Against the Double Erasure

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# Against the Double Erasure: Georgi Markov's Contribution to the Communist Hypothesis

**Nikolay Karkov**

*To articulate the past historically does not mean*
*to recognize it "the way it really was."*
*It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up*
*at a moment of danger.*

Walter Benjamin

*There is a lot of energy in the dirt.*

Georgi Markov

## The Double Erasure of Eastern European State Socialism

Part of the motivation behind this text is a sense of ongoing impasse that *we* (that is, those of us with leftist leanings and political commitments to the region) experience as we confront the still relatively recent socialist past in eastern Europe. While the monopoly of interpreting that past may no longer lie solely in the hands of right-wing think-tanks, the parameters they set in the 1990s for public debate over socialism continue to haunt us. The dominant theme of that early interpretation stipulated that state socialism in eastern Europe was a "lost time" and a "waste of experience," setting the clock back for half-a-century and necessitating an accelerated catching up with the west. A typical example of this attitude was a 2004 declaration passed by the Parliament of my home country, Bulgaria, on the 60th anniversary of the "communist takeover" in the country. The declaration claimed that in 1944 the "European road" chosen in the nineteenth century by those who were building contemporary Bulgaria was interrupted by a "utopian experiment" that retarded social and economic development for several decades.[1] While increasing numbers of social scientists and, in fact, the majority of the population may have embraced by now a vision of socialism as an "accelerated modernization," a top-down conception of the socialist past continues to inform both apolitical forms of "socialist nostalgia" and easy slips into nationalism and xenophobia.[2]

Perhaps somewhat less predictably yet no less importantly, state socialism has also been under severe attack from the western (North Atlantic) left, including its more militant wings. Often launched under the banners of a

1. Iskra Baeva and Evgenia Kalinova, "Bulgarian Transition and the Memory of the Socialist Past," in Maria N. Todorova, ed., *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation* (New York, 2010), 84–85.

2. Petya Kabakchieva, "Rethinking Communism: Social Approaches to Comprehending 'That Society' in Postcommunist Bulgaria," in Todorova, ed., *Remembering Communism*, 46; Maria Todorova, "Introduction: The Process of Remembering Communism," in Todorova, ed., *Remembering Communism*, 18.

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reinvigorated Idea of Communism and the commons, the west European left still unwittingly contributes to what we can call a "double ontological erasure" of historically-existing socialism in eastern Europe. Examples to this effect abound, including among the west's most popular radical intellectuals. Thus, while reading Alain Badiou's recent political work, for instance, one is unlikely to find any positive references to the region whatsoever. Even as he proposes the "communist hypothesis" as the *trans-temporal* idea that "a different collective organization is practicable, one that will eliminate the inequality of wealth and even the division of labor," the French philosopher still identifies, nonetheless, only early Soviet Russia, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and May '68 in France as its only notable sequences in the twentieth century.[3] The "communist" challenge to the State (and the market) has nothing to gain from an engagement with historically-existing socialism, for Badiou.[4] A shared refusal to grant any theoretical autonomy to eastern European radical production unites also the otherwise divergent projects of public intellectuals such as Slavoj Žižek and Antonio Negri, while even theorists as historically nuanced as Bruno Bosteels and Jodi Dean completely overlook the contributions of eastern Europe while insisting on the "actuality of communism."[5]

3. Badiou's "communist hypothesis" was first articulated in English translation in a famous 2008 article from the *New Left Review* under the same name, and also in the final chapter in his book *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, trans. David Fernbach, (London, 2008). See resp. Alain Badiou, "The Communist Hypothesis," *New Left Review* 49 (January-February 2008): 29–42; and Badiou, "The History of the Communist Hypothesis and the Present Moment," in *Meaning of Sarkozy*, 105–17. Badiou understands the communist hypothesis (which he refers to elsewhere as the "Idea of communism" as well) to be less a political program than "a pure Idea of equality" which "has no doubt existed since the beginning of the state" and very explicitly so since the nineteenth century; see Badiou, "The Communist Hypothesis," 35. Badiou's argument has spawned a large literature already, most notably the three volumes of *The Idea of Communism* edited by Slavoj Žižek and Costas Douzinas (London, 2010; 2013; 2016), along with his own collection of articles under the title *The Communist Hypothesis* (London, 2010). I use the term as a theoretical shorthand for major efforts among the western left to extricate the "purity" of a communist future from the "bad history" of the socialist past.

4. Apart from a rare reference to the "Solidarity movement of 1980–81," as a minor instantiation of the "communist hypothesis," that is; see *The Communist Hypothesis*, 258; *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, 111. To the best of my knowledge, Romanian scholar Ovidiu Ţichindeleanu was the first to note the complete devaluation of eastern European state socialism in Alain Badiou's effort at reinvigorating the communist project: see Ovidiu Ţichindeleanu, "Where Are We When We Think of Eastern Europe," in *Art Always Has Its Consequences*, (Zagreb, 2010).

5. See Antonio Negri and Raf Valvola Scelsi, *Goodbye Mr. Socialism: Radical Politics in the 21st Century,* trans. Peter Thomas (New York, 2006); Bruno Bosteels, *The Actuality of Communism* (London, 2011); and Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London, 2012). Both Bosteels and Dean call for a historicization of the experience of state socialism, yet discuss only the legacy of the Soviet experience. Slavoj Žižek's references to state socialism, and to former Yugoslavia more specifically, are too numerous to bear mentioning here. He has been mostly interested in exposing the construction of the "Balkan Other" as a western fantasmatic figure, while also insisting (in various places) that "ethnic roots . . . are simply not categories of truth." See Slavoj Žižek, "Tolerance as an Ideological Category," *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 4 (Summer 2008): 660–82.

Particularly telling about these two approaches, the one on the right and the one on the left, is how they mirror one another as absolute identity and absolute difference, respectively. For the east European right, no real difference exists between the Communist Idea(l) and historically-existing socialism, the latter a direct and logical extension of the former. For the western left, there is no (or at best only minimal) overlap between the Idea of Communism and the historically-existing socialism of the twentieth century, which is then reduced to a betrayal or corruption of that original idea. In a challenge to this double erasure and the impasses that it creates, it is crucial to put eastern Europe's socialist past back on the map, with its messy dialectic of top-down impositions and bottom-up push-backs. While east European state socialism may have been, in a number of ways, in continuity with the logic of capitalist accumulation, it was never just the "poor cousin" of the western society of the spectacle.[6] To the contrary, the point of departure of this text is that historically-existing socialism did constitute a significant rupture with western capitalism, including and especially outside the former's normative and institutional structures. Restoring eastern Europe's socialist past to its place as a site of autonomous radical theoretical production is key to understanding how and why this is the case.

To think critically about state socialism in eastern Europe entails thinking both from location (from eastern Europe itself) and against the grain (of the above mentioned double erasure). Notably, an increasing body of theoretical work on central and eastern Europe has started to "fill in the blanks" in the study of state socialism in the region, especially in its post-Stalinist period. Accordingly, scholarly discussions have emerged on topics such as socialist consumption and daily life, the role of popular media such as television and cinema, the function of material culture and the arts, the strategies of dissident social movements, and the significant achievements of socialist "sate feminism," among others.[7] The tacit presupposition of much of this critical literature is the (factually correct) observation that, for most eastern Europeans today, "the relationship to communism is built upon a

6. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York, 1995), 79.

7. A non-exhaustive list of this literature would include Paulina Bren and Mary Neuburger, eds., *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe* (New York, 2012); David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, eds., *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (Oxford, 2002); David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc* (Evanston 2012); Martin Marinos, "New Media, New Habits: Socialist Television and the Struggle for 'Harmonious Consumption' in 1960s Bulgaria," in *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian, and Central European New Media* 15 (2016), 37–55, at www.digitalicons.org/issue15/new-media-new-habits-socialist-television-and-the-struggle-for-harmonious-consumption-in-1960s-bulgaria/ (last accessed December 16, 2017).; Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca, 2010); Anikó Imre, Timothy Havens, and Katalin Lustyik, eds., *Popular Television in Eastern Europe during and since Socialism* (New York, 2012); Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006); David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics: Opposition and Reform in Poland since 1968* (Philadelphia, 1991); and Kristen Rogheh Ghodsee, *The Left Side of History: World War II and the Unfulfilled Promise of Communism in Eastern Europe* (Durham, 2015).

reconsideration of the past, rather than as an element in a political battle in which communism would be a major player."[8] The critical wager of my own text is to ask under what conditions and via what channels a reconsideration of the past could reemerge as "an element of a political battle," in which a redefined notion of *communism* could still play a major role. As I seek to provide an admittedly limited response to this wager, I take up the work of Bulgarian dissident intellectual Georgi Markov.[9] Author of novels and short stories, playwright and screen-writer, journalist and public intellectual, Markov's literary and journalistic output (both during his life and especially posthumously) illustrates both the perils and promises of a postsocialist gaze into the "communist past," as it seeks to "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."[10] Against normative readings of the author as a "martyr of Bulgarian communism" (alleged to have been assassinated by the Bulgarian secret services in 1978), I argue that Markov makes genuine contributions to not only critical theory, but also to the communist hypothesis—by thinking precisely *from eastern Europe*. In what follows, I explore three such contributions, preceded by a brief literary biography.

