

## Symbols and Images of “Evil” in Student Protests in Sofia, 1997

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### Abstract

*This article analyzes Bulgarian student protests in 1990 and 1997 in their political, sociological, and cultural dimensions. Beginning with an overview of the Bulgarian political situation in the 1990s, the article goes on to consider student protests as cultural expressions of a semi-closed community. The focus is primarily on the cultural and ideological aspects of the protests, and seeks to illustrate the peculiar forms of cultural synthesis that such protests represent.*

*Political protests are more than interesting forms of contemporary culture, showing how new communities are created, how they express themselves in cultural forms, and what their real impact on the social reality might be. Bearing in mind the fact that these are syncretic forms, I present them in their social, ideological, political, and cultural dimensions. Furthermore, having participated in the protests, I present them from the viewpoint of the "insider."*

*The crisis marched in front, dressed in a gown reaching down to the ground, its hair loose, and side by side with it, stepping like a cat, in a light dance-like manner there moved the spectre of communism.<sup>1</sup>*

## Setting the Stage: Political Protests and Political Situation in Bulgaria in 1990 and 1997

Communism in Bulgaria collapsed in 1989. However, the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP), aspiring to stay in power, made some cosmetic changes to try and secure its political position. As part of these changes, the BCP changed its name and became the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), thereby asserting that they no longer were communists. They argued that the communist period of the party had lasted a very short 45 years, and had ended, while the whole history of the Socialist Party had lasted for more than 100 years. Renaming the party was an important move in an attempt to seek legitimacy within the new political context and, if possible, to retain power. Along with the new name, the leaders of the BSP also tried to make some changes in the party's ideological and economic platforms, but because of mass political protests organized against them, these could not be realized.

In 1990, because of these protests, a coalition of opposition parties called the UDF (Union of Democratic Forces) temporarily gained political control. Due to a deepening economic crisis, however, the BSP was able to regain control shortly thereafter, maintaining it until 1996. In the fall of 1996 the economic situation in the country became critical. Inflation increased by the hour, and there was a shortage of basic goods. The bank system collapsed in November as a result of the many unsecured credits that had been extended over the previous years,

and at the same time the political crisis deepened. On December 21, 1996, the socialist government of Jan Videnov resigned, and on January 8, 1997, Nikolay Dobrev, the next socialist leader, was authorized by President Petar Stoyanov to form a government. New political protests sparked by President Stoyanov's unwelcome and unpopular authorization began in early January 1997, but they were transformed into a massive national strike after January 10, when the Bulgarian Parliament building was attacked. These protests lasted for 30 days, and the BSP was forced to hand over the government. On February 4, 1997, Dobrev returned the authorization of the socialist party to President Stoyanov, and new elections were scheduled ahead of term. Since then, the Bulgarian government has been formed by representatives of the UDF.

In short, the 1990 and 1997 protests were successful in terms of achieving their political goal of removing the former communists (now socialists) from the Bulgarian government. Students were key to the success of both protests. As a result, students now believe in themselves and know, for future purposes, that they can have a real impact on political decisions.

I was a participant in both protest movements as protester and observer. As a result, my account is naturally influenced by my own positionality. The members of the BSP presumably would describe the same events in another way. For me, these protests were not only an object of analysis, they were also part of an important time full of high hopes, emotional and intellectual experiences,

and real actions and communications.

I will not, however, speak about myself in this paper, but rather about my students, their colleagues, and friends. My position will nevertheless be an implicit part of the text, presented in the descriptions and in the interpretations of the events in question.

This paper, then, addresses the 1997 student protests—which took the forms of ritualized and theatricalized processions, and mock funerals, all to some extent influenced by Bulgarian folklore—in light of the theoretical construct of a semi-closed community rallying around one cause. The protests will also be juxtaposed with mock funerals from 1990 and 1997, theatricalized expressions of the same protest causes.

### **Setting the Stage Theoretically: Student Protests and the Cultural Expressions of a Semi-Closed Community**

We have to reveal the genuine image of evil, so that people can see it and banish it forever from our lands for good. Its manifestations may pass unnoticed by the mind, but not by the eyes, or by the heart. I don't want anyone to tell me later that I was deluded, for . . . here! That's it!

These are words of a student from St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia. While speaking with me, he painted the portrait of an old and ugly witch finishing her snack with blood dripping from her hands. Above her head there was a red-lettered halo-like inscription: BSP. The text on the backside of the poster read: "It is time for the one aged 100 to retire! Off you go to the woods!"

Responding to my question of why the image of the BSP had to be visualized in such a way, the same student said, "In this way our protest is more powerful and has greater impact. Otherwise people cannot feel it deeply enough." Then he added,

We should not be aggressive, but we should not be afraid of the truth, either. When you depict evil in this way, it is no longer scary. It is also, how shall I put it, a little funny, and you can believe that you are stronger and you can defeat it. Isn't this better than talk, talk, talk, and getting lost in the mountain of words until you forget what you are talking about. This spoils the magic, you get tired and you are ready to give it all up, isn't it so?

The metaphorical use of the concept of magic by this student should not prevent a folklorist from seeing that the overall statement is an expression of the need to exert a synthetic impact by means of words, sounds, and plastic movements. The mechanism of conveying the message by simultaneously employing such means as voice, body, or molded objects, familiar to folklorists working with older forms of folk culture, is set in operation whenever there is a need, and when the requisite socio-cultural environment is in place.

I have elsewhere (1991) defined a semi-closed community as one which closes up around a certain idea and whose members feel the need for artistic self-expression within that community. If a closed community can be defined as a small and limited one with a strong net

of social relations into which the individual is well integrated (Bogdanov 1989), and if an open community can be defined as a large one with mostly written means of communication, then a semi-closed community such as a political protest movement is something in between. It emerges from the social environment of the open community and it is closed only around a specific cause for a particular moment. People who want to identify themselves with such a semi-closed community come from different walks of life. They have different social, educational, and professional backgrounds, but they belong to that community because they share a common idea that unites them.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in the semi-closed community of the protesters, we can expect verbal, musical, or ritual expressions of only one political idea.

