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# POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IN BULGARIA – A FRESH START?

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Bulgaria is a philosophical nation. It is one of the few countries in Europe in which the study of philosophy is mandatory in the high schools. Its philosophers often figure prominently in political life. The first philosopher of importance in this country, Dimitri Michaltschew, was an ambassador to Prague in the twenties and twice to Moscow, first in the thirties, later in the mid-forties. After September 1944 and until the Monarchy was abolished on 15 September, 1946, the Marxist philosopher, Todor Pavlov, was a member of the Regency Council. Finally, between 1990 and 1996, another philosopher, Zheliu Zhelev, was the President of Republic Bulgaria, thus joining the club of three philosopher-heads of state in twentieth-century Europe, the other members being A. J. Balfour of the United Kingdom and T. G. Masaryk of Czechoslovakia.

There are several grounds for this. On the one hand, religious sentiment in the country is not pronounced; on the other, as some authors of the volume under review note, culture as a whole, education in particular, have a constitutive meaning for Bulgaria's national identity. So theoretical philosophy came to have the function of something resembling a *Weltanschauung*. Historically, the introduction of philosophy in the country's culture was a part of a program for radical modernization, passionately embraced after 1878, which was to wipe away the effects of the "dark age" of the "Turkish

yoke." Modernization not only in economy and in politics, but also in *Geistesleben*, was the main priority.

The dominant figure in Bulgarian philosophy was the cited Dimitar Mikhalchev, who already as a student in Greifswald, Germany, published his *Philosophische Studien: Beiträge zur Kritik des modernen Psychologismus*, Leipzig: Engelmann, 1909. The book was widely reviewed in the West, among others by no less a figure than the founding father of analytic philosophy, G. E. Moore. Roughly, Mikhalchev played the same role in Bulgarian philosophy that Kazimierz Twardowski played in Polish philosophy – he placed it at a European level giving it a decisive push into the bedrock of the scientific philosophy that has its roots in Kant. Even in the period of communist rule, all sound philosophy in the country carried the traces of Mikhalchev's mind.

Matters are altogether different with political philosophy – it was always *terra incognita* in Bulgaria. This can be explained by the fact that long after 1878 the country continued to abide by a political priority as clear as daylight: to join the West, to copy its political institutions. The only theoretical discussion in this field was focused on the Marxism–anti-Marxism controversy. After 1944, political philosophy was nothing short of an apology for the local form of totalitarianism. This explains why the recent revolution in political philosophy, initiated in the West following publication of John Rawls seminal *Theory of Justice* (1972), remained unnoticed in this country.

The task of the book under review – a volume of The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy – is to change this situation. As a matter of fact, this book is the first investigation to date, by mainly Bulgarian philosophers, written in the language of mainstream Western political philosophy.

The project is, in short, to combine the efforts of six authors from Bulgaria with those of five philosophers from abroad, with the aim of showing that the country is not the right place for liberal political practices. The book is the result of a division of labor. Roughly speaking, the task of the non-Bulgarian authors is to demonstrate that liberalism as political philosophy reflects only some sides of the American way of life, as well as perhaps the *Sitten* (this Hegelian term is widely used) current in Western and Central Europe, and

so cannot be applied globally, certainly not in the Balkans. The task of the Bulgarian authors is to show that their country differs historically from nations that adhere to a liberal value system.


## II. TWO POLITICAL NEO-HEGELIANS FROM PENNSYLVANIA

Among the authors called up to help their Bulgarian colleagues graft political philosophy to their theoretical discourse are two philosophers from Pennsylvania, Tom Rockmore and Joseph Margolis, both well-known in the West.

(i) *Tom Rockmore.* In his stylistically brilliant and highly theoretical paper, "Social Values in a Time of Change: An Hegelian Approach," Rockmore sets out to use the almost instantaneous disintegration of the Soviet Block, that brought to life radically new social situations, as a test for the character of social values as such.

Rockmore accepts that political values can be either invariant or variable. He defends the second alternative against the first with a little help from his friend Hegel, who first claimed that "social values are the result of an ongoing process of social negotiation between members of a given society" (p. 148). They are not ready made, but are woven into the course of social life.