## From Sofia to London and Back

Born in the outskirts of the Bulgarian capital Sofia in 1929, Georgi Markov spent his late twenties as a chemical engineer in two local factories, prior to taking early retirement for tuberculosis. His literary star rose in 1962, with the publication of his third novel, *Men*, which won the book-award-of-the-year and earned him unprecedented membership in the Bulgarian Writers' Union, the country's elite cultural institution. For the next few years, as one of the most widely-read and talented young writers of the 1960s, Markov produced a series of popular theater plays and short story collections.[11] He also enjoyed all the prestige and material benefits associated with the rich and highly influential Union: nomenklatura-style housing and a western automobile,

8. Iskra Baeva and Evgeniia Kalinova, *Sotsializmŭt v ogledaloto na prekhoda* (Sofia, 2011), 104.

9. This article owes its initial impulse to Zhana Tsoneva and Georgi Medarov's insightful "Georgi Markov: Kŭm edna arkheologiia na otsŭstvashtoto," the first effort (to the best of my knowledge) at reading Markov's work as an immanent critique of state socialism. See Zhana Tsoneva and Georgi Medarov, *Novi Levi Perspektivi* (November 2014), at www.novilevi.org/publications/204-markov (last accessed December 16, 2017). I have also benefited from Zhivka Valiavicharska's close reading of this text and from numerous conversations with Martin Marinos. Last but not least, I express my gratitude my two anonymous reviewers, whose critical comments helped sharpen and nuance a number of arguments in this text.

10. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1968), 255.

11. During the period between 1963 and 1969, Markov published nine plays and two short story collections. As his old friend Dimitar Bochev argues: "His books were devoured, there were queues for them, then they were sold for double or triple price"; see Khristo Khristov, *Ubiite "Skitnik": Bŭlgarskata i britanskata dŭrzhavna politika po sluchaia Georgi Markov* (Sofia, 2006), 68. Before migrating to Italy in June 1969, Markov had done much of the screen-writing for a popular TV series, "Nie sme na vseki kilometŭr" (We Are at Every Mile). His name was subsequently removed from the credits of the series.

unrestricted paid travels around and (especially) outside the country, access to extensive "creative vacations" in the countryside, and dinners and hunting trips with Bulgaria's cultural and political elite.[12] As the author recalled years later, he had literally moved overnight from belonging to the mass of disenfranchised, ordinary citizens to the group of people who "had set up a state for themselves."[13]

Yet membership in the exclusive club of state-sponsored writers also came with strings attached. All its material and symbolic privileges, almost without a peer elsewhere in the Soviet bloc, were only made available so that writers toed the party line and propped up the state propaganda machine.[14] As Markov bitterly recalled later: "All these luxuries were put at the disposal of writers for one reason only—to prevent them from writing."[15] For a person who saw himself as a "writer of the present," as Markov did, this state of affairs could not but present major tests of moral conscience and an increasing sense of discomfort. In the course of the 1960s (and especially around 1968), he grew increasingly critical of the wide gap between the rhetorical promises of the regime and what it was willing (and able) to actually deliver.

Following the removal of three of his plays from the stage, Markov left Bulgaria in June 1969, moving first to Italy, then Germany, then England, where he settled as a journalist in the Bulgarian section of the BBC.[16] He also started freelancing for both Radio Free Europe and the German Deutsche Welle, writing short impressionistic essays on his Bulgarian experience, which were then read on the radio waves to increasingly wide audiences in his home country as well. These weekly broadcasts, bitingly critical of the socialist regime he knew so intimately well, drew the ire of the Communist Party leadership. Markov was sentenced to prison in absentia, and a huge dossier piled up of his immigrant activities. After a series of unofficial warnings, semi-official

12. Georgi Markov, *The Truth That Killed*, trans. Liliana Brisby (New York, 1984), 182–86; Georgi Markov, *Zadochni reportazhi za Bŭlgaria, 2 vols*. (Sofia, 2008), 1:290–97. *The Truth That Killed*, an English language selection from those two volumes, includes less than a third of the original essays. In the remainder of this text, I include the page references from both the English translation and the Bulgarian original, whenever available.

13. See "We Made You into a Writer," *Truth That Killed*, 183; "Nie te napravikhme pisatel," *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:291. As Markov argues further down in the same text: "It flattered me to think that whereas as an engineer my public importance had been nil, as a writer I became the center of public attention," *Truth That Killed*, 184; *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:294.

14. In the same text from the *Reports*, Markov argues that the Bulgarian Writers' Union abundant access to resources was in stark contrast to the plight of similar organizations in Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. *Truth That Killed*, 183.

15. "We Made You into a Writer," *Truth That Killed*, 184; *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:294. By contrast, Markov himself saw the country as "a land of increasing effervescence, a land where gestures and words have many dimensions, where everything is accompanied by its negation, where strength and weakness, love and hatred, reason and stupidity, courage and fear go together—denying and confirming each other" (1984: xvi). The task of the honest and responsible writer was therefore to give uptake to this complexity.

16. Those texts included *Da se provresh pod dŭgata* (*To Pass Under the Rainbow*—banned after its 13th performance), *Komunisti* (*Communists*), and *Az biah toi (I Was Him)*. During the same time period he had also written the libretto to a musical and a movie script. None of those projects ever saw the light of day. See Khristov, *Ubiite "Skitnik,"* 126–29.

death threats, and even an abortive assassination attempt, Markov finally succumbed to the hand of his enemies, in what would come to be known as the infamous "umbrella murder." While walking to work on September 8 in London, he was injected with a small micro-pellet containing a highly poisonous concentration of ricin. Likely orchestrated by the Bulgarian secret services with alleged logistic support from the KGB, the poison caused his untimely death a few days later in a London hospital, at the age of forty-nine.[17]

The first edition of his Radio "Free Europe" writings was published in 1981, under the title *Zadochni reportazhi za Bŭlgariia* (Reports in Absentia from Bulgaria).[18] Yet Markov's second rise to fame, this time posthumously, took place after the collapse of state socialism. A declared "anti-communist" hero by the Bulgarian postsocialist intelligentsia, a number of his older and quite a few unpublished manuscripts would see the light of day again, now framed as a powerful and uncompromising indictment of the totalitarian experience. In 2000 he was posthumously awarded the Order of Stara Planina, Bulgaria's most prestigious state honor, and in 2014 a monument to his name was unveiled in Sofia, in the presence of three post-socialist presidents and the cultural and political elite of the city. His *Reports* in particular have been called a "Bulgarian Bible" and a "modern encyclopedia of Bulgarian life—a future textbook in history, political science, and knowledge of the people."[19] Markov himself has been defined as the "Bulgarian Orwell."[20] He has also been credited as the finest diagnostician of "the anthropological collapse" that was state socialism.[21] His brutal murder in the late 1970s has come to signify all that is repugnant, unforgivable, and irredeemable about the socialist condition.

A poster boy for Bulgarian anti-communism, Georgi Markov has, over the past two decades, become a signifier of the "worst crime of the century," Soviet-style totalitarianism, and a living reminder of a history that should not be allowed to repeat itself again. Or so the story goes. In what follows, I would like to challenge this normative perception, which I claim draws on a highly selective and ultimately ideological reading of his far more complex, nuanced, and contradictory body of work. Instead, I argue that Markov has

17. That Markov was killed by the Bulgarian secret services with the likely logistic support of the KGB continues to be the most wide-spread interpretation of the cause of his death. Among others, this is the position advocated by Bulgarian journalist Khristo Khristov in his monumental study of the "case" of Georgi Markov; see Khristov, *Ubiite "Skitnik."* Notably, Khristov reads Markov's life, work, and murder through an anti-communist lens. The scenario of Markov's murder at the hands of the Bulgarian state has, however, been challenged by different sources, aided by the fact that the massive dossier accumulated in his name was destroyed in 1990. On this point see Evgeniia Kalinova, *Bŭlgarskata kultura i politicheskiiat imperativ, 1944–1989* (Sofia, 2011), 359.

