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Creating the post-socialist middle-class mother: Global hierarchies and local distinctions

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Abstract

This paper discusses the ways class distinctions are upheld through the performance of culturally valued childcare practices in a post-socialist capital: Sofia. It is based on 19 in-depth interviews, concerned with the mundane everyday lives of first-time middle-class mothers on maternity leave. I use feminist critical discourse analysis to trace the ways classed power shapes the meaning my interviewees attach to their experiences of motherhood.

Feminist academic literature on motherhood, generally originating in the global west, has long demonstrated how the labour-intensive, financially demanding and time-consuming practices of middle-class mothers historically inform the very idea of 'good' motherhood. Seeing the child as a project in need of managing, via an amalgam of diligent provision of organic home-cooked food options, skilful manoeuvring around pre-school selection and an endless supply of extracurricular activities, has been exposed as middle-class privilege and thoroughly critiqued. These practices are implicitly opposed to the more intuitive parenting styles of the working classes. However, automatically linking specific childcare rituals with a certain class standing is also a symptom of the global inequalities in knowledge production, which tend to naturalise western realities as universal truths.

My research shows that class distinction, rather than being produced by the exact practices parents engage in, is the outcome of processes of symbolic and material exclusion through which one imagines oneself as superior. The mothering styles of the socially privileged correlate with the norms enforced by childcare experts and state institutions around the world, but these styles are essentially 'glocal' designs. 'Good' middle-class mothers in post-socialist Europe anxiously manage their classed performance of motherhood with an awareness of their inferior position in the global class ladder. As such, Bulgarian 'glocally-appropriate' parenting merges two symbolic strategies in order to secure a relative and fragile economic privilege: mothers' preferred childcare styles deploy an array of technologies of exclusion of the socially marginalised poor as well as those perceived as nouveau riche; and they represent an attempt at imagining oneself and her children as 'civilised' and valuable Europeans, with a focus on rejecting the country's socialist past.

Keywords: middle class; motherhood; Bulgaria; post-socialism; glocal

1 Introduction

All motherhoods were surely not created equal. The intensification of parenting methods is a global trend (Furedi, 2013). Amid a growing global culture of expert-guided 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996), a more intuitive approach to mothering, typically associated with the lower strata of society, is often valued less by childcare experts than the heavily rationalised, labour intensive practices of middle-class women (Faircloth et al., 2013; Harman & Cappellini, 2015; Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2003; Vincent & Ball, 2007). However, even the literature critical to this trend is heavily biased towards western, and particularly Anglo-American, contexts. The problem is that defining class based on specific parenting practices observed in the global west obscures the fact that elsewhere middle-class parenting is significantly different and yet it creates local hierarchies in very similar ways. Thus, the lens through which researchers look at parenting outside of western contexts needs to be adjusted.

This paper adopts a Central Eastern European (CEE), feminist perspective to discuss the discursive exclusions Bulgarian mothers perform when accounting for their childcare choices to analyse the relationship between parenting and social class. This focus on discursive exclusions allows me to contribute to the critical literature on middle-class parenting styles and class formation by constructing a nuanced, 'glocal' approach to the relationship between parenting and social class that recognises both local specificities and universal trends in an unequal world. Only then can we start to truly understand how class is formed through parenting practices both within and without core countries.

In the next section, I provide a theoretical framework for the paper, with an emphasis on feminist sociological literature concerned with the relationship between social class and childcare practices as they relate to the post-socialist transition period. After a short elaboration of the methodology adopted, I discuss my findings in relation to the relevant theoretical debates. The article ends with conclusions, outlining both the contributions and the limitations of the research.

2 Classed motherhoods: Feminist approaches

Hays (1996) claims that parenting styles in the US are classed reproductive strategies: working-class women prepare their children for being employees, while middle-class ones try to foster in their offspring the skillset required for managerial work. The personal qualities valued by middle-class mothers are naturalised by childcare experts/psychologists as essential features of psychologically healthy individuals. Thus, compliance with the prevalent ideology of intensive mothering, which is only accessible to financially secure women because it is 'child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive' (Hays, 1996, p. 8), is what grants a woman the label 'good mother' in the US.

Other classed and raced practices exist but they do not have equal status with the dominant middle-class ones and women who mother in such ways are marginalised as less deserving. Black feminists (Hill Collins, 1990) have argued that feminist analyses of motherhood also privilege the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual mothers over those constructed as 'different'. Indeed, the anxious concerns of western middle-class mothers to secure the best start to their children have been (over)studied and labelled 'middle-class par-

enting': the provision of healthy, fair-trade feeding options (Harman & Cappellini, 2015), the right kind of formal schooling and playdate mates (Byrne, 2006), and extracurricular activities such as swimming, music and foreign language classes (Faircloth et al., 2013; Lareau, 2003; Lareau & Weininger, 2008; Vincent & Ball, 2007).

