

IT TAKES A STRONG MAN TO SURVIVE

or

on Boxing, Pimping and how to be a man in the Roma
ghettos of Sliven

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Abstract

This paper explores the construction of hegemonic masculinities in the Roma ghetto of the town of Sliven, Bulgaria. The major focus of research is on the two main incarnations of the manly man – the Boxer and the Pimp. While the masculinity of the boxer is constructed in a women-free vacuum, the pimp creates himself through women. In a sense these two masculine figures represent the two poles of hegemonic masculinity. Through a historical and social contextualization of the life strategies of these two popular figures, I come to the conclusion that their types of masculinity heavily depend on the political and economic situation. The different masculine qualities that they embody thus represent a reflection of their times. At the end of the paper, I come to the conclusion that the pimp is symbolic boxer, operating in the field of shady economy and exploitation.

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1. Introduction

Do you know how the town is called “The town of the 100 chieftains”¹? Well now it should be renamed to “The town of 100 pimps”. This is how we call it and how everybody here knows it...

These words are told to me by Naycho², the seventeen year old son of the owner of the main shop in one of the Roma neighbourhoods of Sliven, where I have conducted my research. The conversation is taking place in the first evening after my arrival to the neighbourhood and I heard the phrase many more times before it was time to leave. The other claim I encountered very often was that “*We are all boxers here*”. Boxing is the most popular sport among the Roma from Sliven and almost every time I approached a group of more than three men (of whatever age) in the ghetto, at least one of them turned out to be a current or ex-boxer.

My initial intention was to write about the relation between violence and the choice of boxing as a career in the Roma ghettos of Sliven, a town in the central-eastern part of Bulgaria with a population of about 90 thousand, more than a quarter of which are Roma who live mainly in two ghettos. During several previous research

¹During the times of State socialism every city in Bulgaria had a sort of official nickname, reflecting either its glorious past or some picturesque peculiarity to be proud with. Sliven's nickname was *The town of 100 chieftains* (*Градът на стоте воеводи*) as a reference to the numerous proud sons it has given in the struggles for national liberation in the 19th century. Another town in the southern valleys of the Balkan mountains – Kanzalak was known as *The town of roses* to reflect its role as a center for rose oil production etc.

²The names and nicknames of most of the people I spoke with, are changed in order to protect their privacy

trips³ to Sliven I was impressed by the amount of former and current boxers I was meeting while doing interviews in the Roma neighbourhoods. I was asking myself – why? What was the reason that so many young men from these places were choosing exactly boxing as a career and not some other – more prestigious and less harmful sport? My hypothesis was that this choice is an answer to the hostile and violent environment. Poor Roma kids, I assumed, are surrounded by physical violence and discrimination and boxing is both a way out of the ghetto (if they manage to build a successful career) and a way to use their experience with violence and their accumulated bodily capital in a legitimate pursuit of a career, perceived as *manly* and prestigious. During my research, however, this focus was changed and broadened because of several reasons. First of all my initial hypothesis was built mainly on the basis of observations of the bigger ghetto of Sliven where physical violence is a much more visible phenomenon and therefore the link with boxing in the personal stories of the pugilists would be easier to discern (or read into). Due to a series of unfortunate circumstances and probably, wrong choices, my entry to this ghetto was seriously hindered so I had to focus on the smaller neighbourhood where the levels of interpersonal violence are significantly lower. This fact opened my eyes for other factors in the choice of boxing as a career and, what is more important, for other phenomena – too interesting to be ignored. I discovered that in addition to the many boxers in the neighbourhood there is another *manly* group – the pimps. Now I decided to find out what was common for the boxers and the pimps and what was different. The most obvious similarity is that

³The first time I visited Sliven's Roma ghettos was in 1999 when as a freshman in Ethnology I participated in the international sociological survey *Poverty, Ethnicity and Gender* (Selenyi and Emigh 2001) under the supervision of Prof. Ilona Tomova. In the following years I participated in several other research projects as a field worker.

both groups are comprised exclusively by men and that both pursuits are confirming their manliness. The most obvious difference is that the former activity is completely legal and the latter – totally illegal. Despite the last difference however both are granting their performers certain prestige. In addition there are deeper dissimilarities and things that they have in common. So after this shift in my research interest I have decided that the main questions I will try to answer in my thesis are: Why are boxing and pimping so popular among the Roma from Sliven? And how do they contribute in the making of the ghetto man? In other words I want to explore the construction of masculinity in the Roma ghettos in Sliven through two of its most popular incarnations - the Boxer and the Pimp. These two (sometimes complementary) pursuits embody different aspects of the ghetto masculinity and are therefore differently constructed and performed. Boxing takes place in a somewhat “women free” vacuum and is organized, practiced and performed only by men. Boxing practice stresses on the physical features of manliness – strength and prowess but also on the importance of an accumulated and scrupulously maintained bodily capital (in the terms of Wacquant), a fair amount of self discipline, obedience to the prescriptions of the trainer and often – readiness to sacrifice many pleasures and joys of life in the name of success on the ring. Pimping on the other hand, requires other important male qualities – audacity, ability to deal and bargain, cunning. In addition a good social capital is crucially important. Pimping is performed with and through women and the prosperous pimp is perceived as someone who has success with women in general.

In the this work I would also like to explore some of the relations between these two manly activities.

My argument will be that both activities (especially in the ways they are performed in the ghetto) are characteristic for the marginalized and are socially and historically predetermined. Since the Roma communities in Bulgaria are undisputedly the most marginalized groups in the country and the impacts of the economic transformations from the 1989 on were particularly severe for them, I will argue that the pursuit of “the poor boys’ sport” (as the boxing is referred to) and the criminal activity of the pimp are to a significant extent contingent on the structural circumstances. On the other hand, the success in both endeavours is highly dependent on the personal agency. And in the ghetto this personal agency is mostly attributed to the *manly man* who has to be strong, aggressive when needed, independent and active. The manly man is one who has control over the direction of his life, one who's destiny is in his own hands. The characteristic of this control, however, is quite different for the boxers and the pimps. The boxers in their vast majority are employees⁴ and thus highly dependent on the club in financial terms. The feeling and image of independence for them derives from their discipline. They vanquish the earthly seductions of the street and and overwhelm the fear of pain in order to forge out of themselves the image of the warrior (see Wacquant 2004; 1995a,b). On the other hand the pimps are the ultimate petty capitalists (see Bourgois 1995; 2004). They depend on no one but themselves and the whims of the market (and of course on the women they exploit). Their personal qualities and social capital are what helps them to navigate in the jungle of illegal private enterprise.

⁴The professional boxing in Bulgaria is very underdeveloped and with one notable exception all the boxers in Sliven are amateurs. When they compete for the Bulgarian national team they receive salaries from the Bulgarian Boxing Federation which on its part is financed by the state budget.

The pursuit of both activities constitutes a *search of respect* (to borrow Bourgois' terms) which is practically restricted within the ghetto. Even though a successful boxer could win a certain amount of prestige in the mainstream society, boxing in general is not a very popular sport in Bulgaria, so even the best boxers are relatively unknown for the general public. Within the ghetto though, the boxers are praised and respected and the memory of their victories is zealously treasured. The pimps, although regarded as criminals by the mainstream society are nevertheless respected for their wealth and their ability to manage and benefit from the situation at hand by many Roma and Bulgarians (although somewhat secretly on behalf/by of the latter).

The fact that both boxers and pimps orient their search for respect towards the inhabitants of the ghetto and to a significant extent ignore the ways they are perceived by the mainstream society, illustrates the main division the Roma make between themselves and the non-Roma or *gadzho*.

Theoretically this work will draw from the masculinity studies and mainly the work of R.W. Connell and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of power and practice. Connell's understanding of *hegemonic masculinity* as a historically constructed expression of sexual identity depending on specific social, cultural and political conditions, will be combined with Bourdieu's central notions of *habitus*, *field* and *capital* in order to explore the construction of the Roma ghetto masculinity in the context of the relations between the structural conditions that determine the choices of boxing and pimping as men's activities, and the personal agency of the particular boxers and pimps in their struggle for social mobility and respect.

In my thesis I will look at several important ethnographies for inspiration. The most important are Michael Stewart's work on the Hungarian Roma, Loic Wacquant's research on the Black boxers of Chicago and Philippe Bourgois' work among the crack dealers in the Puerto Rican ghetto of New York.

The empirical material for this work was collected during a twenty days fieldwork in the "Nikola Kochev" neighbourhood in Sliven, Bulgaria. During this period I was living in the neighbourhood in the house of the family of one of the sellers in the central food/coffee shop/bar. I was often hanging out there which allowed me to meet and observe people from different parts of the ghetto in their daily interactions. I have recorded eight more or less focused semi-structured interviews with seven current and former boxers (including the main trainer) and a former pimp (who is also a former boxer). Seven of the interviews were conducted in the "Nikola Kochev" neighbourhood and one in "Nadezhda", and they lasted from half an hour to nearly two hours. In addition I have conducted many shorter conversations or longer ones that were not explicitly related to boxing or pimping but provided me with a better understanding of the social relations in the ghetto.

In the first chapter of my thesis I will discuss the main elements of my theoretical framework, specifically Connell's notion of *hegemonic masculinity*, Bourdieu's theory of power and practice, substantiated empirically with his own work on the masculine domination, Wacquant's work on the boxers' habitus and Bourgois' work on life strategies of Spanish Harlem's Puerto Rican crack dealers. Special attention will be paid to Michael Stewart's analysis of the symbolic division between the Roma and non-Roma and to the notion of *Gypsy work*. In the second chapter I introduce my

field in the context of the history of the relations between the Roma and the State will present my empirical findings in two main sub-chapters devoted to boxing and pimping. In the last part of this work I will present my main findings, conclusions and some questions and suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical framework

In this chapter I will outline the theoretical and empirical findings of the school of Masculinity studies, mainly the work of R.W. Connell in order to point out the construction of the Roma ghetto masculinity/ies in its/their relation with the broader social and historical structures. Further on, I will look at the specific mechanisms through which these masculinities are constructed by using Pierre Bourdieu's *analytical toolkit* comprising his notions of *habitus*, *field* and the various forms of

capital. I will then look at Bourdieu's work on the masculine domination in order to return to the essence of masculinity and open the ground for the next part of this chapter, where I turn to the ethnographic findings of Loïc Wacquant from his seminal work with the Black boxers from Chicago's South Side, of Philippe Bourgois from his research among the crack dealers in Spanish Harlem, and of Michael Stewart from his work with the Roma in Hungary, in order to see how masculinities are constructed and performed in these loci. In the following chapters I will use these empirical data for comparison with what I have found in the Roma ghettos of Sliven.

