

## OPINION

on the dissertation thesis of Radostina Borissova Antonova

entitled

### **‘The impact of group affiliation on the life perspectives in young people of Bulgarian and Roma ethnicity’**

for granting the educational and scientific degree of Doctor (Ph.D.)  
sphere of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences,  
professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and sciences of culture,  
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Radostina Antonova’s dissertation thesis *The impact of group affiliation on the life perspectives in young people of Bulgarian and Roma ethnicity* intersects several large research fields in itself, trying to answer the question of ‘how Roma young people of the Fakulteta neighbourhood of Sofia and Bulgarian young people from the same city build their life plans; what impact the different cultural and socio-economic contexts in which the young members grow and socialize of two different ethnic groups, of the majority and a minority, of those living in an European capital city and in one of its stigmatized territorial parts, have on their life perspectives’ (p. 9). There can hardly be any doubt that the theme of the dissertation work is extremely topical not only in terms of scientific problematic concerning the study of social distinctions and practices in a residential area defined as ‘Roma neighbourhood’, reconstructed by the author from diverse perspectives, but also as a serious social problem going beyond the confines of the Bulgarian society. The thematizations of the relations of minority/majority, ghetto-anti-ghetto-hyper-ghetto, the problems of Roma integration, city marginality etc. have been turned into instruments of analysis allowing the exploration of the life perspectives of Roma and Bulgarian youth to remain in the focus of research attention. The comparative study of life perspectives of Roma and Bulgarian youth as chosen by the author permits the analysis of the problem to delve at individual levels – those of the individual and immediate

experiencing of her own being stigmatized, of making explicit the ethnic values that guide her, of the positive and negative in-group and inter-group experience inherited by such environments as family, clan, local community, place of residence. The work is also timely in the applied scientific respect since it focuses on problem groups in the Bulgarian society – young people, Roma, especially the women among them (viz. e.g. the conclusion that ‘women among the Roma participants in 2017 demonstrate in a greater percentage their confidence in their own capacities to fulfill future plans’, p. 145), and the conclusion the author makes could be used in developing specific initiatives, programmes and strategies related to the increase of their status and reaching a higher level of social integration. The specific tasks as set in the separate chapters correspond to the particularities of the studied problems.

With all of that, the dissertation has a clearly set object and subject-matter of exploration from which also the clearly defined hypotheses ensue: 1) ethnic affiliation presupposes differences in the specific goals one sets to herself, as well as in the social conditions of possibility for the formation of the life perspectives of Bulgarian and Roma youth (the author formulates them as ‘experiencing of being stigmatized, ethnic values, fatalism, positive and negative in-group and inter-group experience’, p. 9); 2) education with its socializing, normalizing and homogenizing functions is a factor that additionally introduces differences in planning the future among the Roma representatives of the Fakulteta neighbourhood.

Hence the dissertation’s multidimensional structure that consists of an introduction, six parts, and a conclusion, a structure proposing a consideration of the ways in which ‘the positive and negative experiences of the interrelations between the two and within the considered majority and minority groups themselves... have an impact at the individual level on the plans of young people’, and hence contribute to ‘the change in the Roma and in the Bulgarian group’ (p. 5). The bibliography contains 67 titles in Bulgarian and 102 titles in English, German, Russian and Hungarian. The whole dissertation is built on the basis of two field studies, separated by a time interval, the first taking place in 2002 and the other in 2017, in using also field materials of other researchers to complement the author’s own observations and analyses. I would say as early as here that the dissertation doesn’t make it clear enough what the degree of independence is of the 2002 research and how far the results of project team work can be used in full as a part of the developed dissertation thesis. In this relation I would like to stress the need for a more careful identification of the author’s own contribution in the work done by a team – a contribution that is surely considerable but is not well singled out.

The dissertation's methodology is in correspondence to the object field and the context of the study, which are described carefully with different density and coherence. I stress the different density and coherence because I am aware of how difficult it is to maintain a uniform and smooth saturation with empirical data of a research in the case of such a lengthy and complex comparative field work. The unevenness is still surpassed by the empirical accumulations of the many years of work of Radoslava Antonova in the Fakulteta neighbourhood, which brings in additional information of the context and transformations in the social space as well as of the statuses of the studied persons.

