

A Bulgarian Conference on the Ethnology of Socialism: Five Senses in Everyday and Festive Life

In the past decades, multidisciplinary investigations of the socialist era have been undertaken by Bulgarian specialists in the fields of history, language, ethnology, anthropology, and folklore. In the same academic direction, the International Online Conference “Socialism Through the Lens of the Five Senses” (“Социализмът през петте сетива”) was organised between the 3rd and the 4th of March 2022 by the Center for Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of St Cyril and St Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo (hereinafter VTU) and the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (hereinafter IEFEM). During the event, twenty five papers were presented by scientists, predominantly from Bulgaria, as well as from North Macedonia, Russia, Germany, and India.

In his opening speech, the Director of IEFEM, **Vladimir Penchev** (Sofia) welcomed the participants to the conference and identified the topic of sensory in the era of socialism as innovative and promising for interdisciplinary and comparative studies. He remarked on the growing role of reflection and personal experience in ethnology, as well as the role of analytical writings of the scientists who had experienced socialism. V. Penchev further underlined the idea that the historical memory is an important domain to be shared with new generations of young researchers, who have to be led through the context of the socialist era.

The reports presented at the conference had different objectives, and the speakers used different methodologies and research data. The common feature, however, was the time-frame, as all speakers were referring to the same period of time – the socialist era – in Bulgaria and other countries. Although the scientific meeting was dedicated to the five senses, speakers only partially followed the assigned theme. Taste, vision, hearing, smell, and touch were often approached indirectly, in the context of a broader topic.

A number of presentations were devoted to the taste code: cuisine, culinary traditions, and food production in Bulgaria. In her report, “The Taste of Vegetables Under Socialism,” **Yana Yancheva** (IEFEM, Sofia) analysed the

ethnological aspects of artisanal and industrial production and the harvesting of tomatoes and green beans. The speaker insisted on the role these productions played in the national and family economy; the various ways in which mutual assistance was built in villages (e.g., exchange of seeds and recipes). Despite the fact that canned food was mainly exported during socialism (mostly to the USSR), homemade preparations were in high demand. They strengthened family life and helped maintain the social ties between members.

Rosen Marinov (VTU, Veliko Turnovo) devoted his paper “The Taste of Socialist Holidays” to the issue of maintenance of family and social ties, with a special focus on festive meals. During the discussion, an exchange of views took place on how much canning is still ongoing today and on how much growing and harvesting vegetables is still a survival strategy.

A different perspective on the study of taste and gastronomy was proposed by **Violeta Kotseva** (Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridsky,” Sofia, hereinafter SU). In “The Taste of Socialism in the Bulgarian Cinema of the 70s and 80s of the Twentieth Century,” she considered the feasts depicted in several classical movies as a clear illustration of the opposition “ours/alien” and “socialist/Western.” Reflecting on the food shortage, typical for those years, foreign, Western products exercised a particular attraction. However, the home products, of local origin, were also given an important value.

The conference topic received an interesting interpretation in the report of **Petya Grueva** (SU, Sofia) “The Taste of Socialism, or Porcelain That Tells Stories.” The scholar considered the dinnerware used during certain festive family gatherings as symbols and as signs of memory, combining several different senses: sight, taste, and touch.

In her article, “I’m Not Sick’: Coffee and Tea Under Socialism,” **Svetlana Antova** (IEFEM, Sofia) developed the widely spread idea in Bulgaria that black tea has healing properties and should therefore only be consumed as a remedy. Indeed, Bulgaria is a country of coffee, and if referring to tea, then one only consumed herbal tea, also considered an effective remedy for colds. When ordering a black tea in a shop, it is necessary to mention the brand desired, otherwise what will be served is mint or camomile tea, commonly associated with tea. Relying on personal memories, the speaker showed how one’s earliest childhood experiences shape the perception of tastes and their symbolic associations, which last for a lifetime.

