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Community Creative Capital: UNESCO's Intangible Heritage Politics Revisited at the Bulgarian Chitalishte

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Abstract: Why is it that cultural policy cuts are hardly ever mentioned in the discourses on the inadequacies of welfare and education under the neo-liberalist logic after the collapse of the Soviet Union? Why, indeed, when there are joint ministries of culture and education pointing to their common function of formation of civic values? This paper attempts to describe how this is partially due to a misunderstood concept of cultural policy as an elitist, "high arts" master narrative, and uses an observable phenomenon in Bulgaria that presents an alternative kind of cultural politics focused on local arts. The study examines the chitalishte, or the Bulgarian state-funded community cultural centers, connected in a network of close to 4000 chitalishtes, where locals (amateurs) engage in various forms of performance and visual arts productions. The chitalishte represents a unique public tool for creativity encouragement pre-dating communism, as it localizes cultural policy and, simultaneously, de-professionalizes cultural production by affirming the role of the amateur artist in the making of what the research names "community creative capital," i.e. a locus of intersection between social and cultural capital enhancing creative forms of civil society participation. The "grounding" and "de-professionalization" of cultural policy in the Bulgarian case is analyzed within the international context of the "immaterialization of cultural policy," evident in UNESCO's conventions on heritage and development, where policy-makers are starting to comprehend the social salience of the arts down to the community level, as well as of the living - not archiving - of cultural heritage in society.

Keywords: Cultural Policy, UNESCO, Community Cultural Center, Heritage, Amateur Arts, Creativity, Community Creative Capital, Social Capital, Cultural Capital

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A Glimpse of Introduction

IARRIVED IN Gostilitza on a hot Friday last June. The van stopped at the village square, full of kids playing soccer and older men and women chatting in the shade, in front of the building I had come to visit. The *chitalishte*, or the Bulgarian version of a community cultural center and library, was a pink two-storey building. Suddenly, a woman appeared at a window and started calling the kids to go inside and start their rehearsal.

The protagonists in this anecdote are the *chitalishte* administrator, Dobrinka, and a dozen children who had come to visit their grandparents over the summer break, whom she had organized to prepare a performance of dance, music, song, and theater in order to "fill up their free time with something creative" and present it to the community before the end of the break.

Upon entering the *chitalishte*, I heard a trumpet play. And then another one, but substantially worse than the first. "It's Diado Radi and his grandson," Dobrinka¹ said smiling. "He is always here teaching

him play, using the *chitalishte* band trumpets." Further down the corridor, in the small library, a vibrant meeting of the *chitalishte* board was taking place, with joking, smoking, shouting, and fighting now and then, all at once: the three men and three women (the equal number is a coincidence) were discussing the ways to get a telephone line and Internet for the computer they had just gotten from the *Chitalishte Development Foundation* project.

Amidst all that noisy activity, Raina, a cheerful woman in her mid-sixties, came in and started telling us funny stories of today, and of yesterday, and of all times. Raina is one of the participants in the *chitalishte* folk singing group "Gostilovski Babi" and in the satire theater group staging local anecdotes. Humor is, in fact, what everyone in Gostilitza thrives on and what gave Gostilitza a regional fame for its wit. "Come to see what we are working on!" She took me to a spacious room full of scattered bundles of old weavings, clothes, pots, an obsolete oxen-cart, gadgets of all kinds, and black-and-white photographs. "It is going to be our ethnographic museum, to tell the story and the customs of our village, mostly to the kids who don't know their past," Raina explained. After friendly disputing with one of the men from the *chitalishte* board as to how to display a typical female dress, Raina looked at

¹ Dobrinka. Interview conducted by Nadezhda Savova, August 13, 2006, Gostilitza, Bulgaria.



me: "Now you should come talk to my husband, Jordan Chuhovski, he has many ideas to share."

I will revisit my conversation with Jordan Chuhovski and Gostilitza, but only after taking a circular route in order to fill in the political and economic blanks of my anecdote. Along the way I explore UNESCO's thinking on intangible heritage and cultural policy before returning to hear what Gostilitza has to say in the discourse on *living* - versus *safeguarding* - cultural heritage.

The Culture Paradox

*Art is like myth: "a liberator by its protest against the idea that anything can be meaningless"*²

Cultural policy is consistently absent in the political, economic, sociological, and anthropological literature on the negative implications of "liberal" globalization, where two social services dominate the discourse: social welfare and education inadequacies. Why, indeed, are cuts in cultural policy hardly explored in transition and third-world realities, even when there are many joint ministries of culture and education pointing to their common function of public value formation? This paradox is even more paradoxical when we realize how often we hear the word "culture" used in everyday discussions on cultural homogenization. The *culture paradox*³ hence reveals the *de facto* invisibility of an actual engagement with "culture" in modern politics within an ever rising visibility of an overly generalized, empty use of the term.

