

REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Raina Dimitrova Gavrilova, SU "St. Kliment Ohridski" in competition for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" with candidate EVGENIA GEORGIEVA BLAGOEVA

I have been appointed by order 3-PK-309/22.07.2024 of the Rector of the NBU, as a member of the jury in the procedure for the defense of a dissertation thesis "Nutrition of the young: trajectories of taste" for the acquisition of the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" in doctoral program "Anthropology", in professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences with candidate associate professor Dr. Evgenia Georgieva Krasteva-Blagoeva ".

1. General description of the submitted materials

The set of materials presented by Evgenia Blagoeva is in accordance with the Regulations of the NBU for the application of the ZRASRB and includes:

1. resume;
2. order of the Rector of the NBU;
3. thesis;
4. abstract;
5. bibliographic description of published or accepted scholarly text in the field of the competition and noted citations;
6. certificate of compliance with the national minimum requirements for the ONS "Doctor of Science" for the relevant scientific field.

A review of the documents shows that they fully comply with the requirements.

2. Brief biographical data

Evgenia Blagoeva has a Master's degree in History with specialization in Ethnology from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (1994) and defended her doctoral thesis at the Ethnographic Institute with Museum at the BAS (1998). From 1994 to 2003, she worked at the Ethnographic Institute with a museum, first as a tour guide, and from 1999 as a research assistant. In 2003, she was appointed chief assistant at the NBU, and in 2008 she obtained her habilitation and is currently an associate professor at the same university.

3. Relevance of the topic

In Bulgaria, the topic of food and nutrition has long been the subject of scientific research, mainly in the fields of medicine, health care, biology, and agricultural sciences. A happy exception is the interest of ethnographers, who collected and preserved considerable material, mainly documentation of various practices. After the 1970s, the consolidation of folklore studies produced interesting observations, mostly around the ritual uses of food. Characteristically, both disciplines focused almost exclusively on traditional culture. At the same time, worldwide, interest in consumption in general and nutrition in particular has grown tremendously in recent decades, both among professional

researchers and in popular culture and everyday life. We should add the recent increase of scholarly publications on the role of the microbiome not only in metabolism, but also in the functioning of all systems in the human organism, including the brain. Finally, I will just mention the unprecedented globalization of international food trade, the staggering inequalities and the dangers of the projected climate change, which are changing and will change both the nutrition of large groups and the individual behavior. Against this background, the study and deeper understanding of food practices today and in Bulgaria with the methods of anthropological science is much needed. I consider the exploration of the broad trends in individual human behavior (key to anthropology) conducive to a deeper understanding of modern life. The texts submitted for reviewing is the first of its kind and important both for the advancement of anthropology in general and for the formation and implementation of adequate public policies.

4. Grasp the problem and selection of a methodology

The author, whose work I am reviewing, is a Ph.D. and Associate Professor at NBU, a professional with impressive background, who has been working on various aspects of modern nutrition for more than ten years. Her teaching and work with students has given her enough material and observations to formulate the topic and develop the research project. Her central interest is "the relationship between food choices and individual identity" (p. 6), and her aim – inspired by Steven Mennell – to shed light on how eating mediates the sense of identity (p. 7). The hypothesis that Blagoeva formulates is that "the transformations of young people's food taste is a kind of magnifying glass, through which a number of other significant problems are reflected and refracted" (p. 8). The specific research tasks are formulated in the methodological introduction: "empirical survey and theoretical understanding of the main characteristics of this taste, which is not static" (p. 17; study of food choices as a manifestation of both individual and collective identity; application of new instrumental concepts such as foodscapes, food choices, food behavior, neophilia, neophobia, and food constellation; and, finally, organizing and presenting the results in three main parts: food choices, food profiles and foodscapes'.

To achieve these tasks, Evgenia Krasteva-Blagoeva applies, in her words, a mixed methodology. The extensive theoretical introduction, which in a sense also portends the conclusions of the study, "predetermines" the choice of tools for their presentation and substantiation. She mentions two main methods: empirical research of the target group through unstructured food diaries and semi-structured interviews and content analysis. Both methods are presented concisely and clearly, with a good understanding of their capabilities and limitations. The sample - students at NBU - is presented and commented both through their social situation and through the general hybridity and blurring of the social categories today.

