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Peasants Into Bulgarians, or the Other Way Round: The Discourse of National Psychology¹

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The question of Bulgarian national character was always bound to the problem of statehood. This is mainly due to the fact that, as the prominent Bulgarian intellectual historian, Ivan Elenkov, put it, the state was perceived as "the only source of modernizatory initiative, the only means to catch up with the structures of modernity," and it also constituted the principal horizon of expectations concerning the future. Furthermore, the state-centeredness of the political culture also explains the relative compactness of the intelligentsia in the first decades of independent Bulgaria. This feature entailed that the cultural elite did not become polarized according to alternative traditions, which led to a constant oscillation between different political and meta-political positions.

¹ The present essay is an extract from my longer manuscript on inter-war Bulgarian political discourse, entitled "Symbolic Geographies and Normative Pasts: The Search for the True Bulgarian Self."

² Ivan Elenkov, "Spisanie 'Prosveta'" in: *Arhiv. Byuletin za grazhdansko obrazovanie po istoria*, 1996, I/2, p. 89.

The national educational system, which was one of the most belatedly formed ones in the region, had a spectacular growth by the turn of the century, and produced a broad layer of state-employed "intellectuals" (teachers and bureaucrats), who constituted the strongest group of supporters of the nation-state building project, and were the principal mediators, and often the main producers, of the national discourse. This discourse, on the whole, was secular and, as 1878 meant a radical breach with the previous cultural and political traditions, it was marked by the belief in social and cultural progress.

Consequently, the national ideology transmitted by these social groups was centered on concepts like culturedness (*kulturnost'*) and development.³ Raised in the 1880-90s, the first post-liberation generations were profoundly influenced by the positivist cultural atmosphere, which was at this point pervading the "most advanced" Western countries where Bulgarians turned for cultural models (mostly Germany and France). This positivist tint became formative for the Bulgarian nation-building discourse, so much so that, even when in the West the positivist world-view was successfully challenged by the new intellectual trends, the main tenests of Bulgarian nationalism were still formulated in this language.

A paradoxical duality, inherent in the spectacular speed of the emergence of the national discourse and its ensuing petrification around certain core issues that conditioned it in the 1870-80s, can also be witnessed in the case of the external aspects of this discourse. The rhetoric of Bulgarian nationalism, even though it was marked by irredentism from the very emergence of the "nation-state," can be still described as preponderantly defensive. Contrary to many other nationalisms in the region, the Bulgarian one was not centered around one principal "enemy figure" against whom the community could be defined (the formative clashes of the national awakening with Greek culture and Ottoman administration were soon supplemented by the ensuing conflicts with Serbia and, later on, Romania, not to speak of the long shadows of the Russian Empire), which meant that the horizons of the nationalist propaganda were always determined by the imminent aggression from outside, without actually organizing the geo-political embeddedness of Bulgarians into a

On the social and ideological roots of Bulgarian nationalism in the nineteenth century, see Thomas A. Meininger, *The formation of a nationalist Bulgarian intelligentsia*, 1835-1878 (New York, 1987).

On this issue, see Maria Todorova, "The Course and Discourses of Bulgarian Nationalism," in: Peter F. Sugar, *Eastern European Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, 1995)., pp. 55-102.

permanent symbolic formula of "eternal" enemies and friends. Consequently, the national character-discourse was always heavily reformulated according to the latest turn in the international "chess-match"; and it putatively defined the national self in terms of a permanent exposure to external threat, rather than in terms of a glorious project of incorporating all the contested territories into a resuscitated Bulgarian empire.

In comparison with other Eastern-European nationalisms, the Bulgarian national master-narrative was also marked by a series of conspicuous absences. Throughout the period in question, one of the key tenets of any kind of national character-discourse in Bulgaria was the claim that no normative type of Bulgarianness had yet been crystallized. This "absence" was, in many ways, connected to the proliferation of territorial-regional typologies, which were all identified as sub-categories of Bulgarianness, but were marked by considerable differences, also due to the fact that their codification often resulted from 'internal' comparisons with other such subgroups (e.g., asserting that the inhabitants of "Macedonia" were different from those of "Thracia").

Seen from a different angle, the Bulgarian national discourse was also devoid of a strong sense of normative historicity. While, of course, "national awakening" also entailed the revival of historical consciousness and brought along a cult of medieval greatness, the knowledge of this past was rather sketchy, and its cultural manifestations were almost inseparably intertwined with the aura of Byzantium. Furthermore, the gap of the Turkish domination, yawning between the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century, made any kind of argument built on a normative continuity rather feeble.

However, there was yet another theme which determined the national discourse probably even to a larger extent than the previous ones, namely the growing dissolution of social cohesion. The key problem of most of the social and political thought that emerged in Bulgaria from the late-nineteenth century up to the inter-war period was the constantly evoked "paradox of development." While civilizational advancement was the overall aim of the nation-building project, it also meant social differentiation due to the collapse of the traditional life-world of the peasantry and of the entrepreneurial layer that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century within the Ottoman imperial setting. This posed a series of fundamental questions concerning the identity of the community. On the one hand, it implied the growth of the distance between the emerging nationalized middle-class and the rural population and raised the question of the means and forms of transmitting the "national" culture.

On the other hand, it also meant the relativization of traditional role-models, and threatened the newly-formed nation-state with apparent chaos caused by the permanent dislocation of the principal actors, leading to "misunderstood" forms and veritable mutants of the Western civilizational framework.

Gradually, the very act of cultural mediation and the entire social class of mediators came to be problematized, both in view of their Westernism (thus, blaming the inorganic import of Western ideas for the failures of the Bulgarian cultural-political ventures), and also in view of the mechanism of internal transmission, that is, the process of extending the canon of "high culture" to the more humble strata. While the actual pattern of mediation, assumed by the nation-building intelligentsia, was not questioned, and the critiques themselves were most often involved in the mediating process (albeit importing another model of cultural agency and political values than their predecessors), the critique of this mechanism of dissemination turned out to be one of the stock rhetorical references of the intellectuals who attempted to carve out a space for themselves in the symbolic and material infrastructure of the nation-state. With the passing of time, the most important structural shift was that the role of the state in this transmission was extolled even further, making it not only the "natural" framework, but the principal "actor" of the nation-building process.