Due the size limits of this work I will turn now directly to the work of R.W. Connell. The first major point in Connell's work is that masculinity is not a biologically determined category, neither a social role immanent to the male individual. It is rather a historically constructed expression of the male gender through a collectively patterned behaviour, thought and feeling, and that it is dependent on a wide range of social, cultural and political factors which vary significantly across different contexts. In several works (1987; 1995; 2002) Connell voices and substantiates with own empirical data the findings of many authors from the mentioned disciplines pointing at the constructed character of masculinity. In the industrialized capitalist world the particular images of masculinity are created, shaped and disseminated by media, education and other socialization institutions and practices, popular culture etc. Thus these images are resolutely inserted in the public space and perceived by large parts of the society as the representation of "the Man". The historical process of the creation of these images is obscured and they tend to look normal, even natural. Further on Connell shows the wide variety of meanings of the notion

masculinity including the variety of social positions of different men embodying them, and therefore argues that the researches should rather speak about multiple competing masculinities rather than a unified Masculinity.

Probably the central feature of the current studies of Masculinity is the focus on power. Unlike earlier social scientists dealing with relations between men and women, the current researchers of masculinity give power the central place in their analyses. It is the power that men wield over women but also the one that some men exert over others including the inequalities based on class, ethnicity, race, age, sexuality etc. Here Connell introduces the notion of *hegemonic masculinity* as a central concept. Hegemonic masculinities are the culturally dominant patterns of masculinity (images of “The Man”) in a certain context, which most men are striving to side with. In different historical, cultural and social situations hegemonic masculinities have different traits. In a working class community or in many pre-industrial societies they would imply more visible aspects of domination like ones related to physical strength or aggression, as well as the ability to assert authoritatively one's own will. Heterosexuality is still a central characteristic of hegemonic masculinity in the prevalent part of the world. Among the dominant classes in the contemporary industrialized West, governed by the rules of neoliberalism, hegemonic masculinity would adopt a much less visibly authoritative face. The features of this face would include self-confidence, pragmatism, competitiveness, heterosexuality. In *Masculinities* Connell makes it clear that these models are in no sense fully impersonated by all or even the majority of men in the given context. Thus we cannot say that all hegemonic masculinities necessarily imply physical strength or pragmatism since particular features of the dominant

model vary according to the specific social, cultural and historic context. Connell gives a particularly elaborate account of the relations between hegemonic and subordinated masculinities (the latter being often - in the case of the capitalist West - either not heterosexual or socially marginalized men, like long-term unemployed, ethnically non dominant or “deviant” in any other way from the dominating model). Thus, for Connell hegemonic masculinity is “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (1995, 77).

In *Masculinities* Connell provides rich empirical material substantiating the theoretical findings of the study. Through the analysis of 30 life stories of men from four different groups of the contemporary Australian society, Connell demonstrates how the dominant models of hegemonic masculinities (imposed on through the above mentioned means) determine particular characteristics and dispositions in the lives of these men. “At this level, Connell understands masculinity to be an ongoing process of self-formation, a product of situated life experiences as these are structured by cultural injunctions, class-specific circumstances, political practices and more.” (Ditz 1996:169)

The latter leads me directly to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of power and practice which stresses on the importance of taking into account both social structures and personal agency, macro and micro level in the analysis of social phenomena.

The *thinking tools* (Wacquant 1989:50) that Bourdieu uses to explore the social world are *habitus*, *social field*, the various forms of *capital* and *doxa*. He employs

this analytical apparatus throughout his impressive oeuvre to reveal the struggles for power in every aspect of the social. It is exactly as a constant struggle for power that Bourdieu sees the social world. This struggle is performed by specific actors through specific structured and structuring practices and takes place in various *social fields*, through the *habitus* of the social actor for a certain position, achieved by the accumulation of various *capitals* and is often masked under or attempts to mask itself as *doxa*. These notions are all dynamic theoretical constructs in constant dialectical relation with each other, which cannot be understood separately.

Bourdieu defines *field* as a relatively autonomous network of objective relations between positions; as a particular social space of institutions and forces (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:97). It is the place where the struggles for power are held and simultaneously it is the set of norms and rules that shape the way in which these struggles are performed. Field could be seen as Bourdieu's notion of social structure but it is dynamic and in constant competition with other fields. Fields can be divided into numerous subfields and integrated into broader encompassing fields.

Bourdieu constantly evolves and hones his analytical apparatus. In his different books and articles he emphasizes on certain aspects of his key notions according to the practical use he has of them in the analyses of particular phenomena. Therefore it is not surprising that we find a variety of nuances in his definition of *habitus*. It is at times defined as “a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, and actions* and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks” (1977:82-3) or as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured

structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations” (1990:53). We see in the first of the quoted definitions an emphasize on the historical formation of the habitus and the possibility for improvisation, while in the second the stress is rather on the dialectical relation in the construction of both habitus and field. This dialectical relation becomes even clearer here:

The field consists of a network or configuration of objective relations between social positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of different kinds of capital (economic, cultural and social); while the habitus consists of a set of historical relations, 'deposited' or 'incorporated' within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of actions, evaluations and perceptions. The habitus is thus the internalization of the field, while the field is the exteriorization of the habitus. (Vanderberghe 2002)

In simple words, habitus is the combination of conscious and embodied dispositions that situate us in the social order and orient our actions in the respective social field. In some of its aspects habitus is the social that became biology, i.e. fully inscribed in the body and simultaneously perceived as normal, even natural or in Bourdieu's own terms - *doxic*. It is a dynamic characteristic of the social actor both determined by and determining the specific social structures within which we operate. Habitus allows Bourdieu to overcome the constant binaries between objectivism and subjectivism, structure and agency, mind and body, that divide most of the previous social theory. An important aspect of the habitus is the *practical sense* – the unconscious adjustment to the demands of the field, expressed in what Bourdieu calls a sense or a “feel for the game”. Thus habitus is the set of skills and

dispositions which allows the social actors to navigate in the different fields sometimes abiding to their strict rules, other times improvising. At the same time the habitus is constantly modified by the interaction of the actor with these different fields (and the other actors operating there). But habitus also reflects the specific position the actor occupies in the social order, defined by her class, gender, race, ethnicity etc. and includes the historically acquired knowledge and sense of what is appropriate in the given field and what is not. That is why it is simultaneously structuring and structured.

Another vital aspect of both the habitus and the field, simultaneously determining and reshaping them, is the availability and accumulation of certain kinds of *capital*. *Economic capital* in the usage of Bourdieu does not differ significantly from Marx's original notion of capital – means of production and commodities. *Social capital* is the sum and the character of the actor's connections with other social actors and particularly with ones that possess significant amounts of some kind or kinds of capital. *Symbolic capital* presents the accumulated influence or authority in the form of recognition and prestige. *Cultural capital* is probably the most affluent of Bourdieu's notions of capital. It could be employed to designate various social skills, dispositions and attainments such as educational degrees, mastery of certain culturally valued (within the specific field) practices, tastes for cultural products or certain types of food, practice of certain sports etc. It represents a genuinely new idea that non-material (and not related to political power) acquisitions can influence the social position of the individual. Capitals can be inherited or acquired and what is most important, under certain conditions one form of capital can be translated into another and the recognition of certain forms of capital can be translated over

different fields. (Thus a successful sportsman can cash in on his bodily capital and acquire economic capital. Furthermore he can gain influence in spheres, not necessarily related to sport like politics, and thus acquire symbolic capital etc. Or a criminal – for example a pimp – who has accumulated significant economic capital, even though in a way that is despised by the society, can still gain symbolic capital via specific ways of using his monetary gains.) It is with and for different kinds of capital that the social actors compete in the social fields. Capitals become part of the habitus and therefore form and transform it constantly.

Finally the outcome of a process of presenting the social and historical construction of the implicit requirements of the fields (or “the rules of the game”) as natural common sense reality, is what Bourdieu calls *doxa*.

In order to illustrate how Bourdieu puts his analytical apparatus to work in practice, I will now turn to his book *Masculine Domination* which is particularly relevant for my research with its valuable observations on the construction and reproduction of masculinity. *Masculine domination* draws its empirical substance mostly from the Kabile society but the principles of sexual division and naturalization of social processes which Bourdieu reveals, can be found in our own societies even though masked in more sophisticated ways⁵. In this work Bourdieu demonstrates how masculine domination is imposed and perpetuated through a complex and multifaceted process of naturalization of the socially established division between sexes. This process is carried out and fostered by various means such as

⁵It is a somewhat signatory technique which Bourdieu uses in many of his books to construct highly abstract concepts through the analysis of very concrete empirical observations and to constantly move between levels. Thus via the uncovering of a seemingly particular problem, he defines principles which are, I am tempted to say, universal.

socialization practices, division of the symbolic and physical space, sexual division of labour and division of sexual labour and the social norms of “proper” behaviour divided along the gender lines until it is not just normalized, but totally naturalized to the extent when it turns from doxa to orthodoxy. At this stage any display of behaviour or action which departs from these divisions is seen as deviant, abnormal. So as an effect of what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence (a “gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely mis-recognition), recognition, or even feeling” (2001:1-2)) masculine domination is inscribed in the bodies of both men and women, i.e. it is biologized and turned into part of their habitus. Thus masculine domination is seen and felt and lived by both men and women as “the normal order of things” and invokes no opposition but on the contrary is met with almost total complicity by both the dominating and the dominated.