18. Those texts were read by an associate of the radio (as he was contractually prevented from doing so) between 1975 and 1978, once a week in 137 separate broadcasts, generating an increase in the radio's audience by 60%. See Khristov, *Ubiite "Skitnik,"* 321. Markov had completed them for publication, under the above-mentioned title, immediately prior to his assassination.

19. Tsveta Trifonova, *Da pishesh, za da mozhesh da umresh* (Sofia, 2012), 20.

20. Rozaliia Likova, in Khristov, *Ubiite "Skitnik,"* 890.

21. Toni Nikolov, "Georgi Markov, nash sŭvremennik," in Georgi Markov, *Do moia sŭvremennik: Eseta*, ed. Toni Nikolov (Sofia, 2015), 7.

important contributions to make not only to critical theory more broadly, but also to what we may call, in a friendly but critical nod to Alain Badiou, the "communist hypothesis." I identify and explore in some depth three such contributions here: his critique of consumerism and consumer society; the position of enunciation (the communist ideal) from which he articulates his powerful critique of state socialism in Bulgaria; and his deep and committed interests to practices and socialities on the very margins of social life. The first contribution takes us into the familiar territory of Marx's commodity fetishism (if with a "postcolonial" twist); the second offers an immanent critique of the system of state socialism; and the third, arguably Markov's most original insight, develops what I refer to in this text as a "communism of the abject."

Markov's detailed *tableaus* of social and cultural life in his native Bulgaria were certainly no mere figment of his imagination; rather, they drew on his own experiences. Like many of his peers, Markov came from peasant and working-class roots; unlike most of them, he never turned his back on this life on the margins, after years of work among manual laborers, wide travels around the country, and staring death in the face in sanatoria for tuberculosis. This broadly transversal experience, very much at odds with the bubble-like class existence of most of his writing contemporaries (and of many of his readers today) gave him a clear awareness of a system leaking on all sides, of a "life under the lid."[22] This life was still "more alive, more resonant, more colorful" than his own surroundings in the west in the 1970s.[23] In his *Reports* he tells us that while "many citizens in the west spend their lives in constant communication with cats and dogs, we live in the closest contact and in utter interdependence with other humans; we exist through others and others exist through us; each is against everyone else and each is with everyone else because this is what the law of survival dictates."[24] Turning the tables on both his eastern and western critics, this statement is a true antidote against ontological closure.

## Thing-mania, Alienation, and the "Legend of the West"

Markov's first contribution to the "communist hypothesis" appears in the form of his critique of consumerism and consumer society. Markov offers the outlines of that critique most powerfully in three signal essays from his *Reports*, "The Sting and Honey of Tourism," "Bowing Before King Dollar," and "The Legend of the West," which explore major transformations of Bulgarian society at the time. The decade following Khrushchev's secret speech to the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU (1956–1966) brought not only a relative softening of conditions and an increased (if only temporary) openness, but also the emergence of new forms of control of the socialist masses. Markov's diagnosis of a transitional period in the history of actually-existing socialism is certainly not unique. It has become customary among scholars to refer to this period as a transition from utopia to a "post-utopian state," as

22. Markov, *Truth That Killed*, xvii.
23. Ibid. xv.
24. Markov, "Prologue," *Truth That Killed*, xviii.

a formerly-mobilized society organized around heavy industrialization and political repression morphed into one of total administration centered around technologies of normalization.[25] As old party slogans lost their appeal and concepts such as revolution and communism turned into rhetorical fireworks, new technologies of power were becoming necessary. As Markov insists in a remarkable passage: "Rather than Marx's abstract and foreign formulations, the consolidated totalitarian regime adopted the practical principles of Soviet-style predatory state capitalism."[26]

One of those practical principles included the development of the tourist industry, which rapidly changed the Bulgarian landscape beyond recognition. Catalyzed by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's recommendation during his visit to Bulgaria that the party leadership take tourism seriously, the process effectively helped modernize the country by improving local infrastructure and raising the general well-being of Bulgarian citizens. It also had the unintended consequence of showcasing the inadequacies of the socialist regime, via the "natural exchange of knowledge between different peoples," along with burying the natural beauty of the countryside under the "plastic civilization of tourism."[27]

Yet even more important and consequential was the emergence of a consumer society and consumerist habits among the population, which marked a major point of rupture in social development. In this context, the function of consumption was to serve as a new technology of power, a new *dispositif* of control. In the wake of the challenges brought forth by Khrushchev's revelations and the slowing down of economic growth, Markov seems to suggest that the strategic response by the socialist state was twofold. After a period of relative and only provisional liberalization ("the Thaw"), the repressive apparatus of the state quickly neutralized the political gains of the late 1950s and early 1960s by intensifying practices of surveillance, espionage, and employment termination of politically-suspicious individuals (after 1963 and 1968 in particular). In addition to these more familiar practices, however, the state also deployed a softer (left-hand) approach, by introducing a new "social pact" where ideological compliance and the deflation of social protest constituted the price for increased access to consumer goods and improved material well-being.[28] While Markov sees this process as a patchwork of heterogeneous and not always coordinated strategies, its combined product was a displacement and obfuscation of social antagonism. Thus, "while in the western world a huge movement developed of beatniks, hippies, leftist intellectuals, revolutionaries of all colors, runaways from comfortable homes, hobos and others, one of whose main motivations was the rejection of the power of commodities and hence of the cult of luxury and glitter, in Bulgaria the opposite wave swelled up."[29]

25. Ivailo Boianov Znepolski, *Bŭlgarskiiat komunizŭm: Sotsiokulturni cherti i vlastova traektoriia* (Sofia, 2008).
26. Markov, "Poklon pred tsar dolar," *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:403.
27. Ibid., 1:406, 1:408.
28. Bren and Neuburger, "Introduction," in *Communism Unwrapped*, 12.
29. Markov, "Legendata Zapad: Veshtite," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:422.

Yet while Markov is attentive to the role of the state and its various agents (customs officials, party nomenclature members and their families, western currency stores, national athletes, and so on), the major focus and theoretical innovation of his analysis is its affective, phenomenological component. As he bemoans the new forms of social control, Markov zones in on the "collective disease" that seems to envelope Bulgarian society in the 1960s: "the most popular natural cult that has ever appeared in Bulgaria—the cult of things, especially Western things."[30] Behind this new cult or "veshtomania" ("thing-mania"), as he also calls it, lie two tendencies, whose combined result is evidence of the creation of "the most primitive petty bourgeois mentality" in the country.[31] The first one stems from the greed and voracity of the regime's major beneficiaries, the people in power. Yet it is the second one that is the more interesting: the emergence of broad processes of alienation without precedent in the history of the region. As Markov argues in a seminal passage from the text:

> [This tendency] consists in the lack of real relations between human beings, in the absence of sincerity, honesty, dignity, so very important to all human interaction, which have been replaced by the relations between humans and things. The fear of human relationships leads to relationships with things, which at least provoke no fear. To some extent this is a tendency of despair, as individuals cannot go over the ceiling imposed upon them, nor exit the narrow prison in which they have been incarcerated. The way out, therefore, is to populate that prison with ever more and more interesting things, which become a sort of substitute of the lacking, remote, and inaccessible broad human world.[32]

It is difficult not to notice here, mainstream interpretations of Markov's work notwithstanding, the curious "family resemblances" between Markov's critique of the "cult of things" or thing-mania, and the Marxian concept of commodity fetishism. We may recall that Marx understands commodity fetishism to be both the product and essential ingredient of the logic of capitalist reproduction, whereby the products of human labor take on a character that significantly exceeds their immediate utility. As things become commodities in the context of capitalist exchange, "a definite social relation between men . . . assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things."[33] As human-produced commodities seemingly come alive, while social relations undergo a process of increasing reification, the world of objects end up "rul[ing] the producers instead of being ruled by them."[34] For Marx this process of fetishization of commodities has to do with the obfuscation of the social labor expended to produce them, as individuals in capitalist society continuously misperceive what is effectively a social relation to be a relationship between the products of labor.

