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THE ART OF CHALLENGING: RE-READING AND REMEMBERING IVAYLO DITCHEV

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Abstract. This is an introduction to the special issue of *Filosofia-Philosophy* dedicated to the memory of Ivaylo Ditchev (1955 – 2023), professor of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Sofia, Department of History and Theory of Culture. It combines personal recollections of Ivaylo with a brief overview of his work as a teacher, academic advisor and researcher in the fields of urban anthropology, digital cultures, current forms of political and civic participation. While broad in scope, his research works are united by the exploration of the quest for identity in a situation of dynamic transformations of the cultural frames of reference, and relativisation of values.

Keywords: Ivaylo Ditchev; urban anthropology; visual anthropology; digital turn; politics of participation

It is weird to write about Ivaylo Ditchev in the past tense, after more than 25 years of teaching, discussing, working and thinking together with him. In my memory, I still vividly see him hurrying along the corridor with a cup of coffee in his hand, sipping hastily, listening, leaning slightly forward when he was intrigued, impatient to discuss, asking questions, opening his hands when he urged to think ‘outside the box’, startling, surprising, turning the banal upside down. A tireless intellectual provocateur, a rare combination of tolerance and assertiveness, of shrewdness and responsiveness, in a word: a person outside the box – this is Ivaylo as I remember him.

I did not know him in the 1980s, when he published his collections of short stories and his novel *Identification*, when he was part of a music band and put together a rock opera. My acquaintance and professional partnership with Ivaylo started in the following period of his life, in the late 1990s, when he joined the Department of History and Theory of Culture at Sofia University. He was just back from Paris where he got his second PhD degree from the University of Paris VII ‘Denis Diderot’ with a thesis in cultural anthropology. And he brought back an open and entrepreneurial attitude, a spirit of intellectual curiosity and inventiveness, a taste for challenge and experiment.

Ivaylo immediately attracted the students with his lecture course on the cultural dimensions and implications of psychoanalysis. At the same time, he started what was to remain his most important contribution to the educational profile of the Department – the MA programme in Cultural Anthropology. This was the first degree-programme in Cultural Anthropology in Bulgaria, radically different from the traditional ethnography taught before. It offered a fresh, de-trivialising perspective on everyday realities that surrounded us: those that were always already there, and those that were just emerging before our eyes. It gave a method to explore everyday culture and a conceptual toolkit to make sense of it. In search of the Department's unique positioning, one that would unite our research interests and respond to students' expectations, Ivaylo set out to develop urban anthropology. It proved possible to be embedded in the curriculum through some of its modules, such as the annual summer schools based each year in a different place: Plovdiv, Kardjali, Rousse, Belene, Stara Zagora, Sandanski, Haskovo, Samokov... No less importantly, the focus on urban anthropology was developed through research and study projects, involving both faculty and students. Thus, the project 'DIY City' (2008-2009) explored various types of appropriations of the city of Sofia 'from below', which sought to adapt the urban environment to the needs and interests of its inhabitants (Kazalarska 2010). In contrast to institutional and public admonishing, the project offered an attentive analytical reading of such practices as graffiti, wiring, transformations of facades, etc., on which Ivaylo based his PhD seminar 'The City as a Stage'. Later, based on the exploration of the protests in 2013, he would conceptualise the city as a front line (Ditchev, Petrova 2014; Petrova, Ditchev 2014).

In his usual problem-oriented or site-oriented approach Ivaylo would not hesitate to challenge disciplinary boundaries. A major initiative of this kind was the project 'New Youth, New Cultures, New Causes: interdisciplinary approaches to the study of culture' (2009 – 2012) that he led. The project aimed to make sense of the contemporary intergenerational divergences and their articulations in the social and spatial mobility of young people, their alienation from politics, their alternative civic causes and life styles (Ditchev 2009; Koleva, Gueorguieva 2010). The methodology privileged micro-level interpretation informed by cultural studies. It borrowed insights from media studies, visual anthropology and sociology.

