

'My life has mostly been spent working': Notions and patterns of work in socialist Bulgaria¹

Daniela Koleva

Faculty of Philosophy, St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia, daniela@sclg.uni-sofia.bg

ABSTRACT

The article is an attempt to look at socialism as a cultural code rather than a political system. Different notions of work and symbolic hierarchies of work are examined: the ones spread by the official ideology of communism and the unofficial ones shared by elderly informants in their life stories. A major part of the text is focused on miners' work as a symbol of 'socialist labour', emblematic of its nature, goals and organisation. The official media discourse and imagery of the first two decades of the communist regime are then counterbalanced by the story of a miner about his work life to find out how the everyday perceptions of that vocation by its practitioners related to its official propaganda representations. The last part of the text expands on the everyday notions of work expressed in the life stories – the 'traditional' one and the 'modern work ethic'. It is argued that they can be related to generational, occupational and other aspects of the social position of the narrators rather than to the ideological imaginary of communism.

KEYWORDS: socialism, work, life stories

Introduction

"My life has mostly been spent working. Frankly speaking, my life has been spent working" – this is how Gueorgui Oblanov, a retired miner born in 1940, started to tell me the story of his life one summer evening in 2000. What followed was a detailed and vivid three-hour account of his work experiences, first at the family farm, then at the collective, and later, for the greater part of his working life, as a miner. Hearing a 'work story' instead of a life story was by no means a surprise. More than 200 life stories have been collected in the oral history archive of my department² and most of them are structured around the

¹ The first version of this text was presented at the Social History Workshop in Warsaw (March 2005) and the Biographical Research Workshop at the Centre for Advanced Study, Sofia. I am grateful to the participants in both workshops for their comments and suggestions. The illustrations are from: Svetlin Bosilkov, *Bulgarskiat plakat* [The Bulgarian Poster]. Sofia: Bulgarski hudozhnik 1973.

² Department for History and Theory of Culture, University of Sofia. The oral archive was set in mid-1990s.

theme of work. To make sense of this, I borrow from the sociology of life course one of its key concepts – the ‘normal life course’ – seen as the result of the institutionalisation of the life course, i.e. the socially recognised and institutionally streamlined model of life course in modern societies (Kohli 1985; 1992; Beck 1986; Mayer 1990). Hence, also, the notion of the normal biography, which does not simply amount to the description of a normal life course but outlines the horizon of expectations related to what a good life should be like. Therefore, the idea of the normal biography is also endowed with certain normative power. It is beyond any doubt that work plays a central role in the formation of the so-called normal biography; the modern labour market and the system of paid work are at its core. Though socialism created its own social order and cultural code, work similarly occupied a central place in both the institution and the ideology of life course. Being the sole proprietor and employer, the socialist state exercised direct influence on the lives of its citizens and set the standards for the normality of the normal biography. Therefore, the normal biography had a particularly strong normative, even regulative character precisely in the socialist societies (Niedermüller 2004: S. 29). Naturally, work and occupation played a constitutive role in it. Work was central to the self-identification of the individuals, to the achievement of biographical stability, and in most cases, it also proved central to the structuring and the coherence of their life narratives.

Although work figures prominently as a major theme and a major value in numerous autobiographical accounts, concepts of work seem to vary among generations and occupations. Focusing on Gueorgui Oblanov’s case and drawing on other persons’ accounts, I will try to follow the transformations of the patterns and the notions of work in the early decades of socialism in Bulgaria. I will attempt to link the changing notions of work with the propaganda rhetoric related to ‘socialist labour’, and with the changing social patterns.

The ‘labour front’: Symbolic and ideological context

The tendency toward centralisation characteristic of socialism included strenuous efforts to achieve what might be called a centralisation of meaning, i.e. organised ideological production as a means of legitimating the system. Katherine Verdery has emphasized the disproportionately productive role of discourse for socialist regimes that proclaimed their task to be changing society. According to her view, language took on a special significance in such situations as a constitutor of social life, because the new society-generating practices did not yet function reliably (1991: 91). Fully agreeing with this, I suggest a broader notion of discourse including not only language but also imagery instrumental for establishing the new symbolic order and promoting the new socialist values.

The notion of ‘socialist labour’ occupied a central place in this respect. The propaganda rhetoric in the first two decades after 1944 was to convey the new socialist values, to command support for them and to serve the purposes of mobilisation and the control of labour. The symbolic representations and the political rituals of their enactment laid the main emphasis on freedom and progress, on the radical breaking with the past and the bright prospects for future development. The theme of breaking with the past was a dominant one in the 1940s and the 1950s: the past was to serve as a backdrop against which the aims and the achievements of communist progress were to be brought in stark

relief. The press reports from construction sites and collectives would often state that there is no trace of the former slave labour, and conclude that a hard and disgraceful burden in the past, labour in our country has become a matter of honour, glory, courage and heroism in the years of people's power.³ An enumeration of the machinery used to alleviate the work in the mines and on the construction sites, given in fascinated detail, would complete the picture and highlight the radically new quality of socialist labour.

Notwithstanding the spell of technology, work was defined as a core value of the new societal order primarily in political and ethical terms. Unlike capitalism, socialist ideology regarded it not as a matter of labour market but as the central merit of the individuals defining their social identity, their position in society and their existential condition. Work was the basis of the whole social order. According to the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, workers were the most progressive class in society, its leading power. The Communist Party had to be in its essence a workers' party. Its coming to power was interpreted as the workers' victory in the class struggle (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Ivan Founnev's sculpture *Worker*, 1958

³ *Rabotnichesko delo*, 29 August 1954, p. 1.