30. Markov, "Poklon pred tsar dolar," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:411.
31. Markov, "Legendata Zapad: Veshtite," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:423.
32. Ibid.
33. Karl Marx, "From *Capital, Volume I*," *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. Eugene Kamenka (New York, 1983), 447.
34. Marx, *Portable Karl Marx*, 450.

Admittedly, Markov's use of the concept of "alienation" is at times more reminiscent of the young Marx of the *Paris Manuscripts* than the late Marx of *Capital*. What is more, unlike Marx's own approach, Markov clearly does not locate the origins of thing-mania in socially expended (if disavowed) abstract labor. Still, these and other major differences notwithstanding (including Markov's lack of sophistication in relation to questions of political economy, which significantly hampers his analyses elsewhere), there are at least two ways in which he nuances and updates Marx's discussion, from the perspective of eastern Europe. The first one is that he locates the roots of alienation in the political, and not just economic, specificity of the region, as resulting at least in part from a deep sense of helplessness amidst prohibitive conditions for political change (especially after 1968). To recall the comment by an acquaintance of Markov's: "If I cannot go to Italy, at least I can wear Italian shoes."[35] Second, and even more importantly, Markov also offers a crucial "post-colonial" twist to the Marxian critique of commodity fetishism, and its attendant phenomenologies of alienation, reification, and the like.[36] In Bulgaria (and in eastern Europe more broadly), Markov argues, the cult of things is not only a generalized obsession with the enigmatic character of commodities. Rather, it is a mania for "western things in particular"; in fact, for *all things western*, including people, literature, music, and film. It is no coincidence that his most important text in this regard, "The Legend of the West," is subdivided into sections titled respectively "Things," "People and Life," and "Culture."[37]

In the late 1960s, Jean Baudrillard proposed an updating of Marx's critique of the political economy via a structuralist reading of the logic of newly emerging consumer societies. For Baudrillard, consumption was to be understood as a system "based on a code of signs (objects/signs) and differences,

35. Markov, "Legendata Zapad: Veshtite," 423.

36. By "postcolonial" I understand here the type of theorizing that challenges the alleged superiority of western modes of thinking and being and locates its origins in the rise of Europe/the west to global prominence, via practices of colonialism and imperialism. Admittedly, this is a broad definition of the term, attentive more to the theoretical and political possibilities opened up by postcolonial theory than to its original territorialities and genealogies of intervention (Southeast Asia in relation to western colonialism). I am certainly aware of the significant controversy surrounding the concept, including over the risks of its uncritical deployment to territories from the former socialist ("Second") world. See resp. Ella Shohat, "Notes on the Post-Colonial," *Social Text*, No. 31/32 (1992), 99–113; Ann McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism,'" *Social Text*, no. 31/32, Special Issue on Third World and Post-Colonial Issues (1992), 84–98; and Maria Todorova, "Balkanism and Postcolonialism, or on the Beauty of the Airplane View," *In Marx's Shadow: Knowledge, Power, and Intellectuals in Eastern Europe and Russia*, eds., Costica Bradatan and Serguei Oushakine (Lanham, 2010), 175–96. Still, my use of "postcolonial" here references not the legacies of the Ottoman Empire or the former Soviet Union/Russia in the region, but rather the identification (and self-identification) of eastern Europe and its people as organically inferior to the west and in need of catching up with it (what I call below "internal colonialism without colonization"). Even the biggest critic of the deployment of this term to the region, Maria Todorova, agrees with the imperativeness of the task of "deprovincializing western Europe." See Todorova, "Balkanism and Postcolonialism," 190.

37. Markov, "Legendata Zapad: Veshtite," 409–39.

and not on need and pleasure," with consumer behavior "the metaphoric or displaced expression of desire, and the production of a code of social values through the use of differentiating signs."[38] Markov's critique of "thing-mania" also entails a "system of classification" and a displacement of desire, yet its operating code is different. Rather than reference a universal "empire of signs," Markov's analysis is a premonition of critical scholarship that would identify the construction of the region (the "Balkans") as western Europe's Other, "a synonym for a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian."[39] The "invention of eastern Europe," especially in the eighteenth century, not only relegates the region to a permanently subaltern status vis-a-vis its western model, but also to a sort of internal colonialism without colonization.[40] It also induces psychosomatic effects of self-estrangement and inferiorization that are only exacerbated by the Iron Curtain during the Cold War. It is this self-marginalizing logic that underlies what is first and foremost a "western-mania" in the east: in relation to objects (as the representative of another world, "more alluringly beautiful, rich, fantastic"); people ("In the West no one is unhappy!—as one of my friends had told me"), and culture (as in watching western films ten times in a row).[41] Crucially, it is also a logic nearly invisible from a western (dominant) perspective. Markov's only error here is to attribute to state socialism a creation at least a few centuries older than that.

Martin Marinos has recently noted that while Markov's "anti-totalitarian" essays continue to enjoy immense popularity, his anti-consumerist texts have been broadly ignored.[42] The pattern for this development was already set in the 1980s, when the only two English translations (in 1983 and1984) of a selection from Markov's *Reports* included only one of the essays critical of consumer society (and the most innocuous one at that).[43] As we have seen, there is a rationale to this near exclusion. To begin with, the broad phenomenon of "the cult of things" or "thing-mania" cut across the Iron Curtain, and applied equally to both state socialist and market capitalist societies. What is more, its secret origins, per Marx's analysis, had everything to do with the emergence of capitalism as an "immense accumulation of commodities" now ruling their own producers. Yet second, for all its short cuts and potential flaws, Markov's critique extended beyond the Marxian analysis as well. As he implicitly identified eastern Europe as the internal colony of the west, Markov brought together the insights of both Marx and Baudrillard (exchange value and sign value, political economy and sign economy, and so on) via a "postcolonial"

38. Jean Baudrillard, "Consumer Society," ed., Mark Poster, *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, (Stanford, 1988), 47, 46.

39. Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford, 2009), 3.

40. See here resp. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, 1994), and Madina Tlostanova, "Towards a Decolonization of Thinking and Knowledge: A Few Reflections from the World of Imperial Difference," at www.antville.org/static/sites/m1/files/madina_tlostanova_decolonia_thinking.pdf (last accessed December 16, 2017).

41. Markov, "Legendata Zapad: Veshtite," 418, 428, 434.

42. Marinos, "New Media, New Habits," 41.

43. The only text from the three included in *Truth That Killed* was "Zhiloto i medŭt na turizma" (The Sting and Honey of Tourism), 87–98.

reading of this structurally-enforced fixation with things. Arguably, a similar logic would dominate the transition to postsocialism only a decade or so later, when obsession with "shock therapy," accelerated privatization, and a rapid dismantling of social welfare would be ever-so-easily facilitated by the irresistible label "made in the west."

## "From the Perspective of the Communist Ideal . . ."

Markov's second contribution to the communist hypothesis concerns the vantage point of his critique of state socialism, the alternative vision in the name of which this critique is articulated. To be sure, much of his work is dedicated to a powerful deconstruction of the myths of socialist *Bildung*. As he exposes the abyss between the regime's official claims and its actual accomplishments, Markov describes in vivid detail the bleak realities of historically-existing socialism. In its early years a system of collective terror and often arbitrary violence, in its more mature form it relies ever more heavily (though not solely) on practices of censorship and self-censorship, an elaborate emotional totality organized around collective passions such as fear, rudeness, humiliation, and suspicion, as well as a vast network of surveillance buttressed by careerism and nepotism. What is more, it is not uncommon to find passages such as the following one in Markov's work either:

> The truth demands that we confirm that what was happening in the Soviet Union under Stalin, what happened later during Khrushchev's era, what continues to happen in China or in Cuba, is all solidly founded on Marx's formulations . . . no one can accuse China or the Soviet Union of anti-Marxism, no matter how differently they might understand Marxism. All the horrible political crimes and mass exterminations of people in the Soviet Union, whose horror dumbfounds us, were committed on the basis of Marx's demand for an intensification of the class struggle during the transitional period.[44]

It is these two rhetorical strategies: the not infrequent references to Marx and Marxism, on the one hand, and the far more frequent criticisms of state socialism, on the other, that buttress the claims to Markov's allegedly "anti-communist" credentials. As far as the former is concerned, Markov's official "anti-Marxism" often misses its target, as it mostly operates with hasty generalizations and a rather inadequate reading of the work of Marx himself, along with rehearsing the far-too-familiar tropes of Cold War western historiography.[45] The second strategy is far more powerful and accurate, given Markov's

44. Georgi Markov, "Fiktsiite na marksizma," in *Nenapisanata bŭlgarska kharta: Eseta, chast 2* (Sofia, 2016), 81.

45. Jodi Dean argues that discursive chains such as "communism-Soviet Union—Stalinism-collapse" are in fact ideologically motivated attempts to repress "the communist alternative," see Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London, 2011), 32. It is not difficult to see, in the quote above, how Markov falls in the same trap. A little earlier in the above-quoted text Markov argues that "Karl Marx's effort to reconcile the contradictions in human nature's complex and magnificent variety via an opposition between full and empty stomachs and a materialist vulgarization of human relations testifies to narrow-mindedness and naivete." In his "Zapadnoto levicharstvo—iliuzii i deistvitelnost" (Western Leftism—Illusions and

unique role as an insider and frequent commuter on the ladder of social hierarchy under Bulgarian socialism. Yet, neither strategy allows us to engage with what is arguably the key question, namely: in the name of what alternative, better society does Markov articulate his critique of both Marxism and state socialism?