As the political task of creating Bulgaria was intertwined with the pressing issue of deciding who the Bulgarians actually were, some sort of characterological rhetoric has been influential for the Bulgarian national discourse from the 1860s onwards. The early attempts usually concentrated on the folk customs as the repository of the national soul, or thematized the "national self" in view of a comparison between ancient and modern patterns of life. By the turn of the century, an "evolutionary-organicist" discourse emerged – trying to harmonize a modernist perspective with the protection of "national specificities," thus, criticizing the superficial signs of imitation but firmly believing in the "civilizational" agenda. The 1910s witnessed a significant turn in the evolution of the characterological discourse, giving birth to more "scientific" attempts of "theorizing" on the nation. The first important work aiming at the creation of a self-standing national characterology was written by Todor Panov, a young teacher in the Sofia military academy.⁵ The author was a rather marginal figure, but his book can be taken as ideal-typical in many respects. Writ-

⁵ Todor Panov, *Psihologia na bûlgarskia narod* (Veliko Tûrnovo, 1992). Original edition: Sofia, 1914.

ten just after the Balkan Wars, it attested to the general propensity of national characterology to flourish in the wake of great collective traumas.

Making the historian's work easier, Panov dutifully listed the various sources and methodological examples he used to build his argument. Not surprisingly, he was inspired mainly by French positivist sociology, social-psychology, and anthropology, especially by Fouillée, but also by Tarde, Le Bon, and Quatrefages. In addition, his main source was German *Völkerpsychologie*, especially Lazarus and Wundt, and social-Darwinistic sociology, such as, for instance, Gumplowicz.

It can be seen already from the broad range of references that the task Panov set for himself was not so much to write a "psychological" monograph, but rather to offer an overview of Bulgarian society, fusing social psychology, political sociology, and even cultural history and anthropology. At the same time, the discursive horizons of his work, also focusing on the reception of foreign ideas and the quest for organic development, were quite close to the contributions to the debate on the role of the intelligentsia, which unfolded roughly at the same time. But instead of merely concentrating on the cultural frameworks mediated by the intellectuals, he chose to offer a more encompassing analytical framework, mapping the psychological, cultural and political dynamism of the entire society.

Panov's starting point was an assertion about the symbolic place of his country in the European concert of powers and cultures. Bulgaria is one of the European "small nations with relatively young cultures" marked by the lack of sophisticated high culture, doomed to take their social and intellectual forms from foreign nations. In his interpretation, this means that their internal coherence is rather precarious, and they are especially exposed to the dangers of decomposition. This danger was all the more actual as the Balkan Wars were followed by a profound crisis of orientation which could only be cured by reaching a more profound self-knowledge. Instead of merely concentrating on the role of the intelligentsia, Panov focuses on the "people," describing its psycho-social characteristics, and defining it against the upper classes.8

For Panov, the people (*narod*) denotes only the peasants and the artisans - the "sandalled people," as he refers to them – who provide "beautiful raw material for

Roumen Daskalov, "Transformatsii na bûlgarskata inteligentsia," in: *Mezhdu iztoka i zapada. Bûlgarski kulturni dilemi* (Sofia, 1998). pp. 226-288.

⁷ ibid., pp. 9-10.

⁸ ibid., p. 12.

the nation." By symbolically excluding the upper classes from Bulgarianness, he also implies that the culture of this "narod" should be the basis of the specific national culture. Obviously mirroring the feeling of abandonment after the traumatic wars, Panov opted for an ethno-genetic discourse built on the uniqueness of Bulgarians derived from their Hunnic origins, downplaying both the Slavic kinship and also trying to avoid a "Turkic" reference (which could have implicitly supported the Young Turks, who set to re-valorize the Turkic roots of the Ottoman Empire). This does not mean that he entirely repudiated the Slavic influence on Bulgarian ethnogenesis, and in later sections he kept referring to the Slavic cultural influences as well, but he definitely put the emphasis on the Hunnic element and considered the Byzantine-Greek and the Slavic impacts secondary.

Developing his argument about the ethno-genesis, he devised a veritable counter-characterology. Describing the Bulgarian character as diametrically opposed to the Slavic one, using the vocabulary of social self-criticism of evolutionary organicists, he located the seeds of destruction in the Slavic character. The Slavs are the most uncultivated peoples and are marked by an anarchistic spirit towards the sphere of statehood. This anarchism is "the hidden agenda" of the Slavophiles, who buttress the imperialism of Russia - an "unfortunate country" and the epitome of destruction, marked by "universal messianism" rather than civic virtue.¹⁰

Against this messianism, Bulgarians should be able to formulate a doctrine asserting the "universal" significance of the existence of their nation. The first step: they have to believe in their "Hunnic" messianism. While this messianism has an universal claim, it also has a regional aspect – the natural locus of the Bulgarian nation is the Balkan peninsula, and the "universal mission" of the Bulgarians coincides with their regional power-claim. In order to support his argument, Panov has to reformulate the symbolic geography of the peninsula in terms of fundamental unity. The sub-regions are not separable sharply, and, most importantly, they do not have any

⁹ ibid.; in Bulgarian "tsûrvuli" means a kind of peasant mocassin, "narod tsûrvulan" refers to the people of humble sort.

ibid., p. 97. This messianistic tinge of the new nationalist discourse was not at all uncommon in the broader European context. For instance, Hartmut Lehmann's study of the religious overtones of German nationalism at the turn of the century registered an upsurge of the fused eschatological-political modality in this period. See his "'God Our Old Ally': The Chosen People Theme in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Nationalism," in: William R. Hutchison and Hartmut Lehmann, eds., *Many Are Chosen: Divine Election and Western Nationalism*, (Harrisburg, PA, 1994). pp. 109-114.

Panov, *Psihologia na bûlgarskia narod*, p. 100.

political significance whatsoever. Throughout their history, they never formed separatist political units and all the traditional factors of collective character, which might potentially divide certain areas (like climatic determinants), are deemed secondary by the author.

