

# New Europe College Yearbook

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# FRIENDSHIP AND SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES IN POSTSOCIALISM: THE CASE OF CROATIAN UPPER MIDDLE CLASS

## **Abstract**

The paper explores the emergence of class boundaries in postsocialism in the realm of sociability. The goal was to observe class dynamics through qualitative, experience-near approach, providing a dynamic account of the ways Croatian upper middle class draw symbolic boundaries toward people of different social status. Two main patterns of symbolic boundary maintenance are described and observed in their historical trajectories. The issue of symbolic boundaries is then explored in case of private schooling, in order to follow the process of institutionalization of class inequalities. Finally, an opposite trend of boundary transgression is demonstrated on the case of cross-class friendships.

**Keywords:** symbolic boundaries, friendship, postsocialism, upper middle class, private schooling

## **Introduction**

Several factors made it reasonable to assume that the class structure in Eastern Europe would be rather different from the one in capitalist societies of the West. Firstly, much of Eastern Europe experienced belated modernization, which made class differentiation appear much later than in their Western counterparts. Secondly, in order to create classless societies, state-socialist regimes sought for decades to implement the process of destratification. Finally, two decades of postsocialist transition might have had a significant effect on class transformations: given that the social structure in Eastern Europe, as Eyal, Széleányi and Townsly noticed, is in a flux, any class analysis in this context would in fact be an analysis of class formation (Eyal, Széleányi, and Townsley 1998). Therefore, the question emerged of how and in which direction will the class formation continue to develop? In the empirical research which is presented here, the issue

of class boundaries in postsocialism was addressed through perspective of symbolic boundaries.

Tables, graphs and abstract models have for decades been identified with sociological exploration of social structure. Even though qualitative, experience-near methods have earned a place in sociological analysis already during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (most famously at the Chicago school), the issues related to class inequalities and social stratification remained reserved for macro scale approaches. Since the 1980s, however, a number of social scientists with a background in qualitative sociology became engaged in meaning-oriented study of social inequalities, exploring how categories of class are being “lived” in real life. Instead of perpetuating old cultural clichés based on class labels used in a stereotypical fashion (“bourgeois”, “worker”, “petit bourgeois”), these scholars sought to fill the empty categories with meaning by engaging in the empirical fieldwork. The body of work on symbolic boundary maintenance represents one of the most well known attempts of that sort.

In a series of empirical studies Michèle Lamont explored how social actors categorize objects, people, and practices. These conceptual distinctions by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality, were called symbolic boundaries. Examining these tools, Lamont showed, “allows us to capture the dynamic dimensions of social relations, as groups compete in the production, diffusion, and institutionalization of alternative systems and principles of classifications” (Lamont and Molnar 2002: 168). Instead of regarding culture as coherent and integrated, Lamont therefore embraced the toolkit model of new cultural sociology, directing the search for sources of stability and consistency in the sphere of beliefs and representations – both regarding the schematic organizations which make some ideas or images more accessible than others, and the cues embedded in the physical and social environment (DiMaggio 1997: 267). In the research presented in this paper, the aim was to explore the cues specific for the postsocialist environment in which Croatian upper middle class lived and worked.

This research is based on 60 in-depth interviews carried out in Zagreb from 2009 to 2011 with representatives of four typical upper middle class professions (financial professionals, doctors, architects, cultural specialists).<sup>1</sup> Even though a controversial sociological notion, in this qualitative, small-scale study there was freedom to operationalize the oftentimes confusing concept of class, with less rigor than is usually required in quantitative investigations. When sampling respondents, a

simple occupation-based sample was employed where four groups of professionals and managers represented the well-off, educated part of society characterized by high social status and a high degree of autonomy in the work place.<sup>2</sup> The respondents were found through professional associations, online registries and snowball sampling.

I will start by spelling out two main patterns of drawing symbolic boundaries found among the respondents. After I have elaborated these two types of boundaries, as well as traced their historical origins, the issue of physical boundaries to sociability that emerged in the new social setting will be explored on the case of private schooling. In the final section, I will demonstrate how, thanks to the egalitarian cultural resources, symbolic boundaries in Croatia are transgressed through cross-class friendship making.

### **Culture and Entrepreneurs: Types of Boundaries**

The concept of social class in different social settings hardly refers to an identical set of social phenomena. Even though class terminology everywhere serves to denote groups or collectivities with unequal access to valued resources, its content, as well as the mechanisms of allocation, varies greatly across different geographical settings. Notwithstanding the structural socio-economic features of class inequalities, the extent of contextual variations is perhaps the most salient in the dimension of meaning. In order to explore these differences various authors explored how the group membership is conceived and performed by the actors, or more specifically in the case of symbolic boundary approach, by scrutinizing how the group membership influenced, and was reflected in the metrics of worth employed when assessing other people. In the case of Croatian upper middle class, this had to do with two main patterns: culture and entrepreneurial values.

