America the beautiful: Made in Bulgaria

Eleanor Smollett

This is a prepublication version of an article published in Anthropology Today. The definitive published version can be found as: "America the Beautiful: Made in Bulgaria", In: ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY, Vol. 9, No. 2, London, U.K., April, 1993.

For the past couple of years there has been an increasing infatuation with the USA among Bulgarians. The full context for understanding this phenomenon must include the characteristics of socialist development in Bulgaria as it took shape during the preceding half century, and the dismemberment of socialist institutions in Bulgaria and elsewhere during the past few years. Since it is clearly impossible even to outline these here, this article aspires only to provide a road map of Americanization and a few observations along the way. These are drawn from the experience of ten research trips to Bulgaria during a twenty year period, the most recent during Spring 1990 and Spring 1991.

A pithy characterization of the infatuation with America was provided recently by Blagovest Sendov, President of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, in a *Washington Post* interview (5 January 1992). 'Right now', he said, 'the American is the ideal. Bulgarians believe that Americans never lie, they never steal, they never throw rubbish on the streets'.

In a way, this shouldn't surprise me. Six years ago, urban Bulgarian high school seniors -- the same youth who are the vocal young adults of the present -- were assuring me that unemployment couldn't possibly exist in rich countries like 'America' and Canada, except among the lazy, when even in a poor country such as theirs all were employed. They also believed that all Americans loved Reagan. Any contrary information must originate, they were sure, from Bulgaria's propaganda apparatus. In the pre-Gorbachev era, with little access to foreign media, the Radio Free Europe version of America was just about the only non-Bulgarian source that was available. It waited in the wings as the image of prosperity and democracy to be contrasted with the frustrations experienced by the Bulgarian youth of the 70s and 80s.

Nevertheless, the 1990s' infatuation with America did surprise me. This was because, after November 1989, when opposition Communists had deposed the long-term Communist leadership, all major Bulgarian political forces had declared themselves to be setting out 'on the road to Europe', not the road to America. These political forces included both the Socialist Party (formerly the Communist party, reorganized under a partly new leadership), and the several opposition coalitions. Bulgarian political discourse debated only *how* the road to Europe should be travelled. This road was to lead (either gradually, according to the Socialists, or through 'shock treatment' according to the opposition) to a market economy and, more immediately, to the June 1990 multi-party parliamentary election.

I will sketch in some of the events of this election as background to other observations to follow. The 1990 election was contested by dozens of parties, most of them newly formed, and by several multi-party coalitions. Those who proved to have significant followings were the Socialist Party and the Union of Democratic Forces, or UDF, a coalition of 16 parties ranging from monarchists to Social Democrats, united only in being anti-communist.

During the run-up to the 1990 election, in the rhetoric of all sides, the notions 'the road to Europe', 'market economy' and 'multi-party elections' quickly became coterminous with 'democracy' and 'prosperity'. However, sorting out all the underlying subtleties in what 'the road to Europe' meant is complicated. In the campaign discourse, 'Europe' meant moving towards the EC and, by implication, towards the prosperity of

its members. But hanging in the background, like a gossamer curtain swirling about the campaign rhetoric, was the old Bulgarian (and pan-Balkan) anxiety to prove themselves to be 'true Europeans', prosperous and civilized, and not backward 'eastern' descendants of the Ottoman Empire.¹

The main opposition coalition, the UDF, played on all these elements by running a slick Western-style election campaign. Sophisticated UDF TV commercials appeared, showing fabulously stocked food markets in Greece, with the message 'The choice is yours. Vote for prosperity'. Only occasionally did campaign speeches explain more candidly that the 'shock treatment' transformation to a capitalist economy would bring some hardships along the way to the promised prosperity. European and American campaign experts, and millions of dollars of European and American money, ran this campaign. Some of the American money came from U.S. government information services, some from 'voluntary organizations' such as the U.S. Republican Party.

The UDF plastered the country with bright posters that all could see were printed on foreign-made papers with foreign-made inks. 'The World is With Us', said the posters. Translation: 'The Capitalist World will invest here and give us loans if, and only if, you vote for the UDF'. Speeches and widespread graffiti, as well as less cheery posters crowded with skulls, advocated defeating 'the Communist murderers', and vengeance against Communists.