Work being regarded as paramount virtue (in line with traditional notions embedded in rural culture) and as the first and foremost moral duty of the socialist citizen, the Communist Party waged incessant mobilisation campaigns to intensify it and improve its organisation: for timely harvesting, for rhythmic implementation of plans, for increases in productivity and improvement of work discipline, etc. The party daily *Rabotnichesko delo* [Workers' Deed] that set the tone of the propaganda devoted more than half of its space to the advancement of socialism. In addition to features and reports, it regularly published slogans on its first page setting out the immediate tasks and summoning the working people to their completion. The paramount institution of work mobilisation however was the socialist emulation between enterprises within a branch of industry or agriculture, between units within an enterprise, between teams within a unit. The international labour day, 1st May, and the day of the communist taking of power, 9th September, presented good occasions to report the winners and their achievements, to hold out promises for further achievements, and to challenge the workers to great emulation.

In 1964, the Central Committee of the Communist Party published its *Proclamation on the Occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the Socialist Revolution* as early as 12 March triggering appeals and promises from hundreds of collectives working in different branches of industry and agriculture. The press reacted accordingly, making the Diary of the Socialist Emulation a leading theme for the next six months. This commemorative mobilisation was, of course, placed in the context of the worldwide competition between capitalism and socialism.

The communist ideology of the first two decades understood the nature of work essentially as production of material items. Therefore, a certain hierarchy of work was elaborated where industrial work (heavy industry in particular) occupied a top position (see Niedermüller 2004). Workers were identified by the propaganda mostly with industrial workers. While this was in accordance with fundamental Marxist ideas, it also reflected the actual situation: with industrialization as the first priority of the communist government, industrial workers were actively recruited and their work was given a certain prestige in comparison with agricultural labour to increase its attractiveness.⁴ *Rabotnichesko delo* was published in the early 1950s with few illustrations – no more than two to three photos per issue. Whenever there were individuals depicted, these were always industrial or agricultural workers. Not a single engineer, teacher or doctor appeared in the three-month sample from each year that I reviewed. Thus, in the early-socialist symbolic hierarchy, industrial work occupied a higher rank than agricultural, and vocational work (in the “material production”, often manual jobs) seemed to be symbolically more valued than intellectual work. In line with this, a critical article from 1953 analysing the reasons for the lagging behind in Marbas,⁵ blames exclusively the management: for not supporting the

⁴ The recruitment of industrial workers in the first years of socialism was not a simple process. It met the resistance of peasant smallholders, who were the major reserve of industrial labour. Seasonal fluctuations caused breakdowns in construction and industry (see Vassileva 1991). To ensure sufficient recruitment, a special Law on labour mobilisation was passed in 1948 (Darzhaven Vestnik [State Gazette] no 50, 2 March 1948) threatening individuals who diverged from work with imprisonment.

⁵ *Maritsa basin* – the largest coalfield in Bulgaria.

miners' will to implement the high-speed method, for failing to provide the necessary organisation and thus impeding their work.⁶ Setting the management and the workers against each other, the article conforms to both the dominant symbolic hierarchy of work and the requirement to 'lay bare all faults'.

The strategies of mobilisation and control employed to the end of the 1960s relied on this symbolic hierarchy. They stressed the moral imperative to work, the 'socialist patriotism', the need to 'catch up' and to speedily re-shape the balance of different branches of the economy, the inherent advantages of the socialist system, etc. Certain occupations proved particularly susceptible to sacralisation through ideology and were preferred in the rhetorical staging of socialist labour as emblematic of its nature, goals and organisation. In propaganda, they appeared to be particularly prestigious: construction worker, metallurgist, and miner.⁷ They were declared the vanguard of the working class and most often depicted in visual images (propaganda as well as art), in journalism, in schoolbooks, etc. Thus, they came to represent 'free labour', 'the building of socialism', 'socialist progress', 'the new communist man' with his 'new communist morality', and all the marvellous qualities of the 'victorious working class'. In 1953, following the Soviet example, the last Sunday of August was declared a professional holiday of the miners. Until 1968, *Rabotnichesko delo* would invariably devote its feature on that day to the miners' achievements and would publish the portraits of the miners awarded the highest prize: Hero of Socialist Labour. In 1953, the importance of the miners' work was summarised as follows:

The successes of our national economy [...] would have been unthinkable without the valiant work of the miners. Enormous treasures are hidden in our earth's womb, whose uncovering and utilisation will bring about a new economic upsurge, a speedier construction of the bright edifice of socialism.⁸

Quite often, a miner would be depicted as a representative of the whole working class or even of labour in general (see Figures 2 and 3).

⁶ "For how long will Marbas fail to carry out the plan?", *Rabotnichesko delo*, 28 August 1953, p. 3.

⁷ At the same time, labour turnover in construction and mining was so high that special non-economic measures were taken to counteract it: regulations envisaging punishment for persons who declined to work in the mines (*Izvestia* [State Gazette] no 12, 9 February 1951) or who changed their place of work on their own (*Izvestia* [State Gazette] no 14, 17 February 1953); a special campaign of Politbureau of the Communist Party in 1952 among party members and young people; full state support for students in mining and construction schools, etc. (Vassileva 1991: 58-59, 69, 77). In his speech at a meeting to share experience of the implementation of the so-called 'high-speed method' in the mines, the Minister of Heavy Industry warned that the transfer of workers and machines from place to place inflicted serious harm and advised banning it (*Rabotnichesko delo*, 4 October 1951).

⁸ *Rabotnichesko delo*, 30 August 1953, p. 1.



Figure 2: Boris Angueloushev's poster All-workers' trade union, 1948



Figure 3: Boris Angueloushev's poster 20 years of youth labour for the homeland, 1966

The representations of these occupations abounded in military tropes. An essential continuity was highlighted between the class struggle on the one hand, and the building of socialism on the other. In the 1940s and 1960s, commenting on Gueorgui Dimitrov's statement that "[...] the miners are the backbone of the working class", it was often stressed that the 'glorious miners' army' was the vanguard of the working class in its struggles against capitalist exploitation, and took the most active part in the socialist construction after the victory on the 9 September 1944⁹ (see Figure 4).

