

# Culture of (Dis)trust in Bulgaria

Ana Luleva. Culture of (Dis)trust in Bulgaria: Anthropological perspectives. Sofia. “Gutenberg” Publishing House. 2021. 325 p. ISBN 978-619-176-190-6

The concept of social trust is located at the intersection of a broad field of meaning, including various theoretical tools in the social sciences: social capital, social networks, political power. It cannot be said that ethnology in Bulgaria has never studied socio-cultural phenomena in this light. Certainly, however, the work of Ana Luleva is the first systematic, competent, consistent and comprehensive study of the issue. In this sense, the book *Culture of (dis)trust in Bulgaria: Anthropological Perspectives* is not just innovative or makes a contribution. Undoubtedly it is, but more importantly, we have before us a serious and, I would say, a staged theoretical contribution in the field of social trust research. In

itself, even just the introductory part of the work represents a serious theoretical effort. Without reviewing the literature in its usual form, the introductory first chapter examines not only the concepts of trust and distrust, but also the related theoretical tools. It was not enough for the author to mention only the classical theories in this field, or to go through the ‘fashionable’ names and titles of the day: she also gives the reader the opportunity to get become acquainted with a balanced and coherent theoretical presentation, including the latest literature on the issue. Even this chapter, taken separately and on its own, represents a complete theoretical contribution. Here the author has included a paragraph dedicated to the anthropology of socialism and post-socialism: an appropriate



solution, given first, the scope of the study in terms of time, and second, the dynamics of the social processes she studies. In view of the already vast body of publications in the anthropology of socialism and post-socialism, the author has presented a synthesis of representative trends in this field.

In this review, I will not offer systematic coverage of the book's individual chapters, but rather will try and outline what is a step-by-step study in its individual parts and as a whole. First of all, the book's sound and convincing methodological basis should be noted. The methods, both empirical and analytical, are applied with uncompromising systematicity and consistency. First of all, the book is written on the basis of about two hundred biographical interviews taken conducted by the author personally. I do not remember ever coming across a book written on the basis of two hundred biographical stories. I emphasize this because this book is not based on short, thematic interviews, but on in-depth interviews, each of which requires considerable time and energy. Without this being discussed in depth in the book, the combination of the biographical approach with the study of written sources (archival in the first place) is emblematic of contemporary trends in the social sciences, such as historical anthropology or social history. In this sense, the author closely approaches these two areas without emphasizing them specifically. Empirically, archival research is just as solid a source for research as fieldwork. The large number of interviews is related to the duration of the study itself, which was conducted over a period of more than ten years.

Analytical methods combine clear disciplinary determination and interdisciplinarity. Although this is an anthropological study, it is open to the achievements of other disciplines, primarily sociology and history. In this sense, the study also has an interdisciplinary orientation. The work's clear anthropological profile is guaranteed by the nature of the fieldwork I mentioned above.

The book's individual chapters study the dynamics of social trust in different and diverse areas of social life in Bulgaria during the last hundred years of its history. It is entirely appropriate to include the problem of 'public versus private' (in the chapter 'Public vs. private in the everyday life of state socialism'), in view of the transformations of trust during this period in Bulgaria. Incidentally, as far as I know, this is the first time theories of public and private have been fully presented in a Bulgarian ethnological study. The specifics of the mutual penetration of public and private in the socialist period allow one to understand the changes in the nature of trust and distrust in Bulgarian society.

In this part of the book, the author refers to a variety of theoretical sources, including works in political science. Bulgaria's socialist regime, orthodox by its nature, was established by uncompromising violence, total supervision of its citizens and of the individual as a citizen, and voluntarism of the system of punishments in order to impose itself through fear and achieve obedience. Quite logically, the first victim, as elsewhere in the world of socialism, was social trust, which, with some exceptions, was replaced by personalized trust. The latter has led to paralysis of the ability to act collectively, and to the development instead of virtuoso skills in managing one's personal networks and clientelist relations. Although the author refers to some emblematic interviews, here the focus is rather on Bulgarian society as a whole, i.e. the macro-level of analysis.

The 'purge' and in essence the destruction of the Bulgarian elite is a special case of changes in society, discussed in the previous chapter. Here, in particular, the focus is on a certain section of the elite of Bulgaria: the academic elite of the Faculty of Law of Sofia University. Undoubtedly, the topic of this chapter is unconventional for ethnology in Bulgaria, in so far as it is a study of the elite, and not of the ordinary 'people' or of collective cultural expressions. As the author shows, the defeat of the elite and its replacement with a new ruling elite, loyal to the regime and paradoxically from lower social strata, was not patented by the communist regime in Bulgaria. This was a common strategy in all the countries of eastern Europe, starting with the Soviet Union, namely to impose the new system by decapitating society and thus cutting off options for resistance. In this sense, attention to the elite should be an integral part of the anthropology of socialism, and the author convinces us of this point.