This naturalization is easily understandable when we see how Bourdieu describes the social construction of genders:

The biological appearance and the very real effects that have been produced in bodies and minds by a long collective labour of socialization of the biological and biologization of the social combine to reverse the relationship between causes and effects and to make a naturalized social construction ('genders' as sexually characterized habitus) appear as the grounding in nature of the arbitrary division which underlies both reality and representation of reality... (2001:3)

Thus for Bourdieu genders are relational categories that can only exist in the constant opposition with and negation of each other. In order to be a man one

should obey all the rules of this division that are prescribed for men and distance himself with all his body and mind, behaviour and actions from everything that is not perceived as manly, i.e. from the world of women. Thus to be a man means primarily not to be a woman. Manliness is inscribed the male body through various defeminizing and virilizing practices such as children's games (and rites of passage in different places), clothing, specific manly occupations, socialization into the world of men and education in the necessary qualities and aspects of the masculine behaviour. Manliness (and all kinds of social divisions and *distinctions*) are pertained by the constant awareness (more bodily than conscious) of a series of binary oppositions of qualities 'appropriate' for the worlds of men and women – strong/weak, active/passive, hard/soft, aggressive/non-aggressive, authoritative/submissive etc. In order to be fully inscribed in the habitus, manliness should be recognized by the other men (and to a lesser extent, women). Moreover it has to be constantly proven to them through in various ways according to the specific context. This might take the form of an open or masked competition but ultimately aims to show the possession of the publicly approved masculine qualities such as physical strength, courage, (hetero)sexual prowess, pragmatism, equanimity etc. Many expressions of these qualities, according to Bourdieu, are performed out of sheer fear of 'loosing face' or loosing parts of one's manly image and thus being perceived as effeminate (2002:52) .

If we return now to Connell's terminology, we will see that when Bourdieu speaks about manliness and the masculine habitus, he has in mind exactly hegemonic masculinity – the publicly approved, naturalized image of the manly man. We will also see that Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus explains perfectly well the adoption

and taking for granted-ness of this hegemonic masculinity. So while Connell has a more developed classification of the different masculinities and the power relations between them, Bourdieu has a much more precise set of instruments to explore the modes of construction, habituation and performance of the masculine habitus and to reveal the deep mechanisms of the power struggle for domination.

In his book *Body and Soul* (2004) and his numerous articles dedicated to the Black boxers of Chicago's South Side (1995a; 1996; 1997, 1998a,b,c; 2001; 2005a,b; 2007) Loïc Wacquant applies Bourdieu's analytical instruments in combination with impressive ethnography to explore the boxers' habitus and the social meaning of boxing in the context of the Black ghetto. His work has been a major inspiration for my work (initially planned as an exploration of the link between boxing and violence in the lives of the Roma from Sliven's ghettos) and it has provided me with valuable insights as to what to look for as well as with important points for comparison between the lives and practices of Roma boxers from Bulgaria and Black boxers from the USA. Here I will mention some of the major points in Wacquant's work which I found particularly useful.

The relations between the gym and the ghetto are described by Wacquant in a somewhat typical Bourdieusian way as opposition and complementarity in the same time. Boxing prevents the pugilists from “hustling” on the ghetto streets by keeping them busy in the sanctuary of order and discipline as the gym is presented in the views of Wacquant's interlocutors (2004; 1998a; 2005), but in the same time it “deeply depends on the ghetto for its raw bodily materials, unprocessed masculine libido and cultural support.” (2005:460).

Another important role of boxing for the ghetto youngsters that Wacquant emphasizes is the masculinization and heroization of daily life. The devoted boxer subjects himself to strict code of discipline through “the trinity of the boxers sacrifice” comprising of limitation of one's social activities, abstention from unhealthy food and drinks and sex for weeks and even months before an important match. Thus the prizefighters mould their character and attain their masculinity through a heroization of even the most mundane activities. It takes a strong man to survive the pain of the constant traumas from the sparrings, exhaustion of the intensive training, to overcome the seduction of the (seemingly) easy life of the street “hustler” and to finally achieve success in the ring. Of course the essence of the boxer's virility lies in the triumph over the fear of serious physical damage and even death.

A noteworthy stress that Wacquant makes about boxing is its relative paucity in terms of emolument. The vast majority of boxers cannot even survive only on their ring earnings and they are forced to supplement them with additional work. While only a very small percentage of the professional fighters “really make it” and slightly more make their living only out of it, boxing provides glory for its adepts because:

Last, and relatedly, boxing is a glamorous profession, highly prized not so much by the broader society as by what Tocqueville called the “little society” of relatives, peers, and neighbors. The prestige of the Sweet Science in low-income neighbourhoods is based essentially on the fact that it gives a dramatized public expression to the virile values (such as hardness, pugnacity, and physical bravery) that compose the common bedrock of working-class cultures across ethnoracial divides. A 32- year old black middleweight from the Stoneland Boys Club with over a decade of ring experience has this comment on the topic:

Everybody knows a boxer is a tough individual an' anytime you climb in the ring and put yo' life on the line, people pat you on the back because you doin' somethin' tha' you coul' win' up (gravely) gittin' hurt, seriously wounded or even murdered, so they give you praise and glory for you to be a warrior like that, go in the ring and come out.

[...] The auratic pull of boxing is reinforced by its association with the wider media-dominated constellation of professional sports, arguably the single most alluring sector of individual achievement today among lower-class youths, and in particular black

youths. The ring could prove to be a springboard to stardom and a bridge to the enticing, other-worldly universe of VIP's and "celebrities." (1995a:21-22[505-506])

Wacquant's deepest interest lies in the exploration of the boxers' habitus. He persuasively shows how through training and performing pugilism, through the obedience to the compulsory asceticism of the devotee, through the scrupulous management of their bodily capital, boxers immerse themselves in boxing to an extent when it becomes a (predominant) part of their very being. Wacquant's work on the boxers is one of the best examples of putting to work Bourdieu's notions of capitals, habitus and field. For the the boxers' habitus is structured by the field of professional boxing and the field is built and constantly reformulated by the boxers who compete in it for the accumulation of bodily, symbolic, social and monetary capital.

Finally, one of the most important aspects of the boxers' habitus that Wacquant stresses in his work is agency or the feeling of control over their fate:

By entering an occupation that hinges on "the willful undertaking of serious chances," boxers decisively realign the structure and texture of their entire existence - its temporal flow, its cognitive and sentient profile, its psychological and social complexion - in ways that put them in a unique position to assert their agency. For with risk comes the possibility of control; with pain and sacrifice, the eventuality of moral elevation and public recognition; and with discipline and commitment, the existential profit of personal renewal and even transcendence. Through the ministry of boxing, fighters' ambition is to remake themselves and the world about them. (1995a:23[510])

All of the above mentioned findings were most helpful for my research since I discovered great many similarities as well as important differences between the boxers described by Wacquant and the people whom I interviewed and observed in Sliven.

Another important theoretical notion of Pierre Bourdieu is tested and illustrated in the impressive ethnographies of Philippe Bourgois – symbolic violence. In his work on the crack dealers of 'Spanish Harlem' in New York (1995; 1996; 2004) Bourgois gives a detailed image of the violent lives of several men and women involved in, what he calls, the *street culture* of the ghetto. On a powerful backdrop of a politico-economic analysis of the structural determinants of poverty among the ghetto community, Bourgois outlines the decline of the rural patterns of hegemonic masculinity and the increase of structural and interpersonal violence in the inner-city. Similarly to Waquant's work on urban poverty (1997b;1998d;2002), Bourgois contextualizes the current state of affairs in the ghetto by drawing a bigger picture of the economic restructurings from the 1950's on, leading to mass unemployment a sharp decline in social services and simultaneously to what Wacquant calls – the penalization of poverty. Moving from the thus outlined setting, Bourgois shows how the increasing amount violence (and especially against women and children) is grounded in the loss of legitimate labour opportunities, the reformulation of the traditional patriarchal gender relations and the disintegration of communities and families under the social Darwinian state of being where everybody is at war with everybody. According to Bourgois, these new conditions of living call for new models of hegemonic masculinity involving such economic strategies as drug dealing and such extremely violent forms of socialization practices at the expense of women as gang rapes⁶. The symbolic violence hides in the doxic naturalization of

⁶ In *Masculine Domination* Pierre Bourdieu describes gang rapes as socialization practices which “are designed to challenge those under test to prove before others their virility in its violent reality, in other words, stripped of all the devirilizing tenderness and gentleness of love”. It is, according to him, an illustration of the relationality of manliness which should be sanctioned by the male group (2001:52).

structural violence, leading to an outburst of interpersonal violence manifested by killings, beating, sexual abuse and self-destruction in the form of substance abuse. Far from depicting his crack dealer informants as mere pawns in the games of marginalization, Bourgois portrays them as active agents in pursuit of respect and dignity, denied them by the culturally hostile environment in Post-Fordist America. Moreover he argues that on the background of mass unemployment in the ghettos in the US at the end of the 20th century, “crack/cocaine and heroine industries were the only dynamically growing equal-opportunities employers for inner-city men”, providing them chances for gaining prestige through the accumulation of economic capital, demonstrated in “conspicuous consumption of the prestigious commodities of youth culture from clothing to cars and jewellery” (2004:303-4).

I will use some of the findings of Bourgois to show how the disappearance of factory jobs in the early 1990's and the growing media-fostered hostility towards their culture, lead many Roma men from the ghettos of Sliven to search for means of subsistence and respect in the informal economy. I will demonstrate how the increasing respect which the ghetto society accords to men who made their fortune in the underground economy of pimping and shady business reflects two things - on one hand, the objective need (imposed by the structural conditions in the ghetto) to search for income outside the legal system, and on the other, the long lasting division between the worlds of the Roma and the gadzho, documented so persuasively by Michael Stewart in his book *The Time of the Gypsies* (1997).

