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HISTORY,
REWRITING HISTORY,
RETHINKING HISTORICISM

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HISTORY, REWRITING HISTORY, RETHINKING HISTORICISM

The future depends on us,
whereas we do not depend
on any historical necessity.

Karl Popper

The philosopher is the unquestionable founder of the ideal state since he knows the Truth, the pure Forms, and can reproduce this ideal in reality, according to Plato. K. Popper sharply criticizes Utopian engineering, the close relationship between philosophy-history-power. He accuses Plato of totalitarianism in his political philosophy, as well as of nursing at least nine tyrants among his disciples and friends¹.

Popper argues that Plato is conservative and strives to assert a model of a past condition of society. Philosophers are usually criticized for revolutionism. For formulating ideas rather than for conducting revolutions. What else is a revolution, asks Camus, if not "implementation of the idea in historical experience"². Deleuze and Guattari ascribe revolution to philosophers as a "sin" because of "the enthusiasm with which it is conceived on the absolute plane of immanence - as a presentation of infinity within the framework of a single here-and-now - which has nothing rational" about it³.

This article will not discuss the question of whether philosophers make history by philosophizing on history. It will examine the existential need of history – of a particular type of history – as formulated by intellectual discourse in the place and time which we designate as "postcommunism". The focus is on the persistence in rewriting history. "Rewriting" history not in the historical but in the theoretical sense – as a reflection on the existing and introduction of new conceptual perspectives in whose prism history is understood, evaluated and valorized. Historicism is discussed in detail as the methodological framework within which history is consistently and often non-reflexively conceived.

The analysis is premised on the assumption that social cognition is a non-homogeneous alloy of description and analysis, as well as of Utopian views, existential roots. Any theorizing on social change includes "eschatology, not just epistemology"⁴.

I.

"History" was one of the conceptual pillars of the communist regime. Congresses, plenums and documents were often qualified as historic. So were still ongoing events which completed their course with the assurance of having secured a place in history. The discursive

¹ Popper K., *The Open Society and Its Enemies. The Magic of Plato* (in bulgarian), Sofia, Zlatorog, 1993.

² Camus A., «Uprisal, revolution, history» (in bulgarian), in *Izbor*, Autumn/Winter, 1992, p. 83.

³ Deleuze G. and Guattari F., *What Is Philosophy?* (in bulgarian), Sofia, Kritika i Humanism, 1995, p.171.

⁴ Alexander J., «Modern, Anti, Post, and Neo: How social theories have tried to understand the "new world" of "our time"», in *Zeitschrift fur Soziologie*, No. 3, 1994, p. 167.

sive practice of power outlines the model of history advocated by the latter:

- history is foreseeable. The future is transparent. We know – even today – what the future will no doubt remember of the present. As puts it figuratively⁵, for communism only the past is unpredictable;

- if history is foreseeable, then there should be a subject who knows its course. Hence he is best capable of guiding it. This subject has both epistemological and authoritative functions. That is why concepts of social development were discussed at party *fora* first and then at scientific seminars;

- history is progress. The social technology of planning is based on the belief that it is possible to control chaos, spontaneity and diversity, and to instrumentalize prescriptions for efficiency;

- history is progression from a not that fair and egalitarian society with “small truth”⁶ towards an ever fairer social situation;

- history is both ontology and value. Of the many events, only particular ones were distinguished as “historic”. This distinction was seen as an evaluation – high and undoubtedly positive. Evaluation and reality were mutually inductive. The higher a text, person or event were evaluated, the greater the ontological weight ascribed to them. Needless to say, this perspective was organized by and centered on power rather than everyday life.

If history is so many things, then it unquestionably is. There was not even the slightest hint of its problematization in regard to the outlining of different models of history or the rationalization of the limits of historicism.

This “overproduction” of history in the communist political discourse was not substantiated on the level of everyday consciousness. Everyday consciousness failed – nor did it ever try – to delimit the timelessness of the plethora of periodizations to which it was regularly treated: “real socialism”, “developed socialist society”, “scientific and technological revolution”, etc. In the new terminological garb, the future still appeared like “more than the present”.

