

REVIEW

Of Nina Vasileva Nikolova for the academic position of 'Associate Professor' at the University of Plovdiv "P. Hilendarski" in professional field 3.1 Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences (Sociology - Sociology of the body).

By Professor Miglena Nikolchina, PhD

The candidate Nina Vasileva Nikolova has submitted a total of 46 scientific papers, including 41 articles, 2 studies, 3 monographs. 17 of her publications qualify for the present promotion, including the monograph *Excrementum: Senses of Proximity (A Sociological Analytic)*, Sofia: KH, 2020.

Nina Vasileva Nikolova is Senior Assistant Professor at the Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv since 2000. As a part-time lecturer, she has taught at NBU, SWU "Neofit Rilski" and Sofia University "St. Kl. Ohridski". In 1990-1991 she was a researcher at NCIOM, and since 1991. and currently at ICSI. In 2000 she defended her PhD at the Institute of Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Science (dissertation on the topic: *Political Anatomy of the Modern Human: Sociology of the Living Body*).

Nina Nikolova has extensive teaching experience in leading Bulgarian universities. She has delivered numerous courses and has been a supervisor of diploma theses. She is involved in many research projects involving BA, MA and PhD students. She has done impressive work in research projects on university, national and international level. Her participation in various scientific forums and conferences is also significant.

Nina Nikolova is also actively involved in scientific publishing. In 1995-1996 she was Editor-in-chief of the *Archive* journal (Civic Education Bulletin); in 1995-1998 he was member of the editorial board of the journal *Kritika I humanism* (Critique and Humanism). She is Editor-in-chief of the series "Cases" and "Theoretical Spaces" in IC KH - Critique and Humanism. Her scientific output includes, apart from her own studies, a number of translations, for which she has been awarded the Prize for Outstanding Achievements in the Field of Humanities by the Bulgarian Union of Translators - 2016. r.

In my review, I will focus on the habilitation monograph proposed by Nina Nikolova which has appeared this year with the Kritika I Humanizm publishing house *Excrementum: Senses of Proximity (A Sociological Analytic)*. The study explores the sociological aspects of the "inferior" senses also designated as senses of proximity - smell, taste, and touch. Throughout the years at various conferences, as well as during our joint work on the project supported by the National Research Fund "The Contradictions of Heritage (Strategies for a Virtual Museum of Socialism)", as well as on the basis of publications in scientific periodicals, I had the opportunity to follow various stages in the unfolding of this work. I was impressed by the quality of Nina Nikolova's research which reaffirmed her talent and her uncompromising focus on areas and approaches she believed to be underestimated, misunderstood, or simply unnoticed.

This, I believe, one of the reasons behind the heuristic qualities of Nikolova's work which is usually organized and structured around insights, short circuits, and the unforeseeable trajectories of discovery. She does not like paraphrasing what is familiar. This characterizes her earlier research which resulted in the monograph *Political Anatomy of the Modern Human*; it also characterizes her new book which is in many respects a furthering of the methodology and the perspective of her earlier writing so there is a

great deal of continuity in the style and scientific focus of her explorations. The coincidence of the release of this book which took many years in coming with the unprecedented pressure we experience today towards social distance and towards the virtualization of social existence is a testament to Nina Nikolova's sense for processes that take place beyond the scope of our ready-made explanatory devices.

To put it differently, Nikolova's study provides a striking entrance to the contemporary crisis as an *excrementation* – to put it into the term from her title – of the “senses of proximity,” which her sociological analysis addresses. The moratorium on them with the imposed social distancing, the evacuation of the senses of proximity from the ideal but also from the real polis exemplify the very beginning of the book where we read about the “opposition between the ‘city of pain and compassion’ and the ‘city of comfort and isolation.’” (p.7). Today, this opposition has mutated in the identification of compassion with isolation. “We inhabit a culture of distances: of moving apart, of seclusion and defences... We call this autonomy and freedom... My as well as the others’ untouchability have become a cult. “ (pp.109-110)

This freedom understood as untouchability turns out to be potentially liberticidal – this has become unequivocally clear today. Nikolova's perspective on modernity through the value differentiation of the senses, through their hierarchy of higher and lower, through the control and terror specifically regarding the senses of proximity, is undoubtedly one of the most penetrating approaches that could reveal the broad paradigm of effects we are now witnessing: a paradigm that far precedes and now includes the implications of the big new technologies. As I already mentioned the study is the product of many years of work, but at the last moment Nina Nikolova has succeeded in including a reference to the covid-19 crisis. (pp. 106-107) Very much in the spirit of certain responses to the crisis, this reference is utopian. Although Nikolova explicitly notes the unavoidable conclusion to which her analysis leads – the disappearance of homo hapticus and the human of the “senses of proximity” – she still hopes that the rifts that have been opened will be filled with something nice, for example empathy. I cannot help having my doubts in her hope – both in principle, and in following the logic of her own study. What we are witnessing today is the transformation of the human into a *user* reduced to the bundle of his searches on internet which far from being the zone of freedom as it was believed to be until just a few years ago, has become zone of total surveillance, censorship, and control. What we see today is the beginning of getting rid of the redundancy of human corporeality, of this amorphous residue from virtual consumption, which before our very eyes is metamorphosed into a container of infections and a threat to its neighbors: not even bare life any longer but a biological excrement. What empathy can there be towards your enemy who dares breathe the same air as you? As a result all sociality and togetherness is sanitized to the digital registers where it can be rendered to automated control and is cut off from the senses of proximity. Carnival in Bakhtin's sense – the Rabelaisian revolt of the material bodily nether regions with its laughter and liberating excess – has undergone a macabre reversal and has been made practically impossible.

