
bjoerna.dk [Kultursociolog Bjørn Andersen](mailto:Kultursociolog.Bjørn.Andersen) post@bjoerna.dk

Dritëro Agolli: Rethinking the past



Interview in »*Tirana Times*« August 2006

Version 1.0 - 06.09.2006. - Reprinted with the kind permission of the »[Tirana Times](#)«



Dritëro Agolli was born in 1931. By 1950 he had become an established writer in Albania. Of working class background, he completed studies at the University of Leningrad and embarked on his career in journalism and writing when he returned to Albania. He began by writing poetry and in 1970 began writing prose too. Although he had feelings of hostility toward the then Soviet Union in the sixties, Agolli was Chairman of the Writers and Artists League from 1972 until 1992. Both as a member of the communist nomenclatura, and as a public figure, Agolli retained respect even after the collapse of the communist regime. Still a prolific and popular writer, in the 1990's he took a seat in the Albanian Assembly at the outset of the transition of the Socialist Party.

• *Mr. Agolli, as a writer you are a long standing favourite of the Albanian public and your books have also been published abroad. Your life time has spanned a good part of the socialist phase of the country and these years of radical change. First of all we would be interested to know what values have been important to you in your life?*

It's quite difficult to talk about oneself. For this description to be a little more objective, it should be done by others. Usually when you speak about yourself you are embarrassed to reveal everything, so you leave things unmentioned, or perhaps you are even prone to boasting.

As a writer and like the rest of my generation, I was formed in a period that is now past

history, the period of socialism. All of us have acquired positive and negative features pertaining to that system. You could perhaps say that we are like row boats encrusted with shell fish and seaweed, dragged up onto the sands to be scraped clean. That was a difficult period. Everything was heavily censured. Of course literature and the institutions and instances of culture and politics were no exception. It goes without saying that this period, the system, and the society left indelible marks behind.

These things are reflected in my works, particularly from a critical angle. My works are not mere volumes of praise for the system, but more like a critique of it. This is the reason why several volumes I wrote were prohibited or even reduced to pulp. In 1964 my first book of short stories was printed. It was entitled, »*The Rustle of Winds of the Past*«, and was immediately banned from circulation because it allegedly diluted the heroism of the characters. This was the terminology used at that time. The play, »*The White Age*« and the book, »*The Splendour and Downfall of Comrade Zylo*« also disappeared from circulation following their first publication. This last book was published again in 1973. It was regarded as being critical of society and it focused on power and the individual and how power transforms the individual. This novel received acclaim in other European countries.

• *You mentioned that censorship made things difficult for literature and politics in socialist Albania. What sort of a relationship did you have with politics at that time?*

I am not a professional politician. I am a writer who dabbles in politics - inasmuch as any other citizen does when he goes to the polls to vote. When a citizen casts his vote he also dabbles in politics; when he doesn't vote, he doesn't dabble in politics, that's the extent of it. Aristotle was right when he said that, »man is a political animal«.

I am a kind of political animal, seeing I am also a writer, I have worked this ability to perfection, because every writer is the mirror of the society he lives in. Therefore I was a member of the Party of Labour, I was a communist, and even a member of the Central Committee of the Party. But I was also Chairman of the Writers' and Artists' League for a long time. Subsequently I could do far more, as I did, like Ismail Kadare and others [1]. Irrespective of the conditions of the time, we did reflect that reality. When the time came and the regimes changed I joined the Socialist Party, which emerged from the Party of Labour, changing in name only. In the first years it carried over many dyed-in-the-wool communists, but slowly these elements dropped out of its ranks. I also changed and shed a lot of useless deadweight, although some things still remain.

• *You speak about a kind of purging, which the country, your party, and also you yourself have undergone. Did this occur without problems? Was this cleansing process obstructed by certain issues?*

I remember a verse by the Greek poet Seferis [2], about an island where there was a Church and a Saint. One day many serpents appeared on the island. The Saint called the cats on the island and the cats devoured the serpents. The island was purged of all the serpents, but at the same time all the cats died too. Why? Well, because they had consumed so much venom. In our society today too, people have consumed a great deal of venom. With this venom you could eliminate an opponent, occasionally even an old friend who has become your opponent. But this venom has also done its work on you, I mean one's self as well.