This paper takes a different route in exploring the relationship between social class and motherhood. I contest the straightforward equation of the practices described by the authors mentioned above with middle-class parenting. Knowledge produced in the 'core' is often taken as universally valid (Mignolo, 2000) but through focusing on the practices of middle-class mothers in a Central and Eastern European (CEE) country, I show that dominant practices are locally specific. Class is indeed performed through mothering and the practices of more privileged social groups have a higher chance of fitting the locally dominant idea of proper motherhood (Harwood et al., 1999; McMahon, 1995; Wallbank, 2000). However, material privilege is relative, and the locally specific intersections of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc. produce different regimes of domination. Instead of simply juxtaposing the particularities of contemporary Bulgarian motherhoods to the parenting styles described as middle-class in literature, this paper speaks about mothering normativity from a specifically CEE perspective. I draw light onto the historical processes behind the ways class distinction is produced via parenting in Sofia, Bulgaria, as part of a broader 'post-socialist' context, emphasising the implicit discursive exclusions within them. It is these nuanced, context-specific exclusions that research must focus on when looking into classed parenting, and not simply the parenting practices produced.

3 Class, cultural practices and reproductive strategies

According to Bourdieu (1987), social classes differentiate themselves via taste, and in a broader sense via cultural practices. Taste (in art, food, design and so on), often understood as a set of natural dispositions, directly correlates with people's educational level and social origin. The reason taste appears natural, however, is because it is embodied and continuously reiterated. This internalised set of socially desirable attitudes, dispositions and behaviours is what Bourdieu calls habitus: the embodied dimension of socio-economic class. Habitus is unconscious but significant; it is closely related to the ways cultural capital is (re)distributed between unequally positioned members of society. Cultural capital is one of the forms of capital Bourdieu recognises, together with social and economic capital. While economic capital relates to one's material wealth, social capital has to do primarily with valuable connections, which can help one get a prestigious job, marry into wealth etc. Cultural capital is the subtle hierarchical myriad of knowledges, tastes, values, hobbies and so on that form one's habitus. The different forms of capital are mutually transferrable. Social and cultural capital can be transformed into economic capital while high economic capital usually correlates with the privileged forms of cultural dispositions (Bourdieu, 1987).

From a Bourdieusian perspective, middle-class mothers' childcare practices, as reproductive strategies, aim at ensuring their children will grow up with the 'right' kind of tastes, beliefs, attitudes and even bodies. If examined through the lens of cultural capital, wealthier mothers' obsession with 'clean' and/ or organic feeding has to do with the development of particular tastes for expensive, gourmet kinds of food, while the 'correct' nutritional value

such foods supposedly provide will ensure their children end up in an optimal physical condition. Further, the 'right' kind of extracurricular activities secure the acquisition of socially valued hobbies and skills, whilst also ensuring children will grow up in the preferred social circle of like-minded (and usually relatively affluent) families (Afflerback et al., 2013; Byrne, 2006; Laureau, 2003).

Aside from a reproductive strategy, the aim of which is to sustain or improve the class position of the child, mothering can be approached as a Bourdieusian 'field' (Hilgers & Mangez, 2015). Within it, mothers perform their own class dispositions and aspirations, in a constant struggle to renegotiate the power relations between themselves, childcare and medical experts, local institutions and global knowledges, which structure the ideas about both children's needs and maternal contributions. Before analysing the classed meaning of those maternal performances, I turn to a discussion about the emergence of the middle class in Bulgaria.

Outside core societies, where the middle class did not emerge organically as a function of industrialisation, middle class formation is a multi-directional process (Liechty, 2002). In CEE, where the official ideology of state-socialism spoke of classless societies, the middle class became a topic of official discussion only after the fall of the regime in 1989. Regardless of what official party lines claimed, state-socialist societies were hardly equal or classless. Despite disagreements in the specificities of social stratification in the region, authors generally recognise four different 'classes' in socialist societies: the workers, the peasants, the nomenklatura (party officials and high-level technocrats), and the intelligentsia (university educated professionals, artists and intellectuals) (Buchowski, 2008; Róbert & Bukodi, 2000; Schröder, 2008; Tilkidjiev, 2002; Verdery et al., 2015). In their famous samizdat publication, Konrád and Szelényi (1979) argued that the intelligentsia was on the road to consolidating itself as the new ruling class. While this perspective has since been contested, the affective and ideological ties between the socialist intelligentsia and the emergent post-socialist middle classes are undeniable (Eber & Gagyi, 2015; Szelényi, 2013).