Part of the methodological toolkit of the study is its theoretical part, set out in the Introduction. Its basis is the postulation of a relationship between behavior(practices)-choice-identity and the introduction of taste as both an individual and a collective attribute, both demarcating and inclusive (p. 9). A key place in the work is the concept of "food landscapes", which Evgenia finds critical when studying the behavior of "young" people. The goals and tasks of the researcher further clarify the methodology, because anthropology has long ceased to rely on traditional methods, and this is not only a matter of volume: the modern world is broken up not only into diverse, but also often contradictory practices; uniform patterns do not exist even when looking into a relatively limited group - young middle class people, currently university students. This justifies the use of diaries, a long-established model in food and nutrition research, in the first place. The information in them is valuable and relatively reliable. I saw no comment on the danger of manipulating the real data for self-presentation, but I tend to assume that the type of students in the sample (voluntarily choosing to study food and nutrition) minimizes that danger. In fact, interviews are more dangerous in that they

immediately create a situation - in every sense: it's one thing to eat food, it's another thing to talk about it with another person. In the theoretical part, Evgenia Blagoeva demonstrates an excellent knowledge of the relevant literature - both classical and new. Among the sociological and anthropological works, she discusses and uses (to accept or reject) studies by Bourdieu, Goffman, McKendrick, Appadurai and many others; in the Introduction and in the analyzes in the following chapters she projects in Bulgarian context most of the important studies on food practices in the modern world: the ones of Bell and Valentine, Best, Counihan, Lupton. The same applies to the existing Bulgarian literature on the subject: Blagoeva not only knows well everything that has been published in the last twenty years, but takes a stand and confirms or corrects individual theses. All authors are accurately cited, including urls of those available online.

5. Characterization and evaluation of the thesis

The first and second chapters of the study present the empirical material organized into two themes: food choices and food constellations. Chapter One is also the first collation of a wealth of data collected from the food diaries. The selected elements of the structure: meal types (meal or snack); types of starters (soups, salads and side dishes), types of food (meat, fish, lean, bread) and male/female meals I find appropriate as they describe the overall eating behavior well. (I only doubted whether the use of «breakfast» (zakuska) for the English word “snack” was accurate enough to reflect the ephemerality, disorderliness, extraordinariness of the meal - perhaps "snack" (hapvane) would be better; the verb “to snack” I would definitely translate as "hapvam", not as "having breakfast " - zakusvam.) The purpose of the chapter is to compare this structure with the findings in the materials, the reasons for the discrepancies (if any) and the change (if any).

Beyond the pure accumulation and preservation of this type of data, which is a contribution to the Bulgarian research tradition in itself, the author confirms or rejects a series of observations in foreign literature, which are not only interesting and important, but also a contribution to the work of clarifying the generational and the gender characteristics of nutrition in post-communist Eastern Europe. I have in mind the confirmation of the observation that vegetarians are mostly women; the pronounced presence of vegetables and fish and the low amount of bread in this group; as well as the preference for whole grain bread or bread with other types of flour (pp. 41-42). Or the conclusion that the respondents have "mastered to a great extent the cultural competences that the use of the new products implies" (p. 55) and others. These findings seem to me to be extremely important for practice and for public health in particular, but also for the food industry (if anyone will read them), despite the limitations and discrepancies of the sample. The group is small, young and socially diverse, but it is a precursor of changes that sooner or later will affect the whole society (I hope including the socially vulnerable groups).

The survey of the meals recorded in the diaries according to the above-mentioned classifications is quite interesting and offers quantitatively substantiated comments, comparisons and interpretations for each group, while still taking into account the smallness of the sample. The observations of Bulgarian and, wherever possible, foreign researchers are cited, which places Blagoeva's research in the necessary context. These categories of foods and meals are also tracked in the section dedicated to comparing male and female nutrition. Here I found an answer to a question that arose while starting to read the text and namely whether the significant preponderance of women in the sample does not distort the data. Blagoeva points out and substantiates with numbers, that "contrary to expectations that the predominant number of women in the sample could distort the data, clear differences in the food choices of both sexes are registered" (p. 80). Further in this section some interesting paradoxes are formulated, that may become a task for a future research. The temporal dynamics of consumption, presented in the third subsection, are conscientiously prepared and follow the general methodology,

but in my opinion, it does not provide particularly useful data, insofar as the studied period is too short for any generational or social dynamism to appear. More interesting is the observation on the impact of the COVID epidemic, insofar as it represents a kind of accidental experiment and could have interesting practical implications.