Hegel's enemy was Kant, who as the most ardent defender of the universality of human values, was convinced that values are deduced with the help of the reason "as the absolute guide to life." In historical perspective, this conception was nothing but a secularized form of the Christian persuasion that there is a correct judgment of social states of affairs that can be achieved with God's help.

My main objection to Rockmore's argument is directed against his assumption that social values are *either* social universalia *or* social variables. As I wrote elsewhere (see Milkov 1992), we can imagine a social universal in the manner of Kant's epistemology: as one and the same intuition which nevertheless is actualized differently in the concrete states of affairs to which it is applied.

Towards the end of his paper, Rockmore advances the following argument. According to Kant's political philosophy of reason, there is only one right way to analyze a social situation. In contrast, our author is sure that social states of affairs can be analyzed from

different, often contradictory points of view, none of which is more or less right than the others. The conclusion is that no social practice can be assessed as true.

Although Rockmore does not refer to Wittgenstein here, many social philosophers today (for example, Ted Schatzki) call on Wittgenstein's authority to support considerations of this kind. To be sure, the later Wittgenstein said repeatedly that we accept different ways of life not because they are true, but because we are, in one way or another, convinced to embrace them. At the same time, however, he also wrote that there are activities, for example cooking, in which we are not free to chose the rules; they are defined by the end of cooking (*Philosophical Grammar*, §133). Now, something similar is true of political life. Many things in it are contingent; some, however, are not. They are defined by the end of the game: political, economic, etc., *liberty*.

(ii) *Joseph Margolis.* Even more relativistic is Joseph Margolis' paper, "Liberalism and Liberal Democracy: Paradoxes and Puzzles." His objective is to forewarn the would-be East European applicant societies who strive to join Western liberalism. He encourages them to seek instead for alternative constitutional inventions based on their authentic *Sitten*.

The author follows an argument that was first advanced by Alasdair MacIintyre in *After Virtue* (1981). According to that argument, liberalism is only a form of tradition in North America and Western Europe. At that, even in these regions it "has seen its best inning and is likely to dwindle more quickly now than ever before" (p. 102).

The main reason for this is that liberalism is an utopian, ahistorical, and ideal claim. When confronted with new circumstances, it gives way, it cannot meet the dynamics of actual political life. That was shown in the recent discussions in the USA about abortion, gay rights, assisted suicide, euthanasia, racial and gender equality. They brought to the surface the so-called paradoxes of liberalism which show that when applied strictly, it clearly fails.

Be this as it may, Margolis is scarcely correct in his conclusions. What his paradoxes really show is nothing more than that liberalism is not a straightforward conception as some used to believe.

It requires recurrent paraphrases, in every new situation to which it is applied. This, however, is not evidence to prove that liberalism is wrong, or useless, or impractical.


### III. INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN BULGARIA

We come now to the Bulgarian authors. As is to be expected, they have considerable difficulties in writing on the subject. This is seen clearly in the paper "Promoting Interethnic Dialogue in Bulgaria" by Plamen Makariev, one of the editors of the book. His main thesis, that can also be read as the motto of the volume, is: "It is only natural that this approach [liberalism] is not taken seriously in the Balkans."

Makariev finds the platforms of the mass media and the political messages of various parties in the country "either simplistically liberal or extremely nationalistic policies" (p. 240). Further, he fearlessly identifies them with two rival paradigms in the new political philosophy: liberalism and communitarianism. He sees his task in finding something resembling a "dialectical synthesis" of the two.

Unfortunately, when trying to identify the conflict, the author repeats a cliché from the communist past, more precisely, from the time of the violent change of names of the Bulgarian ethnic Turks in 1984–1985. Specifically, he is convinced that the ethnic Turks and the ethnic Bulgarians are two communities which "conceive of themselves as outposts of different civilizations" (p. 241).

In what this difference consists, however, Makariev refuses to specify. He goes no further than to say that the ethnic Bulgarians are "wearing European-style clothing, listening to European-style music, accepting a modern type of family life and so forth," whereas the ethnic Turks reject all this (p. 251). The presumption is that whereas the ethnic Turks have a traditional culture, the ethnic Bulgarians have embraced a modern way of life.

