

REVIEW

by Prof. Kristian Krastinov Bankov, NBU, 3.1 Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences (semiotics) for the acquisition of the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" with candidate Assoc. Prof. Evgenia Krasteva-Blagoeva, PhD (dissertation work "Food Practices of the Young People: Trajectories of Taste")

The topic of the dissertation is fundamentally different from the topic of the Ph D thesis of the author (back in 1998). It is of particular scholarly significance. On one hand, it fits into the recent research trend studying food and food practices; on the other, it goes beyond the well-developed and somewhat already trivialized problematic sphere of "traditional Bulgarian" (and "Balkan") food and all its' possible aspects. The author has directed her attention to the food tastes of young people (a fundamental and unexplored problem within the framework of Bulgarian anthropology of food) in order to search for their typical food pattern and through it to comment some trends in modern national cuisine as well. In this context, it should be noted that the goals and tasks of the research are clearly and adequately formulated and the contributions of the presented theoretical model are to be found in several directions. Food practices of young people are studied in the context of post-socialist transformations of Bulgarian consumer culture following the school of the world-famous theorist of consumerism Prof. Mike Featherstone. The research provides a detailed analysis of food micro-trends properly contextualized in the frames of general consumer culture. What's more, they are addressed through an innovative combination of quantitative and qualitative methods - an approach that has not yet been applied in Bulgarian food studies. Food diary method is also largely new to local scholarly context. In this respect, the contributions of the author in the collection and analysis of empirical data, as well as in constructing the theoretical model of the research are indisputable.

In this non-representative study of the food practices of students at New Bulgarian University two methods of collecting material were applied: unstructured food diaries and semi-structured interviews. The data from the diaries were processed through quantitative content analysis (descriptive statistics) and qualitative content analysis, and the data from the interviews were analyzed qualitatively. It is beneficial not only to apply these methods, but also to supplement and verify their results. This reflects authors' deep knowledge on the matter, as well as her competences to write a consistent and internally coherent academic text.

The three main parts of the study are presented in the three chapters: food choices (the totality of foods and meals that the respondents consumed within a week), food profiles (repeated combinations of food choices that are directly related to individual identity and lifestyle) and foodscapes (socio-spatial dimensions of food and communication through it as a symbolic code). This structure reflects the complexity of the problem and the authors' desire to encompass and analyze it from all sides.

The theoretical basis of the research is presented in detail in the introduction. The choice of methods is described and justified, and a comprehensive review of the literature is made. A large and representative number of food anthropology texts - in particular about nutrition of

young people - have been introduced into scholarly circulation (mostly in English, and by Bulgarian authors as well). The citations are correct and adequately selected. Several new concepts have been introduced, such as "global new" meals, individual nutritional profiles, etc.

The descriptive statistics presented in the first chapter contain interesting data regarding the hybridity of the food choices of the young people; the stable presence of a male-female dichotomy of tastes (but also its partial overcoming as a result of unisex trends in consumer culture); the temporal transformations of taste recorded during the eight-year period of collection of food diaries. The triad "Bulgarian/Balkan - "Italian" - "global new" dishes in itself contains the modern food code of Bulgarians.

An interesting highlight in the second chapter is the delineation of certain types of collective taste profiles directly related to lifestyle, body techniques and the construction of individual identity. These are: young men and women engaged in sports who eat similarly; non-sporting men (who eat the most unhealthily) and vegetarian women; the minimalistic eating young girls; the "globally oriented" women from the countryside, etc.

The third chapter presents practices of eating at home (*eating in*) and eating outside the home (*eating out*) as essential elements of youth foodscapes. What is important here is the connection with places of consumption and the social relationships that young people form and maintain through food. All the paragraphs of this chapter are of great interest, as they present problematic spheres unexplored on the basis of Bulgarian material, such as modern family communication through cooking and eating; restaurants as "cool places"; the great role of the grandmother as the supreme culinary authority for the young people; the role of the Internet and influencers in students' cooking practices; youth sharing of food as an expression of friendship and intimacy, etc. Although the role of digital culture is touched upon, I believe that this topic is going to become even more important in the future. In this sense, I would welcome a deepening of the author's future research in this respect. It is clear that the so-called Gastromania in social media is becoming a widespread phenomenon, which is yet to be studied by food anthropologists.

The conclusion summarizes the results of the study, emphasizing the main registered trends in the food choices of the respondents. These are: hybrid taste (combining "Bulgarian", "Italian" and "global new" dishes in different ratios); affinity for home-cooked food; frequent visits to restaurants, where in most cases an incomplete course is ordered; "quick, easy, tasty and through a screen" cooking. According to the author, the registered class-based social construction of "healthy" food implies a good financial status and corresponds to the profile of NBU respondents.

The dissertation as a whole represents an original contribution to anthropology of food exploring a fundamental and hitherto unstudied problem. It is a convincing proof of Prof. Blagoeva's in-depth theoretical knowledge of the subject, combined with practical competences for conducting empirical research and writing an academic text at the highest level. Last but not least, the work is a result of the author's many years of teaching and her excellent interaction with students over the years. The very fact that they responded on a large scale and participated as respondents in the research underlines how meaningful the Food and Culture course is to them. This is an example of innovative inclusion and engagement of students to the subject of

the course, and of instantly converting the results of the teacher's research into learning content. It is important not only for Bulgarian students, but also for the international experience of NBU as a whole.

The abstract presents well the main points and contributions of the dissertation. The attached publications reflect the diverse research interests of Assoc. Prof. Blagoeva, which are not limited to the field of consumption and food. Common to them is the interest in identity topic: through personal names, the renaming of Bulgarian-Muslims, religious identity, rural-urban culture, etc. Most of the attached citations are from foreign authors, which emphasizes the well-known international activity and recognition of the candidate.

I have known the author for about 20 years, and during this period we have had many opportunities to collaborate. We were connected by academic activity mainly on the topic of the dissertation and consumer culture in general. My impressions are entirely positive, as I cannot fail to note how well-intentioned and constructive kind of researcher she is, her openness to scholarly dialogue and the ease with which she engages in all possible types of academic activity. In the context of everything stated above, I will vote with conviction to award the scientific title "Doctor of Sciences" to Assoc. Prof. Evgenia Krasteva-Blagoeva.

Sofia, 22/09/2024 г.

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