Culture is an obvious suspect in the social class research. Ever since Weber and Veblen, but most notably from Bourdieu's studies of French society, it has been unsurprising to explore the intersection between culture and social inequalities. In the symbolic boundary approach, however, culture is used in a narrower sense. In contemporary societies, according to Bourdieu, groups and collectivities are formed primarily in the sphere of consumption (Weinger 2005). Everyday acts of consumption serve as a way of symbolizing social similarity, with cultural capital playing

an important role in this process. However, as critics argued, due to Bourdieu's abstract and mechanical model, culture, working through habitus, operates more as a dependent than independent variable; more of a gearbox, than an engine (Alexander and Smith 2002). Rather than simplistically assuming that people's positions in social space will automatically reflect on their identities, Lamont therefore explored how culture is used as a legitimizing principle in making broader value claims.

As in other empirical studies, various expressions of cultural boundaries could be observed in my research. This aspect referred to a broad semantic field of practices mutually related only in a very loose way: boundaries built on high culture, on culture as a resource of intellectual stance and independent thinking, or culture as a guarantee of cosmopolitan values. Even though not completely following the dichotomic logic, these patterns roughly corresponded with classic Bourdieu's typology of culture, presented in his seminal work "Distinction" (Bourdieu 1986). The dominant tastes were thereby divided along two basic streams, which itself continued a chain of Durkheimian oppositions on sacred and profane, existing in various levels of cultural worlds (Velthuis 2005). Yet what proponents of different conceptions of culture shared was the importance given to cultural practices – regardless whether classical or avant-garde, bourgeois or revolutionary. Thus, what by convention is called culture represented one of the unifying patterns with potential to explain variations in the processes of constructing subjective and objective boundaries between classes.

Economic liberalism, individualism, materialism and ideology of productivity belong to the second main criterion used to shape the group patterns of inclusion and exclusion among the respondents (primarily financial professionals, but also from other sectors, such as medical doctors). Although representing, if not contradictory, then perhaps potentially incompatible combinations of values, all of these segments have been united by the, roughly speaking, entrepreneurial worldview. The representatives of this type varied from advocates of Schumpeterian entrepreneurialism, or in the more profane form, people who admired those who achieved financial success, to the libertarian adversaries to policies of solidarity and redistribution. However, as with the previous pattern, this set of values appeared too broad to be defined and bounded in a pure geometrical fashion, again encompassing practices mutually related, sometimes, only through the "family resemblances".



The mention of neither patterns comes as a surprise in qualitative exploration of class boundaries. Money and success – scarce resources by definition – seem as an obvious point of symbolic demarcation, with a fairly simple logic: if you are doing well economically, it is very comforting to assume that this must be due to your own talent and hard work, rather than due to favoritism and unfair advantages. As for the culture and arts, on the other hand, numerous historical and sociological accounts have documented attempts to ground the class identity in the sphere of taste – the domain of subjectivity with a unique characteristic to represent the very paradigm of naturality, spontaneity, and therefore objectivity (Eagleton 1990: 2). However, in order to take into account the full significance of the observed phenomena, each of the two patterns needs to be analyzed in the empirical and historical frame in which they were encountered – that is, within the system of semantical system in which they only can acquire meaning.

In order to pursue this goal, it is necessary to reveal the diachronical context in which both class patterns emerged in the, officially, classless state-socialist society – rather than providing solely snapshot perspective. In the next section, I show that the two patterns differ not only in their content, but also regarding the moment of their historical appearance. This, I show, had an impact on the contesting views on past, different experiences of present, and therefore conflicting visions of future, between these two social groups.

## **Origins of Boundaries**

A diachronical approach to cultural and symbolic aspects of social inequalities has been long present in sociological and anthropological tradition. From Bourdieu's analysis of French class structure (Bourdieu 1986), inspired by Elias's figurational sociology (Elias 1982), to Lamont's exploration of cultural differences between France and the USA in the context of specific national histories (Lamont 1992, 2000b), and Ortner's analysis of the phenomenon of upward mobility within specific territorially bounded ethnic enclaves (Ortner 2003), various authors observed the symbolic distinctions as a result of specific historical trajectories. Yet if the set of cultural cues standing at the disposal of individual actors indeed is determined by intergenerational transmission of class-specific practices

and rituals, the case of class boundaries in Croatian society offers an interesting comparative perspective.

### ***Old Boundaries***

As a result of the militant state intervention during period of state-socialism, Eastern European countries conducted an overall project of industrialization, generating high capital accumulation and levels of industrial investment. Yet surpassing the capitalist countries on the economic level, for the communist ideologues, represented only half of the story; Eastern Europe was to be modernized in a different way, with egalitarianism constituting a central point of its agenda. However, the efficiency of de-stratification measures, as well known, was rather dubious. What, according to numerous critics, differentiated social stratification in socialism from the Western model were simply the patterns which served for transmitting the inequalities, not the existence of inequalities itself. Due to the limited options for direct social reproduction, cultural reproduction operated as a major alternative route for the transmission of inequalities (Kraaykamp and Nieuwbeerta 2000: 100).