Within this semi-closed community, students expressed their identity not only as being against the political establishment, but also underscored the prestigious status of their university community. They shared a common political idea, but they considered themselves to belong to the intellectual elite, a very prestigious and authoritative community in Bulgarian society. Intellectuals are considered and consider themselves to provide mental and behavioral models to be followed. To give an example: in the last few years, people who accrued wealth without an education were ridiculed in many jokes. These jokes implied that such people were rich because they were dishonest, and that they would always remain stupid. It should therefore be clear why it was so important for the

students to identify themselves as part of the intellectual elite. Being identified with the intellectual elite was one more reason for the closeness of the students' community—"we, students" and "they, the other people." One of my students said:

We are educated, intelligent people and we understand very well what is going on. Communists can delude the ordinary people, as they always have done, but not us. Communists can try to hide themselves behind new names or new words, but we know their real names and their real faces. People have to see the truth before it is not too late. We want to demonstrate this truth, we will do this every day, and we hope that the people will support us and throw away this political garbage. It is high time for that!

Two types of leaders could be found among the protesting students: those engaged with organizing, and those engaged with the different performance activities. Organizers coordinated participants spatially and temporally. The main performers not only performed, but also gave creative directions about the performance and costumes to the performing student protesters. The performance leaders set a general example to be followed. All the rest was a question of improvisation by the participants. Political issues, because they were taken for granted as the main topic, were not *overtly* brought up by the student performance. Their aim in conversation was only to show what they already knew. For the sake of illustrating, here is an excerpt of such a discussion between a

leader and a performance participant:

"And what about tomorrow?"  
"Why not something with black and white"  
"Why black and white?"  
"Death and Life."  
"You will be Death" [laughter!]  
"And you will be my victim."  
"Why me? I am not a communist."  
"No, if I am Death, I will be the communist. And you will be the fool—the victim . . ."  
"Please, stop with this! This is not a bad idea. Black clothes and white faces. And the funeral march."  
"No, silence will be more effective. . . ."

Folklore, too, can be found in such a semi-closed community where social interactions provide a specific impetus for doing, narrating, playing. Naturally, I should emphasize that in this case I am not talking about a formal comparison between traditional village folklore and contemporary urban culture, nor am I speaking about "survivals." Rather, I am concerned with the reproduction of certain traditional cultural patterns in present-day social and cultural reality. These are the very types of situations that give rise to phenomena in which we can identify various forms of intertwining, coexistence, and mutual influence between elements of traditional and contemporary culture.

In what follows, I will discuss further the ways in which participants in the protests used some elements of rituals—well known symbols of human gestures, words, songs, material signs—and how they wove them into new syncretic forms of protest performance.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Idea of Being “Against”: The Image of Evil as a Social Integrating Factor**

At first glance it seemed a bit odd that the demand for “good” in the protest, e.g., an end to communism, was expressed mostly through negation, the negation of what was no longer wanted. This created the impression that some balance had been upset.

There are different types of protests, but in the majority of them the protesters know the concrete “good” that they want to achieve: free elections, higher salaries, environmental protection, or other equally important causes. In the case of the student protests, what could be seen and heard in streets and squares was merely different names and images of evil—an “evil” that had to be chased out. “Good” seemed to imply only absence of evil, and there was no need for it to be portrayed, performed, and named, and therefore it was not represented anywhere in the protest. If someone asked protesters “What will happen if you succeed with the protest?” they would answer immediately: “What? Of course, freedom, democracy, a good standard of living, everything will be better . . .”

At times, one was left with the impression that the protesting students were participants in a magic ritual for driving away evil spirits and dark forces rather than people involved in a rally with definite political demands for a concrete “good.” This did not alter the essence of the political demands, which were sufficiently clear, specific, and definite, but the diverse means of express-

ing dissent also created an additional semantic field, where social, political, and artistic meanings of doing and talking were intertwined.

It is probably natural that a protest arguing “against” something should articulate and demonstrate in a multitude of ways what was being protested against, what had driven people out into the streets in the first place and united them in a polyphonic utterance of “no.” The idea of “being against” was the very idea that was needed to serve as a focal point for the creation and unification of the community of protesters, as well as for its self-perception as a single entity. It served as a vehicle for the protesters’ separation from other communities. As a unifying conceptual center, the idea of being against had to be diversified through a multitude of semantic variants, and reiterated by various means, so that the newly created quasi-closed community could undergo secondary consolidation.

The declared political stance and awareness that social actions were needed—the latter best expressed by the slogan: “Who, if not me? When, if not now?”—were reflected in rather interesting ways when evil was discussed or when a certain aspect of its image was shown. The students protested and depicted evil by using verbal, musical, and plastic signs. They wove the idea that united them—the idea of being “against”—into alternatively more static or more dynamic forms. They talked, sang, danced, drew and painted, performed symbolic actions with various objects, and in diverse ways created an overall picture of evil: a picture, where

every element was but a detail, a piece of the whole, providing yet another opportunity to see what it looked like and where it was.

“Evil” was understood and interpreted within quite a broad semantic range. There had been a quest for varied means of presenting its multiform manifestations. There were different ways in which these manifestations passed from the abstract figure of the woeful and feeble “Crisis” or the undying “Specter of Communism,” still haunting the “Back Yard of Europe,” through the extremely rich and colorful images of the “Bulgarian Socialist Party,” to the interplay of cartoons featuring specific political figures. The students were playing both on the overall harsh economic, political, and spiritual situation in the country and on single events that had become emblematic of bad governance, immorality, or simply the stupidity of individual politicians.

The various expressions, manifestations—in the form of ritualized and theatricalized performances, and mock funerals—made up a unified performance of heterogeneous improvised elements depicting evil.

### **Ritualized Forms of Protest: Expressions of a Semi-Closed Community Rallying Around the Concept of Evil**

The demarcation of cultural territory, the shared community experience surrounding the events at hand, the rhythmic reproduction of certain symbolic actions, and the repetition of the key message at different semantic levels not only ex-

pressed the will of the protesters, but simultaneously converted what was a desired future into the actual present. The fact that the desired future was mainly associated with a description of the undesired past did not change the fundamental meaning of the ritualized actions. Chasing away evil was transferred from a social situation to a ritualistic one, in order to guarantee the planned social effect through a ritualistic vehicle. Hence the protest action of the university students should be considered from the perspective of the mode of their ritualization and of seeking a specific social result given the overall interconnection of the ritual components.