There are several aspects of this memorable study of the Rom in Harangos, Hungary on which I will draw the reader's attention. Although Michael Stewart's

book portrays a different group of Roma⁷ than the people whom I attempted to study, living in a different political situation⁸, there can nevertheless be found many similarities between the living situations and the world views of the two groups. Moreover this book drew my attention to aspects of the life in the neighbourhood, which I would probably not notice otherwise.

The main similarity between the situation of the Hungarian and the Bulgarian Roma is the legacy of the socialist past. The Communist parties in both Hungary and Bulgaria (as well as in most of the countries in the Eastern block) perceived the Roma as uncivilised, child-like people with primitive and anachronistic beliefs and ways of life, who ought to be taught how to work and live “properly” and to contribute to the socialist society, instead of just “parasitizing on the others' honest labour”. Throughout their regimes, the Communists of Hungary and Bulgaria have constantly interfered in the lives of the Roma (and of course the whole populations, however at times, the Roma were observed more strictly than the majority) in an attempt to control nearly every aspect of their existence. This paternalistic approach of the state has long lasting effects on the lives of the populations of the ex-Socialist countries. In the empirical part of my work I will attempt to show aspects of this legacy in the case of the boxers.

A central place in the work of Michael Stewart is given to the fundamental division between the worlds of the Roma and the gadzho. The boundaries between the two groups are visible in nearly all aspect of life. Roma and gadzho live in dialectical

⁷The *Dassikane Roma* from Nikola Kochev (the neighbourhood where my research took place) are more similar to the Romungro than to the Vlah Gypsies, described by Stewart.

⁸State socialism in the case of Hungary in the late 1980's and post socialist liberal democracy with an increasingly neoliberal economic face in 2008 Bulgaria.

relations of symbiosis and extreme opposition and negation of each other. What I am mostly interested in this respect is the notion of Gypsy work (*romani butji*) which is one of the perfect illustrations of this dialectic. Gypsy work is, in the imagination of the Rom, the essence of the easy life which grants them the superior position in their relations with the gadzho. On one hand it is one of things that clearly distinguishes them from the gadzhos (flexible and *light* versus the steady and *heavy* work of the Magyars), on the other it expresses the symbiosis between them since the without the gadzhos there will be no one to trick (1997:25-26). I find this notion illustrative for the flexible legitimacy of certain activities depending on the field where they are performed (it is in the normal order of things to trick the gadzhos and totally unacceptable to do the same with fellow *brothers*). I will argue, when I turn to the pimps, that a similar logic is what partially explains the relatively non-judgemental attitude towards them by the people in the neighbourhood, since it expresses a Roma way to make money in the world of the gadzhos and in defiance of gadzho's laws.

Another aspect of the book which I find particularly useful is the vivid illustration of the patriarchal order of the Roma community. The division between men and women is expressed both symbolically (in language and in the notions of shame) and practically (in the division of labour, the different attitudes towards male and female sexuality, the different ways of upbringing boys and girls etc.) in the everyday life of the group. In a Bourdieusian reading the text gives us a vivid image of masculine domination and symbolic violence (see for example pp. 92-93 for the misplacement of an inter-familial conflict from men to women at the expense of the latter). As for the particular qualities for the construction of masculinity, Michael

Stewart's book provides me with rich examples of the importance of cunning and ability to deal for the making of the mature man⁹, qualities held in high esteem also by the Roma in Sliven.

In this part I have outlined the main concepts and theoretical stances which I will use in the construction and analysis of my case. This done, I will now turn to the historical and ethnographic background on which the struggles of the Roma men for respect and recognition take place.

⁹For similar findings about the importance of the ability to deal and fight for the construction of (hegemonic) masculinity among the Gypsies in England see Levinson and Sparkes (2003).

3. Results from the field

In this chapter I will present my findings about boxing and pimping and their significance for the lives of men and women in the “Nikola Kochev” neighbourhood in Sliven. Before I come to boxing and pimping though, let me draw at least a schematic sketch of the historical and social background of the context in which these two manly endeavours take place. In what follows I will briefly present the relations between the Roma and the Bulgarian state as illustrated in some historical notes about the Roma in the town of Sliven.

The politics of the Bulgarian Communist party towards the minorities for the whole period of its rule (1944-1989) can be divided in two clearly distinct periods. Between the second half of 1940s and mid 1950s the Party followed Soviet “multinational” politics, meaning that every group had the right to self identification and profession of culture, and even faith. The Party needed popular support and the minorities in the country were numerous. The aim of this politics was unification into the new socialist society, which would come after the different groups realize that the building of communism unites them more than their cultures divide them. Around mid 1950s, some years after the death of Stalin and the coming to power of Todor Zhivkov, this attitude was replaced by direct assimilationist politics. All cultural associations and institutions of the minorities (such as newspapers, magazines, theaters, dance and music ensembles, etc.) were closed down and expressions of any kind of ethnic identity were firmly discouraged. In the following years up to 1989 the state undertook series of measures aiming at the full assimilation of minorities.

Such were the coercive settling of the travelling Gypsies and the Karakachans in the late 1950s, the changing of the names of all the Muslims in Bulgaria (starting in early 1960s with the Roma and Tatars, moving on to the Pomaks in 1964 and 1972, and getting to the Turks between 1984-1989), the ban on wearing traditional costumes and performing traditional music and dances, the prohibition to speak one's mother tongue (if not Bulgarian) etc. (for the politics of the Communist Party towards the minorities, see: Büchschütz: 2000; Marushiakova and Popov: 1997, 2000). In relation to the Roma, the state adopted an overtly paternalistic approach in its ambition to put an end to their “deviant” practices and aptitudes. The Roma were seen as child-like and uncivilized and were to be taught the right and beneficial attitudes of “the new socialist man”. This meant two general things that would supposedly lead to full integration – waged labour and education. Thus involved in the building of “the new society” and the pursuit of knowledge, the Gypsies were supposed to become equal participants in all spheres of life and to “grow up to the level of the majority.” The situation of all Roma was not the same, of course, since different Roma groups had different lifestyles, spoke different languages and professed different religions, not to mention the variety of crafts and occupations that were dividing them even further. This great diversity of groups and sub-groups had an impact on their identities and, consequently, on their mutual relations. As one of the most informed experts on Roma culture in Bulgaria, Elena Marushiakova says:

The ethnic identity of the Gypsies is extremely complex and multilayered. The only clear division is between “our people” and “aliens”, where “ours” are only the members of the same group and everybody else is “alien” - the majority population, as well as the other Gypsy groups.(Marushiakova 1992:107)”

This diversity entails different levels of integration as well as different attitudes on behalf of the (local) authorities and the representatives of the majority. The town where I conducted my research is an interesting example of a place where several different groups of Roma inhabit different neighbourhoods and occupy different positions in social space.

Sliven is situated in the central eastern part of Bulgaria south of the Balkan mountains. Between 90 000-95 000 people live in the town, and among them some 20 000-25 000 are Roma. Although some Roma live dispersed among the majority, most of them inhabit two separate neighbourhoods which differ significantly in terms of social conditions and degree of integration of their inhabitants, spatial location and dimensions as well as their sub-ethnic composition. The bigger slum-like neighbourhood, a real ghetto, is located beyond the margins of the town, south of the railway, and is surrounded by a concrete wall. It is home to some 18 000-20 000 people from three different subgroups of the *Muslim Gypsies (Horohane or Xoroxane Roma)* ¹⁰. The wealthier groups, the Turks and the Musicians, occupy the northern and western part of the ghetto and live in considerably more decent houses (in the last few years many among them started migrating to work in Western Europe and the houses in their part of the ghetto reflect the increasing prosperity). More than two thirds of the ghetto population (the so called *Goli cigani* or *Naked Gypsies*) live in the internal, southwestern part in shacks built of whatever material is at hand, without sewage system and often without drinking water. There are two entrances to the ghetto – one for pedestrians – through a dark tunnel under the railway on the north side, and one for vehicles – on the south west side after the

¹⁰On the ethnic composition of the ghetto and the social isolation of the *Goli cigani*, see Tomova (2007)

industrial area of the town. The name of this lovely place is Nadezhda, which quite perversely means *hope*¹¹. This is one of the worst ghettos in Bulgaria in terms of living conditions, social and spatial segregation, and levels of education and employment. The whole population of Nadezhda is isolated from the life of the town and is looked down on by the majority population as well as by the other Roma in the town.

The place where I conducted the research for this thesis is the other Roma neighbourhood in Sliven called Nikola Kochev, which stands in clear opposition to *Nadezhda* in many senses. It is located in the other, northern part of the town, very near to the main square, and the boundaries between it and the neighbourhoods inhabited by ethnic Bulgarians are marked by ordinary streets. Most of the 5000 inhabitants of the neighbourhood live in relatively decent one and two-storey houses. The infrastructure is incomparable to the one in Nadezhda but is, however, much worse than in the other, “Bulgarian” parts of the town. Some of the streets are so narrow that a single car can hardly pass between the houses, which are, in some parts, built without any visible order. Ilona Tomova (1995) explains this assemblages with the family structures of the Roma. Close relatives tend to built their homes close to each other and sometimes a whole street can be populated by relatives. Nevertheless Nikola Kochev is one of the most presentable Roma neighbourhoods in Bulgaria – unlike most, it is not overcrowded, it has a relatively

¹¹The big Roma ghettos emerged after the 1950s with the processes of industrialization and mass urbanization. The concrete walls around the ghettos in some towns (like around *Nadezhda* in Sliven) have been built in the mid '80s in the height of the so called *Revival process* when the Communist party denied the existence of any minorities in Bulgaria and tried to hide the existence of the visibly different Roma by walling them off (Büchschütz:2000). After 1989 with the abolition of the collective farms and the decline of the agriculture, the ghettos grew sharply since more and more impoverished Roma from the villages came to search for subsistence in the cities.

well functioning infrastructure and most of the houses are decent. Moreover, the neighbourhood is populated by one of the few Roma communities in the country which are relatively less segregated by the mainstream society. Most of the people here are from the group of the *Bulgarian or Christian Gypsies (or Dassikane Roma)* who have been settled for more than a century and a half (Marushiakova and Popov 1997; Tomova 1995). Their ancestors were among the first factory workers for the textile industry in the town, starting from the second half of the 19th century. The vast majority of them were working in the textile factories up until early 1990s when the latter closed down.