However, there are important internal differences within post-socialist Europe, when it comes to middle class formation. In the Visegrad countries, for example, which followed a more 'neoliberal' model of transition to capitalism, the continuity between the intelligentsia and the new middle classes had more material effects (Gagyi & Eber, 2015; Verdery et al., 2015). The liberalisation of market relations ensured that skilled labourers there could gradually translate their knowledge into a class standing.

In poorer Bulgaria, it was mostly social ties that determined the economic winners and losers of the transformation. Of course, those ties were deeply linked to class divisions under state socialism, which, according to Stoilkova (2003, p. 156), were not organised around wealth but 'along the lines of education, profession, administrative status, and the character of work (e.g. intellectual vs. manual)'. Apart from the nomenklatura, nobody possessed significant material resources. Instead, higher class was associated with different privileges: access to better holiday locations, cultural events, and healthcare as well as a belonging to semi-formal networks of exchange – of goods, favours and status. After the collapse of the regime,

> the status of the so-called 'mass intelligentsia' of socialism… the social group which was expected to constitute the 'middle class' after the fall of socialism – radically dropped in prestige, concurrent with a drop in their standard of living. (Stoilkova, 2003, p. 156)

This drop, however, was an untraditional one: it was not wealth per se that was lost but rather access to the privileges discussed above. One's status as a professional formally remained but it was now void of its material core; thus, a symbolic figure of the 1990s in Bulgaria was the university professor turned taxi driver to make ends meet (Raichev & Stoichev, 2004).

In light of this drastic loss of both symbolic and material privileges, focusing on immaterial values, which had its roots in state-socialism, as I will explain shortly, developed into a class-retaining strategy (Tsoneva, 2017; Valiavicharska, 2021). During state socialism, the intelligentsia saw itself as responsible for setting the moral and cultural compass of society, and its strong appreciation for arts and education served as a measure of human worth. On this basis, the Bulgarian intelligentsia differentiated itself from both the nomenklatura on the one side, and the workers, the Roma and the Turkish minority, on the other (Stoilkova, 2003; Gencheva, 2012). Spatial and occupational segregation in the capital city of Sofia in particular made sure members of the intelligentsia were rarely in contact with members of the peasantry or the working class. Hence, amid the state propaganda about social equality, they were unaware of the vast class differences existing in the country. For them, the uneducatedness of the lower classes was not a structural issue but a choice and therefore a moral, personal failure.

During late state socialism the intelligentsia, while not necessarily taking up an openly dissident stance towards the regime, culturally and ideologically aligned itself with the West (Stoilkova, 2003; Taylor, 2003). Left without options to retain its status, the Bulgarian intelligentsia realised its aspirations of upward class mobility through desired or actual emigration to the West (Stoilkova, 2003). The image of the emigrant exemplified a meritocratic, self-reliant subject, who had transcended the state socialist economy based on 'personal connections', which was blamed for the lack of economic opportunities.

Similarly to Stoilkova (2001; 2003), Tsoneva (2017) argues that the contemporary subjectivising strategies of the middle class in Bulgaria include a sharp focus on morality, coupled with a vilification of both the rich and the poor. In her analysis of the summer 2013 wave of anti-government protests, she claims that the rhetoric articulated by the protests juxtaposed 'the smart and the beautiful' (Tsoneva, 2017, p. 124) middle-class urbanites' demands for ethical and pro-European politics with the 'coalition' formed by the oligarchic government and the deliberately impoverished welfare precariat that supposedly sustained its power. Both oligarchs and the precariat were declared an anachronistic disgrace, belonging to another epoch, or even a different civilisation – that of state socialism. In the eyes of 'the smart and the beautiful' urbanites:

> [T]he (post)communist crisis we have to tackle is not material (utility bills, poverty, inequality, etc.) but cultural/civilizational/moral and aesthetic… Bulgaria is only formally a democracy, as its liberal institutions are lacking in substance. This substance is taste, 'citizen' culture, love for reading books, beauty, rigor, and as such it is immaterial, spiritual, and sadly lacking in the majority of the population seduced by the 'welfare populism' of the oligarchs. (Tsoneva, 2017, p. 117)

Tsoneva coins the term 'anti-citizen': the imagined 'uncivilised', 'uncultured', 'communist', 'Asian'[1] welfare recipient or, alternatively, the powerful oligarch, who tries to keep

[1] Note how the internal other is orientalised.

Bulgaria away from its rightful place in the European family of brotherly nations. Anti-citizens are systematically racialised, assumed to be primarily from the Roma and the Turkish minorities, and their supposed ethnic characteristics serve as an explanation for their lack of cultured habitus. In that sense, we could speculate that, even when distinctions are being made on the grounds of knowledge, culture and morals, as they happen to be in the narratives of motherhood my interviewees produced, the middle class implicitly imagines itself in opposition not only to those in power and the poor, but to ethnic minorities as well.

