

## REVIEW

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of the materials submitted for participation in a competition for holding the academic position of 'Associate Professor' at Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski" in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences, scientific specialty Sociology

The only candidate for participation in the competition is Dr. Nina Vasileva Nikolova

The set of papers presented by Dr. Nikolova is in accordance with the Regulations for development of the academic staff of the University of Plovdiv.

Nina Nikolova has submitted a total of 17 scientific papers, of which 15 articles and 2 monographs, which is more than enough to meet the requirements of the competition. To this I will add the participation (between 2000 and 2020) in 14 national and international projects, as well as participation with reports in 16 scientific forums.

Articles under №№ 7, 8, 12, 13, 15 are not reviewed, as there are no separation protocols to show the candidate's share in the joint publications. I will not review the monograph *Polytatomy of Modern Man. The Living Body as a Challenge to Sociology*, because it largely overlaps with the 2000 doctoral dissertation "The Politanatomy of Modern Man: Towards a Sociology of the Living Body." In fact, my focus will be mainly on the monograph *Excrementum. Senses of Proximity*, as it most fully demonstrates the web of theoretical interests of N. Nikolova and also includes in a more or less revised version most of the articles submitted for the competition.

### **Brief biographical data about the candidate**

I could talk a lot about Nina Nikolova, as I have a look at her development from different perspectives: as her lecturer at Sofia University "Kl. Ohridski", as a reviewer of her doctoral dissertation from 2000, as an Editor of the journal *Sociologicheski Problemi*, which published most of the articles submitted for the competition, and finally as her colleague at the Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv. I will comment in detail on her qualities in the following parts of the review. Here I will only encrypt the horizon of what I will develop in more detail further, with the key words that clearly characterize her work during all these years: *non-standard thinking* and *consistency* in the development of the chosen sociological field.

However, I will also point out a fact from her scientific biography, which is quite succinctly noted in the CV, but it seems to me to be an indispensable element of the calibration of her

scientific attitude. In 1990-1991, she specialized at the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Bielefeld (where I also have been for two years at the time) in an international environment of people actively involved in phenomenology. The participation in the learning process and in the discussions organized by the host, Prof. Richard Grathoff, in my opinion, has significantly contributed to the formation of the theoretical thinking of Dr. Nikolova.

### **General characteristics of the candidate's activity**

In an effort to concretize at first approximation the key words mentioned above, characterizing the qualities of Nina Nikolova, I will note above all the tracing and systematic development of a neglected in sociology theoretical and empirical field: the study of the living body. The marginalization of the living body is a natural consequence for a sociology whose existence from the very beginning was torn between the naturalism of social physics and the ether of social meaning. On the other hand, with her doctoral dissertation "Polytatomy of the Modern Man: Towards a Sociology of the Living Body" Dr. Nikolova takes a different path, turning to Foucault's "polytatomy" and Bourdieu's habitual practices, effectively combining the two perspectives through the phenomenological emphasis on the kinesthetic organization of the living body (Husserl and Merleau-Ponty). Already in her dissertation she manifests an emblematic element of her creative style: analysis of social processes through characteristic (often unexpected) objects (in the case of the dissertation - analysis of modern corporeality through clothing [but also through the railway station and toilet - a kind of anticipation of future activities]).

### **Assessment of candidate's educational and pedagogical activity**

Later Dr. Nikolova successfully asserted these priorities in her work as a teacher, building courses with a clear author profile. Suffice it to mention only such titles as "Historical Sociology of Politics (Anatomopolitics)", "Sociology of the Body" or the Master's course "Sociology of Body Practices". By the way, even lecture courses with more traditional names such as "Sociology of Publicness" and "Sociology of Traditional and Modern Societies" are permeated by the already mentioned theoretical choice.

Nina Nikolova's sociological attitude allows her to fit organically into the work of the Department of Sociology and Sciences of Man (as well as its predecessor – Sociology ), where Husserl's phenomenology and Bourdieu's reflexive sociology are strongly emphasized, bringing original nuances to the research profile of the Department. She also works very successfully with graduates in the Department. A unique evidence of this is the joint publication from 2014 in Russian with one of them (V. Golemanov): "Wild body and sport. Toward a History of the Sociology of sport".