In this case we are not concerned with plain cultural continuity but rather with the replication of efficient cultural models in line with the requirements of the cultural situation that has ensued. The ritualization of the protest was needed for recreating the feeling of its significance and empathy with more general human values. By means of the ritual, *the occurrence* of the desired event was realized.

The student protests lasted for 30 days. Until January 10, these mostly took the form of processions around the BSP headquarters at 20 Pozitano Street, and rallies organized by the UDF in the square in front of St. Alexander Nevski Cathedral. The first organized procession around the National Assembly took place on the morning of January 10. It started from St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia and circulated around the building of the National Assembly in silence. In the evening of that same day

dramatic events took place in the Bulgarian Parliament. People gathered in front of the Parliament in silent protest, but the police came and some of the protesters suffered violence at the hands of policemen. An attempt was made to burn the Parliament, while frightened representatives hid out inside (to this day, no one knows who was responsible). The next day students from different higher education establishments gathered in the building of St. Kliment Ohridski University, and commenced the organized protest processions, conducted on a daily basis until the key political demands were ultimately fulfilled.

The procession started from St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia, passing along V. Levski Boulevard to reach the monument of Patriarch Evtimiy, referred to simply as "The Priest" (*popa*) by citizens of Sofia. At that point the procession was joined by students coming from the students' village in the neighborhood of Darvenitsa or from the Higher Institute of Architecture and Civil Engineering (HIACE) to continue along Patriarch Evtimiy Street, then turning at Vitosha Street to Sveta Nedelya Square. The march then proceeded along the Liberator King (Tsar Osvoboditel) Boulevard. Taking successive turns at Rakovski Street and Moskovska Street, the procession ended up at St. Alexander Nevski Square, where it merged with the afternoon rally of the UDF just about to begin.

There was yet another route setting off from St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia. It proceeded along the Liberator King Boulevard up to Eagles' Bridge (Orlov Most). Next the march followed

the canal up to the building of the Small City Theater of the Canal, taking a turn at Yanko Sakazov Street (formerly Vladimir Zaimov Boulevard) to reach the monument of Vasil Levski. Next it passed by the State Musical Theater turning at Dondoukov Boulevard. The last stage was along Rakovski Street. Once again the final destination was St. Alexander Nevski Square.

There were also some single processions, such as the BSP burial, which pursued different routes. The marches lasted from 1 or 2 p.m. until 5 p.m., when all the processions ended up at St. Alexander Nevski Square and flowed into the UDF rally. The participants in these processions were mostly university students from Sofia, but at times they were joined by other people.

One naturally draws an analogy with the mechanism of semantic and axiological segmentation of space known from traditional folklore rituals and the principles of assuming command of and consolidating one's "own" cultural territory. The reproduction of this old cultural mechanism in today's cultural context is a result of the communal need for position in social space and a manifestation of the desire of the community to demonstrate its importance within a socially heterogeneous society (Ivanova 1993).

The University of Sofia and St. Alexander Nevski Square constitute both the starting and finishing points of the procession. This is important because the University of Sofia is the biggest and most prestigious university in the country, and because St. Alexander Nevski Square has been a well-established cen-

ter of political opposition ever since 1990. The combination of these two spaces is key, as the protests were particular both for the student and for the UDF communities.

It is significant that the places chosen for the protest activities were alternately positively and negatively signified. The University of Sofia and St. Alexander Nevski Square were markedly positive spaces, while the former mausoleum of Bulgaria's first communist leader G. Dimitrov and the new official building of the BSP on Pozitano Street had negative connotations. The University of Sofia, as the biggest and most prestigious university in Bulgaria, became a symbol of the student community and a center of the students' activities during the protests. Conversely, St. Alexander Nevski Square is home to the biggest orthodox temple in Sofia, and was chosen by the opposition as a center for political activities in 1990 as a symbol of their rejection of the communists' atheism.

The route between the two positively designated spatial points delineated a larger center, for the route not only marked the central city area but also crossed locations that already had specific meanings for the city of Sofia. In other words, we no longer moved from the periphery to the center as in the protests of 1990 (Ivanova 1993, 41-43), but rather delineated our own space starting from the center and going in an outward direction, finally to circulate back to the center. Our home was in the center and we gradually expanded the diameter of the "tame" space around us. We had our own center and we gradually chased away the evil surrounding it

until we cleared an ever-larger territory around us. How? By identifying one of the faces of evil, by revealing it in symbolic images and actions and by reiterating a chant whose essential meaning was "Get Out!"

Each procession visualized evil in its own unique way. Evil was symbolically expressed by words or by silence, as well as by definite actions and objects. Images of evil were taken from Bulgarian folklore and literature, ancient history or contemporary political events. All of these images were chosen because of their popular currency, and because of the ease with which their symbolism could be connected to the topic at hand, connections that could be made by everybody. "We want our message to be transparent, to be . . . for anyone who wants to understand it. But we want to put it in an expressive and impressive form, . . . let people feel the future if they do not want to understand the present!"

The first few processions were more disorderly and their principal idea was not initially sufficiently clear. The students toured the city whistling and hooting with drum accompaniment. Among others, the figures of "Death," "Bouratino" (an allusion to the politician Zhorzh Ganchev)<sup>4</sup> and "Ruined Bulgaria," "the Crisis," "the Specter of Communism," and "the Exhausted Red Warrior" put in an appearance. Later marches displayed a more comprehensive idea and more extended forms of its presentation gradually took shape. The examples that follow illuminate the shape and form that the protest took, and should underscore how a semi-closed community of university students ef-

fect change by rallying around a unifying theme: “evil” and getting rid of that “evil.”