This dynamic, while having its local particularities, is of course not exceptional to Bulgaria. According to Owczarzak (2009), the so-called 'winners of the transition' in CEE – usually the educated middle classes – have adopted an orientalising discourse towards those who fared worse from the collapse of state socialism: the working classes, people living outside big cities, the Roma, pensioners, etc. Though the relative marginalisation of these groups is the direct result of a drastic restructuring of the economy (Ghodsee, 2005), dominant discourses tend to explain their misfortune through a moralising logic which equates the lack of economic success with the lack of positive personal qualities. At the same time, relative and often fragile economic privilege tends to get naturalised via its presentation as a matter of morality, individual strength of character, and appropriate lifestyle. Socially valued lifestyle choices, such as consumption patterns, cultural preferences and parenting practices have increased in importance as they serve to justify, enforce, and even create class distinctions.

These signifying performances of class occur in a constantly connected, globalised world where class is simultaneously local – constructed around specific events and institutions and the discourses which make sense of them, and global – based on economic, social and symbolic capital, distributed along power, colour, and poverty lines. The poor and the marginalised being internally orientalised in CEE is not random but rather a response to the cultural tensions within Europe, and the orientalising narratives which tend to symbolically exclude CEE from sharing a European cultural identity with the rich West (Balibar, 2003).

As such, peripheral and semi-peripheral societies like Bulgaria exist with acute awareness of their own culturally marginal position (Liechty, 2002). Within that global dimension, class performances are also civilisational claims of belonging to the 'developed' world (Fehervary, 2013; Liechty, 2002), and it is not at all random that the tropes around which the urban middle class in Bulgaria organises its understanding of the world revolve around being modern and liberal, European or Western, and being an involved citizen as opposed to being old-fashioned and communist, Asian or Oriental, and an anti-citizen (Tsoneva, 2017). Failing to adhere to the current desirable moral code of Bulgarian society is tantamount to both losing class privileges and to a personal 'third-worldisation'. In the words of Fehervary: 'The penalty for slipping out of the middle class now is to suffer the consequences of falling into the denigrated state of a Third World underclass of people that do not count as full-fledged citizens' (2013, p. 22). Thus, as I will show, the orientalisation of Eastern Europe is an extra layer around which my respondents design their mothering. Yet, because of their locally privileged situation, they find ways to 'pass this on' to their poorer or otherwise marginalised counterparts via a process of internal orientalisation. Before showing how this process occurs on an everyday narrative level, I turn to a discussion of the methodology deployed.

3 Methodology

The primary data this analysis builds on is comprised of 19 semi-structured interviews, conducted between 2011 and 2014 with mothers on parental leave in Sofia. The snowball method was used to gather respondents with a middle-class identity. Since my goal was to explore how middle-class was constructed via the performance of culturally appropriate childcare, I did not set extensive economic criteria as to who counted as middle-class but rather relied on the understanding of social networks as organic and reflecting the social identity of their participants (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015; Noy, 2008). Critically dialoguing with Bourdieu (1987), I contend that the symbolic, cultural and social elements of a class identity are at least as important as the economic ones, especially in societies where the middle classes have not been historically well-established as political subjects. As such, the only criteria set for my interviewees were that they had to have a higher education degree and be on parental leave from a paid job. Especially in Bulgaria, these seem to be the only 'objective' criteria in an otherwise "chaotic" class structure, where the usual markers of class identity: professional status, property ownership, real income and consumption patterns do not combine to produce a coherent class status (Raichev & Stoichev, 2008, p. 53). This sampling strategy, while leaving the criteria for ascription to the middle class to my already recruited respondents, produced a pool of first-time mothers on leave from professions traditionally understood as middle-class: lawyers, doctors, academics, managers, engineers, civil servants and so on.

To make sense of my respondents' narratives about everyday motherhood (Lazar, 2007), I used feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA). According to Fairclough and Wodak (1997, p. 258), language is a 'form of social practice', a conceptualisation which presupposes 'a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it'. Hence, CDA was deployed here to disclose the particular connections between women's various accounts of their own activities, the power relations embedded in these, the socio-historical context in which they unfold, and the classed subjectivities produced in the process (Fairclough, 1989).

The interviews were scanned for recurrent themes, activities, metaphors, and contradictions (Cameron et al., 2009; Lazar, 2007), which I later organised into 'codes', such as: the perceived material necessities for starting a family, public vs. private childcare, the participation of other kin members in childcare, the qualities of a 'good' mother, raising the child to be a good person, etc. I only organised these codes into categories of analysis after historicising and contextualising them by engaging with locally and globally important expert-guided literature on childcare, relevant academic literature and periodically reviewing mums' internet forums in Bulgaria. Once the contextualisation was achieved, I focused on tracing the ways 'power' was hidden in the stories that emerged around the delineated categories. Who benefited from state-of-the-art childcare practices in Sofia? Who was on the losing end? How did the status quo manage to sustain itself?