As for modern Bulgarian culture, Panov considers the potentiality of creating an integrative canon through the lens of optimism. Bulgarian language is eminently "realistic," in many ways it is close to German, and it is conspicuously devoid of mutually incomprehensible dialects. This does not mean that the integrity of the national culture was retained, since, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, the emerging modern literature gradually alienated the lower classes. In general, he deplores the social and cultural transformation that followed the liberation. After 1878, the Bulgarian elite did not take into account that the nation had lived for five centuries in slavery. They wanted to make a "unimaginable historical jump" but, instead, they fell behind. This means that his narrative in great lines corresponds to the organicist discourse, but the cleavage between the ideal and the reality is represented as much more wide. Instead of the belief in an ultimately irreversible flow of development, which could create harmony at the end, he contrasts the vision of an idealized past with the image of a deplorable present.

It is not surprising that, for Panov, the overall task of the intellectual elite should be "the education of the national soul," defending it vigorously against foreign cultural influence, even at the price of "failing to adopt some civilisational achievements." The import of "forms which evolved after centuries of development there and are completely alien to the Bulgarian mind" is extremely pernicious to the spiritual balance of a "small culture." At the same time, this accentuation of the autochthonous elements of culture did not mean that he was entirely abandoning the position of the "organicist-evolutionist" discourse, since he did not repudiate the idea of cultural reception altogether, and was also describing the normative character of Bulgarian culture in terms of the positivist *episteme* rather than any kind of national ontology. In fact, he was playing off the alleged "positive-rationalist mind" of the Bulgarian peasant against the divagations of "metaphysical poetry." His main suggestions were also overlapping with the claims of the organicists. On the one hand, he asserts that it is impossible to produce at once all the

¹² ibid., p. 143.

¹³ ibid., pp. 149.

¹⁴ ibid.

classic and modern forms, which in more fortunate countries were created by long development. On the other hand, similar to all the other authors involved in the debate about the intelligentsia, he also advocated a cultural policy of mediation between the character traits of the "people" and the achievements of "Western" modernity.

At the same time, according to Panov, the Bulgarian soul also contains the seeds of regeneration. He contrasts Bulgarian collectivism to the Russian 'mir', which is built on the despotism of the majority over the minority, whereas the Bulgarian version is based on harmonic interaction. This means that the lack of social discipline is not an original trait, but was historically formed. Potentially, the Bulgarian character is far from being anarchistic, as it is rather marked by a combination of collective solidarity and "healthy individualism," close to that of the Anglo-Saxons. The aim of the reforms should be to keep this balance of individualism and collectivism, and not to destroy individuality altogether.

The underlying preoccupations of Anton Strashimirov, who wrote the other key work of narodnopsichologia in the 1910s, entitled Book for Bulgarians, were in many ways similar to those of Panov, even in the sense that the appearance of the book coincided with the catastrophic ending of Bulgaria's next military involvement, i.e. the First World War.¹⁷ The work was published for Christmas 1918, when the war, bringing yet another humiliation for Bulgaria, was already over, but the articles were part of Strashimirov's war publicistic and were not permeated by a feeling of total failure, but rather by that of a heroic fight. In contrast to Panov, he sought to devise a more encompassing characterology and did not identify the national character completely with that of the rural lower classes. At the same time, he called attention to other cleavages, which were less accentuated in Panov's text. The most important novelty of Strashimirov's narrative was the unprecedented stress on regional differences in devising a characterology, which was obviously in marked contradiction to the "unitarism" of Panov and all those who tackled the national character before him. The organizing themes of his book were obviously connected to the specific experiences of the World War. The first issue was the question of the "opinion of others" (allies and enemies alike) about the character of the Bulgarians,

¹⁵ ibid., pp. 178-182.

¹⁶ ibid., p. 216.

Anton Strashimirov, *Kniga za bûlgarite* (Sofia, 1918); see also his post-war columes, *Narod i poet* (Sofia, 1922), *Nashia narod* (Sofia, 1923).

obviously due to the intensification of direct contact with foreign armies, and the growing importance of transmitting a favorable image of the country abroad. The second question was that of the unity of the nation, which was put to a powerful test by the military and social pressures of the war years.

From the very first essay of the book, Strashimirov places the question of national specificity into the context of the observations of foreigners. He points out that the opinion of the others is far from being favorable. From an English perspective, the Bulgarians are devoid of "social patriotism," that is, their frameworks of solidarity are rather feeble. German observers, at the same time, pointed out the unbearably slow motion of the Bulgarian state mechanism in the special conditions of military involvement. But these are all ephemeral problems compared to the more profound issue of the lack of a unitary national character. Strashimirov also subscribed to the idea that such a national culture has not yet been formed. But his reading was somewhat different: according to him, Bulgarianness is manifested through the colorful variety of regional types and not in terms of a cleavage between the "elite" and the "people". Along these lines, the author distributes among the different subgroups those character-traits which were previously conferred on the Bulgarian type as a whole. 19

While he avoided extolling any given regional character as entirely positive in contrast to others depicted in a purely negative light, he nevertheless implied some kind of informal hierarchy. Thus, the *Shops*, living mostly in the surroundings of Sofia, are probably the most primitive "incarnations" of Bulgarianness, often described as dirty and marked by a propensity to alcoholism. Nevertheless, they fit some of the main lines that characterize the other Bulgarians, like pride and an entrepreneurial spirit. In contrast, Strashimirov has a better opinion of the *Moesians*, living in the north-eastern part of the country, who are described as the most cold-blooded of all Bulgarian branches, with a capacity of deliberation, which makes them the most democratic substrate of the nation. The *Thracians*, populating the southern parts of the country, are described as a less homogeneous community, as they were exposed to a powerful ethnic mingling under the Turkish dominance. They were the first to taste economic success, already before 1878, and emerged as the ideal-type of aggressive merchantry. In Strashimirov's opinion, *Bay Ganyo* is the representative of this type. In contrast, the *Macedonians* are marked by the lack of

¹⁸ ibid., p. 9.

¹⁹ ibid., p. 10.

axiological rationality, and have a propensity to lyric speculativity instead. They are the most sensual branch of the Bulgarian nation, and their folk art, especially songs, also signalize their aesthetic inkling. Finally, the *Rups*, living in the Southeast of the Bulgarian ethnic space, partially in territories around Edirne that remained under Turkish rule, are the veritable opposites of both Bay Ganyo and the Macedonians, as they are especially restrained and reliable, thus making ideal bureaucrats.