Postcommunism appeared as intoxication with history. All of a sudden, time was filled with events rather than words – crowds in the squares, new political leaders, first free elections, first independent newspapers. “First” and “new” developments imply change, beginning, history. As ever, there were lots of words: a plenum silencing the almost perpetual (35 years in power) communist party general secretary; a declaration by the still communist National Assembly condemning the communist policy of forcible assimilation of minorities; a round-table discussion; heated debates in multi-party parliaments, etc. The talking was again done by representatives of power who instrumentalized the new words for the latter’s – and their own – purposes. Illustrating the thesis that the conditions of the performance of utterances are not within but beyond the discourse itself⁷, those words now elicited a broad public response since they fused with the hope that they were not merely promising, but making history.

The length and specific subject of this article do not allow us to analyze the reasons why the postcommunist individual soon tired of “making” history – the squares have eventually been deserted, and voter turnout has declined steadily. We are embarking on a new stage – the rewriting of history. I will briefly outline three directions of the theoretical reinterpretation of history.

⁵ Rupnik J., «Return of history» (in bulgarian), in *Izbor*, Autumn/Winter, 1992, pp. 2-17; 58-63.

⁶ “Small truth” (*malika pravda*), a term construed in the final decade of Bulgaria’s communist regime when the errors and failure of the regime could no longer be covered up. The term had a dual purpose: to nominate and minimize the weaknesses. The communist project itself was not to be problematized, remaining as the Great Truth. Anything in reality that contradicted it was not to be regarded as a refutation of, but as a minor departure from the communist model.

⁷ Austin J., *How to do things with words*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1962.

“End” and “beginning” are words which inevitably stir the historical imagination, especially at a time experienced as interim. They are also a theoretical challenge since their use is a diagnosis presupposing formulation of the criteria applied in defining a particular period, civilization, history. They have naturally become central to the debate.

One of the formulations used in discussing the question of the beginning is whether the origin of communist society is natural or doctrinal⁸. Advocates of the doctrinal origin of communism or, to use K. Popper’s vocabulary, of the implementation of communism via the technology of Utopian engineering, premise their arguments on indicators such as initial accumulation of capital and degree of industrialization. The more advanced they are, the more “artificial” the imposition of communism⁹. The opposite view topicalizes the argument of tradition – if a society has been, if it has survived for decades, then it cannot be qualified as artificial: “The origin of communist societies is a natural process of transition from traditional to capitalist (sic) society”¹⁰. As a type of bourgeois revolution, socialist revolution aims at transition from simple commodity to extended reproduction, expropriating petty private property for the purpose¹¹.

These explanatory schemes have two theoretical targets: to offer a new interpretation of Bulgaria’s contemporary history so that we could understand “what’s up”¹² and “what sort of society we’re living in”¹³; to revitalize the concept of history whose key words are way of production, initial accumulation of capital, revolution, etc.

“The end of history” is the subject that “ushered” Francis Fukuyama into contemporary social sciences. He bases his thesis that this is not merely the end of a particular period in world history but the end of history as such, on the idea of the universalization of Western liberal democracy as an ultimate form of human government¹⁴. In the spirit of the view that a concept of history wins publicity if it plays on vital strings of historical sensitivity rather than for its theoretical originality and analytical consistence, Fukuyama’s article overnight became one of the most widely debated texts in the past few years. The subject has triggered a broad debate in Bulgaria too. This fact is indicative per se. It shows that Bulgarian social and human studies are opening up. For the purpose of this analysis, however, I will dwell on another dimension of the debate: the difference in the arguments used by West and East European writers.

Ralph Dahrendorf considers Fukuyama’s view “simplistic and wrong” since it substitutes system for society:

If capitalism is a system, then it should be fought as resolutely as communism. The path to freedom is not a path from one system to another; it is a path that leads to the open space of the infinite variants of the future¹⁵.

History does not stop but returns, Rupnik claims, illustrating his thesis with the East European case: “History, which had artificially come to a halt, has resumed its progress”, he writes, quoting Vaclav Havel¹⁶.