In order to make sense of the subtleties around constructing one's class position through parenting, I unpack the individual stories of several respondents in more detail, while illustrating some of the main points they are making with quotes from other mothers as well. In order for the diverse class-constructing rituals and rationalisations in Bulgaria to make sense to a non-local reader, they must be put into the larger context of an interviewee's

life narrative and their origin story in particular. Not all middle-class women are created equal and whether their class status is hard-earned or inherited correlates with different anxieties, aspirations and subjectivising practices.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that this is a relatively small, qualitative research and as such has no ambitions to present a conclusive account of Bulgarian middle-class motherhoods. My narrow snowball sample constructs its classed maternal superiority in markedly subtle ways. No explicitly racist or even outright classist remarks were made by my respondents, which, as a brief glance at any Bulgarian parenting Internet forum would suggest, unfortunately attests more to the inherent limitations of snowball sampling than to the inclusivity of middle-class mothers. To gain a better picture of those sadly widespread attitudes, more research is clearly needed.

4 The Bulgarian middle class: The endangered moral compass of society

In what follows, I show how the reproductive class strategies of the Bulgarian mothers I interviewed are based on imagining themselves as modern (as opposed to a socialist past), western (as opposed to an alleged oriental 'backwardness') and culturally and morally superior to both the 'poor masses' (including ethnic minorities) and the *nouveau riche*. The child-drearing practices my respondents engage in have both similarities and differences to the practices described as middle class in west-centric literature, which I will outline in this section. In order to make sense of these as class-building strategies, they need to be placed within the local socio-historical context.

The implicit construction of one's own childcare decisions as valuable through an emphasis on immaterial values and respect for high culture, as described by Stoilkova (2003) and Tsoneva (2017), dominated the accounts of my respondents, as we see in the following quote:

> At present it turns out that it is more important what kind of car you have, which Chalga club you frequent, literally, because I have the feeling that my son's whole environment will be like that, his classmates at school will listen to Chalga, I don't know what kind of stuff they'll like. And you still must show what really matters in life, that this outer glam, this simpleton lifestyle we have embraced… I would like to be able to make that *distinction* for him, to discern the truly valuable from the surrounding superficial bling. It sounds simple enough but in our Bulgarian reality it isn't. (Svetlana, 32, medical doctor, emphasis mine)

Chalga (coming from the Turkish word for musical instrument), the Bulgarian variation of a popular Balkan and middle-eastern music style, has a special place in national self-orientalising discourses, and its popularity is a source of both global and local cultural anxieties (Livni, 2014). The discourse on *Chalga* exemplifies the painful repercussions of an 'incomplete modernity' – a forever unfulfilled promise to catch up with a glorious yet elusive west. Conventionally, Bulgarian intellectuals understand *Chalga* to be a post-socialist phenomenon, epitomising the moral decay of Bulgarian culture: once the state withdrew its support for high art and left the cultural life of the nation to be decided by market forces, it was the 'masses' that made a civilisational choice to align with the 'orient' rather than the

supposedly culturally superior west. Politically Bulgaria declared its will to 'catch up' with 'democratic' Europe but the 'uncultured masses' turned to a 'primitive', 'eastern' music style. Thus, they sabotaged the true 'inner' transformation of Bulgarian society.

Jansen (2005) and Adriaans (2017) describe the same tropes structuring the fragile middle-class identity in Serbia and Armenia, respectively. These include an explicit distancing from the music style – and the related fetishisation of new money and the conspicuous consumption of designer goods and expensive cars. For the middle classes, *Chalga* becomes the imagined 'inner world' of the anti-citizen (Tsoneva, 2017). Liking *Chalga* is also attributed to the Roma and the so-called 'peasants', which in the Balkans tends to refer to anyone not from an urban centre (Jansen, 2005).

In that sense Svetlana's determination to protect her child from the 'dangerous grip' of *Chalga* is a reproductive strategy for retaining a middle class, urban status. Moreover, her child is only 1.5 years old, so the detailed description of the questionable tastes of his future classmates is pure fantasy, which speaks more about the middle-class imaginary of the socio-cultural divisions within Bulgarian society than of some objective reality her family is going through. The role of the 'good' parent, according to Svetlana, is literally to create 'distinction' as per Bourdieu: 'discern' the truly valuable from the both the ignorance of the 'simpletons' and the 'superficial bling' of the *nouveau riche*.