After having compiled a regional characterology, Strashimirov turns to the question of the possibility of devising a "unitary Bulgarian self" in the future. He evokes with sympathy those intellectual and political traditions that aimed at the creation of an organic national character. As most other organicists, he also contrasted the Renascence period, marked by "national romanticism," with the following decades, characterized by the inauthentic reception of foreign models and imitative semi-culturedness, or "bayganyoism." The most important "significant others" for Strashimirov are the Germans, whose level of social organization he especially admired and whose work-ethics he compared to the – yet unrealized – Bulgarian potential of hard-working. In order to activate this capacity, he deemed it important to devise a normative image, which would be able to dissolve the problems inherent in the actual national psyche, i.e. the lack of supra-regional and socio-economic cohesion.

In order to devise such an image, he considered it necessary to go back several centuries in history, identifying the deepest layer of the national character.²¹ The most crucial feature for Strashimirov is the pervasive democratic consciousness of the Bulgarians throughout their history. This, however, is not incompatible with strong authority. In their veneration for their leaders (referred to as 'zocnoðap'), one cannot find any morcel of feudal loyalty, as it is first and foremost the unconscious expression of the "national will."²² Furthermore, the ancient Bulgarians were devoid of any powerful sense of transcendence in their collective identity, lacking anything like a mystic nationalism. Following the previous interpreters, Strashimirov describes Bogumilism as a religious movement of universal significance, but also points out that, for the Bulgarian society, its impact was rather negative, as it weakened the sociability of the people and prepared the way for the Turkish occupation,

²⁰ ibid., pp. 55-56.

²¹ ibid., p. 56.

²² ibid., p. 62.

which ultimately resulted in their successful conversion to Islam.²³ The impact of the Ottomans also meant the permanent lack of the presence of the state in the life of Bulgarians, which led to stubbornness and extreme individualism – basic features of the "common people".

Similar to Panov's vision, Strashimirov's suggestions to regenerate the Bulgarian self and to create a unitary national character were implicitly challenging the organicist vision where the harmonization of internal and external temporalities depended mainly on the self-imposed restraint on inorganic reception. The task of the elite would be to "concentrate on the future of the country while incorporating the lessons of the past."24 In order to design a more conscious national spirit, Strashimirov was advocating a vigorous modernizatory policy, along the lines of the achievements of Germany. Far from linking the national tradition to rurality, he referred to his travel memories, and pointed out that there was a strong connection between urbanization and the force of collective memory. In Germany, the symbolic presence of the Rathaus in every city represents the power of the normative past in formatting the institutions and the civic consciousness of the burghers.²⁵ What is more, this pattern also means a splendid framework of compromise between collective spirit, urbanity, and individualism. In this sense, one can describe Strashimirov's project on the pages of the Book for the Bulgarians as a "selective Westernism": namely, following a particular Western model which offers a blueprint for the harmonic coexistence of authorhthonous and universal, collective and individual, past and future.

While the book has not yet referred to the ordeals following the collapse of the Bulgarian army, the task of creating a new synthesis was described by the author as especially pressing. This was mostly due to the contested territorial integrity of his country. Strashimirov concentrated on the problems of the state, and while he was asserting the incoherence of the Bulgarian national character, this argumentation also had another side, namely the claim that the Macedonians, whose territory was contested by Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria, were not less Bulgarian than any other "regional" type. Thus, in the wake of the catastrophe, the book finishes with a rather amusing episode intended to support the argument of this projected unity, while returning to the "foreign perspective" referred to in the beginning of the

²³ ibid., pp. 69-76.

²⁴ ibid., p. 123.

²⁵ ibid., p. 125.

book. Strashimirov evokes his conversation with the German humorist *Roda Roda*, to whom he had to explain that the Macedonians – among them Strashimirov himself – were self-conscious and highly prestigious components of the Bulgarian national movement and intelligentsia, and it is only the Serbian propaganda, capitalizing on some common misunderstandings of the Western public, that claims they might be potential "ingredients" of a South-Slav state-building under the aegis of Serbia.

After 1918, however, this jocular temper was more than dissonant as Bulgaria had to face an even more devastating social and political crisis than after the defeat in the Second Balkan War. In the literature reflecting this situation, the references to 'narodnopsihologia' remained crucial. Since they did not carry with themselves direct political reference, they could appear with a more general message in the actual political context. A good example of the expansion of this discourse is the work by Nikola Krûstinkov, entitled Essay on the psychological analysis of our social life.26 While the book's argumentation was closer to psychology proper than to the other characterological works of the period, many of Krûstinkov's assertions were akin to the literature of 'narodnopsihologia', and his perspective was in many respects overlapping with the character-discourse of the 1910s. Bulgarians in general are characterized by a cunning nature developed during the centuries of slavery, by a feeble development of social sentiments, and by the concomitant lack of a national consciousness, which they intend to camouflage with a patriotic demagogy.²⁷ Other characteristic features of the Bulgarians are self-love, anxiety, and careerism, which altogether can be described as various manifestations of "moral idiotism." 28 For Krûstinkov, this means the total lack of "social sense."

In order to evoke this feeling of "social sense," Krûstinkov deems it necessary to introduce examples in the Bulgarian textbooks taken from foreign literature, which express a higher level of morality than the Bulgarian literature. This suggestion signalizes the overall direction of Krûstinkov's essay, which was ultimately an attempt to fuse some elements of *narodnopsihologia* with a straightforward westernizing agenda. Although he was focusing on the critique of the intelligentsia, deploring the lack of social cohesion and blaming them for falling behind their task of mediation,

N. Krûstinkov, Opit za psihologicheski analiz na nashiat obshtestven zhivot (Sofia, 1922).

²⁷ ibid., pp. 25-33.

ibid., p. 33. The term "moral insanity" was developed by the German social philosopher and psychologist Max Nordau in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

he was trying to enforce an urban-cosmopolitan value-system and did not see any contradiction between the cultivation of universal values and the development of national consciousness.²⁹

At the same time, there were other voices of criticism, also using the vocabulary of *narodnopsihologia*, pointing out the social and political incoherence of the country, while concentrating mainly on the rural aspect of the national character. This does not mean, however, that the national characterology was necessarily used by all political camps. In fact, in the early twenties, while both the agrarians and the socialists sometimes resorted to its sweeping rhetorical characterizations concerning the features of this or that social group, they did not find a way to integrate the complexity of the discourse into their political propaganda, which was devised in terms of rigid class-barriers. Thus, along with the general anti-intellectualism of these ideologies, their perspective relegated the problem of the mediating role of the cultural elite, the focal point of the previous characterologies, completely to the margins of the public discourse.