Unable to help their children maintaining the family social trajectory through material means (*i.e.*, as the consequence of the abolition of private property, limited income dispersion and other de-stratifying measures), knowledge, education and aspiration towards academic success, according to Kraaykamp and Nieuwbeerta, became even more important for transmission of inequalities. The case of a young professional, interviewed for the purpose of this research, can be considered indicative. His family, for centuries part of Croatian landed nobility, has for generations been educated in bourgeois liberal professions. Long after the times when their power was avouched by the monarch, his ancestors converted their status and position into safer modes of symbolical capital, as well as educational credentials.

Art and culture have always played an important part of his life: as a small boy he would go for music lessons, and attend foreign language courses, thanks to which today he fluently speaks several languages. Nowadays, he does not play musical instruments any more, but he is interested in collecting antiques. This education has also left an impact in the creation of his social circle.

I originate from...ok, now it's gonna sound like I live somewhere, like, in the skies, but I originate from a noble family. I was raised in a special way. Since early on I have been surrounded by...hmmm...well I lived in a specific setting. I don't know, I have lots of relatives even outside Croatia which also aren't well, how should I put it...which aren't frivolous. They share a long history, and a certain legacy, too. So, I don't wanna say this limited the type of people who can enter my circle, but in any case I *choose* people. I mean, OK, due to the circumstances I live a normal life, just like anybody else, so I cannot choose people according to this line only, but this definitely has conditioned with whom I will socialize more.

While he is surrounded by people of higher social standing, when asked who are the people that could never enter the list of the "important people", he says:

It's not that I won't hang out with someone who is not from this milieu, or who didn't finish college. But I don't know, when I see someone in a track suit and sneakers... or, I don't know how to put this... who chews a chewing gum and who starts to talk to me... I won't say differently, but who starts to 'howl'<sup>3</sup> [laughter]... I mean unrelated to the regional context, but you know, when it becomes obvious that this guy doesn't have something *behind* him... some sort of culture, then this guy will hardly manage to enter the group of my intimate friends.

People to whom he refers, and to whom a number of other interviewees referred when describing their "other", are "seljačine", which approximately could be translated as "hillbilly" or "redneck", but unlike these terms, is not geographically determined. Although it is, in a literal sense, augmentative of the word "peasant", this is not an adequate English translation, since it refers also to people who live in urban areas – or primarily to them. But the main layer of meaning relates to people who though living in urban areas, have not accepted urban values – whatever these are – combining both ethical and aesthetical connotations.

### ***New Boundaries***

Although state-socialist regimes – in theory more than in practice – sought to eradicate any form of class divisions, social inequalities in the socio-economic sense were perceived as particularly suspicious. Any kind of divergence from the common standard of living was bound to be

denounced as amoral, and seen as subversive. The first ones to feel this were private entrepreneurs – class of parasites extracting the surplus value from the exploited and alienated activity of the working class. With the decline of socialism and the rise of the market economy, however, the situation turned upside-down. Entrepreneurs suddenly received a warm welcome, as those with a potential to bring Eastern European countries along the road of success, with notions of success and meritocracy replacing consecrated ideas of equality and “uravnilovka”.

True, the ideas of entrepreneurialism and private initiative to some extent existed even before 1990. How could one otherwise, as Yurchak observes, explain the dynamics of entrepreneurial activity in the final years of the Soviet Union: having been raised in a society in which private business was practically non-existent, the new generations were not supposed to be good at inventing and running private businesses – and yet, great numbers of young people quickly adjusted (Yurchak 2002: 278). These people, Yurchak continues, acquired particular entrepreneurial knowledge and skills long before the collapse of the communist regime, whether as managers in industry, dealers on the black market, or communist youth activists. Yet, notwithstanding the historical continuities between the two periods, as for the entrepreneurial activities the 1990 indeed had signified a watershed, the beginning of a new life. In words of my interviewee, an auditor in her early 50s:

Well...I could say...I feel as if I had amnesia to this whole socialism past...as if my world and my life...my business life...began with the market economy.

After graduating in economics, my respondent was employed in a big socialist enterprise, with, as she admits, little ambition in life. After 1990, however, she left her job and decided to start on her own. Since then she developed her own business, running both the accounting, and training seminars for auditors. Asked whether her material status has risen since the breakup of Yugoslavia, despite ups and downs, she answers euphorically:

Yes! Yes! Now look, the system in which we live, despite the corruption and current defects...so this system, which if you insist I can call capitalism... induces the capable to have more. While the socialism induces less capable to have more, because it makes people equal, capitalism stimulates the capable ones to have more. And by all means, I belong to the ones to which capitalism opened all the doors...and in this system I simply blossomed! (...)