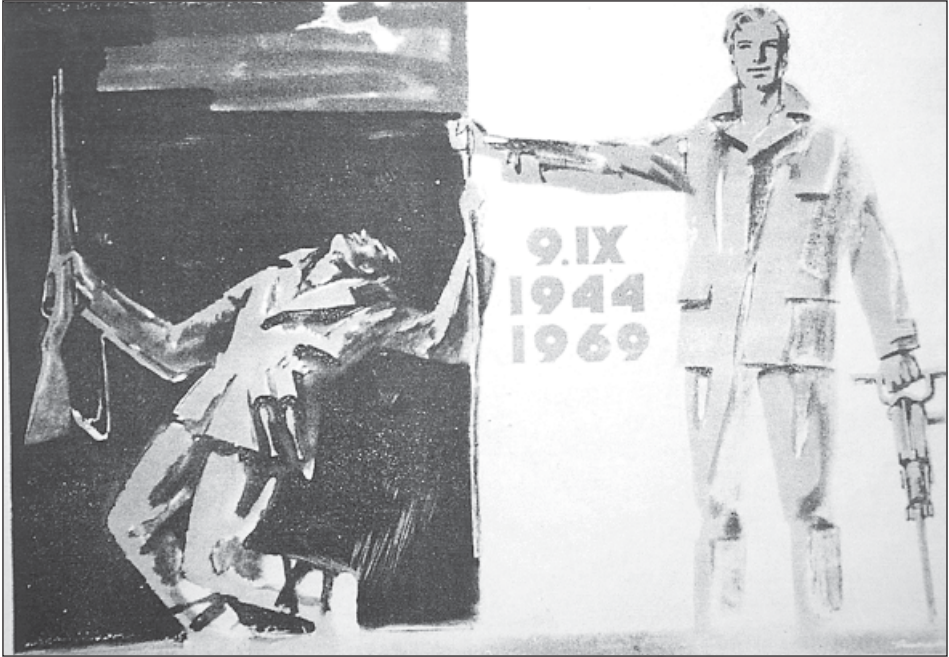


Figure 4: Nikola Mirchev's poster 9. IX. 1944-1969, 1969

In the 1960s, miners were still represented as soldiers on a peaceful front-line, now on a decisive offensive in the struggle to carry out the plan, "[...] strenuously and perseveringly attacking the bowels of the earth", constantly engaged in "[...] a crucial battle to fulfil the tasks set by the Party and the people's government". Their achievements were glorified as exploits and victories. Thus, a technological innovation to cope with subterranean water in a mine near Panagyurishte was presented as a major victory of the miners, conveniently lumping together engineers, workers and geologists under the same category.¹⁰ The usual style of reporting on the achievements in mining relied on the

⁹ See *Rabomichesko delo*, 29 August 1954, p. 3.

¹⁰ "The Panagyurishte miners won a major victory", *Rabomichesko delo*, 13 August 1964, p. 2.

recitations of numbers signifying impressive outputs in tons of excavated ore or coal, and meters of newly pierced galleries. Monika Golonka-Czajkowska emphasized the metaphorical significance of figures in such cases. The large numbers used to report on the production were a particularly useful device in the propaganda because they combined “[...] the measurable and the abstract [...]” and “[...] allowed the victorious campaign on the production front to be related to the mythical struggle and victory of the forces of socialist progress” (Golonka-Czajkowska 2004: 243). More specific outlines of the ‘heroic labour’ in the mines were to be given in the reports on the high-speed method and the movement for its implementation in the extractive industry.¹¹ These, however, seem to have added to the notion of the mythical struggle by offering formulas and appeals rather than information and explanations. The high-speed method was tautologically defined as “[...] reducing the time for the piercing of one linear meter of gallery or for the extraction of one ton of ore.”¹² It was regarded an immense reserve in ore-mining, having great advantages as a new form of organisation but it was not clarified what this organisation consisted of. The words in which the high-speed method is described ring empty of their literal meaning and seem to carry only an ideological one. This shift of the semantics brings the message forward but withholds the information, stresses the value but blurs the meaning.

Thus, the overall tendency of the imagery and rhetoric related to work was to emphasize the new, socialist principles of socialist labour rendering a genuinely new quality to it in contrast to labour ‘in the past’. It was important to stress that only socialist labour allowed for the development of the person’s talents and capacities; that only under socialist conditions could the technological revolution lead to a change in the very nature of work; that work was the core of the socialist way of life. It should be noted however that this strategy, relying on moral imperatives, societal norms and ideological arguments was most actively used in the first decades of socialism and later almost abandoned. The importance of specific vocations in the earlier period stemmed from the scope and the nature of Bulgarian industrialisation. The symbolic value of occupations shifted in the early 1970s towards professions more closely associated with scientific and technological progress. As a result, starting in 1968, the Miners’ day was moved from the front page to the inner pages of the newspapers. Much less attention was devoted to the dizzying amounts of tons and meters, and the celebrations were reduced to a local scale, unattended by top party and state functionaries. At the same time, the gap between the ideology of work and everyday work practices grew ever deeper during the later decades of the ‘actually existing socialism’. It gradually became clear that the communist myth could not be implemented into practice and that everyday life could not follow the ideological model.

In the following, I will examine a case that illustrates how the micro-politics of everyday life adapted and revised the ideological model. I will try to look into the ways people accepted, manipulated or subverted the concepts and the conditions imposed on them through their individual life strategies.

¹¹ *Rabotnicesko delo*, 24 Aug. 1963; 11 Nov., 15 Dec., 19 Dec. 1964, etc.

¹² “The high-speed movement is the basis of the emulation in ore-mining”, *Rabotnicesko delo*, 11 November 1966, p. 2.

The 'mining front': Gueorgui Oblanov's story

The focus of this part is the life story of a man whose experience spanned the pre-socialist and the socialist period. His own occupations – a worker in an agricultural collective and then a miner – were among the priorities of communist propaganda and his story makes an interesting contrast to its rhetoric and imagery.

