these years, I’ve seen only a couple of drunken teenagers there.”¹⁸ This behavior was at least in part due to prudence: a crowd of young males drinking in the street would quickly become the target of police attention. But even those who generally considered drinking in public an act of adventurous defiance refrained from committing such transgressions at the borsa: “I’ve drunk a lot in parks and gardens, but not at the borsa. There, I’ve always been sober.”¹⁹ Intriguingly, the borsa was a location where a particular kind of “high” was experienced in the absence of additional stimulants. This high was not triggered by listening to music itself—since there was a chronic shortage of batteries and very few boom boxes in communist Bulgaria, the sound of rock music was rarely heard at the borsa. Instead, it was the conversations, the exchange of information, and the heightened feeling of belonging that made visits to the borsa an exhilarating experience. Here is a typical statement: “Going to the borsa was the highlight of the day for me. Of course, there was the expectation that I would collect the music I had paid for and thus the pride that my collection was constantly growing. Equally important for me, however, was the anticipation of all these crazy conversations I was going to have about the music I admired and the musicians I worshipped.”²⁰ Apparently, however, these “crazy conversations” could be properly conducted only if other simmering desires—a potent source of distraction—were willingly contained.

In sum, what made the borsa a recognizable urban site was the fact that

15. Troitsky, *Back in the USSR*, 14; Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels*, 4. In contrast, women were embraced as members of the *kompanii* that began to form during the thaw and energized the pursuit of alternative cultural and aesthetic values. See Ludmilla Alexeyeva and Paul Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era* (Pittsburgh, 1990).

16. Djingov, interview; Pipkov, interview; and Doichin Stanchev, interview, Koprivshitsa, 19 July 2009.

17. Antoaneta Dimitrova, Ralitsa Peeva, and Boriana Kiutchukova, interviews.

18. Emil Georgiev and Djingov, interviews.

19. Velizar Shirov, interview.

20. Beninski, interview.

it was an attractive destination: a place young men frequented because there they could hang out, enjoy each other's company, and discuss their favorite music. Topoi like the *borsa* began to emerge in late socialism not only because they facilitated quasi-commercial exchanges but also because "being there" was a performative act carried out by individuals with specific tastes and aspirations. It was the shared appreciation of rock music that facilitated relative strangers' bonding, and it was the reproduction of a set of meaningful experiences that authenticated the existence of a subcultural group. With regard to such experiences, one particular aspect of the *borsa* was especially important: the fact that the black market for hard rock in Sofia was built on networks of trust.

The Borsa as an Interactive Locus of Trust

For peace and trust can win the day despite of all your losing . . .

—Led Zeppelin, "Immigrant Song"

Michael Baxandall begins his famous study of early Renaissance art with the following observation: "A fifteenth-century painting is the deposit of social relationships."²¹ The same proposition applies to the records and cassettes that circulated on the *borsa*. By the late 1970s the *borsa* had acquired all the attributes of an informal public institution: it occupied a clearly delimited urban and social space; it was structured around the pursuit of a specific objective, the dissemination of western rock music; it operated in accordance with unwritten and yet comprehensible rules of membership; and it engendered distinct patterns of behavior—or "standardized interaction sequences"—that accentuated and reiterated the differences between those who wanted to be "in" and those who wished to remain "out."²² But its most important characteristic as an institution was that it was grounded in relationships of trust.

These relationships were systematically cultivated by the most important actors on this urban scene: the men who possessed vinyl LPs and were willing to either sell or record them onto cassettes for a fee. In a generally egalitarian and nonhierarchical environment, these individuals emerged as respected leaders. The two most important *borsa* characters were the legendary Tony and Vesso, who were mentioned by all my interviewees. At around thirty years of age in the mid-1980s, they were older than the majority of their clients. Tony had long hair and Vesso sported a beard, both semiotic markers that (as Jonathan Bolton reminds us) made them vulnerable to the charge of "parasitism" and should

21. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford, 1972), 1.

22. On the concept of *institutions*, see Ronald L. Jepperson, "Institutions, Institutional Effects, and Institutionalism," in Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago, 1991), 143–63. On the notion of *standardized interaction sequences*, see *ibid.*, 145.

therefore be interpreted as displays of nonconformity.²³ Clearly, Tony and Vesso were Schumpeterian entrepreneurs: they were “doing things that are not ordinarily done in the ordinary course” of existing economic routines and did not neglect the profit-generating aspects of their business.²⁴ The profit came from the price of recordings and cassettes—prices that over the course of the 1980s went up from two leva to two leva fifty stotinki for a recorded LP and from ten leva to fifteen for a high-quality cassette.²⁵ How Tony and Vesso procured the records on which their business was based was a subject they were reluctant to discuss with their clients. But the evidence I gathered suggests that the supply of LPs was ensured by effective networks that reproduced themselves over time because they generated profits shared by everyone involved.²⁶

Tony’s and Vesso’s prominent positions on the borsa can be explained with reference to the fact that, having amassed information about contemporary music, they assumed a dual role. On the one hand, they were connoisseurs who cultivated distinct tastes: while offering access to an array of musical recordings, they refused to record the Greek and Serbian hits popular with some young Bulgarians, thus voluntarily restricting their commercial activities to what they obviously perceived to be intrinsically valuable, as opposed to profitably exploitable, cultural products. On the other hand, they played the role of trustworthy business partners who engaged in lasting relationships with their clients.²⁷ In the mnemonic narratives about the borsa I gathered, the two entrepreneurs feature more as devoted aficionados and intellectual partners than providers of a particular service: “What I remember most vividly is the conversations I had with Vesso about music.”²⁸ The entrepreneurs were not perceived as businessmen by their clients: “They were not businessmen; they were educators.”²⁹ “I don’t think they were businessmen. They wanted to talk about the music; sometimes they would talk and talk even though I had already paid for the recording.”³⁰ The entrepreneurs would almost always record something “extra”—a song from a different album or a different band. In addition to being a savvy marketing strategy, this was also an effective mechanism for transmitting information about the rock universe: “They would regularly surprise me with something unexpected, and this is

23. Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012), 122–23.

24. See Joseph Schumpeter, “Economic Theory and Entrepreneurial History,” in Richard V. Clemence, ed., *Essays on Entrepreneurs, Innovations, Business Cycles, and the Evolution of Capitalism* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1989), 259.

