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Counter-hegemonic Struggles in Postsocialist Bulgaria: the 2013 Winter of Discontent

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to contribute to an understanding of power struggles in the post-socialist context of Bulgaria by way of examining the language of protests, which took place in 2013 in Bulgaria. It offers a critical discourse analysis and draws on the theoretical work of Antonio Gramsci and Ernst Bloch to suggest that these protests represented a counter-hegemonic attempt on the part of subaltern classes to challenge the liberal-capitalist discourse of the post-1989 transition by articulating a radical popular-national political identity.

Keywords: Protests, popular mobilisation, post-socialism, Bulgaria, Antonio Gramsci, Ernst Bloch, hegemony, utopia

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INTRODUCTION

The beginning of 2013 saw some of the most widespread protest mobilizations in Bulgaria since 1989 – people demonstrated on the streets of 35 cities and towns across the country for nearly two months¹. The protests were triggered by abnormally high electricity bills (sometimes several times higher than normal). Protesters blamed the foreign-owned privatized energy distribution companies for the price hike and called for their nationalisation; they also accused the political class of ‘betraying’ the interests of the people and demanded radical changes to the political system that would allow for more direct forms of democracy. The protests resulted in the resignation of the centre-right government (GERB²)³. This paper attempts to contribute to an understanding of power struggles in the post-socialist context of Bulgaria by way of examining the language of these protests.

We can be certain that despite its purported rejection of utopianism, East European post-1989 civil society was propelled by idealised visions of the future and of notions, such as democracy, Europeanisation, and morality (see also Ray 2009). Two main larger discourses structure the post-1989 transitional common sense – those of ‘modernisation’ and of ‘Europeanisation’. Broadly speaking, these served to bridge the gap between party elites which embarked on harsh pro-market reforms on the one hand, and the electorate which suffered from these reforms on the other. The concept of modernisation embodied the following message: it is not a question of choosing between liberal capitalism and democratic socialism, it is a question of the future of modernity. Thus, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s vastly different sections of Bulgarian society consistently acquiesced to, and often actively supported, an ideology that often did not represent them and worked

¹ This paper draws on the author’s PhD research project ‘Ideology and Utopia in Social Protests in Bulgaria: Beyond the Liberal Consensus (2016).

² *Grazhdani za evropejsko razvitie na Bulgarija*, translated as Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria.

³ Interim elections held in May then produced an opposition-led coalition government composed of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), and the liberal Movement for Rights and Liberties (MRF), informally known as the party representing Bulgaria’s Turkish minority. Just a month into its mandate, the new government also triggered daily protests that lasted an entire year and eventually, they too toppled the government. However, in this paper, I shall focus on the first (Winter) wave of protest mobilisation only. For a discussion of the Summer wave of protests, see Stoyanova (2016; 2018), Tsoneva (2013a; 2013b), and Tsoneva and Medarov (2014).

against their interests. At the beginning of the 2000s, however, the discursive field began to allow the articulation of a variety of rival discourses – the discourses of decommunisation, liberal democracy, and free market economy which dominated the 1990s became increasingly fragmented and contested by the new discourses of *nationalism*, so-called '*populism*', and, more recently, *anti-austerity*. It can be argued that during the 2000s, then, we witnessed the decline of a hegemonic discourse (which had temporarily functioned as a unifying social imaginary (as a 'horizon' [Laclau 1990])) back into a discourse struggling for hegemony. In this shift from a universal social imaginary back to a particularistic myth, the illusion of unanimity amongst different social groups (and their interests) dissolved, engendering a more complex and more polarised articulation of social divisions and conflict. In Bulgaria, this ideological fragmentation transpired gradually during the late 2000s and, it appears, culminated in 2013.