Gueorgui Oblanov lost his father at an early age. His mother did not re-marry and relied on the two men – his elder brother and himself, aged eight – to help with the farm and the household. That is why he learned everything even as a child. After his discharge from the army, he began working in a prospecting mine:

I came back [from the army], looked for a job for three months – nothing, and I went to the mine [...] and this was [possible] thanks to a cousin of mine – his brother-in-law was an engineer-in-chief up there. And he took this over and arranged for me there. Yes, arranged; [ironically] to get 'arranged for' in a mine – that must have been quite something.

The fact that he was placed in the mine through personal connections after unsuccessful attempts to be employed elsewhere suggests that though the right to work was granted by the Constitution and socialism had done away with unemployment, it was not always easy to find a job. Unemployment was an aspect of the reality in the late 1950s and early 1960s (see Vassileva 1991: 80-82) but not a part of the vocabulary used to describe that reality. With only one exception, interviewees do not use the word 'unemployment' even now in their retrospective accounts and, like Mr. Oblanov, present the structural problem as a personal one: "Couldn't find work". Like him, many others solved the problem through informal networks where kinship, locality and instrumental friendships played an important role.

Three years later Gueorgui Oblanov left the mine to become a unit leader in the collective upon 'a party commission'. Members of the Communist Party were supposed to observe party discipline and go where they were summoned.¹³ His personal reason for leaving the mine, however, seems to have been his anxiety about the casualties there. In his narrative, he also hinted at his low standing because of his manual job in the mine. He pointed out that all his kin were 'clerks' and that he was the only worker:

I was to become a clerk. They were most of them clerks – a teacher, another teacher... And one of the cousins – he was a school principal all his life... School principal, then high-school principal and in the end he even got higher education. [...] aaand me – where shall I go? One was an accountant in the collective, one was a tax collector and so on. Goshkata is now simple – a miner.

¹³ Although Bulgarian economy in the 1960s was a centralised and planned one, there obviously existed a competition between branches of economy and individual enterprises to attract personnel (see Sabel and Stark 1982).

By using ‘Goshkata’ – the pejorative diminutive of his name with a definite article (which is not normally used with proper names) and speaking of himself in third person, Mr. Oblanov seems to follow the accepted notions of prestigious and non-prestigious jobs and to admit that his relatives were more successful with their occupations. Albeit in an ironical and self-defensive way, he admits that manual occupations never really had the prestige that the propaganda tried so hard to attribute to them. In retrospect, he does not consider himself a loser, because now he seems to be in a better position than his relatives who have also retired and have lost the benefits of their former occupations. An evidence of this is his wife’s remark to the above account: “But now they envy you for your pension.”

Mr. Oblanov himself summarized the only asset of his work in the mine from the same point of view: ‘money in every pocket’. From other persons’ stories, we learn that sometimes mines have served to ‘launder’ one’s origins and re-write one’s biography (see Bertaux 1994). Dimiter Minev, born in 1924 in the same village and sentenced to three-year imprisonment by the People’s Court in early 1945, explained that labour was always in short supply in the mines, so they were open to persons with ‘untrustworthy’ origins and ‘bad’ biographies. Petko Nikov, born in 1934 and expelled from high school for ‘oppositional activities’, could enrol to study at the university only after spending a year at the Bobovdol mine and getting good references from its management. Guergui Oblanov however never had any problems with the authorities and payment was his only motivation to return to the mine after several years spent elsewhere and to work there until his retirement in 1990:

And we decided, Nadka and I, to build a house. But you can earn the money neither here [the collective] nor in Chervena mogila [factory]. Velichko came – ‘a lot of money, a lot of money’, he said – I already knew how much he got and I knew how much they were worth. He couldn’t catch me anymore. And I went to the mine. [...] That’s how I got along. Up there, I got decent money. If I had not, I wouldn’t get this pension now. And, as I said a while ago, we started to build a house. And, with strain and stress, we completed it in two years.

From another part of his narrative, it becomes clear however, that even though miners’ work was very well paid, the conditions were so hard and precarious that many left. These details add an aspect of self-respect based on a notion of masculinity that is developed later in the interview in the more detailed narratives of the work in the mine; money lured many to go to the mines but only real men could endure and stay:

Many people came: ‘we’ll turn the rock over, now we’ll turn the rock’, and they stayed for a couple of weeks and – pooh!!! – down along the river. Missing. Those left, others came, started to turn the rock over and I don’t know what. It’s true, what I’m telling you. If we compare, like the Partisans on the 9th September: as they came down from the mountains, [ironically] so experienced, *such* brave commanders and old partisans, as they reached

Gyueshevo¹⁴ – Gyueshevo is just over there – it turned out that the Germans fire at Gyueshevo. But these had thought... and they enrolled as volunteers, to go to the front line. But they had thought that [the Germans] on the other side would throw bars of chocolate. Ah, it didn't work like that. It didn't work. [Laughs] And these, they think that it's like cheese down there in the mine – poke the cake and that's it [laughs].

In this excerpt, the ideological imaginary is indirectly referred to, only to be subverted by his sarcasm: the continuity between the war front and the labour front described above, between the partisans and the miners, is inverted to illustrate the anti-values of cowardice and flippancy.

An ironic tone and sarcastic remarks occur frequently in Mr. Oblanov's story, giving an idea of the tensions and the antagonisms in the workplace, of which he did not speak openly. The major antagonism seems to have been the one between the workers and the 'learned ones'.¹⁵ The latter category first includes of all his immediate bosses – the engineers and the management of the mine:

You must [hurry to] eat, change and go to get the assignment, because that one'd say, 'Where are you hanging around today'. The general is there [...] One thing is that we are to start at 7 o'clock – we go at 8:30 – and up there, now we smoke a cigarette, now we make an analysis, this and that... and when someone says 'He's coming!', and you see the learned one coming – zzz, everybody runs inside. He is after you like an imperialist! You go inside right away.