This is precisely the kind of society I come from too. I was admitted into the Socialist Party, I was elected to its forums, first to the Executive and then to its Steering Committee. Then I

wanted to leave the Party. This Party now is more modern, which means it has offloaded a lot of the past dogmas of the period of socialism. It has drawn closer to other European parties in kind. There have been a great deal of polemics and debates, and in the time when I was involved fully in politics, I was always ready to talk about the flaws of the Socialist Party. Over the last eight years I have frequently raised my voice in criticism, writing articles and in interviews, perhaps even more than its own political opponents. Anyway, I did not drop out of the SP and no one made the slightest effort to have me expelled. I have always been a writer and their firm supporter.

• *This means that you joined them, and you have sought confrontation in a party sensitive towards changes-which in the meantime you even thought of leaving, as you just mentioned. Does this differ from the stand you had towards the communist Party of Labour?*

What I would like to explain is the fact that one should always speak up about the good and bad even when referring to a political party you are a member of. A contemporary French philosopher Bachelard [3] once said, »Before you get to know a person you must first quarrel; you must oppose the person so the truth emerges; without quarrelling or without debate you can never get to know anyone, because the truth is not the daughter of sympathy, it is the daughter of discourse.« I always bear this in mind.

When the Chairman of the Socialist Party stated, »The Party resembles a marshland«, I opposed that and said he himself was bloated like a swamp toad. I was never shy to speak out when it came to the truth and within my limitations I have done a great deal of criticising. However, I have always been in support of the party. Like everyone else, I too have my pet foibles, I have my good sides but also my weaknesses. Perhaps I should have criticised somewhat more in the past system, but the conditions were such...and not only that, but you create a family and you certainly don't want anything bad to befall them. One piece of verse says that in the time of Galilee, there were also other Galileans who could have come out and said the truth, but they had families. They also knew that the Earth was round, but if they had said this in public they would have been burnt alive at the stake. This is also the case with writers who lived during that system, they knew so much, they also knew the Earth was round, but they also had families. I am one of those individuals.

• *What ideals do you regard as being fundamental in the field of politics and society? Although you do not consider yourself a politician, are there any foreign or local politicians who have had such a special impact as you have?*

I grew up and was moulded in a socialist society, and at that time we had communist ideals. We were sincere in these ideals and like many other intellectuals in the world, talented writers such as Aragon [4], Paul Éluard [5] or even Picasso and Majakowskij [6], embraced this idea of communism. We also believed that the world could be changed. We believed that there could be more equality between people; that poverty could be eliminated; that there could be greater solidarity, and a more complete freedom. These were the ideals we had and which influenced our formation. Philosophical figures like Marx, as well as political figures like Enver Hoxha did have an influence on me. This was our ideal, and our generation cannot deny this. For some time it was the same ideal, but as the years went by the enthusiasm began to wane, because we could see there were so many flaws in our society.

As a writer I idealised Naim Frashëri [7], because he was a poet inspired by the West and in particular by the French Revolution. He was very humane, he loved freedom, he worked

for equality between people but also fraternity. His work helped me a great deal to create my own opinion on the development of society. From this angle, Frashëri became my idol in my creativity and other political issues. He was my idol, not only as a writer because he was also a distinguished politician, but especially regarding his approaches to issues of the country and how he fought the evils perpetrated against our country. He also wrote in Greek and one of his most famous poems is entitled, »*The Albanians and the Greeks*«. So there is also an international side to his spirit. Another idol I had was Fan Noli [8], one of the finest socialists. I believe so because he headed the June Revolution. Although he only governed for six months, he jump started development in Albania, bringing it closer to Europe. That is what the people wanted and what I wanted for my country. From outside of my country, Marx and Lenin and later on Willy Brandt were figures I respected. I thought highly of Brandt as a socialist and as a person with his own views. By this time I was an adult so I was not greatly influenced by Brandt, but I thought he had charisma at the time. The same went for other socialists of the epoch such as Mitterand. Naim Frashëri, Fan Noli and Enver Hoxha were the individuals whose work influenced me the most.

• *It is obvious that drawing closer to Europe has always had significance for you. Today, Europe is no longer merely a geographic and cultural notion; on the contrary, this now means social-economic and political structures. Do you believe that Albania has the maturity needed to become part of these structures?*

No, I don't believe it has. First of all, to be able to approach the more developed countries, we must have a developed economy. That goes for the social side of the coin, including cultural and educational levels.