If we stick to the elitism of "high culture," the privatization of cultural policy with funding relegated to private sponsors and NGOs might make sense; yet, if it is what most anthropologists believe to be the lifeblood of citizenship, then the commitment of the state to its citizens' knowledge and living of cultural heritage is worth re-visiting. I place the Bulgarian *chitalishte* model of cultural centers network within the global heritage discourses as a phenomenon embodying the concepts of: (1) *grounding* of cultural policy, which comprehends the importance of *living* creativity and heritage on local grounds; (2) *de-professionalization* of "culture" in the sense of cultural productions, affirming the role of the amateur in the making of what I call *community creative capital*, or an intersection of community social and cultural capital; and (3) *immateri-*

alization of heritage symbolized by UNESCO's recognition of the significance of immaterial heritage in the global, national, and community dimension and of the importance of "immaterial," social meanings in evaluating tangible/material heritage; and how this phenomenon moves dialectically with the *materialization* of culture in development schemes.

This paper draws on three months research in Bulgaria, during the summer of 2006, when I conducted interviews with: *chitalishte* administrators; people participating and not participating in the *chitalishte* art groups; officers in the Ministry of Culture in charge of the *chitalishte* system; the team of the *Chitalishte Development Foundation* (CDF), collaborating with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and working with a portion of the *chitalishte* to help them become "information intermediaries" and "citizens' centres" that also build additional revenues from activities such as an Internet club, collecting of medicinal herbs, or craft-making (Benthall 2000).⁴ The collected interviews were close to 50, and I used this data and participant observation conclusions to ground my broader analysis of the major social benefits of the *chitalishte*. I explored in more detail the activities of five *chitalishte* (two in Gabrovo, Gostilitza, Sofia, Tryavna), and, though limited by the length of this paper I provide ethnographic material from Gostilitza alone, the questions that its case raises are common to most other *chitalishte* and perhaps to other community arts centers and projects.

Museum/Library/Cultural Center Dialectics

Tony Bennett (1995)⁵ described how in the nineteenth-century museum in Western Europe the bourgeois cultural capital was produced and offered for passive consumption to the working class (or the "masses") only to put in bold their inferiority and deserved docility. At the same time, however, a different picture was being drawn in Eastern Europe, which has traditionally been neglected in cultural studies, so keenly focused on the West. Particularly in Bulgaria, still under the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century and thus in the absence of a Bulgarian nation-state, we find a fascinating, alternative "living museum" produced and used by the ordinary people to accumulate their own cultural capital.

In 1856 in the town of Svishtov prominent local figures built the first *chitalishte*, whose name comes

² Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1966 [1962]. *The Savage Mind*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press: p.22.

³ The notion of *culture paradox* I introduce is in some ways related to Tyler Cowen's "paradox of diversity," where the rising cultural blending creates greater homogenization and at the same time requires some societies to reject blending and thus be classified as "primitive" and "traditional" in the tourism economy. On this note, for more on the related concept of "hegemony of corporate diversity" see George Yudice's *The Expediency of Culture* (2003).

⁴ Benthall, Jonathan. 2000. "Civil Society's Need for De-deconstruction." *Anthropology Today*, Volume 16, No. 2, April. pp.1-3.

⁵ Bennett, Tony. 1995. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, and Politics*. London: Routledge.

from the Bulgarian verb “to read” (*cheta*) and, at its inception, was a reading room/small library, where people bought books in common (or the local elite did for all) and kept them in a designated building (usually bought by a prominent figure) for anyone to use in self-education. In the structure of the *chitalishte* we trace the influences of Belgium and France’s reading societies and reading rooms also spread in Greece and Serbia. The *chitalishte*, however, differs substantially from all these models, since it was conceptualized as an institution not confined to reading practices, but conducting “educational, philanthropic, library, theater, and economic activities” (Panov 1934⁶), and where “Bulgarian citizens, with no difference in socio-economic position, exchanged ideas on current local and broader issues, discussed resources and took decisions on joint action” (Chilingirov 1930⁷), turning the *chitalishte* into a citizens’ forum/club. Furthermore, the *chitalishte* started researching and collecting folklore data in the spirit of a community ethnographic museum, substantially more sensitive to the richness and dignity of “small places” and “popular arts” than its Western counterparts.

After the Liberation from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, the *chitalishte* became subsidized by the Bulgarian government, yet always acknowledged as an independent institution. With the subsidies, from an ordinary house many *chitalishte* moved into beautiful specifically designed buildings with large performance halls. There were 3691 *chitalishte* by 1944, 4225 by 1995⁸, and today remaining are about 3500, as many did not survive the post-socialism transitions. Most are funded by the Ministry of Culture through the municipalities, or from the municipalities alone, but they have the legal status of a non-govern-

mental membership organization and are fairly independent in choosing their activities.

The concept of state-funded community cultural centers, which spread across socialist Russia as “houses of culture” (*dom kulturnyi*) might have had its historical prototype in Bulgaria, and the concept of ubiquitous cultural (mostly performance arts) centers has faultily been considered a communist invention, when its roots lay in a mid-nineteenth century civil society in Bulgaria. Today, Bulgaria is one of few countries in the world, perhaps most like Cuba, that still has a nation-wide (literally, in any populated area of any size⁹) state-funded community cultural centers network (*not* a public library system per se), whose structure could give a refreshing spin to understanding cultural policy as *grounded* and *de-professionalized* in its focus on local, amateur, everyday creativity.