⁸ Naidenov G., «Is the Origin of “Socialist” Societies Natural or Doctrinal?» (in bulgarian), in *Philosophski Alternativi*, No. 6, 1993, pp. 29-38.

⁹ Badjakov M., «Is the Origin of Our Society “Natural” or “Artificial”?» (in bulgarian), in *Philosophski Alternativi*, No. 6, 1993, pp. 54-7.

¹⁰ Naidenov G., «Is the Origin of “Socialist” Societies Natural or Doctrinal?», *op. cit.*, p. 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Naidenov G., *What’s Up*, Sofia, Vikom-Kos, 1991.

¹³ Badjakov M., *What Society Are We Living In*, (in bulgarian), Sofia, Microprint, 1993.

¹⁴ Fukuyama F., «The End of History» (in bulgarian), in *Izbor*, Autumn/Winter, 1992, pp. 2-17.

¹⁵ Dahrendorf R., «The 15 minutes of Fukuyama» (in bulgarian), in *Izbor*, Autumn/Winter, 1992, p. 26.

¹⁶ Rupnik J., «Return of history», *op. cit.*, p. 58.

Tsvetana Georgieva admits that she does not read Fukuyama with the academic tranquility of critical distance, but affectively, to the point of “stress”:

the millions of us who live in the post-totalitarian world of Eastern Europe [...] have too much hope to accept the end of History just when we are eager to start reinterpreting History¹⁷.

In a more analytical text, Asen Davidov points out a dimension in which Fukuyama is right – the extinction of productive imagination could be regarded as a symptom of the end of history, yet not because of the dawn of the age of liberal democracy but because of “the twilight of the individual”¹⁸. Even if the end is endless and the fight against totalizing history is futile, this “existential, internal, non-social”¹⁹ fight is as essential as human dignity.

We see two groups of arguments. Dahrendorf’s are mostly theoretical and Rupnik’s, factual. Both are analytical. In the case of the quoted Bulgarian writers, the existential prevails despite the difference of approach and the high level of the analysis – the submersion in a particular here-and-now, the fear of a recurrence of timelessness, the responsibility of preventing totalizing history from devouring us once again.

I will also dwell on a third direction in the reinterpretation of history. If a number of writers argue that postcommunism effects a transition to capitalism, some believe that it has a chance to skip modernity, landing straight in postmodernity²⁰. If we class this humorous projection as intellectual stylistics, the fact is that another type of narratives is also distinct among the multiplicity of old and new, but invariably modern, interpretations of history. Alexander Kiossev suggests reading Fukuyama in Lyotard’s perspective. In this perspective, Fukuyama’s position appears to be an

attempt at a Grand Narrative [...] in a situation of crisis of Grand Narratives, an attempt at winning new confidence in the existence of a Universal Story which organizes-unites-totalizes all flows [...] of time²¹.

To the tyranny of the Centre which has the self-confidence to proclaim the end, to monopolize time, Kiossev offers the alternative interpretation of the end of History as the beginning of a multitude of histories.

We have three quite different views on history. In the first case, history is perceived without inverted commas and is operationalized in “stringent” indicators such as industrialization, hired labor, capital, party, concentration camps... Society has a substance, “nature”, and in order to understand a particular specific-historical manifestation, one must identify structure-definitive factors. In the second, the ontology of history is inseparable from productive imagination as an *a priori* form constituting historical reality. In the third, historical reality no longer exists independently and beyond the mode of its narration.

In the first perspective, history is in the singular. Claims of communism as a deviation, of a return to normality, express the belief in a single logic and general course of history. The second position structures the view of the historical around a term in the plural – people as centres of being and meaning. In the third perspective, history itself is in the plural.

The tenor of the three positions is substantially different too. The first is constructive. It operates with realities and analyzes them with the self-assurance of scientific objectivism.

¹⁷ Georgieva T., «At the Deathbed of History» (in bulgarian) in *Izbor*, Autumn/Winter, 1992, p. 55.