A preliminary, albeit negative, answer to this question emerges in Markov's reflections on his own experience in the west. Mainstream accounts of the "short twentieth century" in eastern Europe as a rule juxtapose the "twin totalitarianisms" of Nazism and Stalinism against the ultimately victorious liberal democracy, reading the restoration of capitalism after 1989 as a return to normalcy. Having crossed to the other side of the Iron Curtain and thus able to compare the two systems first-hand, Markov's position is far more nuanced. As he argues, in no unclear terms, in letters to friends from the late 1970s, a lot more unites state socialism and market capitalism than actually separates them. For instance, a similar structure of economic incentives motivates individual behavior on both sides of the Cold War divide, as his western peers consistently pursue the economic and symbolic advantages he had left behind in Bulgaria.[46] He also maintains that economic and political pressures from powerful institutions easily hollow out formal rights such as freedom of speech: "Try expressing an opinion in the "independent" paper *The Times*, or in the independent BBC? Good luck under the patchy hat of democracy. There, just like in *Rabotnichesko Delo*, you have to tow the line of the paper or the radio . . . "[47] Perhaps nothing says it better than the title of a book that Markov jokingly proposes to write: *Two Equivalent Pieces of Shit on the Two Sides of the Tin Curtain*.[48]

Yet, above and beyond noting the structural homologies between socialism and capitalism, Markov's critique of the former (and in fact, of both) appears to be motivated by a grand vision that he articulates under the rubric of the "communist ideal." As he argues in one of many passages, but especially in the *Reports from Absentia*: "The communist regime can only be criticized and attacked from communist positions, or, more accurately, *from the position of the communist ideal*. It is my firmest conviction that departing from any other position would be a complete and inexcusable folly."[49] The frequent recurrence of such a sentiment belies the possibility that this is a mere rhetorical move, a textual strategy seeking to foreground the structural inconsistencies of a socio-economic system while keeping a cynical distance from its core principles. Rather, speaking from the position of the communist ideal lies at

Reality), he warns against "Mr. Marcuse's" "crazy" ideas; See resp. Markov, *Nenapisanata bŭlgarska kharta*, 80, 109. Other examples of Markov's simplistic (and ultimately ideological) readings are not hard to find. Yet rather than read them as broadly indicative of the author's generic anti-communism, I find it more productive to draw on the general tenor of his work, which more often than not speaks to a broad sympathy with the grand leftist themes of social justice and equality.

46. Markov, "Pismo do Dimitŭr Bochev," *Az biah toi: 121 dokumenta za i ot Georgi Markov* (Sofia 1999), 225.

47. Ibid., 222.

48. Ibid., 258–59.

49. Markov, "Izbor na pozitsiia," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:239, *my italics*.

the very heart of Markov's work (both journalistic and literary), and in more than one way.

In fact, in his sharp opposition between a communist Idea(l) and historically-existing state socialism, Markov comes closest to the position of the western left today (see footnote 1 above). His embrace of an originary, anti-bureaucratic communism and its grand themes of social and economic justice belies any facile categorizations of the author as a staunch anti-communist.[50] Examples to this effect abound throughout Markov's work. In a wonderful short text from the *Reports* titled "At the Foot of Malyovitsa," for instance, Markov tells the story of a meeting with young students on a brigade high up in the mountains.[51] As the students expose the discrepancy between the high moral stance of his speech and the very material signs of his conformism (a brand new BMW, expensive clothes, big salary), they challenge him to reflect powerfully on his own responsibility as a public intellectual. Markov's openly expressed embarrassment before the collective question, "and what about you, comrade Markov?," evidences his own commitment to an egalitarian vision of society where the accumulation of wealth on one side may not come at the price of an accumulation of misery on the other. The unbridgeable abyss between bureaucratic socialism and an authentic communism is also what motivates the contrast, in a short impressionistic text on anti-establishment writer Radoy Ralin, of the figures of the *partiets* (party apparatchik) and the "true communist." While the former is fully self-centered, unwilling to take any risks on behalf of others, and "gets away with false responsibility before the party or the false society," the latter "loves the poor, the weak, and the disenfranchised . . . and has the highest sense of responsibility before her own conscience."[52] It is this true communist, Markov insists, that embodies the vision of a "communism with a human face," that of the Prague revolutionaries in '68 that had fascinated him so much.[53]

Yet perhaps one of the most powerful articulations of the communist ideal comes in the form of a New Year's fantasy, as the basis of a short text of the same name that Markov pens for Deutsche Welle on the eve of 1974.[54] In this remarkable text, purposefully unconstrained by claims to verisimilitude, Markov invites his listeners to "fantasize together" (*da si pofantazirat*) about the world they would like to live in. His creative imagination leads him to wish for more than the relatively predictable destruction of state security dossiers, the renunciation of special privileges by the party leadership, and

50. Markov, *Truth That Killed*, 187–92.

51. "Krai Mal′ovitsa," *in Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:320–27.

52. Markov, "Bŭlgari ot novo vreme," *in Zadochni reportazhi*, 2:490.

53. As Markov argues in another key text from his *Eseta*, the great challenge that the Prague Spring had posed to Soviet-style socialism had been the question: "Can the beautiful principles of Christianity, democracy, utopianism, and socialism become real beauty in real life?"; see "Praga'68," in *Do moia sŭvremennik*, 111. The violent repression of that question by the tanks of the Warsaw Pact prevented the possibility of a positive answer, along with crushing any remaining hope for real reform. Another notable text from this period is Markov's play *Communists*, commissioned for the 25th anniversary of the Communist Party takeover in 1944 and based on unprecedented access to the archives of the secret services. It was never performed on stage.

54. Markov, "Novogodishni fantazii," *Az biah toi*, 152–57.

official apologies to all victims of state-sponsored violence.[55] In a radically multicultural vision, he enjoins his audience to "send to hell" all isms, including and especially patriotism and nationalism (so that Serbs, Turks, the Roma can all become accepted members of society). He also calls for an end of the exploitation both by "the capitalist grocer who sucks you out for money" and by "the party secretary who sucks you out for a career."[56] The apotheosis of this anti-capitalist and anti-racist vision is a statement whose radical credentials are hard to miss:

> Of course, after all this we have to accept that the world has awoken reborn according to the oldest and most wonderful law: "From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs," a Christian or communist law, call it as you like. [It is] a law that precludes exploitation under any shape or form, rendering unthinkable the existence of cruel capitalist trusts—state-owned in the East and private in the West.[57]

Markov's work is replete with nods to major names and concepts in the canon of the western left: from Ranciere's "communism of intelligence" (as when Markov argues that the peasant, the woman giving birth, the shoemaker, the barber, and the clown *are no less creative* than Einstein or Dostoevskii), to Antonio Gramsci's "war of position" as an heir to early twentieth-century strategies of armed confrontation (dramatized in Markov's work in relation to Bulgarian Enlightenment debates around the struggle for national independence).[58] This is not to say that there are no equivocations or contradictions in his work as it falls at times into essentialism, a folk psychology, or a depoliticized existentialism. What I do want to argue instead is that at the heart of Markov's work there is also a grand communist vision, an Idea of Communism, which significantly tempers and qualifies his critique of state socialism. Importantly, his vision is that of an insider, as opposed to "bourgeois, capitalist or nationalist positions" which only allow a person to "judge the situation from outside."[59]

55. Interestingly, the series of wishes also include, among others, the end of standing armies and their arsenals, with their resources allocated now toward the construction of schools, hospitals, and homes, the disbanding of all political parties, the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the restoration of free speech, the right to difference, and even a wonderfully Fourierist fantasy of using the energetic resources of the rich countries for tilting the Earth's axis, so that all the planet's regions have a fine weather.

