

## OPINION

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For the acquisition of the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" in the doctoral program "Anthropology", in professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences with candidate associate professor Dr. Stefan Ivanov Dechev.

By order 3-PK-310/22.07.2024 of the Rector of NBU, I have been appointed as a member of the Scientific Jury in the procedure for the defense of a dissertation work "From the rice of Asia to the peppers of America. An intertwined history of food and cuisine in Ottoman Bulgaria and neighboring lands (from the end of the 14th to the beginning of the 19th century)" for the acquisition of the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" in the doctoral program "Anthropology", in professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences with candidate associate professor Dr. Stefan Ivanov Dechev.

I have read the attached documents and made sure that they fully comply with the requirements of the RSARB, the Rules for its application and the Rules of the NBU.

The thesis presented for defense "From the rice of Asia to the peppers of America. An Intertwined History of Food and Cuisine in Ottoman Bulgaria and Neighboring Lands (from the end of the 14th to the beginning of the 19th century)" is the first original historical study of food and cuisine during a period, when the Bulgarian national identity and modern culture were formed (with all the conventions of using these concepts in the singular). This fact alone shows that it is a text that fills a significant gap in our knowledge and self-knowledge. The text is also significant in a more general perspective: in recent years, nationalist discourse has gained visibility and popularity, influencing both the behavior of political subjects and the general public opinion, and nutrition is not left out of this trend. Therefore, the existence of a scientifically sound and maximally complete presentation of this part of the history of the Bulgarian lands is an important corrective and source of information.

The goal that Stefan Dechev sets for himself sounds modest: "to research food, cuisine and dishes in the specified chronological scope in the widest economic, social, political and cultural context from the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans to the first decades of the 19th century" (p. 39). This modesty, however, is misleading: in two pages the author unfolds a research program that includes a whole series of tasks. I will take the liberty of presenting my opinion by following them.

First among these is the intention (stated in the Introduction) to expand the geographical and chronological contexts to include observations on "the development of agriculture, crafts, proto-industry, social structure, the emergence of a leisure class and money to spend, a range of psychological preconditions and aesthetic values". The five hundred and forty-six pages of the study are an indication that even the sheer volume of the submitted text promises to deliver. In the exposition, in the various chapters we find the inclusion and use with good judgement of information and observations from the above mentioned fields.

The second task is the reconstruction of the history of formation of Bulgarian culinary culture, real and imagined: the set of products, recipes, practices, perceptions, hierarchies, standards, etc., or in other words, the phenomenology and social history of nutrition between the 14th and 19th centuries. The author, sensibly in my opinion, has excluded the symbolic perspective from his research field: the discourses and practices and their meanings have been studied in sufficient detail

and well enough by Bulgarian ethnography and folkloristics to be retold in an already sufficiently voluminous work.

A third goal of the author is to explore the history of food and nutrition in comparison and by tracing the influence of other historical food cultures, both in the East and in the West of the lands of today's Bulgaria.

These major themes are developed through the products and dishes, simultaneously presenting both the achievements of historical science and authors such as Bistra Tsvetkova, Lyuben Berov, Shefket Pamuk, Soraya Faroki, Massimo Montanari, etc., as well as contemporary observers of the subject in the Balkans. It is a well-known fact that our sources are limited, and Dechev moderately applies extrapolations from studies for other regions in the same period. Here is the place to note specifically the use, presentation and, where necessary, comment on the available research tradition. The number of reviewed works is impressive, 305 titles in Bulgarian and 294 titles in foreign languages, not including the collections of documents and cookbooks.

In order to organize this huge material and carry out his tasks, Stefan Dechev uses the historical method. I must note right away that this does not mean chronological registration, on the contrary, the work is organized thematically. The author does not follow the purely narratological method either and I would define it as interdisciplinary and problem-centered, which I find to be an appropriate methodology for this type of research.

In conclusion, I would point out as the main contributions of the thesis proposals for evaluation, first of all, its very appearance as the first independent, full, original presentation of the history of food and nutrition in the Bulgarian lands in the specified period, and if we are to be precise - in general. Secondly, the broad and largely heuristic approach, if not of the total history, at least of the multifaceted examination of the subject of the work from different perspectives, including transboundary and transdisciplinary ones. Without listing specifically, among the contributions of the work are reasoned conclusions about the nature and development of Bulgarian culinary culture and its diverse sources, including Ottoman and Muslim, which influences are not popular among Bulgarian public. I would also add the state of the field presentation, proposed in the Introduction - the most complete in the Bulgarian language to my knowledge, which fills a significant void.

Stefan Dechev has attached a list of his publications after obtaining the scientific degree "doctor" with 34 titles, of which 12 are on the topic of the dissertation, including 6 in foreign languages. Publications are in indexed or refereed editions. From the attached list of noted citations, it can be seen that his publications are cited in publications indexed in international databases such as Scopus (noted 6), and the publications on the topic of the dissertation are cited mostly in refereed and peer-reviewed publications. The table of compliance with the minimum national requirements shows that Stefan Dechev meets the criteria.

If I have any remarks to the work, submitted for consideration, it has more to do with *embarras de choix*: the work deals with so many topics and sub-topics that sometimes the general line is lost. If the work is going to be published, I would recommend editing it – or breaking it up into parts.

In view of the above, I believe that the dissertation "From the rice of Asia to the peppers of America. An intertwined history of food and cuisine in Ottoman Bulgaria and neighboring lands (from the end of the 14th to the beginning of the 19th century)" for awarding the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" with author Assoc. Dr. Stefan Ivanov Dechev is an independent original scientific good

work and I give a positive assessment. I recommend to the honorable jury to decide on awarding the academic degree "Doctor of Science".

Prof. Dr. Raina Gavrilova