A procession depicting the warriors of King Samouil marched blindfolded with red bands over the eyes, thus invoking legendary Bulgarian history—the capture of King Samouil by the Byzantine Emperor Vasilii II, known as the Killer of Bulgarians. The Emperor had Samouil’s warriors blinded, and only one in every hundred warriors retained a single eye. In the procession, one Cyclops for every ten blind warriors marched along. At the end of the march, their bands were simultaneously removed. The idea behind this procession was that the red blindfolds had to be removed so that people would be able to see and realize the truth about the essence of communism. Clearly, they had previously been blind to the truth, and the red color of the blindfolds referred to the culprits.<sup>5</sup>

Portraying a similar message, a procession of scarecrows and drummers marched along, shouting “Wake up, Bulgarian brothers! Wake up Bulgarians!” Another procession made its way through the streets in pajamas, carrying alarm clocks that went off continuously, while students shouted, “Bulgarians, wake up!” and sang an old song from the Bulgarian National Revival, “Arise, arise thou valiant Balkan hero, wake up from your sound sleep.” This procession underscored that it was time for the sleeping nation to wake up and shake off the yoke of communism. There is an implicit reference in this to the period of Bulgarian history when Bulgarians struggled for independence from the

Ottoman Empire. The message was that a similar effort was required for them to emancipate themselves from communist rule. In history textbooks for secondary schools the Ottoman rule is described as a great hardship and is usually referred to as the “Turkish Yoke.” Some of the conceptions of that period of Bulgarian history are revised in newer editions of these textbooks, but even now Bulgarians very often speak of the Ottoman period in their history as a “yoke.” The students merely drew an analogy between one yoke and another.

In another procession, people carried bags full of “red garbage,” which was later ostentatiously thrown into dustbins. While marching the students chanted, “No to the red Mafia!” “Down with red terror!” “It has no mouth, yet it eats, it has no hands, yet it steals. What is it? BSP,” “Put the reds out into the cold!” They carried posters reading “An appeal to the Cleanliness Municipal Company: Gentlemen, let us clean the red garbage,” or “Clean home, healthy people. Red garbage. Mafia.” Here, too, the message was against communism: the country was to be cleaned up after the communists, who had converted it into a big dustbin.

One procession marched under the motto “Clean Hands Operation.” The students carried water, metal mugs, soap, and towels to help the communists wash their hands of the blood of the people beaten on the fatal night of January 10, as well as of the dirt of their entire known and unknown criminal acts. There were silent marches as well. A procession of black clothes and white faces at times slowed down at crossroads, at

times broke into a quick run. It was an attempt at wrathful silence expressing protest, but simultaneously declaring the quick power of the black army wearing white masks.

A procession with umbrellas invoked the vile assassination of the famous Bulgarian novelist George Markov, killed with an umbrella in London. Another procession carried white, green, and red banners, the colors of the national flag, burning torches turned upside down in an attempt to show signs of war or national calamity, and thereby to describe the current situation in Bulgaria in a highly emotional manner. A procession with suitcases, bags, and even an airplane model chanted “Don’t banish us!” “We want to live in Bulgaria,” “We want our Bulgaria,” “The homeland is for us and the guillotine is for you,” alluding to mass emigration out of Bulgaria in 1990 and subsequent years, making an urgent plea against allowing the communists to keep banishing citizens from the country.

A related phenomenon which may be considered a ritualized form of protest was the piling up of a “cairn.” In older tradition, when an individual was singled out as guilty of an unconscionable crime, it was customary for villagers to throw stones into a pile near the village and curse the guilty party with every stone. The cairn in this case represented a curse, anathematization and damnation of the communists and all their sympathizers. The students amassed a cairn at the end of a “fiery procession” with torches, and every time a stone was thrown they said, “Damn Videnov [the leader of the BSP at that

time] and all his people!” This is a form of collective damnation readily recognizable from traditional folklore. It seeks the symbolic elimination of the person whose name is mentioned.

The general sound of “no” articulated by the protesters was constantly iterated and reiterated, and negation, whether overt or not, was found in every procession. Yet, each procession revealed different transformations of the “evil” against which the students protested, which they wished to banish with their magic, in a highly picturesque and emotional way.

### **Theatricalized Forms of Protest: Continued Rallying Around the Concept of Evil**

Another form of protest took the form of theatricalizing the same ideas represented in the processions. The students often called them “sketches” and each sketch had its own specific name. Again, examples can best illustrate the potency and vibrancy of the sketches and the meaning that protesters attached to them.

In a sketch called “Firemen’s Operation,” the students wore cardboard firemen’s helmets and carried metal mugs full of water. They stood on the steps in front of the BNB (Bulgarian National Bank), spilled water on the steps and chanted “Foo-foo!” (blowing with their mouths) to “liquidate Bulgaria’s domestic and foreign debt,” as though it were on fire. Key here is the fact that the Bulgarian word for “liquidate”—as in liquidating debt—is the same as “extinguish,” so the students played the pun.

Students from the Krastyo Sarafov Academy of Theatrical and Film Arts acted out a sketch called “The Events of January 10th.” Some of them played the part of the members of Parliament hiding in the Parliament building (in this case the building of the Theater Academy), while others were outside demonstrating the clashes that took place.

Similar to the red garbage procession, in the sketch “Sweeping the Red Garbage Away” or “For an Environmentally Clean Country,” students swept garbage piled up in the yard of St. Kliment Ohridski University in the direction of Parliament. This symbolized the “sweeping” of the red (i.e., communists) garbage out of the country. In connection with this sketch the following announcement had been posted in advance: “Today, 01/15/1997—to show support for the students’ demands from the yard of Sofia University to the Parliament, please bring plastic cups and bottles or other light things! Let them be left by the fence. They will be symbolically swept away!”

These sketches can be viewed as miniature spectacles. They were prepared as individual performances and the elements that constituted them were not ritualized, nor were they converted into regularly recurring symbolic actions. Their language was not the language of ritual, but the language of theater, an alternative to the more ritualistic processions. Using both ritual and theatrical languages, the protesters thus presented recurring images of the “evil” that had to be thrown away.

