

Buying into the American Dream

Reforming National Symbols in Bulgaria

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In this paper I examine the way in which national political symbols have changed in Bulgaria during the last decade. Using a comparative approach with examples from both the socialist and post-socialist periods, I observe two important trends. The first is that changes in the use of symbols reveal rural-urban divisions that have arisen as a consequence of post-socialist reform. The second trend is that there has been a notable shift away from symbols that give primacy to the political domain and towards ones rooted in the economic sphere of social life. Such observations provide a valuable insight into the particular direction that post-socialist reforms are taking in one east European context.

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While post-socialist reform is primarily thought of as political and economic transformation, and indeed much of the social science literature concentrates on these dimensions, it also involves a change in national symbols. The dismantling of a centralised political and economic system, and the establishment of market relations, has included a shift in the use and meaning of symbols. Even production, a central arena of reform, is more than just about the creation of material objects since objects always have particular use and significance within a broader context. As Sahlins (1976: 169) reminds us, objects are not only useful, but also meaningful. While advocates of capitalism present the reforms as economically rational – in contrast to the way in which socialist production is represented – the capitalist economy is no less detached from symbolic meanings than any other economic order. We would therefore expect that in adopting a capitalist type of economy, a reassessment of Bulgarian national symbols – those that “accompany” the political-economic structure – has also occurred. Below I examine the situation in post-socialist Bulgaria: how symbols have changed in the last decade, the role they have played in re-orienting Bulgarian

society toward the West and some of the implications of this for post-socialist society.

In the case of Bulgaria the shift in symbolic meanings associated with the reforms was particularly evident through national politics. Phrased differently: political relations seem a particularly fruitful site of focus when exploring nationally significant shifts in symbols. This paper focuses on the symbols used both in the socialist and post-socialist period in the domain of politics; such a comparison is one valuable means of examining the transformation in national symbols. Further, in the discussion of post-socialist Bulgaria, I concentrate on the period when political divisions – and symbolic battles – were at their height in the early to mid 1990s. While the reform of symbols is always underway, focussing on this period is particularly useful, for the political symbols used at this time were especially powerful in shaping social processes in the crucial early phase of the reforms. It was during this time, for example, that a stark contrast between political symbols of rural and urban areas – in terms of what symbols were employed and what discourse was used – became evident. It is a contrast which emerged in the post-1989 period

and which laid bare the essential political differences between rural and urban regions in Bulgaria. This rural/urban division may no longer be as prominent, but it is still a crucial factor in understanding ongoing relations between the countryside and cities. Further, the use of different symbols after 1989 and re-valuation of the old ones, provides insights into the specific way in which the re-orientation of the country towards 'the West' has occurred and is still occurring. Symbols have played a vital role in the legitimisation of the post-socialist political-economic order. The new symbols therefore reveal something about the particular "brand" of capitalism that is "on offer".

Before moving onto the next section, I conclude this one with a brief note on the data presented here. Ethnographic sources for this paper are varied: historical "documents" from the socialist and post-socialist period provide a foundation, but these are complemented with both fieldwork data and anecdotal materials from both times. By virtue of the open-ended nature of symbolic systems, I can but describe what must always be the tip of the iceberg, only a limited rendition of the meta-narrative or metaphors which 'speak' to the different symbolic structures of the different systems (socialist and capitalist).

National Socialist Political Symbols

During the socialist period it was Bulgaria's relationship to the Soviet Union rather than to any other country that was given primary state importance. In a speech in 1980 to the Fatherland Front (a government organisation with a membership comprising approximately one-half the total population of the country), Todor Zhivkov, the leader of the Party and government for the last 35 years of socialist rule, stated that "...we declare with profound conviction and pride that our country has never had a more loyal, more interested, more sincere and secure ally than the Soviet Union..." (*Todor Zhivkov. A Biographical Sketch*¹ 1981: 313). Of course, as with any political rhetoric, we need not take the declaration too literally, but nevertheless it does reflect the warm relations between the two nations which continued relatively unchanged

throughout the socialist period (in contrast to the relationship between other east European countries and the former Soviet Union).

Indeed the closeness portrayed between the two countries went beyond political rhetoric and was evident in a wide range of ways: from common linguistic, cultural and historical heritage, to economic and ideological factors. Even outside the capital of Sofia, in the provincial areas, Russians were spoken about in a positive way. Thus Bulgarian villagers referred to the Russians as their "brothers" who had given their lives to help Bulgaria attain freedom from 500 years of Turkish rule. On spotting red poppies growing in fields by the road side, people were quick to elaborate that each poppy represents a place where Russian blood has been spilt in the battle to free Bulgaria. This image, which holds historical complexity and symbolises annual renewal, displays the depth of the relationship that existed between the two nations.