I will not miss something that usually goes unnoticed by the outside eye - the performances of Dr. Nikolova as a translator. Her work includes key translations of thinkers such as N. Luhmann, S. Freud, H. Blumenberg (for the translation of *Paradigms to a Metaphor* of Hans Blumenberg in 2016 she received the Prize of the Union of Translators in Bulgaria for outstanding achievements in the field of translations in humanities ). I mention this fact because her work "from within" with the German language is a condition for a nuanced interpretation of language structures, as N. Nikolova constantly demonstrates in her publications.

Representative of the candidate's work is her monograph from 2020 *Excrementum. Senses of Proximity* and therefore, focusing on the evaluation of scientific contributions, I will concentrate mainly on it. This work fully reveals what in the beginning I defined both as non-standard thinking and as a consistency in the work of the candidate. On the one hand, the book is a natural continuation of Nikolova's analyses of the living body, and, on the other hand, the choice of theoretical focus is more than unconventional: the so-called senses of proximity. As far as the senses were at all within the scope of sociology, this was mostly with sight and hearing as senses of distance, while the senses of proximity seem rather strange as a subject of sociological interest. Perhaps that is why Nikolova tried to achieve a sociological effect not so much through the interpretation of sociological works (although references to such works are not lacking), but through an organic amalgam of discussions mainly of historical works<sup>1</sup> and literary works (P. Süskind's *Perfume: The Story of the Murderer*, V. Hugo's *Les Misérables*, *Chocolate* by J. Harris).

At the beginning of the monograph, however, quite naturally stands Georg Simmel – one of the few sociologists who dealt with the senses, including (albeit peripherally) the senses of proximity. However, he is present in an unusual way – in a staged dialogue with Sigmund Freud, the thinker that N. Nikolova adds to the already known methodological "bouquet", including Foucault, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu. It is no coincidence that Simmel asks questions rather than participates equally in the dialogue - for him, touch and smell are "lower" senses compared to sight and hearing. Putting an aesthetic (albeit always specifically negotiated) distance between himself and his object, Simmel, in Nikolova's words, rather "'smells' the subversive power of the olfactory sense" (p. 23), stays in dramatic tension with it, without being able to focus on its social significance. Freud is the one who "offers an analytical explanation of its specificity" (ibid.), because, as it turns out, he finds himself intellectually liberated from the "world of the abominable" through a factual "initiation" into it. I would strengthen this assumption by saying that the initiation in question "produces" a kind of psychoanalytic "epoché" in relation to the disturbing affective power of this world, an epoché that Nina Nikolova practices in her book in an original way to reveal various manifestations of social manipulation of the senses of proximity.

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<sup>1</sup> I find extremely interesting the fact of newly acquired empirical and theoretical significance of historical research for sociology today, as it was the case in the prehistory of "understanding" sociology (when the complex of "human sciences" was in *statu nascendi*).

She brings to the fore a Freudian principle, which has an important explanatory function in the exposition: "disgust is a former desire." (Desire, on the other hand, is perceived as coupled with pleasure and is seen as "foretasting of future pleasure" [p. 7]). Nikolova sociologizes Freud's principle and shows how, through systematic repression, reversal takes place, in which disgust performs repressive functions and is seen as a "symptom of defense." This reversal, of course, although visible in abbreviated form in child development, took place in a long social time in the course of specific discipline of the senses, as shown by *The Civilizing Process* of Elias (work that N. Nikolova also includes as an element of her analysis). In fact, the center of the monograph occupy loosely related essays on tactile sensations, taste experiences and smell, embodied in a living body as "being-in-the-world" (in other words, in the body as "penetrated by the world and penetrating the world", if I may use a paraphrase with which Nikolova refers to Merleau-Ponty).

At the same time, the phenomenology of the living body is a kind of key to the sociological analyzes in the book. It provides original (in the sense of primordial) access to such seemingly distant to the senses of proximity phenomena as the sewerage, considered in the book as "the bottom of the city", the toilet as a "connection to the underworld", the communal house in the Soviet Union as a space both of proximity and distance, etc.