If the chapter on the purge of the Faculty of Law at Sofia University presents a section of a social segment of Bulgarian society under socialism, the next chapter, which is dedicated to the regions near the country's state borders, draws attention to the territorial aspects of power and its regimes. The author sheds light on once-shrouded and now already forgotten or abandoned policies and practices. The state's policies towards these regions marginalized entire parts of Bulgarian society. Thus the population of the border regions, initially by imposing a regime of repression, was subjected to a process of 'cleansing' by evicting entire areas along the border, and later a regime of fear and of surveillance of the local population sprang up. The disintegration of social trust as a result of these measures and the sowing of internal contradictions in local

communities was the logical outcome. In this part of the work, the archival sources have great weight as its empirical basis.

Two of the book's chapters, the fifth and seventh, can also be seen as contributions to the anthropology of tourism, again linked to regimes of trust. These, respectively, are the chapters on 'Behind the window of socialism: trust, mistrust and informal practices in the 'Borovets' resort; and 'Ancient Nessebar: between world cultural value and the tourism business.' Studying the regimes of trust and distrust, the author develops an interesting aspect of the anthropology of socialism. Developed through central state policy and social engineering, the tourism economy of socialist Bulgaria is in fact an example of the profound transformation in then-Bulgarian society, mainly agrarian until the socialist transformation. The examples of the mountain resort of Borovets (and the population of the near-by Samokov region as a source of labour for tourism) and of a city with an ancient cultural heritage, Nessebar, show in this case the social technologies that led to a decline in social trust and vice versa, the flourishing of informal and even 'shady' practices and forms of economic behaviour. The example of Borovets is informative about the destructive economic and social processes that occurred during post-socialism (non-transparent privatization, unemployment, part-time employment, etc.). The study of Nessebar, in turn, necessarily includes a study of the problem of cultural heritage as such and as a factor in the development of recreational tourism.

The border, this time also connected with natural borders such as the Black Sea, is touched upon again in the book in the chapter just mentioned on 'Ancient Nessebar' and another chapter, 'Intercultural interactions: networks of trust and mistrust'. The Balkan's entangled history inevitably reflects on these chapters in so far as it concerns the formation, through emigration and resettlement, of coexisting post-World War I ethnic communities, Greek and Bulgarian, as well as the hostility and the mirroring of ethnic stereotypes between them. Here, as in the chapter about the border, the level of analysis is determined by the local perspective. The communities of three small Black Sea towns are described: Sozopol, Pomorie and Nessebar. Through the analysis of abundant empirical material from her interviews, the author reaches the conclusion regarding the gradual transformation, through mutual acquaintance, of the initial regime of mistrust and hostility between Bulgarians and Greeks, in which they grew closer together and reached mutual understanding and trust. This process has also led to a transformation in the region's ethnic identities.

As can be seen from this cursory review, the author studied these regimes of trust on the basis of rich and varied empirical material, which in turn required her competence in various areas of anthropological theory: from political anthropology to cultural heritage, the anthropology of tourism, the anthropology of borders, etc. This allows her to demonstrate the key role of trust in a wide range of areas of culture and social life. Together with the book's fundamental contribution to the study of trust, this enables the author to contribute significantly to various specific areas of anthropological knowledge. Remarkably rich in empirical terms, Ana Luleva's book also makes a significant theoretical contribution to theories of social trust, including but not limited to the anthropology of socialism and post-socialism.

The book is definitely a success not only for the author, but also for ethnology in Bulgaria. In it the reader will find a key to understanding many complex and painful issues about the recent past of Bulgaria, the mentality of Bulgarians and the hidden mechanisms of social agency in general. Its theoretically informative nature makes it a suitable read not only for scientists and teachers, but also for students and for a wider readership of those interested in the technologies of social life more generally.

Milena Benovska,

South-West University 'Neofit Rilski' - Blagoevgrad

[milena.benovska@gmail.com](mailto:milena.benovska@gmail.com)

**Milena Benovska** is professor of ethnology/ sociocultural anthropology at the Chair of Ethnology and Balkan Studies – South-West University of Blagoevgrad (Bulgaria). Member of the editorial board of *Ethnologia Balkanica* and the journal *Antropologia/ Anthropology*. Research publications on the anthropology of religion (Russia, Estonia), anthropology of socialism and postsocialism, kinship and clientelism in Southeast Europe, *Folklore Studies*, Muslim communities in Bulgaria.