25. The average monthly salary at the time was 180–200 leva, so what the entrepreneurs asked for was affordable. Notably, during the same decade, the communist authorities increased the fixed prices of consumer good on several occasions, so that the price hike for recordings was actually lower than general inflation.

26. Three hypotheses regarding supply were discussed by my respondents: (1) Tony and Vesso relied on truck drivers traveling beyond the Iron Curtain; (2) the records reached Sofia through the port cities of Varna and Burgas; and (3) the records were purchased from the teenage sons of high-ranking officials and intelligence officers stationed abroad.

27. Petrinski, Djingov, Stanchev, Pipkov, and Marius Velichkov, interviews.

28. Pipkov, interview.

29. Namev, interview.

30. Boiko Batov, interview.

how I learned about some of my favorite records.”³¹ “They would always tell me, If you like this band, why don’t you check out this other band?”³²

If another interesting feature of the economic activities on the bursa was that business there was conducted in accordance with informal rules intended to diminish, rather than amplify, the obvious asymmetry of power inherent in black market transactions involving entrepreneurs and clients. In the case of the bursa, this asymmetry stemmed primarily from the fact that payment always preceded the delivery of the final product. Customers who wanted to have an LP recorded on a tape would be given little notebooks that contained a list of all offerings, make their picks, pay the price upfront, and then an appointment would have to be arranged so that the buyer could receive the purchased music. For obvious reasons, this time lag between payment and delivery exposed customers to risks (relatively small ones if they had paid for only one recording but quite substantial losses if they had paid for multiple recordings and cassettes). One of my most striking findings, however, is that buyers of music were reportedly never cheated by the entrepreneurs.

Nothing better illustrates the importance of trust for the functioning of the bursa than the conflict resolution mechanisms that spontaneously evolved as the entrepreneurs and clients tried to sort out their disagreements. Inevitably, situations arose in which customers had reasons to complain—either the quality of the recording was poor or the music on their cassettes was different from what they had ordered. Such disputes were apparently always resolved in favor of the customer, with a new recording being made for free.³³ This fact demonstrates that the bursa was the only commercial establishment in communist Bulgaria where the principle of “the customer is always right” was scrupulously followed. But it also shows that for everyone involved, the sustainability and reproducibility of forged relationships was an abiding concern. Once again, the contrast with other black markets in Sofia is instructive: there, such concerns were largely absent. In fact, almost all of my informants shared stories with me of deceit and thefts perpetrated by other underground entrepreneurs, particularly those dealing in clothes and hard currency. In principle, the kind of trick played on the protagonist in Karen Shakhnazarov’s movie *Ischeznuvshaiia imperiia* (The Vanishing Empire, 2008)—he pays a hefty sum to an “entrepreneur” in Moscow for the Rolling Stones’ 1973 album *Goats Head Soup*, only to find out later that he has been given a recording of Petr Tchaikovskii’s *Swan Lake*—was not unknown to young Sofians, many of whom had been victimized in a similar fashion when they tried to obtain various western products through illicit channels. Remarkably, however, such tricks allegedly never occurred at the bursa. The black market for hard rock was a space in which the Durkheimian “non-contractual elements of contracts” spontaneously emerged and formed the basis of a sustainable pattern of relationships that were simultaneously business oriented and subculturally embedded.³⁴ It

31. Djingov, interview.

32. Georgiev, interview.

33. Djingov, Petrinski, and Georgiev, interviews.

34. See Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York, 1984), 154–65. It should be noted that according to Durkheim, “non-contractual relationships” are an

was also a site where mechanically reproduced works of art were creatively deployed in pursuit of authentic personhood and aesthetic ambitions—the scene of enchanting encounters between technology and culture.

The Borsa as a Site of Mechanical Reproductions of Works of Art

But my dreams,
They aren't as empty
As my conscience seems to be.

—The Who, “Behind Blue Eyes”

The borsa's mode of operation necessitated the duplication of western rock music on a massive scale. It is, therefore, important to emphasize that the borsa constituted what, with a nod to Walter Benjamin, might be called “the social basis of the mechanical reproduction of works of art.”³⁵ Whether Benjamin and his Frankfurt School colleagues would have considered products like AC/DC's *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap* (1976) works of art whose mechanical reproduction is worth discussing is a tantalizing question which I must put aside. More important for the purposes of this project, Benjamin's main ambition was to explore how technological advances affect the ways in which consumers interact with works of art; in light of this exploration, the black market for rock music would appear as a recognizably critical site: it could only function because tape decks and turntables (technology) made it possible for Bulgarian rock fans (newly emerged consumers) to gain access to rock music (works of art). Key dimensions of the borsa can therefore be adequately grasped only if we approach them with the help of the analytical lenses supplied by Benjamin. Interestingly, however, once his hypotheses are brought to bear on the study of the borsa, it becomes clear that the mechanical reproduction of rock music in late socialism frequently generated outcomes demonstrably different from the ones he anticipated.

Benjamin's proposition is that technology-driven reproductions strip original masterpieces of their aura and reduce works of art to “a plurality of copies” devoid of intrinsic value.³⁶ But the circulation of “a plurality of copies” in late socialism—whether among rock fans or lovers of literature who devoured samizdat publications—did not produce such results.³⁷ On the contrary: rec-

attribute of society. My argument is that they emerged in the borsa as an attribute of a discrete, anti-establishment subculture.

35. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1968), 217–51. My interpretation of Benjamin has been influenced by Dagmar Barnow, *Weimar Intellectuals and the Threat of Modernity* (Bloomington, 1988), and Jennifer Todd, “Production, Reception, Criticism: Walter Benjamin and the Problem of Meaning in Art,” *Philosophical Forum* 15, nos. 1–2, (Fall–Winter 1983–84): 105–27.

36. Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 221.