The 'learned ones' however seem to be not only the managers; in other instances the concept includes the party functionaries, the planners and the policy makers, who imposed their initiatives on the workers to carry out. These are described with a great deal of sarcasm. I am going to quote at some length the story of the much-glorified high-speed method (whereby I managed to get an idea of the method itself):

G. O.: 1981, the high-speed. We did the high-speed from 1st July to 31st December. Without any break, no break, non-stop – 1st July-31st December. Four shifts of six hours. The shift [comes] on the spot, in the stope; it's not like: two hours from one shift to the next. It's like this: he's working, you come, pat his shoulder, hey, here I am... And – he gives you the hammer, the hammer's working all the time.

¹⁴ Checkpoint at the border with Macedonia.

¹⁵ I suppose that if I were not myself a representative of the 'learned ones', this antagonism could have been more explicitly stated.

D. K.: You mean you don't turn it off?

G. O.: It's like – you leave, I take the hammer and I start boom-boom-boom...

D. K.: Wait a minute, can it be that...

G. O.: Well it's not that it's working all the time, 24 hours. You hammer [the rock] and you blast it.

D. K.: But you said, you had to wait for two hours after you blast in order to...

G. O.: There's no time. There's neither two hours, nor 20 minutes with the high-speed. You spray it, sprinkle it [with water] and you start again. And then, for the 1,300 years of Bulgaria they gave us a monthly plan of 1300 meters. And Todor Zhivkov¹⁶ became 71, and the learned ones, the heroes said: for Comrade Zhivkov – 71 meters in addition! Here it is! We're through!

D. K.: But they didn't give you 1,300 levs, did they?

G. O.: Well, they did. They did give us 1,200-1,300 levs, but they took 130 levs [party] membership fee. Ow, mother dear, I could have bought a pair of shoes and a suit with that! But you give the BCP 130 levs membership fee because you've got 1,300 levs. But never mind that – the hero got 2,200 levs, so [he paid] 220.¹⁷ I say, let's see now, Ivane, who got what. He's calling them names, – I'll throw my card away! – Well, do throw it away, I wanna see that, how you'll throw it away... And then – you rail at them, but what can you do... Tell me now, was that right, was that humane, was it? [...] And I don't dare say at home how much I've given away, for there will be a war, she'll sack me from home."

This description of a widely popularised example of socialist labour gives an idea of the contrast between work as an ideological construct and the concrete reality of work. The language of narration reinforces this contrast and makes it function in a subversive way. The shorthands 'the high-speed' (instead of 'high-speed method'), 'the hero' (instead of 'hero of socialist labour'), as well as other vernacular expressions, add a tinge of familiarity, which undermines the heroic aura of the things told and makes them sound rather comic. Mr. Oblanov's manner of performance also adds to this effect. A particular dynamic of his speech is achieved by the contrast between the first passage where he makes a summary of the high-speed method almost without any verbs, and the next sentences where he strings two-three verbs in each. Another contrast is there between his 'muscular' style of narration (reinforced by interrupting my questions and increasing the velocity of speech) and the spurious enthusiasm in aping the typical style of the slogans.

¹⁶ General Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party from 1956 to 1989.

¹⁷ At the same time, the monthly salary of newly appointed university graduates was centrally set at 160 levs.

Answering my question about the money, he reveals what were probably the real motives of the workers: in exchange for their 'enthusiastic' work initiative, they bargained for higher wages.¹⁸ However, right afterwards he blocks this earnest statement with the humorous comment on the party membership fee and how 'the hero' reacted. This comment suggests the existence of certain tensions between the workers themselves related to the distribution of work tasks and payments.

It is made quite clear in this excerpt that the celebrated high-speed method was in fact a systematic breaking of the safety rules and that it yielded dubious results. This is never stated explicitly. The message is conveyed by an ironic undermining of the official heroic rhetoric that brings to mind Caroline Humphrey's idea of evocative transcripts as a form of tacit anti-communist resistance. The evocative transcripts are statements where the text is meant to evoke an interpretation that goes beyond (or even contradicts) its surface meaning (Humphrey 1994: 22-23). The situation of Mr. Oblanov's storytelling however is different and does not call for duality and equivocation. It can be hypothesized that the reference to the evocative transcripts of the past and the ironic tone of his narrative convey the workers' shared attitude at the time to the initiative that had been imposed on them but was represented as their own.

The antagonism between 'us' the workers and 'them' the bosses finally finds its quintessential expression in the suggestion that the former's hard work did not have any sense because of the latter's incompetence. In this particular instance, engineers appear as 'us', i.e. as workers' allies, first because they shared the hardships of the work in the mine, and second, because as experts they attested to the fruitlessness of the whole endeavour of drilling that part of the mountain in search for ore and condemned the waste of resources:

The mountain up there is drilled like this. Not only the galleries, but also the prospecting drills as well: horizontal drills, vertical drills, plus, not only in the main direction, but also to the left and right each 50 meters. [...] and that is why they assigned to us those meters, that is why – meters, meters... We haven't dug out as much ore as we've buried ready, melted and cast iron in those hills. [...] And we, poor fellows, kept plugging away and didn't give a damn. You know, it was like this... there was apathy, whatever they say about it now. There's a saying: Marko is ploughing, Nikolcho is harrowing. No matter if it's sown or not, he's harrowing. He doesn't care. What matters is to get my money – let the others think.

This devastatingly critical account does not contain any trace of despair. There is no feeling of a life lived in vain. This seems to be possible because for the last decade Mr.

¹⁸ The bargaining power of workers outside the unions (which were anyway bereft of their original role and reduced to an adjunct to the party-state) has been noted by various authors in different contexts (Sabel and Stark 1982; Mitchell 1992). Supposedly, the case in the mines was similar: labour being in short supply, the workers obviously were in a position to bargain and defend their financial interests.

Oblanov has become an active supporter of the right-wing Union of Democratic Forces (in power at the moment of the interview) and of its reforms leading to privatisation and restitution of the agricultural land. In one more sense, he seems to consider himself a winner.