We see reflected in these images the complex and shifting meaning of “Bulgarian” in national and international

contexts. The protesters implicitly presented “the Bulgarians” as complex and non-monolithic. The protesters were Bulgarians, the “other” people were Bulgarians, and the communists, too, were Bulgarians. Nevertheless, the appeal “Wake up, Bulgarians!” was addressed only to “the others” not yet awake, and not to the communists, who were to be thrown away when the people awoke. The “others” essentially had to become part of the “us,” the protesters. They had to become part of the good Bulgarians, to prevent bad Bulgarians from harming Bulgaria in the future. This was a national task, not only because in this way Bulgarians would become part of a democratic world, but also because they would become part of an international community unified by ideals such as freedom and democracy. In this way “we, the good Bulgarians” were nationally and at the same time internationally committed.

The explicit image of the communists was much more detailed and colorful, and had more dimensions in terms of artistic presentation. All of the examples revealed a new facet of the same evil associated with the Party, whose actions were the catalyst of the protests. Unlike that of the Bulgarians, the image of the party was monolithic.

### **The Inherited and the New in Expressions Carrying Social Meaning: The Mock Funerals of 1990 and 1997**

In 1990, the students “buried” Success (*Spoluka*) at the Central Graveyards of Sofia to lay bare the demagoguery of the communist election slogan—“Success

for Bulgaria” (*Spoluka za Bulgaria*)—against the background of the crisis that hit the Bulgarian people immediately afterwards. In 1997, the students “laid the one-hundred-years-old BSP in the grave.” A comparison between these two mock funerals highlights once again how a semi-closed community rallies around a single cause, but each also reveals its own specific temporal concerns and problems

The 1990 funeral procession was headed by several people carrying wreaths and girded with red bands, inscribed with “Success for . . . ?” Following them was a red pyramid with a red five-pointed star on the top carried by two students. Behind this, another two students marched, one of them carrying a black pillow girded with a red band, and the other one a box full of medals and military crosses. The medals were honorary decorations of the deceased, “Success”, an eminent communist. All these people were followed by a brass band playing a funeral march, traditional or jazzed up. Close behind them a hearse with the deceased was moving very slowly.

The deceased Success was represented by parodic dummies of sugar, butter, cheese, pork-chops, and flat sausages, all symbolizing “Success” for Bulgaria. All of these representations were situated around a black coffin. Just right of the dummy’s head stood two student honor guards. They had toy guns and black and red mourning bands on their sleeves. Next to them were two students, actresses from the Theater Academy, tearfully grieving for the deceased person:

Oh, my Lord!  
To whom have you left us, dear “Success”?  
We are now poor orphans,  
We are down-and-out without you!  
What will we do without you?!  
What will we do alone and sad?!  
To whom have you left us?!  
To this damned Democracy!  
Oh, my Lord!  
Who will look after our children?!  
Oh-oh-oh . . . !  
Poor us, poor orphans!

Behind the hearse, Success’s closest friends followed in mourning attire. Here also were Grave-diggers followed too, dressed as proletarian workers with picks and spades. Guards protected the sugar, cheese, meats, and other ingredients of the dummy from the people trying to steal them. In the center of the procession was a huge obituary of the dead Success with an inscription:

After a long and very painful illness  
Success was dead and gone.  
We will remember You forever!

Around the obituary, there were huge models of coupons with captions like “The last hope for Success perished today!” “Success! No more!” and so on.

The funeral itself took place at the Central Sofia Graveyard. The black coffin was slowly lowered into the grave. Again, mourning and cries were heard. The red pyramid and the wreaths—a few thorns instead of flowers—were all placed on the grave, and several candles were lit. There was a solemn funeral oration and announcements for the wreaths: “A wreath from the Bulgarian Musical Academy!” “A wreath from the Bulgar-

ian Theater Academy!" "A wreath from the Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski!" Each announcement was accompanied by a short orchestral performance. Finally, the participants piled everything on the grave and began to dance the *hora* around it.

The funeral obviously was a parody, but of what type of a funeral? This was not a traditional village funeral rite, regardless of some of the traditional elements that were included. This was a parody of a funeral from the socialist period, a funeral of a communist. That is why the black was combined with red in the mourning dresses. That is why there was a red pyramid with a five-pointed star, but no funeral service with a priest. This was the communist version of the funeral rite. People wanted to bury communism itself, to bury the evil, and through the ambiguous form of parody these funerals lay somewhere in between the abstract notion of socialism and the concrete political situation in Bulgaria in 1990.

The second funeral, in 1997, was of the one-hundred years-old BSP.<sup>6</sup> In the days prior to the funeral itself, certain notices and slogans on this topic appeared: "St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia. Theological Department. Students against the one-hundred-year-old one," "Let's bury the one-hundred year-old one." At the same time, the following slogan also appeared at the UDF rally: "Mournful joy. On this day, the winter of 1997, after a prolonged, one-hundred-year-long meaningless existence, the final death agony of our party of many names began. Public prayers for an easy and quick death will be held in

the square in front of the Alexander Nevski Cathedral. In the name of the people. Amen!"

The funeral procession began with four students bearing a coffin, which had been made by a skilled coffin maker, containing a red banner representative of the body of the deceased person. One of the four carriers was dressed like an evangelical priest, the second like a party leader, and the remaining two wore black mourning clothes. They marched with stony faces and an air of utmost solemnity. A despondent widower walked in front of the coffin; a soldier wearing the battle uniform of the royal army was carrying a banner, his appearance suggesting complete exhaustion. The coffin was followed by a brass-band continually playing funeral marches or party hymns. There was a group of howling wailers wearing mourning attire including lace, veils, and hats with small veils. "This was a disgusting black group which emitted odious wails, and when people heard them for the first time they were startled and fearfully turned to see what was going on but then they laughed and some of them joined the procession." The participants in the procession were mostly students, but as they marched on, their numbers increased as other people joined. There were individual masked figures: soldiers with Cossack hats decorated with bands bearing the inscription "WYU" (an abbreviation standing for Workers' Youth Union) or "Excellent Student" (a typical communist distinction). The latter wore the old uniform students' caps from the socialist period.

The marchers gathered at the University of Sofia, but from there they made

their way to the former Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov (Bulgarian communist leader from the first years of the communist government), which was the actual starting point of the funeral procession. At the outset it was a quiet procession, but gradually it changed, and cries were heard that merged with the howl of the mourning women. The cries actually turned out to be actually chants against the BSP; they were not particularly expressive of any profound grief.