37. “The [samizdat] book might just be a copy of some original, but it also had the aura of a unique existence with its own individual history.” Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent*, 105.

ords and cassettes, commodities which Benjamin would undoubtedly have characterized as mechanically reproduced copies of live performances, acquired an irresistible aura.³⁸ Interestingly, this aura materialized irrespective of whether the rock fans in question lived in Britain in the 1950s or Bulgaria in the 1980s. In his critically acclaimed autobiography Keith Richards, of the Rolling Stones, maintains that it was vinyl LPs that were the highly valued building blocks of the distinct rock subculture to which he felt he belonged: “It was, always, all about records. From when I was eleven or twelve years old, it was who had the records who you hung with. They were precious things.”³⁹ In the same vein, Erik Davis, in a penetrating essay on the esoteric universe of *Led Zeppelin IV* (1971), makes the compelling argument that all studies of rock as a cultural phenomenon should pay heed to the following fact: “Whatever airs the music wore—of sex or transport or rebel fun—rock was also a *thing*, a manufactured and packaged chunk of media whose stimulating powers over body and soul lay coiled in a black groove, awaiting the vibrating probe of an electrically charged machine.”⁴⁰

What transpired at the bursa in Sofia confirms the transcultural validity of such observations. In the memories of bursa regulars, things like records and cassettes invariably feature as awe-inspiring objects: the records’ “stimulating power over body and soul” was very much alive. The most graphic comment I heard was that “stripping the LP of its cellophane wrap was like deflowering a virgin,” but even respondents who were not willing to bring the conversation to orgasmic heights would readily admit that looking at the records, touching them, and anticipating the moment when they would release their magic was a special experience for everyone involved.⁴¹ Even before emitting a single sound, the LPs radiated with an enigmatic glow, like shining black pieces of meteorite that confirm the existence of an alluring but unreachable universe. What really happened when musical works of art began to be mechanically reproduced is not that the originals lost their aura but that the copies acquired an aura of their own.

Another widely discussed Benjaminian thesis is that the circulation of copies destroys the emotional authenticity of interactions between connoisseurs and true artistic masterpieces and will reduce encounters with works of art to identical series of ersatz cultural experiences—or, to use his own language, techniques of reproduction will recreate “in the field of perception” a lamentable situation that has already transpired in other social fields, namely, “the increasing importance of statistics.”⁴²

The bursa, however, generated a distinctly different cultural dynamic, one typical for what, in a study of Indian music, ethnomusicologist Peter Manuel describes as “cassette culture.” Like in India, in late socialist Bulgaria the circulation of recorded music also posed “a challenge to one-way, monopolistic,

38. Benjamin mainly discusses “picture magazines and newsreels” in the essay. Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 223. He does not offer a systematic analysis of the cultural significance of the mechanical reproduction of music.

39. Keith Richards, *Life* (New York, 2010), 80.

40. Erik Davis, *Led Zeppelin’s “Led Zeppelin IV”* (New York, 2005), 13. Emphasis in the original.

41. Namev, Ganchev, Djingov, and Stefan Kiutchukov, interviews.

42. Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 223.

homogenizing tendencies” and fostered the emergence of “specialized, local, grass-root audiences rather than a homogeneous mass market”—except, of course, that it was the homogenizing tendencies of the communist regime’s media that were challenged and the regimented market for socialist cultural products that was deliberately abandoned.⁴³ Put differently, the borsa’s products were not used as indistinguishable bricks in the service of the egalitarian masonry of cultural sameness; they were embraced as bric-a-brac with which every buyer could create his own unique self. It is precisely this ambition that Nick Hornby brilliantly captures when he describes the feelings of the main character in his novel *High Fidelity* (1995): “This is my life, and it’s nice to be able to wade in it, immerse your arms in it, touch it. . . . I pull the records off the shelves, put them in piles all over the sitting room floor . . . and when I am finished I’m flushed with a sense of self, because this, after all, is who I am.”⁴⁴ The borsa’s frequenters were motivated by the exact same desire: to create for themselves a statistics-defying individuality. In the words of one of my respondents, “The best thing about my collection was that it was *mine*: it consisted of records *I* bought, recordings *I* made, music *I* discovered. I still keep all the records and cassettes from that time, because they are a part of my adolescence I do not want to outgrow.”⁴⁵ The mechanical reproduction of rock music did not generate objects of manufactured desire but enchanted cultural fragments that made possible a quest for an authentic personhood. Hence, the availability of ersatz copies made possible novel projects of self-invention.

Finally, Benjamin proposes that the mechanical reproduction of works of art triggers a process of consumerism-driven cultural homogenization. Among the most important consequences of the spread of technological devices, he asserts, is “the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life”; the true significance of this trend lies in the fact that the domain of culture will be reshaped in accordance with the masses’ “desire . . . to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanely.” Unable to appreciate the true value of authentic masterpieces embedded in robust artistic traditions, crowds of consumers can only hope to shorten the aesthetic distances they encounter through acts of experiential mimicry and cultural parroting. Their self-assertiveness will obliterate “the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction” and expunge aesthetic sensibilities that valorize qualitative differences and cultural distinctiveness.⁴⁶

That the reproduction of rock music in late socialism was motivated by the desire to imitate the west is a plausible proposition. Undoubtedly, the appropriation of this aesthetic idiom should be construed as an attempt “to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanely,” and those who partook in this appropriation might be portrayed as cultural arrivistes anxious to overcome a collective ignorance of which they were acutely aware. In a revealing interview, Milan “Mejla” Hlavsa, a member of the famous Czechoslovak band the Plastic People of the Universe, made the following statement: “Exchanges developed

43. Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (Chicago, 1993), xiv, 2.

44. Nick Hornby, *High Fidelity* (London, 1995), 52.

45. Djingov, interview.

46. Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 223.

later in the 1970's to swap, buy and sell vinyl records, so we weren't complete Neanderthals [sic]."⁴⁷ The term *Neanderthal* captures a particular feeling with which many east European rock fans were all too familiar: the sense that they were nothing more than unsophisticated primitives forever destined to remain peripheral observers of a spectacle created by others and unfolding elsewhere. After all, Tony, Vesso, and their young customers had never traveled to the west, had never attended a rock concert by a world famous band, had no access to the commercial infrastructures through which the art they loved was disseminated, and spoke almost no English. It should not be surprising, therefore, that the rise of a rock subculture in the "Second World" has been characterized in ways that resonate with Benjamin's contention that the spread of technology makes it possible for "the masses" to engage in cultural mimicry. Stephen Ashley, for example, ridicules Bulgarian rock fans' behavior as an effort "to imitate and copy Western tastes," undertaken by irredeemably provincial parvenus who, having grown up in "a peripheral and isolated country," suffered from "an ingrained sense of inferiority."⁴⁸