The Materialization - Immaterialization of Heritage - Culture

Please, allow me here to play some with the terms “material” and “immaterial,” in a similar way in which UNESCO has been juggling between “tangible” and “intangible” heritage, in order to illustrate some intriguing dichotomies winding their way between heritage and culture - somehow strangely separated in different fields - of international, national, and local body politics.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, “culture” became a tool to experiment with in development agendas. “Culture” is one of those terms that, like Clifford Geertz once said about anthropology, have the merit of defying simple definitions. Indeed, “culture” has been mentioned so much by politicians and organizations without any real clarity on what

⁶ Panov, A. 1934. *Svishtov in the Revival period: Previous monuments of enlightenment, charity, and patriotism* [Свищов в епохата на Възраждането. Ценни паметници на просвета, благотворителност и родолюбие]. Sofia: The Svishtov Association Publishers.

⁷ Chilingirov, Stilyan. 1930. *The Bulgarian chitalishte before Liberation* [Българското читалища преди Освобождението]. Sofia: Sofia University Press.

⁸ Kondarev, N. and Sirakov, S., and Cholov, P., eds. 1979. *The People’s Chitalishte in Bulgaria* [Народните читалища в България], Vol. 2., quoted in *The Chitalishte in Bulgaria: Past, present, and future* [Читалищата в България: Минало, Настояще и Бъдеще]. 2000. United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Sofia.

⁹ More history information: The fact that culture houses in Bulgaria and in Cuba exist in virtually every administrative unit (of any size) and receive public funding is precisely what makes the two systems unique. The concept of the *chitalishte* existed in other Balkan countries in the late 1800s (Croatia, Serbia, and to some extent Romania), and following the Bolshevik Revolution a similar model of the so-called *izba-chitalnya* (reading huts) was developed across Russian villages as part of the national literacy campaign; yet compared to the *izba-chitalnya*, the Bulgarian *chitalishte* had perhaps an ever more pronounced function as a cultural center. With Stalin, Russia did develop a network specifically focused on “culture” as “national folklore”, called “houses of culture” (*dom kulturnyi*), which spread to the other socialist countries. In Bulgaria, “houses of culture” were also built under the Russian guidelines, but they hosted predominantly professional performances, whereas the *chitalishte* – about 4500 of them - remained the locus of amateur creativity (even if some of the ensembles acquired professional recognition). Without having found historic evidence on this, it is my untested hypothesis that the Soviet “house of culture” system was tailored after the already existing Bulgarian network. Most of these cultural institutions closed down in the post-socialist world, with maybe a few places still called the old name yet performing different functions. The folk high schools in the Nordic countries, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and the Netherlands could seem similar, but they are a lot fewer in number (hundreds, not thousands) and mainly offer paid workshops. The same applies to the French *maisons de la jeunesse et de la culture*, whose distribution is still not nation-wide, particularly lacking in very small villages. At the same time, in Latin America in recent decades a few countries started creating culture house networks (*redes de casas de cultura*), the most prominent being Venezuela under Chavez, recently Belize, Colombia (in the 1990s), El Salvador, and Honduras; yet, as a fairly new phenomenon, the *casas* are significantly fewer than in Bulgaria (4000) or Cuba (300), usually between 100-200 *casas*, concentrated mainly in cities. The ubiquity of the centers in any populated area in Bulgaria and Cuba reveals the recognition of the need of any group, regardless of its size or location, to have access to a creative venue for self and communal expression.

they mean that it somehow acquired a funny amorphous personality that many like to talk about without knowing— or precisely because they do *not* know – what they are saying. If I want to speak to the policy discourses, however, then I will also need to simplify things, for the sake of an attempt at understanding cultural policy trends.

Culture in politics and economics usually refers to two things: a. broadly the arts and b. even more broadly, the patterns of behavior and life-styles of a group of people. National and international development theorizing and practice have passed through testing the investment in physical, human, and social capital, and since none of the types of capital produced the full scope of desired results, policy-makers and NGOs turned to cultural capital as yet another resource, as an “expedient” for certain goals (see Yudice 2003),¹⁰ thus constituting a process I call the *materialization* of culture.

UNESCO officials today face the challenge of the new discourses on culture in both of its principal meanings, manipulated as an excuse for failure and over-prescribed as a panacea for multiple problems – problems that were previously the domain of politics and economics¹¹; at the same time, UNESCO itself centers its own arguments on culture as an ongoing effort to convince governments that investing in “local” culture and in the global “culture of peace” initiative can lead to civil society participation and sustainable economic development. How much of a “resource”/“expedient” can culture be is more than questionable, since the very definition of the term and its wide-ranging individual and collective implications are hard to measure, let alone harness and control, even if for something like “the common good.” In this context, the Bulgarian *chitalishte* could provide some insights of creative thinking on culture (from now on I use “culture” to refer to the arts that way it is usually done in cultural politics) often lacking in development rationalities.