Such shared ties were reflected – and at the same time provided a basis for – Bulgaria's close economic relationship with the USSR. Bulgaria was acknowledged to be receiving "...sustained favoured Soviet treatment..." where the Soviet Union provided the east European nation with important raw materials on favourable terms, trade and investment credits, technical assistance and an 'unlimited' market for agricultural and industrial products (McIntyre 1988: 69). The statistics emphasised the dependency and importance of trade links between the two countries: for example in 1985 the USSR received 56.5% of all Bulgarian exports and provided 56.1% of the latter's imports (McIntyre 1988: 79). Further the USSR provided the model for both Bulgarian agriculture and industry. The degree of closeness has been such that some have doubted the autonomous category of foreign policy for Bulgaria. But as McIntyre correctly observes "...this is a less provocative question in the Bulgarian case than for other Eastern European countries since fundamental differences in interests are hard to find" (1988: 77). McIntyre also realistically points out that the closeness between the two countries is in part due to the "persistent efforts of the USA to resurrect the Tsarist army and political groups

that had collaborated with the pro-German wartime government” (1988: 67). (Notably, such USA involvement in sponsoring anti-socialist movements continues in the present as, for example, in the 1992 elections, see Smollett 1993.) While there have been brief moments when relations between the USSR and Bulgaria have wavered – for example, in the mid-80s – bilateral relations were generally described as of fundamental, even ‘organic’ importance. A view reflected in a comment made by Dimitrov (Bulgaria’s first socialist leader after World War II) when he said that “...for the Bulgarian people friendship with the USSR is just as necessary for life as the air and sun is for any living creature” (Crampton 1987: 174).

Much of the closeness between the two countries was embodied in the symbols of the leaders and what I term fictive relations of kinship that were constructed between them.

Schwartz (1971) has shown how all USSR leaders after Lenin built their political reputations and authority on the basis of their established ties to Lenin. The ‘cult’, as Schwartz describes it, began with Lenin’s death which Stalin used for his own political purposes. Ever since – and especially after Stalin’s public demise – leaders have portrayed themselves as in the direct line of ideological succession from Lenin.

In a similar way, Bulgarian socialist leaders from 1944 – when the socialist state was established – onwards have all linked themselves with the two ‘founding fathers’ of Bulgarian socialism – Blagoev and Dimitrov – who in turn were depicted as direct descendants of Russian Bolshevism.

Blagoev was a Bulgarian revolutionary elite educated in the USSR. He was one of the founding members of the first Marxist groups in the country and his followers took part in the Russian uprising against tsarism in 1905 and the October revolution in 1917. Indeed much of the 19th century Bulgarian revolutionary elite was educated in Russia while an autonomous Marxist tradition in Bulgaria created a strong ‘Leninist’ following well before the October revolution (McIntyre 1988: 67). During periods of political upheaval – such as the military-royalist seizure of power in 1923 – the Bulgarian Communist Party leadership was sheltered in Moscow. The

close relationship between the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) “...was reflected in the prominence accorded to leading BCP figures in the international communist movement, in particular the Soviet dominated comintern which was headed by Dimitrov from 1935 until 1943” (McIntyre 1988: 42). Dimitrov, who had worked with Blagoev, was a confidant and adviser to Stalin (McIntyre 1988: 43).

This tradition of Russian influenced Bulgarian socialist leaders provided, in turn, the root for following Bulgarian leaders. Chervenko, who preceded Zhivkov, had spent two decades in Moscow and was “a favourite of Stalin’s” (McIntyre 1988: 68). Of course the falling out of Stalin in Moscow contributed to Chervenko’s downfall, since his political reputation was built upon his close association with Stalin. Bulgaria’s long serving leader, Todor Zhivkov, made no such mistake. He asserted his closeness to Dimitrov, who in turn was re-presented as “Lenin’s loyal disciple” (*Todor Zhivkov. A Biographical Sketch* 1981: 141), any previous association with Stalin being played down. In 1952, when speaking to the members of the Central Committee (of the BCP), Zhivkov said “Comrade Dimitrov tirelessly taught us to master the experience of the Bolshevik Party, to master the Marxist-Leninist teaching. There can be no doubt that had Comrade Dimitrov been alive today, he would have shown no less exigence towards our cadres. We are steadfastly following Comrade Dimitrov’s directives. We are learning from the experience of the Bolshevik Party” (*Todor Zhivkov. A Biographical Sketch* 1981: 159–160). When Brezhnev presented Zhivkov with the honoured title of ‘Hero of the Soviet Union’ he declared that “During the trying years of the war, you were one of the organisers and leaders of the partisan movement in unsubdued Bulgaria. And when freedom triumphed in the Bulgarian land, you devoted all your energies to the building of socialism and showed yourself a worthy disciple and contributor of the work of that great revolutionary, Georgi Dimitrov.” (*Todor Zhivkov. A Biographical Sketch* 1981: 312). Apparently unimportant communications between Zhivkov and Dimitrov are given considerable attention in his biography.

Zhikov was noted to have taken part in numerous demonstrations and meetings in displays of support for Dimitrov at the time of the Reichstag Fire trial in 1933 (*Todor Zhivkov. A Biographical Sketch* 1981:39)². Photographic ‘proof’ of the associations between them is included, showing their attendance at the same events (*Todor Zhivkov. A Biographical Sketch* 1981).

