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The Bulgarians and McDonald's Some Anthropological Aspects

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The opening of the first pizza house in the early 1980s in Sofia was a veritable event for the capital. Although the Western-sounding word 'pizza' was deliberately substituted by the more neutral '*garnirani piti*' [garnished thin round loaves of bread], the 'capitalist' significance of this culinary novelty was recognized by all customers. For that reason in the course of several months there were permanent queues in front of that restaurant on Rakovski Street. The appearance of the pizza restaurants may be discussed as an element of the gradual infiltration of contemporary Western standards in the food of the Bulgarian people, which continued for about two decades. Several periods may be differentiated in it. The first one is associated with the selling of sandwiches, whose variety was enriched in the course of time. The first sandwiches for out-door consumption appeared in the 1960s (approximately at that time the first booths with sandwiches appeared at bus stops, railway stations, and in front of the main hospitals in the capital of the Republic of Macedonia, which at that time was part of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia; see Spirovska 1997: 430). They consisted of a slice of bread with yellow cheese and salami on top, all wrapped in plastic. Until that period (as before the communist takeover in Bulgaria in 1944) the sandwich was eaten only at home; it was unknown both in the public catering establishments – cafes, confectioneries and restaurants – and in the streets and at railway stations in towns and cities, where the traditional fast food was *banica*, a kind of cheese pastry resembling dough nuts, rolls, cheese cakes and the like. In decree no. 111 of 1961, the new self-service establishments were considered 'progressive' (Stefanov 1962: 3). Despite their 'modern' service they offered mainly traditional meals such as soups and full dishes (meatballs, hotch-potch, pork with cabbage etc). In this kind of place sandwiches were eaten mostly at breakfast, often with fresh milk or yoghurt (Stefanov 1962: 13–15). The sandwich of the 'hot-dog' type was introduced at the end of the 1970s. It was garnished with mustard and – for quite a long time – with traditional *ljutenica*, a paste of mashed tomatoes and roasted red peppers, instead of the ketchup that was not yet available. From the mid-1980s, French fries began to be sold on plastic plates (particularly typical for the '*Sinjoto Kafe*' [Blue Coffee House] close by the Levski Stadium, which was famous as one of the meeting places of the youth in the capital). Quite popular at that time were the establishments offering *milini*, a product made of dough and cheese very close to traditional dough products. And among other things, croissants with chocolate or cheese,

resembling the French ones, also began to be offered. Following the radical political and socio-economic changes in the country after 1989, the burger type sandwiches and grilled meat became widespread in the 1990s. The next major step in that process was the arrival of a number of Western fast food chains in Bulgaria, the most important one being the American McDonald's.

In this paper I shall focus on some anthropological aspects of the Bulgarians' attitude toward this type of restaurant. The paper is based on fieldwork data collected by the author and a group of students from Sofia University 'Kliment Ohridski' in February through May, 2000, in four McDonald's restaurants in Sofia. The subject has not been chosen randomly. Like the Internet, McDonald's is perceived as one of the symbols of 'modern civilisation' dominated by Western culture, and of the way of life typical for it. It is not accidental that in the public consciousness it is precisely this chain of restaurants that has become the collective and emblematic image of fast food restaurants in general. Wherever it entered a new country, McDonald's invariably became a bearer of American standards, models of eating, and pertinent behaviours and ways of life (cf. Watson 1997). That is why attitudes to it are highly polarised, in many countries ranging from enthusiasm to complete rejection.

Contemporary Bulgarian society is a case in point. The Bulgarians' attitude to McDonald's is an example of the attitudes resulting from the extensive spread of fast food restaurants in the post-communist Balkan countries. For its part it is an element of the process of establishing 'consumer culture', a process that took place in different parts of the world at different times and paces. Essentially, it is a counterculture which denies traditional behavioural patterns, values, and ways of life mostly by developing a market and advertising. Advertising becomes a guardian of the new morality, a source of up-to-date behavioural stereotypes, providing 'the poetics of everyday life' (Featherstone 1982: 172-174). Apart from being a basic instrument of attracting customers, i.e., consumers, advertising is a means of teaching the people 'not what to think, but how to think' (Ewen 1976: 55). This is particularly true for the so-called fast food model which is based on the North American concept of saving time and effort. In H. Levenstein's words, only in the US could anyone aim to serve customers a complete meal in 15 seconds, as the renowned Burger King did at the outset of his career (Levenstein 1992: 227).