An alternative interpretation is also possible—an explanation grounded in the understanding that a "Neanderthal" who recognizes his own condition as existing in a state of forced cultural deprivation is no longer a Neanderthal. Put differently, the very lack of satisfaction with what one "is" and the desire to become something different, as well as the awareness that such becoming can only be realized through imaginative appropriations of culturally unmapped territories, indicates that the borsa fans were something more than imitators. They could arguably be characterized not as consumers interested in the lowest common denominator of works of art but as cultural entrepreneurs who tried to come up with innovative solutions to a very real problem: how to gain access to a form of artistry whose thunder they could hear but from which they were separated by the Iron Curtain. More broadly, the reproduction of hard rock did not foster a mass mentality; rather, it was an essential component of both the individualistic projects of self-creation and the collective effort to nurture bonds of sociability.

My comments on Benjamin demonstrate that his insights may be productively deployed in analyses of cultural phenomena that began to emerge decades after his suicide.⁴⁹ But at least one of his claims seems demonstrably erroneous, namely that when works of art are mechanically reproduced, things are brought "'closer' spatially and humanely" and cultural homogenization ensues. What Benjamin failed to consider is the following hypothesis: the effort to reduce cultural distances may trigger not homogenization but a dialectical interplay of the simultaneous erasure and creation of separateness. At places like the borsa, things were not just decontextualized copies of something more "real," they were recontextualized in order to demarcate the borsa

47. Richie Unterberger, "Interview with Milan Hlavsa," at www.richieunterberger.com/hlavsa.html (last accessed 22 January 2014). Emphasis added.

48. Ashley, "The Bulgarian Rock Scene," 141.

49. For a pertinent critique of Benjamin and the Frankfurt School, see Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution*, vol. 3, *The Breakdown* (Oxford, 1978), 341–420.

as a topos of difference. Moreover, the determined effort to narrow certain cultural gaps through purchases of rock-related items was not a manifestation of a disturbing propensity for egalitarian leveling. This effort was propelled by the willingness to mark off the borsa from its communist environment—to demarcate it as a place in which alternative values decisively at odds with a hegemonic political culture could be openly expressed. Or, put simply, the borsa was a political space.

The Borsa as a Political Space

There must be some kind of way out of here . . .

—Jimi Hendrix, “All Along the Watchtower”

The contention that the emergence of a rock subculture in the eastern bloc is a phenomenon with political implications cannot be disputed in good faith. Just what kind of politics it exemplifies is a question to which two different answers have been proffered. Up until recently the conventionally accepted view was that east Europeans embraced rock music because they rejected official socialist dogmas. Political scientists like Sabrina Petra Ramet, musicologists like Richard Taruskin, catholic intellectuals like Václav Benda, musicians like Bulgarian rocker Kosio Atanasov, sociologists like Anna Szemere, and dissidents like novelist György Konrád have all agreed that the social principles, ethical norms, and aesthetic tastes which rock epitomized were incompatible with reigning Marxist ideology and that rock music was the muse of many antiregime activists across the Soviet empire.⁵⁰

This proposition was recently questioned by Alexei Yurchak. His main argument is that rock fans were loyal to, rather than disdainful of, the regimes under which they lived. According to him, the very “forms of existence” of subcultures such as rock fans’ were grounded in “principles that were central to the functioning of the late Soviet system, not to being in opposition to it.”⁵¹ Or, to quote one of the most memorable phrases in Yurchak’s book, “It did not seem contradictory to be passionate both about [Vladimir] Lenin and Led

50. See Ramet, “Rock,” 2; Richard Taruskin, *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley, 2010), 72; and Szemere, *Up from the Underground*. Benda states, “In some areas like literature and . . . popular music, the parallel culture overshadows the lifeless, official culture.” Václav Benda, “The Parallel ‘Polis,’” in H. Gordon Skilling and Paul Wilson, eds., *Civic Freedom in Central Europe: Voices from Czechoslovakia* (New York, 1991), 37. Kosio Atanasov expressed the following opinion: “The communists made it so that the most democratic music was declared to be counterrevolutionary and dangerous. Thus all rock fans automatically counted themselves to the right of the political spectrum and became anti-communists without even thinking about it.” Quoted in Rumén Ianev, *Vkusut na vremeto: Shturtsite, Bŭlgarskata rok legenda* (Sofia, 2007), 21. And Konrád notes, “The antipoliticians . . . want to free biology and religion, rock music and animal husbandry from the pathological bloat of the political state. . . . An antipolitician is someone who wants to put the state on a strict diet and doesn’t mind being called antistate because of it.” György Konrád, *Antipolitics: An Essay* (New York, 1984), 229.

51. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 156.

Zeppelin.”⁵² Whereas others have seen the politics of rock as an expression of dissent and a rejection of the status quo, Yurchak construes it as a form of affirmation of and allegiance to the communist system.

Analysts who wish to enter this debate should be reminded that many of the issues central to it are empirical in nature. This means that the conversation about how the rock subculture was related to the hegemonic socialist culture must proceed on the assumption that views on the subject will vary depending on the constituency a researcher focuses on. In Yurchak’s case, the constituency is *komsomoltsi*, the communist youth activists who were loyal to the party and, as he demonstrates, willing to serve as its brutal enforcers.⁵³ Undoubtedly, Yurchak would have heard very different opinions about the compatibility of the values exemplified by western rock with Leninism had he talked to dissidents like Vladimir Sorokin, who describes his first encounter with Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love” (1969) in the following way: “It was the unforgettable lesson of freedom. It was probably on that very day that I spontaneously became a dissident.”⁵⁴ Similarly, differing opinions would likely have been expressed by the Latvian rock fans who were arrested because they founded a John Lennon Peace Committee in Riga or the young citizens of Dnepropetrovsk whose attitudes Sergei Zhuk summarizes in the following way: “Music by the Beatles, Deep Purple, and Andrew Lloyd Weber was a point of *cultural fixation* for thousands of young people. . . . [Its popularity] highlights the complete failure of Soviet ideologists and the KGB to protect the youth . . . from ‘ideological pollution.’”⁵⁵

The main question with regard to the politics of the *borsa*, then, might be formulated in the following way: given that the *borsa* phenomenon may be interpreted in different ways depending on how socially constructed notions such as *socialism* and *rock*—or *Lenin* and *Led Zeppelin*—are situated within webs of shared meanings, which interpretation do the facts support?