Perhaps a quote will best serve to display the way in which Zhivkov’s political authority in the late socialist period was validated in terms of past Bulgarian socialist leaders, who I emphasise, in turn legitimated their own historical importance in terms of Russian Leninist traditions. In Zhivkov’s biography (*Todor Zhivkov. A Biographical Sketch* 1981: 364) it is noted that:

“For half a century now Todor Zhivkov’s name has been associated with the heroic struggles and constructive work of the Bulgarian Communist Party. He is a loyal disciple of Dimiter Blagoev and Georgi Dimitrov, their successor and continuator, who has carried on their revolutionary work under qualitatively new social conditions...To the invaluable political and theoretical heritage of Dimiter Blagoev and Georgi Dimitrov, Todor Zhivkov has been making a fresh contribution connected mainly with the advances of the Party and the people along the road to mature socialism.

The history of the Bulgarian Communist Party and of our country assigns to him a rightful place alongside Dimiter Blagoev and Georgi Dimitrov. Since the Liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman domination, these three men have been the most eminent political figures, the most outstanding leaders of the Bulgarian Communist Party, who elevated the prestige of the revolutionary workers’ movement and that of the country far beyond its borders.”

This publicly legitimated portrayal of Bulgarian-Soviet relations via an exemplary leadership, however selective and thus narrow in what it reveals, nevertheless underlines a few themes which I believe to be instrumental in understanding some of the crucial symbols of the period.

The relationship associating Bulgarian leaders ultimately to Lenin may be viewed as a type

of metaphoric ‘kinship’; a kinship based on the shared associations between revolutionaries who all held the common goal of the realisation of a communist order. This kinship was ‘sealed’ with the spilling of Russian blood on Bulgarian soil. This image, often evoked by ordinary individuals as well as political leaders by referring to the Russians as ‘brothers’, had historical depth: it extended back at least to the freeing of Bulgaria from Turkish oppression and was strengthened by the close political affiliations the former had with the Russian hero – Lenin. Further, the fictive relationship of kinship between the leaders was represented as fundamental in the country’s development of socialist goals and for its pursuit of the age of communism. Those leading the Bulgarian state towards this goal were exemplary figures in relationships worthy of imitation. Through the Bulgarian leaders, the nation was linked to the Soviet Union which ‘...blazes the trail to communism for entire mankind’ (Zhivkov 1985: 101). In short the relationship between the two is one of ‘brotherhood’ created on the basis of the commonly shared ideology of the states. My impression is that the idiom of brotherhood – one which also existed in other socialist sites³ – was not so much ‘imposed’ from Moscow, as much as a strategy adopted by Bulgarian leaders. Events in different countries of eastern Europe – Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland – had made it obvious that open resistance to the USSR was futile. On the other hand, apparent compliance brought with it rewards; good relations with the USSR were necessary for privileged access to resources and special assistance. In much the same way that local village leaders connected to the Bulgarian state centre (see below), it seems that national Bulgarian leaders associated themselves to the USSR centre for similar reasons and in the same way (by fictive kin).

Importantly, this constructed ‘kinship’ between the leaders provided justification for – and generated further – economic activity between the two countries. As Zhivkov commented during a speech at an award ceremony conveying to Brezhnev the highest of all Bulgarian distinctions, the title of ‘Hero of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria’, “...The profound mutual respect and the personal example of the two

Party and state leaders generate powerful impulses for the further expansion and deepening of Bulgarian-Soviet friendships and co-operation which are becoming a great material force of our development” (*Todor Zhivkov. A Biographical Sketch* 1981: 310). The close relationship between leaders was put forward as a *model* to be imitated across Bulgarian society in every realm of social life. Economic development was justified and enabled on the basis of mutual and close ties of ‘kinship’ between the two, not the reverse. Bulgarian (and Soviet) socialist state ideology thus defined the particular way in which both countries were ‘bound’ together: a community based on shared ideological goals and legitimated by the state through the constructed ‘kinship’ of its leaders.

To date I have described at the national level how constructed relationships between Bulgarian and Soviet political leaders served as vital symbols in the legitimation of socialist ideology. It is now important to add that the significance of these symbols extended all the way down to the local administrative level. Further, this had practical implications for the everyday functioning of state socialism. Elsewhere I have stressed the importance of the centralised nature of the socialist state when considering the nature of political relations (Kaneff forthcoming). During socialism, the state centre⁴ played a fundamental role in the control and allocation of resources: the village was a ‘primary’ unit of the administrative hierarchy subordinated to the district, that in turn was subordinated to the region, which in turn was subordinate to the national capital, Sofia. The direction of goods and resources along the administrative hierarchy reflected a vertical pattern of movement where everything was valued with respect to the centre. In this sense the socialist system differed from market-oriented systems where goods flow in a lateral direction (Verdery 1991). I would add that this vertical flow not only explained the movement of goods but also was equally relevant to the movement of power – to political careers and social capital more generally. The significant fact to grasp about the centralised state is that because it was those at the very peak of the hierarchy who controlled resources and privileges (Verdery

1996), how an individual or community connected to the state centre was particularly significant. At the local level, officials would engage in the state administrative process both through the official/formal hierarchical structure and informally. In both instances the fictive kinship connections between national leaders was significant. Individual local leaders, on behalf of a community, would make connections directly with the state centre, through establishing his/her historical connections to the fictive ancestral leadership discussed above.