"I'm totally in favor of a *fierce* capitalism", she says, demonstrating a cultural framework which oftentimes accompanied postsocialist transition and its alleged neoliberalism, making way for a reduction of welfare programs by narrowing definitions of their respective symbolic communities (Lamont 2000a: 605). "The ones who are capable should go forward", she says, "and the less capable take the place that belongs to them. Why would a capable person ride a bicycle, while an incapable person drives a Mercedes?" The cure for the illnesses of postsocialism, according to her, is "more capitalism", rather than "return to socialism". In capitalism, she says, if you work you can earn. "And for me... *for me, this is paradise!*"

She characterizes her and her group of friends, as mostly consisting of entrepreneurs: "Our value system is work and order. (...) Principally, we are honest and decent...we are the honest and hardworking part of this nation." In a country still very much struggling with the difficulties of the postsocialist transition, and which only until recently had still been trying to catch up with the pre-1990 levels of economic performance, entrepreneurs oftentimes seemed prone to ground identity and feeling of self-worth in their role in overcoming these hardships by making a better society.

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In this section it was shown how two main types of symbolic boundaries provided separate types of resources that the respondents used for grounding their feelings of self-worth, as well as assessing the worth of the people around them. However, the cases of my interviewees at the same time indicated deeper political and societal divides emerging as symptom and outcome of the contesting metrics of worth. In the case of Croatia, this revolved around different political attitudes, and more broadly, the ways in which the respondents interpreted the nation's turbulent history.

A certain form of nostalgia for socialism has been noticeable among many respondents, yet few of the interviewees advocating entrepreneurial values seemed to share the sentiment. Asked again about her reminiscences about the times before 1990, the auditor quoted in the previous section answered: "socialism? I don't think of unrealistic things. Regardless of the good sides, biology does its own part. It's like two pine trees, where one is growing, and the other is puny. Socialism is simply evaporated out of my head." Some of the respondents from this group have had the experience of

state-socialism, while some of them, too young for that, got to know only its offspring, yet what all of them agreed was that only in capitalism would they get rewarded for their effort. This group of people therefore seemed to support libertarian idea of capitalism by referring to the genuinely moral principles, meritocracy and justice, which state-socialist aspirations towards egalitarianism and redistribution could not fulfill.

Even though not necessarily nostalgic for the time of socialism, for the “cultural” group of my interviewees, the emphasis was very different. Instead of pointing their criticism at heritage of state-socialism, it was what followed after which bothered them the most. Phenomena ranging from marketization and political radicalization (remarks more noticeable in the case of intellectual strands of upper middle class), to the lamentations about recent social upheavals, the rise of the *nouveaux riche*, and the ever lesser role of culture within dominant scale of values (motifs common among the cultural bourgeoisie), were understood as true problems of the society in which they lived. The issue of symbolic boundaries, in this way, rather than revealing solely the shape and content of “personal communities” (Pahl and Spencer 2004), uncovered more serious social divisions.

After analyzing symbolic aspect of boundary maintenance, in the next section I turn to the issue of institutional boundaries. The topic of private schools in postsocialism, as I propose, represents an interesting analytical point for exploring how the symbolic boundaries between classes intersect with physical boundaries to sociability. This subject will also be presented in a longer diachronical perspective, juxtaposing contemporary trends to the case of comprehensive reform of the secondary education from the 1970s.

## **From Destratification to Private Schools: Institutionalization of Boundaries**

Educational policies in state-socialist societies after World War II, as described by Prokić-Breuer, had been guided by three primary considerations: firstly, acknowledging the importance of educational expansion for economic prosperity; secondly, recognizing its ideological potential; and thirdly, identifying education as one of the mechanisms of social reproduction (Prokić-Breuer 2011: 18). In order to achieve the third goal, and to assure the equal opportunities in access to schooling,

state-socialist regimes implemented various policies. Despite the only partial success of such actions in the Yugoslav context and elsewhere, the (in)famous educational reform called “Šuvarica” from the mid 1970s, gives a telling example.

“Šuvarica”, called after Stipe Šuvar, at the time one of the leading Yugoslav communist leaders, and a minister of education and culture of the socialist republic of Croatia, represented one of the most thorough attempts to eradicate the influence of class inequalities in the educational attainment through the system of “directed education”. Why was the reform deemed necessary in the eyes of the Yugoslav educational experts? Similarly to its counterparts in other Eastern European countries the educational system in Yugoslavia had been modeled after the Soviet blueprint: eight years of comprehensive compulsory education were followed either by a technical high school, or the more academically rigorous gymnasium, forming a two-track system (Prokić-Breuer 2011: 18). The type of secondary school attended by adolescents, Prokić-Breuer explains, therefore played a significant role in their subsequent educational career, with entrance into gymnasias creating a highly competitive bottleneck.