Another layer of the narrative, however, adds an entirely different dimension to the picture of the work in the mine. When Mr. Oblanov describes the relations between the workers in his unit, he no longer refers to work in the mine as simply a source of income. There is neither sarcasm nor ironic distancing in his account. His tone is entirely different when it goes about the distinctive forms of solidarity within the immediate work group. He seems to place significant value on the all-male company in the mine in the light of the hardships and the risks of the miners' work, of learning from each other, protecting each other in the pit, and the sympathy with those who were less lucky and suffered accidents. The following excerpt gives an idea of a cooperative and solidaristic culture of mutual support:

True, in the end, a few months before retirement, the colleagues used to protect me, notably a boy – I'd taught him the trade already... – he really wouldn't let me touch the worst places, where I had always climbed because I had the highest qualification class. [...] You know, when it's about work, I can't dodge and have the others say, 'He gets the money and we do the drudgery.' [...] You must know, it's an extreme situation down there; no one holds an umbrella over your head. Protect me to protect you. No joke... The mine, there must be no joke, there must be mutual respect and protection. If you see something [falling], no joke, what if it kills the other and you survive. Will you thrive, if you survive? Save the man. And there have been terrible things – let's not talk about that. [...] Let's say, your job is to teach. Ours is a different thing. It's a front line, a war. The mine is a war.

The comparison of the mine with a front line here does not really echo the propaganda rhetoric of the peaceful front. The meaning is totally different, for war is associated here with risk, injury and death, rather than with victory and heroism. Juxtaposing his job and my job, Mr. Oblanov once again compares manual with non-manual labour, this time however with no irony, emphasising the dignity and the worth of his fellow-miners who protect their colleagues and act decisively in extreme situations. Thus, his manual and masculine occupation can successfully stand comparison with my feminine one. Physical strain, perseverance in hard and risky conditions, mutual help and solidarity are central features of this notion of masculinity, which seems to be a counterweight to the feeling of meaninglessness on the balance sheet of his work life.

Considering Mr. Oblanov's account, it is important to remember that life stories are in certain ways non-transparent. First, they are retrospective accounts viewing the past from the perspective of the present. Therefore, it is the present situation that defines what is important and what can be left out. One's self-perception as a winner or a loser is important in defining the plot and the message of the story. Second, the life stories are reconstructions of the past based on human memory; memory itself is not storage of facts but rather a creative process guided by one's attitudes and values. What we get therefore, are not simply 'facts', but – to use Alessandro Portelli's apt expression – also 'philoso-

phies', that is, not only people's memories of the events but their theories as well – their comments, explanations, evaluations, contextualisations (1997: 79-88). Third, the oral autobiographical accounts are performative acts; they bridge the private and the public sphere by making one's experience known to others who are immediately, physically present and react to what is being told. Thus, the life stories are in a way co-authored, they are dialogues rather than monologues. In addition, they are also acts of self-presentation: not only a complex and contradictory past reality is described and evaluated, but at the same time, a vindicated identity of the speaker is constructed. For these reasons, I tried in my brief comments on Mr. Oblanov's story to pay special attention precisely to the evaluations, the aspects of subjectivity, and the reactions to my presence and my person. I am convinced that these do not obscure the referential aspects of the story and do not reduce its value as an account of the past but, on the contrary, add to it the richness of personal experience and the colour of personal attitudes.

Self-presentation and notions of work

Viewing the personal narratives as acts of self-presentation, in this part I will try to reconstruct two different notions of work expressed in the life stories we have collected since the mid-1990s. From the perspective just outlined – of the inseparable referential aspects and aspects of self-presentation – the centrality of the accounts of work in many narratives seems to be quite significant. Work often means obligations, efforts, burden and fatigue, but at the same time it is seen as self-fulfilment, independence, worth, honour, and sometimes even as the meaning of one's life. These attitudes indeed resemble the images of the past and the socialist present outlined in the beginning but they are far from that ideologically coloured rhetoric of work. Rather, they focus on personal experience and perceptions.

I am going to consider two different notions of work that appear repeatedly in the life stories and I shall try to relate them to generational, occupational and other aspects of the social position of the narrators. It seems that these two different notions embrace the 'traditional' differences between physical and intellectual work and to some extent even those between industrial and agricultural work.

The 'traditional' notion

The notion that I more or less arbitrarily call 'traditional' derives from the idea of hard work and industriousness as a basic virtue, gaining others' recognition and esteem for the person. It is almost the only virtue that the interviewees openly claim to possess. In most cases, their strategies of self-presentation preclude direct self-assertion. The only thing that they allow themselves to boast about is their being hard working (and, for women, their motherhood). Here is an excerpt from the story of a woman, a rural resident, born in 1933:

Interviewer: What was it that you liked most at school?

Interviewee: I like everything. Flowers in particular, I'm dying for flowers. Same with school – I like everything, I can't say I hate something, despise something... What I love is work, you see, I'm never bored with it, I can dig the whole day long, the whole day, but to stay in bed, to stay idle – that I can't do... From an early age, we have been by ourselves and I have struggled from an early age to work. [...] We used to have neighbours over there, and the son went to the army in the summer, but they still had their private fields of wheat... and I was his younger sister's friend. And we harvested together in the summer. They said: 'Jana, will you come to help harvesting?' And I – 'I will'. And as I got there – but who could have known that... I never had the thought... – you see, I'm like this, when something has to be done, I can't bear, I get up and I do it. They say, as I got there, I'd take the broom – they had a cabin in the fields, they used to sleep in the fields when harvesting – so I'd take the broom, I'd sprinkle water, I'd tidy everything, I'd make it cosy, and my [future] father-in-law told his son as he came back on leave from the army: 'I don't know what you're going to do, but I like this girl very much.' And there he showed up and proposed to me (Koleva, Gavrilova, Elenkova 1999: 54-55)

This being an early phase of the conversation, the interviewer is trying to direct the narrator's thoughts to her childhood and school years. As can be easily seen, she practically does not answer that question and quickly turns to what she thinks most important about herself: her work. There is a striking resemblance between this story and a popular folk tale where the girl, without knowing it, is also put to test by her future father-in-law, and the criterion is the same: the future bride's efficient work and industriousness. Referring to a different folktale, another interviewee, also rural resident, drew a direct link between work and well-being. He contended that in his village in the past, whoever worked hard was fairly well off, while the poor were poor because of their laziness: "If you work, you'll have, if you don't work, you won't have... I've never found myself penniless" (Koleva, Gavrilova 2004: 259). Thus, contrary to the communist rhetoric, poverty appeared to be shameful in his view because it stemmed from a vice – indolence.