Capitalism – or at least its Bulgarian version - in the 1990s radically cut cultural policy subsidies and caused the closure of about a thousand *chitalishte*. In 1996, however, the then United Nations Development Program (UNDP’s) Representative for Bulgaria, Mr. Antonio Vigilante, saw in the *chitalishte* a potential to forge sustainable social and even economic community development (whatever that meant for the UNDP). On the one hand, the UNDP revitalized a unique 150 year-old phenomenon by funding a project at the Ministry of Culture, which later became independent as the *Chitalishte Development*

Foundation (CDF) to continue the work through other private sources. On the other hand, the UNDP and the CDF apply the Western, mainly American, concept of development as rooted in economics and decision-making, conceptualizing the *chitalishte* as a hub providing paid information and administrative services and teaching practical skills and capacity-building. This model is based much more on the US notion of active civil society than the EU’s strong emphasis on local governments, since such transparent institutions in Bulgaria are not the reality that exists in Western Europe. For Emilia Lissichkova, CDF’s Director:

Development means to see folklore as only one aspect of the overall concept of the *chitalishte*, which should serve as a citizens’ center that brings people together to discuss and collaborate. It is most convenient for the government to have a few people sing and jump around, and thus forget political criticism, so this is why the *chitalishte* needs to change its vision and relate the arts to social action!¹²

The idea sounds engaging, however it so happens that the emphasis on “practical services” and the arts as “not enough” for social progress – quite volatile of a term, anyway - in the imported view on development did clash with many *chitalishte* administrators and artists, who expressed their conviction that the arts have been for decades and still are, in fact, of “enough” importance for their communities. While these reactions are often tied to the inherited logic of Communism, when a few cultural events a year and participation in folk festivals was all the *chitalishte* were ever ordered and expected to do, there are many *chitalishte* today that see in the CDF’s notion a “golden medium” of balancing – and not “sacrificing,” in the “either-or” argument – the arts with social services that would respond flexibly to the changing local necessities, thus broadening the reach of the *chitalishte* in community building beyond the performers and their audiences.

Still, however, the *materialization* of culture remains a problem, since even when cultural projects are funded, it is usually a project that ultimately aims the achievement of an economic component as if it is just not sufficiently “*useful*” to “develop” imagination and entertainment. This trend is evident in the European Union politics, and in particular the Council of Europe’s European Heritage Network: while until 1990 the dominant view in Europe was that cultural heritage is a “spiritual resource” to be

¹⁰ Yudice, George. 2003. *The Expediency of Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.

¹¹ Director of Division of Creativity, Cultural Industries and Copyright at UNESCO, in George Yudice, “Para una ecología cultural,” Paper prepared for the seminar “Nuevos Retos y Estrategias de las Políticas Culturales Frente a la Globalización,” *Institut d’Estudis Catalans*, Barcelona, 22-25 November.

¹² Lissichkova, Emilia. Director, *Chitalishte Development Foundation*. Interview by Nadezhda Savova, June 30, 2006, Sofia, Bulgaria.

“protected without any requirement for profitability from the investments made in it,” the current EU vision is that heritage is mainly an “economic resource” to be used for “improvement of the quality of life by means of cultural tourism development, creating new jobs, improvement of the trading environment, etc.”¹³

Perhaps, it is only when we link creativity with the term “capital,” which among economists implies monetization, that the cultural value of art acquires “true,” convincing value? I do link those terms later in the paper, with the concept of *community creative capital*, which defies the materiality dominating development thinking by injecting “capital” with new significance.

While the *materialization of culture* is a way to denote the uses of culture as an economic tool, the *materialization of heritage* refers more specifically to two parallel heritage-related phenomena: (1) the material understanding of cultural heritage as mainly material/tangible heritage, i.e. artifacts and architectural monuments; and (2) the effort to confine intangible heritage to the logic of cultural property rights and to the materiality of documentation and archiving as opposed to practice.

Tangible cultural heritage according to UNESCO refers to “sites that bear witness to multiple cultural identities, are representative of minority cultural heritages, are of founding significance or are in imminent danger of destruction.”¹⁴ The 1972 *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and National Heritage* finally came to reformulate the cultural value criterion for selecting material heritage, where “objects, collections, building, etc. become recognized as heritage when they express the value of society and so the tangible can only be understood and interpreted through the intangible” (Munjeri 2004: 13),¹⁵ and “intangible heritage must be made incarnate in tangible manifestation” (ICOMOS 2000).¹⁶ Furthermore, the 1994 *Nara Declaration on Authenticity* called for the broadening of the traditional 4-point table of object authenticity (material, workmanship, design, and setting) to include ideas such as traditions, feeling, memory, hu-

man experience, and even “spirit of place” (Munjeri 2004: 14).