Let me return just for a short while to the assimilationist politics of the communists. When the BCP (Bulgarian Communist Party) took over power and withdrew the discriminatory practices of the previous regime, it found natural support among the neighbourhood's proletariat. Some people there had been trade union members since 1920s. Thus the Roma from Nikola Kochev massively accepted the reforms of the new authorities towards inclusion in the wage labour and education. Several cultural organizations were founded in the first decade of the "People's power," and in the following decades the vast majority begun to enrol in schools and complete elementary education, which led to a significant decrease of illiteracy and, as a result, several doctors, journalists, teachers and party functionaries came out of the neighbourhood. Close party control and active propaganda among the neighbourhood's population were bearing fruits, and many of the "deviant" customs and propensities seemed to fade away (Büchschütz 2000).

The contemporary results of these policies are somewhat ambiguous. Today the population of the neighbourhood has one of the highest levels of education among the Roma in the country. What is more, many share the feeling that to be educated and to speak Bulgarian means to be less Roma. Many among them take pride in the fact that their children don't know a word of *ciganski*, and that they barely speak it and therefore communicate only in Bulgarian. I have participated in several conversations when my interlocutors were telling me things like: "We are *almost like Bulgarians* here" or "We stick together, we live together [with the Bulgarians] – look, those houses over there *are already Bulgarian* (pointing at the houses on the other side of the street which separates the Roma neighbourhood from the others)". Young women with "Bulgarian" appearance (lighter skin and fancy clothes) were shown to me with pride. One such girl was called to the table where we were sitting with three middle aged men, so that I can see her better and while she was staying there with a confused smile on her face, one of the men asked me: "Tell me now, when you look at her, *can you tell that she's a Gypsy?*"

I read these experiences as signs of the internalization of power structures in the Bulgarian society and the stereotypes of the majority which say that whatever is *Gypsy* is bad, and what is *Bulgarian* is more prestigious and valuable. The Roma from Nikola Kochev have obeyed the demands of the Party to abandon those features of their culture and ways of life which were not appropriate for "the socialist society," and this has granted them higher status and a relatively better life during the regime of the BCP. After 1989 and the decline of the city's industries, the vast majority of Nikola Kochev's inhabitants became durably unemployed despite their long lasting work habits. Moreover, their status dropped dramatically with the rise of

nationalism and the widespread discrimination against the minorities, especially the Roma. The majority in Sliven does not distinguish between “the good” and “the bad” Roma communities and, despite the claims that “we all live together” and a few mixed marriages, I have seen no ethnic Bulgarian (other than myself) crossing the imaginary boundaries of Nikola Kochev for the nearly three weeks of my stay there. Furthermore, people from the neighbourhood often hide their address when they want to hide their identity in contacts with ethnic Bulgarians, something that they do quite often (if their physical appearance allows it) in order to avoid disrespectful treatment based on anti-Romani stereotypes. Thus, despite the fact that the neighbourhood is much better than most of the Roma settlements in the country, it remains isolated from the mainstream society and is perceived as a ghetto both by the majority and by many of its inhabitants. The people from the neighbourhood find themselves in the puzzling situation where the things that they highly esteem in themselves (the fact that they don't speak the devalued *ciganski* and instead master the Bulgarian language, their working habits, their superiority over the “uncivilized Gypsies” from Nadezhda) are not valued any more, and that their *almost-Bulgarianness* is bluntly rejected by the mainstream society which does its best to remind them of their *Gypsiness*. Another, probably banal, consequence of the transformation of the economic system is the reversal of social stratification within the ghetto. Those who were previously seen as deviant – the ones who refused to work and continue their education, and who were engaged in the informal economy (perceived at the official level as indecent dodgers), under the new conditions became *the heroes of their time*, if I am allowed to borrow from Lermontov. They turned out to be fit for the challenges of the market economy. In a nutshell, at least

within the ghetto, they managed to translate their economic capital into a symbolic one (I will elaborate on this issue in the part devoted to the pimps)¹². On the other hand, the former possessors of cultural and symbolic capital – the state employees (mainly teachers and party functionaries) - lost their positions and never succeeded to make the reverse translation of capitals (some aspects of this situation will be elaborated on at the end of the part devoted to boxers).

3.1 On boxing as a school for masculinity and the State as a mother who abandons her children

*I am just a poor boy.
Though my story's seldom told,
I have squandered my resistance
For a pocketful of mumbles,
Such are promises
All lies and jest
Still, a man hears what he wants to hear
And disregards the rest...*

*The Boxer
Simon and Garfunkel*

We are all boxers here. 80% - 90% of the boys used to train... we have great boxers here. Have you heard of Cakata? Of Deko?

Why are there so many boxers here?

It's in our blood... and many of the boys' older brothers or uncles or fathers were boxers before them...

¹² More on the reversal of the positions (and especially between Roma and Bulgarians in certain spheres), see in: Konstantinov (1998).

This is a conversation that I have had probably ten times during my research. Every time I would approach a group of three men or more, from boys of 15 up to men of 50 years of age, and explain what I was doing there, at least one of them would turn out to be a boxer. The claim that *it is in our blood* made me curious about the issue of style. Inspired by the different styles of the Black, Latino and White boxers in the USA mentioned by Wacquant (2004; 2005a; 1995b), I asked several experienced boxers and a young boy is there any difference between the style of the Roma boys on the ring and the way the ethnic Bulgarians do it. Here is the answer of Anatoly, an Evangelical priest in Nadezhda, former prominent welterweight boxer:

Well, they [referring to the Roma boys] are faster than the Bulgarians... and more aggressive. Have you seen how the Cubans play? You know that they are the best? We fight the same way. We work a lot with our feet. I had a bout with a Cuban once on an international tournament... Every nation is the best at some sport. The Cubans in boxing, the Brazilians in football, and we the Roma, we have it in us, this thing...

Another man from Nikola Kochev told me how: *the kids suck it through the air, this ardour for boxing... and even without training they know what to do, how to punch, how to dodge... it is in their blood.*

Now, in order to explore this notion of the “natural born pugilists”, I will turn to the history of Sliven's boxing tradition and the involvement of the Roma boys with it. Boxing was brought to Sliven by a Red army lieutenant in 1945. The name of this Demiurge is forgotten. What is still remembered, is that he ignited the spark for the first generation of boxers (and later – trainers) in the town. There is one figure which is mentioned constantly when it comes to training – Dobri Zagorov, often referred to as The Father of Sliven's boxing. After a short career on the ring in the late forties

and early fifties he devoted himself to training. Most of the famous champions from Sliven came under his coaching. He was the main engine for the development of pugilism in the neighbourhood but also in the whole town. I would like to draw the reader's attention to his recruiting practices. My older informants who remember him say that he was walking around the ghetto and observing the boys playing on the streets and the school yard. He used to spot the talents immediately and would propose them to make them boxers. According to the world champion Toncho Tonchev, Dobri Zagorov was a quick-tempered man, but one who would teach you many things: *From him I've learned that, once in the ring, you should do your job and there is no place for fooling around.* The training was not an easy thing for sure but it was worth the efforts. Through boxing the young boys were taught how to express their virility – the pugilistic practice was enhancing their bodily capital. With active training the boys were moulding their bodies and bringing them close to the ideal image of The masculine body – strong and agile, ready to respond to any challenge by rival men. They were learning to fight – an ability, particularly important for the manly man in poor urban settings (Wacquant 2004;1998d;1997a;2005a; Bourgois 1995;1996;2004; Levinson and Sparkes 2005; Epstein et al. 2001). Moreover boxing was inuring these young boys to discipline. This was emphasized in many of my interviews. Here is how Dimitar Shtilyanov, twice European champion sees it: *Boxing steels the will and strengthens the character. It teaches you hard work and persistence.* Thus boxing was creating a particularly appealing aura of a sort of school for manliness. Throughout the fifties and especially in the sixties, it became increasingly popular among the Roma from Nikola Kochev. Several of my interviewees were coming from some of the neighbourhood's boxing dynasties

spanning one or two generations of pugilists. Hence in these decades boxing became a kind of tradition. The vast majority of the boys from the neighbourhood were spending more or less extended periods of time in the gym, which grew to a sort of socializing and, more importantly, masculinizing institution comparable to an early and non compulsory military service for Roma boys¹³. They were becoming men among men and their manliness was evaluated by other men. The gym became a women-free shrine of masculinity.

Obsessed by the *pugilistic habitus* described so persuasively by Wacquant (especially in 1995b), I was asking my respondents what is the most important thing when you climb on the ring. And I almost expected to hear that it is *the embodied feel for the moves of the foe, the accumulated past trainings incorporated in the moves and blows of the boxer...* And quite surprisingly, I heard it (here one can probably state, without being fully wrong, that I read into the field my personal expectations). It only puzzled me in the beginning because it was expressed in words which seemed totally opposite to Wacquant's and Bourdieu's ideas about the habitus as an embodied, non conscious feel – **to think!** It was stated by three different guys and for quite some time I refused to accept it. I used to ask further (here I give a short part of the most articulated from the three interviews – the one with Anatoly)

- But do you have time to think when punches are flying towards your face?

¹³In Bulgaria, and as far as I am aware, in all the Balkan countries, military service, especially for the working classes and the peasants, was the most important masculinizing institution. To the extent that one could not marry without serving one's time as a soldier. This was reflected in the copious and loud feasts, performed at the sent-offs (the evenings before the boy's entering in the military service) – true illustrations of a rite of passage.

- Yes, ***if you know what you're doing***. You have to think, not to hasten, if you hurry too much ***you will not see***. If you start throwing punches you might succeed if you have luck, but if you don't – you're finished! Instead you have to think and judge ***when to enter***.