Over a period of some ten years, in the 1970s, fast food was seen by many West Europeans as an 'American threat'. According to the French, for instance, the hamburger and ketchup threatened "that joie de vivre for which the world envies us"; they were regarded a threat to culinary art and to health alike, an embodiment of the decline of the great French cuisine and the adoption of dangerous eating practices (Fischler 1993: 223). The opening of the first McDonald's on Piazza Spagna in Rome was accompanied by a huge protest rally.

The way to the establishment of fast food in the US was essentially a way to the establishment of transcultural syncretism and culinary cosmopolitanism. A number

of typical national dishes such as Italian pizza, Mexican taco, Japanese sushi, and most of all the hamburger (which has European roots and was brought to the US by Jewish immigrants) owe their world-wide success to the ways in which they are offered, advertised, and marketed in the US. This is due to the Americans' ability to adopt foreign items and to integrate them successfully into their culture, largely by means of a powerful advertising industry, until they are accepted as typically American both at home and abroad (Fischler 1993: 163-164).

It is the food cosmopolitanism of American fast food that changed traditional European food practices. Although the supporters of national culinary traditions opposed it as a part of a dangerous 'Americanisation', it has become a basic element of the inevitable modernisation and industrialisation of feeding worldwide. The process began in the US in the late 1960s and reached Western Europe with a short delay (Fischler 1993: 224). Two decades later it reached the southeast European countries, exerting its influence on regional and national culinary traditions.

According to a general European concept, taking a meal is an autonomous social action, subjected to its own rules, which should not and cannot be confused with other activities such as working, travelling, speaking on the phone, etc. This concept runs counter to the 'take-away' and 'nomadic' meals characteristic of the US. As a non-specific cultural activity for the Americans, eating is less subject to rules; it can take place anywhere and anytime, and is characterised by a great deal of voluntarism. In this respect the example given by Fischler is indicative. He noted that in some American libraries, shops, and boutiques there are warnings reading "Positively no food or drink allowed", which in itself is evidence of the existence of such practices where they are not explicitly banned (Fischler 1993: 225).

The European concept of taking meals is, of course, valid in Bulgaria. As a consequence, the concept of 'fast food' runs counter to the Bulgarians' traditional idea of taking a meal as a slow and long activity. The above mentioned traditional 'quick snacks' do not contradict this concept. A meal begins with a glass of *rakija* (brandy) with appetisers, so that one can relax without being in a hurry. Furthermore, taking a meal is (and probably has always been) a collective action with important social functions; according to Bahtin it embodies the finishing of the daily collective labour, bringing together the members of the family, kin and neighbours (Bahtin 1978: 306); sitting in a circle and sharing a meal creates strong social bonds and communicative interactions. For the Bulgarian of today, meals are usually associated with directly communicating at the table with a circle of people - relatives, friends, etc.

It is noteworthy that a precursor of the fast food model already existed in the period of socialism. Under the conditions of rapid socialist industrialization and collectivization, millions of people had their daily meals in the canteens of state enterprises and collective farms, and we can assume that these meals had an integrative function. After 1989, the process of economic transformation forced many companies to close down, while those who survived gave up their former

social institutions and services, including the canteens. The closing of many canteens and the general change in Eastern Europe from community based on workplace to community based on residence (Andrusz 1996: 64–65) were factors that were highly conducive to the spread of fast food restaurants.