In the talk entitled “Food in the Pioneer Camp. Sensory Memory and Evaluations,” based on personal memories, **Radina Ilieva** (IEFEM, Sofia) analysed the specifics of taste perception of catering products during the socialist era. The most significant antagonism, highlighted the speaker, should be considered the dichotomy “ours/alien”, where “ours” is the homemade, familiar food, cooked with love. The same opposition was discussed by **Petko Petkov** (VTU, Veliko Turnovo) in his report “The Smell of Wax, the Taste of a Soldier’s *Chorba* and the Melody ‘Back in Black.’ The Barracks Through My Senses,” who also analysed other feelings that fit into the opposition “civil/military” (e.g., Western rock sounds, home smells, etc.).

Lana Petkova’s presentation (Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv, Plovdiv), “Hunger and Identity,” recalled the history of the Ukrainian Holodomor and the tribulations of the Second World War in Ukraine, through family memories. The narratives about “tasty” and “edible” foods are an important part of the collective memory and determine the connection between generations.

Memories and their associations were at the base of **Plamena Kirova**’s study (VTU, Veliko Turnovo). In her speech, “Colours of Socialism Through the Prism of Memory,” the speaker shared the results of a survey on colours during the period under study. The people interviewed were Bulgarians who remained in the country during socialism, as well as Bulgarians who emigrated at different times. The expectation of the dominance of red as the main visual symbol of socialism was confirmed by the results. Another interesting finding was the predominance of the colour grey; in the visual perception of emigrants, according to their memories, everything in the public sphere was colourless or grey.

“Cultural Influence of the West: Fashion in Socialist Yugoslavia – An Inside Look”, by **Mirjana Mirčeska** (Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Macedonia), shared her childhood experiences during socialism in terms of visual perception of fashionable clothes as markers of “ours/alien”, “new/traditional”, “foreign/domestic.” The discussion raised the issue of the typical features of the socialist economy – the role of personal connections, the power of the elite, orientation towards the “abroad,” both to the “brotherly” socialist countries and to capitalist ones.

The theme of clothing symbolism was continued by **Veneta Yankova** (Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen). In her report, “Visual Images of Muslims During the Socialist Era (According to the Newspaper *Kolarovgradska Borba*, 1959–1960),” the scholar presented a historical analysis of the eradica-

tion of traditions, especially through women's clothing. With the motto "With an open face towards the future" the socialist propaganda called upon Turkish women in Bulgaria to abandon the veil.

This talk was continued by a presentation by **Sevim Kurtchu** (independent researcher, Kubrat), "Forbidden Traditional Customs of Socialism," which discussed the choice of names for newborns and the ritual circumcision of boys (Turk. *sünnet*) among Turks in Bulgaria during the 1970s and the 1980s. V. Yankova and S. Kurtchu showed how the policy of the so-called "Bulgarian revival" was being prepared by the mass actions of the authorities against the "foreign" and "alien" Muslims. The change of names among the Turkish population of Bulgaria was actively debated during the following discussions. The strategy of choosing similar sounding Turkish and Bulgarian names, as well as the secret preservation of the sacred name given by a *khoja* (an Islamic teacher) or by an elder relative, turned out to be most effective according to the participants at the conference.

Nadezhda Ivanova (SU, Sofia) scrutinised the materials of printed publications of socialist Bulgaria. In her report, "The Idea of the Future in Publications for Young People in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century," the speaker analysed, in detail, the visual illustrations used in the science fiction literature of that time.

Plamen Sabev (VTU, Veliko Turnovo) addressed the audience on the "Veneration of Icons and Party Leaders During the Socialist Era," drawing attention to the similarity between the depictions of saints and the portrayal images of the Bulgarian elite.

Presenting "Souvenirs of the Times of Socialism," **Pavlin Chaushev** (VTU, Veliko Turnovo) turned to the relevant but not enough explored topic of manufacturing products that symbolised socialist Bulgaria. Goods made in the leather and ceramic traditions, and other traditional crafts had both applied and ideological significance. The now almost forgotten badges occupied a special place; collecting them was a common hobby during the years of socialism. **Borislava Petrova** (Ivan Vazov House-Museum, Sopot) made a presentation entitled "Graduation Party in the Period of Socialism Through the Prism of Basic Feelings," in which she showed the dominant role of the visual code (clothes of graduate students) in the preparation and conduct of these significant events. The taste code: the feast foods and drinks mattered only for relatives but not for the students saying farewell to school.