56. Ibid., 154.

57. Ibid., 157, *my italics*.

58. See here his "Pismo do Khristo Botev," in *Nenapisanata bŭlgarska kharta* (Sofia, 2016), pp. 139–45, as it probes the disagreement of two major figures from the Bulgarian independent struggles: Khristo Botev and Liuben Karavelov respectively. See also the above-mentioned "Izbor na pozitsiia," 239–40, where Markov juxtaposes Botev's theory of the physical combat to Karavelov's position of "long and protracted struggle through which the regime can be returned to the pure beginning of communist idealism." The former is no longer operative, according to Markov. While he tends to read the latter in accordance with Enlightenment ideals of education and persuasion, it can also be reinterpreted as a proto-Gramscian strategy for building a counter-hegemonic discourse.

59. Markov, "A Biography of the Regime," *Truth That Killed*, 144; "Biografiia na vlastta," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:122–23.

In sum, there are two prongs to Markov's "anti-socialist communism." The first one is his insight into the structural homologies between (western) market capitalism and (eastern) state socialism, both vehicles of collective exploitation, albeit even "more immoral, modern and solid" in the west.[60] It is not hard to discern here theoretical overlaps with the work of leftist critics such as Cornelius Castoriadis, C.L.R. James, and Guy Debord, for instance, as they propose concepts such as bureaucratic socialism, state capitalism, and the centralized spectacle to trouble easy oppositions between western liberal democracies and eastern totalitarian regimes.[61] The second prong consists in what, in the language of the Frankfurt School (FS), has come to be known as "immanent critique," a critique of a system in the name of its core principles—yet with a caveat. As FS theorists criticize the "irrational character of rational society," they inevitably do so from a certain remove: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno by drawing less than obvious (if perfectly legitimate) connections between the Enlightenment and the Holocaust; Herbert Marcuse by locating a "democratic unfreedom" and "repressive tolerance" at the very heart of totally-administered societies. Markov's position, by contrast, is closer to that of the Yugoslav Praxis circle Marxists, as they argue that phenomena such as alienation are in fact a problem only under socialism, since capitalism, by definition, is founded on alienated social relations.[62] It is east European state socialism, Markov seems to imply, that uniquely provides the conditions for an immanent critique of its own logic, from the perspective of an ideal that is simultaneously affirmed in theory and systematically denied in practice.

## Toward a "Communism of the Abject"

Still, it is Markov's third contribution to the communist hypothesis which is arguably the most powerful, original, and pressingly relevant for our own present. As we have already seen, Markov's critique of state socialism from the perspective of the communist ideal is a textbook one, including for the contemporary left. When measured against the standards of a truly egalitarian society founded on principles of social justice, non-exploitation, and a real appreciation of difference, bureaucratically-entrenched state socialism inevitably falls far short. Yet, in addition to this "light-side" articulation of a communist alternative, there is also a "darker" vision at the heart of Markov's work. We can see premonitions of it when Markov compares the "petty bourgeois" existence of his writing colleagues to that of the manual workers he had come to know so intimately well as a chemical engineer in the 1950s. Members of the Writers' Union spent countless hours "*na prikazka*" (chatting it up), gossiping and slowly sipping their tiny glasses of traditional alcoholic

60. Markov, "Pismo do Dimitŭr Bochev," in *Az biah toi*, 226.

61. All these (autonomist) Marxist critics of state socialism, however, locate an irreducible gap between the "Idea(l) of communism" and its perverted materialization in the Soviet bloc. Markov's work, as I read it here, is more nuanced.

62. Rudi Supek, "Some Contradictions and Insufficiencies of Yugoslav Self-Managing Socialism," in Mihajlo Marković and Gajo Petrović, eds., *Praxis: Yugoslav Essays in the Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Dordrecht, 1979), 270.

beverage. Yet, "this type of drinking was incompatible with the alcoholism of the glass blowers who, in order to bear the cruel work, would down a whole bottle of rakia in one gulp."[63]

This dark vision, or "dark-side" communism, recurs throughout Markov's work. Unlike most of his writing peers, whose lives were confined, as one of them put it, within 900 meters of territory (home-editorial work-writers' club-back home), and "whose knowledge about life outside of their own narrow circles in Sofia or Dragalevtsi [was] smaller than that of a middle-school student," Markov never lost sight of or interest in the lives of not only ordinary peasants and workers, but also people and socialities on the very margins of society, those permanently outside the lofty ideal of Socialist Man.[64] Perhaps to his own surprise, it was among these *abnormal* communities and practices (abnormal from the perspective of the traditional normativities—sexual, gendered, class-based, racialized, disciplinary—of socialist society) that he would discover some unprecedented and extremely rich utopian possibilities. A careful reading of Markov's work yields at least six such spaces and socialities: religion, sex work, poker/gambling, theft, life-threatening illness, and fecal matter.[65]

Markov's brief but poignant vignettes on religion are striking with their "non-Marxist" interpretative disposition. Rejecting facile dismissals of (orthodox) Christianity as the "opium of the people," Markov reads its popularity to be less an expression of faith and devotion and more a desire to challenge a repressively-atheist regime. As he explores a not infrequent confrontation between police and ordinary citizens on the eve of Easter, he insists (in a perfectly secular way) that people seek to find inside a church what they are absolutely deprived of outside of it: a sense of true community, belonging, and "the mystical fascination of a world in which one could find seclusion from the ugly noise of daily life."[66] Furthermore, if his descriptions of Christian rituals stray into the lofty realms of the spirit, his analyses of sex work, gambling, and theft return to the heavy materiality of the body and the profane intransigence of matter.[67] In a fascinating way, Markov foregrounds the logics that govern these collective practices in various degrees, including: an agonistic conception of the social (as the poker players he knew so well "stalk each other like wolves," for instance); a radicalization of an otherwise normative logic of accumulation ("Who's not a prostitute in this state? . . . look for the parasites elsewhere . . . higher up than me"); a redistributive proclivity in the context of a still inegalitarian society (as stealing from the state becomes a "unifying,

63. Markov, "900 metra zhivot," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:332.

64. Ibid., 1:330, 1:331.

65. The taxonomy here is mine, not Markov's. Markov's approach, at least in the *Zadochni reportazhi*, is "empiricist," a collection of scattered stories and impressionistic reflections whose cumulative effect allows for a broader pattern to emerge.

66. Markov, "Velikden krai 'Aleksandŭr Nevski,'" in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 2:57.

67. On sex work, see his text "Prostitutsiiata," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:487–502. On gambling, "Zapisano mimokhodom," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 2:443–50, along with his wonderful text "Portretŭt na moia dvoinik," in *Mezhdu noshtta i denia: Portretŭt na moia* dvoinik, *Selected Writings* vol. 3 (Sofia, 2009), 362–415. On theft, see his short texts "Krazhbite," "Zashto khorata kradat ot svoiata dŭrzhava," and "Namigvashtata Temida," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 2:96–117, 118–25, and 126–33.

international element in the existence of national democracies"); and a set of relations informed by an elementary notion of justice and reciprocity ("I have received nothing on a silver plate in my life") along with indifference towards the class and caste differences ("the best poker players are the workers and the uneducated, rather than the intellectuals").[68] Perhaps no one says it better than the major protagonist in Markov's short text "The King of the Villas," a professional thief specializing in robbing the villas of the party nomenklatura: "To have a villa today means that you are a thief! No one in this world has even earned a villa in an honest fashion, because if it was honest, then all the ordinary people in the world would have villas."[69]

Yet perhaps most powerful and radical are Markov's reflections on tuberculosis and excrement, as visions of excess and finitude at the same time. Both life-threatening illness and fecal matter exceed symbolization in a normative social order, while also marking the outer limits of biological reproduction (one by disintegrating the organs of the body, the other by the excretion of waste). Markov himself was privy to the devastating effects of consumption, having spent nine years in various sanatoria and having witnessed the collapse and death of many friends and acquaintances.[70] Yet what fascinated him the most was not only the immense thirst for life that he discovered here, but also the radical egalitarianism instituted by the constant threat of death. In a series of remarkable reflections, he powerfully juxtaposes the "sovereign republic without sovereignty" of state socialism against this "peculiar *republic of the consumptive*," whose logic "refused to follow the dictates of party propaganda."[71] He outlines a classless utopia where, as "It disintegrated our lungs, the illness at the same time dismantled the barriers between us. Gone were class, age, ideological, and all other divisions. A professor in botany now shared a common tongue with a carriage driver, a violinist got along happily with a carpenter, solemn elderly people struck friendships with yesteryear's kids . . ."[72] In this borderland between life and death, Markov comes to a conclusion very different from Jean-Paul Sartre's: "the idea that "the others—that is me," or rather, that without the others I do not exist."[73]

If struggling with tuberculosis points to an excess of life in the midst of death, an encounter with "shit" points to the energizing powers of decaying matter. In what is perhaps the most shockingly fascinating text of the *Reports*, appropriately titled "Otpadychni vodi" (Waste Waters), Markov recounts the

68. These quotes are from Markov, *Zadochni reportazhi*: "Komardjiysko intermetso," 2:449, "Prostitutsiata," 1: 491–492, "Krazhbite," 1:111, "Prostitutsiata," in *Zadochni reportazhi* 1:491, and "Komardjiysko intermetso," in 2:449, respectively.