It is true that by promoting educational opportunities for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds and hindering those coming from high social positions, communist governments made a tremendous effort to ensure accessibility. Reserving a large number of seats in prestigious high schools for children from working class families, as well as providing them with the financial aid, represented only some of the measures intended to encourage students to continue schooling rather than enter the labor market following their compulsory education (Prokić-Breuer 2011: 19). And yet, despite succeeding in diminishing the effects of social background, according to Stipe Šuvar, this system simply replaced one form of inequality with another, producing a new pattern of class differentiation.

Rather than organizing a truly egalitarian society, such a system, Šuvar objected, did nothing more than provide a higher level of equality of chances. Even in the ideal situation where it would diminish the importance of social background, which was, as he admitted not always the case, the existing system helped to maintain the separation between “intellectual” and “physical labor”. In order to change this, the Yugoslav educational system planned to pass a comprehensive reform, radically changing its structure, replacing the two-track system with the one-track arrangement. Instead of dividing the 15-year-olds into, respectively, the

future college graduates, and prospective workers, the new secondary schooling system ensured equal education for all.

Curriculums containing knowledge in general culture and science were no longer reserved exclusively for students attending gymnasiums – thereby providing every student with an equal opportunity to continue their educational process by enrolling in a university. The new system of education was, however, at the same time “directed”. Instead of providing only general knowledge necessary for academic scholarship, all students were supposed to finish a practical instruction, traditionally associated with vocational training. The first two grades being taught in schools were therefore being followed by the practical part of the curriculum, conducted in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade, in various industrial enterprises. This enabled every student, including the bulk of those who would later enroll in a university, to get acquainted with manual labor. The labor and education, “the school and the factory” – both of them, supposedly, being a product of bourgeois society – were therefore meant to be re-embedded into the social process of production (Šušvar 1977: 61).

Amongst the general public, the “directed education” scheme had been met with great revolt. True, this was partly due to the extremely sloppy ways the reform had been implemented: lacking fully elaborated curricula and necessary textbooks, as well as mostly relying on improvisation by the teaching staff, the new educational system seemed chaotic to almost everyone. Formal problems, however, represented only one side of the problem: a decision to abolish the system of gymnasiums – traditionally key educational institution of the central European intelligentsia – was crucial in causing such a broad-sweeping, angry response.<sup>4</sup> In vain Šušvar’s figures revealed an overall increase of students gaining knowledge of classical languages, history of art and literature. “Šušvarovka” has since then been kept in the public memory as “uravnilovka”, a reform responsible for shattering the knowledge of general culture among Croatians, bringing nothing but ignorance.

The story of the “Šušvarica” reform matters for the topic of this paper in two ways, confirming at the same time the continuity and the discontinuity of the contemporary trends with what was before. On the one hand, the opposition to the reform shows that in socialist Yugoslavia educational system was used (or sought to be used) as a mechanism for intergenerational transmission of inequalities, just as it did in Western capitalist countries. The fact that the class distinction existed even back in the days can be concluded not only from the consciousness about the



advantages and disadvantages associated with different levels of education (*i.e.*, the university track high schools), but also from the symbolic importance given to the idea of spatial separation, as seen from the case of a medical doctor in her 50s interviewed for this research.

The respondent, whose daughter attended a private school, explained to me that this was not a matter sudden decision. Even though during state-socialism her children were not yet in the school age, she recalls, “my husband was always saying how his children would attend a private gymnasium, if it ever opens here in our hometown”. Living in Yugoslavia, they had no clue what private schools exactly were and how they functioned, and yet her husband, she recalls, “he just... well, had this sentiment.” However, the case of the “Šuvarica” school reform demonstrates the narrow limits under which these sentiments, during the state-socialism, were tested. It namely shows that, if the symbolic boundaries between classes during state-socialism did exist, this unquenchable thirst of human desire for excelling above the rest and providing the same for the generations of their descendents, was institutionally bounded.

After 1990 things started to take new forms, bringing the possibility of class divisions to a whole new level: not only was the old two-track high school system immediately restored – therefore allowing, relatively speaking, early separation of the pathway for the intelligentsia on the one hand, and the manual workers on the other – but it was also “enriched” by the various new private schools, which enabled people like my interviewee and her husband to fulfill their dreams. Being the most selective and producing the highest scores in the state competitions, as well as internationally, elite examples of public gymnasiums in Croatia (for example, schools offering an IB program) still hold the most prestige. However, since the mid 1990s, the private gymnasiums started taking over their share of the market. Out of approximately 400 secondary schools, nowadays about twenty-five of them are private.<sup>5</sup>

In order to gain inside information about private schooling, I talked to a head of a private gymnasium specialized in art and culture, and curiously enough, until 1990 a close collaborator of Stipe Šuvar.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to public schools, private institutions, as she explains, offer flexibility and more possibilities to meet students’ interests. In her school, as she proudly declared, students can attend courses in a number of foreign languages, workshops in film production, as well as classes on calligraphy. Thanks to its pedagogical resources, number of different workshops, greater ratio

of teachers and students, as well as highly motivated teaching staff – not least due to the generous financial incentives – the school principal waxed lyrical about the high results of her students achieved in the previous year's state exams.

