

Title: Bai Ganio Revisited: Slavi Trifonov and His Show As A Reworking of the National Relation to Bai Ganio

Author: Angelina Ilieva, University of Chicago

The eponymous character of the late nineteenth century Bulgarian classic by Aleko Konstantinov, Bai Ganio can be viewed as a part of what, after Maria Todorova, can be called “self-balkanizing.” Depicted through the normative prism of educated Europe, Bai Ganio is the product of a process of the painful judgment of the “Balkan self” through the European/modern/civilized gaze and the poignant recognition of the failure of that self. Very roughly speaking, Aleko and his narrators’ normative values are based on an idealized image of European civilization, community, and nobility. Bai Ganio offends against every norm of civil behavior, both “European” and Balkan/Bulgarian. His dress, language, manner, and values are a strange mixture of the old (“uncivilized”) Ottoman world, of the peasantry turned nouveau riche, and of crude, unscrupulous entrepreneurship, and, as the Bulgarian critic Svetlozar Igov has argued, the ruthless accumulation of capital. The critical and public discussion of Bai Ganio in Bulgaria has consistently involved a poignant sense of national identification with his persistent failure to live up to the standards of civilized “normality.” The character has been interpreted as the truthful depiction of the Bulgarian national character, i.e. he is a national type, this is who we are by “nature,” and there is no helping it (the balkanizing move). Even when Svetlozar Igov argued that Bai Ganio Balkanski was not a national type, but a social type (the product of belated modernization of Bulgaria shortly after its emergence from the Ottoman Empire), Igov’s interpretation was significant in national terms – if Bai Ganio is a social type, then we can break free from him, the national character is not inherently tragic-comically flawed, there is hope, we can be “normal,” civilized, European.

I give such a long introduction to the issues, in order to provide the context in which, it is my hope, my claims about Slavi Trifonov will make sense. One of the most, if not *the* most successful “showmen” in contemporary Bulgaria, whose TV show was the most popular in the country in the 1990s and early 2000 (and for some continues to be), Slavi appropriates Bai Ganio in subtle ways in order to turn the stigma into stubborn pride. In other words, those characteristics that, until then, were painful failures to live up to European standards of civility, are now turned on their head and become points of superiority of the Bulgarian (male) over the European one. The paper will compare episodes from Bai Ganio and Slavi’s show, in order to flesh out this claim. If, for example, Bai Ganio’s attitude toward women marks him as oriental, as a remnant of the uncivilized Ottoman Empire, Slavi’s similar gender attitudes are fleshed out as winning, successful, correct, superior. Likewise, Bai Ganio’s “inferior” taste in Balkan/Oriental music becomes, in Slavi’s show, a banner of vitality, creativity, and ultimately, superiority. Bai Ganio’s crude and woefully uninformed nationalism becomes with Slavi deeply emotional patriotism... Beyond fleshing out the details of comparison, and beyond rehearsing the old reversal going on here – lack of civilized becomes vitality and sexual prowess, for example – the paper will attempt to think about three issues: a) the circumstances that necessitated and allowed for the rejection of “national humility” vis-à-vis normative Europe and the “empowerment” of the national (male) self. b) the specific representational strategies that have been so effective for “Slavi’s Show,” in other words, the mechanism that makes the reversal and empowerment possible. For example, Slavi’s Show is based on Jay Leno, yet is deeply “patriotic,” crude yet glamorous, etc. c) Slavi as cult figure because he is an extremely successful Balkan businessman.