Nina Nikolova refers to Bakhtin in a number of cases, emphasizing that he juxtaposes the material bodily nether region to the sacred and spiritual upper region. (p. 58, n. 14). She points out how the reversing of the reversal of the two regions work in the course of the Bolshevik revolution worked, while also examining the preference for the sacred spiritual "upper" one during the socialist regimes. The study, as I have already pointed out, turns out to be a particularly heuristic entry into the civilizational paradigm that manifests itself in these processes both then and now. Nikolova does not use the term paradigm in the way I resort to here – i.e. in a rather Agambenean spirit, as a vast arc that spans many epochs. Her

historical raids stay closer to our times – as in her analysis of the early Soviet era in the third part of the book, as well as in some other cuts from the era of socialism. However, the overlap of the theoretical and the historical in her consideration of the social instrumentalization of smell, touch and (to a lesser extent) taste creates a conceptual network with wide applicability. Theoretically, the study unfolds in the framework of two main circles: one which includes Freud and Simmel as well as some other representatives of the philosophical and sociological thought from the first half of the 20th century; and a second one which involves the social sciences and the humanities from the recent decades with their growing interest in the senses of proximity and, more specifically, the "olfactory revolution." The study is structured as a series of concrete analyses, each subject to an approach that I would define through a literary term as *ostranenie* - the effect is to render unfamiliar what is seemingly most familiar and most inconspicuous - because it is too close, perhaps? This means a consistent application of the psychoanalytic method as socioanalysis, which yields some astonishing results.

In fact, each of the three parts of the book and each of the chapters in these parts opens a new door and a new space in a building that - although it allows expansion as the author herself notes - has an organic coherence. In a short but significant reference to the transhumanist idea of the augmented human, Nikolova asks the question that structures her research - whether the augmentation does not consist in - or should not be – greater vulnerability (p. 114). Perhaps, after all, what what makes us human is the vulnerability and the risk pertaining to the senses of intimacy? Thus, going against the current of modern technocracy, Nikolova's position unfolds as a multi-layered defense of the residue of the human.

The study does refer to Mary Douglas, Julia Kristeva and the concept of the abject as a conceptualization of disgust, this essential threshold in the disciplining of the senses of proximity. However, it seems to me that this concept deserves more space as a way to examine the civilizing and individualizing function of disgust and to explore its dynamics between the risk of destruction, the temptations of authoritarianism (as an antidote to the forces of the abject) and as creative transformation. This might allow a more nuanced approach to the hierarchical differentiation between the senses as, on the one hand, constitutive for the human and, on the other hand, as we can see it today, hardly for the first time, as excrementing the human.

Yet, as I already noted, Nikolova never refers to authors or ideas simply in order to demonstrate her erudition: she always does so with a view to developing her own theses to the extent that they are innovative and contribute to the problem that has attracted her interest. I believe the monograph in my opinion *Excrementum: Senses of Proximity* belongs to the most notable and perceptive studies in the field of Bulgarian sociology.

Apart from the publications in the area of the monograph I would single out Nikolova's articles on the problems of cinema, which is among her lasting interests. I would also like to point out that the citations of her works are not only numerous, but also indicative of the impact of her work on other researchers.

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, the Regulations for implementation and the respective Regulations of PU "Paisii Hilendarski".

Nina Nikolova has presented a significant number of scientific papers published after the defense of her PhD. In her works there are original scientific contributions, which have received a serious response in the work of other scientists. Her theoretical developments have practical applicability, as some of them are directly involved in her academic work with students and doctoral students. The scientific and teaching qualification of Nina Vasileva Nikolova is beyond doubt.

Nina Vasileva Nikolova's achievements in teaching and research fully comply with the specific requirements of the Faculty of Philosophy and History, adopted in connection with the Regulations of the University of Plovdiv.

After getting acquainted with the materials and the scientific works presented for the competition and analyzing their contributions to the field, I give a positive assessment and strongly recommend the Scientific Jury to propose to The Faculty of Philosophy and History the election of Nina Vasileva Nikolova to the academic position of 'Associate Professor' at the University of Plovdiv "P. Hilendarski " in professional field 3.1 Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences (Sociology - Sociology of the body).

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Reviewer:

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