Indeed, one cannot start too early to set the scene for 'correct' socialisation and even physically separate one's children from the cultural patterns of the undesirable:

> I meet other mothers but only friends of mine from before. In our neighbourhood there is a park where many mothers gather, but they are of the type who just sit around all day, munching on sunflower seeds… I wouldn't want him to grow up in such an environment. With my friends I feel calmer, we have similar values and interests. (Nadia, 31, senior expert at a state agency)

The focus on values and intellectual interests is obvious in this quote as well. Sunflower seeds here are a symbol of the 'lazy ways' and the unrefined tastes of the lower classes, in particular the population from the countryside in Bulgaria.

Through their open denunciation of superficial glamour, low culture and lack of morality, Svetlana and Nadia construct themselves as an endangered minority, the social reproduction of which is truly valuable. Implicit in their accounts is the self-definition of the middle class as the moral compass of society, inherited from the socialist intelligentsia. Marina (32, translator at a sales company), while speaking about not yet owning a home, spells it out explicitly: 'The material is not so important.'

As I will shortly show, this explicit focus on the 'immaterial' does not mean that mothers from Sofia do not often make costly purchases to satisfy the perceived needs of their children, especially when it comes to nutrition. Yet, on a discursive level, what we see here is a conceptualisation of 'good motherhood', which is a far cry from the obligatorily financially expensive intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996) described in western literature. Regulating a child's environment and friendship circle isn't necessarily achieved via heavily structured playdates and private schooling (cf. Byrne, 2006). In my understanding, this is the result of both the socio-historical formation of the post-socialist middle class in Bulgaria as already discussed, as well as the economic discrepancy between the actual purchasing power of the middle classes in the global west and in Bulgaria. My data shows that class status is conceived as a set of personal, moral qualities, transmitted from generation to generation

(cf. Bourdieu, 1987), with several local specificities. This is visible in Svetlana's story, who claims that the best thing about motherhood is being able to 'transmit something valuable to someone else'. She continues, speaking about her mother:

> She has shown me what's worthy in life, the difference between good and bad, how to value the right things. My view on life is surely largely influenced by my parents and I am very happy about the way they raised me, let alone all the financial help which they gave and still give me.

In Svetlana's quote, however, a rare reference to the wealth underlying the moral and cultural sense of superiority is also visible. Her story of motherhood is one of comfort and self-worth, inherited from one's parents and projected onto one's offspring.

Svetlana, like many others of my respondents, relied on her mother for childcare and considered her influence on her child both inevitable and desirable. The words of Maria (29, researcher), whose university professor mother provides free childcare daily around her work schedule, confirm this: 'I don't want my child to spend time with my mother because she is his grandmother. I want it because I think of her as an intelligent person who shares my values.' With the scarce places in state-owned childcare institutions, and the unaffordable fees of private ones, the care work of the grandmother is indispensable – that is, if she lives in Sofia and can provide it. When this isn't the case, it is usually because the middle-class status (as understood in Bulgaria – urban, cultured and well-educated, and inherited from the family of origin) of the speaker is not as straightforward as with Svetlana.

In Gergana's motherhood narrative, for example, multiple tensions about class and the subjectivising processes around it are noticeable. She is one of the most economically privileged women in my sample, but her wealth is the result of successful upward class mobility. Neither she, nor her partner come from Sofia, which adds a layer of fragility to their claim to a middle-class, urban identity. Well-educated and self-proclaimed 'workaholic' Gergana is the epitome of the self-reliant post-socialist entrepreneur (Tsoneva, 2017). And not by chance, she is the only one in my sample to openly denounce the care of grandmothers as detrimental for a child.

> The grandmother is a grandmother, not a babysitter. [...] her experience dates back 28–29 years. They refuse to accept that things have changed, that children are seen differently, the whole attitude towards children has changed drastically... For the older generation a 'good mother' means the child is well-fed, with chubby cheeks, with changed nappy and nice clothes, but I don't think this is it. That's a basic requirement and doesn't even enter the category 'good mother'. The 'good mother' is higher up in Maslow's hierarchy of [children's] needs and one can only judge her by her child. (Gergana, 29, company owner)

Behind the apparently straightforward assumption that a grandmother would have old-fashioned beliefs about childcare, lurks the post-socialist young urbanite's will to distance herself from her parents' shameful, 'pre-modern' socialist past (Tsoneva, 2017). The less harsh words of Mira, whose mother-in-law that she is referring to here is also from the countryside, point to this as well: 'The older generation has a lot stricter attitude to children. They tend to extremely rigidly forbid things that are not that important at all. It's just that their ideas are old-fashioned' (Mira, 31, credit risk management expert at a bank).

Simultaneously to denouncing grandparental care, Gergana describes state-owned crèches and kindergartens as 'tragic' due to understaffing and the perceived resultant in-

capacity to provide the necessary attention to individual children. Yet, Gergana speaks of fostering independent problem-solving skills and self-sufficiency in her 5-month-old son by leaving him alone as much as possible.