They proceeded from the Mausoleum to the Central Department Store and along Vitosha Street in the direction of the National Historical Museum and the National Palace of Culture. Then they continued along Patriarch Evtimiy Street. At times the mourners would throw themselves on the coffin. A student pretending to be a member of the Workers' Youth Union wept. When the students reached the Monument of Patriarch Evtimiy, they made a turn and walked along V. Levski Blvd. in the direction of the Sofia University and returned to the Mausoleum.

The funeral itself took place in the Mausoleum. The coffin was solemnly brought up to the stand where party leaders had stood in socialist times and had greeted the rally passing by. During this long demonstration of grief, solemn speeches (expressed only in gestures and mimic) imitated those of Georgi Dimitrov, recognizable from documentary photos. All this was accompanied by an orchestra. The funeral itself took place as the coffin was taken down from the frame of the stand to a spot that was not seen from the square. The end of the funeral was marked by the lively reel-

like *hora* dances typical of the Danubian region and performed in the square in front of the Mausoleum. The irony here was that *hora* dances were usually performed during communist elections and other communist celebrations. Both the participants in the mock funeral and the audience that had gathered in the square took part in the dance.

The two funerals—of 1990 and of 1997—can be compared in many ways but I shall content myself by listing some of the major factors of interest. The 1990 Funeral of Success was a far more metaphorical expression of a political position, while the 1997 Funeral of the Centenarian (the one-hundred-year old party) provided direct guidance to the goal of the political protest. The theme of Success was developed in 1997 as well, but it was not the dominant theme, nor did it figure prominently in the protests led by the students. Numerous inscriptions and slogans related to this topic appeared, such as: “No more Success, so that we remain here!” “The party of destruction ruined Success,” “Who has brought us to this plight? Who has inflicted this Success on us, so that we have already drawn the moral: BSP in the garbage-bin!”

The burial of Success in 1990 was a parody of a socialist funeral, so that even the mourning attire was not conventional: “Our appearance had to be such as to suggest that we were burying a notorious Mafia boss.” “That is why most of us were dressed in black suits and black ties, and we wore yellow chains on our wrists. One of us had a toy mobile phone showing from his pocket.” These displays of conspicuous wealth

conveyed the notion that communist profiteers had stolen the Party’s and the people’s money.

The 1990 procession began at the neighborhood of Darvenitsa, the so-called Student City, far from the center of Sofia. It ended at the Central Sofia Graveyard, enacting a symbolic move from the periphery to the center. The 1997 funeral started and wound up at the former Mausoleum of G. Dimitrov, closing a circle. Both in 1990 and in 1997 the Mausoleum and the space around it was the home of evil, it was the “alien” center. During the 1997 funeral, however, the protesters were “going in there to destroy even its last remnants, to prevent it from coming to life again and from moving among us like an evil spirit.” Therefore, the funeral of 1997 was more definite, and more explicitly linked to the major political demands of the protesters. It was a direct reference to their goal and even though the ludic form of presenting these demands was retained, this burial was already a manifestation of a changed social position of its participants. This was probably the result of the greater social self-confidence of the student community and of its awareness of its own significance at decisive moments in Bulgaria’s modern history. The fact is, that they were again successful and achieved the main goal of their protest.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unattributed quotes throughout the article convey the words of demonstrators, recorded by the author and stored in the Archive of the Institute for Folklore, Bulgarian Academy of Science. Most of the interviews with students were taken incidentally, among other things during the protest, so they sound like individual voices rather than an exhaustive recounting of events.

<sup>2</sup> Recently I heard a paper presented at the California Folklore Society Annual Meeting, Berkeley, April 14-15, 2000 by Pauline Tuttle, entitled “Whose Streets? Our Streets! Whose World? Our world! Narratives & Negotiation after the WTO.” She spoke about a completely different type of protest, but she also spoke in general about this peculiar community created in the time of protests. She said: “In the ritualized and transformative performance of protest, the participants experience a reduction in difference (both social and ideological), and an enhanced sense of community.” And she considered the narratives as performances and as performative, constituting political subjects.

<sup>3</sup> See also a special volume in Bulgarian with articles on the 1997 protests by folklorists, linguists, sociologists, historians, and political scientists (Yordanova 1997). Of related interest is a website on “Language Change in Bulgaria after 1989,” maintained by a team of researchers and students at the Institute for the Bulgarian Language at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (<http://www.language-change.ibl.bas.bg>).

<sup>4</sup> The name of Zhorzh Ganchev is often associated with the students’ idea of a communist under cover, while the nickname Bouratino refers to Ganchev’s own words to the effect that “even if my name were Bouratino, I would still be a great Bulgarian.”

<sup>5</sup> All these “ideas” were explained to me by

students who took part in the performances. Not all of them were understood by people observing in the same way, but the general sense did come through. One woman observing the procession with the alarm clocks commented: "I do not know what they [i.e., the students] want to say, but it is true that we have to wake up. It is high time to do that!"

<sup>6</sup> For the concise general presentation of the event, as well as for the explanations concerning its original ideas and their alteration, I would like to extend special thanks to Petrinel Gochev, third-year student at Krastyo Sarafov Academy of Theatrical and Film Arts, majoring in dramatic theater stage production. I am also obliged to him for the descriptions of a part of the events that I did not observe myself and for the explanations regarding their symbolism and means of expression.

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## Responses

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I am familiar with the events discussed in Iveta Todorova-Pirgova's article. I too was a participant in the protests against the Communist Party from the very first rally held some 11 years ago at the square in front of St. Alexander Nevski Cathedral in Sofia. This square is the center of the city, its heart. St. Alexander Nevski Cathedral is in close proximity to St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University, which, in turn, was the starting and ending point of the 1997 university students' protests. Even a superficial comparison of the 1990 events and those that occurred in 1997 would be indicative of the long path traversed in search of a new place under the sun, which was no longer the "sun of militiamen's socialism" (as it was referred to in some of the feuillets broadcast by Radio Free Europe).