This is hardly true. The national state of the ethnic Turks – Turkey, a country which has an extensive common border with Bulgaria – has been a secular state for some 80 years now. It applied for full membership in the European Union decades ago and today this application is under serious consideration. In many respects, the Turkey of today is more modern (Westernized) than Bulgaria. So the question emerges, where do the resources of the Bulgarian ethnic

Turks come from to allow them to retain their traditional form of life? Apparently, not from the idiosyncrasy of their ethnicity. In the past, they came as a reaction against attempts at assimilation by the authorities under the banner of modernization.

Makariev is afraid that a liberal policy could erode the cultural identity of the ethnic Bulgarians (p. 248). Here the outstanding question is how can 9.4% of the population erode the integrity of the whole community – especially if we keep in mind that the two ethnic groups have lived side by side for hundreds of years (!) and nevertheless have survived in a good shape. The feeling that the one community endangers the identity of the other is stirred up by a false political philosophy: nationalism.

Here is another point that betrays a weakness in the author's perspective. Following Margolis's appeal for introducing "alternative constitutional inventions," Makariev suggests the following solution to his main problem. He dreams of an arbiter who would judge the litigation between the two communities. The dialogue should be "conducted according to the algorithms of discourse ethics [in order] to synthesize the rights of the individual and the good of the community" (p. 253). Unfortunately, it is unclear how this dialogue would be institutionalized.

## IV. BULGARIA – AN ENEMY OF MODERNIZATION?

Despite all its disadvantages, Makariev's paper is the only one of six written by Bulgarian authors in which political philosophy is treated according to the terms of contemporary post-Rawlsian developments. This cannot be said about two other papers that are devoted to cultural anthropology.

(i) *Vessela Misheva.* The main thesis of the most extensive paper in the book (it takes up one-fifth of it), Vessela Misheva's "Beyond Modernity," is that the Balkan nations are not "European-style societies." "Their emotionally loaded social experience, their intellectual priorities, and their patterns of thinking and acting not only are not readily seen to exhibit 'European' features, but in fact are generally considered to be inferior" (p. 156).

Bulgarians are especially unsusceptible to modernization. Misheva attempts to show that the reasons for this are both historical and geographical; objective as well as arcane. The arcane, however, predominate. This prompts her to reach the following conclusion. "The different degrees of success with which the members of the former Communist block have adapted to the market economy raises serious doubts about regarding economic freedom and reforms as a universal remedy" (p. 191, n. 14). These are words that Joseph Margolis has been waiting to hear.

One of the objective reasons for the Bulgarian enigma is that the boundaries of the Balkan states were drawn by the Great Powers, not by the local folk groups. Borrowing Barry Smith's terminology (Misheva doesn't do this), such boundaries are not bona fide, but fiat boundaries. Her judgment: "Formations whose boundaries have been drawn from the outside are not nation states, but rather 'compulsory organizations' or institutions" (p. 169). Nothing could be wider of the mark. Many countries of today's Europe which are commonly considered successful – Germany and Belgium, to name only two – have borders that are nothing but the result of fiats.

One of the arcane reasons is what Misheva calls national nihilism. Unfortunately, on this point she is in the right. Bulgarians suffer from what she calls national nihilism. Their self-consciousness is plagued by "a paradoxical state of self-denial, self-underestimation and self-dishonor" (p. 171). This state is accompanied by an acute sense of shame for being different; of not taking part in the life of Europe, of being only tacit observers of what happens on the scene.

All this is true, but Misheva fails to say why this is a paradox. It is such since this characteristic is only one part of the national soul. The other part is the Bulgarians' self-appreciation that they inherently belong to Europe. That is why they are, in their moments of depression, ashamed of who and what they are: they are ashamed that they play no role in a game in which they strive to play an important role.

This point brings us to the sources of Misheva's paradox that also lie at the roots of the Balkan enigma in general. To make a long story short, the troubles in the Balkans began after the defeat in 1683, close to Vienna, of the Ottoman army. This coincided with the general acceptance of Newton's physics as well as with the end

of the confessional wars. All of a sudden, Europe realized that she is not only different from the outside world; she also is decisively superior to it. Europocentrism became the resulting ideology, with its principal notion of *civilization* to which the non-European world remained decisively insensitive. On these grounds, colonialism and imperialism were later embraced, the declared objective of which was to civilize the barbarian nations.