In this paper, I offer a discourse analysis of the language of the Winter 2013 protests. I discuss fragments from texts which textured the protest mobilisation, followed by a study of the discourses of the latter's critics. Following the Critical Discourse Analysis approach developed by Norman Fairclough (1992; 1995; 2003), my analysis of the texts, involves first reading them in terms of three aspects of meaning – *action (genre)*, *representation (discourses)*, *identification (styles)* – and how these are realised in the various features of the texts; second, how (and to what effect) the different genres, discourses, and styles are articulated together in the texts; and third, how these texts and discourses relate to other texts and discourses both within and beyond the protest event. I then discuss some implications of the ideological distortions evident in the texts in relation to the historico-political background of the post-1989 transition to liberal democracy and free market economy in Bulgaria. I draw on Antonio Gramsci's work on hegemony as well as on Ernst Bloch's theory of the interlace between ideology and utopia in attempt to understand the peculiar dynamics of the different discourses which structured the events of 2013. My analysis suggests that the protest mobilization of winter 2013 advanced a counter-hegemonic struggle against the post-1989 liberal consensus of the post-socialist transition. In their mobilization against political and economic elites, the Winter protests made a counter-hegemonic attempt to challenge the liberal-capitalist discourse of the transition's intellectual

elite by articulating a popular-national political identity. Significant sections of intellectuals – who tend to be particularly influential in the country – responded with intense criticism and mockery of the Winter protests and a refusal to ‘join in’ the latter’s protest, despite the common ‘enemy’ (corrupt power-holders).

1. THE WINTER PROTESTS OF ‘THE PEOPLE’

February and March 2013 saw thousands of people across the country, including in the hitherto silent small-town Bulgaria, rally behind slogans calling for the nationalisation of energy companies and an ‘end’ to poverty, unemployment, low pay. Although the immediate trigger were abnormally high electricity prices, the ‘irruption’ of the protest was precipitated by multiple factors, which can be briefly summarised as including austerity measures implemented by the centre-right government over the preceding three years, recent fuel price hikes, a strong and wide-spread disappointment with and distrust in political elites, and long-lasting disillusionment with the outcomes of the ‘transition’. Some of the most popular banners observed at the demonstrations included *‘For a dignified life in Bulgaria’, ‘Security and Future in Bulgaria’, ‘Enough [with] Lies! Enough [with] Poverty! It Is Time For Change!’* The mobilization also quickly broadened its initial economic demands and called for the abolition of political representation and political parties in favour of a more direct form of democracy. Large groups of people declared they no longer believed in political parties and desired to ‘take power into their own hands’. Slogans along these lines included: *‘No To Parties and [No] To Monopolies’, ‘Down Go The Mafia. Power In Citizens’ [hands]’* and *‘End to the Illusions. Self-governance. Activeness Every Day’*. ‘Real democracy’ and ‘representative democracy’ appeared as an oxymoron in the language of the protests. They also formed ‘citizen councils’ which were characterised by a horizontal (‘internet-like’) structure. In online forums, they initiated grassroots drafting of a new constitution which reflected their demands for political system change. In this sense, these protests can be seen as a radical call for inclusion, or for ‘counting’ in Jacques Rancière’s (2004) terms. Or, as Tsoneva (2013a, 2013b, and Tsoneva and Medarov, 2014) observe, in their rejection of the logic of representation, protesters articulated a notion of civil society that overlaps with ‘the people’: a sort of *‘civil society of the people’*.

The discourses of the Winter protests

Overall, a genre chain (Fairclough 2003: 32) consisting of two key genres could be distinguished in the discourse of the 'popular' rhetorical community: *revolutionary-liberation agitprop* and *conspiracy theorising*. Texts in each of these genres entailed different but significantly overlapping and interconnected discourses, among which key, or nodal, discourses were those of 'freedom' (or rather 'liberation'), 'awakening', 'united-ness', and 'morale'. The social relations which these genres established were those of 'unification' and collaboration based on a higher, collective goal (of collective struggle), grounded in the moral ethos of the nation. In this sense, we can think of it as a 'national-popular' discourse community. The identities which were built during the discursive enactments of these social relations were those of '*patriots*', '*freedom-fighters*', and '*alert and wilful citizens*'.