One way or another, the theme of work is the most frequent focus of self-presentation in the life narratives. As an alternative to the use of traditional folklore themes describing work as a paramount virtue, some interviewees lay the emphasis on their own hard work through comparisons with contemporary young people who have forgotten this basic value and are oriented towards consumption. Another narrative strategy to present oneself as hard working is through the recognition by others. Petra Gueorguieva, born in 1927 and widowed early, was proud that men in the village had admired her work. Of course, she did not mean her housework, but a kind of work where men usually play the leading role:

I'd take lambs to sell, and Krustyu would say: 'Hey look, a woman, and her lambs are better than ours.' The deliverer Vulcho, he'd say: 'Look, look at Petra, look – her lambs are as plump as she i.' (ibid.: 222).

Another woman, Stanka Boneva born in 1926, described in her narrative a competition at harvesting where she competed with a man and won (Koleva, Gavrilova, Elenkova 1999: 123). It seems that precisely such instances, in which they successfully compete with men, are important for a few women in their affirmative self-presentations. Men's recognition and admiration reflects women's worth not as women but as fellow-workers.

In these and many other stories (primarily of rural residents and elderly manual workers), an underlying notion of work can be seen, which evidently derives from traditional rural culture. Work is understood as physical effort, in harmony with nature and its elements, directed to the satisfaction of immediate basic human needs. Skills for this kind of work are acquired through experience and industriousness, not through formal education. One can only learn if one practices for a long time as an apprentice. Knowledge is only valuable if it can be immediately applied to the solution of practical tasks. The idea of mastery nourishes self-esteem. This understanding of work seems to have much in common with the idea of the worker-demiurge developed by Luisa Passerini in her analysis of the stories of workers in Turin (1987: 42-46). Noting that forms of behaviour and ideas often get mixed up when work serves to establish the identity of the narrator, Passerini traces the origins of the biblical contentment and the values of self-sufficiency in the traditional peasant and artisan culture. Indeed, interviewees who understand work as bodily effort and skill of the hands tend to link it to all aspects of life and to see their own lives as part of the succession of generations. Therefore, it appears generally stable: changes do happen, of course, but they do not affect the major values inherited from previous generations. Stemming from traditional culture, this notion does not seem to have much in common with the principles of socialist labour except that it too endorses the rule that one should receive gratification according to one's work.

Stressing that their lives have mostly been spent working, some interviewees tend to counterpose manual work and office work; the worker's work and the intellectual's work (less often – agricultural and industrial work) either as genuine and 'spurious' work (in the sense of: "Do you actually work or are you a shopkeeper?") or as two different kinds of work. A shopkeeper's account exhibits attitudes quite similar to the ones already noted in Mr. Oblanov's story:

I have dreamed and dream even now that I had studied at the time, because I earned my living with very hard labour and I had acquaintances that earned theirs easier. One was able to find work everywhere: they became clerks, teachers, this and that, and I was doing the drudgery, carrying goods... I used to carry things by the ton. In particular, when I worked in a grocery – it was quite far to carry, across a park – there were no trolleys, nothing and there was plenty of work in that grocery. I was alone there; true, I did earn quite a bit, but the drudgery was great (Koleva, Gavrilova, Elenkova 1999: 104).

One's own worth here is still anchored in one's work understood as hard physical labour. However, instead of harmony with nature or tradition, there is already the dissatisfaction by the conditions and the nature of work, triggered by comparison with others who had softer jobs. This is obviously the type of situation and the way of perception, which has generated the popular slogan: 'Study to avoid working' (i.e. manual work).

The modern 'work ethic'

I use Weber's expression, although it was designed to describe the essence of capitalist development, because it contains the notion of a calling, and carries the idea of a dedication to work and viewing it not simply as a way of making a living, but rather as an end in itself. Furthermore, this notion of work stresses its institutional settings and mediated nature. Work again is a means to earn one's living but no longer in that immediate and self-sufficient way. It is institutionally organised and regulated by formal norms. It depends on specialised formal knowledge acquired in institutional settings and attested by certification. It implies institutional hierarchies and division of competences and tasks. In such cases, work tends to be presented as an occupation requiring special qualifications, implying certain responsibilities, and sometimes even as a calling. A nurse in a children's ward views her job in precisely this way:

I don't know whether I have chosen my occupation or I've been called to it, but I have no regrets; on the contrary, I love my profession. I try to be good to the patients...; I constantly try to learn new things to improve my work. The doctors with whom I have worked have been of great importance. I've always preferred them to be knowledgeable, clever, so that I can learn from them.

A little later, she tells of her colleagues' attitude to the work:

In those days no one hurried home at the end of the workday if it was necessary to help some of our little patients in case of emergency. In such cases, everybody would go back to their workplace and provide help, and only afterwards would they go home. The head of our ward was a female doctor always up to the mark, who taught us a lot: both as medical specialists and as people who treat their patients well.

The satisfaction and pride in one's work stem here not from ingenuity and capability associated with manual skills, but from education, qualification, learning capacities, responsibility and creativity in coping with new tasks. Work is seen as professional work and the self-presentation sometimes is the interviewee's professional balance sheet: a teacher born in 1929 reports 34 years of work, hundreds of pupils, of whom she lists the most successful by profession – doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers – to conclude: "I am professionally proud that I have reached not only to the mind, the consciousness, but to the heart of my pupils as well."