The Socialist Party, lacking money, lacking foreign aid, and lacking -- by this time -- much access to the mass media (which were already largely 'democratized' and in the control of young supporters of the opposition) ran a low key campaign. They relied on public gatherings, on TV time allotted by the election law, and on their own press. They admitted that, given the disintegration of the international socialist economy, they had nowhere to go but to the market, and no clear economic plan; but they would develop a plan, they said, that retained as much as possible of what working people had gained under socialism. They stated clearly that hard times were coming, and they promised no prosperity. They conceded the planning failures, inadequate democratization and corruption of the past -- but denied that these justified the discarding of socialist objectives.

Despite the difficult circumstances, the Socialist rallies had an upbeat mood, filled with laughter and a sense of warm solidarity. The leaders' speeches had a tone of tenderness and quiet reflection, of empathy with their listeners; and the response was in kind. 'We have been through a lot in this period; we have learned some terrible things about our past; we must live through it in solidarity and retain our goals'. The speeches decried the vindictiveness of the opposition's campaign and its painting of all Communists with a criminal brush.

And, although the Socialists had also declared themselves to be 'on the road to Europe', they mocked the opposition's obsequiousness toward the West as *the* locus of civilization. The fine honed political satire that is so well developed and appreciated in Bulgaria was evident in the speeches, and was met by delighted hilarity -- as in one speech at a huge rally, given by Angel Wagenstein, a much beloved film and theatre director. 'The UDF', he said, 'has dispatched a blue express train' (blue was the UDF campaign colour), 'a blue train hurtling towards Europe, where backward Bulgaria will learn civilization; well, we ask of the UDF only to include one small red caboose on their blue train, and in it will ride Geo Milev and Nicola Vaptsarov, Pablo Picasso and Sean O'Casey ...' and there followed a long list of all the greatest Communist intellectuals of Bulgaria and the world.

¹ I was reminded by chance of the pan-Balkan nature of this anxiety this summer, when I read in the press a quote from a Bosnian Muslim, a professor of sociology. 'We used to have a peaceful life', he said. 'We thought we were Europeans. I had a big house, my children were in high school ... so I never expected these things could ever happen to us ... We are not Kurds, we are Europeans, there must be some justice'. (*Toronto Globe & Mail*, 27 July 1992.)

At rallies, the Socialist slogans were simply: 'We are still here', 'We are many', 'We shall be victorious'. And they *were* victorious. The Socialist Party won the election, won it with a clear parliamentary majority. But in an eerie echo of their pre-World War 2 election victories (in the then monarchist Bulgaria), they won but were not allowed to govern.² And it is here that we must return to America the Beautiful. Because it was towards the end of this 1990 campaign, when it became evident that the Socialists might very well win the election, that the American presence became extremely noticeable. And it remained so from then into the present. As a *Washington Post* reporter later commented (5 January, 1992), 'The European Community is actually spending more in Bulgaria than the United States, but America carries a bigger megaphone'.

By the latter part of the 1990 campaign, it had become obvious that 'Europe' was preoccupied with other problems and places, and was not hastening to promise EC membership to Bulgaria. 'America', on the other hand, having been alarmed by Bulgaria's Spring 1990 moratorium on debt repayments, and perceiving the possibility of a Socialist victory, expressed increasing interest. Some groundwork had been laid the year before. Bulgarian-American Friendship Societies had been established. Bulgarian sociologists had carried out opinion surveys, commissioned by (and on themes formulated by) these societies, about Bulgarian images of American life, and had widely broadcast the positive results. Now, hundreds of American advisers took up residence in the downtown Sheraton Hotel in Sofia (the capital), giving advice on how to conduct a democratic election (and -- after the election -- remaining to give advice on how to make the country ungovernable by the democratically elected Socialist Party).

According to press reports, when asked a question by the American ambassador about the opposition campaign, the Socialist leader, Andrei Loukanov, had replied, 'You are the opposition'. On the final evenings of the campaign, opposition motorcades wound through Sofia, horns blaring and American flags waving from car windows along with the opposition blue. And at the final opposition campaign rally, the American ambassador spoke, flanked by a large American flag on the podium.