¹⁸ Davidov A., «End of history – beginning of absurd?» (in bulgarian), in *Izbor*, Autumn/Winter, 1992, p. 43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Ivanova E., «The Comeback of History As a Myth» (in bulgarian), in *Izbor*, Autumn/Winter, 1992, pp. 64-9.

²¹ Kiossev A., «The End of History: Beginning of Histories» (in bulgarian), in *Izbor*, Autumn/Winter, 1992, p. 126.

The second proceeds from the submersion of the individual in the becoming of the *socium* and tries to reconcile alarm with hope, predestination with responsibility. The third “loses” the subject among the multitude of narratives with neither a beginning nor an end, in a world of the simulacrum which can hardly tell real from artificial, a world where self-identification inevitably centres on the traumatic, the marginal.

It is paradoxical – and important – that those incommensurably different intellectual universes have one and the same motif: the theme of our present need of history. For the first approach, history is not a problem – the problem is to attain the truth about history. The object of analysis and the subject to which this knowledge is addressed overlap: society as a whole. The second approach explicitly introduces the individual perspective: being historical, the individual cannot be indifferent to history, and today this need has become imperative – we are hoping, expecting, trusting that time will be filled with becoming, that “transition”, “change”, “post-” will become performative, their presence in political and intellectual discourse materializing in real referents. History is most problematic in the third perspective which hardly distinguishes between becoming and narrative. The striving for the rehabilitation of history – at that, a rehabilitation condemning the monopoly of the Centre and giving the periphery a chance – is all the more indicative. The epistemological operation of using history in the plural is existentially inspired, prompted by the desire of us marginal people not to be doomed to merely follow, but to have the liberty of creating narratives, ourselves, and histories.

Having analyzed those three directions in the reinterpretation of history, I will now focus on an unexplored theoretical perspective. The absent themes are as typical in studying discourse as the present ones, since they delimit the intellectual universe, the terms and themes left beyond it.

Spontaneously created order is better than the most perfect “ordering” of the world in a rational project. Precisely because it is unpredicted – and unpredictable – the former is entirely open: to innovation, experiments, errors, tests, discoveries. Even the perfect – individual, collective, “artificial” – intelligence is incapable of grasping the incredible variety of information, ideas, knowledge on the basis of which spontaneous order emerges and which are the driving force of its expansion.

Those ideas advanced by F. A. Hayek are yet to “translate” into concepts in our present reflections on history²². His critique of the inclination to project social development, of the disposition that the world must first be “ordered” mentally, with practice merely following the prescriptions, of the conceit of reason which believes with Enlightenment-like enthusiasm in the intelligibility of historical becoming, have no substantial equivalents in intellectual discourse. If the latter remains insensitive to F. A. Hayek’s theoretical challenges, that is because it continues reproducing the position he rejects.

F. A. Hayek argues that to understand the errors of socialism one must realize the illegitimacy of its epistemological premises, namely that reason is capable of perceiving, projecting and judging historical becoming and that this is better for humanity than following practices that have emerged spontaneously and have been asserted through their viability and efficiency rather than through authoritative intervention, as well as the open opportunity for experimenting a multitude of others.

Bulgaria has easily, promptly and categorically realized what is F. A. Hayek’s main thesis: the essential, “necessary”, fallacy of socialism. This, however, has had the opposite theoretical effect: if F. A. Hayek objects to the very idea of design, in Bulgaria the rejection of the communist project has been supplanted by the idea of the imperative need to replace it by another, “better”, project. Indicatively, we will find this theme in a number of writers uncritical of their own theoretical premises, as well as in considerably more self-reflective

²² Hayek F. A., *The fatal conceit. The errors of socialism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988.

thinkers²³.

Even though my attitude to historicism stops short of F. A. Hayek's "frank hostility", I have certain reservations about historicism:

- teleologism. We find it not so much in concrete historical studies as in historicism as an approach. If the historian reveals "the diverse madneses, failures, predation which history enacts"²⁴, the rationalist philosopher is not afraid to trace the "logic" of history in this show and to translate it into "the neat idiom of categories"²⁵.

