

OPINION

For the dissertation titled

Trauma and Celebration. Sacralisation and Transformation of Commemorations

For obtaining the degree of Doctor in professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies

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The proposed dissertation work is the result of the author's long-lasting interest in the thematic field of commemorations and commemorative rituals. As a student in the Master's program "Management and Socialization of Cultural Heritage", Iliyana Hubenova developed a term paper on the celebration of the anniversary of the April 1876 uprising in Batak and already then she showed interest in its transformation, whereby the mourning commemoration acquired features of a local holiday. This interest was the basis of her choice of a topic for her master's thesis under my supervision, in which, based on field work at several sites, similar transformations of the celebrations of the April 1876 uprising were registered also elsewhere: in Perushtitsa, Koprivshitsa and Klisura. My first observation after getting acquainted with Iliyana Hubenova's dissertation, which I am sharing with great satisfaction, is about her growth and development as a researcher.

First of all, I would like to point out the appropriate contextualization of the researched cases, which provides the overall framework of the dissertation. They are situated in the context of the myth-history of the Bulgarian national 'Revival', a topos of universal consensus (or, in Pierre Nora's terminology, a place of common memory) and, accordingly, the April 1876 uprising as its culmination. The author has convincingly justified her choice with the importance of the uprising and its suppression for the national "we", and for the "building the image of Bulgarian virtues, through tragedy, trauma and death, masked with the features of heroism and self-sacrifice", from which the corresponding "romanticized" traits of the nation are derived (p. 3).

In this context, the object of study – the realization of the narrative of the April 1876 uprising and of the Russian-Ottoman war of 1877-1878 through contemporary commemorations – is constructed in an anthropological perspective, by examining the dynamics of commemorations in several places: Batak, Perushtitsa, Skravena and Karlovo (so-called "the Scary", a period of a few months of terror on the civil population during the Russian-Ottoman war). These celebrations, as Hubenova rightly states, on the one hand represent and honour the past; on the other hand they generate part of cultural tourism, but at the same time, and importantly, they are an element of the identity of the local communities. It is exactly the capturing of this intertwining of the local and the national, of the mourning and the celebration, of the "high" and the everyday, which is the original and innovative contribution of the dissertation in a conceptual aspect. In methodological terms, in order to realize its purpose, i.e. to establish whether and how commemorations acquire the characteristics of a holiday, the author develops a research model that covers the development of celebrations from their inception to recent years. The main highlights in

this model are the emergence, the establishment and the transformations of the celebrations, as well as the symbols and meanings that are embedded in them. Another important focus is the profiling of social actors: the organizers and the audiences, in order to uncover the meanings of the celebrations for the respective local communities. Thus, Hubenova discovered her own perspective on the topic of local festivity, namely the transformation of commemorative celebrations into local holidays.

Along with the appropriate clarification of the object and focus of the study and the research questions, as well as their contextualisation in the existing scholarly literature on the issue of rituality and festivity, I would like to note the author's approach, which includes dense fieldwork on the ethnography of the celebrations in the four selected sites in the course of a few years. In this regard, the outline of the tasks and hypotheses of the research should be specifically mentioned (pp. 10-11), as well as the appropriately selected, described and applied field research methods (pp. 12-13). Last but not least, Hubenova takes special care to elaborate on the key concepts with which she works further in the course of her research, and the connections between them: mourning, trauma, the sacred, celebration, collective identity, nation/national identity, collective memory and site of memory.

The historical development of commemorative celebrations in the context of the construction of the "Grand National Narrative" is the subject of a separate chapter of the dissertation, which examines its main carriers and the dimensions it has reached over the years to the present day. Hubenova traces the steps of institutionalization of the celebrations in parallel with the legitimization of the historical narrative. Particularly valuable from a cultural-studies point of view is the inclusion of landmark texts from memoirs, fiction and historiography for the creation of the "topoi of the heroic". The author logically concludes that despite the disputes and contradictions among their authors, all of them together contribute to establishing the foundations of the "grand narrative". Quite appropriately, the perspective here is broadened to include the transformation of the April 1876 uprising into an event (in D. Dayan's sense of the term) through its coverage in the world press.