Hours after the election results were known, and declared fair and legal by teams of international observers, huge rallies of youth were organized. UDF leaders told them the election had been manipulated. They led chants of 'Strike, strike! We'll never work for the Reds'. A 'City of Truth' tent encampment to harass the government was set up near the parliament in Sofia and continued for months. Student strikes were called. By the same Autumn, the leaders of these student strikes were studying on scholarships at American universities.

Before many months had passed, the elected Socialist government -- despite its parliamentary majority -- turned over most key ministries and the Presidency to the opposition. Faced with constant blockades and

² Such an occasion is described in the *New York Herald Tribune*, September 1932, quoted in Leo Huberman's *Man's Worldly Goods* (New York and London, 1968, originally published 1936):

BULGARIA, MONARCHY, HAS COMMUNIST CAPITAL But Reds' Sweep of Sofia Council to be Short-Lived

SOFIA, Bulgaria, Sept. 26 -- The sweeping victory of the Communists in yesterday's municipal elections caused great surprise and much embarrassment here.

Out of thirty-five seats in Sofia's city council, the Communists won twenty-two, against ten for the allied governmental bloc and the Democrats and three for the Zankoff party. Since the parliamentary elections, in 1931, the Communists have more than doubled their votes, while the governmental bloc has lost 50 per cent of its followers.

Sofia is the first European capital, outside of Russia, to go Communist, and the anomaly becomes even more striking when it is remembered that Bulgaria is a monarchy and that the residence of King Boris is only a few minutes' walk from the city hall.

For this, and other reasons, a Communist city administration will not be tolerated. As soon as the election results were known, Premier Nicolas Mushanoff announced his intention to dissolve the city council before it assembles. It also is probable that the Communist party will be declared illegal and forbidden throughout Bulgaria.

The Communist victory was due to the desperate economic situation, which led many persons in no way connected with Bolshevism to vote Communist out of protest.

disruptions of production and transport, and even the torching of the Socialist Party's Central Committee building, they chose to give up power rather than allow an escalation of disturbances that could lead to a civil war. The avoidance of bloodshed had become the primary concern of the Socialist government under Andrei Loukanov. The opposition took advantage of this response to its destabilization campaign, and ultimately used it to go around the election results and take power.

In the succeeding year, 1990-1991, the institutionalization of American influence proceeded with intensity. In fall-winter, the Open Society Fund established itself in Sofia. This organization is sponsored by the Soros Foundations. Led by George Soros of New York, this self-styled private 'charitable' organization is setting up Privatization Training Programmes, Business Administration Seminars and Educational Projects all over Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.³ During 1991, the pre-war American College in Sofia (a secondary school) was quickly re-established, with American staff for humanities and social sciences. Within a year, an American University was created in the town of Blagoevgrad. This was accomplished by the same Open Society Fund through an Initiative Committee chaired by Elka Konstantinova. Today, Elka Konstantinova is the Bulgarian Minister of Culture. In addition, a member of the Board of Trustees of the Open Society Fund, Dimiter Ludzhev, is Minister of Defence, and in 1991 was made Deputy Prime Minister. In 1992, another member of the board of the Open Society Fund, Blaga Dimitrova, was elected Vice-President of Bulgaria.⁴

In 1991, Bulgarians could attend seminars on 'The American Way of Life' at the University of Sofia, advertised on posters all over Sofia, taught by a Fulbright exchange scholar. They could listen to Voice of America broadcasts on loudspeakers in the central square of Sofia and in a multitude of cafes and shops. That summer, young Bulgarians of my acquaintance assured us that we must find their television programmes very dull, as American ones (which they had never seen) are so much more interesting. In America, the talents of young people are always developed, never wasted. And in America, even the business men are 'more intelligent': 'Here in Bulgaria', they explained, 'business men buy cheap goods and sell them at high prices to the population to make a big profit; in America, business men are more intelligent and would never do such things'.

