

## Shark and Dog

May 10, 2008. Neoliberals might find it amusing because it is just beyond their imagination that their philosophy could fall one day as did communism, but in fact no one can rule out that our economic system could break its own back one day, too. After all, those depending on salaries already now take comfort from the idea that the policy of outsourcing might finally bring back work to their home country after it has turned into a low-wage country itself.

In an interview for an Austrian radio station, the Bulgarian writer Alek Popov stated that "on the Balkans we still have this concept of an ideal state - which, of course, would be in the West. And the more west, the better. So if you take this thought to its logical conclusion, it will take you around the world and finally back to where you started." This finding of course goes beyond the bounds of national economic systems and would allow for various historic-philosophical interpretations. Most interesting, though, is what Popov actually says: After the fall of communism, the development of the former Eastern Bloc countries has become a purely dynamic matter. Popovs hints at globalization which, they say, cannot be stopped. A state, however, that embarks on the journey of globalization will finally get back to its starting point – after all, that is where a one-way movement will always take you.

It is against this background that Popov's second novel takes shape. The book, translated into German in an easy, shiny style (German title: *The Dogs Are Flying Low*), tells the story of two Bulgarian brothers, Ned and Ango, who go looking for traces of their late father in New York. The book is about the nature and logic of money and about how it deforms human beings through greed, imprudence and recklessness. At the end of the novel, Shark, a financial shark, confronts his boss Ned with a disastrous speculation on the stock exchange he had dragged him in. "Who had put that bug in your ear?" Shark asks. "A ghost", says Ned. "I don't believe in ghosts." "Well, what do you believe in?" "In money, Ned, in the kinetic energy of money." And then Ned, who himself has lost everything, starts with a lengthy explanation that must be seen more as philosophy of money than a moral statement. "Imagine yourself as a door through which money goes in and out. The direction is not important. It's the movement that matters. Those who understand this will never again be worried about whether they win or lose." This reminds us of a poem by Nietzsche: "He who has lost what I have lost will stop nowhere." According to Popov, however, it is not this process of disillusionment, the loss

of all hope that matters but rather, as Ned also confirms, progress, the act of moving ahead, no matter what direction that means.

It is the logic of road movies that Popov here and there alludes to, and it is commitment that counts. After the revolutions of 1989, commitment can only mean commitment to money as an almost universal symbol for happiness. Ned breaks this soulless rule, as we can see from the "ghosts" he fell for in his share transactions. This is the predetermined breaking point at which Popov makes his monumental philosophic construct crumble - if you want to accumulate capital, there is no room for sentimentality. This is actually a rather banal conclusion, but Popov uses it well. An important moment in the story, also referring to the book's leitmotif, is the story of Baruch. Ned recounts it as follows, "According to a great Wall Street legend, Bernard Baruch, a notorious investor in the 1930s, used to give beggars financial puzzles instead of money. 'I just gave you 300,000 dollars,' he would say. 'If you got the brains, go get them.' Of course Baruch was sure none of them would be able to capitalize on the information." Any system without rivaling systems fuels conspiracy theories, and Ned considers this possibility, too. "Some even think that the beggars in New York's financial district are in fact brokers in disguise, lurking for such hints," he says.

*Black Box* is a story of disillusionment. Everything starts with a parcel from the U.S. that the two brothers receive back home in Bulgaria, containing a black box with ashes - the ashes of their father. He had been in the New World as a visiting professor and for reasons of economy, this is how he had been sent back to the Old World. Ned is skeptical about the package's content, so his brother Ango tries to pacify him with a satirical anecdote. Something similar once happened to a family in the Balkans. Unfortunately, however, they just could not figure out what the ashes were supposed to be, and so they ate it as a tonic with their breakfast. "Their relatives then told them that their aunt had passed away and that they had sent her ashes to be buried in Bulgaria," Ango continues. "This is when the family stopped to praise the West to the skies."

The two brothers finally get to New York. Ned climbs the ladder in a consulting company and watches his brother, who followed him to the States and plans to make his money by walking the dogs of rich New Yorkers, with some skepticism. In a country that gives a chance to everyone, Ned has developed a sense for hierarchies ("There are such services and such services"), whereas Ango insists that "there is no dirty work." Suffice to say that this can only be a momentary point of view for a climber like Ango. Against the moral self-confidence of such a newcomer, however, the character of the capitalist who would never do certain jobs wins. In the first half of the book (alternately recounted from the perspectives of the brothers), it is Ango the reader tends to like more, but this

changes in the second half – after all, Ned is the one who takes risks by investing in stocks of a company producing dog food. “The dogs are flying low,” someone had told him in a Baruch moment.

This is also when the brothers start to get closer again. Ango turns out to be the central figure in a dangerous feud between dogwalker unions, and he finally meets his Mrs. Right, Diana. Meanwhile, Ned becomes wrapped up in an intrigue schemed against him and is transferred to his home country for disciplinary reasons where he is supposed to get rid of a disagreeable guy holding the fort in the Old World, a certain Kurtz who, not without reason, reminds us of Joseph Conrad’s novel or Coppola’s movie. Several such allusions to films like “Rain Man”, “Fight Club”, and works by Tarantino make this novel drastic, thrilling, and funny (just read Ango’s first dog walk in Central Park).

Towards the end the storyline becomes more and more dramatic, but the book’s narrative construction, consisting of immensely effective, almost flashy elements, remains stable. Be it the brothers’ doubts about their father’s death (he might just as well maintain a low profile as a gas station attendant), Merl, Diana’s shady uncle who keeps his niece at his mercy and pulls the strings in the dogwalker union’s war or the James Bond-like final showdown in a warehouse – Popov draws on a variety of ideas. Already in his first novel *Mission: London* (published in German in 2006), Popov digested a wide range of his experiences as Bulgarian cultural attaché in the UK and has been compared to John Irving and T.C. Boyle.

And here it is, the post-communist novel without artistic pretentiousness (Ango is just a children’s books publisher manqué). So is the story told so fluently and accurately that one might tend to forget the hidden didactic idea of communism and capitalism being brothers like Ango and Ned who, just like Leverkühn and Zeitblom, share the secret of their identity? No, that would take it too far. Ango, who finally ends up with the better part (not that this would make him happy), knows from the very beginning that a war of systems is a zero-sum game and that other things matter. “I felt safe like in a rescue capsule and I knew that no money in the world could buy me this feeling,” he says, “There are niches where market economy just doesn’t work.” This brilliant book is such a niche.

Alek Popow: *Black Box*.

The review appeared in Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung on May 10, 2008 (Nr. 109, p. 27) and refers to the German translation under the title: *Die Hunde fliegen tief* (The Dogs Are

Flying Low). Translated from Bulgarian into German by Alexander Sitzmann. Residenz Verlag, Salzburg, 2008. Hardcover, 412 pages. €22,-.