Further in the dissertation, the history of the celebrations at the selected sites is analyzed precisely as an articulation of this "grand heroic narrative" indicating the specifics of each individual place. Here, I would like to particularly emphasize as an interesting contribution the analysis of Skravena as a memory site, which does not directly refer to the event itself (the death of Hristo Botev and his men), but establishes the beginning of the national narrative about the heroes. As Hubenova astutely concludes, while in the other researched areas self-sacrifice and heroism are celebrated, in Skravena the celebration of Botev and his crew is also a symbol of the patriotism and heroism of the local community (p. 58). In this connection, the typology of the analyzed memory sites deserves attention, where – unlike the others, which are "primary" – Skravena is defined as an "associated", i.e. secondary, site of memory (p. 126).

With her very good observation capacity and her attention to details, Hubenova has discovered in some of the historical descriptions evidence of the subsequent tendencies

to transformation of the celebrations into “popular festivities”. They are rooted precisely in the construction of the “grand narrative” as heroic, combining the honoring of the dead with the gratitude for their sacrifice in the name of freedom – a form of affective “management” of the past, which the author finds even today in her interviews with the organizers of the celebrations (p. 59).

The first transformation in the history of commemorations takes place in the context of the “grand heroic narrative”: this is their nationalization, i.e. their elevation to the status of events of national importance, where mourning is replaced by solemnity, and religious sacredness by national sacrality (military honours, cultural events). This replacement was particularly significant after 1944, when the second transformation was observed, namely the inclusion of the respective commemorative event in a new context, distinguished by a certain ideological teleology. The nation and its history is intertwined with the ideology of the Communist Party through an invention of tradition (Hobsbawm) of sorts, i.e. forging a continuity between the national revolutionary struggle and the communist regime.

The author aptly notes that the sacralization of historical events leads to their one-dimensionality and their exclusion from the critical historiographical narrative, demonstrated by the “Batak” scandal. The historical trauma in this case has reached a certain phase and has remained “anchored” in it, she concludes (p. 81).

I am particularly pleased to note the contributions of the dissertation to the ethnography of the contemporary commemorative events discussed in the last two chapters, and the broader conclusions that emerge from the author’s analyses. Her observation of the transformation of the mourning commemoration into a social celebration of the local community is based on revealing field findings and her reflections on them. She convincingly links the affirmation of national identity as a function of the commemorative events to the pattern of public behavior in which the element of remembrance is replaced by joyousness, acquiring the characteristics of a celebration. And the celebration is primarily about the local community and the articulation of its values and identity.

In this connection, I would like to highlight Hubenova’s observations about the role of social networks as particularly interesting and deserving of further attention: those who publish online give broader, “national” importance to the celebrations and emphasize their mourning element, while those physically present are rather passive regarding the initial cause for the celebration. Although they directly participate in the processions and other rituals, their communication, eg. the conversations among themselves, are not related to the immediate occasion. On the other hand, by posting photographs and other publications on social networks, private individuals directly participate in the national memory.

Last but not least, I would like to emphasize the author's contribution to the interpretation of the symbolic and spatial dimensions of the celebrations. In this way, she is in a position to explicate the features of their third, modern transformation, where, in addition to marking the historical event, the celebrations also acquire the character of a

social event, an occasion for the local community to assert and reassert itself. In this process, the sacred is to a certain extent displaced by the festive, and more specifically – the festive in the sense of profane, everyday, the focus of which is consumption. It makes a very good impression that here Hubenova does not succumb to the temptation to slide into superficial criticism, but draws in her analysis on both traditional Balkan rituals for honouring the dead, including the consumption of food and alcohol (p. 118), and the teleology of the heroic narrative, which implies an emphasis not on the sacrifice itself, but on its meaning and its result – the liberation.

I would like to add here that the roots of this transformation can be sought already in the previous period: for the communist regime, not only the “invented tradition” that connects it with the national liberation movement is important in order to lend legitimacy to it, but also the need for a “socialist optimism”, i.e. a life-affirming interpretation of otherwise tragic events.

In conclusion: Iliyana Hubenova’s dissertation, and her publications on the subject fully correspond to the criteria for awarding the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in Professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies, which I will vote for without hesitation.

I declare that I have no conflict of interest, I have no publications in common with the author, and I have not discovered plagiarism.

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