

OPINION

by Andrey Viktorov Bundzhulov, Doctor of Sociological Sciences, Associate Professor in the Department of Economic Sociology in the University for National and World Economy on the materials submitted for participation in a contest for the academic position of ‘Associate Professor’ in the Paissiy Hilendarski University of Plovdiv

sphere of higher education: 3. Social, economic and legal sciences

professional field: 3.1 Sociology, anthropology and sciences of culture

Sociology – Sociology of the Body

In the competition for the position of ‘Associate Professor’ as announced in the State Gazette, No. 57 as of 26 June 2020, and on the webpage of the Paissiy Hilendarski University of Plovdiv for the needs of the Department of Sociology and Human Sciences of the Faculty of Philosophy and History, there is one candidate applying: Senior Assistant Professor Ph.D. Nina Vassileva Nikolova of the Department of Sociology and Human Sciences of the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the University of Plovdiv. The submitted body of texts and documents is in compliance to the University’s Regulations of the Development of Academic Faculty. The candidate has attached a list of her scientific works. Of here, 15 articles and two monographs, the latter being a habilitation thesis, are intended especially for this competition. They are set apart from those reported for acquiring the scientific degree of ‘Doctor’ (Ph.D.) It is seen from the attached note that the candidate fulfills the requirements and the scientometric indicators for the academic position of ‘Associate Professor’.

Not dwelling on the candidate’s biography, I will highlight a few moments relevant to the competition. Most of the teaching activity of Nina Nikolova has taken place in the University of Plovdiv where she reads courses in *Sociology of the Body*, *Historical Sociology of Politics (Anatomopolitics)* etc. which are accepted with interest by the students. Nina Nikolova is the initiator and organizes of extracurricular and inter-university seminars and practicums; she has a serious commitment to the scientific supervision guidance of graduating students and the research work with undergraduate and doctoral students; she takes part in authoritative scientific projects and venues. I must also mention her translation activity for which she has received an award from the Union of Translators in Bulgaria (2016).

The Sociology of the Body – which is the thematic focus of this competition – is also the focus of her research interests ever since her student years. I will remind the theme of her graduation work: *The body in the structures of power*, and later also the theme of her doctoral dissertation is *Political Anatomy of the Modern Man: toward a Sociology of the Lived Body*. This is an example of continuity and building upon previous effort, and in an under-explored field. If we return to her monograph *Political Anatomy of the Modern Man* (Nikolova, 2001) in the context of her habilitation work *Excrementum. Senses of Proximity* that has been recently published by the Critique & Humanism Publishing House (Nikolova, 2020), we will see that some of the main methodological instruments and approaches elaborated in that first monograph have now been applied in her habilitation thesis: I have in mind the combination of a Foucauldian analytic of the body as a target of power, Husserl's phenomenological analysis of the 'lived body' as well as Bourdieu's reflexive sociology and especially his concept of 'habitus'. This has all found expression in the quest for intersection points between the analytic of power as incorporated in bodies and the phenomenological and sociological analysis. In *Excrementum* we find a shift of the focus from the body through the prism of dispositives, mostly those of disciplinary and symbolic power (senses of distance) to the body viewed through the prism of senses of proximity.

There can be no doubt that Nina Nikolova is a researcher with her own handwriting and contribution in the Bulgarian sociological community. The sociology of the body is a problem axis, a kind of trademark in her works. This problematic may sound extravagant to quite a few researchers. In her own words, this is 'a rather unconventional concept of sociology, as far as the reflexive sociological approach is combined, on the one hand, with the psychoanalytic research vision, and on the other, with the phenomenological one' (*Excrementum*, 9), and even more so when this methodological approach is applied to the analysis of concrete research areas, themes and objects – the worlds of olfaction, taste and touch (the so-called senses of proximity) and the worlds of vision and hearing (the so-called senses of distance); motives and themes from Freud's psychoanalysis – 'disgust as a former desire', 'repression of desire', 'former desire as a failed enjoyment', 'prohibition and temptation' etc.; the purposeful search for 'shortcuts' between aesthetic, moral, affective, sensory poles (of feelings) – homo hapticus and homo hygienicus, 'excrements and perfumes', 'the toilet and the woman' as symbolic topoi (of modern culture), 'the up and the down' (of the body and of the socium), 'private and public', 'visible and invisible'; 'the wild body' and 'the tame body' (of sport), 'the womb mass', the 'private' space, the 'communal apartment', 'the queue', the 'former ones' (of state socialism) etc. Of course,

these are deliberate provocation affects not as a part of trying to look original but, to repeat, as an approach of exploration, as an analysis with regard to revealing the abjects and objects in unusual sociological optics, approaches, otherwise remaining unnoticed by ‘conventional sociology’.

Remarks and recommendations

First, I would like to raise a more general question: the question of the constructing, through *transgression*, of the body as *asocial* but not extra-social – i.e. as a body that is at the border of the social and even beyond it but, however, staying within the social spaces. Moreover, in a crucial sense it constitutes social spaces as spaces of excession, transgressions, delineating territories and enclaves of otherness (heterotopicity). Transgressions that outline and enhance, by problematizations and weakenings, the antinomies of ‘biological – social’, ‘natural – cultural’, ‘private – public’, ‘normal – abnormal’. Sensitivities-practices-experiences-limits that reproduce not *negatively*, by *denial* or *resistance* against norms and rules imposed by diverse power apparatuses, but *positively*, by the acts themselves of overstepping the limits by which these are posited, reproduced and transformed. A motive we find in the early Foucault (in his reading of Sade and Bataille in *A Preface to Transgression*, 1963), although it is later transformed in the themes of disciplinary power, ‘the universal juridicism of modern society’ etc. But maybe precisely because she stays focused in the field of anatomopolitics, N. Nikolova brackets away the problem of transgression although it does have its place in the researched field. It seems this has made her sociology of the body weaker.

Secondly, I am tempted to say something also of the analyses of the socialist society. I find interesting the idea of the ‘womb mass’ as an ‘other body’ of the mass of socialism – a body ‘stopped’ or ‘waiting’ at ‘the endless queue of socialism’ which ‘is present in public spaces but has no public being’ (*Excrementum*, 136–138). But this idea remains presented rather schematically, as the backside of ‘the mirror mass’. Are not, however, queues under socialism the nutrient ambience in which specific network relations and motivations are generated and spread, reproduced by, but also compensating, the ‘shortage economy’, undermining the official publicness by semi-lit or unlit places that remain politically and ideologically opaque and are denounced by official discourse as ‘bourgeois remnants’, ‘negative phenomena’? In this sense, private spaces, zones and niches not only cannot be abolished under socialism, even in the times of its ‘classical system’, but, rather, they have their constructive, positive role here, as far as they are generated by the hybrid, centauric network formations that include both apparatus agents,

quasi-market mediators, and people from the street who show inventiveness – a ‘network of anti-discipline’ that simulate and play with ‘discipline and conscientiousness’?

To conclude: the scientific research and teaching activity of Nina Nikolova contains original contributions in an important field that has not been sufficiently developed so far. My impressions from our joint work on research projects, from her participations in scientific venues, the reviews on her lecturing give me reason to declare that she is an authoritative scientist and teacher. I am convinced that her candidature corresponds entirely to the criteria of occupying the academic position of ‘Associate Professor’ in compliance with the Development of Academic Faculty in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (DAFRBA), the Regulations for the Application of this Act, and the Regulations of the Development of Academic Faculty of the Paissiy Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

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