- empowerment of "initiated", "elites", those who know the truth about history and can foretell its course.

There is no reason why all or some should be endowed with the whole knowledge of history

F. A. Hayek thinks²⁶, but this type of arguments fails to crack the tough shell of the historicism deeply ingrained in our humanitarian thinking.

K. Popper suggests an attractive alternative to historicism: individualism, rational knowledge and personal responsibility. I, for one, am tempted by this solution. As a researcher, it is my duty to see its constraints too. It is an unquestionable achievement of modernity that the latter has valorized and given a free rein to the freedom and autonomy of the individual. Yet it is precisely modernity that has realized how heavy the cross of freedom and autonomy really is.

A profound observer like K. Popper cannot fail to note that counter-formations, the closed niches that are formed even as the social space starts opening up. The moment that the nascent philosophical tradition of rival theories and their critical discussion tries to crack the magic integrity of the closed world – this very moment coincides with the spread of the so-called Orphic cults whose followers strive to replace the lost sense of integrity by a new mystic religion²⁷. These manifestations are all the more numerous 25 centuries later. From submersion in the anonymity of the crowd to integration into the disciplining communities of fundamentalist cults, Modern Man has tried a number of ways of avoiding individualism. What has made him or her lock himself or herself up in an open world? Any categorical answer would be simplistic. I will note a single dimension relevant to this analysis – the loss of the sense of meaning that transcends the individual, a superior and unconditional meaning.

From a theoretical vantage point, I would prefer "territorialization" to historicism. Not to underrate the becoming but to appreciate the environment. Geography – mental rather than physical – does not aspire to replace history, but to

uproot it from the cult towards necessity, to underline the irreducible nature of chance, to uproot it from the cult of foundations so as to assert the power of the environment²⁸.

From my existential position of an intellectual submerged in our postcommunist dilemmas and quests, I cannot fail to appreciate the need of history.

"God is dead", philosophers realized back in the 19th century. The 20th century offered and quite soon denied another two points of reference: race and class. The loss of transcendence is one of the most dramatic experiences of Modern Man. This existential void is

²³ Bogdanov B., «The Two Welfares», in *Lettre Internationale*, No. 7, 1994, pp. 43-57.

²⁴ Ricoeur P., *History and Truth* (in bulgarian), Sofia, Arges, 1993, p. 30.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁶ Hayek F. A., *The fatal conceit...*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

²⁷ Popper K., *The Open Society and Its Enemies...*, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Deleuze G. and Guattari F., *What Is Philosophy?*, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

only occasionally filled by liberalism, and comparatively seldom by dry institutional and abstract rationalistic versions such as Popper's. Figuratively speaking, the life-blood of liberalism is liberalism itself just as much as its alternatives. When the latter no longer have historical chances, this is experienced as "the end of history".

Paradoxically, we postcommunist people are happier. Preoccupied with vital concern about the present insecurity, we are far from the metaphysical concern about radical meaninglessness. We still vaguely identify history as intersubjectivity of the totalizing integrity of power in history. Yet we believe in history. We believe in history as an event and in history as meaning. We expect the eventfulness to materialize for us in the modern modes of "change", "development", "progress". We need a locus of objectives and values that transcend us, a locus which our secularized mind finds in history.

Only the naive mind believes that facts precede theory. As Goethe aptly puts it, what we "know" about things are our own interpretations of them²⁹.

The rewriting of history is now a "fact". It is manifested in the diversity of theoretical prisms in which we analyze history and which naturally "write" history in a different way. The important thing is that the choice of theoretical perspective is increasingly motivated by epistemological rather than authoritative considerations.

The position of historicism is more ambiguous. Historicism is either reproduced non-reflexively in a multitude of texts or is postmodernly shattered by breaking down the totality of history into a multitude of narratives. The critical reinterpretation of historicism in the sense of realizing its epistemological premises and limits, as well as developing theoretical alternatives, is yet to come.

²⁹ Quoted by F. A. Hayek, *The fatal conceit...*, *op. cit.*, p. 106.