The data I collected suggest that the *borsa* was not the site of overtly political restlessness. My interviewees do not remember it as the scene of opposition politics. They readily acknowledged that, for the most part, their daily lives consisted of acts of compliance with the rules and practices established by the regime: they went to school, attended obligatory Komsomol meetings, and took part in the mandatory public rituals celebrating the greatness of the Communist Party. Visits to the *borsa* were not retroactively construed as a deliberately subversive activity: “Just because I went there does not mean that I considered myself a dissident. I knew that what I was doing violated

52. *Ibid.*, 219.

53. Yurchak describes an incident in which a group of rock-loving young activists ruthlessly purged from the communist youth organization a young Christian who refused to renounce his religion. *Ibid.*, 112–13.

54. Vladimir Sorokin, “On Hearing ‘Whole Lotta Love’ for the First Time in Moscow,” *New York Times*, 10 March 2010, at www.nytimes.com/2010/03/11/opinion/11iht-edsorokin.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (last accessed 10 April 2014).

55. On the John Lennon Peace Committee incident, see *Soviet Nationality Survey* 1, no. 6 (June 1984): 3. On popular music in Dnepropetrovsk, see Sergei I. Zhuk, “Religion, ‘Westernization,’ and Youth in the ‘Closed City’ of Soviet Ukraine, 1964–1984,” *Russian Review* 67, no. 4 (October 2008), 679. Emphasis in the original.

the law, but, frankly, I never thought about that as a big deal.”⁵⁶ “It was all about spending time with nice guys, talking about music, and having fun.”⁵⁷ The conversations in which the borsa regulars typically engaged rarely spilled over into discussions about issues like human rights, freedom, and democracy: “The spirit of the borsa was the spirit of fandom. Music is what it was all about. Subjects like democracy or anything like that were simply never broached.”⁵⁸ The borsa appeared not to emanate political impulses that threatened communist autocracy.

Do such facts warrant the conclusion that rock fans were simply loyal socialist subjects with idiosyncratic musical tastes? Analysts who might be tempted to rush to this conclusion should heed James C. Scott’s wise warning: “We are in danger of making serious mistakes . . . whenever we infer anything at all about the beliefs and attitudes of anyone solely on the basis that he or she has engaged in an apparently deferential act,” and the most serious mistake would be to overlook the possibility that individuals and groups who dutifully follow the rules enforced by a repressive regime may be acting in accordance with “a transcript of resistance.”⁵⁹ The interviews I conducted attest to the fact that such a “transcript” actually existed. The borsa should therefore be interpreted as a site of dissent. Since *dissent* is a term that covers an array of different modes of behavior and cultural sensibilities, however, it is necessary to be clear about what the political aspects of the black market for rock music were.⁶⁰

Two groups of interrelated facts are important for understanding the politics of the borsa: first, the binary “us versus them” was the operative code for understanding how the place was situated vis-à-vis its environment; and second, it was perceived and valorized as the epitome of an alternative publicness that rendered possible unorthodox forms of consuming leisure time.

Us versus Them

Tons of ink have been unnecessarily spilled since the 1980s over the “us versus them” dyad, mostly by scholars complaining that the dichotomy is too simplistic.⁶¹ Such critics should perhaps remember Max Weber’s analysis of the cognitive predicament inherent in the very attempt to describe reality in analytical terms and, more specifically, his argument that the quest for interpretative categories that fully capture reality is destined to fail.⁶² What

56. Pipkov, interview.

57. Velichkov, interview.

58. Petrinski, interview.

59. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990), 23.

60. For excellent discussions of the analytical and empirical aspects of the notion of dissent, see Barbara J. Falk, “Resistance and Dissent in Central and Eastern Europe,” *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 2 (May 2011), 318–60; and Ann Komaromi, “Samizdat and Soviet Dissident Politics,” *Slavic Review* 71, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 70–90.

61. See Yurchak, “Late Socialism: An Eternal State,” in *Everything Was Forever*, 1–35.

62. See Max Weber, *Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. and ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (New York, 1949).

Weber's insights mean is that the popular charge that the use of various analytical tools results in "simplifications" is largely meaningless because this charge can be leveled against any set of analytical tools without exception. From that vantage point the "us versus them" interpretative framework might certainly be judged crude as an analytical device in certain contexts—but a very sharp instrument in others.

The case of the borsa serves as an example of a set of circumstances to which the binary is readily applicable. One particular rendition of the "us versus them" dyad is particularly important in that regard—a rendition brilliantly formulated by György Konrád: "The working day is theirs, the free time is ours."⁶³ The symbolic significance of the regular visits to the borsa fit this east European axiom rather well: after long hours of comportsing themselves in accordance with the regime's rules, rock fans quickly switched gears and embarked on defiantly chosen pursuits. The key factor about the borsa, however, is that by being there, the regulars did not just escape from but also directly confronted "them." And that is because the site was frequently raided by the communist police. One of the most important political facts about the borsa, therefore, is that virtually all regulars were at one point or another beaten up or detained.⁶⁴ It is this reality that my female respondents referred to when they explained their reluctance to hang out there.⁶⁵ The expectation that visits to the borsa would ensure the reconstitution of a "we" was inextricably linked to the notion that the locale was monitored by a ruthless "they," ready to deploy violence in order to disrupt it.