69. Markov, "Tsaria na vilite," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:134.

70. Markov discusses that experience most powerfully in "Okhtichavi godini,"in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:210–16. Fictionalized narratives of consumption include also the story "Smŭrt-zhivot" and the novelette "Sanatoriumŭt na dr. Gospodov," in *Mezhdu noshtta i denia*, 103–14 and 258–361.

71. See resp. Markov, "Prologue," in *Truth That Killed*, xvi ("Uvod," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:11), and "Okhtichavi godini," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:211.

72. Markov, "Okhtichavi godini," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:213.

73. Ibid. Sartre's famous statement from his play *No Exit* is, of course, "Hell is other people." See Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1989), 1–46.

story of a visit to the place of occupation of a former classmate of his, a station testing the capital's excrement and waste disposal.[74] It is a place whose stench is so unbearably powerful that, as Markov is told, even the police dare not enter. But it is also a place whose motley crew of characters materialize a radically anti-bureaucratic and counter-normative utopia paradoxically patched together by excrement: from Dr. M., an ex-con who insists that "there is a lot of energy in the dirt," to Harry, a young man without a passport who revels in the absence of a calendar, clock, and radio on the premises, to Sir Bonyo, an elderly green-dressed (and green-painted) gentleman who hates all things red (from tomatoes to communist flags), to Mariya, a former Greek guerrilla and communist fanatic who has fallen in love with the resident criminal. In a series of powerful rhetorical reversals, Markov interprets the all-repellent stench as both, in Mariya's words, representative of the city rather than the station ("the stench here is theirs, not ours") and as an invisible barrier protecting those inside this excremental heterotopia ("the stench protects us from them and reminds us of what happens there").[75] As Mariya argues, in what is perhaps the most central passage in the text:

> I am so happy here, because this is probably the only human place. Here no one fights for power, no one seeks to displace anyone, no one stabs others in the back, no one lies, but rather says exactly what they think. And each one of us is precisely what they are. None of us is a conformist, none of us wants money, villas, apartments, cars, no one is an informer or a lackey to others . . . Harry respects Bonyo's green world, and Bonyo listens to Harry play the guitar with pleasure . . . You should have seen the others. They are all rude, have lived through a lot, but once here no longer want to leave . . ."[76]

How do we call this "dark" vision of communism projecting a utopia of égaliberté and cross-cultural diversity in the midst of sex, illness, and shit? How do we square a vision of excess, expenditure, and agonism with not only bureaucratic socialism, but also productivist versions of communism as a society of emancipated labor? In an effort to answer these questions, I suggest that we take inspiration from Julia Kristeva's work from the early 1980s. As she sought a position outside to normative ontologies organized around a subject-object duality, Kristeva proposed the concept of the "abject" as both the repressed and foundational element in the construction of individual and collective identities. Essentially a borderline phenomenon, Kristeva defines the abject as "something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object."[77] Permanently "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite," the abject is "what disturbs identity, system, order," the constitutive outside whose very exclusion at the same time helps construct the outer boundaries of an identitarian unit.[78] If we collectivize Kristeva's concept, we can certainly think of practices and socialities as

74. "Otpadŭchni vodi," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 2:148–61.
75. Ibid., 160–61.
76. Ibid., 161.
77. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1982), 4.
78. Ibid.

abject, or abject-ed, from the normativities of the social. No less importantly and in light of the phenomena just described, we can also think of Markov's communism as consisting of two prongs: the lofty communist ideal, as the basis for his immanent critique of bureaucratic socialism, and a "communism of the abject," as the basis for a "darker" vision of the social as agonistic, nonproductive, and permanently resistant to normalization. A heterological communism, a communism of base matter, a materialism based more on the abject than on the object, focused on the means of expenditure rather than on those of production.[79]

Thinking about the second prong of Markov's vision as a "communism of the abject" offers a few distinct advantages. Specifically, it stresses the inseparability of its two constitutive terms, "communism" and "abject," both in the sense of a *communism* of the abject and of a communism *of the abject*. To begin with, Markov's analysis invites us to locate and retrace communist practices among abject (abjected) communities and socialities. In this he is certainly not alone, but part of a genealogy of radical thought that extends from at least as far back as Mikhail Bakunin (with his famous definition of the lumpen as the "flower of the proletariat") all the way to Markov's contemporary Pier Paolo Pasolini (with his fascination with homosexuals, street urchins, and even working-class police).[80] Even more importantly, Markov's reflections prompt us to be attentive to the "energy that lies in the dirt," to the counter-hegemonic potential of the radical periphery of society. For a long time now, the western left has identified its major actors to be political parties, trade unions, or mass movements, largely ignoring the critical mass that accumulates at the margins. It has stayed away from the mob, strongly disparaged "the rabble," and generally remained suspicious of the lawlessness, hierarchy, and sloth that supposedly permeate their ranks. By contrast, Markov's focus on abjected locales and socialities reminds us that often the most radical practices and possibilities emerge precisely among those who, by virtue of their outsider status, are the most immune to (because excluded from) the normalizing gaze of both capital and the state.

Second and no less importantly, Markov reminds us to be attentive to the abject, to abjection at the very heart of communism. Normative visions of a communist society often foreground reasserted control over the means of production and a fairer production and distribution of the social surplus as essential to a post-capitalist transition. Indispensable as such measures are, they also run the risk of reinscribing a protestant ethic and a society of work as the sufficient conditions for an alternative to capitalism. Markov's signal contribution here is to argue that no communism can ever institute and sustain itself unless, apart from a reorganized production process, it also makes room for non-productive expenditure, social waste, the potlatch, and

79. Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl, (Minneapolis, 1985).

80. See resp. Mikhail Bakunin, "The International and Karl Marx," in Sam Dolgoff, ed., *Bakunin on Anarchism* (Montreal, 1980), 294, and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Heretical Empiricism*, trans. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett, (Washington, 2005), esp. his text "The PCI to the Youth," 150–58, among others.

excretion.[81] In addition to the lofty ideals of freedom, equality, and solidarity there is also what Georges Bataille refers to as "base matter," forever "external and foreign to ideal human aspirations" and resistant to "the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations.[82] Notably, such ideas are also not completely foreign to the contemporary left, including for instance Fredric Jameson's recent work on the irreducibility of antagonism even in structures of dual power, or Kathi Weeks's resignification of the key problem of non-work.[83] The key point—what I have called here Markov's most original and important contribution to the communist hypothesis—is that no Idea of Communism is likely to do any better in the new century lest it makes room for its abject Other, in an ever precarious balance under the constant threat of neutralization.[84] Arguably, this would be one of the biggest challenges to post-capitalist governmentality."

In sum, Markov's communism from the "dark side," or communism of the abject, is at least as essential to his vision as is the lofty ideal of égaliberté as the basis for his anti-socialist position. In this section, I have identified at least six instantiations of this communism of the abject, in religion, sex work, gambling, theft, tuberculosis, and excrement, respectively: all testimony to Markov's enduring sympathy for those on the very margins of society.[85] Therefore, it might be appropriate to stress at this point the relevance of Markov's critique to the geographical referent of his own reflections, now in a post-socialist context: Bulgaria. A country that rapidly descended from Second to "Third World"

81. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 51, 94, 117, 129.

82. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 51. For a fascinating discussion of Bataille's relevance for contemporary debates on the Left, see Gáspár Miklós Tamás, "On Post-fascism: The Degradation of Universal Citizenship," *Boston Review: A Political and Literary Forum*, (June 2000), at www.bostonreview.net/world/g-m-tam%C3%A1s-post-fascism (last accessed December 16, 2017).