People must show greater tolerance with one another, and also towards politics. A political debate should not automatically lead to a fight and to hostility, as if every change of government resembles the installation of a new invader. What I mean by this is that we lack a developed democratic and political culture. If, hand in hand with economic development, democratic culture also increases, and if tolerance is predominant in the debates on issues, then dogmatism and intolerance are avoided. If there is no longer any revenge in society, then yes we will be mature enough to enter Europe. This hideous ulcer of our society, revenge, must be eradicated.

• *How can the International Community assist Albania? What do the Albanians themselves have to do to be included in the process of becoming part of the EU?*

Representatives of the EU who come to Albania should carefully study the conditions of this country. They should not all come and go with the same approach they have had towards other countries. On the contrary, they should have studied and know the nature of Albanian society. They should know what customs and traditions there are, and what the positive sides of the Albanians are. They should know the country's spiritual constitution. It is worthless if intelligent people come and go who do their work well in Bulgaria or Rumania, because even though we have many things in common with other Balkan countries, we are also different in many ways.

• *Where do the differences lie? From a socio-psychological angle, is there any such thing as an individual type of Albanian?*

Albanians are very intelligent and they are people with a great deal of imagination. But they are also very impatient and lose interest in their work very quickly. If a job takes ten years to

do, they want to do it in one year; they want to complete in one hour something that takes five months to do. If someone who would know the psychology of Albanian society well came to work in Albania, this person would do a great service to the country.

However, first of all the Albanians must build their own country themselves. Unfortunately, we are used to others doing our work for us - but this is a very bad lesson. It depends on our psychology: when others direct us, we appear to be very clever. For example, in Turkey there were thirty Prime Ministers and who knows how many commanders, soldiers and statesmen who were remarkable individuals of Albanian origin. Or Take Greece as another example - how many heroes of the Greek Revolution were Albanian?

The Albanians are exceptionally resourceful if they are led by others, but if they are the ones at the helm they are forever at loggerheads. Only the Albanians themselves can change this psyche. First of all they must fight to do their own chores themselves and not perpetually depend on others on the journey to Europe.

So, the Albanians must work themselves to reach Europe. At the same time they are resourceful, but impatient and badly coordinated. Is this the gist of what you said?

Within a very short period of time, the Albanians have made major changes, particularly in the cities. They have the energy and limitless imagination in all fields. But they are also very masterly at being the Mafia - on this point they have even surpassed the Russians and the Italians. In the case of the Mafia, they make their way to the top very quickly. So they are not only very capable in just the one direction, but on many planes. This is why they need skilful leaders. A leader should never shirk work. Here people develop rapidly and well and they pick up things better and quicker than the leader, who understands very little or pretends he does. This means that the people are more advanced and skilful than the leaders.

- *The political future hinges a great deal on the future politicians. How do you conceive the young people of today? It seems that during these last few years, the youth are being left out of politics and its commitment is decreasing.*

Previously, young people were active in politics. Young men and women wanted to make change and progress. But it is as if the youth of the country has shifted to slow motion mode because the party leaders have failed to encourage younger people to join; only the senior membership remained, who never really understood the youth properly. This very weak policy became obvious when the Socialist Party split and all the young people went with the Socialist Movement for Integration. Only if party leaders offer qualified young men and women leading posts in society, in the economy, in the party and in culture and education, will they get the chance to come in and make their contribution. And in the final account, these are the young people who have studied and know how to operate so they should be activated and not left idle.

- *Do you consider the epoch of communism in Albania as time wasted?*

No, I don't. Irrespective of the enormous flaws of the socialist camp and in that system, there were very positive sides too. I would mention here, in the moral-political field, the solidarity, which was extensive, because people lived in collectives. The emancipation of women also proved a huge help. Women were isolated in the Balkans and their emancipation helped in developing schooling, culture and similar fields. In the time of Ahmed Zogu [9] and up until 1944, there were only seven secondary schools in Albania.

During the years of socialism 370 secondary schools were opened and 12 Universities. There were no universities at all previously. We even had a Ballet and Opera Theatre, a People's Theatre, and Film Studios that produced 14 features films per year and many other institutions.

To this day, Albania is fed by electric power generated by the same hydropower stations of that period. Music and literature benefited the most in cultural development. Prior to the socialist period, not a single one of the works by our authors was ever translated into any foreign language, so the world could come into contact with them. But in this time, our translations and literature became known in countries like Germany. This reveals a high level. Books from the beginnings of literature in the Middle Ages or of the time of Ahmed Zog up until the epoch of socialism were translated. This played a very important role.