The realization that the black market for rock music was simultaneously a revered site and the target of hostile aggression was constitutive of the dominant sentiment that shaped the regulars' attitudes, a sentiment described by Gaston Bachelard as *topophilia*, an amalgam of emotions that includes an appreciation of "the human value of [a] space . . . the space we love with all the partiality of the imagination" but also the understanding that this space must "be defended against adverse forces."⁶⁶ That the borsa was a site to be "defended against adverse forces" was the very problem rock fans had to cope with. For some of them, the knowledge that they might incur the wrath of the regime served as a deterrent: "The first time I went there, I could see black pieces of broken LPs on the ground. The police had attacked the previous evening and had destroyed every record they could put their hands on. So I felt that this might be a dangerous place and went back there only once."⁶⁷ "I used to go, but, frankly, I was scared. I never went there to hang out—just to collect my recordings."⁶⁸ Others, however, took "defense" of the space more seriously: "Of course I would go back. I would not let them take that away from me."⁶⁹ "I knew the bastards could strike at any moment, but going there was important for me. I would take my chances—almost on a daily basis."⁷⁰

63. Konrád, *Antipolitics*, 203.

64. Djingov, Velichkov, and Petrinski, interviews.

65. Dimitrova, Peeva, and Kiutchukova, interviews.

66. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, Mass., 1994), xxxv–xxxvi.

67. Ganchev, interview.

68. Batov, interview.

69. Djingov, interview.

70. Petrinski, interview.

That an intelligible transcript of resistance shaped the rock fans' perceptions is also evident from the fact that during the interviews they routinely resorted to what Scott describes as a distinctly "oppositional linguistic code" in order to describe "them."⁷¹ Specifically, when discussing their harassers, several borsa regulars used the word *kuka* (slang, "hook") rather than *chenge* (slang, "cop").⁷² *Chenge* was the generic term used to designate a uniform-wearing, low-ranking policeman patrolling the streets. A *kuka*, in contrast, was a mid-ranking, plainclothes officer working for state security and tasked with handling exclusively antiparty and antiregime activities (his primary function was to trawl through the crowds and catch, or "hook," citizens who made derogatory or offensive comments about the socialist system). The use of a linguistic code suggests that the borsa is remembered not just as the site of illegal transactions but as the scene of ideological transgressions. As already discussed, the black market for rock music comprised in a unique way both a series of illicit deals (buying from unauthorized sellers) and a series of ideologically suspicious acts (acquiring western rock music). When the regulars reflected on the dangers to which they were exposed, it was not the former but the latter point that was underscored. This piece of linguistic evidence I adduce shows that the borsa's rock fans understood very well that they were under surveillance not because they were buying and selling illegally (which was something "cops" would be concerned about) but because they were listening to western music (and such modes of behavior were under the jurisdiction of "hooks").⁷³

Admittedly, the borsa's transcript of resistance did not call for self-sacrificial acts: a valiant determination to stand up to the police was not an element of the élan permeating the place. In that regard, the ethos shared by rock fans was reminiscent of the ethos of the Bulgarian folk musicians studied by Carol Silverman who, while consistently defying the regime, did not consider "bravery" to be "central to their identity" and "did not seek to become heroes because of lofty anti-government principles."⁷⁴ Likewise, the borsa regulars' attitude seems to have been that the most appropriate reaction to a police raid was the rather unheroic act of running away. It would, therefore, be misleading to describe the borsa as hallowed ground on which this grand drama, the struggle against oppression, played itself out. But the fact that the contrast between "us" and "them" was a defining feature of the site is undeniable: the lucid realization that "they" forced "us" into retreat one day did not undermine the shared understanding that "we" would reconvene again the next. It might be a sign of romantic indulgence to depict the borsa as a site exemplifying the courage of the victimized, and there can be no doubt that the regime could have easily shut down the borsa once and for all.⁷⁵ Likewise,

71. On oppositional linguistic codes, see Scott, "Making Social Space for a Dissident Subculture," in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 108–36.

72. Namev, Petrinski, and Djingov, interviews.

73. After 1989 the term *kuka* rapidly fell into disuse, and it is probably unfamiliar to the newer generations of Bulgarians.

74. Carol Silverman, "Bulgarian Wedding Music between Folk and *Chalga*: Politics, Markets, and Current Productions," *Musicology* 7 (2007): 75.

75. Why the police chose not to do so is a question that goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, my respondents mentioned two hypotheses: (1) some police officers

however, it would be a sign of analytical shortsightedness to fail to note that it was a place driven by the politics of resistance—by the deliberate and resilient pursuit of heterodox alternatives construed as a long-term project.

Alternative Publicness

That the bursa was a place where the “us versus them” stand-off was continually reenacted is one important reason why it should be described as a locus of dissident energies. But its most important political characteristic was that it was a site of alternative publicness. The place’s very existence was the consequence of a series of spontaneous acts aimed at the purposeful reclaiming of a public location that was subsequently transformed not into a private domain but a space visibly epitomizing unorthodox communal aspirations. Why did the black market for rock music operate in such a way that it was open to an array of urban gazes, undoubtedly including those of policemen, and why did the effort to symbolically cordon it off from the surrounding urban landscape persist even though it was fraught with risks? Certainly, this publicness was not related to any functional necessity: the “business”—arranging the transfer of rock music from LP records to cassettes—might have been conducted as easily, and less riskily, in private apartments, or in more secluded places like backyards or parks. The only plausible answer is that the bursa’s conspicuousness was deemed desirable—what the rock fans who sustained it wished to engage in was a public life visibly different from the official one imposed by the authorities.

There are two aspects of this alternative public life that are worth accentuating. First, the bursa made possible a particular type of leisure. Hanging out at the bursa was a leisurely activity—what Thorstein Veblen described as “non-productive consumption of time.”⁷⁶ However, it was a nonproductive consumption of time that departed from the two notions of leisure tolerated under socialist regimes: the ideologically orthodox but practically unenforced notion that *nonproductive* consumption of time is legitimate insofar as it allows citizens to replenish their *productive* potential, and the ideologically dubious but practically endorsed notion that that leisure should be devoted to private consumerist pursuits (such as the “weekend getaways” encouraged in “normalized” Czechoslovakia).⁷⁷ In contrast to the former, the bursa was

received a cut of Tony’s and Vesso’s profits; and (2) many of the teenagers frequenting the bursa were in fact the sons of high-ranking officials, which motivated the police to exercise some restraint. I would add two additional hypotheses: (3) since the site was visible and activities predictable, officials preferred to monitor it rather than drive the entire black market for hard rock underground; and (4) throughout the 1980s the communists’ repressive apparatuses had to deal with crises compared to which the bursa was a minor problem (e.g., carrying out the party’s assimilationist policies vis-à-vis the Turkish minority and nipping rapidly emerging dissident movements in the bud).

76. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York, 1979), 28.