In such accounts, not much is told about the nature and the technology of work, neither about specific work tasks. The narrators express their feeling of belonging to a professional community with distinct traits and sometimes even describe themselves through the stereotypes associated with their occupation. They seem to be much more interested in the aspects of responsibility, creativity and self-fulfilment, and bring these to the fore. It is striking that with very few exceptions interviewees always find something positive to share about their work, even in cases like the following one, a translator in a research institute, born in 1926:

You know, when I'm thinking now how used to work I have been... Saturdays and Sundays were really workdays [for me]. But Saturdays and Sundays were days of free labour, while during the week you had to put up with certain things and to go to work on time in order to sit there – God knows why – there was not enough work sometimes... Too many of us were packed there for too little work.

It is beyond any doubt that in many cases institutions were overstaffed and inefficient. Like Gueorgui Oblanov, a few interviewees would be right to doubt as to the meaning of the work they had done as their occupation. Nevertheless, scanning more than 200 interviews, I have not come across any entirely negative accounts of work.

By calling one notion of work 'traditional' and the other 'modern', I do not mean that they should always chronologically succeed each other. In fact, sometimes they co-exist in the same story, as in Mr. Oblanov's case: when he tells about learning the trade, he seems to refer to a more traditional notion of work, and when he wants to emphasize how hard he had worked, he refers to institutional recognition – a certain Form n30 certifying the work term of a retiree that he got at an early age. Of course, observations relating one notion of work or the other to the person's age, education, occupation and place of residence are also relevant. Thus, the two notions seem to reflect changing patterns and changing perceptions of work. They neither follow nor contradict the ideological imaginary of socialist labour although they share some of its principles: the ones that relate to the centrality and the importance of work and to the work ethic, and are not intrinsically 'socialist' in character.

Another important aspect of these notions of work – and one that I find particularly interesting – is that they are shared. They seem to be shared not simply because they occur frequently but in a more significant way as well: the speakers find them 'normal', that is, agreed upon and meeting the expectations of their respective milieus. They fall into shared narrative patterns, make use of shared metaphors; add to a mosaic of a collective mental imagery. They represent both experience and pattern and are therefore both personal and social.

Thus, the everyday notions of work represent a form of Bakhtin's 'heteroglossia', a tacit struggle between the attempts of those in power to impose their monological language and the efforts of those below to stick to their vernacular.

Conclusions

I have tried to look at socialism as a cultural code rather than a political system. It is the former that guides the strategies of everyday life and of life course. That the practice differs (and sometimes substantially) from the ideology of work elaborated by the communist state is beyond any doubt. What Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery noted about the post-socialist transition holds true of the earlier period as well: the micro-politics of everyday life and of life course “[...] infuses externally imposed projects with intentions and directionalities divergent from those that were planned” (Burawoy and Verdery 1999: 14). It seems that after the romantic period of the 1960s, the divergences between plan and reality and the resulting heteroglossia grew ever greater. Work, however, did not cease to be a central part of people’s lives and of their self-perceptions. I am interested in how work gets involved as the core of a personal ideology”, i.e. in personal representations and identity constructions. The socialist state had defined work primarily in political and ethical terms. Furthermore, work seems to have been reduced to material production in the first place, at least until the late 1960s. In that period, physical labour seems to have had a greater symbolic worth than intellectual work, and industrial labour greater than agricultural. These ideological and symbolic distinctions, supplemented by the state classification system (including payment) set the stage for individual biographical projects. The latter complied but in certain respects also diverged from the state imaginary. Even if they diverged, however, these divergences had to be acceptable and negotiable. The range of acceptable divergences would characterise the societal order. In socialist societies, that range was much smaller than in Western democracies and the normal biography was therefore much more widespread – not to say the only possible one. It was anchored in education and occupation, which figure prominently in individuals’ accounts of their lives. It seems that occupation and work were the basis of stability and security in one’s life and have become essential for the formation of a sense of personal and social continuity, which lies at the core of biographical strategies for normalising discontinuity (Breckner 2003: 205).

This article has been an attempt to look at social imaginary as an essential part of the everyday reality. Social imaginary cannot be isolated from the logic of everyday life and from the everyday practices of negotiating normality. Although I have been trying to access it by personal narratives, I am aware that it is always collective. Even though I have used retrospective interviews conducted in the late 1990s, I think that they distort the picture in quite predictable ways and therefore make it possible to capture the discrepancies that existed in an earlier period between ideology and practice, between the desirable and the possible.

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POVZETEK

Članek je poskus pogleda na socializem kot na kulturni kod in ne kot na politični sistem. Proučuje različna pojmovanja dela in simbolnih hierarhij: tako tistih, ki jih je razširjala uradna komunistična ideologija kot tudi tistih neformalnih, ki so jih v svojih življenjskih zgodbah predstavljali informanti. V največjem delu se prispevek osredotoča na delo rudarjev kot na simbol 'socialističnega dela' s specifično naravo, cilji in organizacijo. Uradni medijski diskurz in podobe prvih dveh desetletij komunističnega režima so uravnoteženi z življenjsko zgodbo rudarja z namenom lažjega prikaza, kako so vsakdanje zaznave tega poklica s strani samih rudarjev povezane z uradnimi propagandnimi reprezentacijami. Zadnji delu prispevka se razširja na vsakdanje zaznave dela skozi življenjske zgodbe z vidika 'tradicionalnega' dela in z vidika 'moderne delovne etike'. Pri tem prispevek kaže, da so različna pojmovanja dela bolj odvisna od generacijskih, zaposlitvenih in drugih vidikov družbenega pozicioniranja pripovedovalcev kot pa od ideoloških imaginarijev komunizma.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: socializem, delo, življenjske zgodbe

CORRESPONDENCE: DANIELA KOLEVA, Faculty of Philosophy, St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University, 15, Tzar Osvoboditel Blv., 1504 Sofia, Bulgaria. E-mail: daniela@sclg.uni-sofia.bg