After the collapse of the agrarian regime, however, the problem of "social semiosis," the transmission of the national canon to the lower social classes and the problem of authentic culture, once again came to the fore. It is not by chance that the most coherent restatement of an "agrarian" national characterology was formulated only after the fall of Stamboliyski. In fact, the new semi-authoritarian regime had an extremely ambiguous relationship to the rural population. They described the idealized Bulgarian peasant as a source of symbolic legitimacy, but also considered the actual peasants to harbor a dangerous potential for anarchistic destruction. This tension created a space for attempts to "negotiate" about the role of the rural substrate in the formation of the Bulgarian national character. This ambiguity can be observed clearly in the work by the historian and ethnographer Ivan Kepov on the relationship of the intelligentsia and the people. While his discourse can be taken to be representative of a certain intellectual momentum, Kepov, while not completely unknown, and later a renowned author of textbooks, was not really a central figure (a fact also attested by the curious self-advertisement he appended to

²⁹ ibid., p. 47-48.

I borrowed Sorin Alexandrescu's terminology, who conceptualized modern Romanian intellectual history in these terms in his book, *Paradoxul român* (Bucharest, 1998).

For this symbolic negotiation in the artistic sphere, see Irina Genova and Tatyana Dimitrova, *Art in Bulgaria during the 1920's. Modernism and National Idea.* (Sofia, 2002).

³² Ivan Kepov, *Inteligentsia i narod. Belezhki po kulturnata istoria na Bûlgaria* (Plovdiv, 1925).

his book, announcing that a series of analytic works written by him are waiting for an editing house...)

The author sought to establish a precarious balance between the cult of the peasantry as constituting the character of the nation, which implied a strain of antielitism, and the summary condemnation of the agrarian regime. This ambiguity might be explained by his complex intellectual and political setting, as he was coming from a rather left-wing background and was also involved in the Macedonian liberation movement, which, in turn, became one of the most important enemies of the agrarian regime in the early-twenties. His discourse centered on the village as the only normative locus of Bulgarianness. Compared to urban existence, Kepov describes it as a life-world marked by relatively more secure living-conditions and milder forms of social differentiation. His argument ultimately attempted to devise a political order built principally on this peasant class and serving its "real interests." It is exactly from this perspective that he criticized the agrarians, whom he described as the typical case of half-intellectuals (poluinteligentnost), who were not really rural and referred only demagogically to the village as their focus of attention. Concentrating on the peasantry and asserting that Bulgaria is a land of "90 percent peasants," he was ultimately trying to repudiate those political suggestions which sought to establish some form of dictatorship in the wake of the fall of the agrarians. Thus, national characterology in Kepov's hands turns into an instrument of defending some form of democratic government: "according to its soul, traditions, and interests, our village population is instinctively democratic."33 Consequently, Bulgarian democracy "should turn into rural democracy."

While politically Kepov's discourse was rather divergent from the previous trends in *narodnopsihologia*, the key discursive features are rather similar. He contrasts the personality of the peasant, characterized as being close to nature, autonomous, and marked by moral integrity, to the urban population, shaped by foreign influences. All in all, the author's main point of criticism was that the Bulgarian intelligentsia assumed the right to pass moral judgment on the people without being able to behave in an exemplary manner, producing an institutional network – journalism, literature, education - which was perpetuating corruption rather than working towards a prospective national regeneration. The solution is to revert to the peasant life-world for inspiration and to identify with the autarchic values of the yet-uncorrupted village. This, however, does not mean a program of exclusive national-

³³ ibid., p. 4.

ism, as national and universal are not incompatible. It only means that the intelligentsia should give up its propensity to identify with causes that are phrased in a cosmopolitan language. In fact, "fulfilling our duties to the nation means also fulfilling our duties to humankind." In cultivating the national spirit based on the village, Bulgarians might become a useful partner of other cultures. "Bulgaria, even though it is a small nation, can bring, as in the past also in the future, something to the treasury of universal culture."³⁴

In the wake of the fall of the agrarians, this solution of the dilemma of characterology became extremely popular, contributing to the formation of an "ex post facto" agrarian-populist discourse extolling the peasantry as the principal focus of national essence. The most important representative of this discourse was the writer Konstantin Petkanov, who returned repeatedly to the question of national character throughout the twenties and thirties. Petkanov also described the interaction of the peasantry and the intellectual elite as the principal question of the national culture. He also used the vocabulary of narodnopsihologia as a basis of his characterdiscourse. There is, however, an overall shift in his narrative compared to the characterologies of the previous decade. While the principal agents of his narrative were the same (i.e. the modern cultural and social structures breaking through the traditional life-world of the peasantry, causing a feeling of anomie and resulting in the collapse of social coherence), his tone was markedly darker and he did not cherish a belief in the ultimate harmony brought along by a more patient, organic and evolutionary development on the part of the political elite. Simultaneously, he also got close to abandoning the linear vision of cultural development as the direction of the unfolding "authentic national culture."

This does not mean that Petkanov's character-discourse was altogether pessimistic, but he definitely questioned the ability of the actual elite to implement a project of regeneration from above. Instead, he set out to re-valorize the image of the Bulgarian peasant, seeking to formulate a new normativity based exclusively on the rural substrate of the nation. Thus, in his essay on the *Characteristic traits of the Bulgarian*, he sought to devise a compelling image of the peasantry, subverting the common rhetoric of under-development.³⁵ According to Petkanov, the tag, "Bulgarian work," which was often used as a stigmatic auto-stereotype for unaccom-

³⁴ ibid., p. 56.