77. On the officially sanctioned notion of leisure, see Stephen Lovell, “Leisure in Russia: ‘Free’ Time and Its Uses,” *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, no. 3 (2006): 123–54; and Gleb Tspirsky, “Having Fun in the Thaw: Youth Initiative Clubs in the Post-Stalin Years,” *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 2201 (2012): 1–68. On consumption-oriented leisure in Czechoslovakia, see Paulina Bren, “Weekend Get-

a place where the consumption of time was conspicuously unrelated to any productive processes. In contrast to the latter, it was a distinct locale where a group of people coordinated their activities in an effort to pursue shared objectives and maintain a form of unsanctioned togetherness.

Second, the leisurely activities associated with the borsa were animated by a quest for cultural distinction which inevitably involved the conspicuous violation of “their” taboos. Pierre Bourdieu maintained that the central fact about the pursuit of cultural distinction is that “art and cultural consumption” fulfill “a social function of legitimating social differences.”⁷⁸ This definition illuminates the politics of the borsa rather well. In Soviet-type dictatorships, any attempt to legitimate differences other than those officially sanctioned by the authorities contained an element of resistance. Sometimes this resistance was expressed in a low-key manner. A good example is the behavior of Spartak Moscow’s supporters, analyzed by Robert Edelman: for them, the display of allegiance to “the people’s” club (as opposed to soccer clubs championed by the Communist Party) was “a small way of saying ‘no’ to all that was going on around them.”⁷⁹ In comparison, the creation of distinction at the borsa was much more emphatic and defiant: it was propelled not by the consumption of cultural spectacles with indeterminate political content, like soccer, but by the appropriation of an aesthetic phenomenon unambiguously associated with the west and therefore denounced as alien. Leisurely activities at the borsa thus accentuated the detachment of a group of like-minded people from the values and hierarchies of status that constituted the ideological armature of Soviet-style socialism—and attested to their determination to interact with the system that surrounded them, not on its terms but on their own.

The argument for there having been a “transcript of resistance” revolving around the “us versus them” distinction as well as an effort to create an alternative publicness is bolstered by interpreting the borsa from a diachronic point of view. A close-up look at how youngsters’ behavior in communist Bulgaria evolved over time allows us to discern how, with the rise of the borsa, the evolution of the rock subculture in Bulgaria reached a qualitatively new, more politicized stage. As Karin Taylor points out, in the 1960s and 1970s most young people in Bulgaria, including those who regularly listened to rock music, preferred “to operate inside the socialist codes without crossing into the precarious territories of opposition or non-conformity.”⁸⁰ By the 1980s, however, this same constituency had learned *precisely* how to operate within the system and adroitly cross into those “precarious territories.” The term *crossing*, with its implication of a visibly divided cultural-political space, is a fairly accurate depiction of the general rationale that guided the multiplicity of personal decisions as a result of which the borsa was sustained as an institu-

aways: The *Chata*, the Tramp and the Politics of Private Life in Post-1968 Czechoslovakia,” in David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, eds., *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (Oxford, 2002), 123–40.

78. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 7.

79. Robert Edelman, *Spartak Moscow: A History of the People’s Team in the Workers’ State* (Ithaca, 2009), 2.

80. Taylor, *Let’s Twist Again*, 210.

tion. Or, as one of my respondents put it, “Leaving the drudgery of school and everything else behind and jumping into the rock universe—that was really great!”⁸¹ What this quote makes clear is that the borsa provided an opportunity for a symbolic exit from the domain of hollow officiality and an entry into a space defined by its difference. Those who simply sought entertainment could listen to music in their own homes. Those who “crossed” into the borsa performed an act that validated the symbolic ordering of two distinct public domains: the inferior domain of work and school, official duties (including Komsomol activities), and party propaganda, and the superior domain of aesthetic adventures, an iconoclastic communal spirit, and countercultural aspirations.

Conclusion: Music, Contested Spaces, and Politics in Late Socialist Bulgaria

What does the rise of the borsa tell us about late socialism in Bulgaria? First and foremost, the emergence of a robust black market for rock music demonstrates that the country was undergoing transformations quite similar to those transpiring elsewhere in the region. One of the most important characteristics of the period usually described as “the era of late socialism” is the “move away from the revolutionary values of asceticism, collectivism, and proletarianism” and the concomitant rise of “consumption as a varied cultural practice that reflects different identity projects.”⁸² The borsa exemplifies this shift and the attendant diversification of the Bulgarian cultural landscape. Central to this process of change were consumers’ choices, and such choices are best understood as “subjective statements with objective implications about who they were and what they thought about the world around them. These were matters of identity and their preferences had political meaning.”⁸³ Individuals’ decisions regarding what, where, and how to consume were propelled by cultural ferment intermingled with political energies. These energies were not necessarily antiregime or anticommunist. From the fact that late socialist subjects eagerly seized the opportunity to make choices does not follow that they rejected the system under which they were living. Some novel forms of cultural consumption arguably reflected the desire to find new ways of being “socialist.” But it is also undeniable that as the 1970s and 1980s unfolded, the opportunities to challenge the regime through conspicuous consumption of certain cultural products also multiplied. The rise of the borsa—a public space which both rock fans and communist authorities perceived as a topos where such challenges were choreographed—shows that transformative processes in Bulgaria fit into this more general pattern.

At the same time, I submit that the borsa phenomenon brings into sharp relief two important characteristics specific to Bulgarian late socialism: the

81. Beninski, interview.

82. Gulnaz Sharafutdinova and Neringa Klumbyte, “Introduction: What Was Late Socialism?” in Neringa Klumbyte and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, eds., *Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964–1985* (Lanham, Md., 2013), 3, 6.