Before and during the Winter protests, the online public space abounded with what we might call 'revolutionary agitprop', the central (nodal) discourse of which was 'revolution', or the need for one. This discourse was enacted in viral agitprop made up of diverse genre formats, such as short social impact films, short political tracts, revolutionary poems (both historical – from Bulgaria's 19th century liberation struggles from the Ottoman Empire – and contemporary), photo collages and caricatures, revolutionary songs (again both historical and contemporary), which went viral – 'liked', 'shared' and discussed by hundreds, often thousands of people on social networking sites.

The 'agitprop' which circulated widely during the protests carried a high emotional charge and abounded with revolutionary enthusiasm. The latter was channelled along two main discursive lines – economic and moral-nationalist – which corresponded to the two key 'enemies' at whom protesters pointed an accusatory finger and against whom they directed their grievances: 'monopolies' and 'politicians'. Often, these discourses merged to form an 'arch-enemy' – '*the politico-economic mafia*' – as illustrated in this post on a protest group's Facebook page:

ATTENTION! THE POLITICO-ECONOMIC MAFIA ROBS YOU EVERY DAY, EVERY HOUR, EVERY MINUTE, EVERY SECOND. THIS HAPPENS NOT ONLY THROUGH THE BANK SYSTEM. THINK ABOUT IT!...[capital letters in original]ⁱ

In addition, the struggle against the enemy was articulated as a radical rejection *in toto*: the entire political class – “all politicians who have been in power for the past twenty years” – were discursively renounced as traitors (see below) and as having irreparably compromised their trustworthiness. This short fragment also illustrates the recurring motif of the ‘transition’ as a crime, and the corollary that justice must be served – with the perpetrators’ narratives cast down and the losers’ vindicated. The post-1989 period of ‘transition’ was thus experienced as containing suffering, personal and collective tragedies and failure – experienced as a ‘crime’ that must be redeemed.

Along with an economic line, a second and more popular construction of the enemy – the ‘politico-economic mafia’ – was devised in moral-national terms. The most common lexicalizations here included: ‘traitors’ [*predatelī*], ‘enemies of Bulgarian-ness’ [*vragove na bulgarshtinata*], ‘national apostates’ [*rodootstupnitsī*], referring to the entire political class. The national-moral revolutionary discourse seemed to carry a higher emotional intensity. It trumpeted a cavalry charge, raising emotions to a higher pitch, so as to inspire individuals to be united with a larger group – that of the nation. A key discourse in this and in numerous other instances is the *celebration of history* – of past acts of heroism and bravery during Bulgaria’s liberation struggles against the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. Thus, rallying cries of Bulgaria’s 19th century freedom-fighters such as ‘*Liberty or Death*’ and ‘*For a Pure and Holy Republic*’, circulated in the internet and got printed on protest placards in February-March 2013. The memory of heroism in the national liberation struggles seemed to be able to turn belonging to a nation into willpower – one becomes not only a ‘national’, but also an heir to ‘liberty fighters’ and hence an agent in the historical evolution (and emancipation) of the national community as a generator of legacies for the next generations. Thus, drawing on the national liberation struggles for inspiration for these protests meant that the struggle often appeared to be articulated in nationalist terms: the fight for liberation was often ethnocentric (e.g. a fight to free ‘ourselves’ – ethnic Bulgarians from an ethnic ‘Other’, i.e. the Turks).

This displacement, however, needs to be understood as something much more complex than a simple illustration of ‘false consciousnesses’. It is easy (as it was

common) to dismiss the nationalistic twist of much of the discourse during the Winter protests as driven by ideological 'mystification' made possible by the 'irrationality' of 'uneducated masses' – as I will illustrate in the next section, the media and intellectuals' criticism of the protests utilised precisely this sort of explanatory frame. Yet, following the German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (1977), I want to challenge the reader to envisage a wider conception of rationality – one that takes from practical reason what first appears as 'irrational' and rationalises rather than eliminates it; in other words, giving a positive account of 'irrationality' by taking the world-informed character of protesters' subjective experience seriously (Hudson 2013: 30-31). The integration of anti-capitalist sentiments generated by present conditions into nationalist narratives rooted in past experiences of political subjugation can be seen as illustrating what Bloch (1977) called a *nonsynchronous* contradiction – older ways of thinking as well as archaic objects of hate, such as the image of the Ottoman oppressor, break through the present and become once again potent. The memory of collective suffering helped the revolutionary agitation instil a sense in which the redemption will be collective because the plight was collective as well. The ethnocentric (nationalist) elements of the protest then harboured an anti-imperialist progressive core, despite being couched in seemingly reactionary discourse.