In her investigation, “And the Smell of Socialism Was Felt,” **Margarita Karamikhova** (VTU, Veliko Turnovo) chose to discuss several topics related to the senses simultaneously, starting from the chronicle written by one of the guards of G. Dimitrov’s mausoleum. In his account, the guard describes how after (or even during) the festive demonstrations, the members of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party and other high-rank officials of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria used to descend into the room where the leader’s body was resting and treated themselves with abundant meals, while sitting at richly covered tables. M. Karamikhova outlined several hypotheses meant to explain the choice of organising such feasts in a dark room, with a specific morbid smell, in the proximity of the body of the deceased leader. She used different methods (interviews, email surveys, etc.) and collected representative data to analyse the sensory perception of such a symbolic memorial of the socialist era.

In the study entitled “Collecting Memories. The Role of the Older Generation in Growing Roses,” based on participant observation, **Ilia Iliev** (SU, Sofia) described the specifics of this traditional Bulgarian occupation. For people employed in the production of roses, as the speaker showed, it is not so much the visual (aesthetic) and olfactory (fragrance) characteristics of flowers that are important as the economic parameters of the business. The harvesters of the roses acquired only negative associations. In their narratives, the smell was described as too strong and annoying.

Petya Bankova (IEFEM, Sofia) presented the paper entitled “The Taste of Betrayal in the People’s Republic of Bulgaria.” The speaker acquainted the participants of the conference with the initial stage of her study regarding denunciations and betrayal in Bulgaria at different levels (in friendship, in love, at work, etc.), resorting to the metaphor of feelings (sweetness and bitterness as emotions when committing reprehensible deeds).

Diana Radoinova (Prof. Dr. Assen Zlatarov University, Burgas) expanded the range of the sensorial in her narrative, “‘My Brother Will Tie Me a Red Tie’: About the Psycho-Emotional and Ideological-Social Aspects of Continuity Between Generations During the Socialist Era,” adding a psycho-emotional scale to the main five senses. A scale which turned out to be very significant to the intergenerational relations.

In her analysis of “The Semantics of Basic Feelings in Boris Pasternak’s Poem ‘August’ (1954): Poetic World vs. Socialist Everyday Life,” **Irina Sedakova**

(Institute of Slavic Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia) also appealed to additional feelings, for example, to intuition and knowledge, citing the Bulgarian expression *Имам чувството* (*Imam chuvstvoto*, ‘It seems to me’, ‘Intuition tells me’). Analysing the colouring of the famous poem by B. Pasternak, the scholar showed the obvious and intuitive “non-Soviet” and religious attitude of this work. She also showed the differences between the senses in the original text and in its translation into Bulgarian.

The conference also touched upon topics related to the role of feelings in coping with disasters and misfortunes. **Stamen Kunev** (IEFEM, Sofia) dedicated his report, “Urbanization – A Prerequisite for Devastating Natural Disasters and Human Losses (On the Example of Varna in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century),” to an anthropological analysis of building up one of the residential neighbourhoods in Varna, while **Lilia Uzlova** (Municipal Council, Gera, Germany) and **Eva Tolasch** (Friedrich Schiller University, Jena, Germany) compared the feelings of native Germans and emigrants to Germany in relation to various events that the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it.

The presentation of the Indian scholars **Arkaprava Chattopadhyay** (Central University of Sikkim & University Sikkim, Gangtok, India) and **Manoj Kumar Das** (Central University of Sikkim, Gangtok, India) “The Mediatization of Religion Through Folk Media: A Study of *Purulia Chhau*” stood somewhat apart. However, here, too, links with other reports of the conference were found, since the visual code is one of the main issues in the archaic ritual that the researchers described, and it is significantly modified with the development of media technologies. In addition, the main research method of scientists is semiotics, which served as the basis for the analysis of the symbolic nature of ethnological realities discussed in most of the presentations at the conference.

A proceedings volume, reuniting the contributions to the conference, is planned for 2023.

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