> We are raising our child to be independent; it is not necessary to engage with him all the time… He doesn't need a constant hand there, to stick a pacifier in his mouth, to rock him or whatever. He has his toys. It's not that we neglect him, not at all, but he needs to be self-reliant and that also allows us freedom at home. (Gergana, 29, company owner)

The apparent contradiction reveals that childcare practices are empty signifiers – the same practice may be labelled beneficial or detrimental depending on the (class) status of the performer. Interestingly, even refusing to comply with expectations of intensive child-centred parenting ('he has his toys, it is not necessary to engage with him all the time') can be reclaimed as a moral, character-building childcare decision, when the right kind of middle-class values (self-reliance, independence) are invoked as a justification.

Gergana's anxieties about the quality of public childcare are not unique. The majority of mothers in my sample are concerned with the lack of outside play at state-owned institutions, which tends to be blamed on insufficient personnel or the laziness of women working in such institutions – often understood as a legacy of state socialism. In the words of Kalina (29, university lecturer), talking about public nurseries and kindergartens: 'I suspect lack of professionalism, uncleanliness, neglect'.

What is atypical is rather the solution Gergana has for the care of her son: hiring a private babysitter. Despite otherwise emphasising qualifications and professionalism as crucial for any job performance, Gergana is willing to overlook previous experience if she likes 'the person, their attitude and worldview'. Like-mindedness, which in essence has to do either with the sharing, or the uncritical acceptance of middle-class values, become the conditions of a childminder's acceptability. Instinctively, Gergana recognises that her beliefs in an entrepreneurial approach to life are to be systematically fostered in her child to ensure the reproduction of her fragile class status. As a first-generation resident of the capital and a self-made woman, Gergana does not experience the sense of comfort and relaxed attitude to life we see in Svetlana's life narrative. Her care is very much directed at instilling 'ambition' and teaching her child to be 'the change he wants to see in the world' – the same middle-class attitudes Tsoneva (2017) describes in her analysis of the wave of anti-government protests in 2013. Finally, we see how a dislike of the old-fashioned ways of her parents' generation, institutional deficit, and poverty are all conflated in the way she imagines appropriate parenting:

> There is a problem in the country, there aren't enough kindergartens, crèches, spaces in those. People can't afford private babysitters, it is clear why they fall onto the care of grandmothers in the end, this is the financial reality of many families… But I believe that, given the situation in the country, everyone must find their own way. From the point of view of the child's interest, I don't think the grandmother is the best option.

At first glance sympathetic to the struggles of poorer families, eventually Gergana not only advocates an individualist solution to the problem but narratively constructs her own class status as superior to that of the majority of the country's population. Despite claiming to recognise materialities as the root of the widespread participation of grandmothers in the organisation of childcare, Gergana ultimately frames the issue in moral terms: making a

choice in the best interest of the child. This elevation of children's needs, driven by the heavily psychologised widespread expert-guided literature on appropriate childcare, has long been discussed by feminist sociologists as the core of recent conceptualisations of classed 'good motherhood' (Lawler, 2000).

Indeed, my respondents did not rely on their gut feelings when it came to childcare choices. In the words of Ani (32, construction engineer):

> [In order to be a good mother] one needs to be an overall cultured person. Someone without broad general knowledge and culture, even if they are kind and well-meaning… one has to be well-informed as a parent, not to rely simply on her own opinions… I read a lot on the Internet, specialised literature around breastfeeding and solid food introduction, for example.

Here the intuitive approach to parenting by women who are perceived to be uncultured (i.e. not belonging to the urban middle class, in the Bulgarian context) is dismissed as inadequate. Middle-class good motherhood is expert-guided (Hays, 1996), indeed, yet not all experts are created equal.

Gergana, like almost all my Bulgarian respondents, claims to extensively read English language expert-guided literature on childcare, because in her opinion 'the best practices described there are lightyears ahead of what we do here'. Western knowledge is clearly considered superior. An obvious pattern of auto-orientalisation of Bulgaria and a simultaneous construction of one's own childcare decisions as western (i.e. modern) is observable in other maternal stories too, although some interviewees attested to reading local literature as well as relying on the advice of their paediatricians. Appropriate parenting is a 'glocal' construct, with global knowledge/power inequalities structuring it from within.

The preoccupation with being excluded from western modernity is also evident in my respondents' concern with early foreign language education, which is a must for many.

> My mother encourages me to speak to him exclusively in English, regardless of the way people stare at us because it will be so beneficial for him (Maria, 29, researcher).