Konstantin Petkanov, "Harakterni cherti na bûlgarina," in: Ivan Elenkov and Roumen Daskalov, eds., *Zashto sme takiva? V tûrsene na bûlgarskata identichnost* (Sofia, 1994), pp. 401-411., first published in *Filosofski pregled* (1930).

plished activities, should be re-valorized in view of the successful survival of Bulgarians throughout their calamitous history.³⁶ It means that they must be more than mere caricatures of "Western" modernity, as their normative core is the village population, which remained untouched by corrupting external influences. Their life is most naturally linked with their native soil: the Bulgarian peasant is characterized, over every other social bond, by his thirst for the land. In the life of the rural population, work, more precisely agricultural work, is a central concept, and its importance reaches such proportions that one can even say that it turns into a cult. This cult is also intertwined with the anthropomorphic image of nature, and they both converge into a specific peasant fatalism, which should not be mixed with pure religious consciousness, even though it is marked by a strong transcendental element, but all in all the manifestation of this religiosity is rather superstition than some kind of mysticism.³⁷

Petkanov subscribes to the classical claim of *narodnopsihologia*, according to which Bulgarians cannot be described either as essentially good or bad, as their character-traits can be turned into good and bad directions as well. In this sense, Petkanov's ideas concerning the solution of the "Bulgarian riddle" flowed from the previous suggestions, but there is also a significant difference. The task remains the same: to activate the constructive potentials of the national character and to create a new cohesion through extending the circles of solidarity envisioned by the citizens. At the same time, this cannot be achieved merely with the curbing of the excesses of inorganic reception and relying on the wisdom of piecemeal evolution. The solution of the riddle requires a much more unprecedented creativity: a cultural offer that is able to stimulate progress and also makes it possible for the Bulgarians to "remain primitive", i.e. close to their "real essence."

This discourse was not free from controversial points. It is symptomatic that the editors of *Filosofski pregled*, where the article was published, appended a critical remark to the essay, asserting that Petkanov's characterization was only true for one part of the society, namely the peasantry, as the urban classes already lost those traits which Petkanov defined as constitutive to Bulgarianness.³⁸ This critique notwithstanding, Petkanov's essay came to be one of the central pieces of the inter-war form of "national characterology," evolving from *narodnopsihologia* but in many

³⁶ ibid., pp. 401-411

³⁷ ibid., pp. 402-403.

³⁸ Filosofski pregled, 1930/4., p. 367.

ways superseding it. As a matter of fact, especially in the early thirties, characterology became a real fashion and a symbolic battlefield of different (meta-)political conceptions. Apart from the general European influence, this upsurge can also be explained through the specific political context of the period.

In the late twenties, the semi-authoritarian regime of the Democratic Alliance became increasingly unpopular and was slowly but steadily decomposing. opened a space for the various political formations that were marginalized by the regime to formulate their cultural and political agendas. At the same time, the public sphere was rather limited and party politics had a strongly negative connotation in the public consciousness. As a result, the intellectuals, who preferred to define themselves as free from daily political fights, tended to assume a more encompassing stance of cultural criticism to express their opinion. Throughout the inter-war period, one can observe the translation of the political dilemma concerning the ideal form of government into the characterological language, focusing on the question of the ideal match of political structure and the Bulgarian national specificity. This discursive situation, in essence, remained unaltered also during the short interval of the parliamentary regime (1931-34) that was marked, after a momentum of enthusiasm, by an ever increasing distrust of party-politics, and it was naturally fitting for the post-1934 autocratic period as well, which once again restrained the actual political involvement of the public sphere.

Therefore, the period was marked by an intensification of the characterological debates, and these years produced an impressive number of divergent intellectual offers, coexisting in the same discursive field. It is almost impossible to give a full picture of the application of the discourse in different political and cultural projects, but one might try to map some typical usages and typical trends. Usually, the various attempts aimed at the symbolic compromise of the different methodological, cultural and genealogical narratives that coexisted in the public sphere.

One possible direction was to try to rephrase the characterology so that it supported an etatist discourse. As a matter of fact, in the early thirties, in the absence of a developed discourse of the role of state in a mass society, this attempt was rather self-defeating. Petko Rosen, for example, in his essay from 1931 on the "Bulgarian national traits," sought to bring together the historical and psychological narratives that were evolving in the 1920s to a certain extent in parallel with each other, producing a rather pessimistic picture.³⁹ His image of the national revival was less fa-

³⁹ Petko Rosen, "Bûlgarski natsionalni cherti," *Filosofski pregled*, 1931/I, pp. 70-75.

vorable than that of the previous generation. He did not apply the usual distinction between pre-1878 patriotism and post-1878 corruption, but described the entire period as fatally permeated by the spirit of atheism and nihilism, imported mainly from Russia, thus prejudicing the very process of national awakening and making it impossible to create a strong state. Due to these imported ideologies, "the flower of our emerging intelligentsia" became "godless and ill-disposed towards the state." The traumas of the Balkan Wars and the First World War just accomplished the process of decomposition, which started at the very beginning of the nation-building project, finally resulting in the "total collapse" of Bulgarian statehood. Repudiating the political institutions, he did not find consolation in the rural class either. When turning to the program of reshaping the national self, Rosen goes emphatically against the central assumption of the mainstream discourses of characterology that the only source of collective regeneration is the peasantry. According to his opinion, "the village is in such a religious, moral, and social crisis and total disarray" that it is impossible to build a new state tradition on it.⁴¹

While the discursive turn towards etatism was yet premature in 1931, when the parliamentary regime was revived for a short time, there were also other transformations going on in the value-orientation of the Bulgarian intelligentsia that were promptly mirrored by the debates on national character. One has to place the new turn in the debate concerning the interpretation of the "national icon," Bay Ganyo, into this context as well. The underlying shift of perception was first expressed by Boyan Penev, who, in his articles in the early twenties, attempted to rid Aleko Konstantinov's creature of the aura of normativity that it gradually obtained as a preferred auto-stereotype. Penev pointed out that the behavior of Bay Ganyo, as described by Aleko, was characteristic for every uncultivated nation undergoing a transition process of Europeanisation, so it cannot be taken as the ideal-type of Bulgarianness. Furthermore, he asserted that the author compressed into this figure a multitude of psychologically incompatible types, which cannot be unified as one personality, but rather form a catalogue of attitudes and character-traits typical for the Bulgarian society of his time.

In the early-thirties, the debate around Bay Ganyo got a new impetus after the appearance of the article by Gerhard Gesemann on the "problematic Bulgarian,"

⁴⁰ ibid., p. 74.