Another problem-oriented interdisciplinary project was 'New Cultures of Festivity: Communities, Identities and Policies in 21st century' (2016 – 2020). It explored a wealth of festive events, from traditional to newly invented, from local to highly mediated, and from commemorative to recreational. The aim was to understand how festivals were linked to local, regional and national identity, for whom they were organised and how they fitted into local and national cultural politics (Ditchev, Petkov 2020); and, more broadly, what were the symptoms and the consequences of what might be called a 'ludic' turn in contemporary culture:

from responsibility to entertainment (Ditchev, Petkov 2017). While working on these issues, Ivaylo developed an interest in historical re-enactments, which led him to another major project: 'Living through the Past: Historical Re-enactments as a Cultural Phenomenon' (2018 – 2022), hosted by the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (Troeva, Yankova 2021).

Yet another strand of Ivaylo's research interests were the (re)mediations of cultural and communicative practices, including forms of political and civic participation, influenced by digital media. The project 'New Interactive Cultures and the Balkan city' (2013) was the result of the cross-fertilisation of urban anthropology and media studies, especially in relation to the 'new', i.e. digital, media. It was a pioneering exploration of the tensions and superimpositions of urban spaces and virtual spaces, generating new forms of participation. Out of this project, a couple of teaching courses grew, such as 'New Media and Participatory Cultures' (BA) and 'The Anthropologist in the Virtual World' (MA). Eventually, the topic made its way into the curriculum of the Bachelor Programme in Cultural Studies. The course on 'Digital Cultures', introduced in 2018, was initially Ivaylo's experiment. And it was not the only one of this kind: Ivaylo would not hesitate to tease students' curiosity and imagination with seminars such as 'Anthropology of Emotions' (PhD) and 'Anthropology of the Imaginary' (BA).

Even if there existed an ivory tower for social research, Ivaylo would never have lived in it. His talent to challenge appearances turned live issues and current societal and existential anxieties into research topics. I do not mean only his presence as a public intellectual, a columnist of *Deutsche Welle* and a frequent contributor to other media. The last project that he carried together with colleagues from the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication – 'Pop-culture, pop-politics: The Digital Turn' (2021 – 2023) – offered interdisciplinary analyses of current political phenomena thriving on social media and making use of pop-cultural genres (Popova, Ditchev, Neykova 2022; Smilova, Krasteva, Ditchev 2022; Ditchev, Dimov 2023).

This enumeration can be extended. However, my aim here is not to give an exhaustive list of Ivaylo's academic achievements but to map out the field of his research interests and how he ushered others into it. Each of the projects mentioned has necessitated collaboration across disciplines, departments and sometimes across institutions; building teams of colleagues; recruiting students, motivating them, guiding them and catering for their academic growth. Each of his courses introduced the students to the process of original research, which happened before their eyes and invited them to take part. Each new theme that Ivaylo discovered was very likely to attract some of the students and to grow into a PhD project. In fact, one way to map out the field of his scholarly interests could be through the topics of the PhD theses he supervised. And it would prove to be a broad and fascinating field organised around several foci, with unexpected links among them: urbanity, digital media, political and participative cultures. A field formed by his own

inquisitiveness and his genuine curiosity and respect for colleagues' and students' ideas. And a team – in fact, a real school – of devoted young researchers who still consider him their academic 'father': a major reference in their work, a first reader and critic, a life model.

To create a community, vision and élan may be enough. To maintain a community, a platform is needed, one that would ensure continuity and sustainability beyond the initiative and energy of its founder. The peer-reviewed open-access online journal *Seminar-BG*, whose founding editor was Ivaylo, has proved to be such a platform. The 26 issues that have come out since 2009 are the outcome of the work of both established researchers and talented students. And here, I have come to think of how Ivaylo has become an inspiration and a reference for all of them – that is, all of us. It was not only a matter of personal charisma. And not only a question of intellectual curiosity and hardly-human energy. For me, it was his seemingly impromptu theorising, his ability to immediately forge meaningful links between minute empirical details on the one hand, and serious theories on the other. This ability was based on a profound erudition coupled with an intellectual nimbleness and creativity. At the same time, his conceptualisations do not appear to be some kind of *Glasperlenspiel* because they relate to current existential and societal issues.