Thus, for example, in village Talpa where I have conducted research⁵, the head of the Communist Party – Comrade Pashev – made known his acquaintanceship with Zhivkov, an association that originated in the late 1930s. During this time Zhivkov had lived in Talpa for two years, in hiding from the fascist government. Pashev legitimated his contemporary power (during 1980s) in local politics by regularly recounting, both in meetings and during informal conversations, his memories of past times. The village museum also commemorated Zhivkov’s stay in the village (or more accurately it commemorated the period that Zhivkov and his fiancée spent in Talpa, the latter in her professional capacity as village doctor) and documented villager’s relations to the Bulgarian head of State. Both the museum and historical recountings became a centre-piece in local acts of legitimation, in displays of commitment to socialist ideology. The benefits to the community for displays of dedication to socialism was privileged access to the wide range of resources and privileges controlled by the state centre. This was by no means the only strategy employed to connect a peripheral village with the state centre, but it was a particularly significant method. In using his established connections to Zhivkov, Pashev and other prominent village figures were able to obtain resources that otherwise a bureaucracy with all its hierarchical hurdles would have made much harder to attain. The advantages of this were evident to anyone visiting the village: it was better serviced – for example, more of its roads were asphalted – than many other communities in the same administrative district.

Cashing-in Socialism for Capitalism

After 1989, the Bulgarian state adopted a very different relationship with foreign powers. This involved swapping its traditional ally, Russia, with 'the West', a result achieved by two simultaneous processes: rejecting its established relationship with the former Soviet Union and creating a new association with Western allies. Below I look at both these dimensions and the different symbols that were employed in this process.

The severing of ties with the former Soviet Union was achieved largely through rewriting the role of the Soviet Union in Bulgarian history, not only the history of the past 50 years, but also that which extended back to Bulgarian independence from the Turks. Russia was no longer presented as having 'freed' Bulgaria from Turkish oppression, but as fighting the Turks for its own imperialist aims. Again 1944 was not the point at which Russians aided Bulgaria in attaining freedom from fascism but the point at which Bulgaria was incorporated into the Russian communist empire. The rewriting of the past to reject any positive contribution made by Russia to the Bulgarian nation represents a very different way in which the historical relationship between the two was conceived. The process was led by urban intellectuals and anti-socialists.⁶ Historian Tzvetkov, for example, writes that "...the *occupation* of Bulgaria by the Red Army in September 1944 and the subsequent forced Sovietization brutally interrupted the country's natural development" (1993: 37, my emphasis) and he frequently uses phrases such as "Bulgaria's humiliating subservience to Moscow", describing communists as having an "ingrained subservience" to Russia (1993: 38). Along with such a rewriting of history has come the usage of 'new' public symbols and rituals (eg. the importance of the church), and the destruction of others (eg. statues of Lenin).

Soon after 1989, high school children across Bulgaria were issued with new history textbooks.⁷ Semkov, the author of such a book presents the Soviet Union⁸ in very negative terms. His attack is primarily focussed on the government and Communist Party. Thus the people in the USSR were "...detrimentally affected by the ...incompetence and corruption

existing at every level of government, from the dying economy, from militarism, from every viciousness of a totalitarian system, a depersonalised nation – which raised generations of human culture, raised nations which have lost faith in communist imperialism [while their people have] ... become immersed in alcoholism, drug abuse, prostitution and with developed levels of crime which compete with the American mafia" (Semkov 1993: 135). The decay of Soviet society is underlined when it is described as developing into "...the biggest beggar that has ever existed" (Semkov 1993: 137). Semkov continues to explain that in order for the Soviet population to survive, an ever-increasing amount of food and medicines have been diverted to the USSR. The author then lists in the 6-month period from January to July 1991 the amount of aid given by western countries. Such a depiction of the USSR at the same time elevates "the West" to the moral, political and economic high ground.

An important way in which the long-standing alliance between Bulgaria and the former Soviet Union was questioned after 1989 was through discrediting previous political leaders who were once society's "model" citizens. The fictive ancestral link extending between Bulgaria's Zhivkov and Russia's Lenin that was discussed in the previous section was made irrelevant and devalued. Semkov (1993: 138), describes the Soviet Union as a nation run by "sclerosis-ridden high-ranking nomenclature". Breshnev and Chernenko, members of Politburo, members and candidates of the Central Committee, ministers, marshals and generals were all part of a "never before seen in contemporary times gerontocracy (government by geriatrics)" (Semkov 1993: 134–135). In 1991, Dimitrov's embalmed body was taken out of the mausoleum and cremated, thus destroying the country's most important socialist symbol⁹. In 1999 a decision was taken to dynamite the empty mausoleum and thus totally wipe-out the structure. This took repeated attempts as the building was designed to withstand nuclear attacks – the staying power of the building proved an apt symbol of the resistance to the changes shown by the rural areas (see below).