The Balkan people turned out be the most ardent believers in this narrative. Here it is in its essence, as adapted to the local peculiarities.

On the eve of the Ottoman conquest, the medieval societies of the Balkans had reached a high degree of sophistication that made them commensurate with, if not ahead of, developments in Western Europe. . . . The arrival of the Ottomans was a calamity of unparalleled consequences because it disrupted the natural development of the southeast European societies as a substantial and creative part of the overall process of European humanism and the Renaissance. The consolidation of Ottoman rule in the Balkans definitively isolated the peninsula from European developments and left it untouched by the great ideas and transformations of the Renaissance and the Reformation. (Todorova 1997, p. 182)

Following Napoleon's wars at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the idea of nationalism was added to this narrative. Ottoman rule over the Balkans was apprehended overnight as the "Turkish yoke"; the first political priority was declared to be liberation from it. The neighbouring countries too were seen as remnants of the Ottoman legacy with which nobody wanted to have anything in common.

In fact, it is these two ideologies – Europocentrism and nationalism – that are intrinsically alien to the true Balkan *Sittlichkeit*, not liberalism. Their wholehearted adoption in the beginning of the nineteenth century brought about the Balkan calamities in the twentieth century.

(ii)   *Anna Krasteva.* The paper by Anna Krasteva, "Bulgarian Cultural Identity," is based on a book edited in 1994 (in Bulgarian) by Ivan Elenkov and Rumen Daskalov under the title: *Why Are We as We Are? In Search of Bulgaria's Cultural Identity*. This is a collection of papers by nineteen authors, the *crème de la crème* of Bulgarian intelligentsia of the time, all but two written between 1920 and 1943.

According to these inter-war authors, the kernel of Bulgarian identity is the feeling that Bulgarians are members of one family. "Land, people, kin, and individual are linked together into a single organism" (p. 210). Now "conceiving one's 'own' in terms of an organic body has several important implications. For example, the links are based on 'blood' rather than on contract or agreement" (p. 211).

On the basis of these assumptions, Anna Krasteva offers the following conclusion in support of the Margolis-Rockmore thesis.

If organic relationships of kinship are so ubiquitous, that is because there are no alternatives, no other types of relationships to weld the social [order] together. Such alternatives do exist *de jure*, but *de facto*, their efficiency is weakened by their classification as 'alien' or 'imported.' . . . Indeed, the very idea of the formalization and codification of social relations is assumed to be 'non-ours' and, therefore, arbitrary. (p. 217)

The most serious problem with Krasteva's argument is that her nineteen inter-war authors scarcely represent correctly what Bulgarian cultural identity as such is. The point is that the authors in the years 1920–1943, the period often called the European Civil War, were highly prejudiced. Not only in Bulgaria. If we select writings of the most representative inter-war German authors, we could produce a similar picture. Take, for example, Oswald Spengler, Werner Sombart, Adolf Halfeld, and Giselher Wirsig. All of them believed in German's destiny to provide an alternative to the "political positivism of America and Russia," an alternative that appeals to *Geist, Blut und Boden*, not to law and economics (see Kittsteiner 1997). You cannot, however, accept that this belief is the main ingredient of German identity today, nor that it was so in, say, 1860.

### V.　SOME MYTHOLOGEMS IN POPULAR DISCOURSE

Philosophers who write on cultural anthropology are often iconclasts. Unfortunately, most of the authors of this volume, who write on Bulgarian values, repeat some of the widely exploited mythologems in popular discourse. Two examples.

(i) *Russia as an alternative to Bulgaria's Western orientation.* This myth, readily retold in the West, where Bulgaria is still regarded as

having been allegedly the Soviet Union's closest ally, is supported by both Krasteva and Misheva.

In fact, Russia was really of importance to both the cultural and political discourse of this country only from 1830 until the Russo–Turkish war of 1877–1878. This was connected to the hope that Russia will free Bulgarians from the "Turks." Indeed, after the war, Russia tried to rule Bulgaria, but without success. It is true that between April 1881 and September 1883 the country was governed by Russian generals; and that on August 1886 a group of Russophile officers dethroned the (German) Prince of Bulgaria, Alexander of Battenberg. Following Stefan Stambolov's regime (1887–1994), however, Russia ceased to play a leading role in the country. Henceforth, Bulgaria was oriented to the West exclusively. Two pieces of evidence for this.