That was it! I remembered some lessons from years ago when I was practising another martial art – the term I am familiar with, is ***to search for the opening***. And it is not conscious thinking, since you have *to know what to do*, and knowing what to do comes with practice. It is the combination of conscious learning and mechanical memory, experience of the body, that allows you to stay aware and improvise when you find *the opening* and once you find it, to take full advantage of it, that is, in the case of boxing, *to enter* (or break the guard) and cause as much damage as possible to the adversary. It is, as far as I understand it (of course only in its most carnal dimension), what Bourdieu means by *practical knowledge* or *sense of the game*.

The idea of practice (this time in the meaning of repeating a series of actions) leads me back to discipline (as the will to overcome certain seductions of life and force oneself to persist in the dull practice of training) in the name of some achievement. As we have seen so far, the essence of boxing is the mastered expression of masculinity achieved after devoted trainings (i.e. hard work) and finally manifested in a fight (in the ring or the street, it is not so important) guided by the *sense of the game*. If we now return to the politics of the BCP towards the Roma, we will see that this school of manliness through discipline served its goals pretty well. It was teaching “the child-like Gypsies” hard work and learning in the name of achievement (for the common good). That is why

“the People's power” was investing in sports. The care for the healthy bodies of the members of the socialist society provided disciplined builders of the Bright future, committed to hard work in the name of achievement. And the Party knew that the image of the manly man (or the successful and healthy person, depending on the context) would be an even more desirable goal if supplemented with some material and symbolic gains. So it provided them. For virtually all my respondents who were active boxers before 1989, a very important advantage of their career was the feeling that their successes were recognized and appreciated. The following extract from an interview (again with Anatoly) should illustrate it well:

Then [*during the Communism*, as it is referred to] the State used to take care. If you were doing good [in boxing], if you were winning matches, they would give a salary, they would give equipment, even free food. They issued me a picture with my names [a personal pass] and I would go the cafeteria of the sports high school and eat there for free... for us, athletes. The State was taking care of sport back in the days. And for the kids, they would give sweatpants, plimsolls, shorts... and when they were becoming worn out, we knew, we would go and take new ones... and in those days to take 150 leva salary, it was quite a lot of money, and 120 additionally in food coupons... my mother used to work in the factory for 85 leva per month and my father – for 135... the State was taking care then...

As we can see from this example, the gains for a successful boxer were not merely symbolic.

I will elaborate some more on the career trajectories of some of the boxers, but let me first return to the notion of the “natural born fighters with boxing in their blood”. We have a boxing gym, managed by an inventive coach who supplies it regularly with talented Gypsy boys who become respected and famous men by

training their virility and learning discipline and hard work. This creates a powerful “auratic pull” (Wacquant 1995a:506) for the vast majority of the ghetto boys who live in isolation from the mainstream society under the degrading label stuck to their ethnicity. When we add to this the material stimuli – a combination of recognizable and therefore symbolically valuable items which are in the same time useful (in the rigidly practical sense) - the appeal becomes even stronger. In the end we have the creation of an almost traditional institution of masculine socialization (and less visibly, one that teaches obedience to rules and authority) affecting the whole neighbourhood, because nearly every boy has been training in the gym for at least some months. Given these factors, I think the “we have it in our blood” becomes less of a biologically determined disposition and evolves into a slightly more complex (and very Bourdieusian) picture where the structures of power present themselves as a manifestation of personal (although allegedly somewhat shared) agency. Thus the pursuit to escape the marginality of the ghetto and distinguish oneself by becoming a manly man or gaining personal prestige and recognition is allowed only as long as it reproduces the same structures that create marginality in the first place.

I will now talk about the people who managed to leave their trace in the history of Sliven's box an more particularly about their relations with the state. Most of the boys from the Roma ghettos of Sliven used to start boxing early. Between 12-14 years used to be the average age to enter the gym, but boys starting at 10 were not an exception. Of course, the vast majority of those enrolled did not manage to distinguish themselves as successful boxers. Let us look at the ones

who did. What were their aspirations for the time after the end of their careers, and what were the results? As we have seen, the champions were hired by the state and were paid salaries. Despite the fact that they have earned these salaries by risking their life and health on the ring, this was seen as a generous gesture by the state which was *giving* them something (monetary and symbolic goods). Furthermore the state was nurturing among them the feeling that they will be taken care of after they leave the ring for good. Three of the former boxers told me that their expectations were to become *starshina* (senior non-officer in the army), and the fact that they were not appointed was the decisive factor for the end of their careers¹⁴. Here is what Stanko Kapishev, a well-known name in Sliven's boxing from the 1980s and a descendant of one of the prominent boxing dynasties, answered when I asked him why did he decide to put an end to his career:

... they sent me to the European championship and they have promised that they will make me a *starshina* if I win. And back then *the starshini were well off*. But I was defeated with with a knock out and when I returned, not only did they not take me in the military but they stopped paying me salary. That's why left. I have not received anything in return of **all the victories I have won for this state**. I have sacrificed so much... look at my hands [he shows me his deformed knuckles], look at my hands! And what did I get – nothing!..

¹⁴ Prominent athletes were serving their military service in sport companies. During this period (2 years until the mid 1990s), despite their club affiliations they were competing for the CSCA (ЦСКА – Central Sports Club of the Army) and (formally), if they had the necessary secondary education degree, they were appointed *starshini* which were in most cases responsible for the supplies of military bases. (However, for distinguished members, the Party was always willing to make “an exception” - a personal favour, which bound the beneficiary with eternal loyalty). This provided them with several important privileges – secured life-long employment with enticing social benefits, early retirement, high pension and, most importantly, access to supplies, which automatically granted them advantageous position in the informal economy. Moreover the *starshini* possessed the symbolic power of a commander which their rank provided.

Similar resentments were expressed by all of the older boxers in Nikola Kochev: *Do you know how Deko [a famous name from the seventies] died? Like a dog, he couldn't talk properly, he couldn't walk, he was a ruin...* [probably from *dementia pugilistica*, known also as punch-drunk – see Wacquant (1995b)] *...and nobody took care of him...* The only professional boxer from the ghetto Toncho Tonchev says he is happy that he only has two daughters and not a son, since he would probably want to follow his father steps and Toncho would never allow him – *I have sacrificed too much and I know it's not worth it* – he concludes. In their moments of glory the Roma boxers were praised and flattered by the authorities but after the end of their careers they were invariably abandoned. In regards to this I would like to add some words to the notion of *sacrifice* and make a brief comparison to the way it is used by Loïc Wacquant. According to Wacquant, the successful boxer heroizes his daily life through the fact that he sacrifices his social contacts, sexual liberty, and food and drink consumption in the name of success in the ring. The case of the Roma boxers differs significantly from what Wacquant have observed in Chicago. I heard no one speaking about the monastic regimen described in *Body and Soul*. The key word among my respondents was *discipline*, while *sacrifice* was used exclusively in a retrospective manner. The current pugilists were taught and demanded discipline, while the former ones have sacrificed their youth, health, strength etc. for the glory of the Bulgarian sport and received no reward for it. One of the possible explanations for this difference, at least for the majority of the young boys who do not remain in boxing for a long time, is that their engagement with pugilism is much less

agentical. As I have demonstrated, for most of these young boys their training represents following a tradition or a reproduction of some structured modes of masculinization and not so much an active pursuit of a career. For this reason, they are much less prone to subject themselves to the ascetic abstentions described by Wacquant.

Finally, I would like to offer some observations on the (failed) adaptation of the former boxers to the new economic conditions in Bulgaria after 1989, and the decreased investment in sports in general, and in boxing in particular. None of my informants from Nikola Kochev has “made it” through boxing. Amateur pugilism does not provide enough even for the subsistence of the most successful athletes, let alone their families. Consequently, almost all of the former boxers find themselves forced to search for alternative means of subsistence. The only one (from the generation that started their active career before 1989) who kept on boxing is Toncho Tonchev who turned professional in 1996. Despite his successes in the professional ring¹⁵, however, last summer he was forced to work as a watchman for the electricity company in the ghetto,¹⁶ and is currently working in a shop somewhere in Cyprus (an information that was offer to me as an example of the shameful carelessness of the State by most of my interviewees in Nikola Kochev).

The resentment of the former champions over their fate is combined with a resentment over the general decline in boxing. Dimitar Shtilyanov who

¹⁵Toncho is the winner of two European and one World cup (WBA, WBC and EBU).

¹⁶Electricity companies in almost all urban Roma ghettos hire watchmen for their devices so that no illegal share of electricity can be made. More on the relations between Roma and the electricity companies and the related speculations in the media in (Krastev 2007)

occasionally trains some of the kids in the gym, tells me: *There is no money in boxing now and the kids don't come any more in such numbers. There is nothing to stimulate them. We are trying to keep them off bullshit, but now the pimps are the new models...*

As a conclusion we can say that most of the Sliven's Roma boxing champions did not manage to translate their symbolic (and social) into an economic capital. The interesting exception from this general tendency, the story of the Cane¹⁷, will take us to the last part of this chapter.

3.1 On pimping as a construction of masculinity through the exploitation of women. The “players” and their search for the opening.

*Работете, рибки, работете,
Да си купи Кути най-хубавата кола...*

Kymu

*Work, fishes, work,
So that Kuti can buy the best car...*

Kuti

¹⁷Everyone in the ghetto has a nickname. Very often people do not know somebody's official name but only his nickname. I have been in many situations when without knowing the nickname of the person it was much harder to find him despite the fact that he might be well known to the people I ask.

In this part I will introduce some other features in the construction of the ghetto masculinities, manifested in the figure of *the player*. Let us first take a look at the story of the Cane.