Along with criticizing the ethnocentric (nationalist) patterns of the discourse of the Winter protests then, I argue that we should take the 'energy' of the protests seriously – its language full of pathos "which does not just come from despair and ignorance" (Bloch 1977: 19) – i.e. the way the protest's critics have it (see next section) – "but rather from the uniquely stirring power of belief" (ibid.) in one's own (collective) agency. In this way, although the obsolete object of hate – the Turk (or, generally, the ethnic Other) – is undoubtedly 'irrational' (rooted in a non-synchronist contradiction) and has to be challenged, the emotional drive for justice against the figure of the oppressor and the energy stirring such hate is authentic and has to be taken seriously and understood. In short, the outdated ethnocentric sentiments inherent in a significant part of the national-popular discourse can be seen as not merely rooted in irrational (xenophobic) drives which must be repressed, but also in the genuine (and rational) longing for commonality and

emancipation – the Blochian ‘utopian surplus’, which carries significant revolutionary potential.

Another key element of the Winter discourses is some odd hybridisation of distinct discourses and identities. What many of the revolutionary manifestos which flooded the Bulgarian public sphere in February seemed to share was the demand to replace politicians (or political representatives) with *citizens*. A very conspicuous example is one of the key demands which called for ‘citizen quotas’ in all major political institutions. Many of the placards which were raised in the streets also echoed this, e.g.: ‘*It is the citizens’, not the parties’ protest*’. What is more, some of the most commonly reiterated phrases in televised interviews with protesters were ‘(anti)-corruption’, ‘(anti)-monopolies’, ‘civil society’, ‘transparency’, ‘responsibility’. These are of course key liberal notions, yet they spearheaded demands for nationalisation of energy companies and abolition of political mediation (parties). Central liberal concepts then textured an essentially populist (anti-elitist) discourse which dichotomises the social order into ‘them’ (politicians/mafia/power-holders) versus ‘us’ (‘the people’), and which articulates a conspicuously liberal – responsible, active, alert (who keeps an eye on politicians) – civic subjectivity. Tsoneva and Medarov (2014: 2) refer to this as an *appropriation* – “liberal signifiers are [no longer] privileged object of elites but disperse and lend themselves to popular appropriations”.

Articulating themselves as ‘citizens’ along with ‘the people’ and calling for ‘activeness’ and ‘responsibility’ every day, protesters mobilised a distinctively liberal form of the notion of ‘civil society’ as a weapon against the liberal notion of political representation. The popular political subject which constituted itself in this way, however, at the same time distanced itself from the former carriers of liberal ‘civil society’ – NGO experts (Tsoneva and Medarov 2014) – forging the divisive line along categories, such as authenticity and morality. In this sense, we can think of the Winter protesters’ ‘borrowing’ of liberal language as an important part of the process of constituting a new and hybrid political subjectivity – one that previously had no ‘voice’ in the public sphere (in the words of Krastev [2011], it could change governments, but not policies) and which is now constituting itself as an active political subject by attempting a counter-hegemonic attack on the

established transitional (liberal-capitalist) rationality. What is particularly interesting is that it is doing so by emptying the contents of the 'transitional' liberal notions and re-filling them with new content which contradicts the old meanings (demanding nationalisation and the abolition of representational democracy under banners such as 'anti-monopoly' and 'civil society'). Thus, the appropriation of liberal notions does not entail a simple borrowing of concepts and ideas on behalf of a subaltern group which desires to constitute itself as the 'true' representative of the liberal project of a liberal civil society. Instead, liberal notions are re-contextualised into a different discourse: one of radical inclusion, articulated by a new popular political subjectivity – a sort of 'people's civil society' (Tsoneva 2013, 2013b; Tsoneva and Medarov 2014), which also articulates a different ideologico-utopian project for social change that is neither liberal nor authoritarian (since it asks for 'more democracy', not less).