McDonald's got to Bulgaria in 1994, i.e., five long years after the political changes of 1989. What is more, it did not appear first in the capital of Sofia, but in Plovdiv, the second largest city in the country. Just for comparison: the first McDonald's in Yugoslavia opened in the early 1980s, in the Czech Republic and in Poland in the late 1980s, and in Russia in 1990. This delay reflected a lack of interest in this kind of restaurant that was completely new for Bulgaria. The smiling inflatable figure of Ronald McDonald was not welcomed by long queues as in Russia, where more than 30,000 people lined up for hours in the cold Russian winter to be among its first patrons. The late arrival of McDonald's was a reflection of the fact that after five years of reforms the Bulgarian population accepted without unnecessary emotions the various manifestations of Western mass culture flooding the country. And yet, the 18 McDonald's restaurants that have opened since enjoy great popularity and excite a permanent interest. The aggressive advertising campaign of the first years has certainly contributed to this success.

By moving into Bulgaria, McDonald's provoked the emergence of local fast food restaurants serving typical Bulgarian dishes, and became a model for them. Likewise, the fast food chain 'Elki palki' was established in Russia, serving traditional Russian cuisine. As mentioned before, this type of restaurant appeared in the 1960s and was thus not unknown to the Bulgarians, but the new ones were quite different. They soon adopted the American model of perfect cleanliness, speed, and friendliness of the staff. In spite of their success with the Bulgarians, none of the local chains has the image of a prestigious place to go to as McDonald's does.

McDonald's in Bulgaria has kept its basic features, but it has also changed to a certain extent to meet local tastes, preferences and traditions of taking meals. For instance, the so-called Mexican Weeks were organised because of the Bulgarian taste for spicy food; it was known that in the Mexican cuisine hot peppers were a favourite spice. Likewise, salads typical of the Mediterranean cuisine were included because *Kenar*, one of the main local competitors of McDonald's, was very successful with them. Great attention has been given to desserts, because (as will be shown later) they turned out to have the largest number of fans among the customers. The main rival of the 'Western type fast food' restaurants are their Asian counterparts serving Chinese fast food. The numerous Chinese restaurants and take-away booths in Sofia and several provincial towns have large numbers of customers. As a consequence, McDonald's organised Chinese weeks which were a successful attempt at attracting those who like Chinese cuisine. The diversification of dishes offered by adding elements of traditional national cuisines is a strategy of the fast food chains in the US to avoid monotony and potential loss of customers (Emerson 1982: 25–37). By organising Chinese weeks in Bulgaria,

McDonald's followed its principle, formulated in 1978, of introducing "ethnic diversity in the menu". According to this principle, the essentials of the food served in a given restaurant should not be changed; what was to be done was to introduce new 'ethnic' elements solely in the particulars, such as dressings, stuffings, icing, etc.: "to make something German, don't hire a German cook, just give your roast beef a topping of German-style sauerkraut, that is, canned sauerkraut with some caraway seed added"¹. The MacFu or Chicken MacFu hamburger served during the Chinese weeks followed this principle: the only genuine Chinese ingredient in it was the sauce. Along with the so-called 'spring rolls', similar to those served in Chinese restaurants but considerably smaller in size and weight, and packed in a cardboard box in the McDonald's style, this sandwich is a symbol of the attempt at transcultural synthesis between the East and the West in the fast food sphere. Its only purpose is to increase the number of consumers.

The tendency to adapt to local tastes can probably be found in all countries (40 percent of the company's restaurants are located outside the US). I want to focus on the ways by which McDonald's changes the Bulgarians' traditional tastes and models of taking meals as well as the functional changes that the restaurants are undergoing in the Bulgarian environment.

The process of mutual adaptation of the American chain and its Bulgarian clients and employees has various manifestations. The staff of the restaurants in Sofia adopted the main features of the model of work advanced by the company, but has tacitly changed some features to meet the Bulgarian taste. The young people have quickly mastered the skill to be serene and amiable, to be busy all the time, to maintain perfect cleanliness, to explain politely without showing any signs of boredom and without being affected in their expediency. This American style of service has not only become a model for other restaurants and supermarkets, but has largely contributed to the company's good image in the country, because it contrasts so sharply with the service people were used to from the socialist period (and after). On the other hand, however, the staff members do not accept the company's implicit requirement of keeping a distance from each other and keeping work and private life apart. They quickly make friends, share their worries and joys, help each other in their work, e.g., take each other's shifts, when needed, etc.²

The pleasant atmosphere drawing Bulgarians to McDonald's is owed, apart from the fast service, also to the cleanliness, which in the early 1990s stood in sharp contrast with the sanitary conditions in most restaurants in the country. For many respondents, the first thing associated with McDonald's is the impeccable hygiene. Another advantage is their location in the busiest places in towns and cities, and the availability of a parking lot.