The advantages of attending a private school leave no ambiguities: in contrast to the bureaucratization of public school, congestion and overcrowding, bad organization and lack of interest in the students' needs and wishes, private gymnasiums offer everything without these problematic features. However, in the discourse dominated by notions of freedom and values of humanist education, one aspect remains conspicuously hidden: the concept of class. Notwithstanding the value of humanist education, the question emerges, who are the ones actually benefiting from this? In contrast to the system in which she herself once worked, a system that sought to introduce art, classical languages and general culture to children from all social strata, the rules of the game changed. Ironically, once working on a project aiming to eradicate class differences, since 2001 when she founded a private gymnasium, my respondent gave her fair contribution to the process of institutionalizing class boundaries, managing to adjust to the new conditions rather well.

Despite underlining the humanist education and its student-oriented perspective in order to conceal its, undoubtedly, elite status, private schools in Croatia therefore represented an obvious class marker. However, in my research this marker, to conclude, became contested. Despite the prestige associated with attending a private gymnasium, several students, as a teacher employed in the school led by my earlier respondent informed me, reported a feeling of shame. Instead of using the fact of attending a private school as a point of pride and self-worth, they sought to hide this from their friends from the neighborhood.<sup>7</sup> The controversy surrounding the attendance of private institution, in this respect, implied the existence of an egalitarian order of worth, prohibiting classist isolation. In the final section of this paper, I focus on the egalitarian legacy by analyzing the topic of cross-class friendships encountered in my research.

### **Transgression of Boundaries: Cross-class Friendships**

Research of friendship patterns in the Western countries established class homogeneity as one of the most important factors in explaining non-kin sociability. Numerous research projects proved the homogenous

content of personal networks (Louch 2000; Williams 1959; Wong, Pattison, and Robins 2006; Wright and Cho 1992), whereas homophily, as a “principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001: 416) comprised various demographic and psychological characteristics: age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, intelligence, attitudes, aspirations. In a world distinguished by professionalization, division of labor, and all other forms of specialization, this can seem intuitively acceptable: “Given the social and economic barriers to socializing”, Degenne and Forsé observed, “two people need a good number of common traits to stand any chance of establishing a relation” (Degenne and Forsé 1999: 35). With whom shall we relate if not with people who are closest to us in social space? The question yet remained, what are these common traits.

On the one hand, it seems rather obvious to expect people to prefer persons with whom they share common values or interests, that is, a belonging to the same symbolic community. The way we see ourselves, and appreciate our own worth will, as assumed by Lamont, most likely have a similar influence on the way we evaluate people around us. On the other side, these expectations risk the neglect of real-life possibilities. As conceptual distinctions by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality, symbolic boundaries are essentially imagined and exist in minds, rather than in physical space. Symbolic boundaries, however, never exist in vacuum, but are always drawn in frame of an “activity space” (Horton and Reynolds 1971) in which different people meet and interact. In order to analytically approach these issues, Feld coined a term “focus of activity”, which he defined as any “social, psychological, legal or physical entity around which joint activities are organized” (Feld and Carter 1999: 136).

The symbolic boundaries between classes no doubt existed even in, allegedly, classless Yugoslav society. The transition, however, laid the ground for expanding these inequalities in several ways. While the income dispersion between occupational strata has expanded, social status differences between manual and non-manual occupations has risen drastically. The possibility for grounding class distinctions in the domain of consumption was increased (Fehérváry 2002), helping the newly rich “to establish new networks of relations among those who can afford to sponsor and attend their ceremonies” (Creed 2002: 65). Through these processes upper classes have acquired new possibilities and mechanisms of social

closure, enabling spatialization of inequalities in various dimensions of sociability.

While in state-socialism the symbolic boundaries could not enhance further social divides, the postsocialist transformations brought significant changes. Private schools, marketization of nursery homes, gated communities and exclusive social clubs, in this respect represented only some of the ways in which the symbolic boundaries between classes resulted in physical separation. Yet, despite the new possibilities of social closure, this trend in Croatia has been far from ubiquitous. Surprisingly, patterns of sociability among a number of interviewees did indeed transgress class boundaries, therefore refuting a hypothesis on the complete dominance of homophilic ties. The case of a museum curator from Zagreb is indicative.