What the hybridisation of national-popular and liberal discourses seems to reveal then is an aporia, an ideological incoherence that is very similar to the phenomenon Ernst Bloch referred to as 'non-contemporaneity' or the 'nonsynchronic' nature of thinking, as well as to what Antonio Gramsci (1971) described as the 'incoherences of common sense' – the fragmentary result of the sedimentation of ideas and beliefs elaborated by various intellectuals, including the organic intellectuals of the 'transition'. Apart from being fragmentary, the common sense, as both Gramsci and Bloch agree, often fails to correspond sensibly to people's own lives and experiences. Thus, the discrepancies displayed by the hybridisation of liberal notions and national-popular discourses described above can be thought of on the one hand in terms of a fragmentary coupling of a consciousness which "unites men in their capacity for practical transformation of the real world" and, on the other hand, as a consciousness which man "had inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed" (Gramsci 1971: 326). The often uncritically absorbed liberal-capitalist ideologemes of the liberal consensus after 1989 are now peculiarly being interwoven with contradictory ideologemes (egalitarian but also nationalistic ones, and anti-austerity but also liberal-capitalist) in a new, popular, political subjectivity.

The Winter protests attacked

Many of the Winter protests' demands and slogans were seen by cultural and intellectual elites as 'dangerously populist' and too reminiscent of 'communism'. Since the language of these protests seemed to draw on a collectivist/communitarian rather than on an individualist/liberal ethos, they were commonly framed (in media and by intellectual elites) as a communist as well as backward- and Eastern-looking⁴ *populist uprising*. The mobilisation was decried as one that sought 'social privileges' rather than 'rights' and thus as *populist, nostalgic of communism, and irrational*. To these intellectuals and NGO activists, it seemed to pose a threat to the modernization (Europeanization) and de-communization projects which underpinned the agenda of the 'transition'⁵. Such a 'populist' protest threatened to shake the dominant identity discourse of the transition – one that is linked to a capitalist narrative of future progress – which many thought of as stable and indisputable. Three key tropes characterise this attack against the Winter protests. The first one held that the protests were 'communist': this trope relies on the commonly held (liberal) understanding of communism/socialism which accuses it of 'having derailed' Bulgaria from its 'normal' development. An important feature of this anti-communist discourse is a narrativisation of the 'transition' as a naïve and mistaken programme which charted a plan for ('necessary') political and economic change but missed the 'fundamental' aspect of *cultural change*. In other words, the demands and language of the Winter protests, their critics argued, can be explained by the transition's failure to change people's thinking (common sense). Their presumption here is that the 'transition' should have engendered new ways of thinking and behaviour that are compatible with (and conducive to) the development of the new liberal democratic and capitalist order.

The second trope of the intellectuals' attack against the Winter protests was that the latter was 'irrational'. The demands made during the Winter protests were seen as ranging from "the unwise to the harmful" and "fantasmagoric" to "absurd" and "catastrophic". Listed as 'absurd' were ideas such as introducing a complete

⁴ In their view, this specifically implies leaning towards communism and pre-modernity.

⁵ and which seemed to boast much greater consolidating power during the 1990s.

majoritarian vote, cutting the number of MPs, and copying the approach Iceland had taken towards its corrupt bank and political elites, labelled as 'irrational', 'futile' and 'fantasmagoric' respectively. Numerous articles emerged in various liberal-oriented media which claimed to offer 'rational analyses' of the protesters' demands by juxtaposing the latter to 'economic rationality' (e.g., an article in the liberal daily *Dnevnik*, reprinted from a liberal think-tank, titled 'Protests and Economic Knowledge: a review of some of the demands through the lens of economic theory and rational choice'ⁱⁱ) or to 'common sense' (e.g., a media piece titled 'The Protesters' 5 Biggest Follies'ⁱⁱⁱ, in which the author lists the demands for a new constitution, majoritarian elections, depriving MPs of parliamentary immunity, cutting the number of MPs from 240 down to 120, and making it easier to depose them, as protesters' five biggest follies). Thus, more often than not, there seemed to be a merely simulated dialogue with protesters' statements, whereby a strategy of labelling protesters' arguments and proposals as illegitimate (absurd, irrational, etc.) served to skirt any engagement in an actual discussion about what made them 'absurd' or 'irrational' in the commentators' eyes. Needless to say, such moves resemble nothing of the 'deliberative' public sphere liberal intellectuals otherwise covet. Such "undialogized"⁶ language (Holquist 1990) effectively aimed to delegitimise and silence the divergent voices of February 2013.