83. In his recent *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, Jameson argues for universal conscription as a powerful institutional force in the transition to post-capitalism. He insists that even in a future society antagonism (envy, the theft of jouissance) will not disappear, but will be, as it were, de-institutionalized. See Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London, 2016), 1–96. Kathi Weeks's response is in the form of an essay in the book, under the title "Utopian Therapy: Work, Non-Work, and the Political Imagination," 243–65.

84. Notably, Markov himself thinks of abjection as an Outside that is never quite outside, that cannot be assumed as a consistent subject position. In the text immediately following his "Otpadŭchni vodi," he tells the stories of a few friends who tried to "leave" their cozy lives so that they can be among the people (one by seeking to become a miner, the other by going to live high in the mountains). In a finely dialectical complication of the lesson from the earlier essay ("exiting" the city, hence the logic of socialism), Markov concludes that no such outsider position is possible, or rather that it risks turning into complicitous escapism. See Markov, "Opiti za uedinenie," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 2:162–68.

85. Notably, the notion of the abject straddles the divide between (theories of) the psyche and (theories of) the social. To reiterate, the idea of a "communism of the abject" takes us beyond traditional types of Marxism, and even beyond Marx himself. Admittedly, the type of abject communism I discuss here cannot serve as a "model" for any future/better society, nor can it be assimilated and normalized within any historically-existing one. I have included religion as one example here as it was officially abject-ed by the socialist state. I have also discussed tuberculosis as an instance of the abject due to deep-seated anxieties around death and physical decay that continue to plague Bulgarian society to this day.

status after the collapse of socialism, it is today marked by glaring socio-economic inequalities, permanent existential instability, and periodic outpours of popular rage.[86] As Bulgarians took to the streets in 2013 to protest the politics of austerity of just another government, they did so in two successive waves: a winter (February-March) wave composed of mostly working-class poor, and a "summer" (starting in June and ongoing for months) wave consisting mostly of well-behaved and well-educated middle-class protesters. Mainstream intellectuals were quick to mark the class differences between the two, juxtaposing the "poor and humiliated" workers as they allegedly ventriloquized old leftist slogans, to the "beautiful" and intelligent protesters who knew how to read and pay their bills on time.[87] The abyss between such a characterization and Markov's own egalitarian vision could not be wider, as when Markov tells us, recalling his years in the TB sanatorium in the midst of mostly working-class people: "In the years to come, in the world of the healthy, I would many times feel the ugly absence of precisely these beautiful people, of their powerful and noble gestures, of their capacity for self-sacrifice."[88]

In this text I have argued against what I call the "double ontological erasure" of state socialism in eastern Europe, by both the local right and the west European left. If resisting that double erasure entails also recuperating authors and texts from that past in a counter-hegemonic vein, then Georgi Markov certainly has his rightful place in the construction of such a counter-canon. Notably, he would not be alone in such a construction: future investigations might want to look at Markov's work in relation to that of his artist peers in Bulgaria who were also critical of state socialism (and paid their own price for it).[89] Undoubtedly, if Markov went further than most in his critical insights, that was a byproduct of not only his artistic gift and commitment to "writing in/for the present," but also (and crucially) of the critical distance afforded by his migration westward. A separate if related project could also place Markov's writing in conversation with more familiar figures from the eastern and central European dissident

86. Rossen Vassilev, "The 'Third-Worldization' of a 'Second-World' Nation: De-development in Post-Communist Bulgaria," *New Political Science* 25, no. 1 (March 2003): 99–112.

87. Georgi Gospodinov, "Protestirashtiiat chovek e krasiv," *Dnevnik* (June 18, 2013), at www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2013/06/18/2084449_protestirashtiiat_chovek_e_krasiv/ (last accessed December 16, 2017).

88. Markov, "Okhtichavi godini," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:216.

89. Important texts detailing figures and practices of resistance to state socialism in Bulgaria include Evgeniia Kalinova, *Bŭlgarskata kultura*, esp. sections 3, 4, and 5; Vladimir Migev, *Bŭlgarskite pisateli i politicheskiiat zhivot v Bŭlgaria–2 (1971–1989 g.)* (Sofia, 2014), esp. chapter 1; Elka Traikova, *Bŭlgarskite literaturni polemiki* (Sofia, 2001), esp. pp. 178–211; and Atanas V. Slavov, *The "Thaw" in Bulgarian Literature* (Boulder, 1981). Evgeniia Kalinova has suggested that at least three different responses were available to Bulgarian writers (and artists more broadly) in the country: that of compromise and accommodation (as embodied by poet Liubomir Levchev); that of a refusal of reconciliation (Konstantin Pavlov, Radoi Ralin); and that of provisional accommodation followed by a growing critical distance (Georgi Markov); see Kalinova, *Bŭlgarskata kultura*, 337–40. Markov himself has suggested a taxonomy of four "communist" types under state socialism: idealists, Soviet agents, accommodationists, and random communists. See Markov, "A Biography of the Regime," in *Truth That Killed*, 144; "Biografiia na vlastta," in *Zadochni reportazhi*, 1:122–23.

scene. While such a critical investigation is yet to be accomplished, my own preliminary sense is that Markov would feature rather favorably in such a comparison. His "empiricist" attentiveness to the heterotopias of state socialism, along with his nuanced understanding of oppression and resistance allowed him to (mostly) avoid the totalizing neo-Hegelianism of a Miklós Haraszti, while his awareness of the institutional production of subjectivity and his sympathy for some version of democratic socialism put him at odds with the "apolitical politics" of a Václav Havel, for example. Keeping in mind Havel and Haraszti's "post-socialist" evolution, it is of course anybody's guess how Markov's politics would have turned out to be had he lived to see the collapse of the system that brought about his own demise.[90] Yet, a decade or so earlier and in a country lacking a major revisionist Marxist tradition such as Hungary (with the Budapest school) or Yugoslavia (with the Praxis circle), it fell to this official "anti-Marxist" to articulate the ingredients of a radical alternative to both bureaucratic socialism and market capitalism.[91]

In a text written shortly before his suicide in 1940, entitled "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin argued that critically appropriating the past was not about "recogniz[ing] it 'the way it really was,'" but rather a matter of "seiz[ing] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."[92] Drawing on the insights of both Jewish mysticism and an open-ended Marxism, Benjamin went on to contend that such a critical appropriation could only proceed from the conviction that "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins."[93] Recuperating Markov's legacy for radical purposes is a modest contribution to resisting an "enemy [who] has not ceased to be victorious," whether in the guise of the party apparatchik or of the neoliberal think-tank expert. It is also an effort to reassert the theoretical and praxical relevance of *thinking from eastern Europe* (thinking "from location"), as we seek to expand the boundaries of the thinkable in a post-socialist context a long way off from having reached "the end of history."

90. Hararszti's famous *The Velvet Prison* traces a teleological narrative of the artist's seamless incorporation into the structures of the socialist state, under the rubric of what he calls "progressive censorship." Written from the perspective of a self-proclaimed "romantic individualism" (162), it offers very little in terms of infra-practices of resistance and counter-genealogies of dissent which subtend even the most heavily administered institutions of control. See Miklós Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison: Artists under State Socialism* (New York, 1989). Havel's Heideggerian (via Patočka) critique of the "anonymous and impersonal" power of totalitarian society locates its origins in the soil of Western rationalism, proposing "living-in-truth" and a substitution of morality for politics as an antidote. See Václav Havel, *Living in Truth: Twenty-two Essays Published on the Occasion of the Award of the Erasmus Prize to Václav Havel (London*, 1990). While Markov himself occasionally falls into the trap of the "totalitarian paradigm" or lapses into an existentialism that may even border on essentialism, a lot of especially his post-immigration work exhibits some of the features I have discussed in this essay.

91. See on this point Boris Popivanov and V. Penev, "Marks izvŭn vlastta: Roliata na Karl Marks v ekspertnite i nauchnite diskusii prez bŭlgarskiia prekhod," in Liliana Kaneva, Maksim Mizov, and Evgenii Kandilarov, *Izsledvaniia po istoriia na socializma v Bŭlgariia: Prekhodŭt–II*, vol. 4, (Sofia, 2013), 189–210; and Emilia Mineva, "On the Reception of Marxism in Bulgaria," *Studies in East European Thought* 53, no. 1–2 (June 2001): 61–74.

92. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255.

93. Ibid.