83. Edelman, *Spartak Moscow*, 2.

extraordinary significance of music as a cultural idiom for expressing dissident sentiments, and the emphasis on what might be called the “occupation of spaces” as a preferred oppositional tactic. In a groundbreaking study Donna Buchanan points out that “the complex interaction of music, politics, and identity in Bulgarian society” is key for understanding local cultural and political dynamics, and in the emerging body of literature on 1980s Bulgaria one finds ample confirmation of this claim.⁸⁴ Dimitrina Kaufman, for example, provocatively characterizes the “wedding orchestras” that gained enormous popularity as “dissident formations,” because their music departed from the canons of socialist folkloric art and the activities of these musicians revolved around an alternative worldview that valorized economic entrepreneurship, personal autonomy, and deliberate detachment from the all-pervasive structures of the communist state.⁸⁵ In a biography of *kaval* player Teodosii Spassov, Vladimir Gadzhev makes a similar point about the community of jazz musicians: the regime made a strenuous effort to monitor their behavior, but these artists proved willing and able to transmit to their audiences unsanctioned aesthetic messages and ideologically suspect cultural idioms.⁸⁶ My analysis of the borsa phenomenon confirms the validity of this interpretation of late socialism in Bulgaria: the quest for ideological alternatives was oriented toward various musical genres.

This quest was not necessarily motivated by anticommunist militancy, but it clearly had political ramifications. To borrow Padraic Kenney’s language, while performative acts of cultural consumption in Bulgaria did not amount to “waging a war against the regime” they did “rupture the monologue of the Party—not with a persuasive argument, but with a cacophony of insistent and derisive voices.”⁸⁷ Timothy Rice’s argument about consumers of wedding music in 1980s Bulgaria—namely, that within this community of listeners “antigovernment sentiments were carried . . . effectively and powerfully in the musical sounds themselves”—is fully applicable to the borsa fans as well.⁸⁸ The important fact about musical sounds in Bulgaria is that they are multiple—and cacophonous. Readers who associate Bulgarian music with the mellifluousness of mysterious voices will perhaps be startled by the term *cacophonous*, but it is precisely what Mark Slobin describes as a “leap into the musical maelstrom”—the wealth of sounds, the simultaneous reverberations of an array of tunes, the growing appreciation for a wide variety of melodies and noises—that allows us to analyze the role of music in late socialism.⁸⁹ My

84. Donna Buchanan, *Performing Democracy: Bulgarian Music and Musicians in Transition* (Chicago, 2006), 6.

85. Dimitrina Kaufman, “Suvremennite svatbarski orkestri kato ‘disidentski’ formatsii,” *Bŭlgarski folklor* 21, no. 6 (1995): 49–57.

86. Vladimir Gadzhev, *Teodosii Spassov: Presledvashtiia zvuksi* (Sofia, 2012). Among the many virtues of this book is its extensive coverage of developments that transpired outside Sofia, particularly in Plovdiv, Sopot, and Ruse.

87. Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989* (Princeton, 2002), 5.

88. Timothy Rice, *Music in Bulgaria: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (Oxford, 2004), 73.

89. Mark Slobin, introduction to Mark Slobin, ed., *Retuning Culture: Musical Changes in Central and Eastern Europe* (Durham, 1996), 2.

analysis of the black market for rock confirms that the rise of new musical tastes in the country decisively shaped subcultural communities, processes of identity formation, and novel forms of sociability.

Of course, the fact that hundreds of youngsters frequented the *borsa* should not be interpreted to mean that Bulgaria was about to undergo a democratic revolution. The country's reputation as the most docile Soviet satellite is well deserved. But even there the political terrain was being redrawn.⁹⁰ The *borsa* phenomenon illustrates an important aspect of this general tendency: those who wished to challenge the regime preferred a specific tactic—the occupation of spaces. For example, in her study of “oral discursive resistance” in 1980s Bulgaria, Albena Lutzkanova-Vassileva describes how those who practiced this form of politics tried to appropriate “small, inconspicuous university offices while gradually moving to larger halls and auditoriums.”⁹¹ Along the same lines, in her study of the coalescence of anticommunist intellectual circles in Sofia, Miglena Nikolchina demonstrates that the first step undertaken by dissident groups was the “acquisition” of certain sites and their transformation into “impure spaces” contaminated by heretical ideas.⁹² This was precisely the tactic spontaneously chosen by *borsa* fans as well: they cordoned it off from the surrounding urban landscape and turned it into the focal point of their nonconformist energies.

Among the more significant aspects of late socialism in Bulgaria, then, one should count the heightened audibility of a politically important cacophony of musical genres and the fracturing of the regime's monopolistic control over public spaces. Put differently, the spatial transformation of socialist landscapes should be construed as a series of political positionings, and more frequently than not this process was animated by the sound of music. The black market for rock music exemplifies both developments. But it also reveals something which observers prone to see this era solely as a time of changes, shifts, and transformations should not forget: amid the flux, stable cultural meanings had begun to congeal. It is this semiotics of the taken-for-granted to which Milan Kundera alludes in an essay on the impact of the Soviet invasion on Czechoslovak society: “Right in the middle of Prague, Wenceslaus Square, there is this guy throwing up. And this other guy comes along, takes a look at him, shakes his head, and says: ‘I know just what you mean.’”⁹³ By the mid-1980s, the question of what attitudes toward the regime were compatible with a genuine devotion to rock music was no longer an issue surrounded by

90. On the indigenous human rights movement, see Ivan Gadzhev, *Neprimirimiāt: Iliā Minev or purvo litse i drugite za nego* (Sofia, 2003). On dissident activism in Bulgaria in the 1980s more generally, see Natal'ia Khristova, *Spetsifika na bŭlgarskoto disidentstvo: Vlast i inteligentsiia, 1956–1989* (Plovdiv, 2005). On the secret police's growing concerns about the regime's ability to quell ideological dissent, see Dimitar Ivanov, *Shesti otdel* (Sofia, 2004).

91. Albena Lutzkanova-Vassileva, “Spoken Revolutions: Discursive Resistance in Bulgarian Late Communist Culture,” *Poetics Today* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 138–39.

92. Miglena Nikolchina, “The Seminar: *Mode d'emploi*; Impure Spaces in the Light of Late Totalitarianism,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 98–99.

93. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York, 1981), 7.

the cultural ambivalences and hermeneutic uncertainties that render a multiplicity of choices contextually plausible. As Yurchak reports, the *komsomolets* who believed that he could be “passionate both about Lenin and Led Zeppelin” eventually found out he would have to choose one or the other.⁹⁴ The choice he made was identical to the one made by the borsa fans, and it reflects a simple truth about what listening to Led Zeppelin actually meant in eastern Europe in the 1980s: it meant that you did not like Lenin.

94. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 294–95.