Moreover, as mentioned already, this was achieved particularly through a strategy of pinning protesters' arguments to a supposed 'irrationality'. The tendency to derationalise, and thus belittle, the claims made by the Winter protests on the grounds of their emotionally charged content (where emotion is posited as irrational) is a move which must be challenged in its own right. 'Unemotional reason' is just as fallible as emotional judgments (Sayer 2006). As Archer (2000) and Nussbaum (2001) claim, emotions are important evaluative judgements which are "...very closely connected to beliefs about what is valuable and what is not" (Nussbaum 1993: 239, cited by Sayer 2006), and to dismiss these as merely 'irrational' does nothing but highlight the full-on conflict between belief systems and values that the above actually entails. To the extent that one side of the conflict

⁶ The term 'undialogised' draws on Bakhtin's (1986) dialogical theory of language, which sees the 'dialogization' of a discourse as the process of the latter's becoming relativised and de-privileged.

refuses to acknowledge its own value-based grounding, instead claiming for itself a superior position based on a claim to access to supreme 'rationality' and in this way advancing particularistic interests masked as universal, its discursive practices are ideological and serve to repress and dominate.

The final, third trope of the intellectuals' attack against the Winter protests is that the latter were not a protest of civil society. Protesters' self-identification as civil society was specifically, and cynically, mocked: it was frequently referred to as 'the so-called civil society'. Here is a fragment illustrating such criticism from the Bulgarian section of Deutsche Welle (where Bulgarian liberal journalists write) under the satirical title '*We repeal gravitation! And everything else*'^{iv} (in this way mocking the protesters' all-or-nothing rhetoric full of pathos and rejection):

It is not enough for a group of people, no matter how large, to get angry, to rise up and start yelling, for [us] to say that civil society has woken up. No matter how loud the calls for 'a better life' and 'more justice' are shouted out, they are not yet civic demands. The most general and total disgust with politics is not yet a civic position.

Civil society must be capable of speaking much more 'articulately'. [...] Civil society is not an amorphous mass which does not know exactly what it wants, how and whether [what it wants] can be achieved and to what consequences.

The attempt of the Winter protests to de-monopolize the exclusively liberal application of the term 'civil society' was thus fiercely attacked by delegitimizing, through exaggeration, sarcasm, ridicule, and often clear distortion, the demands the 'people's civil society' made during their mobilisation in February-March 2013.

In many ways, then, what emerges in these texts is a set of discursive practices that can be seen in terms of what Rancière (2004) describes as the 'policing' of the social order through 'the distribution of the sensible' – i.e. the practices of determining (which imply both inclusion and exclusion) the roles and modes of participation in a common social space (Rancière 2004; 2013). The distribution of the sensible then parses the visible from the invisible, the thinkable from the unthinkable, the sayable from the unsayable, the doable from the undoable. Similarly, in the terms of Agamben (1998), this established pattern of inclusion and exclusion (which