The move away from the limits of the tangibility, or *materialization* of heritage, signaled a direction of policy *immaterialization* in the sphere of tangible heritage, as decision-makers and academics began valorizing social meaning-crafting as a key building element. The second aspect of the *immaterialization* of heritage constitutes the approach to intangible heritage where the focus shifted from the *heritage materialization* inherent in the Soviet-style rigid documentation, context-cleansing, and homogenization of “folklore,” as well as in the case of property rights laws disputes, where “efforts to regulate ‘traditional’ expressive culture are bound to have a chilling effect on fair use and artistic expression, especially given the *constantly changing, entirely negotiable* [my italics] content of heritage” (Brown 2005:51¹⁷). The current approach has evolved out of Japanese political philosophy on historic memory and patrimony¹⁸, where to “preserve” is to “help live,” to promote the *practice* of the cultural *practice*. The *immaterialization* of heritage trend was marked by the 1989 *Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore* and, even more so, by the development of the List of Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of the Humanity under the 1998 *Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage* and the “Living Human Treasures” Program, with which the *immaterialization* process arrived at yet another level, where the intangible heritage is “to include not only the masterpieces, but also the masters” with the “task to sustain the whole system as a living entity and not just to collect ‘intangible artefacts’” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006:4).¹⁹

The most recent step in this long-standing *immaterialization* of heritage process was the 2003 UNESCO *Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Finally, the *immaterialization* of culture in cultural policy resonates with the concept of the “dematerialization” of heritage artifacts related to the process in which digital media and information technologies allow museums to re-

¹³ European Heritage Network (HEREIN) website. “Heritage Contribution to Sustainable Development,” case study of Bulgaria. URL available at < http://www.european-heritage.net/sdx/herein/national_heritage/voir.xsp?id=1.2_BG_en >. Consulted March 13, 2007.

¹⁴ UNESCO web site. Culture Sector. Tangible Cultural Heritage. Available at < http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=2187&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html >. Accessed March 24, 2007.

¹⁵ Munjeri, Dawson. 2004. “Tangible and Intangible Heritage: from difference to convergence.” *Museum International*, Vol. 56, No. 1-2: 12-20.

¹⁶ International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). 2000. *Evaluation of Cultural Properties for the 24 th session of the World Heritage Committee*. WHC-00/CONF.204/INF.6. Paris: ICOMOS: 108-110.

¹⁷ Brown, Michael F. 2005. “Heritage Trouble.” *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 12: 40-61.

¹⁸ Japan established the first “Living Human Treasures” legislative system in 1950, followed by Korea in 1964. By now, six other nations (The Philippines, Thailand, Romania, France, Czech Republic and Bulgaria) have also created national systems but not full national registers like Bulgaria’s.

¹⁹ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 2006. *World Heritage and Cultural Economics*. In *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures, Global Transformations*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

think their role as medium of dialogue on social issues (Kirsheblatt-Gimblett 2002: 59²⁰).

In the international dynamic plays of terms such as “material” and “immaterial” – a binary I have over-used in the previous paragraphs only to exaggerate its extremes and artificiality of separation between the two concepts - I will now view the Bulgarian *chitalishte* model in light of the *immateralization* trend and test whether it performs UNESCO’s idea on the role of the “cultural spaces” of immaterial heritage enactment as “immaterial heritage” in themselves, spelled out in the 2003 *Convention*:

Intangible heritage includes the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and *cultural spaces* associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage [my italics].²¹

On the Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of the Humanity List website, Bulgaria is listed with the Bistrishki Babi song and dance tradition declared heritage in 2005 and with the *chitalishte* defined as “culture and community centers,” which are a “successful means of civil self-organization and activity in the area of culture” that “ensures to a large extent the transmission of knowledge and skills in the area of the intangible cultural heritage.”²²

Furthermore, Bulgaria is currently the only country in the world that has created a complete – or complete as possible - national *register* of intangible heritage practices. “To compile information for the Register, we used the extensive *chitalishte* network as the local heritage safeguarding institutions closest to the people,” said Dr. Mila Santova²³, Director of the Institute of Folklore and leading the Register creation. Whether the availability of the *chitalishte* network is the reason why Bulgaria managed first to compile a register is a question I keep exploring for future publications. For now, it is enough to note that UNESCO does not go beyond simply mentioning the *chitalishte* existence, while remaining unclear as to actual grassroots mechanisms of implementing the *Convention*. I argue that the Bulgarian *chitalishte* network and its role for the creation of the National

Register of Intangible Heritage functions as those precise “cultural spaces” spelled in Article 2 of the Convention that secure the *living* of heritage within a dynamic of cultural development as continuity and non-disruptive acculturation.

... Re-Imagining Community Development through the Arts...

Let us now return to the Bulgarian *chitalishte* and examine it as a “cultural space” of intangible heritage recreation. The *chitalishte* secretaries circulate a discourse about the “3 ‘s’” that define its structure: *samostoyatelnost* (independence), *samoupravlenie* (self-management), and *samodeynost* (volunteerism), and the triangular relationships among them seem to have been the energy generator keeping the institution active close to two centuries. Jordan Chuhovski, Raina’s husband and a life-long *chitalishte* activist (*deetz*), stood up for those three terms and the name “people’s” (*narodno*) before *chitalishte* to remain after the fall of Socialism, because:

The social creativity embodied in the *chitalishte* spirit is the desire of the human being, a being really meant to live among people, to voluntarily create things together with and for others. The notion of ‘people’s’ [*narodno*] for many had a Communism taste, but I believe it is the opposite: it is to show how the people [*narod*] of Bulgaria created a center for civil society long before Communism, long before we even had a nation-state!²⁴

The *chitalishte* generally serves three main functions: (1) public library; (2) venue for local performance groups (singing, dancing, music, theatre), amateur artists, artisans, or artists to practice, learn, teach workshops, and perform in the professional performance hall, which most of the *chitalishte* have; and (3) center for documentation, preservation, and re-enactment of local traditions in the realms of both intangible and tangible cultural heritage. The evolving functions of the *chitalishte* are indicators of the dynamic nature of change in Bulgarian society, as many of them become the *information intermediaries* of their communities through the opening of

²⁰ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 2000. Keynote Address, Museums 2000: “Confirmation or Challenge.” *ICOM*, Sweden, Vadstena, September 29.