But at this first rally and at the numerous ones that followed people thronged from all directions, from all quarters, with their own handwritten slogans: "Down with the BCP," "Todor Zhivkov Stalin," "Take the plunge and you will be free!" Blue banners fluttered, and one could come across caricature masques of the recently toppled party and state leader, Todor Zhivkov. Given my own participation in the protests, I would like, first, to offer a remark regarding the ritualized forms of the protests against the communist/

socialist rule in Bulgaria in the period 1990-1997, and second, to articulate some thoughts regarding the parallel between the initial protests and the university students' protests in 1997. The parallel to which I'm referring involves the notion that the driving force and foundation of these protests were the university students, the educated young people, Bulgaria's elite, as Todorova-Pirgova also points out in her article. During the early rallies, one of the frequent chants initiated by the youth nucleus was "he who doesn't jump is red!" Jumping was a right and privilege of the young, of the living and vigorous, who swept with them the adherents of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) with their enthusiasm and energy. The "red" represented the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) = the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) = Centenary Party = infirmity = death.

Starting with the first rally all the way down to the events of 1997, the most frequent chant besides the "UDF!" slogan was "Down!" This "Down!" had both direct and indirect resonance. It could be seen on building walls, it could be heard in song lyrics: "45 Years Suffice," "We want no communism, down with the BCP!" Personified in the BCP, "Evil" was depicted on posters as well. Pictured as a multitude of skulls with crossed bones, indicating the locations of the communist camps, Evil was condemned verbally, by means of a gesture known since ancient times (a fist with a thumb turned downwards), unequivocally spelling out "Death!" The meaning of

its semantically opposite sign “V” was not simply “Victory!”, but victory over the big Evil. Victory was once again conceived of as death, in accordance with the old formula of “the end as a beginning,” “death as life.” I find it interesting that Todorova-Pirgova has drawn a parallel between two similar events: the burial of “Success” (*Spoluka*) in 1990 and the funeral of the Centenary BCP. The second funeral—around and at the Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov—was already the burial of Evil at the home of Evil, with clearly declared intolerance articulated with enhanced social self-confidence.

The parallel between the two funerals brought to my mind an association with rituals (for example in the case of long lasting drought), where the absence of an expected result from the performance of certain ritual actions entails their repetition. Actually, prior to the 1997 funeral the space around and in front of the Mausoleum was repeatedly “domesticated,” “humanized,” and “reclaimed.” Silent candle-light vigils were held there for evenings on end, evenings in which people protested in silence, prayed in silence with radiant faces and eyes. Viewed from above, Sofia resembled an enormous temple wrapped in silence. It was in this square that the “Town of Truth” emerged at the “Dawn” of democracy and each of its tent-homes represented the idea and the great hope of living with and in Truth. It was in this same square, which kept the memory of thousands-strong rallies in honor of socialist red-letter days, that people chose to celebrate Christmas and Eas-

ter. The space around and in front of St. Alexander Nevski Cathedral was not accessible to everyone at any time: on great Christian holidays a hedge of militiamen allowed only people with passes across the barrier. This long process of humanizing and reclaiming common meeting grounds in the center of the city not only marked an integration into the heart of the city, but also indicated a return to normal day-to-day life. To my mind this process of humanizing and reclaiming grounds was in reality a process of humanizing the very participants in these activities. An old/new way of communication was (re)born in the course of dozens of vigils and rallies. The need for adequate social communication was manifested in the desire to be part of another and yet another rally, where we wished to chant together, to sing together, to talk to each other, to share minutes of silence.

I find it interesting that the author has drawn a parallel between the initial protest marches and the 1997 marches of the university students as regards the route of the latter, when the pressing vital need for one’s own place in the social space was emphatically stated. The lyrics of one of the hit songs of that time went as follows:

I shall not walk with my head bent,  
I shall find a reason to stay,  
I am still here, am I not?  
I haven’t run away.

“I want to stay” is tantamount to “I want to have a home,” “I want to have a job,” “I want to have future in Bul-

garia.” What is new here? What is new is the claim on “one’s own [university students’] space,” not a movement from the periphery to the center, as it was in 1990. As Todorova-Pirgova points out: “‘Our’ home was in the center and we gradually expanded the diameter of the ‘tame’ space around us.” The following question can be asked now: is “the new” really new? Perhaps it is as new as are magic rites performed in a circle, common in folklore, that aim for and achieve definite results.

I find Todorova-Pirgova’s article engaging not only because it testifies to the rapid reaction of the folklorist—of her skill to collect and document phenomena from “yesterday” and “today”—but also because this article is provocative in identifying cultural models of behavior in a post-communist society seeking new ways for itself.

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**T**odorova-Pirgova’s article “Symbols and Images of ‘Evil’ in Student Protests in Sofia, 1997” provides an intriguing insider’s glimpse into the powerful performative language used by the Bulgarian student protest movement in its efforts to celebrate, in the guise of satirical mourning, the 1990 demise of Bulgaria’s monolithic one-party political system and the subsequent ousting of the communist/socialist government in 1997. Her article is written against the backdrop of the increasingly difficult and tumultuous 1990s in Bulgaria—a time that saw wave after wave of expectation and hope pitted against disillusionment and struggle in the lives of the vast majority of the Bulgarian population. During these years, the country was immersed in the painful transition to a democratic multi-party political system which was coincident with massive environmental degradation resulting from heavy industrialization during the years of communist rule, exponential inflation, a shortage of basic goods, the collapse of numerous banks and a failing economic system suffering from the abrupt transition to privatization, the closure of two sub-standard nuclear power plants, social stress from reforms in internal and foreign investment policy, the introduction of a new constitution, as well as the rejection of rigidly articulated nationalistic performative parameters in theater, music, the arts, etc. In

retrospect, these factors seem to have mitigated many of the goals of the 1990 and 1997 protests “free elections, higher salaries, environmental protection” that “good” which was to fill the void left by the eradication of “evil,” the focus of the protests.

Whether we are speaking of the student protest movements in Sofia; *Canboulay* in nineteenth-century Port of Spain; the musical street theater of Trinidadian Carnival revelers protesting South Africa’s apartheid in the 1980s in the streets of Toronto, London, Port of Spain, New York, and beyond; the WTO protests in Seattle which began in 1999 and have now entered their “third anniversary collaborative protest” in what has become known as the “annual battle of Seattle;” or any number of other social, religious, political, and cultural protest movements around the world, the collective focus of protest is often the glorification, through sheer overt attention, of that which is corrupt and objectionable, rather than the promotion of that which may provide a viable alternative model for sustainable development in the future.