nonetheless is historically contingent) works via the Aristotelian distinction between mere biological existence ('zoe') and the political life of speech and action ('bios') – between 'bare life' and the 'good life'. Both Rancière (2004) and Agamben (1998) invoke the Aristotelian characterisation of man as a political animal endowed with speech and contrasted to animals who merely have *voice*, which is only used to express pain and pleasure, but not *speech* (*logos*), which is used to discuss matters of common concern (i.e. political matters). Rancière (2004) builds on this, arguing some people (groups in society) are given the role of only 'hearing' speech but are excluded from producing speech (and left with only a 'voice'). In this sense, during protests, Rancière argues, people (who are not taken to be the 'right' people to speak, e.g., non-experts), have to consistently 'prove' that they are speaking and not just 'shouting', that they use speech and not just voice. In this sense, it is via the invocation of the idea of 'civil society' hinged on the recognition of some individuals' and groups' possession of *logos* that many liberal intellectuals in Bulgaria in 2013 attempted to delineate (or rather, re-affirm) patterns of inclusion and exclusion. "If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being", argues Rancière, "you begin by not seeing them as the bearers of politicalness, by not understanding what they say, by not hearing that it is an utterance coming out of their mouths" (ibid.); it is through such an anti-democratic and anti-political refusal to recognise the capability of Winter protesters to produce not just noise but reasoned discourse that liberal intellectuals attempted to exclude them from the sphere of 'civil society'.

The socio-symbolic power of the group of intellectuals to define the terms of the distribution of status and prestige then stood out particularly clearly in the unequal power dynamics of the tumultuous Winter 2013. Protesters did not just have to constantly 'prove' that their voice is not mere 'noise', that they are not simply 'shouting', and that their language is legitimate speech (Ranciere 2004). They also operated in a politico-cultural environment dominated by the group of the intellectuals which exerted pressure on them to frame their demands around values traditionally espoused by the intelligentsia, such as morality, freedom, and autonomy. Since the subaltern groups who mobilised in February did not express their demands in the grammar of the intellectuals, their demands were declared 'invalid' by the latter and their protest subjected to denigration and even

contempt. They were not only consistently lampooned as 'losers' who deserve their economic disadvantage, but their "grit" to make political demands was repeatedly disparaged and their right to participate in political life and particularly in civil society denied.

2. CLASS STRUGGLE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The unequal access to the public sphere (i.e. to be 'heard') and the denigration of political agency that protesters experienced is a matter of class, despite not being explicitly understood as such by political analysts and indeed by protesters themselves. Yet, the glaring lack of class articulation in February is not surprising at all. During the 1990s, key to the transition from the socialist industrial state to liberal capitalism was class decomposition whereby people ceased to positively identify with a social class. The 'working class' in particular was no longer deployed as a political identity category by people in everyday struggles against exploitation. The liberal-capitalist social imaginary ('horizon') of the 1990s required such class decomposition in order to present itself in universal (rather than in particularistic) terms, i.e. to present its interests as the interests of all and thus become hegemonic. Its success at acquiring a hegemonic character can also be particularly clearly seen in the fate of the unions in the country after 1989, when workers felt increasingly reluctant to unionise and to defend their interests as part of a general enthusiasm for and even a sense of 'civic duty' to the 'new' social order, which required individualised (rather than collective) and self-reliant (rather than 'dependent on the state') 'citizen-workers'⁷ (see, e.g., Ost 2000; Bohle 2006; Crowley 2004). Thus, the liberal capitalist imaginary of the 1990s dissolved the boundaries and masked the conflict between different social classes and their interests by relating them to the common project of the 'liberal transition' to a free market economy and liberal democracy. Although by the 2000s, political scientists, sociologists, and scholars of the post-communist region were concerned about the ostensible weakness of civil society (Howard 2000), one line of inquiry which was likely to provide at least partial

⁷ See Ost [2000] on weak class consciousness and labour's acceptance of the bad deal in several post-communist countries, including Bulgaria. In his analysis, Ost concludes that "East European workers and unionists eschew class identities. They do not think of themselves as a separate class requiring separate organisations to defend their interests. Rather, they embrace the neoliberal project in the hope that 'the free market' will ultimately serve their interests as well" (Ost 2000: 520).

answers to the lack of large-scale protest activity is potentially, and paradoxically, precisely the temporary success of (neo)liberal ideology in harnessing wide support for, and acquiescence to, the decomposition of class and other collective identities, leading to the fragmentation and individualization of social inequality and of struggle against it.