²¹ UNESCO. 2003. Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. < http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=15782&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html > (MISC/2003/CLT/CH/14P).

²² UNESCO website. Intangible Cultural Heritage Division. Bulgaria Section. URL available at < <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?cp=BG> >. March 14, 2007.

²³ Santova, Mila. *Bulgarian Institute of Folklore* at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Interview by Nadezhda Savova, May 17, 2007, Sofia, Bulgaria.

²⁴ Chuhovski, Jordan. Interview by Nadezhda Savova, August 15, 2006, Gostilitza, Bulgaria.

computer/Internet clubs²⁵ and the UNDP-sponsored project with 80 *chitalishte* to start offering technological and administrative services.²⁶ Particularly in urban settings, the *chitalishte* have started to offer new forms of art that are not traditionally Bulgarian – martial arts, Latin dance, classical and modern ballet, pop singing, as well as language training. However, here I want to focus on the *chitalishte* as the central “cultural space” for teaching and learning the heritage, which in most places is not practiced as an integral part of the life-cycle but occupies a new space as an integral part of leisure time in urban and rural lives. For the purpose of this research, I do not include the modern art forms in the discourse on “heritage,” but I do include them in the broader conceptualization of how community creativity relates to social development.

Neo-liberal politicians, infatuated with the decentralization fables, often criticize community art venues for being vehicles of “centralized state control;” yet, taking those arguments into consideration, my observations showed that the *chitalishte* should rather be understood in terms of a what I would call *grounded cultural policy* and perhaps an exemplary case of “cultural policy decentralization,” as Ventsislav Velev²⁷, the Director of the Department of Regional Cultural Activities (working with the *chitalishte*) referred to it. Its “groundedness” embodies John Stuart Mill’s political ideal of the government offering its constituents access to a rich array of social practices, in this case a creativity-stimulating venue, which citizens themselves sculpt at the grassroots level. Furthermore, in this policy I note a trend of *de-professionalization* that values amateur creativity – even despite the socialist efforts to turn local spontaneity into a league of homogenous national ensembles – and escapes the pitfall, where cultural policy remains trapped in the “high” altitudes of professional arts, often causing ordinary people to see it as elitist and last of all policies in relevance to social wellbeing.

Under socialism in Bulgaria, the *chitalishte* remained vibrant public spheres of volunteerism and social interaction, and even though most activities were ordered and censored with all sorts of Communist “folklorization” propaganda, there were also nooks of subversion, from satire plays to the unacceptable but still enacted *kukeri* (carnaval mumming) celebrations.²⁸ These phenomena challenge Habermas’ (1989a²⁹; 1989b³⁰) “communicative theory” that lively public spaces can exist only outside of authoritarian regimes, since state intrusions suffocate social exchanges and paralyze creativity (the initiatives at the *casas de cultura* in Cuba further defy this claim³¹). This is perhaps because Habermas did not look carefully enough into artistry. Art seems to have its witty ways of tickling public imagination in any context. For example, in the rejection of the “Gostilovski Babi” group to sing re-worked folk music, insisting on their *izvoren* (authentic; literally, “watersource”) folklore and on their satirical sketches, I argue as Foucault did that “There is something else to which we are witness, and which we might describe as the *insurrection of subjugated knowledges*” (1994 [1976]: 202³²). The community cultural centers have generated empowering “local knowledges” that could spin at some degrees the elites’ “master narratives” about past and present by accumulating their own mixture of social and cultural capitals: *community creative capital*?

... Community Creative Capital...

Something tasty was cooking at the *chitalishte*, in Gostilitza and elsewhere. One way to call it might be *community creative capital*, which is the immaterial, non-economic capital that lies at the intersection of social and cultural capital as developed in Bourdieu (1986³³). On the one hand, from the concept of “cultural capital” the *community creative capital* incorporates the elements related to the knowledge of the arts and its *embodied* and *objectified* state, but

²⁵ Mahan, Amy & Yuri Misnikov. 2004. “Introduction: Basic Principles from Lessons Learned,” in *How to Build Open Information Societies: A Collection of Best Practices and Know-How*. UNDP. Printed in Slovakia.

²⁶ Project titled “Enhanced role of the Chitalishte in rural regions as key information intermediaries (channels) for the communities in small settlements,” carried on by the CDF with UNDP support in cooperation with the rural projects funded by the European Union’s program for agricultural development, LEADER.

²⁷ Velev, Ventsislav. *Department of Regional Cultural Activities*, Ministry of Culture, Bulgaria. Interview conducted by Nadezhda Savova, July 25, 2006.