⁴¹ ibid., p. 75.

written, in its turn, as a reaction to Petkanov's characterological article.⁴² The participants in the debate were answering to Gesemann, but, in a deeper sense, they were following Penev's thematization. As a matter of fact, the two focal points of Gesemann's article themselves followed Penev's argument. First, he raised the issue of the psychological coherence of the type, and also repudiated the claim that the caricature expresses the hidden essence of the Bulgarian nation. Instead, he pointed out that the socio-economic context of "bayganyoism" could be located in a scheme of historical development. In the debate around Gesemann's article, the most powerful voice was that of Petkanov himself. By confronting the organicistevolutionary narrative of the previous generation, now expressed by a foreign author, he found a splendid occasion to express his opinion in an unusually sharp way. As a matter of fact, the novelty of the debate was not Gesemann's argumentation, who in many ways reiterated the local topoi, but Petkanov's answer, which was probably the most powerful step towards a break with the hitherto dominant discursive tradition and the development of a new agrarian populist-autochthonist narrative.

While previously, Bay Ganyo's propensity to deceive the Westerners was considered to be a reason to be ashamed, now it could be redescribed as a source of pride, reflecting the Bulgarian ability to survive even in highly unfavorable conditions.⁴³ This revalorization is only one step in Petkanov's overall attempt to turn "negativity" into "positivity", i.e. to redefine the Bulgarian character's deficit of Europeanization as a promise of regeneration. He agreed that Bulgaria was undergoing a period of transition, but contrary to the evolutionary-organicist paradigm, which defined this transition as a shift from uncultivatedness to creating a Western type of high culture, which showed its maturity exactly by emancipating itself from the tutelage of others, Petkanov defined this transition as a much more fundamental transformation.

In his opinion, the sign of this "liminal" phase is the disorientation of the society, expressed by the "ardor of the contemporary Bulgarian to be liberated from what is

Gerhard Gesemann, "Der problematische Bulgare," Slavische Rundschau 3 (1931), pp. 404-409. The most interesting reactions can be found in Filosofski pregled, 1931/4, pp. 349-363. For a recent interpretation of this debate, see Alexander Kiossev, "The Debate about the Problematic Bulgarian: A View on the Pluralism of the National Ideologies in Bulgaria in the Interwar Period," in: Katherine Verdery and Ivo Banac, eds., National Character and National Ideology in Interwar Eastern Europe (New Haven, 1995), pp. 195-217.

⁴³ *Filosofski pregled*, 1931/4, p. 355.

primary in him." The only possible resolution of the dilemma is the creation of a "new type of Bulgarian."⁴⁴ This new type will be the result of a compromise between primary existence and modernity. From this perspective, Bay Ganyo could be read as a liberating self-critique, exposing the inorganic reception of Western manners but also praising the survival potentials and primordial vitality of the Bulgarians. With this narrative, Petkanov made an important move towards the total reevaluation of Bulgaria's symbolic geographical locus. Along these lines, a new nationalist discourse could emerge, which, contrary to the previous versions, located the national essence in the non-European element of the "Bulgarian self."

While this conception concentrated on the peasantry as the focus of national character, the discursive shift in the early thirties did not imply a total thematic break. The crucial discussions, like that around the role of the intelligentsia, continued. In fact, the entire debate around the national character always oscillated between two poles of normativity: the subconscious bearer of the canon (i.e. the peasantry) and "the select few", who represented the active substance, extracting and projecting back the national essence on the community. While the scheme was unchanged, the contents of the discourses underwent substantial changes. Petkanov, for example, also described the interaction of the "people" and the intelligentsia, but while the previous generation blamed the intellectuals mainly for failing to fulfill their task of projecting the authentic matrix of the national essence back on the people, he depicted a much higher level of alienation between the two groups, culminating in mutual aggression and a veritable *Kulturkampf*.⁴⁵

In Petkanov's opinion, the dynamism of modernization, as it is imposed by the elite, is fundamentally self-destructive, subverting the national soul's bonds with its own past. The outcome is permanent factionalism and the facelessness of the community, which is attested by the spectacular collapses of the political framework in crisis situations, since it is utterly incapable of producing natural leaders to save the country from the impending catastrophe. The solution would be to return somehow "to the village" for inspiration, and activate the potentiality of the peasantry in formatting a new national character. Along these lines, Petkanov sought to break with the discourse of the evolutionary-organicists, who blamed the cracks of social and cultural cohesion on the immaturity of the nation and the belatedness of its

⁴⁴ ibid., p. 356.

Konstantin Petkanov, "Bûlgarskata inteligentsia kato pozhba i otritsanie na nasheto selo," (1932) in: Elenkov and Daskalov, *Zashto sme takiva?* pp. 412-420.

modernizatory efforts. "It is not rue that the Bulgarian nation is young" – it is "as old as the earth or wisdom." ⁴⁶

Petkanov's trajectory exemplifies one of the most important directions of the character-discourse of the thirties, shifting from conservative reformism to a "populist eschatology," extolling the peasantry as the focus of national salvation, provided that a new "missionary" elite, chosen to disseminate the new national ideology, succeeds in overcoming the forces of darkness in the soul of the urban classes. This vision was compelling, but was far from being the only available scenario. In fact, Petkanov's stance had rather powerful inherent limitations. Most importantly, its consciously "meta-political" discourse, which made it possible for him to turn to rather divergent audiences, also meant that he kept a considerable distance from the more tangible political agendas. As a result, his characterological narrative had an ambiguous fate: while his *topoi* became common currency in the thirties, they were successfully de-contextualized and came to lead a life entirely independent of their author.

Concerning the mid-thirties, we can speak of the general "inflation" of the characterological discourse. As a matter of fact, this vocabulary became the core of different political, meta-political, quasi-political, and anti-political inquiries. One of the highest points of this discourse was in the early thirties, which was followed by a temporary ebb, in many ways coinciding with the introduction of non-parliamentary government, until it came back to the fore in the late thirties. The genre did not remain unaffected by the transformation of the ideological context: in the limited public sphere peculiar to an authoritarian regime, the character-discourse lost its previous vividness derived from its polemic function rooted in the intention of having a direct impact on the political life of the country. In the late thirties, the references to the "Bulgarian character" became more routinized and often performed merely legitimizing discursive functions, deriving the new regime's features from the putative national essence.