Yet, the 2000s and particularly the events of early 2013 seem to attest to the failure of the liberal-capitalist transitional project to become truly hegemonic. To wider and wider sections of the population, it appeared more and more as a form of *passive revolution* in Gramsci's (1971) terms, i.e. a top-down imposed form of political transformation in which the dominant classes managed to *de facto* exclude the popular classes from autonomous and organized participation in the process of change (see Thomas 2013). In this sense, we can talk about the rise of contentious politics in CEE since the latter half of the 2000s and in Bulgaria in Winter 2013 as attempts at an 'anti-passive revolution' (Morton 2003; 2007) or the eventual response of the *subaltern classes* – those social groups comprising the working and the unemployed classes which had been displaced, marginalised, and excluded from political participation in the processes of social transformation of the preceding two decades.

This response can then be seen as a form of Gramscian 'war of position' launched by subaltern groups wishing to challenge the hegemonic project of the 'transition' by contesting both its substance and its class carriers. In other words, they challenged the transition's liberal consensus in the form of its economic pillars of liberalisation, privatisation, and deregulation, and its political pillar of representative democracy (Stoyanova 2016); and they further challenged the authority of the civil society that was instituted through the transition's liberal consensus, i.e. 'expert' intellectuals and NGO activists, who ultimately served (knowingly or not) the particularistic interests of the neo-bourgeoisie class of post-1989 'transitional' capitalism.

Yet, the tendency of the Winter protests to integrate discontent with the 'politico-economic class of thieves' into nationalistic rhetoric rather than in class terms often served to shift anger away from systemic flaws of the post-1989 capitalist establishment, thus preventing what appeared to be an inter-class 'war of position'

from unfolding fully as such. The inadequately developed class-consciousness during the Winter protests then threatened to sever the potentially progressive (anti-capitalist and anti-elitist) kernel of the protests.

Within what emerged above as alarmingly opaque and fragmented tendencies in which emancipatory impulses get distorted, there lurks a *radical conception of democracy* as the horizon of social critique, epitomised in the utopian desire to *democratise civil society*. Indeed, such a radical conception of democracy is what is contained in the articulation of a '*people's civil society*' (Tsoneva 2013a, 2013b; Tsoneva and Medarov 2014) in February 2013. To many who think of the idea of civil society as an essentially liberal notion, the concept of a '*people's civil society*' sounds contradictory. Indeed, many critical theorists have rushed to reject the idea of civil society *in toto*, seeing it as a liberal ideological instrument whose focus on individuality and competition helps constitute a system of mutual selfishness pretending to enrich the society as a whole (see, e.g., Ehrenberg 1999 and Rehmann 1999). Such views have tended to equate (or reduce) the concept of civil society with (to) its bourgeois aspect in the historical development of the West¹, where the figure of the *citoyen* is blended with that of the *bourgeois*, and have then called for the concept's abolition altogether (see Rehmann 1999). It is Gramsci who differentiates the utopian (civil) aspect of the concept from its ideological dimension (bourgeois), and it is thus his work on civil society that we can draw upon to challenge such a reduction. Gramsci's theoretical concept of civil society maintains its analytical difference from bourgeois society, even if the former gets empirically subordinated to the latter: as a theoretical concept it designates the hegemonic apparatuses and dimensions by which social consent is constructed; whereas empirically, it is likened to an instrument of bourgeois rule (Gramsci 1971; Rehmann 1999). Gramsci argued that civil society *can* be transformed into a sphere wherein the popular classes have secured a footing, enabling them to restrict the bourgeoisie's claim to this important democratic arena. Following this thread, we can see February protesters' identification with a '*people's civil society*' as an attempt to *disarticulate civil society from its bourgeois dimension and rearticulate it in radical popular democratic terms*. In its essence then, although it was oftentimes ideologically veiled in ethnocentric and hence exclusionary terms, the popular imaginary of a people's civil society articulated in February retained its

emancipatory and egalitarian core since it mobilised dominated and oppressed groups seeking to restore power imbalances. In this sense, it retained the potential to articulate an inclusive and egalitarian project if its classed character (class commitment) were to be salvaged from the mystifying husk of ethnic (nationalistic) politics.

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