The importance of political leaders as social-

ist symbols set the stage for the type of symbols that became prominent in the post-socialist era; with “old” socialist leaders situated in contrast to the “new” capitalist ones. We need search no further than the Bulgarian elections of 1991 to find how the new anti-communist leaders were represented. Philip Dimitrov, the leader of the Union of Democratic Forces (the UDF was a coalition formed by 19 different parties who held one thing in common, their anti-communist stance) was a young, Sofian lawyer who was soon given the nick-name “Philip Kennedy” because, to quote a supporter, “he’s young, a new face and new stimulus”. This name, which his supporters frequently used, underlined the features considered important by the anti-communist camp. The new Bulgarian leader (a position he held only temporarily due to factional rivalry that led to the loss of power of his elected party) symbolised a new relationship between Bulgarian leaders and “the West” and significantly with one country in particular – the USA. But his nickname “Kennedy” did more than connect the Bulgarian leader to the USA. It also served to graft onto Bulgarian politics a new symbol with the intention of establishing a new narrative which implicated the importance of material wealth, youth and power, using one of the wealthiest and most powerful US families and one of their youngest and most charismatic presidents. The Kennedy symbol stood in deep contrast to those of the socialist period, where the leaders age, financial or charismatic appeal were qualities irrelevant to their symbolic powers. The fact that it was Kennedy rather than more contemporary USA leaders – Bush, Reagan – who was given symbolic significance is

also interesting. Kennedy was at once something to aspire to (much in the same way that previous socialist leaders had been) and a tool which gave a particularity to the political-economic system that was under reform.

The importance of material wealth becomes a particularly dominant concern of post-socialist political symbols. “The West” and more specifically the USA are raised as representative of a high standard of living, evidenced through the wide ownership and display of material goods. “Being western” is to be prosperous and in turn this indicates a high level of civilisation (Smollett 1993: 10). From the high school text we see not only evidence of this, but can learn more details about it. In a number of places the text discusses the advanced nature of western Europe and its high standard of living and compares this with the more impoverished eastern Europe (Semkov 1993: 130). (No mention is made of the fact that industrialisation in Bulgaria only began in the middle of the 20th century, unlike much of western Europe, nor of the fact that the latter’s wealth was largely accumulated through the colonisation of other countries.) Thus, for example, the book quotes figures from Bdzedzinski who compares the USSR with the USA, European Union and Japan in respect to the number of computers in 1983. (The author notes that in 1992 the discrepancies are even greater, Semkov 1993: 136.)

The table (Semkov 1993: 136) is followed by the following comment, worthy of being quoted in full.

“If added to this example you consider also the quality of used computers and items in the

Table 1: Comparison of computer ownership between USA, EU, Japan and USSR

	USA	EU	Japan	USSR
Large and middle sized computers	96 500	23 400	16 900	3 040
Per 1 million population	412	135	142	11
Personal computers	1 000 000	240 000	70 000	22 200
Per 1 million population	4 273	1 387	588	80

USSR (if they are not from the west)... it in itself explains why the USSR collapsed. As once the sheep ate [out] feudalism, so now computers have carried out the same function towards socialism, computers and the totalitarian system are incompatible – at the moment that the mass production of computers began, it [socialism] died. The reason is, that democracy and the totalitarian system are incompatible and because of that the USSR could not be saved by the reforms of Gorbachev” (Semkov 1993: 136–137).

Some implications from the quote deserve highlighting. Socialism and the USSR at its head is viewed as “backward” and this “backwardness” is measured in terms of technology. Technological progress – consumer objects of a particular type – becomes one means of measuring the “stage” of development of a social system, it is also directly associated to levels of democracy. Material goods, including technology such as the number of televisions, radio’s, computers that are owned, are used as direct indications of standard of living. The USA is credited as the source of the knowledge which led to the computer age (Semkov 1993: 148) and by implication this country is the most progressive and most democratic. In short, capitalist democracy and high level technology are equated, while simultaneously viewed as incompatible with the socialist system.

Example after example in the school text raise the USA as the model of technological advancement, high standard of living and thus as being the most democratic. The president of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences is quoted in the *Washington Post* (1992): “Right now the American is the ideal. Bulgarians believe that Americans never lie, they never steal, they never throw rubbish on the streets” (cited in Smollett 1993: 9). Thus:

“In these countries [the West] the tendency is towards a levelling out in standard of living. During 1954 the USA (then having 6% of the worlds population) owned 60% of all cars in the world, 58% of all phones, 45% of radio’s and so on. Revealing is the example of number of televisions in the USA. During 1950 they numbered ‘only’ one million, during 1954 they

had grown to 29 million, during 1960 – 83 million, during 1969 – 114 million, by 1992 every family has at least two television sets. But that is also now the situation in most European countries...” (Semkov 1993: 150).