¹ Fast Service, March 1978, p. 36.

² Informant B. B., age 20, former employee of MacDonald's, recorded by M. Pišmirova.

Of special interest is the paradox that most guests of McDonald's in Bulgaria do not go there because of the food. The food is quite often described as unhealthy, tasteless, and having too many calories. The cleanliness and the fast service cannot fully make up for the fact that the food is quite unusual for the average Bulgarian taste. Despite the arrival of convenience food, Bulgarians expect meals to be cooked, served on a table covered by a table cloth and not to be eaten with disposable plastic dishes, spoons, and forks. Or, in the words of a 35-year old businessman: "I want a fine dish, fastness is not the most important thing. It is important but not of first-rate."³ Most people prefer salads and desserts such as pies, ice-creams and shakes. Feeling uneasy to order just a dessert, some of them also try a hamburger. Indicative of the popular attitude to this kind of sandwich, as well as of the Bulgarians' taste for sweet foods is the advertisement in a local sandwich restaurant in the centre of Sofia: "You get a free wafer for each hamburger you take."

The way of serving sandwiches and French fries at McDonald's (as well as at the other restaurants of this kind) packed in cardboard like any other item, creates a sense of sterility and lack of imagination; it desecrates the meal, turning it into a mass product or rather, an ordinary consumer good, while the person taking it loses its individuality and becomes just one of the numerous patrons. On the other hand, the opportunity to mix one's own combination of spices and sauces, to turn the separate elements into a dish, is close to game-playing and probably therefore liked by children⁴.

Prices are particularly important to the Bulgarians. They are widely considered too high for the quantities served. An informant jokingly said that after arriving in Sofia, Big Mac has become leaner and has turned into a fairly small Big Mac. Many informants are aware that for the same or for a lower price they can have a much better meal at the Bulgarian *Kenar* or *Trops Kăšta*, at the *Arabic Mimas*, and even at KFC. But despite the common disapproval of the food, large numbers of people are attracted by McDonald's and visit them frequently or even regularly. Even among the greatest detractors who consider McDonald's as a promoter of uniform American standards and a threat to Bulgarian traditions, there was no one who had not been to the restaurant at least a few times. And yet there is a great number of people who claim they do not like McDonald's, mostly intellectuals and university students. Apart from their negative attitude to the food, some of them avoid the restaurant because to them it is a symbol of the West or the US, or because of the fact that it is fashionable. Others do not wish to be considered members of the crowd; they want to keep their individuality and go to restaurants where they can choose the dishes or have the food cooked specially for them. Although this attitude can be found in many countries, in Bulgaria it may be

³ Informant I. R., age 36, businessman from Loveč.

⁴ Comment by I. Dičev.

stronger because of a counter-reaction to the collectivism forced upon the people by the socialist regime.

The high prices contribute to making the McDonald's prestigious places which cannot be frequented by everyone. This is true particularly in the first year or two after the opening of a restaurant. After the opening of the first Bulgarian restaurant, quite a few citizens of Sofia travelled the 150 kms to Plovdiv by car over the weekend in order to enjoy a meal at McDonald's⁵.

Going to McDonald's has become an event for children and for teenagers. As for the children, the company launched a strategy which successfully addressed the little ones who, in turn, secured the presence of their parents. Following the same principle, children belonging to minority or immigrant groups became the most vigorous supporters of the new food, often forcing it on the rest of their families (cf. Fischler 1993: 103). McDonald's 'children strategy' includes menus for the kids with gift toys (specially produced for the company), the celebration of birthdays, and female employees taking care of the children even when there is no special occasion. The games with which these employees entertain the youngsters are very different from the ones their parents used to play in their childhood, as, for instance, the collective puncturing of large quantities of balloons, which focuses on competition and destruction.