²⁸ On the *kukeri* games, see Creed, Gerald. 2004. “Constituted through conflict: Images of community (and nation) in Bulgarian rural ritual.” *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 106, no1: 56-70.

²⁹ Habermas, Jurgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT Press.

³⁰ Habermas, Jurgen. 1989. “Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision: On Theory and Practice in a Scientific Civilization,” in *Jurgen Habermas On Society and Politics: A Reader*, ed. by Steven Seidman. Beacon Press. pp. 29-54.

³¹ Fernandez, Sujatha. 2006. *Cuba Represent: Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press.

³² Foucault, Michel. 1976. “Two Lectures,” pp. 200 – 222, in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. by Nicholas Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry Ortner. 1994. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

³³ Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. “The Forms of Capital,” *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Greenwood Press: 241-258.

the context here is not “high culture” or education but rather the local space, where it is the Foucauldian “local knowledges” of cultural heritage – generating pride and entertainment - that enable people to accumulate their own form of cultural capital removed from the elitist confinements of institutionalized knowledge. Local cultural capital transcends the faulty divide between “high” and “low” culture: culture can be “low” only as long as this refers to a spatial-social construct of proximity to the local.

From Bourdieu’s “social capital,” *community creative capital* incorporates the ideas on how social networks generate “durable obligations” such as feelings of respect and friendship, since the *chitalishte* adds to the networks of family, workplace, and friends networks of arts groups members, whose paths would have not crossed otherwise (particularly true in bigger places, like cities), as well as a network with and among the audience through the rituals of common attendance to events.

David Throsby’s (1999³⁴) notion of cultural capital relates directly to cultural heritage and thus offers a perspective to add to Bourdieu in constructing the *community creative capital* concept. In Throsby, “cultural capital is the stock of cultural value embodied in an asset” as well as “the flow of capital services over time.” the “tangible cultural capital” embraces buildings, structures, sites, as well as artifacts and artworks of cultural importance (or what cultural policy calls “tangible cultural heritage”); and the “intangible cultural capital” is “set of ideas, practices, beliefs, traditions and values which serve to identify and bind together a given group of people” (1999: 6-7). Throsby develops further the notion of “cultural ecosystems,” along the lines of natural ecosystems, in arguing that:

Neglect of cultural capital by allowing heritage to deteriorate, by failing to sustain the cultural values that provide people with a sense of identity, and by not undertaking the investment needed to maintain and increase our stock of intangible cultural capital, will likewise cause cultural systems to break down, with consequent loss of welfare and economic output (9³⁵).

As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2006) also puts it: “Whereas like tangible heritage, intangible heritage is culture, like natural heritage it is alive;” hence, natural heritage as “a systemic approach to a living entity, provides a model for thinking of intangible heritage as a totality, rather than as an inventory” (4³⁶). Besides this recent holistic vision of heritage,

however, one needs to ask why for Throsby “identity” is so important and a break into the cultural system would cause a decrease in welfare? What is the relationship between change and tradition?

On the point of identity, I found intriguing that the *community creative capital* is not generated solely by the energy exchange between the *chitalishte* performers and their audiences. It is crucial to hear what the people who do *not* engage with those cultural activities express, in various conversational contexts, about the *chitalishte* performing groups being an important symbol of the “merit” and “value” of the community (words used by them), whose creativity was formally recognized with an award from the Ministry of Culture for the “Gostilovski Babi” singing group. I re-think the idea of social capital as linked not only to the numbers of participants and new social groups formed, but also to the quality of the artistic products and of their potential to circulate communal pride: *community creative capital* as a bonding mechanism. Certainly, the “effervescence” is not at constant peaks, and often those peaks occur when groups from other *chitalishte* come to perform, which shows that the “community” part of the *creative capital* is not contained to local performers but to the dynamics that the arts stir moving inside the community.

But why is “art” experienced as liberating and difference-bridging in this context, whereas it may be boundary-maintaining in another, and “high” and highly alienating in third? At the *chitalishte*, the arts connect, because the performers have formed the arts groups voluntarily, and since enactments can be understood as rituals, in Durkheim’s terms³⁷ (1990: 386-387), the “effect is to bring individuals together” and “induce a state of effervescence” (aesthetic delight, excitement, and pride), which eventually leads one to be “carried outside himself” and “in contact with a higher source of energy.” Once “pulled away from his ordinary occupations and preoccupations,” “we return to profane life with more energy and enthusiasm,” precisely because our capacities have been enhanced by “living, for a few moments, a life that is less tense, more at ease, and freer.”

In addition to the generation of shared identity, the *chitalishte* have an interesting way of deconstructing group affiliations of both socio-economic status and age. Theatre and *izvoren* folklore singing groups usually have an array of ages in a joint artistic endeavor, as the young ones learn the “old ways” from the “masters” in a *retrospective prospective vision* of heritage as both “fun” and “important” as an arrow

³⁴ Throsby, David. 1999. “Cultural Capital.” *Journal of Cultural Economics* 23: 3-12.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 2006. World Heritage and Cultural Economics. In *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures, Global Transformations*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

³⁷ Durkheim, Emile. (1912) 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated by Karen E. Fields. New York: The Free Press.

to one's origins. The association among different age groups is unusual in Bulgaria and has been a progressively decreasing phenomenon around the world, with the widening gap between the cultural capital of the older and newer generations in the course of globalization's information offerings available mostly to the youth (specifically through the Internet and other newer technologies). In line with Simmel's (1955³⁸) argument that knowledge accumulation is the basis of group formation, learning arts at the *chitalishte* often ruptures conventional age divisions.