On one of my first evenings we are sitting in Traiko's shop and cafe in the center of the neighbourhood and having a beer. It is around 10 pm, and Traiko is sitting with us, while his wife Ceca and the bartender Kateto are taking care of the customers. The Cane, a tall man, around 60 years old, with silver hair, a nose that has been broken several times, and a shiny red sweat-suit is telling me about his boxing career. The story goes like this:

The Cane was a successful boxer in his youth. He started training at the age of eleven and until the age of sixteen had won three national competitions. Since he was actively competing, he was supposed to receive a salary. According to him, though, his salary was given to a poorer boy, even if the Cane was a better boxer. Then he had a quarrel with Dobri Zagorov and left Sliven's team for Bourgas, where he was paid what he deserved. An year later his new team started playing tricks on him and delayed his salary. He left with a scandal and returned to Sliven, where he competed one more year before it was time for his military service. During this year (at the age of 18) he won another Republican cup. Despite his promising performance in the ring, The Cane was refused a place in the sports company and, disappointed, he returned again to the team of Bourgas and was competing for them over the next two years while in the military. After his discharge in 1980, the team of Sliven asked him to return but proposed him no salary. He saw no reason "to get my

head broken again and again for them if they are not going to pay me...” and he became a security guard in a bar in the center of the town.

At this point the Cane goes to the toilet, and Traiko taps me on the shoulder, blinks at me and tells me to ask him what has he been doing at this bar and what was his nickname. He offers me some rakiya and sniggers. The Cane reappears and Traiko tells me with a purposely deeper and louder voice *Ask him, ask him, what was he doing before he became a pensioner and what was his nickname!* The Cane smiles happily and answers – *a pimp*. Traiko bursts into laughter and announces: *and we all called him Papa Love...*

The Cane sits down and continues the story. Somewhere in the early 1980s he was working in this bar, guarding the door and selling reservations.

One evening I was at the door and these two females come, but real females, i'm telling you, and they don't pay but go strait to the bar and sit next to two guys. The guys buy them drinks. They stayed for less then 20 minutes and left together. I quickly savvied what it was all about and the next time they appeared I go directly to them and tell them that if I don't get some of what they get, I'm gonna throw them out like wet kittens and, no more work here...

According to the Cane, the prostitutes willingly accepted his offer and inquired whether he will protect them and were all too happy to hear his positive answer.

After that he became one of the first pimps in town (and for sure, the first one in the neighbourhood) and that's how he earned the nickname Papa Love.

Traiko goes inside the shop and in some minutes returns with a plate of salami. In the meantime the Cane goes on bragging:

Do you know to how many boys I gave bread? They were coming to beg me to give them [sell] one of my cunts. The cunts were coming on their own, begging to take them to work for me. These were good years, I was making big money. I had many connections - friends

A.M. – Boxers?

Yeah, boxers from the sea resorts and other towns and I sold them many cunts or I was giving them some percentage from the money and I was doing nothing – just collecting. I had many cows and didn't have to do nothing, the money was coming to me... I was working with Kondyo¹⁸. He was also a boxer for a while in his youth. Once he brought me two cunts – drug addicts. I told him – take them away, these cunts are trouble. He asked me how do you know they are taking drugs? Well I see their veins – they are injecting stuff, I don't want them around me.

But Kondyo insisted on keeping them, and since he was their “owner”, The Cane could do no more than warn him.

Let us now interrupt the Cane and try to see what his story tells us. Whatever part of it is true, we can definitely see that the Cane manages to take advantage of the situation at hand. He has friends at the seaside and involves them in his “business pursuits”, he “gives bread” to many boys and thus creates affiliations. Unlike the other boxers in Nikola Kochev, he succeeds in translating his social capital (friends, boxers from different towns) into an economic capital. He does it by expanding his social capital even more – he creates or participates in already existing networks, “buys” and “sells” women, involves a famous singer in “the business” etc. He is obviously not saying exactly how he started and it is a bit hard to believe that in Bulgaria in the 1980's, when the Secret services controlled almost every aspect of life and especially the criminal circles, one could start such a lucrative enterprise on his own. But even the things he is hiding are very telling. In the “Late Socialism,” as the 1980's are sometimes called, when the propaganda against the Imperialist West and their decadent mores, it took very strong connections to find a job in a shady bar in the first place, and even more so to become a pimp. He could not do it without a powerful “backing”. The central point in his story, however, is Cane's ability to see

¹⁸Kondyo is one of the doyens of Chalga (the Bulgarian version of the Romanian Manele and the Serbian Turbo Folk). Some years ago he was imprisoned for pimping and human traffic.

the opportunity in the situations around and take full advantage of them. He was probably a really good boxer and he managed to translate his sense of the boxing game into the field of pimping where he constantly finds the *openings*. He is, what the people in the neighbourhood call *igrach* (*играч*), which means player. A last illustration of his ability to spot what might turn out to be profitable, is his proposition to me. When he learned that I am studying in Budapest, he proposed “to do business together”. My part would be “just to find a bar” and he would organize all the rest. From that moment on, I could “just lean back and the money will drop”. He would “collect” the women, organize their transportation, I could maybe help with the accommodation and then we will just live our life. For someone interested in such kind of occupations in general, this offer would definitely sound appealing.

Later on I will provide some other examples of *igrachi* but before I do that, let us look at some general remarks on the gender relations among Roma in Bulgaria which I will illustrate with some personal observations.

In her important survey (Tomova 1995) on the situation of the Roma in the early 1990's, Ilona Tomova talks about the early socialization of the Roma children. From quite an early age boys and girls are involved in the maintenance of the family by helping the parents in their work. Boys and girls are socialized in different ways and internalize the sexual divisions of their communities. While women and girls are closely observed and strictly controlled, boys are allowed to behave in sometimes truly obnoxious ways. Further on, the attitudes related to the sexual behaviour of men and women are evaluated very differently. While women's chastity is strictly observed, men are allowed to have sexual relations before the marriage as well as

out of it, and such behaviour is praised as manly and even encouraged. Domestic violence is a widespread phenomenon, so one of the most important things women look for when they choose a marital partner is for him “not to drink and not get rough” (Tomova 1995:36).

Let me now present an incident which I witnessed in the house where I was living and which, I believe, illustrates some aspects of the sexual divisions in the neighbourhood. My host Stanka was an active participant in the preparations for the wedding of one of her nieces (the daughter of her first cousin). The family of the girl has been living in Italy for some years now and they prosper by acting as mediators between local employers and Bulgarian workers. They were in Bulgaria for the wedding and would return to Italy few days after it. On the morning before the event I woke up and heard some heated debate. I came out of my room to see what was going on and saw Stanka shouting on the phone that she “will tear her hair off” and “what does this whore want”. The debate was going on for about half an hour and Stanka was often bursting into threats and curses about someone. I asked her husband Joro what was it all about and he started telling me the story. After the conversation on the phone ended, Stanka also joined. The reason for her anger were the claims of another family that the son of Stanka's cousin (the brother of the bride) has slept with their daughter. Apparently Stanka's nephew Jorkata has been going out with this girl for four years and everybody expected them to get married. But a year ago Jorkata left the girl because “he just didn't love her any more, you know how such things happen”. And now the “dishonoured family” wanted something in return even though it was not clear what exactly. Stanka and Joro explained that, since the family of Jorkata are rich, the other family have

encouraged their daughter to seduce him and if possible, to conceive, so that they can force Jorkata to marry her. The daughter was often referred to as “*curveto*” (*кypæemo*) which means - “the little whore” and Stanka told me what a slut her mother was when she was younger. Joro tells me:

It's not his fault if she's a whore. What else can he do, he's a man after all. Everyone in his place would do the same. They are to blame that they were sending her all the time to hang around with him. Even his father once called them and told them to make her go home because this was just a disgrace – a fourteen year old girl to constantly hang out there. They were sometimes left alone in the house... what do they expect?

Stanka interrupts with some more insults for the girl and her family and insists that they were purposely sending her. When I suggest that there is no need to force a couple of youngsters to sleep with each other if they are together for so long, she bursts again and tells me, pointing at her daughter Nina (fourteen years old) who quietly listens to the fuzz:

How can she know what to do and not be a slut and the curveto cannot? Because she knows that if she starts flaunting her pussy around I'll beat her to death, I will break her legs. It's their job to control her, not Jorkata's. He is a man and a handsome one, this is the most natural thing to do and they know it perfectly well. It's just that they want their slut to marry him. But they can't do nothing now. It's over.

We can see from this conversation that the standards for sexual behaviour differ significantly for girls and boys. It also becomes clear that it is the responsibility of the parents to safeguard the girl's chastity and that no such things are expected from the boys parents. As far as I am aware there were no other consequences of this conversation. Less than a week after the wedding the family of Jorkata went back to Italy and they did not pay anything to the family of the girl, nor did Jorkata decide to come back to her.

The next example tells us more about the qualities of the manly man. One evening we were sitting in Traiko's shop with a group of men and were talking about politics. I asked them what do they think about the mayor Lechkov¹⁹. Even though some of the men claimed that he promised many things and did nothing for the town, everyone agreed that Lechkov is both a manly man (*мъжкар – mazhkar*) and *голям играч (golyam igrach)* or a big player. His manliness is illustrated to me with two examples. The first is related with the death and funeral of Deko, one of the legends of boxing in the neighbourhood. When he died in misery, his relatives did not have money to bury him, so two other former boxer went to Lechkov to ask for some assistance from the municipality. Lechkov, they told me, behaved very manly. He just got 500 leva from his pocket and placed them on the table. Thus he showed his respect for the memory of Deko and attitude towards the bureaucratic procedures (for financing officially the burial) which would take time and energy.

The second example is about last year's celebration of the 8th of April – the international Roma day. The municipality organized a big free concert in the center of the town and invited Azis²⁰, the undisputed chalga superstar, to perform. In the break between some songs Azis went backstage and threatened that he will not continue the concert if the municipality does not double the pay. The puzzled organizers did not what to do and sent for Lechkov. The mayor, according to one of

¹⁹Yordan Lechkov was famous football player and an important part of “the golden generation” of 1994, when the Bulgarian team reached the semi-finals for the world cup. He is a wealthy businessman and owns a fancy hotel complex with bars and discos near the town. It is a commonly known secret in the town that Lechkov is in good relations with some of the members of the local mafia. Many ethnic Bulgarians accuse him for buying Gypsy votes on the elections.