In Part One, *Emancipating the young people as a separate socio-biological group*, the problematic of the study is outlined in the context of the qualitative difference in the personal development of adolescents and young people, the separation of young people as an independent group is explained and hence the stratification of society according to a 'natural indicator (age)' (p. 13), the concept of 'emerging maturity' is clarified as well as the idea of the so-called 'prolonged adolescence' – all of that in the context of the social, economic and political changes in the transition from traditional to modern and late modern society. Here the author manages to sum up a multitude of theoretical ideas and to put important emphases related to a theory of the life-cycle of the individual, a theory that differentiates the personal tasks of childhood from that of adolescence, linking them also to the social expectations from those stages of personal development in a concrete social context.

In Part Two, *The Roma community*, the research optic shifts from age differences to ethnic differences, which raises the other important conceptual and interpretive problem in the dissertation – that of the Roma. Starting from the concept of 'minority' and from clarifying the ways in which belonging to a 'minority group' impacts the personal development and life perspectives, passing through the clarification of the problems of Roma marginalization and stigmatization in the post-industrial city, by introducing concepts like 'ghettoization', 'hyper-ghettoization' and 'new city marginality', the author describes the way in which they appear as a form of control and discipline on poverty. The parallel is interesting between hyper-ghetto and anti-ghetto as made by Wacquant, instrumentalized in the dissertation and successfully applied to the Roma community in Bulgaria and to that of Fakulteta in particular.

Part Three expands on the goals, tasks and hypotheses of the study. It remains unclear to me why the author should chose to make this important methodological move as late as on p. 119 of the study, which hinders the understanding of the conceptual and interpretive schemes presented in the previous two parts. In my view, Part Three should be the form-giving

methodological and epistemological context from which their clarification should follow rather than the other way around.

Part Four describes the setting of the study (participants, ethical standards, methods, description of samples) and dwells on the quite appropriate and well outlined restrictions of the study. And finally, the essential parts of the dissertation where a comparative analysis is done of the ways in which one experiences being stigmatized, fatalism, group affiliation, positive and negative experience in the interaction between Bulgarian and Roma young people (Part Five). Their life perspectives are problematized (individual plans, fatalist attitudes, experiences of being stigmatized, community values and their impact on the individual life plans, the interaction between community values and the context, etc. Part Six).

In this manner, the work of Radostina Angelova offers a theoretical model in which one could not only think the concept of life perspectives but also to reconstruct the research object, namely the Roma community, because besides being *about* ‘young people of Bulgarian and Roma ethnicity’, the dissertation is primarily *for* the Roma – the many years of work in the neighbourhood has indeed saturated the research language and has filled the research sense with rich empirical data and interesting observations through which one can discern a specific practical reflex reflexivity, a ‘silent knowledge’ (as in Bourdieu) of the social interactions in it, by which problems are outlined and possible solutions are identified.

Inevitably, such a large text must have its weaknesses. Although the theoretical framework is well outlined, the fact that the main contributions of the study are only presented at its end is also one of the weaknesses of the dissertation thesis. I am aware that this problem is largely an effect of the long period of field work as well as the expanded (during 15 years) work on writing the text itself – I would like it more if the text were more condensed rather than diluted at some places as it is. Structurally, there are many repetitions of the same statements, expressions, analytic elements whose analysis don’t build in any way on what has been said elsewhere.

I will also permit myself a question concerning the claim on p. 6 which is a part of the description of the so-called ‘peculiarities’ of the text: ‘A particular challenge in the work on this dissertation thesis was the reading, through the prism of sociological theoretical terms, of the results obtained by processing the data collected in 2002 and in 2017 with the instruments so created. In other words, the bulk of the theoretical review *does not precede but has been selected so as to read and explain results that have been already obtained*’ (p. 6, emphasis mine – S. P.). If the theory is especially picked so as to explain the practice, doesn’t it presuppose the

obtained results and can one guarantee the objectivity of the conclusions made in the dissertation?

The stated weaknesses are negligible and don't affect the general positive impression of the dissertation that presents a mature, ambitious and valuable research perspective elaborated in the many years of field work. The study results are presented in a sufficient number of publications. The extended abstract reflects the content of the text although too displaying a certain dilution of the analytic interpretations in the desire to offer a maximally wide context of the studied problematic. This, however, is a personal decision, and the choice of Radostina Antonova to construct her text in this way speaks of her scientific responsibility and her desire to study the object until 'its complete exhaustion', including in areas that could be spared.

In view of the stated contributions and qualities of the dissertation thesis, I convincingly support before the respected scientific jury the granting of the educational and scientific degree of Doctor (Ph.D.) to Radostina Borisova Antonova.

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