Durkheim's "collective representations" thus produce at the *chitalishte* a "culture in interaction" (see Eliasoph and Lichterman 2002³⁹) that extends beyond the arts and serves as a "toolkit" (see Swidler 1986⁴⁰) for conjuring everyday strategies of action, more and more related to local politics and social issues as it used to be in the pre-socialist years and is only now getting revitalized with the new development discourses.

Conclusions

Eyes glittering, Raina and the Chair of the Board of Directors of the local Club of the Handicapped in Gostilitza told me:

For a while, we have been collecting old games we used to play in childhood, and we'll have tons of activities to engage the kids next summer. We hope so much that the games will take them away from the computer and back outside to play, to understand the outlooks we grew up with!

The levels of activity at the *chitalishte* have historically been an indicator of the liveliness of a place, and perhaps this is mostly true in present-day Bulgaria, where the majority of young people left the villages to search for jobs in the urban centers, and the remaining village inhabitants believe "you can tell if a place is dead when the school and the *chitalishte* shut down." "Social effervescence" stops circulating when there are no heritage enactments to propel what might seem as "simple rejoicing" or "profane corroboree" but ends up having longer-term social reverberations in the accumulation of *community creative capital*. I have argued that this original form of capital is the product of voluntary local

engagement in both traditional and modern arts (*samodeynost*, one of the "3s"), which expands social networks, deconstructs generational divides, and mediates the topsy-turvy dichotomy between "heritage" and "progress."

People's valorization of the *chitalishte* understood as a "cultural space," to use UNESCO's term, of heritage/identity/memory safeguarding is an important factor in the survival of more than 3500 *chitalishte* alive with satirical theatre, folk dance performances, singing, storytelling, festivals, ritual reenactments, etc. Though differences among the *chitalishte* are substantial from place to place, a general patterns reveals how people complain about the decrease in subsidies for activities and, at the same time, show passion in producing and/or consuming *community creative capital* with hardly any economic resources involved, symbolically refusing to give in to the disruptive forces of economic stagnation and migration. The *retrospective prospective vision* of heritage interestingly revealed that for many adults and young people past comes as the ingredient needed to get a flexible look towards "modern," "European" social improvements.

With the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU in January 2007, the *chitalishte* model was recognized by a EU expert commission as unique to the Union. However, the Council of Europe's European Heritage Network might pose some ideological challenges to the *chitalishte* ideals, since it envisions heritage as an "economic resource": *materialization* of heritage that goes different direction from the *immaterialization* I traced evolving in UNESCO's Conventions on intangible heritage.

Though the *chitalishte* have not been directly related to UNESCO initiatives⁴¹, it is in the vibrant locus of community centers that *grounded cultural policy* on *de-professionalized culture* embodies well UNESCO's abstract ideas: no professional artists, no intellectual elites, no cultural industries, but those living in a city neighborhood, a town, or a village, who genuinely interact with the arts without striving for economic profit and rarely for the *institutionalized* state of cultural capital (which, if acquired, comes from recognitions at festivals). *Community creative capital* is a concept not confined to Bulgaria, and can be applied to other community arts cases with flexibility and sensitivity to the local reality, as I myself have observed cases of grassroots heritage

³⁸ Simmel, Georg. 1955. "The Web of Group Affiliations." Trans., Reinhard Bendix. In *Conflict and The Web of Group Affiliations*. N.Y.: Free Press: 127-43.

³⁹ Eliasoph, Nina and Paul Lichterman. 2003. "Culture in Interaction." *American Journal of Sociology* 108: 735-94.

⁴⁰ Swidler, Ann. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review*. 51:273-86.

⁴¹ Except for one project in 2003 when UNESCO funded the Roma Music Theatre Project, coordinated by Simo Blagoev at the Ministry of Culture.

revitalization abound in Latin America and Europe⁴², and I know exist in Africa, Asia, and Australia.

Perhaps in the future UNESCO will focus more attention on encouraging the creation of community cultural centers (sustainably funded by governments) as representing the mechanism through which the *immaterialization* of heritage and its “safeguarding”

as actual *living* can truly work on the ground, doing *what* UNESCO has nicely said without elaborating *how*: “allowing it [creativity] to flower in a spirit of freedom and intercultural dialogue is one of the best ways of maintaining cultural vitality. [...] since creativity concerns everyone.”⁴³

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⁴² I have done research on community cultural centers in Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Colombia, Honduras, El Salvador, Belize, Morocco, France, the Netherlands, Russia and all the former-Communist countries, and know that there are countries in Africa and Asia that have somewhat similar systems of community centers. The research has shown very similar modes of functioning of local creativity and community building in those cases.

⁴³ UNESCO website, “Art and Culture” Division, October 2006. <http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=1404&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html>

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