The children's birthday celebrations at McDonald's meanwhile outnumber those at home. They have become a fad not only because of the children's strong tendency to imitate and their sensitivity to inequality, but also because of the parents' readiness to spend their savings on their offsprings, so that they will not feel inferior to the others. Mothers take their children to birthday parties in private houses and wait at some other place to pick them up again, because the hosts cannot afford to offer meals to the mothers as well. That is why it is more convenient to organise a party at McDonald's rather than at home, because here the mothers can sit and wait for the party to end⁶.

The children's corner of McDonald's has been given functions specific for the country. While originally it was meant to enable parents to have an undisturbed meal or to do their shopping, in Bulgaria the visits of mothers and fathers, and most of all of grandparents are mostly prompted by the desire to take their grandchild to the children's corner of McDonald's. Intensive and unregulated house construction has wiped out hundreds of playgrounds in Bulgarian towns and cities, and children lack group play outside the kindergarten or the school. Therefore children are taken to McDonald's to play, to meet other children and to get toys which would otherwise be unavailable. To them, McDonald's is a wonderful little world which they take along with them outside the restaurant. Going there is a

⁵ Informant N. D., age 33, former employee of MacDonald's PR Department. Recorded by the author.

⁶ Informant S. G., age 35, recorded by the author.

holiday, an expected reward for having been well-behaved, the main topic of their conversations for weeks ahead. They boast to their friends of having been at McDonald's and collect the toys that they have received there, but rarely exchange them, because few of them have enough toys to be able to afford this.

No less of an event is a visit to McDonald's for the teenagers. While in the 1960s Ray Kroc, chairman of the Company, deliberately turned his back on this social group and founded a 'family restaurant' (Levenstein 1992: 229, 232), in Europe the main group of patrons are young people. McDonald's has become part of the counterculture of the young, who are increasingly independent of the world of the middle-aged and elderly. New forms of restaurants and food appeared specially for them, but their emblem was McDonald's. Like American music, cinema and fashions, the restaurant was soon incorporated in their everyday culture, which was no reason why in the course of time their numbers should not gradually go down (Fischler 1993: 173, 177). For many Bulgarian teenagers having a meal at McDonald's is "kind of keeping up an image not only in front of the others, but before your own self"⁷. Like the children, this age group also invests new meanings in McDonald's, taking it far away from its original character as a fast food restaurant. For them, it is a prestigious and fashionable place which they visit to see others and to be seen – and to bolster their self-esteem. Unlike the Western customer who visits such a restaurant in order to have a quick meal and hurries to leave it, the Bulgarian teenager will stay there for hours, ordering just one coke or the cheapest meal (because in most cases he cannot afford any other) and has long and intimate talks with friends. While the American guest at McDonald's is often alone or silent, the Bulgarian teenager goes there to communicate. It is obvious that for them the meaning of the restaurant differs significantly from its intended purpose. To them it serves social-integrative functions that are very close to those of the traditional pub or the coffee house. Like the children, the teenagers boast to each other, although casually, with whom and how often they were at McDonald's. They also collect toys from the children's menu, particularly the teenager girls in small towns without such restaurants who will invariably go to a McDonald's when they visit one of the larger cities. A group of high school students from the town of Trojan, who often travel to Sofia for theatre performances, always drops in at the McDonald's.