In addition to defining the advanced nature of the USA in terms of technology, “uniform” ownership of technology is viewed as a indicator of equality between all people. The old concern for socialist equality based on the attempt to eliminate class difference has been replaced with the elevation of technology and material goods in general which are viewed as measurers and levellers of social parity. Semkov (1993) creates the illusion that there is no poverty in the West by failing to mention the great levels of internal disparity of wealth – a problem that did not exist to the same degree in socialist countries. Nor does his work raise the morally questionable fact of one country consuming so many of the world’s resources. Further, he clearly sets up the association between technology, high standard of living and democracy as if the three are necessarily consequential of each other.

The promise of future wealth, of democracy, is conjured up by the symbol of the USA flag or in the reference to Philip “Kennedy”.¹⁰ Importantly, it is particular groups in Bulgarian society who adopted this new symbolism – namely, the young, urban Bulgarians seduced by USA mania. Smollett writes “...these young people who have literally wrapped themselves in the USA flag, printed on their T-shirts ... are convinced that the market equals democracy and brings prosperity...” (1993: 12). It is the same young Bulgarians who believe that there is universal wealth in the West (Smollett 1993: 12). As the socialist system in this history book is associated with an “administration of the aged” (Semkov 1993: 135) so “the West” with the USA as its flagship is linked to youth, vitality and contemporaneity. “The youth is searching for its own place in society, different from the life of its own parents” (Semkov 1993: 153), and so the chasm is formed between socialism/backwardness/old on the one side and capitalism/progress/new on the other. American symbols represent a significant break with the past; they become the ‘natural’ domain of, and are held in high

regard by, the youth. In adopting these symbols, which emphasise technology, the promise of wealth and prosperity, Bulgaria comes out as the poor partner, backward in terms of “the West” but with the promise of gaining material prosperity. This promise binds Bulgaria to “the West”; it is a relationship founded on materialism and the anticipation of increased standard of living through the greater availability of consumer (especially) technological goods. USA symbols – spearheaded by Kennedy – become all important as measures for technological advancement, materialism and prosperity; in short what many in the urban regions at least understand to be the most attractive qualities of capitalist “democracy”.

The temporal metaphor aligning the country with new capitalist relations was not adopted across the country, however. Indeed the symbolism of Kennedy and the popularity of the Bulgarian leader who carried this new set of values with him, had a following that was largely restricted to the urban areas of Bulgaria – Sofia, Varna and Plovdiv. In the rural areas the situation was very different.

To understand this I begin by underlining the fact that rural Bulgarians experienced socialism in a different way from urban inhabitants. As a consequence their response to the reforms was also different. Villagers’ lives improved dramatically during the socialist period; basic conveniences such as running water, electricity, the establishment of good services (pensions, free medical and educational opportunities) and an improvement in communication services (roads, telephones and so on) were all a result of socialist investment. Post-1989 changes have reversed much of this, depriving villagers of many of the advantages in lifestyle gained in the previous 50 years. Throughout rural Bulgaria, including Talpa, this is a central reason stated by villagers for their own pro-socialist views.

The links Talpians developed with the previous socialist ruling elite, were another important consideration. As noted in the previous section, successful local pursuit of political connections to high-level Communist Party officials gave Talpians privileged access to a range of resources before 1989. Villagers recognise their current loss of political power and privi-

lege in the new capitalist-oriented order where previous connections to Party officials are no longer of benefit. The breakdown in relations between the village and the state centre was most strongly evident in the early 1990s when the village museum, Talpa’s most visual symbol of close local associations with the state centre, was shut down. The house was eventually returned to its pre-World War II owners under privatisation laws. The owners, however, have no interest in returning to Talpa and the site remains unoccupied and untended. The village’s decline in political status was also evident by the return of urban-residing village natives who formerly held high level state official positions but since 1989 have been removed from office and returned to retire in Talpa. Those who built their careers on the basis of their links to Zhivkov have lost their individual power and prestige while the Talpian community exists “out on a limb”, excluded from the present political activities. Further, at precisely the time when Philip “Kennedy” was running for election, there was little, almost no political or any other public activity in the village: Party meetings were not held, public holidays and other events once celebrated by large gatherings passed with no public acknowledgement. The absence of such events was an additional sign of the breakdown in relations between the urban and rural regions.

Village discourse about the reforms posed a spectacular contrast to events as described in the new history texts written by urban, anti-socialists. Talpian discourse held Gorbachev as responsible for the devastating reforms. Stories circulated about the involvement of the CIA in the collapse of state socialism and in Gorbachev’s involvement in this plot. One view was that Gorbachev was educated, in part, in the West and therefore he upheld the interests of the West. What was evident during this time was a revival of the political split, between communists and anti-communists, that has plagued Bulgaria on several occasions during the 20th century. To many Talpians, UDF supporters (that is, those from Philip “Kennedy’s” party) were people who had interests in taking revenge against supporters of socialism. Many had had, during the World War II period, asso-

ciations with the fascist government. In one village meeting in 1994 – the first year that public gatherings were held again after 1989 – such anti-socialists were identified as “the murderers, and their descendants, of the anti-fascists” and “model vandals, inflated from a vindictive class who today are seeking revenge” (for more detail see Kaneff 1998). The political polarisation between communists and anti-communists, a division that rose in intensity during World War II, was a national wound reopened in those first years after 1989.