Stoilkova (2003) argues that the newly formed Bulgarian middle class symbolically aligned itself with the west, performing or fantasising about upward social mobility by emigration. The alternative meant succumbing to a quality of life similar to that of the Third World underclasses. Raising a child to be bilingual in a western language then is 'the best thing you can give to a child' (Maria) because it is literally a ticket to First World status. Learning a western language is the number one extracurricular activity the mothers in my sample chose to invest in. Other practices such as music or dance lessons, described by western sociologists as typical of the heavily organised middle-class parenting were very rarely mentioned by my Bulgarian respondents.

Interestingly, the privileging of Western knowledge and lifestyle is evident even in infant feeding decisions. Apart from being concerned with organic feeding options, in line with a global trend (Harman & Cappellini, 2015) my respondents also clearly preferred western brands of baby food over local ones: 'I like an English brand of jarred purees, which are organic, tested and have many certificates. If I have [another] child, I'd wean on those, because I trust them' (Daniela, 37, dentist). Or, as Ani says, 'I buy organic jarred purees, or organic vegetables when I can get my hands on them. I have found this organic shop where they sell French chicken, it's supposed to be really good.'

Eating high quality healthy food is an important part of contemporary middle-class socialisation, which aims to ensure children have the right kind of attitude to their bodies. As Marina (32, translator) passionately puts it: 'I have never bought [my son] crisps, wafers and that kind of stuff and I never will!' In the words of Nadia, who puts healthy eating into a larger context:

> I like taking [my son] to the open-air gym in the park. There aren't any cotton candy stalls, merry-go-rounds and other traps for children over there. He seems to really like it and I hope this will foster an appreciation for sports later on. (Nadia, Sofia, 31, senior expert at a state agency)

Doing sports, and engaging in the 'right' kind of entertainment are supposed to ensure that my respondents' children will grow up to be self-reliant, educated, responsible, healthy, multilingual citizens of the world. Once again, like Svetlana's concerns about *Chalga*, the superficial pleasures of empty consumerism like merry-go-rounds and unhealthy snack options are perceived as a gateway drug that may eventually lead to a slip into lower class status and thus a personal 'thirdworldisation'.

Interestingly, all my respondents had travelled to the West and quite a few had studied or worked there. They were obviously aware of class divisions and poverty in the west; however, it was upper/middle-class opulence which they imagined to be preparing their children for. In that sense, Bulgarian middle-class parenting is always 'aspirational' – trying to reach a western middle-class standard of living, if not in reality, then at least in fantasy.

6 Conclusion

In this paper I have shown how global symbolic and material inequalities, coupled with different socio-historical construction of the middle classes in core western and (semi-)peripheral post-socialist societies, create an interesting amalgam of culturally dominant childcare decisions in Bulgaria, which both echo and differ from those critically described in western feminist literature. In Sofia, we see a lot of the global trends around healthy eating, outdoor play, and relying on expert advice to be able to adequately respond to children's perceived needs, but with an added twist of auto-orientalisation: the denigration of locally made jarred food, the expectation for lack of outdoor play at public kindergartens and reading primarily western parenting literature. Other local particularities take centre stage as well: the sharp focus on immaterial values and appreciation for culture as a spiritual endeavour is essential to Bulgarian middle-class parenting styles as a remnant of state-socialist intelligentsia's role as the moral compass of society. Importantly, however, these still function as an invisible barrier to achieving the status of 'good mother' for various segments of society, and thus help construct middle-class' parenting as valuable and important, resolving some of the tensions around not/belonging to western modernity. The reproductive class strategies of the Bulgarian mothers interviewed for this research are based on imagining themselves as modern (as opposed to a socialist past), western (as opposed to 'oriental' 'backwardness') and culturally and morally superior to both the 'poor masses' and the *nouveau riche*. But what are the larger theoretical implications of this Central and Eastern European-focused analysis of stories about the maternal every day for the feminist study of classed parenting?

While both motherhood and class have been studied in CEE, this paper contributes to the feminist literature on middle-class parenting styles and the interplay between class and

parenting around the world by providing an innovative Bourdieusian perspective of treating motherhood as a cultural practice essential to the construction of class distinction. The research also adds to the body of critical literature discussing class formation outside of core countries and more specifically, post-socialist sociological and anthropological literature on class. Linking the two fields of parenting and CEE class formation through contextualising and historicising the emergence of middle-class parenting styles in Bulgaria, I reconsidered mothering normativity from a specifically Central and Eastern European perspective. Rather than simply positioning my respondents' childcare accounts in relation to western research, which tends to describe a specific set of labour and emotionally-intensive mothering practices as the essence of middle-class parenting, I propose that class analyses of parenting require a move away from specific practices towards a focus on the exclusions produced through them instead. It is such a move that allows us to articulate the 'glocal' design permeating locally-privileged childcare styles.

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