While it is easy to get lost in the wealth of Ivaylo's oeuvre, there is indeed an underlying theoretical outlook, which lends coherence and systematicity to it. In his book *From Belonging to Identity* (Ditchev 2002) Ivaylo builds on his earlier research in aesthetics and psychoanalysis to unpack the concept of identity in what could be seen as a sociogenetic perspective. He identifies the characteristic traits of contemporary culture that lead to a change in the mode of self-perception: from belonging (to a group, community, place) to identity, which is conceptualised as individualisation based on the 'privatisation' of cultural contexts by the individual. This transformation is seen as a result of the growing importance of visual representations, which appropriate the 'territory' of discourse. More broadly, the tension between text and image (in the broadest sense) lies at the core of contemporary culture. Therefore, the politics of representation can help understand many phenomena of the world around us. What has actually changed in the modern world is that the cultural context that used to be regarded as hierarchy and obligation, on which belonging was based, has been 'privatised' and has come to be considered a right and a matter of 'ownership' in an egalitarian world. This situation has placed the consumer at the centre of contemporary culture (Ditchev 2016, p. 61) endowing her with the right to take over or to lay aside each and any cultural product.

This has proven to be a research programme applicable to phenomena as diverse as mobility (spatial, social and virtual), migration, nationalism, citizenship, consumption, subcultural scenes, appropriation of urban space, media and their impact on the cultural imaginaries of contemporary people; to processes of globalisation, the parallel worlds of the 'Balkan post-modern'

(Ditchev 2005, p. 167), and Bulgarian ‘pop-socialism’. Or, as Ivaylo himself has put it: ‘the search for a reference system in a world with shifting borders’ (Ditchev 2009, p. 61). To my mind, it was this particular research programme that made his oscillations between ‘the field’ and ‘the concept’ possible. Not simply possible, but illuminating and inspiring.

Ivaylo was among the first Bulgarian researchers to engage with what has become known as the ‘digital turn’ or ‘virtual turn’. For him, WWW was the ‘big space’ (successor of Bakhtin’s ‘big time’) with its utopias of openness, accessibility, freedom and non-hierarchisation, situated between ‘the global market’ and ‘the global gift’ (Ditchev 2005, p. 189). He captured both the macro perspective (‘globalisation as privatisation’) and the users’ perspective (‘cultivating the distracted gaze’) coining concepts and converting metaphors into concepts in a synthetic intellectual effort. The identity-as-privatised-culture perspective has proven fruitful in making sense of the experiences of the generations who ‘grew up online’, accumulating social capital, which was predominantly ‘virtual’, and whose participation to a subcultural scene was a way to validate their individuality, rather than to establish and maintain a ‘belonging’. No less successfully, this perspective has been adopted as a starting point in making sense of historical re-enactments as identitarian consumption (Thiesse), whereby it is not history that molds individuals’ identity, but rather, the individual selects that version of history, which matches her identity. This is why re-enactments are seen as unmediated appropriations of the past ‘according to the complex logic of desire’ (Ditchev 2016, p. 53).

Closer to my own research interests in the field of memory studies, the ‘logic of desire’ as a product of the cultural populism of late socialism has been a vantage point to approach post-socialist nostalgia as both a life-world experience (as expressed in the life narratives of elderly people) and a contemporary pop-cultural phenomenon. More broadly, Ivaylo’s analysis of the use of monuments in the post-communist ‘memory wars’ has been helpful in making sense of the memory cultures and communities of memory in nowadays Bulgaria in terms of their emotional sovereignty.

I am noticing that, when discussing Ivaylo’s ideas in the last paragraphs, I have diverted from the past tense. This is not an error. Ivaylo Ditchev is still an inspiration and a challenge. And always worth to re-read and re-discover.

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