Some elements of this discourse were incorporated into the more encompassing philosophical attempts at creating a "new identity" for the nation.⁴⁷ In the 1920s,

Konstantin Petkanov, "Buntarski nastroenia u bûlgarina," in: Filosofski pregled, 1938/1, pp. 52-61.

The best study on the Bulgarian "metaphysical" nationalist discourses is Ivan Elenkov, *Rodno i dyasno* (Sofia, 1998). See also Nina Dimitrova, "Opiti za natsionalnokulturna samoidentifikatsia na bûlgarina. Istorikofilosofski pogled," in: •nna Krûsteva et al., *Universalno i natsionalno v bûlgarskata kultura* (Sofia, 1996), ••. 48-91.; and Roumen Dasklov, "Populists and

Bulgaria was hit by the general crisis of evolutionary historical consciousness in a similar way as other Central and Southeast-European countries. This crisis was due to the traumatic events at the end of the war and the ensuing whirlwind of violent social and political changes, which undermined any kind of unwarranted belief in the beneficial and cumulative effects of historical evolution. Various new ideological trends based on "cultural morphology" reached Bulgaria, relativizing the linearity of historical time and stressing the incommensurability of civilizational circles. This also overlapped with the emergence of new generational ideologies that further problematized the normative continuity of their tradition, asserting the fragmentation of the past and the need to reconstruct it under the aegis of a new creative synthesis.⁴⁸

At the same time, the positions of this new "meta-historical" discourse were rather constrained. In the twenties and thirties, alongside the growing sensibility to the problematic nature of the normative past,⁴⁹ the agents of "official" nationalism were busy establishing a historical canon to buttress their efforts at nation-building. As a matter of fact, as befitted a culture with a rather belated institutionalization of "national sciences," the Bulgarian historical canon, built mostly on positivist grounds, was largely created in the inter-war period. It is due also to this fact that most of the attempts at undermining this framework of historical narrativity and the corresponding national characterology remained rather idiosyncratic.⁵⁰ On the whole, although the discursive potential was there, even those who sought to subvert the official narrative were trying to reach a compromise between the (symbolic) geographical and temporal aspects of defining Bulgarianness.⁵¹ While it problema-

Westerners in Bulgarian Hisotry and Present," in: Central European History Department Yearbook (Budapest, 2002), pp. 113-142.

One of the protagonists of this new *Kulturphilosophie*, fused with a generational disocurse, was Konstantin Galabov. See his *Zhivot, istina, tvorchestvo. Literaturni opiti* (Sofia, 1926), and *Zovût na rodinata* (Sofia, 1930).

The best document of the "negotiation" between official nationalism and the "metaphysical" crisis-discourse, is Spiridon Kazandzhiev, *Pred izvora na zhivota* (Sofia, 1943).

For the most important conceptions, see Nayden Sheytanov, *Velikobûlgarski svetogled* (Sofia, 1940). Janko Janev, "Filosofia na rodinata," *Zlatorog*, 1934/6, pp. 263-266. Janev also wrote a series of texts in German, fusing the Bulgarian identity-discourse with the official national-socialist narrative of the "New Europe." See, e.g., his *Der Mythos auf dem Balkan* (Berlin: 1936), and *Aufstand gegen Europa* (Berlin, 1937).

A good example of this attempt of "compromise" is Athanas Iliev, *Natsionalno vûzpitanie* (Sofia, 1944).

tized the conception of normative continuity, the mainstream discourse, seeking to "define the national self," never turned to the "ontologized" categories of atemporal symbolic geography.⁵²

The other direction of development of the *narodnopsihologia*-discourse was towards "compartmentalization", which came to border on the very dissolution of the genre, as the authors produced an extremely wide range of studies on the character of different social classes and types. Thus, apart from the more normative discourses about the character of the peasants or of the intelligentsia, one could read about the character of hooligans, prostitutes, bureaucrats, and even about that of bachelors and spinsters. This proliferation did not mean, however, that the characterological discourse lost its innovative potential. Building on the previous traditions, but also reshaping them to a considerable extent, various narratives, ranging from "official" nationalism to fundamentalist autochthonism and radical leftism,⁵³ sought to expropriate it in order to legitimize their position with a reference to the "national essence." But these (meta-) political discourses usually broke through the framework of conventional *narodnopsihologia*, abandoning social-psychological vocabulary and bringing in other disciplines (history, philosophy, sociology) as the normative framework for defining the national character.

At the same time, the previous narrative also survived on the margins of the public sphere. The swan-song of the genre was the book by the former leader of the Radical Party, Stoyan Kosturkov, written partly in the early-forties, but published only in 1949.⁵⁴ The study reiterated the main tenets of the tradition of national psychology, but, due to the recent series of historical ordeals, it lost its political illocutionary force and remained a rigid catalogue of general observations on the national psyche. The fate of the book showed that this discourse befitted the condi-

He most representative author for this "official" narrative, instrumentalizing history for constructing a new identity, is Boris Jotzov, who also served as a minister of culture in the early 1940s. See his "Naroden buditel," in: *Otets Paissy*, 1930/19-20, pp. 287-295.; "Bûlgarskata istoria, neinata razrabotka do osvobozhdenieto i znachenieto y za probudata na bûlgarskia narod," *Otets Paissy*, 1933/8-9, pp. 6-11. The most coherent attempt of creating a historical-characterological narrative was by Petûr Mutafchiev, *Kniga za bûlgarite*, which remained however unfinished due to the death of the author. It was edited by V. Gyuzelev (Sofia, 1987).

The most important attempt to reshape the Bulgarian national character along a left-wing political agenda is due to Ivan Hadzhiyski. See his *Bit i dushevnost na nashia narod, I-II.* (Sofia, 1940, 1945) and the collection *Optimistichna teoria za nashia narod* (Sofia, 1966).

⁵⁴ Stoyan Kosturkov, Vûrhu psihologiata na bûlgarina (Sofia, 1949).

tions of a limited public sphere, where political messages could be successfully couched in sweeping references to the national peculiarities, but it became almost completely meaningless in conditions marked by a pseudo-public sphere. The careful references to the previous inquiries on the Bulgarian self, – obviously written before 1945 and mostly mirroring the atmosphere of the mid-1930s, – came to border on absurdity when the figure of *Georgi Dimitrov* appeared, out of the blue, on the list of exemplary heroes.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Kosturkov, ibid., p. 158.