²⁰The glory of Azis is partly due to his peculiar appearance. He is a plumpy Roma with died blond hair and beard who often performs in splendid female clothes and lavish make-up. His shows and videos present a magnificent abundance of kitsch. He is often dressed as a striking combination of a princess and an Ancient Greek god of the seas and he openly plays with homosexuality.

my interlocutors, came and shouted at him: *I will fuck your faggot mother!* [*Мама ми ще еба педерашка!*] *We have agreed on this sum and you will sing for this sum. Now move your ass and go back to the stage!* Which Azis did immediately and the concert continued.

From these two stories we can draw some conclusions as to what are the qualities of the manly man. The assertiveness of Lechkov is visible in both of the stories. He acts independently and with a fair amount of self-confidence. He demonstrates material wealth and generosity in the case with the funeral of the boxer. It was emphasized in this story how he was acting like a real man [*мъжкарски*].

The second case is more or less obvious but let me still point out that in addition to the decisiveness, the mayor demonstrates his superiority over “the faggot” Azis. Thus we see Connell's notions of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities in full swing.

When I asked about the contacts of Lechkov with the criminal world, my companions told me that *he knows how to do his things* and that being *OK with everyone – politicians, gangsters and the common people* allows him to *play his game*. Thus Lechkov represents the essence of the manly man, who is an assertive macho and a skilled player at the same time. Lechkov enjoys the possession of an enviable set of symbolic, social and economic capitals which he knows how to use in the appropriate time and the appropriate space. Both his legal and illegal activities were praised as manifestations of his skills as an *igrach*. I heard the term *igrach* for the first time in relation to the two main figures in Sliven's criminal circles. Both of them deal with drugs and have extended pimping networks spanning, in the case of

one of them to Holland, where he apparently *owns a whole street with window brothels*. The reason they are called *igrachi* is that they manage to use the right techniques of violence and bribery in order to maintain their *game* and keep asside the police and the authorities as well as the possible competition from other criminals. The informants who were mentioning them were speaking with a combination of overt respect and envy but I heard no accusation for their criminal activities²¹.

The last story I will present will point at some more necessary qualities of the manly man – his sexual prowess and his ability to deal, and the relation between these two.

It was my last evening in Sliven and I decided to spend it in Traiko's cafe. I wanted to say good bye to Traiko and to chat with the men who were hanging out there, and maybe to learn something more about pimping. Traiko was busy so I sat at the table of some younger men and a woman to whom I have been introduced a week earlier but have not had a chance to speak with. They asked me what was I doing in Sliven and I told them. I mentioned that I spoke several times with The Cane and fortunately the conversation revolved around pimps. I heard again how the Cane “helped many boys” and how now there are many pimps in the neighbourhood. I asked what were the pimps doing before becoming pimps. One of the men told me that almost all of them *started with rubbers*²² in the early 1990's and that *they made*

²¹I would like to emphasize here that I did not speak about these two figures with all the people that I interviewed, therefore I do not claim that this is the attitude of everyone regarding the criminal activities.

²²*The rubbers* is a variation of the *shell game* and is played with three pieces of rubber, one of which is marked. The player shuffles them quickly and from time to time shows the marked piece as to let the finding of it look simple. The audience bets for the location of the marked piece. In the early

a lot of money . Later on, when *there was no more money in the rubbers* and the boys saw that The Cane and some others are well off, they also decided to start pimping. I asked how did they recruit their prostitutes and got the striking answer that in addition to *poor girls from the villages* (about which I have heard from The Cane and some other men), the main body of prostitutes were the pimps girlfriends. The man described it as an expression of love from their part. *She loves him a lot and she wants to make some money for him*. This was the second time I heard such a version on the recruitment of prostitutes. The first time was in my conversation with one of the current boxing champions of the neighbourhood who told me how last year, after he won another in his series of competitions, *a girl from the villages* came to him and told him that she likes him a lot and wants to work for him. He chased her away and told her that he is not in this business and does not want to enter.

This stories show a particularly interesting inversion of the idea of agency in pimping, where the prostitute is not the passive victim of the pimp, but indeed the active agent, who does what she does out of love. On the other hand, even though the man in these stories is shown as less active, his manliness is enhanced. He controls the women by making them love him, either with his sexual potency or with his manly attractiveness (as in the case with the boxer). Unfortunately I did not have the time (or luck) to check the validity of such statements. Apart from this aspect, the above example adds to the image of the pimp as an active *player* who searches for the openings in the market. When the boys saw that *there was no more money*

nineties the game in several variations was indeed very popular and groups of people could often be seen on the streets quarrelling over the payment.

in the gambling games, they oriented themselves to the more lucrative business of pimping.

Soon after this conversation my companions left and I moved to Traiko, who has, in the meantime, sat with Mahmud on a nearby table. Mahmud is a Kurdish man from Turkey, who appeared in the neighbourhood some years ago. He is doing some business in Bulgaria but was not willing to tell me more about it²³. He is a respected member of the manly circle around Traiko's shop and is known to have five women in different places in Turkey and Bulgaria. The two men were talking about women and when I joined them started asking me whether I have already *screwed* any girl in Sliven. After that Traiko started a story about his youth and his exploits in sex. He told us how he had a girlfriend who used to live in a dormitory with a room-mate and how once, when he was copulating with his girl, he felt that the room-mate wants him too. So after he finished, he sent his girlfriend to the bathroom to take a shower and it was enough to just blink at the other one, who *was ready*, to make her jump on him. When the girlfriend came out of the bathroom, Traiko had finished with the other girl and was lying in the bed and falling asleep. He bluntly interrupted the attempts of his girlfriend to wake him up for *another round* by saying that he wants to sleep.

Here the sexual virility does not need much comment. What was particularly interesting to me was the next story, which Traiko started almost without a break.

The story is about a trading expedition to Moldova in which Traiko participated in the

²³When I asked him about his business a week earlier, Mahmud smiled solemnly and showed me that he doesn't want to talk about this. Some minutes later, The Cane, who was also on our tale, told me: *There are four businesses that can make your live good: women, alcohol, gambling and cigarettes! Are there others?*

mid 1990's. The group of six men went to Moldova with a supply of cheap goods of different kinds and managed to sell them in short time. Traiko was particularly proud that he was among the first ones to sell his stuff. They were then taken by a local acquaintance to a striptease bar. It was their first time in such a place and they were excited. Some of the women came to them at the bar and one of them, *a great chick with long black hair*, came to Traiko and asked him whether he wants to invite her for a glass of wine later, which he of course did willingly. Back in the hotel the men went to the bar and started drinking. They were excited and happy because of the successful trade. They were shouting loud and ordering louder and livelier music. Women started coming to their tables and flirting with them. One of them approached Traiko and asked him *Как тебя зовут?* [*What is your name?*] He opened his jacket, took out his wad of money and answered *Меня зовут Миллионер!* [*My name is Millionaire!*]

I am tempted to leave this last sentence speak on its own, but will, nevertheless, point at some aspects of this narration. First, I would like to underline again the importance of the fact that Traiko told the two stories one after the other. At first sight there might be not much common between them, but if we look twice, we will see that there is. And it is the control over women. The second story reveals the importance of dealing for the manly man in Nikola Kochev. The manly man controls through dealing (as noted by different researchers – Levinson and Sparkes 2003; Stewart 1997), and they gain control over the others by completion of successful deals. They acquire money and money are still, as banal as it is, power. The fact that the two stories were merged drives me to the conclusion that money, control

over women, sexual prowess and the ability to deal are all merged in the essence of the manly man which is, ultimately, power.

4. Conclusion

In this thesis I have tried to explore the construction of masculinity in the Roma neighbourhood Nikola Kochev in the town of Sliven, Bulgaria. I have focussed my attention on the two most popular incarnations of the hegemonic masculinity in the neighbourhood – the boxer and the pimp. Leaning heavily on the chosen theoretical

framework, I have attempted to trace the historical emergence of these two figures which embody different qualities considered to be manly. The relations between the historical, political and economic contexts and the particular qualities, regarded as masculine, were of major concern for me throughout this work.

Today it is a common notion in the neighbourhood that boxing is *in the blood* of the local boys, that they pick it up from the air around them. In my exploration of the history of Sliven's boxing, I have demonstrated that this visceral endowment of pugilism was to a large extent created in accord with the requirements of the Socialist state. The boys were attracted to the gym by the idea that boxing will *make them men* – strong and able to fight. In addition they were given material stimuli in the form of clothes and shoes and the most successful among them received a salary and free meals in the local sports school. In the gym, however, boxers were taught the main qualities proclaimed by the state propaganda as needed for the real man – diligence, discipline and perseverance. The reward for the efforts was prestige, recognition and a relatively decent livelihood. Thus, attracted by the opportunity to distinguish themselves and acquire the prestigious attributes of the famous boxers of their neighbourhood, and guided by the structural leverage of the State, three generations of boys created a tradition. Moreover, they created a myth. After the demise of the State socialism, the former boxers found themselves in a peculiar situation. Taught that they will be taken care of, most of them did not manage to capitalize their symbolic gains in the new economic order. Also, because of a sharp decrease in financing sports with no significant commercial potential, the inflow of young boxers dwindles.

Few of the boxers, however, succeeded in translating their boxing skills into the market. My example with the Cane shows that Pimps perform a sort of boxing game in the field of illegal economy. They demonstrate a great mastery of *foot work* in avoiding the State's repressive institutions, they *dodge* around the blows of mighty competitors in the shady business and they are always on the prowl for an *opening*. If we are to use boxing metaphors, we can say that women are the pimps' boxing gloves, the ones who deliver the winning blow and the ones who take the whole impact upon themselves.

Finally, I would argue that both images – the boxer and the pimp, are *heroes of their times*. While the boxer is deeply bound with the past, with its secured pension and hypocritical recognition, the pimp is the ideal incarnation of the present with his thirst for gains and his readiness to use whoever at hand in their pursuit.

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