- Even before the October revolution of 1917, Russia had only a marginal role in within the Bulgarian economy. In 1913, just prior to the outbreak of World War I, it ranked seventh among Bulgaria's trading partners, after Austria–Hungary, Germany, France, Italy, Great Britain, and the Ottoman Empire.
- The Bulgarian elite strove to integrate with the West and only with it. Thus "of the nineteen authors in Elenkov and Daskalov's compilation [quoted above, the *crème de la crème* of Bulgarian intelligentsia of the time] one did not go to university at all, three did so in Bulgaria, one studied in both Russia and the West, one in Russia alone, and thirteen in the West" (Crampton 1997, p. 235).

To this we can add that the national psychology of Bulgarians and Russians is radically different. This was already noticed by the great Russian political philosopher, K. N. Leont'ev, who between 1863 and 1873 lived in the Balkans. In these long years, he failed to discern, despite all his attempts, the difference between the Greeks and Bulgarians who live in Thrace; they think and act the same way both culturally and economically, being at the same time directly opposite to the Russians (see Leont'ev 1876, pp. 111–112).

(ii) *Bulgarians and liberalism.* The main point against the Margolis-Rockmore thesis, as applied to Bulgaria, is that the history of this country produced one of the most brilliant examples of a civil

society. So between 1830 and 1875, the time of the national revival, a strong urban economy developed in which ". . . the *esnaf*, or guild, played a dominant role. The structure of the *esnaf*, with its ranking of apprentice, journeyman, and master, and its ruling council elected by and from local masters, was similar to the structure of guilds in western Europe, and like those provided welfare for their members" (Crampton 1997, p. 38). It used "to finance schools, cultural associations, and social or municipal amenities of all sorts" (Glenny 1999, pp. 111–112).

This social phenomenon resulted, among other things, from the fact that in the Ottoman empire there was as good as no social hierarchy. As we shall see below, the same was true of the Christian Orthodoxy. This, of course, was a good ground for germinating liberal political values in the country.

(iii) *Orthodox "Caesaro-Papism"*. The only iconoclastic paper in the book is Georgi Kapriev's "Christian Values and Modern Bulgarian Culture" – it clears up many misunderstandings concerning Christian Orthodoxy. The author describes the Orthodox Church as "a mystical fraternity in union with God." In contrast to Catholicism, "Orthodoxy insists not on some type of institutional structure but rather defines itself primarily through following and worshipping God in the correct way" (p. 230). Another difference with Western Christianity is that Orthodox theology is rather a practice, not a doctrinal instruction. It puts emphasis on freedom and personal responsibility. There is no ecclesiastical hierarchy in it, except in a purely liturgical sense.

This explains why there is no uniform Orthodox institution in analogy to the papacy. Instead, each of the Orthodox Patriarchs runs the affairs of his autonomous Church, without relying on instructions from Constantinople. This also explains why Orthodoxy has no political doctrine. The West used to speak of Orthodox "Caesaro-Papism," understanding under this concept that the Church is to follow the Tsar's instructions. This, however, is nothing but "an explanatory mechanism that has been utilized in West European ecclesiastical and historical thought" (p. 231). As we have seen in this review, many of the misunderstandings about Bulgaria and the Balkans have the same source.

## VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As I took the book under review into my hands, I hoped to find signs that Bulgarian philosophers were finally coming round to the discourse of modern political philosophy. Unfortunately, there are few signs of this. Frankly, it is understandable, though finally disappointing, to see that professionals who were trained during the communist regime as anti-liberals are continuing to argue against liberalism – despite the immense changes of the last eleven years in Eastern Europe.

I fear that claims regarding the "simplistic" nature of liberalism, as well as attempts to display layers of political meaning somewhere beyond law and economics, are evidence for nothing but the failure of will to support democratic change.

In this sense this book can be seen as a typical example of Bulgaria's difficulties following 1989 to join the modern world. This is true especially of the intelligentsia and the cultural elite in general. Having in mind the important role that philosophers in this country usually play, the reluctance to embrace liberal values on their part is rather alarming.

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