During this time, and indeed until his death in 1998, Zhivkov remained a central and positive symbol for villagers and pro-socialist supporters more generally. Talpians were aware of urban criticisms of Zhivkov, but they did not accept these. One elderly woman told me, during a conversation on the street in 1994 “...they say in Zhivkov’s time that he heaped a debt of millions but at least in those times there was new construction, while now they’ve heaped as many millions in debt as Zhivkov did in 30 years but not one brick has been laid in the last few years”. The Zhivkov period as one of growth and the post-socialist period as one of destruction was a common theme. Another elderly villager in 1996 commented “...everything built over the last 50 years has been ruined in the last three”. At the time when Zhivkov’s opponents had him under house arrest (despite their attempts they were unable to find any misdemeanours which held substance in court), a Macedonian from Talpa commented “Zhivkov may have been a criminal, but bread was 36 stotinki (the coinage currency) everywhere in Bulgaria”, so indicating the cheapness of living during the socialist period and the stability existing throughout the country as a result of fixed prices. In the struggle to make ends meet, and with the majority in the village dependent on pensions which were worth very little in the context of steep inflation, another village woman stated in 1993 of the socialist times “dyado [grandfather] Tosho [short form of Todor] was well off but so were we”. Note the familiarity of address – a common way of talking about Todor Zhivkov. In short, Zhivkov represented an “era” in which rural Bulgarians had experienced a better quality of life and they spoke about him

and the socialist system with considerable nostalgia. Until the late 1990s comments such as “bring back T. Zhivkov and the earlier times” and “we lived well with dyado Tosho, but now?” clearly questioned the present in preference to the socialist times. Such post-socialist rural symbols had little in common with those that found popularity in urban Bulgaria during the same period.

Conclusion

Post-socialist reforms are given specificity, in part, through the distinctive symbols that make the process meaningful to people. The early period of post-socialist reform, with its particular new symbols, played a crucial role in establishing the future ideological direction of Bulgaria. It was also an intense and nationally divisive time.

I have suggested above that relations of familiarity with the state, the creation of fictive kin between political leaders, were a central dimension of state socialism. Such processes regulated economic and other relations at all levels of the administrative hierarchy: between the village and state centre and even between Bulgarian national leaders and the USSR centre in Moscow. Metaphoric kinship between political leaders was constructed to validate and reproduce socialism. The constructed kinship amongst the leaders was intended to be more than just exemplary, it actually formed, in fact presupposed, the basis of the close ties between leaders which enabled, in turn, a whole range of economic, social and other contacts to be established and legitimated. This was as true at the international level (between Bulgarian and USSR leaders) as it was locally, in Talpa, where references to “dyado Tosho” indicated relations of familiarity existing between villagers and the head of the Bulgarian state. It helped place Talpa in an economically enviable position in terms of access to resources.

While during the socialist period there was considerable uniformity in the political symbols that were used between rural and urban regions of the country, the situation appears to have changed after 1989. Kennedy and other US-made symbols that were picked up so quick-

ly by certain sectors of the population – especially urban youth and anti-socialist advocates – emphasised material prosperity. Accepting that a prominent characteristic of Western society is “material maximization” (Sahlins 1976: 167), then the adoption of Kennedy as a meaningful Bulgarian symbol spoke to this re-orientation towards “the economy”. The difference between these urban based symbols and those used in the rural regions reflects an increasing division that has emerged within the country since 1989. A division due to conflicting political and economic interests which in turn, I suggest, is rooted in different experiences of socialism that can be traced back to World War II, if not earlier. It points to the diverging ideological directions that different sectors of society wished to push the country after 1989.

In trying to make sense of the changes in national political symbols in Bulgaria over the last decade, it is perhaps useful to recall the societal model put forward by Sahlins. A characteristic of Western society, Sahlins (1976: 212) suggests, is that the site of symbolic production is the economic domain and all other relations – political, religious and so on – are in positions of subordination. He contrasts this with “primitive” societies where it is kinship relations that provide the main site of symbolic production and which dominate and shape all other relations – economic, political and others. This model provides a useful framework within which to understand the observed shift in national symbols in Bulgaria – from ones that were about politics to ones about the economy. During socialism, I have suggested, economic relations were subsumed to political relations, the main site of symbolic production was not the economic realm, as in the “West”, nor kinship as in “primitive” societies, but political relations. The “nexus” that determined all social relations with respect to production was the political ideology of Marxism-Leninism; the political domain was elevated to the position of dominance, its leading symbols, socialist political leaders¹¹. I discussed above how these symbols “filtered” down and enabled the participation of local communities in socialist political and consequently economic activity.