It is in this context that I would like to mention a brief analysis of Dr. Nikolova, which, it seems to me, has great potential. Taking M. Diaconu's study of the smell as a starting point, Nikolova emphasizes it as an "intercorporeal bridge" in social interactions, as the repressed tactile and taste sensations of modern man seem to sediment in the sense of smell. Hence the assumption that "the senses of proximity are concentrated in the smell and it replaces and represents them." Smell as an "intermediate sense", in Nikolova's words functions "as having the ability to attract, to bring closer the desired objects and – conversely – in disgust it functions as a repulsion and puts a distance to the abominable objects" (pp. 189-190). In noting the potential of this analysis, I mean the possibility of its continuation in a more explicitly phenomenological direction. Here is an opportunity that comes to my mind at first reading.

In *Ideas II*, Husserl speaks of the "second face" of the living body as a "place of conversion" where an immediate transition from "spiritual to natural causality" takes place. If we project this idea on intersubjectivity, the conversion will now be between the living body of the Self and the Other (in both directions). However, conversion presupposes a reversal in which the "alien" (either in the sense of attracting or repelling) modifies "my" actions beyond the volitional control of the Self. Such a projection, it seems to me, would yield interesting results, especially in the direction of affectivity as a social phenomenon, if it were played precisely through the sense of smell as an "intermediate sense."

Discussing the monograph of N. Nikolova, I actually highlighted her main scientific contributions (not only in this work, but also in other papers submitted for review).

In general, these contributions have the character of establishing and expanding a new scientific field for Bulgarian sociology: sociology of the senses (with special emphasis on the senses of proximity). An essential role for the effective development of this field is played by the development of complex methodological apparatus through a synthesis between phenomenological and psychoanalytic perspectives, with which Foucault's theory of embodied power and Bourdieu's reflexive sociology (in particular his theory of habitual practices) coexist organically. In the monograph reviewed, as well as in the attached articles, the work with this toolkit gives concrete sociological results. The most important of them: a specific view to the urban (interior and underground) environment through the toilet and through the sewer; focusing on the recent past through "sanitary culture" and "communal house" under socialism; the key emphasis on the so-called "affective history" (with special attention to the affective structure of individual experience) [cf. in addition to the monograph reviewed publications №№ 6, 8, 9, 10, 12].

The contributions outlined above are undoubtedly the personal work of the candidate. The review of the citation report shows a high number of references that come from various scientific circles (among which the share of doctoral students is significant).

### **PERSONAL IMPRESSIONS**

I will end with something that I started this review with. I have known Nina Nikolova as one of my most original thinking students, I highly appreciated her doctoral dissertation, and now I have the pleasure to sanction (in my opinion with a great delay) the next step in her scientific development. My wish is for N. Nikolova to continue to maintain the authenticity of her mental style, but to walk the path to the professorship at a much faster pace.

### **CONCLUSION**

The documents and materials submitted by Nina Vasileva Nikolova meet all the requirements of the Law for the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB), the Regulations for implementation of LDASRB and the respective Regulations of PU "Paisii Hilendarski".

The candidate in the competition has submitted a sufficient number of scientific papers published after the materials used in the defense of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor". As I argued in my review, the candidate's work has original scientific contributions, most of which have been published in journals and scientific journals with scientific reviewers. My definite conclusion is that the theoretical works of N. Nikolova are a significant contribution to the development of Bulgarian sociology, some of them being

directly oriented to the educational work. The scientific and teaching qualification of the candidate is unquestionable.

The results achieved by Nina Vasileva Nikolova in her teaching and research activities fully comply with the specific requirements of the Faculty of Philosophy and History, adopted in connection with the Regulations of the University of Plovdiv for the application of LDASRB.

After getting acquainted with the materials and scientific papers presented in the competition, analysis of their significance and scientific contributions contained in them, I give my positive assessment and recommend the Scientific Jury to prepare a report-proposal to the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Philosophy and History, according to which Nina Vasileva Nikolova to be elected to the academic position of 'Associate Professor' at the University of Plovdiv "P. Hilendarski " (Professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences, Scientific specialty Sociology).

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Reviewer: Prof. Kolyo Koev