So, in the end, it has been America and not Europe that has seduced and embraced a large and highly visible portion of the Bulgarian population -- the young, educated urban Bulgarians, the technical and professional workers, including those who now programme the mass media and claim the national voice. They are floundering between a socialist system they have rejected (but whose benefits they take for granted) and a capitalist system whose characteristics they grasp vaguely at best. But these young people who have literally wrapped themselves in the American flag, printed on their T-shirts, and who are convinced that 'the market' equals democracy and brings prosperity -- their voice speaks in fact for only part of the population.

This is evident if we examine the results of the most recent elections -- in 1991 and 1992. In October 1991 a new parliamentary election was held. This time, the UDF won power. But it won power with 34% of the votes (for all the 16 parties in the UDF coalition together) as against 33% for the Socialist Party alone. (The UOF requires the tacit support of an ethnic Turkish party in order to govern, the only party besides the Socialists and UDF to win seats in the parliament.) Then in January 1992 a Presidential election was held. Again, it was won by the UDF coalition candidate, but by only 53% against 46% for the Socialist Party candidate.

³ According to *Open Society, Chronicle of the Soros Foundations*, 3.4, April 1992, p.1, some of the Soros Foundations' activities receive major funding from the United States Information Agency.

⁴ Elka Konstantinova, Dimiter Ludzhev and Blaga Dimitrova held the offices mentioned at the time of writing, in April 1992.

The split in the electorate shown in these figures is along clear lines. It reflects a real division in the population -- in experience, and in thinking.

Support for the Socialists comes largely from older people, 40s and up, including a heavy rural component - the cooperative farmers, as well as industrial workers (mostly outside the capital), and older artists and intellectuals with strong Communist roots. These are people many of whom remember the pre-socialist past, people who actively struggled for political change, who participated in the process of socialist development, and who experienced substantial benefits under the socialist system. They were disgusted with the inadequacies and abuses of the Party leadership in power up to 1989, and anxious for it to be replaced. But they remained committed to socialism, and proud of its accomplishments in Bulgaria. They came out to rallies hundreds of thousands strong during the elections to say so. In Spring 1991, I re-interviewed some of these people, cooperative farmers whom I had by then known for 20 years. 'Why should I want my land back, as the UDF offers?', they asked. 'What shall I do -- resume ploughing with a horse? We thought we had built something fine. We began in dire poverty, and for a long time now have been living so well. Now the UDF will tear it all down.'⁵

Supporters of the Socialists tend to compare their recent (up to 1989) standard of living with their pre-socialist past, and to see the advances as having resulted from their own activities in work and politics -- both within Bulgaria, and as part of an international socialist system. These are not people who expect improvements to come from importing either an American model or American aid.

Supporters of the UDF, by contrast, are mainly younger, 40 and under, largely urban, and educated in technical and professional occupations. They grew up assuming that socialist benefits such as socially provided higher education, health care, housing and guaranteed employment were normal, universal human rights. They matured, however, in a period in the 70s and 80s, when they experienced socialism as a system in decline, when corruption and lack of adequate democratization were apparent in their government, and when the failure of the system to find adequate means of decentralizing the economy was leading to occupational frustrations among the young. Most important, they matured in a period when few paths for political action were open to them, paths of struggle for actively changing their situation.⁶

These younger people tended to compare themselves to young people of similar occupations in the West, not against their parents' and their grandparents' standard of living. And they judged what they had as inadequate by this external standard. It is they who have been reaching abroad, then, for models, models that they hope will allow them to import the universal prosperity they believe exists in the West. They search in many directions -- flocking to religion, exploring the occult (poltergeists are all the rage), starting dozens of little splinter parties or voting UDF, embarking on entrepreneurships of many varieties, and admiring America. Even the Bulgarian language has expanded appropriately. One can now say *beezinesmen* (singular), *beezinesmeni* (plural), *beezinesmenka* (feminine).

One thought has come to me repeatedly during the past few years as I have watched this process. The UDF government and the young urban Bulgarians who support it (and wave American flags) seem intent on tearing down existing institutions as quickly as possible. Granted, the disintegration of socialism internationally makes some of this unavoidable. Still, the assumption seems to be that if they strip away all traces of socialism -- the cooperative farms, the state enterprises, the social benefits -- then prosperity will come.