My respondent is a museum curator in his late 50s, currently finishing his PhD thesis, and married to a high school teacher. His hobbies are mountaineering and speleology, while a lot of his free time constantly goes towards further education. As a scientist and an intellectual he frequently socializes with his colleagues with whom he shares common interests. However, one of the people on the interviewee's affective map is his neighbor, a metal worker. Despite being a recent friendship (my respondent moved to the neighborhood only a short time ago), the two of them have already established some common rituals, for instance a regular Saturday evening card game, which they conduct together with their wives.

Being a biologist and a speleologist, my respondent's work depends crucially on fieldwork in remote wild areas, and there the choice of people is certainly not limited only to people with graduate degrees like him: "speleology just as mountain hiking is a hobby not limited to a certain educational range, you know. You have guys who finished only primary school, to guys who have a PhD." In these remote areas he meets farmers and villagers, who oftentimes turn out to be of essential importance for survival in wilderness – and he certainly knows to appreciate it:

Well, the interests are certainly different, of course. They are different. But, as I said, you can always find a mutual language. If you can find something in common, you organize part of your life around that. One makes many acquaintances, when you do fieldwork. And when you go to a field, it's crucial to establish a contact with people in the field (...) because it's easier to get the information you need that way, it's easier to gather material.

These guys will lead you...if you meet a person, you'll get to places in the territory where you on your own wouldn't find a way that easily.

However, even if it may seem that these relations remain at a merely instrumental level, he objects, and gives an example of a friendship he made with one of the people he met during his fieldwork adventures:

When you meet this person, then this doesn't end with some superficial contact, you deepen it. You don't go to the field only once, usually, you go there several times. For instance, I'm very close to a man who works as a janitor and as a weatherman at the hiking station (...) and this goes over many years now. We have spent a lot of time [there] and we made a contact with people who live there (...). And then, as I said, this is not just a superficial acquaintance; this is a much deeper relation. (...) For instance, this hiking station is separated in two parts, you have beds for hikers, but these friends of mine who run it have also their private part, and we of course sleep in the latter, not in the former. So that's something completely different, because we sleep at their place, we have lunch together. And there are lots of such contacts.

His friends from the field therefore include people with different profiles and jobs: "one works on his land, the guy from the hiking station finished only high school (...), there is one forester, one of them also works at a bus station. But you know them, you know their children...this friendship then goes through generations and generations. Your kids get to know their kids, and so this develops further". True, many of his friends belong to the educated milieu, either as his fellow biologists, or his classmates, "but this isn't necessary, it's not necessary...because, as I said, socializing with people who aren't on the same educational level can be equally nice and very interesting. You learn from them, they learn from you, and this is all very nicely intertwined." As a professional speleologist whose life oftentimes depended on others – especially during the war in Croatia from 1991-1995 when he served in a special army unit located in hard-to-reach mountain areas – he learnt how to appreciate, what he sees as real human values.

In Lamont's study of French and American upper middle class, the domain of morality constituted one of three main patterns of symbolic boundary maintenance. Yet in the case of my respondent, morality played a different role than among Lamont's respondents. Whereas Lamont's interviewees used moral grounds to distinguish themselves from

the people below them, on the contrary, individuals presented in this section employed them, exactly in order to transgress these boundaries. Hard work, work ethics as well as the basic moral qualities of honesty and sincerity appeared to these interviewees, namely, as properties attainable to everyone, and equally distributed among different classes, being therefore independent of education and social standing. Despite appearing important for building the identity of interviewees, morality therefore at the same time transcended class boundaries, demonstrating its inclusionary, rather than exclusionary function.

## Conclusion

Eastern European societies since the demise of state-socialism represented a huge social laboratory, where class differences constituted an essential part of the puzzle. In this study, the aim was to contribute to this discussion by analyzing symbolic boundaries. The research questions therefore revolved around various aspects of social life, including the realm of values, identity building, and friendship making, all regarded in their class dimension. How do people in postsocialist societies construct their identities? What criteria do they use when they evaluate people around them? To what extent are these criteria based on their class positions? How did this change with the transitional transformations, and how much are they still governed by the heritage of values borrowed from the communist ideological framework?

High culture, as well as its intellectualist denial, represented an ideal candidate which upper classes used in order to symbolically distinguish themselves from the ones below them, seeking to find their dominance in the subjective sphere, which would then in a magical way attain an attribute of objectivity *par excellence*. At the same time, the entrepreneurial values of success and meritocracy represented alternative order of worth, which seemed to emerge after 1990, as a correlate of the growing number of entrepreneurs, providing them ideology and moral economy needed for grounding their identity and feeling of self-worth. The historical period in which each of the patterns occurred, it was shown, had a strong impact on contesting visions of recent history: whereas the former demonstrated critical stance towards various features of transitional changes (rising inequalities, new elites), the latter tended to be more critical towards the previous regime whose ills have, supposedly, been cured by capitalism and market economy.