Chapter Two establishes what was promised in Chapter One, namely that "despite the many micro-differences (discussed in the next chapter) the delineation of basic patterns of taste is possible, and no doubt this is largely due to the similar social status of the students " (p. 37). This fulfills the main task of any scientific research: to find out among the huge variety of facts whether recurrences could be identified, that could be interpreted as phenomena, trends, patterns and regularities and at different levels (micro community, local community , society). Blagoeva performs this task through the concepts of "food constellations" discussed in the introductory part ("a set of foods and meals consumed for certain period of time") and "food profiles" ("repeated combinations of products and meals that are directly related to individual identity and lifestyle"). From the food diaries, the candidate establishes as common features of the food profiles of the sample the high valuation of home meals; the skipping meals, mobility and the minimalism of portions; and as a gender difference, seeing that women eat less and more globally, and neophilically, and men are more traditional and prone to monotony. The formulation of these conclusions is a contribution on its own and, most importantly, they are built on empirical material. On this basis, several types of food constellations have been proposed, which can easily be extended to patterns of eating and behavior in general, which also has significant heuristic potential.

The third chapter provide content and comments for the third new concept, introduced by the author - food landscapes ("socio-spatial dimensions of food and communication through it as a symbolic code", p.9) or "how young people connect with different people and places in the city through food" (p. 124). Following Appadurai on the interweaving of individual identity with the identity of places in the general network of consumption, she brings in one of the important goals of her research - the construction of identity. The author is careful not to absolutize even very attractive theses and emphasizes that the opposite is equally true - places gain identity through their visitors/users. An interesting observation is that "most respondents stated that they like small, quiet and cozy places where there are not many people: 'I prefer authenticity and atmosphere to fancy establishments.' Here, by the way, is my main question, the answer to which is not sufficiently clarified in the research and I would like to hear it during the defense, namely the financial affordability of one or another choice. The Introduction states that for the respondents – students from families of average and above average means who can afford a private university tuition – prices in most establishments they visit and food they buy are not a problem. At the same time reminding Goffman that every communication situation is a self-presentation, I wondered if the preference for "authenticity" over "luxury" is not a disguised form of preferring accessibility (low prices) over inaccessibility (high prices).

In the same chapter, when looking at eating at home, a conclusion was drawn that seems to me important both for the study itself and for the general understanding of the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of life in Bulgaria: "a significant deviation from the global trend of diminishing presence of the family meal" (p. 143). This conclusion is yet another contribution to our understanding of the phenomena in public life, especially now, when the efforts to explain and resolve the crisis of public consciousness seem so urgently needed. A number of other phenomena and trends are further highlighted in this chapter – not least the role of the Internet and of social and traditional media in shaping both tastes and choices, as well as identities.

6. Description of the contributions:

I pointed out in the course of presenting the research the contributions I saw

7. Impacts of the dissertation work on the external environment.

The attached list of publications on the subject and the noted citations proves Evgenia Blagoeva's lasting interest in the problem of identities and the topic of food and nutrition. Her works are known by the researchers who work in these fields, and among the noticed citations there are some by foreign scientists. As I noted above, the research should reach a wider audience and the main theses should be summarized and made available to representatives of other sectors.

8. Abstract

The abstract is 24 pages long and correctly presents the subject, hypotheses, research methods, content, and conclusions of the dissertation.

9. Personal qualities of the author.

I have known Evgenia for years and I must immediately point out that she is one of the few researchers in Bulgaria working in an extremely underdeveloped field. She is involved in various extracurricular initiatives related to both the research topics and the anthropological community, taking on pro bono various administrative tasks. Her dedicated work with students is noteworthy.

10. Opinions, recommendations and notes.

They were mentioned above.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation contains scientific results that represent original contribution of the author and meet all the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ZRASRB), the Regulations for the Implementation of ZRASRB and the relevant Regulations of the NBU. Associate Professor Dr. Evgenia Georgieva Krasteva-Blagoeva possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional qualities corresponding to the requirements and expectations for a doctor of science.

Due to the above, I confidently give a positive assessment to the presented dissertation and propose to the honorable scientific jury to award the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" to Evgenia Krasteva-Blagoeva in the doctoral program "Anthropology", in professional direction 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences.

04.10.2024

Reviewer:

Prof. Dr. R. Gavrilova

Date.....

Signature:.....