The reaction of teenagers from wealthier families who visit McDonald's more frequently is quite revealing. They are interested only in the toys and will ask their parents going to Sofia to bring them the children's menu just to get the gift toy included in it. After being fed up with McDonald's they will (unsuccessfully) try to tell their friends with smaller allowances that the KFC food is superior. After long disputes, the group from Trojan visits both restaurants consecutively. Collect-

⁷ Informant I. I., age 20, recorded by M. Pišmirova.

ing children's toys by 14–15 year old girls is a fact deserving attention. Essentially, it resembles the fashion of collecting 'capitalist' paper napkins some 10–15 years ago. What is of special significance here is the fact that they collect no ordinary toys, but McDonald's gift toys. The bigger the collection, the higher the self-esteem of its owner. Among the teenager girls, however, these toys are practically never exchanged (as this was the case with the napkins, when one 'silken' napkin was exchanged for ten ordinary ones of rough paper, but also beautiful and coming from the West).

While the teenagers frequent the restaurant, because it is "somewhat different", prestigious and fashionable, middle-aged and old-age people do it mostly to please their children or grandchildren. The Bulgarians' proverbial love for their grandchildren can make even the poorest old-age pensioner save part of his meagre pension in order to give the child that pleasure: "When my little grandchild says, come on, grandma, take me to McDonald's, I check my purse and set out."⁸ While waiting for their children celebrating birthdays, parents usually order salads and desserts; almost no one likes the 'tasteless' American coffee, which is too weak to their taste. In the case of a mother and her 14-year old daughter from the countryside who often go to McDonald's in Sofia or Varna, each of them claimed to be going there because of the other rather than for her own sake. Both of them obviously like the restaurant but will admit this neither to the interviewer nor to each other, because for them going to McDonald's is an event of much greater significance simply because there is nothing like it in their small town; there, the only restaurant offering ordinary burgers is always empty, because people have no money and prefer the traditional dough snacks (rolls, cheese cakes, doughnuts).

One of the basic reasons for grown-ups to go to McDonald's not only in their capacity as parents is the opportunity to have, at least for a short time, the feeling of being Europeans, and superior to the other Bulgarians; to forget about the worries of everyday life and even the fact that they are in Bulgaria. Although they will not admit it, going to McDonald's is also a matter of prestige, at least for some of them. It is indicative that most cars stopping at McDrive are expensive vehicles; their owners could certainly afford something better for lunch.

Since going to McDonald's is an unusual and desired event for people of different age groups, it is very often associated with a special occasion or holiday, such as the Day of the Child (June 1), the end of the school year or a birthday. Parents who cannot afford a large celebration at McDonald's will take their family there as a reward.

It has become clear that McDonald's restaurants in Bulgaria have been invested with a number of new implications and meanings, which extend their original character of fast food restaurants. This fact gives rise to a few conclu-

⁸ Recorded by J. Manolov.

sions. Bourdieu's statement that combination of taste, consumption, and lifestyle preferences "involve discriminatory judgements which at the same time identify and render classifiable our own particular judgements of taste to others" (Bourdieu 1991: 18) appears to be fully applicable to present day Bulgaria. The Bulgarians' attitude to McDonald's is a case in point. With regard to McDonald's, they behave like villagers coming into the big city for the first time. The same appears to be true for Romania where, as I was told, teenagers often don their Sunday best and visit McDonald's with the same gravity and self-esteem as if they went to a fancy restaurant.

The Bulgarian customer spends between one hour and an hour and a half in the restaurant. By using McDonald's this way he bestows new functions on it that are alien to its essential character. He adapts it to his specific social needs and thereby gives it much greater importance than a fast food restaurant deserves. The main product McDonald's is marketing in Bulgaria is not the food (which is only a pretext), but the service, the environment, and most of all the new, peculiar type of social life. Basic to this are the economic crisis and the low self-esteem and the feelings of inferiority of the people. Therefore despite the sustained popularity of McDonald's, few are those who can be regarded as real patrons. After only a few years in Bulgaria, McDonald's has undergone certain changes both on the inside, i. e., with its staff, and on the outside, with its guests, without, however, changing its basic character. On the other hand, McDonald's has to a certain extent changed the eating habits of the Bulgarians and further spread the idea of fast food. This process of mutual 'taming' of both McDonald's and its Bulgarian customers continues today. Its outcome will depend largely on the country's economic development and on its chances to join the European Union. Chances are that McDonald's will lose much of its magnetic power and will become just another fast food chain.

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