After spelling out the types of symbolic boundaries encountered in my research, as well as tracing their origins in recent Croatian history, the section of private schooling provided additional perspective on class inequalities in contemporary Croatia. The introduction of private schools, which replaced the socialist one-track system (designed to reduce the impact of parental background for school success), was described in order to demonstrate the recent trends. The institutionalization of class inequalities, in this way, helped expand the boundary drawing from symbolic to spatial dimension, shifting the obstacles to cross-class sociability to a higher level. As the “communities in mind” began to be transformed into “communities on the ground” (Pahl 2005), the homophilic mechanism also changed the form from choice homophily to induced homophily (Kossinets and Watts 2009). Surprisingly, however, as was shown in the final empirical section, the opposite trend was also noticeable.

The principle of homophily, or in essence the rule that “birds of feather flock together”, which has been confirmed in so many different studies, undoubtedly played an extremely important role in sociability of many interviewees. However, a number of respondents had transgressed class boundaries and sustained close friendship ties with people of lower class background. Contrary to new, classist orders of worth, and despite spatialization of inequalities, the cross-class sociability has been facilitated by the contextual features of Eastern Europe and legacy of state-socialism: recent modernization (with most of the people still having living ancestors among the rural population), stages in life-course associated with low degree of institutional separation (e.g. school friendships), and other manifestations of spatial proximity (lack of residential segregation). Finally, egalitarian values played a crucial role, providing cultural resources needed for grounding the concept of similarity in class-neutral terms. In a society whose ruling ideologies for decades insisted on social equality as the primary value, and which condemned the idea of inequality as amoral, aversion toward any inclination to create the symbolic boundaries on the basis of someone’s socioeconomic status, education or occupation becomes perfectly understandable.

The structural context in which people live, Lamont argues, consists not only of the structural conditions, in the sense of a person’s market position, but also of cultural resources, consisting of “narratives made available by national historical and religious traditions and various sectors of cultural production and diffusion – intellectuals, the educational system,

the church, the mass media" (Lamont 2000b: 7). Egalitarian values, lack of classist prejudices, and an absence of structural barriers to cross-class sociability constituted an important part of these cultural resources, with state-socialist past representing an important source of such societal forces. However, as other stories illustrated, the question of how far back into history one has to go to identify this path dependency remains. In some cases very far, along the family trees of the noble or bourgeois families, while in some other cases, not too far as some agents turned out to be far more ready to adjust to the new "orders of worth".

Despite the expectation that people in postsocialism as rational choice actors will immediately adjust to the new social, economic and political conditions, these results showed a far more complex picture, confirming the view that social relations are profoundly governed by underlying social and cultural structures, which are, according to Sewell, multiple, overlapping, and composed simultaneously of different cultural schemas and modes of power (Sewell 1996). In this way, the demise of state-socialism can be seen as a transformative event which changed social structures and enabled new conditions in which agents created and manipulated new opportunities, without, however, discarding values and routines acquired in the old regime. The postsocialist transition should, my aim was to show, be regarded as a complex process containing multiple and overlapping social and cultural structures, and providing different motivations and means of action, enabling agency and allowing actors to be something more than a mere "effect of the structure".



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In order to understand both sides of the class boundaries, in my research the working class population in Croatia were also interviewed, whereas for the sake of achieving a comparative perspective I also carried out field research in Vienna, where I interviewed Austrian upper middle class. In this paper, however, I will present results from interviews with Croatian upper middle class.
- <sup>2</sup> Instead of identifying the concept of class with proxy used for sampling (in this case, occupation), a broader ('umbrella') approach to defining social class was embraced. For more on the folk concept of class and kitchen-sink approach in sociological analysis of inequalities see Conley's piece in the volume he edited with Anette Lareau (Conley 2008).
- <sup>3</sup> In Zagreb slang, this word refers to the dialect of immigrants from the rural areas.
- <sup>4</sup> As an example of "humanist" critique, see work by Puhovski (Puhovski 1990).
- <sup>5</sup> Some of these are religious private schools, which do not require tuition fees, or carry social prestige, and in general do not seem to play any significant role in the processes of social stratification, at least in the Croatian context. As for the primary schools, the number of private schools is still insignificant: out of nearly 900, only two of them are privately run.
- <sup>6</sup> She was not chosen as a part of the original upper middle class sample, but for the purpose of the pilot interview of the research on private schooling in Croatia. Unlike other respondents quoted in this paper, the main topic of this interview dealt with the implementation of private schools in the contemporary Croatia, rather than with her personal network and friendship ties.
- <sup>7</sup> It is indicative that, despite her dreams about sending her children to a private school, even the doctor described in the beginning of this section did not manage to provide both of her daughters with a private education, with her older one having categorically rejected her mother's persuasions.

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