• According to what you have said above, the socialist period was therefore a phase of development of the country in the direction of modernization. But at the same time it was also a time of isolation, to a far greater degree in comparison with the other countries of East Europe. Could Albanians communicate with the rest of the world seeing that this was so restricted and irrespective of the fact that this could only be realized through the works by Albanian authors?

You are quite right regarding Albania after 1960. Isolation was exceptionally stringent. However, there was trade with other countries in the West as well as the Eastern Bloc. Although through mediation of a third party, there was communication with the world. Our artistic ensembles, such as the State Folk Song and Dance Ensemble all performed overseas. Archaeological exhibitions were opened in Paris and Rome. In other words, there was a level of communication.

Unfortunately we are used to thinking only in black and white and the rest we discard. Some even ask whether people fell in love in the years of socialism. If people had not loved, there would not have been children. We were so sick of such questions about those times. The only question that was not asked was whether or not there were children in socialism?

• In other words, you keep on differentiating about the period of socialism. Does that mean that this period produced values that are of importance to you?

Yes, socialism also had its good aspects. The backward customs of the Middle Ages were eliminated and there was no longer any fratricidal killing. People were not confined behind the four walls of their homes for fear of being tracked down and killed; these things do not exist in a dictatorship.

Families were more consolidated than today. There was greater equality between people and the huge ratios of differences between incomes did not exist. Without doubt this led to a level of backwardness when you look at the levels the rest of the world enjoys today, because the ratios are hugely different in pay scales in capitalism.

At that time the solidarity between people was something positive and led to a situation where everyone worked together. In the time of socialism, the communists tried to play on the positive sides of our people, like solidarity, which was demonstrated in certain moments of our history. Today, we harshly criticise that system because of the existence of a dictatorship and Enver Hoxha.

At the founding congress of the Socialist Party, where the name changed from the PLA, I

was the first to stand up and attack the system, Enver Hoxha and the dictatorship. All the delegates turned on me. Naturally, this was painful for me to do. Why did it have to happen this way, why were so many things so futile? But not the entire period of socialism was futile. The Middle Ages were not a waste either. In every system you can find positive elements. In the Middle Ages, there would not have been a Cervantes, but he emerged with Don Quixote. There were the Niebelungen of the Germans; artists of genius emerged from that time and not from today's modern times. Socialism was a system that was established over half of Europe. Similar things occurred in the time of Charles the Great. Did Charles the Great bring Europe together through war?

Notes

- [1] Ismail Kadare (*1936), writer of renown in and outside of Albania. 1990-1999 Kadare lived in Paris seeing that whilst in Albania he had written about the collapse of the communist regime and because, in general, he was a person who could not abide by the rules of the regime; he returned to live in Tirana in 1999.
 - [2] Giorgios Seferis (1900-1971), Greek Poet who won Nobel Award for Literature in 1963.
 - [3] Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962), French philosopher and critic, professor in Dijon and at the Sorbonne (Paris).
 - [4] Louis Aragon (1897-1982), French writer, co-founder of the Surrealist Movement and later on a member of the French Communist Party.
 - [5] Paul Éluard (1895-1952), French poet, active during the Resistance and a member of the French Communist Party.
 - [6] Wladimir Majakowskij (1893-1930), Russian writer, co-founder and chiefly the representative of Russian Futurism; Bolshevik since 1908.
 - [7] Naim Frashëri (1846-1900), Albanian writer, first and foremost, a poet, wrote in Albanian for early on, fighter for the liberation of the country.
 - [8] Theophan (Fan) Stylian Noli (1882-1965) Albanian orthodox priest and politician, committed to the independence of Albania and its recognition whilst being a resident in the USA. In 1924, after the downfall of Ahmed Zog, Noli became Prime Minister, but he was brought down during the same year and he fought the self proclaimed King Zog from abroad. During WWII Noli was in contact with the Albanian communists of Enver Hoxha.
 - [9] Ahmed Zogu(1895-1961), known as Zog, the Sovereign of the Albanians, as he was from 1928-1939 up until the invasion of Albania by the Italians. He officially abdicated in 1946; he was PM 1923-24 and President of Albania 1925-1928, before proclaiming himself King.
-

TIRANA TIMES

»*Tirana Times*« - <http://www.tiranatimes.com/> - is an Albanian weekly in English. **Editor-in-chief** is Jerina Zaloshnja. Information about **subscription**: <http://www.tiranatimes.com/subscription.php>

Links: • [Dritëro Agolli. Biography in Danish Wikipedia](#) [PDF] • [Agolli-articles from the 1970's and 1980's](#)