With this backdrop in mind, Todorova-Pirgova explicitly frames her study in relation to the dichotomous imagery drawn on by the students in their evocation of that which they perceive needs to be eliminated, replaced, obliterated, signified simply as “the evil.” Curiously, she defines “good” from a point of negation rather than as a goal to be achieved. Good, she notes, is “the absence of ‘evil’” rather than evil being the absence of good. Good is de-

finied in terms of the imagery of evil, as highlighted in conversations and performances Todorova-Pirgova has recorded from the protests. From these, Todorova-Pirgova draws on the symbolic dichotomy of “good” and “evil” value-laden terms that are difficult to attain a conceptual grasp of outside of the context in which they are given voice and form through performative, ritualized, and theatrical enactment. An example of this is the simple but powerful use of contrastive color – black costumes offset by red props, against painted white faces – as an evocation of literal and subliminal markers of “the good” and “the evil.” “The evil” is, not surprisingly, linked to the color black, to death (of the BSP), the old and outworn, the oppressor, silence (absence of music), the Bulgarian Communist Party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), and sites of political power – BCP and BSP physical landmarks and administrative centers. On the other hand, for the Bulgarian students the white painted faces symbolize “the good” a new life supported by the vibrant strains of jazz and marching band music, and given credence by their association with the intellectual centers of power and reform – the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), the Universities, and St. Alexander Nevski Square.

In their symbolic representation of “the evil,” the Sofia students draw on their belief that if feelings can be engaged through visual and aural graphic images of “evil” this will allow the observer to see that “evil” (the BSP) needs to be extricated and made invisible. The

paradox of making invisible or banishing by means of making visible jumped out at me as I read the explicit descriptions of the dramatic props drawn on. Realizing that I am immersed in an entirely different culture, I nevertheless had to ask myself: would not the memory of vivid graphical images of witches and blood, of black suits, red arm bands, and white faces, of coffins, slogans, songs, red five-pointed stars and pyramids, umbrellas (signifying the assassination of Markov with an umbrella), red garbage, torches, suitcases, etc., all leave potent impressions on the mind and heart that would not be easily forgotten? If such images and vocalizations of "the evil" are entrenched in the collective memory, how then can they be purged to make way for "the good"? In light of this, it would have been helpful if she had offered more historical depth into the rich political, cultural, religious, and social history underlying the protest movements and the age-old symbology she speaks of. Curiously, also, the student protestors have turned the identity of the victim inside out and drawn on it as a symbol of empowerment and action, as a means of drawing others to their cause. According to Todorova-Pirgova, by satirizing and mocking, the protesters have removed the mystique and power from "the evil" and transferred it to the viewer. Rather than being powerless, the viewer is thus energized through a magical transformation of horror into humor.

As a reader, I expected to learn more about what these ideas look like in relation to the performative enactment of symbols of "evil" in Bulgarian student

protest dramatizations. Instead, Todorova-Pirgova embarks on a discussion of her methodology, whom she interviewed, and the core idea that united and served as the identity-marker and maker of the "semi-closed community" she both studied and was part of. This unifying idea based on negation—that of being "against" communism, particularly the BCP and the BSP—somehow would result in the "magic" of the transformation of a named and imaged "evil" into an unnamed, unarticulated, and seemingly unimaged "good," beyond the absence of evil that was the desired end product of the protests, i.e., the literal ousting of the socialist government and the societal changes expected to result from this process of purging. Unfortunately, I could never quite figure out who was an insider in the semi-closed community of the student protestors and who was not, or if there were peripheral lingerers and onlookers who reside in the ephemeral space demarcating the boundaries of closed and open communities, or what happened to the community that had defined itself in relation to being against "the evil" once this entity was laid to rest during the elaborate mock funeral held by the protestors. Curiously Todorova-Pirgova presents the community members she works with, the student protestors, as being simultaneously representative of the peoples' voice and the intellectual elite within the social framework of a tripartite system of "we, students," "the other people" those who the "we" aim to convert, to "awaken," to empower—and the "communists."

Students are unnamed and identified only by place of study, giving them the stamp of authority that privileges the voices of the intellectual elite—the very factor that allowed the protest movement to succeed in its goals. Todorova-Pirgova in fact uses a modified multi-vocal approach in which she does not privilege her own voice but rather sets the voices of her students and consultants side by side with hers, an approach I have also drawn on in previous attempts to place my own voice on more equal footing with that of my consultants, to decenter the perceived notion of the authority of the ethnographer (Tuttle 2001).

As my reading came to a close, I was left somewhat confused as to what Todorova-Pirgova meant by her use of the term “performance” and would have preferred to see her problematize this more directly in relation to the subject matter. I also wondered who is the audience? What role do they play? We rarely catch a glimpse of who the audience—the potential convert—is and never what their reaction and role is in these street dramas that provided the spark for revolutionary social action and interaction. The article, I found, lacks a coherent framework that would provide the reader with easier access to the important points Todorova-Pirgova raises. With some tightening up and a clearer articulation of the links between traditional symbology and its current application, this article could provide us with a much deeper insight into the Bulgarian expression of the powerful role played by music, art, theater, and voice in the shaping of new governments and

emergent power structures in this historically volatile area of the world, particularly in the post-1997 years. As it stands, Todorova-Pirgova offers an insightful look into the intersecting pathways that map the multi-faceted layers embedded in symbolic performative protest and the powerful societal results of the complex and evocative multi-vocal threads running from one protest dramatization to the next and culminating in a massive funeral for “evil” that was duplicated in social and political life with the resultant ousting of the communist regime and the subsequent institution of the Union of Democratic Forces as the ruling party. In closing, one of the most refreshing aspects of this article was the opportunity it gives the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the Bulgarian voice in that it was written by a scholar who is not only intimately familiar with Bulgarian culture but is actively involved in both the political reformation of her nation and the performative enactment of generations of ancestral knowledge, symbology, and life-ways in contexts that speak to the exigencies of contemporary experience and needs and performance practices.

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