

culture does matter. But the comparative data suggest that the exclusion from labour market and from political and social spheres matters much more than religion and culture when we try to understand political, moral, and gender differences. On the other hand, ethnicity in the “nationalizing national state“ is a major factor for minorities’ economic and social exclusion. The aborted process of replacement of the model of nation from ethnic to a political one, together with the prolonged economic crisis, enforced the role of ethnicity on the construction of inequalities and on social exclusion of the largest minority groups in the country.

## **GENERATIONS, UNEMPLOYMENT AND EXCLUSION IN URBAN BULGARIA**

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*“...rights for all generations lie in their access  
to the labour market”*

(Greenberg and Muehlebach 2007: 203).

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the city of Plovdiv, Bulgaria, I often visited a close friend, who works for a private company which installs double glaze windows, awnings and blinds. At the factory headquarters, it struck me that the workers – from the administrative staff to the workmen who install the blinds – were all young people. There was not a middle aged or elderly person in sight. When I asked my friend, Kalinka, (in her late 20s), who is the head of one of the administrative departments about this, she informed me that the boss, aged 38, employs only young people and that most of his employees are 10-15 years younger than him. There is no worker older than the boss in his workforce of almost 100.

The above example is not an isolated phenomenon; rather the visibility of young employees and absence of older workers in the workplace seems to be quite a common phenomenon. It is this observation that lies at the centre of this paper which focuses on generations, work and exclusion.

The starting point is the idea that critical periods or moments of social change have profound and different implications for different generations. Nineteen eighty-nine was such a moment across Eastern Europe. Neoliberal reforms have created new markets both at home and transnationally. However, much of the recent literature on neoliberalism has shown that everyone is not equally well placed to take advantage of, or engage in, the new markets: with certain groups and particular regions being more disadvantaged than others. This has resulted in the emergence of new inequalities and uneven development, regionally and globally (e.g. see Harvey 2005; also Rapley 2004; Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005).

In this paper I focus on generation as one important but frequently overlooked disadvantaged group in neoliberal economies. The question of generations and neoliberal reforms are explored in terms of work, in the context of postsocialist Bulgaria.

I begin with a general discussion on generations in the context of social change before giving this discussion more context in the next section by providing background information of the fieldsite. The following two sections ground the previous sections empirically through a presentation of two case studies.

First, however, a brief note of explanation is required as to the methods used in this study. This research is based on fieldwork carried out in the city of Plovdiv over 6 months, during two years 2004 and 2005 (each fieldtrip was of 3 months duration). As an anthropologist my primary method of data collection was participant observation (ethnography) although structured and more often semi-structured interviews played an important part of this urban based research. Both case studies presented in this paper are based on semi-structured interviews that lasted 2-3 hours and in the case of Tanya longer (as we met on several occasions). My concern has been to go beyond the undoubtedly important survey and statistical data, in order to address questions that cannot easily be answered by quantitative data, such as providing information on coping strategies of the unemployed. Further, such a method has the advantage of supplying information on topics that cannot be gleaned from officially generated statistical/survey material. For example, one of the two individuals discussed is not registered as unemployed even though she has been without work for a number of years. The complexities of her situation – and the hundreds if not thousands of others in a similar position – fall outside the scope of studies that rely entirely on quantitative data collection methods.

### **SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE INVERSION OF POWER RELATIONS BETWEEN GENERATIONS**

Generations are never simply a biological process but intricately determined by social relations. In other words, generations are not simply ‘natural’ but produced ‘through common experience’ and socially constructed (Yurchak 2006: 30). Generations can be understood as groups of people with shared social locality (Mannheim 1972: 290), where age provides a common perspective on social processes between contemporaries in any given period of history. Such a shared perspective may be based on understandings, meanings and processes from a particular time that create a shared consciousness or identity (Mannheim 1972).

Generation is often explored with respect to social change. Common generational experiences are seen as shaped by and shaping political-economic processes as well as centrally implicated in economic and political restructuring (Cole and Durham 2007: 2; see also Bridger and Kay 1996; Haukanes and Pine 2005). Thus ‘...the reorganisation of production and consumption that has occurred at various historical junctures...’ shapes intergenerational relations and determines ‘...who can work and how, who can consume and what...’ (Cole and Durham 2007: 14). In this way generations can be distinguished in terms of their various positions vis-à-vis the political economy with members of specific generations being valued differently in the context of an emerging market economy. Different generations also have access to particular resources and assets that allow them to engage in the domain of formal work or alternatively be excluded from it.

Divisions between generations are often perceived as a consequence of rapid social transformation (Mannheim 1972: 309-10). This is an observation recently noted