The thought that keeps coming to me is *cargo*. A mechanical analogy to cargo cults is meaningless of course. There is no cargo cult in Bulgaria. There is no charismatic leader. We are not seeing a revitalization

⁵ In 1992, the UDF government in fact began to dismantle the cooperative farms.

⁶ There were other important causes for their dissatisfaction. These will require detailed analysis in future publications.

movement (though some monarchists have appeared) or a millenarian religious movement. But still, in this secular, highly educated, industrial society, there are echoes that say 'cargo'.⁷ The wealth that is coveted exists somewhere else, in an external society. The structure of that external society and the manner in which the wealth is produced are poorly understood. The young people who covet what they imagine is the universal wealth of the West were not suffering from unemployment, poverty or absolute deprivation under socialism (although, in the present situation, they are beginning to experience all of these). They were and are, however, experiencing relative deprivation, as compared with their external model. It is this relative deprivation that moves them, as David Aberle made clear long ago in discussion of cargo cults. And as Eric Hobsbawm pointed out in contrasting these movements with revolutions, the leadership of such movements has no clear programme or plan of implementation for a new social system. The expected improvement to society is based on faith. If we strip away the old institutions, then the foreign aid, the investment, the development, the cargo will come.⁸

And if it doesn't come? If 'the market' doesn't bring prosperity? Perhaps the West was not emulated accurately enough -- perhaps not enough of the economy was privatized, or the 'democratic' elections were flawed, or the communists inadequately suppressed.

Postscript -- August 1992

During the Spring and Summer of 1992, the UDF government launched a widespread purge of communists from the civil service and from academic institutions. Thousands of people have been subjected to loyalty investigations in the guise of 'competence' checks. Many of those who have not been replaced have been required to sign loyalty oaths. In July, three past Prime Ministers in office during the 1981-1991 period (including Andrei Loukanov) were arrested. Charges included 'corruption', 'mismanaging the economy', or 'misappropriating state funds' (for international solidarity!). The trial of former Communist Party leader, Todor Zhivkov, on similar charges, continued.

⁷ For my non-anthropologist readers:

The "Cargo Cult" was a widespread phenomenon -- a variety of millenarian movement -- in the Pacific islands (particularly Melanesia) after World War II. These islands were inhabited largely by village dwellers subsisting on horticulture and fishing, people who had little experience with industrially manufactured goods. The American soldiers who fought the Japanese on these islands and/or occupied them as bases were supplied with unlimited cargos of fabulous seeming goods and equipment. Even soldiers who were dark skinned like the islanders were seen receiving and using these items. The local people had no understanding of the system and methods of manufacture or of the sources of these goods. They considered that the Americans must have more powerful ancestor or other spirits looking after them than their own.

In the post-war years, a number of cult movements arose in the region, usually organized around charismatic leaders. Participating islanders made changes in the local way of life so that similar cargo would be delivered to themselves. Followers of these movements sometimes built docks or airstrips, if none were left by the troops, in order to facilitate landing of the expected cargo. Some proceeded to abandon much of their existing way of life - from social and political institutions, to ritual, to methods of subsistence -- clearing the decks of all old institutions to make room for the cargo to come. Then they waited for it to arrive.

When it didn't? Perhaps the Americans were at fault. Though generous to them during the war, they might have turned stingy and interfered with the spirits who send cargo. Or perhaps they, the islanders, were at fault. Maybe they had too little faith, or had failed to imitate Americans well enough, or had failed to abandon their old ways thoroughly enough.

⁸ I have discussed Bulgaria because it is what I know. To suggest that the phenomenon is probably much more widespread, here is a quotation from a Canadian reporter, Fred Weir, who describes political posters seen in Moscow during the 1991-92 winter: 'My personal favorite is entitled "Imperialist Conspiracy" and shows the sky over Moscow black with airplanes bearing U.S. Air Force markings. They are dropping hams, cheeses, baby food, stylish winter clothes, even television sets'. (*Canadian Tribune*, 20 January 1992).