

## OPINION

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of a dissertation for awarding the scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences” (DSc) in the Area of professional qualification 3.1. Sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies to Stefan Ivanov Dechev, PhD

Topic: *From the rice of Asia to the peppers of America: An entangled history of food and cuisine in Ottoman Bulgaria and surrounding lands (late 14<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century)*

The appearance of Assoc. prof. Stefan Dechev's dissertation *From the rice of Asia to the peppers of America: An entangled history of food and cuisine in the Ottoman Bulgaria and surrounding lands (late 14<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century)* is a result of his research activities over the past few years. The topic is not among the frequently discussed in the Bulgarian humanities and social sciences. The author himself explains: “The presented work is a history of food, ways of eating and cuisine in the Ottoman Bulgaria and the neighbouring lands from 1396 to the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.” At the same time, Stefan Dechev weaves into his narrative a number of issues related to food production, food trade, consumer culture in the region, etc. Quite deliberately he does not explicitly set the scope of the research, leaving it to depend on the logic of the object of study. This brings the endeavour very close to one of the basic principles of anthropology (“let the field work lead you”). However, Dechev repeatedly insists that the methodological approach he uses is historical despite the fact that he also draws on the achievements of ethnography/ethnology. Therefore, I would regard the dissertation as belonging to the cultural studies (and more specifically, history of culture) in the area of professional qualification 3.1. It is from this point of view that I will present my opinion here.

Among the author's main contributions I would single out the critical tracing of the global, regional, and Bulgarian academic literature: an extremely rich corps of literature in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, but also agronomy, plant breeding, animal husbandry, and climatology is consulted and used. Moreover, the vast amount of information gathered on the different types of food, their origins and their distribution – both geographical and social – over the territory under research is impressive. Although most of the sources have

been used through other authors, their variety is beyond doubt: archaeological material, various types of images, travelogues, diaries, memoirs, published documents (such as Ottoman palace kitchen registers, trade registers, and other administrative documents).

Stefan Dechev traces the development of food, cuisine and dishes from the point of view of the economic development and trade, not only in the Ottoman space but also as an intertwined history with neighbouring culinary circles such as the Mediterranean and Central Europe – attention is paid to borrowings and transfers, pointing out both differences and similarities. The social, economic, and cultural context is not ignored, and the role and importance of social hierarchy in food and nutrition are pointed out. The relationship between food, culinary contact, and ethnocultural identity in the 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries is discussed, and the “long” 18<sup>th</sup> century is given special attention. All of the above, however, does not lead to the construction and defence of a clearly formulated central thesis in this text, the balance of which, in my opinion, is shifted towards enumeration and description rather than analysis and evaluation. I respect the claim that this project is a first step towards charting the path of national cuisines in Southeastern Europe between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. It is in relation to this claim as well as in view of the anticipated publication of this dissertation that I would present some of my remarks and recommendations to the author.

The organisation of the material into chapters and paragraphs could follow a more coherent pattern to avoid the odd (sometimes) division of the text. For example, in the first chapter some of the sections are divided by type of food while for others other principles apply – “globalisation” and “Americanisation”, fasting, etc. The mixing of problem and chronological approaches applies to the chapters too: while discussion of the “long 18<sup>th</sup> century” and the changes that occurred during it in a separate chapter may be justified, the same cannot be said, at least in my view, of the separation of dairy and sweets from other foods. Perhaps one reason is the large volume of the text, but in fact in most chapters the reader is left with the impression of a number of separate topics brought together in one place.

Stefan Dechev does not clarify well enough how he comes to the conclusion about Balkan rural economies as autarkic (p. 66), since the mode of management in the economics (and farm management in particular) is not discussed. With regard to this lack of clarity, I would raise the question how justified it is to speak of Balkan economies in plural in this case, that is, the 15<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> centuries? And I would also draw attention to the rather loose jumping between

the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in the presentation of individual foods, despite the stated desire of the author to historicize (vs. contextualize). These centuries are different in so many ways.

I also have a number of formal comments to make on the dissertation, of which I will mention only a few. The text in its present form gives the impression of having been unread in its final form before submission: for example, one sentence of the Introduction claims that the chronological scope is “up to the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century”, and immediately thereafter that it “ends with the end of the Ottoman rule and the creation of the modern Bulgarian state” (if the thesis is about not only Bulgarian but also about the surrounding lands, in what way does the creation of a nation-state matter? ); or “the centre to be the Ottoman province of Bulgaria” (in terms of geography) – an obvious mistake, as no such Ottoman province ever existed. The work needs some serious editing and proofreading to remove the (often) reversed wording, the underdeveloped sentences, the use of foreign words such as the Russian *шам* or terms as Ottoman Turkish cuisine and other Ottoman Turkish things – only the language of the Empire can be correctly called this way, and everything else is better to be named Ottoman (in Bulgarian as well as in the other languages). Finally, I’m aware of the immense volume of work done, and this should excuse the presence of some sloppiness in the formatting of the notes (lack of italics for the titles, etc.) and some lacunae in the bibliography: for example, a title of the author himself (on beans) is there listed as “in print”, although in the *Dissertation Summary* – where this title is among the 10 publications on the subject listed – it is described as having been published in 2015 (this means that the presented bibliography has not been updated for several years...).

In spite of the comments and remarks just provided, the positive impression of the presented dissertation thesis dominates. The author opens a new, and useful, page in the study of food and nutrition through the prism of the history of culture, “spiced up” with some methodological techniques from the field of more static disciplines, as Dechev (with some disdain) calls them. The abundant material presented allows him, indeed, to offer a good basis for another planned and, it seems, already largely accomplished endeavour: outlining the main stages in the construction of national cuisines in the region of Southeast Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The presented *Dissertation Summary* mirrors very briefly the content of the dissertation, focusing mainly on the historiography, sources, and aims of the dissertation. In the text of the

*Dissertation Summary* there are parts of the dissertation text directly transferred (see the references to “next pages”, “previous pages”, etc.), which does not make a good impression.

As far as the minimum national requirements for obtaining the degree of Doctor of Sciences are concerned, the publications presented by Stefan Dechev illustrate his long-standing interest in the issues developed in the dissertation and fully meet the requirements. The ten publications with which the doctoral candidate participates in this procedure are listed at the end of the *Dissertation Summary* and do not repeat titles with which he is listed in the NACID system as an Associate Professor. Five of these are in Bulgarian and the other five in English language, and all of them are published in prestigious academic journals or thematic volumes of proven standing.

All other submitted documents comply with the requirements of the Law for the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for the Implementation of this law, and the Regulation for the Development of Academic Staff of the NBU on the Conditions and Procedure for the Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and for Holding Academic Positions.

In conclusion, before the forthcoming public defence, I express my intention to vote in favour of awarding Assoc. Prof. Stefan Ivanov Dechev, PhD, *the degree of Doctor of Sciences* in the Area of professional qualification 3.1. Sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies.

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