After 1989, the use of different symbols – for example Kennedy – reveals the new importance that material wealth and the economy have taken in the post-socialist country. In the early 1990s economically-driven symbols imported from the West served to fundamentally reorder the Bulgarian nation: not only away from the Soviet block and towards the West, but also away from a society whose relations were predominantly shaped by political relations towards a society oriented by the importance of the economy. Reform has therefore involved a shift in symbols: from socialist ones that signalled the importance of political kinship to ones based on (promises of) material prosperity and the prominence of economic relations. In the process, local rural communities have been excluded from engagement in political and economic activity.

The situation in the late 1990s and early years of the new century has not greatly changed from that described above. These new economically-oriented symbols that have played a central role in the post-socialist reforms still disadvantage and largely exclude the rural population. To rural Bulgarians who have not benefited materially from the reforms – indeed the majority are far worse off – and who speak with bitterness about young, urban Bulgarians who have become wealthy overnight (through presumably dishonest, even illegal means) and can afford to eat at McDonald’s and buy Levi jeans, the economic symbols of capitalism are not enthusiastically embraced. Rural people continue to be excluded from the present political arena; marginalized in terms of their restricted access to state resources and in terms of their engagement in the developing market economy. All they can do is witness and comment on the ever-increasing gap between their standard of living and that of urban people. Indeed new economically-oriented symbols assist in marginalizing rural citizens. For Talpians at least, such symbols are alien and distant (unlike the socialist symbols to which they were intimately connected) and serve to emphasise their exclusion from current events. Rural inhabitants cannot compete in a society whose dominant ideology now values material wealth, domination of the economy above all else, and

whose symbols “speak” to these values. In short, economically-oriented symbols remain exclusively the property of a new class of prosperous and therefore powerful urban elite. For the present at least, these urban wealthy appear to have a determining influence over national political symbols and over the general direction of post-socialist reforms in Bulgaria.

Notes

1. While there are numerous biographies of Zhivkov, this one must surely hold particular importance as an official publication produced by the Communist Party.
2. Used by Hitler as an excuse to outlaw his communist opponents, the fire is thought to have been started by the Nazi dictatorship itself in order to consolidate its power. Dimitrov was one of a number of communists charged with starting the fire. He heroically represented himself in court and won acquittal.
3. I thank Patty Gray for bringing to my attention the use of the idiom of ‘brotherhood’ across the USSR. She informs me that the term was used in an attempt to ‘Russianise’ the Soviet people.
4. When I speak of the state ‘centre’ it is the elite Party leadership in Sofia to which I am referring. It would be naïve to believe that this elite was made up of a unified body, rather than of individuals with conflicting interests. Nevertheless, I join a number of authors who feel it is useful to distinguish the centre from the rest of socialist bureaucracy – e.g. Feher, Heller & Markus 1983, cited in Verdery 1991: 423–424.
5. I first went to Bulgaria in 1986 when I carried out 19 months research, mostly in Talpa. Since this time I have been returning regularly to the site, including a further 9 months research in 1992–93 and most summer months in the years since then.
6. The political split between pro and anti socialist groups was not new. This division can be traced back at least to the World War II period – when political differences existed between the fascist government and its opponents (including communists) – but perhaps even earlier when the left-wing Agrarian Party held office for some years in the 1920s and was eventually and violently ousted from office. The right/left political division was less obvious after World War II, as critics to socialism were silenced, but many of those marginalized during the socialist period joined the right-wing faction of post-socialist reformers. This latter group, supported with funds from the West, especially the US, have once again gained the political upper-hand.

7. More permanent editions have now been produced which somewhat more balanced in their historical appraisal than this volume by Semkov (1993). Nevertheless I would argue that the years that Semkov’s (1993) book was used gives an important insight in processes that occurred during the early reform years.
8. I use this term because despite the text’s publication in 1993, that is, two years after the break-up of the Soviet Union, the book continues to refer to the “Soviet Union”.
9. Contrast this act and its strong symbolism with the situation described by Verdery (1999) concerning the political lives of other “dead bodies” across eastern Europe.
10. In Bulgaria’s pursuit of everything “western” it is the USA that has been given prominence. Why a USA-made brand of capitalism was chosen, rather than a European version, is an interesting question which I cannot delve into here, except to offer a few speculative comments. Firstly, after WWII, the USA has been a considerable economic and political force across Western Europe. After 1989 the Americans saw the untapped market potential of eastern Europe and moved quickly to extend their economic and political ties in the region. Europe was slower off the mark. Secondly, as the USSR was the “flagship” of socialism during the cold war period, so the USA was, and remains, the “flagship” for capitalism. In this respect European capitalism cannot compete with the more influential US symbols.
11. Some commentators may wish to term the relations of familiarity that were a dimension of this system as “corruption”, but to do so tells us nothing about how the system operates and indeed masks the particular way in which political relations were put in motion – through fictive kin. I believe it is more useful to understand the nature of socialism as a system founded on criteria which gave prominence to the political realm, unlike capitalism which gives prominence to economically-determined relations.

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